

“Full of vigour, & nature, fresh, original, warm from observation of nature, hasty, unpolished, untouched”: The Oil Sketches of John Constable*

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The English landscape painter John Constable (1776–1837) is a key figure in the influential book *Art and Illusion* by E.H. Gombrich (1909–2001), published in 1960. In the final chapter of this “Study in the psychology of pictorial representation”, its author mused upon the reasons for the commonly-held “view that Constable’s finished paintings are less interesting, less artistic than his oil sketches” (figs. 1–3):

We prefer suggestion to representation, we have adjusted our expectations to enjoy the very act of guessing, of projecting. And we rationalize this preference by fancying that the sketch must be nearer to what the artist saw and to what he felt than the finished work [...].¹

Similar sentiments about sketches had been expressed in 1845 by Constable’s friend, the artist’s colourman George Field (1777–1854). Writing of the Italian masters, he remarked on:

[...] the esteem which the sketches of the artist often justly obtain from the truly connoissant above his finished works, from possessing more truth of nature and spirit of the master and of the art, than his more laboured and embodied performances.²



Fig. 1 John Constable, *Willy Lott's House near Flatford Mill*, ca. 1811, oil on paper; 24.1 x 18.1cm, Victoria and Albert Museum, London (166-1888; R.11.37).



Fig. 2 John Constable, *Full-Scale Sketch for the Hay Wain*, 1820–1821, oil on canvas, 137 x 188cm, Victoria and Albert Museum, London (987-1900; R.21.2).



Fig. 3 John Constable, *The Hay Wain*, 1821, oil on canvas, 130.5 x 185.5cm, National Gallery, London (NG 1207; R.21.1).

When in 1833 the landscape painter F.R. Lee (1798–1879) and his patron William Wells (1768–1847) asked Constable to put a price on some of his studies and sell them, he indignantly refused and sarcastically retorted that “they would get them by the dozen—for nothing” at his studio sale after his death.³ Samuel (1802–1876) and Richard Redgrave (1804–1888) had both known the artist, and later explained that:

Constable himself knew the value of such studies, for he rarely parted with them. He used to say of his studies and pictures that he had no objection to part with the corn, but not with the field that grew it.⁴

I shall review the shifting critical reception of Constable’s oil sketches between his day and ours, and seek to classify them according to their type and role in the artist’s working practice, before concluding with some observations on how they were regarded in his own time.

The Critical Fortunes of Constable’s Oil Sketches

A year after his death, Constable’s collection of prints and drawings was offered for sale by the auction house Foster and sons on 10–12 May 1838. Lot 304 comprised twenty-nine of his own studies “in oil, on paper, of Clouds and skies, *with curious and interesting memoranda at the backs*”, which was purchased by the dealer D.T. White for £3.11s.0d.⁵ Five days later, Foster’s sale of a further 171 of Constable’s pictures included “a most interesting collection of sketches and studies”. On this occasion, fourteen of his landscapes “painted from nature” sold for £8.14s.6d., fifteen “Sketches for pictures” made £26. 0s. 6d. and “seven slight sketches” just £2.2s.0d; an average price of slightly over one pound each.⁶ As Constable had foreseen, these works realised only paltry sums, comparable with the miserable pittance of 10s. 9d. then paid weekly to the farm labourers he had so often portrayed.⁷ Consequently, many works at the sale were bought in by friends on behalf of his seven children, who retained most of his oil sketches.⁸

Interest in Constable’s sketches was initially confined to painters who had known him personally. In March 1836, less than a year before his death, he sent his friend and future biographer C.R. Leslie (1794–1859): “a few ‘skies’ [...] that might suit your delightful picture”.⁹ The latter work is Leslie’s conversation piece *Autolycus*, exhibited that year at the Royal Academy, in which the background sky is manifestly indebted to Constable’s cloud studies (fig. 4).¹⁰ In his biography of the artist, published in 1843, Leslie remarked that:

Twenty of Constable’s studies of skies [...] are in my possession [...]. They are painted in oil, on large sheets of thick paper, and all dated, with the time of day, the direction of the wind, and other memoranda on their backs. On one, for instance, is written. “5th of September, 1822. 10 o’clock, morning, looking south-east, brisk wind at west. Very bright and fresh grey clouds running fast over a yellow bed, about half way in the sky.”¹¹

This work is now in the National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne (R.22.23; fig. 4), and a further six sky studies in crayon (R.19.11–16) and eight in oils (R.22.11, 20–21, 25, 31, 54–55, 66) have been identified as formerly owned by Leslie. In his sale on 25 April 1860, seventeen of Constable’s “Studies of Skies” made £18.7s.6d as a single lot. While this



Fig. 4 John Constable, *Cloud Study*, 1822, oil on paper, 30 x 48.8cm, inscribed by the artist on the back: *Sept. 5.1822. looking S.E. noon. Wind very brisk & fresh. Clouds moving very fast with occasional very bright openings to the blue.* National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne (455-4; R.22.23).

