



# CONSTABLE

IMPRESSIONS OF LAND, SEA AND SKY

EDUCATION KIT



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IMPRESSIONS OF LAND, SEA AND SKY

John Constable, one of the greatest British landscape painters, was born in 1776 and died in 1837. *Constable: impressions of land, sea and sky* traces his development as an artist and demonstrates his close bond with the English countryside, where he was born and raised. It examines how Constable sketched from nature, and how his constant reference to these sketches enabled him to capture light, movement and atmospheric conditions in his finished works.

## Education Kit

### Introduction

This printable version of the education kit accompanies an interactive **CD-ROM** and is intended to prepare students for a visit to the exhibition. It contains:

- seventeen images from the exhibition and five subsidiary images
- activities, questions, discussion points and further information related to the images, to test comprehension or extend awareness
- a biographical summary, including cultural and political events of Constable's time (separate pdf document)
- links to the National Gallery of Australia's website [nga.gov.au](http://nga.gov.au) and other relevant websites



*View towards the rectory, East Bergholt*

30 September 1810

oil on canvas laid on panel 15.6 x 24.8 cm

John G Johnson collection, Philadelphia Museum of Art,  
bequeathed in 1917

John Constable was born in East Bergholt, a small village in Suffolk, on 11 June 1776. He was the fourth child and second son of Golding Constable – a prosperous mill owner, corn and coal merchant, and barge operator – and his wife, Ann.

East Bergholt is situated overlooking the fertile valley of the Stour River. Views of luxuriant meadow flats, woods, rivers, churches, villages and cottages often appear in Constable's sketches and paintings, and even after he left home his affection for the childhood he had spent there became one of the driving forces of his art. Constable was not interested in running the family business (which his younger brother Abram took over) however, he did continue to paint the mills, barges and fields associated with the business. The emotional connection he felt for this part of England resulted in paintings of the countryside that capture a harmonious relationship between humanity and nature.

From the age of sixteen Constable had been interested in sketching outdoors. He became friends with John Dunthorne, a local amateur artist, and they worked together in the fields, painting one view for a certain time each day until the shadows changed. From an early age he was interested in the fleeting effects of nature and the challenges of capturing them on paper and canvas.

Constable painted several oil sketches of the view across the fields to the East Bergholt rectory, showing the fields where he walked with his fiancée, Maria Bicknell, on her

many visits to her grandfather, Dr Rhudde, at the rectory. In a letter to Maria Constable he suggested that it was actually in the fields separating East Bergholt House from the rectory that they had reached an understanding. They had fallen in love in 1809 but were unable to marry for seven years. Maria's grandfather was opposed to the relationship and they were only able to marry in 1816, after the death of Constable's father gave them some financial independence through an inheritance of 400 pounds a year.

*View towards the rectory, East Bergholt*, is a lively impression of the rising sun glowing over and through the fields, painted from an upper-floor window at the back of the family home, in 1810. Note how Constable captures the intensity of his response through energetic brushstrokes and the use of bright reds and greens.

### Questions

- Why do you think this view was so important to Constable?
- Can you think of a novel written at this time, examining the plight of unmarried women?





*View towards the rectory, East Bergholt*  
30 September 1810  
oil on canvas laid on panel 15.6 x 24.8 cm  
John G. Johnson collection, Philadelphia  
Museum of Art, bequeathed in 1917



*Autumnal sunset* c. 1812  
oil on paper on canvas 17.1 x 33.6 cm  
Victoria and Albert Museum, London, gift of Isabel  
Constable in 1888

By 1812 Constable was thirty-six years old. He had been living in London for twelve years – firstly as a student at the Royal Academy Schools, where he learnt to draw from plaster casts of antique statues and from life, and later as a professional artist, making a small living by painting society portraits. But it was the lure of the landscape that led him to purchase a small house opposite the family home in 1802, so that he could paint the local landscape. He expressed his intention to return to East Bergholt as often as possible to make, in his words, 'laborious studies from nature' and to get a 'pure and unaffected representation of the scenes'.

Between 1808 and his marriage in 1816, Constable spent most summers and early autumns in East Bergholt, painting directly from nature, sketching in the fields and surrounding countryside. He then returned to London to get his works ready for exhibition at the Royal Academy in May.