price represented more than an eight-fold increase on that paid for similar works by D.T. White in 1838, it remained low in comparison to the value of Constable's large exhibition paintings, which by that date could fetch sums as high as £860.¹² The sky studies owned by Leslie were bought by the genre painter William Powell Frith (1819–1909), who later recalled making a visit to Constable's studio sometime around 1835–1837:

There was a piece of the trunk of a tree in the room, some weeds, and some dock leaves. "And what line of the art do you intend to follow?" said Constable to me. [...] "Well, whatever it may be [...] never do anything without nature before you. [...] See those weeds and the dock-leaves? [...] I know dock-leaves pretty well, but I should not attempt to introduce them into a picture without having them before me."¹³

Constable's surviving oil studies of leaves include one dated 1828 (R.28.14; fig. 5). By the time Frith's memoirs were published, the artistic climate of England was profoundly altered, and in 1874 the critic Frederick Wedmore (1844–1921) likened the oil studies of Constable and the Barbizon School to paintings he had recently seen at the first Impressionist exhibition in Paris:

"Impressionnistes" [...] record impressions [...] the transient effects of things [...] so that the quick study *shall* convey the impression [...] the difference between these men and [...] Constable, Rousseau, Daubigny, Dupré [...] is that these men are satisfied with the studies which the acknowledged leaders did but use as helps to pictures still to be painted. The one exhibits the study, the other the picture.¹⁴

In 1888 Isabel Constable (1822–1888), the artist's last surviving child, gave ninety-two oil sketches, two hundred and ninety-five drawings and three sketchbooks by her father to the South Kensington Museum, now the Victoria and Albert Museum (V&A). An anonymous reviewer, most likely Wedmore, commented:



Fig. 5 John Constable, *A Study of Docks and Grasses*, 1828, oil on paper, 15.2 x 24.1 cm, inscribed by the artist along the right-hand edge: *Brighton July 24th 5.1828*. British Museum, London (1919.0415.6; R.28.14).

Modern taste is extremely in favour of such studies “from the life”, faithful and brilliant transcriptions of the thing of the moment—nature caught in the very act. [...] And [...] the intelligent young painter, fresh from Parisian studios, is apt [...] to be absolutely hysterical in his admiration of Constable.¹⁵

By 1921 the director of the National Gallery, Sir Charles John Holmes (1868–1936) foresaw that “the time is not [...] far distant, when Constable’s greatness will be seen to rest far more upon his brilliant sketches and studies”.¹⁶ This was precisely the opinion of the painter John Piper (1903–1992) on the centenary of Constable’s death in 1937:

[...] his sketches mean more to us today than his big paintings [...] they are so complete, vivid and timeless [...]. Constable [...] made the Impressionist movement, and ultimately the whole of the modern movement, possible and necessary.¹⁷

The American curator Peter Galassi (b. 1951) proposed in 1981 that such early outdoor oil sketches “present a new and fundamentally modern pictorial syntax [...] devoted to the singular and contingent [...]. It is also the syntax of photography”.¹⁸ And indeed, in 2006–2009 Constable’s studies did inspire the Canadian Scott McFarland (b. 1975) to undertake a suite of colour photographs of the skies above Hampstead.¹⁹ In 2003 the veteran painter Lucian Freud (1922–2011) responded to the challenge laid down by his favourite artist with an etching after Constable’s *Study of the Trunk of an Elm Tree* (R.21.113), which had stirred his imagination while still a teenager:

I’d seen the little painting of the tree-trunk, close-up in the V&A [...] and I thought what a good idea. That’s the thing, I thought. Trees. They are everywhere. Do one of those. A close-up. Real bark. So I took my easel out and put it down in front of a tree and found it completely impossible.²⁰



Fig. 6 John Constable, *Study of the Trunk of an Elm Tree*, ca. 1824, oil on paper, 30.6 x 24.8cm, Victoria and Albert Museum, London (786-1888; R.21.113).

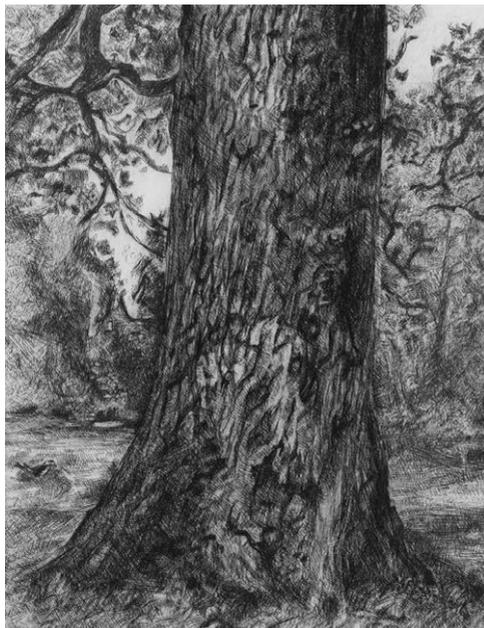


Fig. 7 Lucian Freud, *Elm Tree after Constable*, 2003, etching, 31 x 24cm, Victoria and Albert Museum, London (E.1063-2003).

Freud's words and these works (figs. 6–7) were displayed at the end of the Constable retrospective exhibition at the Victoria and Albert Museum in 2014–2015.

Antecedents

Oil sketching originated in Renaissance Venice, and was brilliantly practiced by such masters as Peter Paul Rubens (1577–1640). Until the mid-nineteenth century, it remained almost exclusively a studio-based activity, while outdoor sketches were generally made in chalks or graphite. However, as early as 1650–1652 the visiting English soldier and antiquary Richard Symonds (1617–1660) had seen in Rome a portable oil paint box suitable “to paint *Paeses* (landscapes) [...] in the fields”.²¹ In his *Cours de peinture*, published in 1708 and translated into English in 1743, the French painter and critic Roger de Piles (1635–1709) describes a similar “flat box, which commodiously held their pallet, pencils, oils, and colours” for “drawing nature more particularly, and with greater exactness”.²² Joachim von Sandrart (1606–1688) and Filippo Baldinucci (1624–1696) both claimed that Claude Lorrain (1604/5–1682) painted landscapes in oils out of doors, but none appears to have survived.²³

The Welsh painter Thomas Jones (1742–1803) was a great admirer of Claude, and in the 1770s and 1780s he made powerful “Studies in Oil on thick primed paper—after Nature”.²⁴ Around 1805–1806, JMW Turner (1775–1851), William Mulready (1786–1863) and John Linnell (1792–1882) also occasionally made outdoor oil sketches (fig. 8).²⁵ The last two were encouraged in this endeavour by their teacher John Varley (1778–1842),



Fig. 8 John Linnell, *Study of a Tree*, 1806, oil on board, 32.4 x 16.8cm, Tate Gallery, London (T01490).



Fig. 9 Cornelius Varley, *Lord Rouse's Park, Henham Hall*, 1801, watercolour on paper, 26.3 x 37.1cm, British Museum, London (1973.0414.15).

whose brother Cornelius Varley (1781–1873) made similarly fresh and informal watercolour studies from nature (fig. 9). In his youth, the art collector and connoisseur Sir George Beaumont (1753–1827) had been an occasional student of Thomas Jones. The former expressed deep regard in 1806 for the “extraordinary fidelity—upon a small scale” of Linnell’s outdoor oil sketches, and many have encouraged his protégé Constable to make similar works.²⁶

A Classification of Constable’s Oil Sketches

Throughout his career, Constable made numerous drawings, mostly in graphite or sometimes black chalk or ink, often heightened with wash, typically in the pocket sketchbooks he habitually carried. In May 1802, in a letter now regarded as a fundamental statement of his aspirations, Constable remarked “drawing I am pretty well master of”, and announced his intention to “make some laborious studies from nature [...] to get a pure an unaffected representation [...] with respect to colour particularly”.²⁷ During the next few months he made a number of outdoor oil sketches such as *Dedham Vale: Evening*, which is dated July 1802 (R.02.6; fig. 10). As this is painted on a reused fragment of canvas, it was surely not meant for display, but the following year Constable did exhibit two now unidentifiable “studies from nature” at the Royal Academy.²⁸ After a hiatus of a few years, around 1808 he resumed outdoor oil sketching, which was central to his working method for over two decades until 1830 when he abandoned the technique in favour of watercolours.



Fig.10 John Constable, *Dedham Vale, Evening*, 1802, oil on canvas, later lined, 31.8 x 43.2cm, Victoria and Albert Museum, London (587-1888; R.02.6).

Constable's oil sketches are mostly broadly and rapidly painted, and utilise a range of supports, including millboard, wooden panels and fragments of canvas. He eventually came to prefer a homemade laminate made from two entire "Royal" size sheets of paper measuring 19 x 24 in. (48.3 x 61cm), glued back-to-back for extra strength, primed with a ground layer, and cut into smaller pieces for use.²⁹ He sometimes sketched on both sides, on one occasion even using the roughly planed reverse of an oak panel, years after painting on its front (R.10.39/21.13).³⁰ Constable generally covered over the white grounds of commercially prepared canvases with a reddish brown priming while the grounds of his sketches on paper laminate range from pale pink to burnt umber and purple, and from 1823 he experimented with blue grounds for evening subjects.³¹

The artist briefly explained his working method in a letter of 5 January 1825 to his close friend Archdeacon John Fisher (1788–1832): "my Brighton oil sketches [...] were done in the lid of my [paint] box on my knees as usual [...]. I put them in a book on purpose—as I find dirt destroys them a good deal."³² As they were not intended for display, these un-mounted works were left unvarnished which made them vulnerable to dirt, so he tipped them into a protective album for safekeeping. Many of Constable's oil sketches were subsequently lined onto canvas, varnished and framed, but about half those given to the Victoria and Albert Museum in 1888 remain in their original state.³³

Studies from Nature

Most of Constable's oil sketches were made between 1809 and 1829. Like the studies from the nude which he made at life classes in 1807–1808, some of these isolate a motif against a featureless brown background. For example, in 1814 Constable made a series of careful