In *Autumnal sunset* c. 1812 he paints an evening view over the fields, with a man and woman walking down the ancient path connecting East Bergholt with the neighbouring village of Stratford St Mary. The figure on the horse is about to descend the farm track to Vale Farmhouse. Constable has shown the sun glowing across the undulating landscape, but not reaching into the valley, which remains in shadow; he included a flock of rooks to enhance the atmosphere of the evening.

He later wrote that 'Autumn only is called the painter's season, from the great richness of the colours of the dead

and decaying foliage, and the peculiar tone and beauty of the skies'. He was fond of this image, and in 1829 selected it as one of the works for David Lucas to translate into a mezzotint: *Autumnal sunset* c. 1829–32.

### Question

- Read the entry for 1812 in the biographical summary. What connections can you make between Constable's attitude to nature and that of contemporary writers?





*Autumnal sunset* c. 1812  
oil on paper on canvas 17.1 x 33.6 cm  
Victoria and Albert Museum, London, gift of  
Isabel Constable in 1888



**David Lucas** (1802–81) after John Constable *Autumnal sunset* c. 1829–32  
*English landscape* part V July 1832  
mezzotint, drypoint 17.6 x 25.2 cm (plate)  
National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne, acquired through the Felton Bequest in 1970

In 1829 Constable decided to employ David Lucas to engrave and publish a number of mezzotints after his paintings. The decision to make prints was based on financial and promotional reasons. As more people could afford to buy prints, his art and his ideas about art and nature would theoretically become more widely known. However, few copies sold during his lifetime.

Constable emphasised two points in the introduction to his first folio of prints. Firstly, that he always took his inspiration directly from nature, unlike other artists who painted from memory, and secondly, he revealed his obsession with 'the Chiaroscuro of nature' – the light and dark effects of sun and shadow. Constable's use of dramatic lighting expressed the transitory character of nature, which he had become more and more interested in since the 1820s. In his later works he increasingly revealed his state of mind with darker and more dramatic images of nature, storms, rainbows and sudden gleams of light.

The process of making a mezzotint is laborious and difficult. The metal plate is firstly roughened to create a surface that when loaded with ink will print a deep, dark black. The engraver then smooths out the texture of the plate with a sharp instrument, creating surfaces that do not collect ink and therefore print as light areas. The dramatic contrast between light and dark thus produced supported Constable's ideas about the importance of atmospheric light in his work.

Lucas based the mezzotint *Autumnal sunset* c. 1829–32 on Constable's oil sketch *Autumnal sunset* c. 1812. He began working on the plate in around 1829 but it was not published until July 1832. During the proofing Lucas reworked the sky, adding a line of low-lying clouds. He also introduced a tree on the left, corn stooks and stubble in the foreground field, and the towers of Langham and Stoke-by-Nayland churches.

In a letter to Lucas, dated 2 June 1832, Constable criticised his poor transcription of the flight of rooks. He wrote: 'the Evng – is spoiled owing to your having fooled with the Rooks – they were the chief feature – which caused me to adopt the subject – nobody knew what they are – but took them for blemishes on the plate'. Lucas reworked the image until Constable was satisfied.





**David Lucas** (1802–81) after John Constable  
*Autumnal sunset* c. 1829–32  
*English landscape* part V July 1832  
mezzotint, drypoint 17.6 x 25.2 cm (plate)  
National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne, acquired  
through the Felton Bequest in 1970



*The Stour Valley and Dedham Village*

5 September 1814

oil on canvas 39.4 x 55.9 cm

Leeds Museums and Galleries, City Art Gallery, purchased through the Harding Fund in 1934

Constable spent the summer and early autumn of 1814 in Suffolk, painting directly from nature. In one such work, *The Stour Valley and Dedham Village*, he portrays a panoramic view over the Stour Valley from a raised position on the road. He shows Dedham church and village to the left of centre, and labourers shovelling manure in the foreground. This down-to-earth image of the landscape around his home is a realistic record of Suffolk farming practice of the time and emphasises the value of honest farming life. The men would clear manure from the stockyards and deposit it beside the fields in June. In September they shovelled it up and carted it away to spread over the fields.