Fig. 11 John Constable, *Two Studies of Ploughs*, 1814, oil on paper, 17.2 x 26cm, inscribed by the artist: *2d. Novr. 1814*. Victoria and Albert Museum, London (789-1888; R.14.44).

oil studies of a horse and cart (R.14.37–40), and another distinguishing between a lightweight plough used around his home village of East Bergholt and the more robust type suitable for heavier soil elsewhere in Suffolk (R.14.44; fig. 11).³⁴

Constable applied the paint thickly and wet in his *View of Dedham from the Lane Leading from East Bergholt Church to Flatford*, with long shadows suggesting a summer afternoon (R.09.65; fig. 12). Painted around 1809–1810, this was the first of a series made from that viewpoint, including the more schematic *Cart on the Lane from East Bergholt to Flatford* (R.11.9), dated 17 May 1811. A few months later, probably from a window in his parents' home, Constable sketched East Bergholt fair with its temporary canvas booths and stage with a red canopy overlooked by dark trees and a threatening sky (R.11.10). *Barges on the Stour at Flatford Lock* was probably also painted that year, perhaps at a Spring high tide, with craft waiting to enter the lock while a livid shaft of yellow light suggests a coming storm (R.11.32; fig. 13).³⁵

Sketches of *Willy Lott's House* (R.11.36 and 11.37; fig. 1) were enlarged as the left half of the composition of *The Hay Wain* (R.21.1; fig. 3), while that of *Dedham Lock and Mill* (R.16.108) was the model for a successful cabinet painting of which several versions exist, one dated 1820 (R.20.10–13). Painted on a stormy day during Constable's honeymoon in 1816, *Weymouth Bay, Bowleaze Cove* (R.16.78; fig. 14) provided the composition for two exhibition pieces (R.19.9–10). In the oil sketch water marks left by raindrops falling on the surface of the wet paint emphasize Constable's original use of the medium, to capture rapidly changing effects of light and weather.³⁶



Fig. 12 John Constable, *View of Dedham from the Flatford Lane*, ca. 1809–1810, oil on laid paper, later lined onto canvas, 23.9 x 30.3cm, Victoria and Albert Museum, London (134-1888; R.09.65).



Fig. 13 John Constable, *Barges on the Stour at Flatford Lock*, ca. 1811, oil on paper, later lined onto canvas, 26 x 31.3cm, Victoria and Albert Museum, London (325-1888; R.11.32).



Fig. 14 John Constable, *Weymouth Bay, Bowleaze Cove*, 1816, oil on millboard, 20.3 x 24.7cm, Victoria and Albert Museum, London (330-1888; R.16.78).

Effects from Nature

In October 1821, Constable explained his thoughts on painting skies to Archdeacon Fisher:

I have done a good deal of skying [...]. That landscape painter who does not make his skies a very material part of his composition—neglects to avail himself of one of his greatest aids. [...] the sky is [...] the “*key note*”, the *standard of “Scale”* and the chief “*Organ of sentiment*” [...]. The sky is the “*source of light*” in nature—and governs every thing [...]. I hope you will not think I am turned critic instead of painter.³⁷

The smoke-free hilltop location of Hampstead was ideal for viewing atmospheric effects. *Hampstead: Evening* is the last of three sketches made over eleven days in October 1820, looking westwards towards the evening sky, and is annotated with weather notes: “fine Evening Wind Gentle at S.W.” (R.20.82; fig. 15). The orb of the setting sun silhouettes the foreground shrubbery and the black clouds may be pollution from coal fires. *Branch Hill Pond, Hampstead* (R.22.43) was probably painted in the late summer of 1821, and shows the sunset piercing clouds to illuminate a solitary tree and the pond, where a rider waters his horse. Constable then flipped the canvas and on its reverse painted dark clouds parting to reveal a blue sky and white clouds above a narrow clearing fringed by trees with a cylindrical brick kiln emitting a waft of smoke.³⁸

In October 1822 Constable told Fisher: “I have made about 50 carefull studies of *skies* tolerably large”.³⁹ At least two were painted on 5 September, one at 10am (R.22.23; fig. 4), and another two hours later, which he annotated: “looking S.E. noon. Wind very brisk &



Fig. 15 John Constable, *Hampstead: Evening*, 1820, oil on card, 15.9 x 20.3cm, inscribed by the artist on the back: *28th Octr. fine Evening Wind Gentle at S.W.* Victoria and Albert Museum, London (159-1888; R.20.82).

fresh. Clouds moving very fast" (R.22.24). A smaller cloudscape inscribed "cirrus" on the back (R.22.59) portrays the wispy clouds found above 7,000 metres viewed through patches of the denser and lower cumulus, utilises meteorological terminology gleaned from Constable's own copy of Thomas Forster's *Researches about Atmospheric Phaenomena* (1815).⁴⁰

Between July and October 1824 Constable and his family visited Brighton, where he complained to the archdeacon: "there is nothing here for a painter but the breakers —& sky—which have been lovely indeed and always varying".⁴¹ The minimal sketch he made there on 12 June utilizes a long and thin sheet to express the expanse of sand, sea and sky (R.24.9; fig. 16). At the left, a boat traveling in the opposite direction to the two solitary women, wearing bonnets against the squally weather, emphasizes the distance they have yet to travel, while their bent backs suggest the wind blowing from the sea. On the "Very lovely Evening" of 19 July, Constable recorded the view eastwards, with the sand still damp and the black hulls of colliers grounded by the receding tide silhouetted against an almost cloudless sky with "very white and golden light" (R.24.11; fig.17).

After the death from consumption of Constable's wife Maria in November 1828, Fisher urged him to return to Salisbury where the following summer he engaged on his final campaign of outdoor sketching. *The Close, Salisbury* was made between 11am and midday on a fine day in July, and depicts a cloud towering above the poplar and giant alder which stood in his friend's garden (R.29.15; fig.18). Constable was perhaps attracted by the anthropomorphic character of the two trees, one tall and slender and the other massive and bulbous. *A View at Salisbury, from Archdeacon Fisher's House* (R.29.40) was painted from a window of his host's house. Long shadows suggest the early morning, and a grazing



Fig. 16 John Constable, *Brighton Beach*, 1824, oil on paper, 12 x 29.7cm, inscribed by the artist on the back: *June 12 1824*. Victoria and Albert Museum, London (783-1888; R.24.9).



Fig. 17 John Constable, *Brighton Beach, with Colliers*, 1824, oil on paper, 14.9 x 24.8cm, inscribed probably by the artist on the back: *3d tide receding left the beach wet—Head of the Chain Pier Beach Brighton July 19 Evg., 1824 [...] Very lovely Evening—looking eastwards—cliffs & light off a dark grey [?] effect—background—very white and golden light*. Victoria and Albert Museum, London (591-1888; R.24.11).

horse serves as an indicator of scale and distance, but its fine detail more closely resembles a finished picture than a sketch, suggesting it was perhaps a personal memento of what proved to be the penultimate visit to his friend's home.



Fig. 18 John Constable, *The Close, Salisbury*, 1829, oil on paper; 26.4 x 20.3cm, inscribed by the artist on the back: *Close—15 July—1829 11.o clock noon—Wind S.W.—very fine*. Victoria and Albert Museum, London (334-1888; R.29.15).

Studio Sketches

Constable's earliest dated sketch of *Branch Hill Pond, Hampstead* was made in late October 1819 but its composition was inspired by a large Rubens landscape he had seen exhibited at the British Institution the previous summer, as well as by direct observation on Hampstead Heath. (R.19.32; fig. 19).⁴² Its foreground was later reworked with a palette knife, probably in the studio when Constable used it as the model for a painting which he exhibited in 1828 (R.28.2), and later reproduced as a mezzotint in 1831. Similarly, a small graphite life drawing dated 19 April 1821 (R.21.11) was worked up as the oil sketch *Spring: East Bergholt Common* (R.21.13), probably around 1829 for the mezzotint of that subject published the following year.

Constable's most remarkable studio sketches are full-scale ones made to co-ordinate motifs assembled from smaller studies and establish the balance of light and shade for "six-foot" exhibition paintings. He first used this laborious procedure in preparation for *The White Horse* (R.19.1), now in the Frick Collection, New York, and following the positive reception of this painting in 1819, it became a regular part of his working method. This is well exemplified by the large sketch for *The Hay Wain*, which was broadly and rapidly



Fig. 19 John Constable, *Branch Hill Pond, Hampstead*, 1819, oil on canvas, 25.4 x 30cm, Victoria and Albert Museum, London (122-1888; R.19.32).

painted during the winter of 1820–1821 (R.21.2; fig. 2).⁴³ Its handling contrasts dramatically with that of *The Leaping Horse* (R.25.2), which emerged tortuously in 1824–1825 as the result of an empirical process of revision, which included opening the tacking margins at the top and the right side to slightly enlarge the canvas.⁴⁴ On display at the Victoria and Albert Museum since 1862, these full-size sketches were well-known to the Redgrave brothers, who concluded that Constable: “[...] deliberately and from judgement chose to work from studies and from memory in his studio [...] to form instead, a style and manner built on careful studies [...]”⁴⁵

The Design Argument of William Paley (1743–1805)

A unique critical appraisal of Constable’s oil sketches made during his lifetime appears in a letter of 8 April 1825 from John Fisher, thanking him for the loan of a dozen sketches of Brighton and promising to return them together with “as a sort of remunerating fee” the recently-published *Sermons on various subjects by William Paley* (fig. 20). Of these, the archdeacon remarked:

They are fit companions for your sketches, being exactly like them: full of vigour, & nature, fresh, original, warm from observation of nature, hasty, unpolished, untouched afterwards.⁴⁶



Fig. 20 John Jones after George Romney, *The Reverend William Paley*, 1792, mezzotint, plate size 56 x 40.7cm, Victoria and Albert Museum, London (26705).