By this time the common lands were being enclosed and becoming unavailable for use by poorer members of the community. Constable was very anxious about this transformation, and his paintings sometimes reflect respect for the past, rather than acceptance of social change.

The image is not framed by the large trees often found in his picturesque landscapes (influenced by Claude Lorrain). Here the horizon bisects the composition and the viewer's eye is led through the image via the dark shadow of the foreground, with the line of trees emphasising the horizontality of the painting. The lighter area in the lower right is balanced by the sunlit background and distant village.

Constable painted this work as a preparatory study for a painting commissioned by Thomas Fitzhugh for his bride, as a memento of the valley she knew well and was leaving

behind.

### Question

- How does this painting reflect Constable's feelings about contemporary farming practice?





*The Stour Valley and Dedham Village*  
5 September 1814  
oil on canvas 39.4 x 55.9 cm  
Leeds Museums and Galleries, City Art Gallery,  
purchased through the Harding Fund in 1934



*Kitchen garden at Golding Constable's house* c. 1814  
pencil 30.2 x 44.9 cm  
Victoria & Albert Museum, London, gift of Isabel Constable  
in 1888

*Kitchen garden at Golding Constable's house* c. 1814 is one of two carefully detailed drawings that Constable may have exhibited at the Royal Academy in 1815.

Constable depicted the garden and fields at the back of his family home, a place he described to Maria Bicknell as 'the sweet feilds [*sic*] where we have passed so many happy hours together'. In the foreground he drew the flower garden with the central circular bed, which he associated with his mother, and the adjacent kitchen garden that he connected with his father. He included the figures of a woman (perhaps his mother) in the flower garden, and two gardeners tending the rows of vegetables in the kitchen garden. On the left he drew his father's barn, and on the extreme right he depicted the rectory where Maria stayed with her grandfather, Dr Rhudde. Beyond lie Golding Constable's fields and, on the horizon, his windmill on East Bergholt Common. Constable drew the scene looking down from a first-floor window at the back of the house.

Constable was a consummate draughtsman, using pencil in a variety of ways to capture the structure of the landscape. In his earlier drawings, such as this one, he reproduced the natural appearance of the garden in a detailed and descriptive way. Later drawings were looser and more expressive, and were often enhanced with watercolour washes. This looser style is also evident in his later oil paintings.

Constable was concerned with facts of nature, but because of his personal connections and deep affection for the subject of this work, he created an emotionally charged

scene. In this ordered and harmonious landscape he expressed his pleasure in a successful and well-organised farm.

### Questions

- Where is the vanishing point in this composition?
- Compare this drawing with the drawing *A cottage in a cornfield* c. 1815, and discuss the purpose and technique of each.





*Kitchen garden at Golding Constable's house*  
c. 1814  
pencil 30.2 x 44.9 cm  
Victoria & Albert Museum, London, gift of Isabel  
Constable in 1888



*The wheatfield* 1816  
oil on canvas 53.7 x 77.2 cm  
Estate of Sir Edwin A.G. Manton

Constable painted *The wheatfield* in 1816, the year that the enclosure of the common fields was introduced into Bergholt, together with more mercenary practices of farming, whereby the poor were prevented from collecting leftover ears of wheat after the harvest.

In this painting Constable presented life before these changes. We see harvesters, gleaners, a boy with a dog and a distant ploughman – a traditional farming community working harmoniously together. The woman and two girls in the foreground are collecting the ears of wheat missed by the reapers. The boy with the dog is guarding the workers' food and drink, which is draped in clothes to shade it from the sun.

Although Constable referred to a number of sketchbook drawings when creating this work, he mostly painted it outdoors, during August of 1815. It is a painting that demonstrates his ability to capture the immediate sensations of light and atmosphere, and to paint with jewel-like precision. The detailed surface of this painting may be the result of criticism Constable received for his 'unfinished' works exhibited at this time.

This painting was exhibited at the Royal Academy in 1816 and at the British Institution the following year. Constable included a quotation from Robert Bloomfield's *The farmer's boy* with the catalogue entry:

Nature herself invites the reapers forth  
No rake takes here what heaven to all bestows  
Children of want, for you the bounty flows!