To clarify the nuance of these words, we may consult the most comprehensive lexicon then available, the *Dictionary of the English Language* by Samuel Johnson (1709–1784).⁴⁷ Fisher plausibly found the sketches “original” in the theological sense of “primitive” or “pristine”, “unpolished” and “untouched” because they were not “refined” or “meddled with, and “fresh”, “warm” and “hasty” as they were “vigorous”, “zealous” and “passionate”.

A recent study of “Samuel Johnson and the languages of natural description” has shown how religion provided the principal framework and language for the description of landscape in England during the so-called “long eighteenth century”, which ended around 1830.⁴⁸ Constable was a staunch Anglican who would himself reportedly have entered the priesthood had he not been “disinclined to the necessary studies”, and his principal patron was Dr John Fisher, the Bishop of Salisbury (1748–1825), the uncle and namesake of Archdeacon Fisher, who became his closest confidant on artistic matters.⁴⁹

The archdeacon’s gift of Paley’s sermons was well considered, as their author was one of the most highly regarded and widely-read theologians of the day, with a natural style which made complex arguments readily accessible to the laity.⁵⁰ Like Fisher and his uncle, Paley had studied at Cambridge, where his *Principles of Moral and Political Philosophy* (1785) was a standard textbook. He had been one of the university’s most popular teachers when the elder Fisher was a student, and their mutual friendship with the mathematician

John Law (1745–1810) suggests they were personally acquainted.⁵¹ Fisher's simplicity and piety made him a favourite of George III, but the king was suspicious of Paley's liberal outlook, and declined to make him a bishop too.⁵²

The diaries of Constable's mentor, the landscape painter Joseph Farington (1747–1821), himself the son of a clergyman, shed light on the reception of Paley's work. Farington was engrossed in Paley's *Moral and Political Philosophy* in 1795 and 1805, and the following year he discussed the theologian's ideas with his friend, the reformer William Wilberforce (1759–1833).⁵³ In 1807 an acquaintance "expressed great satisfaction" with Paley's *Natural Theology* (1802), finding its "proofs of the truth [of] Christianity" to be conclusive, and in 1811 another remarked on the popularity of his works.⁵⁴ On Sundays in 1813 when Farington was unable to go to church, he took pleasure in reading Paley's sermons, and in 1818 the wealthy literary patron Lord Lonsdale (1757–1844) regaled him with an account of their author's personal eccentricities, which contrasted markedly with his eminence as a theologian.⁵⁵

Paley drew examples from anatomy and botany as proof of the purposeful activity of a divine creator in his "design argument for the existence of God". This may be exemplified by one of his sermons, which cites the "the limb of a fly, the feather of a bird, the scale of a fish, a grain of corn, or even a leaf of the vilest weed that grows", "the whole process, from the first budding to final decay" as "evident marks of design [...] intention and contrivance" of "a God above [...] the artificer and framer [...] of every thing which we do see".⁵⁶ Such reasoning accords with what Iris Wien has aptly termed the "sacralisation of science answering the secularisation of nature" which was widespread in the early nineteenth century.⁵⁷ For decades after Paley's death, his arguments were accepted with little demur by natural scientists, and they "charmed and convinced" the young Charles Darwin (1809–1882) as an undergraduate at Cambridge in 1828–1831, years before he developed the theory of natural selection which would ultimately refute them.⁵⁸

We know that Paley's readers included the wealthy Whig politician and art collector Nicholas Ridley Colborne (1779–1854) as well as the Baptist landscape painter and inventor Cornelius Varley (1781–1873), because in 1811 the former lent Paley's *Moral and Political Philosophy* and *Natural Theology* and the latter his *A View of the Evidences of Christianity* (1794) to the young painter John Linnell.⁵⁹ The latter's natural oil sketches (fig. 8), which had impressed Sir George Beaumont, and Varley's fresh outdoor watercolour sketches (fig. 9) seem to exemplify the "pure and unaffected representation" Constable sought in 1802 to achieve with his own "laborious studies from nature".

The third chapter of *Natural Theology* considers the workings of the eye and includes the following striking passage:

In considering vision [...] by the means of an image formed at the bottom of an eye, we can never reflect without wonder upon the smallness, yet correctness, of the picture...A landscape of five or six square leagues is brought into a space of half an inch in diameter; yet the multitude of objects which it contains, are all preserved, are all discriminated in their magnitudes, positions, and colours. The prospect from Hampstead-hill is compressed into the compass of a six-pence, yet circumstantially represented [...]. If anything can abate our admiration of the smallness of the visual tablet compared with the extent of vision, it is a reflection which the view of nature leads us [...] to make [...] that, in the hands of the Creator, great and little are nothing.⁶⁰

That Constable himself associated this popular book with his own outdoor sketching is shown by the quotation from it which closed his final lecture on landscape painting, given at Hampstead on 30 July 1836:

Paley observed of himself, that “the happiest hours of a sufficiently happy life were passed by the side of a stream”, and I am greatly mistaken if every landscape painter will not acknowledge that his most serene hours have been spent in the open air, with his palette on his hand.⁶¹

In his oil sketches, shared only with intimate friends, Constable similarly sought to capture the “great and little” of the natural world—from dock leaves (fig. 5) to elm trees (fig. 6) and from clouds (fig. 4) to sun-sets (fig. 15)—each “discriminated in their magnitudes, positions, and colours”—as though only this afforded him the necessary entitlement to include them in his exhibition paintings (fig. 3). His almost obsessive zeal in this regard was in accord with Paley’s argument that the abundance of nature was itself the ultimate proof of divinity.

Notes

* In the text and footnotes numbers preceded by the letter ‘R’ within brackets (e.g. R.22.23) refer to entries in the catalogue raisonné by Graham Reynolds, *The Later Paintings and Drawings of John Constable*, 2 vols., New Haven and London, 1984 (nos.17.1–37.7) and *The Early Paintings and Drawings of John Constable*, 2 vols., New Haven and London, 1996 (nos. 90.1–16.111 and Additions 17.29A–36.36). I am grateful for assistance to Christiana Payne, Louise Cooling, Iris Wien and participants in the Kyoto University colloquium “Appreciating the Traces of an Artist’s Hand” and the Tate Britain workshop, “Constable and the Reform of Landscape”, held respectively on 25 September and 19 November 2016.

1 E.H. Gombrich, *Art and Illusion, A Study in the Psychology of Pictorial Representation*, Princeton and Oxford, 1960, p. 385.

2 George Field, *Chromatics; or the analogy, harmony and philosophy of colours*, London, 1845, p. 120, cited in John Gage, “A Romantic Colourman: George Field and British Art”, in *The Sixty-third Volume of the Walpole Society*, London 2001, p. 18.

3 R.B. Beckett (ed.), *John Constable’s Correspondence*, III, *The Correspondence with C.R. Leslie, R.A.*, Ipswich 1965, pp. 97–99.

4 Richard and Samuel Redgrave, *A Century of Painters of the English School*, London 1866, vol. II, p. 396.

5 *A Catalogue of the interesting and valuable collection of engravings, formed by the late John Constable, Esq. R.A.*, Foster and Sons, Pall Mall, London, 10–12 May 1838; Ian Fleming-Williams and Leslie Parris, *The Discovery of Constable*, London, 1984, p. 15.

6 *A Catalogue of the valuable finished works, studies and sketches of John Constable R.A. deceased, likewise a most interesting collection of sketches and studies also, a few pictures by old and modern masters*, Foster and Sons, Pall Mall, London, 15–16 May 1838, lots 2, 4, 5, 15, 16, 17, 18.

7 For farm labourers’ wages, see: Hansard’s *Parliamentary Debates, 1837–8*, vol. 44, London 1838, p. 1048.

- 8 Fleming-Williams and Parris, *op. cit.* (note 5), pp. 20–21.
- 9 Beckett, *op. cit.* (note 3), p. 135.
- 10 Ronald Parkinson, coll. cat. *Catalogue of British Oil Paintings 1820–1860*, Victoria and Albert Museum, London, 1990, pp. 164–165.
- 11 C.R. Leslie, *Memoirs of the Life of John Constable Composed Chiefly of his Letters*, Jonathan Mayne (ed.), London, 1951, p. 94.
- 12 Fleming-Williams and Parris, *op. cit.* (note 5), p. 45.
- 13 W.P. Frith, *My Autobiography and Reminiscences*, vol. III, London, 1888, pp. 318–319, cited by Graham Reynolds, coll. cat. *Catalogue of the Constable Collection*, Victoria and Albert Museum, London 1973, p. 197.
- 14 Frederick Wedmore, review in *The Examiner*, 13 June 1874, cited by Ed Lilley, “A Rediscovered English Review of the 1874 Impressionist Exhibition”, *The Burlington Magazine*, vol. CLIV, no. 1317, December 2012, p. 845.
- 15 *The Standard*, 27 July 1888, cited by Mark Evans with Susan Owens and Stephen Calloway, exh. cat. *John Constable: The Making of a Master*, Victoria and Albert Museum, London, 2014, p. 43, n. 29.
- 16 Cited by Fleming-Williams and Parris, *op. cit.* (note 5), p. 124.
- 17 In *The Architectural Review*, vol. 81, April 1937, p. 150, cited by Mark Evans with Nicola Costaras and Clare Richardson, exh. cat. *John Constable Oil Sketches from the Victoria and Albert Museum*, London, 2011, p. 9, n. 11.
- 18 Peter Galassi, exh. cat. *Before Photography. Painting and the Invention of Photography*, Museum of Modern Art, New York, 1981, p. 25.
- 19 Martin Barnes, “The Sky in Sympathy: Scott McFarland’s Hampstead Series”, in exh. cat. *Scott McFarland*, Vancouver Art Gallery, Vancouver 2009, pp. 76–91.
- 20 Lucian Freud with William Feaver, *Lucian Freud on John Constable*, London, 2003, pp. 20, 23.
- 21 Mary Beal, *A Study of Richard Symonds: His Italian Notebooks and their Relevance to Seventeenth-Century Painting Techniques*, New York and London, 1984, pp. 73–74, 232.
- 22 Cited by Evans *et al.*, *op. cit.* (note 15), p. 40.
- 23 *Ibid.*, pp. 39–40.
- 24 *Ibid.*, p. 44.
- 25 *Ibid.*, pp. 44–45.
- 26 Noted by Farington 9 November 1806; cited *ibid.*, p. 45.
- 27 Letter of 29 May 1802 to John Dunthorne; R.B. Beckett (ed.), *John Constable’s Correspondence*, II, *Early Friends and Maria Bicknell (Mrs. Constable)*, Ipswich, 1964, p. 32.
- 28 Evans *et al.*, *op. cit.* (note 17), p. 19.