Bloomfield believed, as Constable most likely did, that it was good to be generous to the gleaners, to display Christian charity and to remember the fickleness of fortune. The idea that a nation's countryside reflected its social and political state was common at this time. Scenes of husbandry and cultivation signified order and harmony, whereas wilderness reflected barbarity and anarchy. By making social, political and moral allusions Constable believed he was elevating his landscape painting to the status of history painting.

Although the Napoleonic wars between England and France were coming to an end with the Battle of Waterloo in 1815, feelings of anxiety led a number of British artists to paint subjects of pastoral pleasure and a lifestyle threatened by imminent invasion.

### Activities

- Look at how the illusion of depth is conveyed by the placement of figures along the diagonal. Use the zoom to examine the brushstrokes in detail.
- By reading the entry for 1816 in the biographical summary find out more about the social implications of the enclosure policy.





*The wheatfield* 1816  
oil on canvas 53.7 x 77.2 cm  
Estate of Sir Edwin A.G. Manton



*'The Quarters' behind Alresford Hall* 1816  
oil on canvas 33.5 x 51.5 cm  
National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne, gift of Mrs Ethel Brookman Kirkpatrick in 1958

Located in the grounds of Alresford Hall, near Colchester, 'The Quarters' were used as a picnic, fishing and boating lodge by Major-General Francis Slater-Rebow and his family. Slater-Rebow's father-in-law built the lodge during the 1760s in the fashionable Chinoiserie style, at a time when garden pavilions were frequently used for informal parties.

Constable's patron and friend Slater-Rebow commissioned the artist to paint *'The Quarters' behind Alresford Hall* and a larger companion picture, *Wivenhoe Park, Essex*, during a visit there in July 1816. He returned to paint these works in August and September and began by making a detailed drawing of the subject, which was used as a basis for preparing the painting.

The close foliage on the right-hand border of the painting frames the composition and leads the eye to the focal point: the pavilion placed in the exact centre of the painting. The contrast between the natural landscape of the woodland and the artificiality of the oriental pavilion is revealed through texture and colour. Constable's closely observed details of the shadows of the trees, the reflections on the still water, and the swallows skimming the water's surface and flying in the sky, indicate not only the season but the time of day, a late summer's afternoon.

### Discussion

- Compare this painting with *The Glebe Farm* c. 1830 and discuss the change in Constable's approach to the handling of paint and representation of light.





*'The Quarters' behind Alresford Hall* 1816  
oil on canvas 33.5 x 51.5 cm  
National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne, gift of  
Mrs Ethel Brookman Kirkpatrick in 1958

*A cottage in a cornfield* c. 1815  
pencil 10.2 x 7.9 cm  
Victoria and Albert Museum, London, gift of Isabel  
Constable in 1888



In his 1813 sketchbook, Constable made three drawings of this cottage – one from the same point of view and two from the opposite direction. Two years later, around 1815, he made the drawing *A cottage in a cornfield*. He also made two paintings of the scene, including *A cottage in a cornfield* c. 1816–17.

Constable wrote to Maria Bicknell on 27 August 1815: 'I live almost wholly in the feilds [*sic*] and see nobody but the harvest men. The weather has been uncommonly fine though we have had some very high winds that have disconcerted the foliage a great deal.'

Constable drew constantly in small sketchbooks, documenting the structure of views for later paintings. These sketchbooks were his storehouse of images, and he continued to refer to the 1813 and 1814 sketchbooks of Suffolk scenes for the rest of his life. His control of the medium is evident in the numerous ways he handles the pencil. Compare the way he draws clouds with the way he defines the structure of the cottage, and look at how he creates the variety of tones in the foreground with pencil strokes of different density and direction.



*A cottage in a cornfield* c. 1815  
pencil 10.2 x 7.9 cm  
Victoria and Albert Museum, London, gift of  
Isabel Constable in 1888





*A cottage in a cornfield* c. 1816–17  
oil on canvas 31.5 x 26.3 cm  
Amgueddfa Cymru National Museum Wales, Cardiff,  
purchased with the assistance of the National Art  
Collections Fund in 1978

In *A cottage in a cornfield* c. 1816–17, Constable painted a cottage he often passed as a boy, on his way to school at Dedham. The cottage, at the end of Fen Lane, belonged to Peter Godfrey of Old Hall. One of his workmen probably lived in it.