29 *Ibid.*, p. 145.

30 Mark Evans, Clare Richardson and Nicola Costaras, "A Recently Discovered Oil Sketch by John Constable at the Victoria and Albert Museum", *The Burlington Magazine*, vol. CLV, no. 1329, December 2013, pp. 823–824.

31 Evans *et al.*, *op. cit.* (note 17), pp. 151–156.

32 R.B. Beckett (ed.), *John Constable's Correspondence*, VI, *The Fishers*, Ipswich 1968, p. 189.

33 Evans, *et al.*, *op. cit.* (note 30), p. 823.

34 Michael Rosenthal, *Constable: The Painter and his Landscape*, London, 1983, p. 12.

35 Evans *et al.*, *op. cit.* (note 15), p. 47.

36 *Ibid.*, pp. 47–48.

37 Letter of 23 October 1821; Beckett, *op. cit.* (note 32), pp. 76–77.

38 Evans *et al.*, *op. cit.* (note 30), pp. 823–826.

39 Letter of 7 October 1822; Beckett, *op. cit.* (note 32), p. 98.

40 Evans *et al.*, *op. cit.* (note 15), p. 51.

41 Letter of August 1824; Beckett, *op. cit.* (note 32), p. 171.

42 Evans *et al.*, *op. cit.* (note 15), pp. 156, 170–171.

43 Evans *et al.*, *op. cit.* (note 17), pp. 23–26, 79.

44 *Ibid.*, pp. 26, 86.

45 Redgrave, *op. cit.* (note 4), pp. 391–396.

46 Beckett, *op. cit.* (note 32), p. 196.

47 First published in 1755; numerous later editions. (<http://publicdomainreview.org/collections/samuel-johnsons-dictionary-of-the-english-language-1785>. Access 1/9/2016)

48 Robert J. Mayhew, *Landscape, Literature and English Religious Culture, 1600–1800*, Basingstoke and New York, 2004.

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- 52 G.M. Ditchfield, *George III: An Essay in Monarchy*, Basingstoke and New York, 2002, p. 92.
- 53 Kenneth Garlick, Angus Macintyre, Kathryn Cave and Evelyn Newby (ed.), *The Diary of Joseph Farington*, 17 vols, New Haven and London, 1978–1998, pp. 388, 2621, 2823.
- 54 Garlick *et. al.*, *op. cit.* (note 53), pp. 3151, 4032.
- 55 Garlick *et. al.*, *op. cit.* (note 53), pp. 4420, 4435, 5206.
- 56 Edmund Paley (ed.), *Sermons on Various Subjects by William Paley*, London 1825, vol. II, pp. 247–255.
- 57 Iris Wien, “[T]he Chiar’oscuro does really exist in Nature’: John Constable’s *English Landscape Scenery* and contemporary theories on colour, light and atmosphere”, in Magdalena Bushart, Gregor Wedekind (ed.), *Die Farbe Grau*, Berlin and Boston 2016, pp. 173–174.
- 58 Fyfe, *op. cit.* (note 50), pp. 321, 329–332, 334–335; Charles Darwin (ed. Nora Barlow), *The Autobiography of Charles Darwin 1809–1882*, London 1958, p. 59.
- 59 I am indebted to Christiana Payne (personal communication of 29 November 2016) for the information that the transcripts of John Linnell’s journals now held by Joan Linnell Ivimy and the Linnell Trust include the following diary entries: “July 6th 1811—Called on Cornelius Varley. Borrowed of Mr Colborne Paley’s moral philosophy”; “July 15th 1811—Borrowed of Mr Ridley Colborne the 2nd vol. of Paley’s philosophy, Paleys Natural History and Bacon’s Essays”; “Sept 23rd Called on C Varley. Borrowed of do 1st vol. of Paleys Evidences.”
- 60 William Paley, *The Works of William Paley complete in one volume*, Edinburgh 1827, p.442, cited in Mayhew, *op. cit.* (note 48), p. 80.
- 61 R.B. Beckett (ed.), *John Constable’s Discourses*, Ipswich 1970, p. 74; Leslie Parris, Conal Shields and Ian Fleming-Williams (ed.), *John Constable: Further Documents and Correspondence*, part 1, London and Ipswich 1975, p. 24; Paley, *op. cit.* (note 60), p. 541: “I have been a great follower of fishing myself, and in its cheerful solitude have passed some of the happiest hours of a sufficiently happy life [...]”.

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