Constable painted two versions of this subject, based on the original pencil sketch. The first was painted mostly outdoors, at East Bergholt, and was started in the summer of 1815 and completed in 1833. This, the second version, was painted in his studio in London towards the end of 1816 or at the beginning of 1817. Constable made a number of changes to the drawing, adding a figure beside the cottage on the left, and the donkey and foal standing to the right of the gate.

Throughout his life Constable copied the work of other artists, both as quick sketches and as finished copies. He copied artists as diverse as Cozens, Cuyp, Reynolds, Rubens, Titian, Willem van de Velde the younger and Richard Wilson. But the artists he copied most frequently were Claude Lorrain and seventeenth-century Dutch landscape artist Jacob van Ruisdael. In this painting Constable appears to have based his trees on those in Martino Rota's engraving after Titian's *Martyrdom of St Peter Martyr*, a work Constable greatly admired. Thus, even during a period when he was working close to nature, Constable combined elements from older artists in his paintings, in order to improve his composition.

### Activity

- Visit the National Gallery of Australia's Constable website and find other works of art in the exhibition that are based on works by earlier artists.  
[nga.gov.au/Constable](http://nga.gov.au/Constable)



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IMPRESSIONS OF LAND, SEA AND SKY

*A cottage in a cornfield* c. 1816–17  
oil on canvas 31.5 x 26.3 cm  
Amgueddfa Cymru National Museum Wales,  
Cardiff, purchased with the assistance of the  
National Art Collections Fund in 1978





*Malvern Hall: the entrance front* c. 1820  
oil on canvas 54.6 x 78.1 cm  
Yale Center for British Art, New Haven, gift of Mr and Mrs  
Paul Mellon in 1977

Constable had met Henry Greswolde Lewis, the owner of Malvern Hall, in Warwickshire, through the dowager Countess of Dysart, Lewis's sister. In 1820 she asked Constable to paint views of the house from both sides. He visited the house in September that year and painted *Malvern Hall: the entrance front*, a full-size preparatory sketch of the entrance, or garden front of the house, as viewed from the east. He painted it with the liveliness of an outdoor sketch created directly in front of the motif, with the canvas support clearly visible in some areas. He also made a pencil drawing of the subject on the spot, dated 10 September 1820. On his return to London he painted a pair of views for the countess – one showing Malvern Hall from the garden front, as in this work, and the other as seen from across the park and mirrored in the lake.

Although this painting is an example of country-house portraiture, the house is not central to the composition; in fact the garden dominates and the house is a background feature in the landscape. Framed by the two dark areas of foliage, the grand house recedes into the middle distance. This less formal, asymmetrical composition demonstrates Constable's interest in views where the subjects of compositions are partially hidden and seen via a winding vista.

Before the 1820s Constable's working method was to firstly create a pencil sketch, then a small oil sketch of his subject. In the studio, the small sketch was scaled up to create a larger composition. When he began to paint the very large six-footers, or paintings of nearly two metres in width, he often created full-size studies. Sometimes he had

two versions in progress at the same time, with very similar brushstrokes, and this has led to a lot of confusion about which paintings are sketches and which are finished works.

By the 1820s Constable was at last achieving some success with his paintings. In 1818 two landscapes fetched twenty and forty-five guineas, and demand was building for his very competent portraits. The nearly two-metre wide picture *The leaping horse* was painted in 1819 and, in part due to its large scale, attracted notice on the crowded walls of the Royal Academy. Even though some thought that the energy of the brushwork was not appropriate for a public painting, in general it received critical approval and was bought for 100 guineas. The painting confirmed Constable's reputation and helped his case for election as an Associate of the Royal Academy in November 1819.

### Question

- If you divide this composition vertically into quarters you will find that, as in many of his paintings, Constable has placed a significant detail on the dividing lines. What details can you note on the dividing lines of this work?





*Malvern Hall: the entrance front* c. 1820  
oil on canvas 54.6 x 78.1 cm  
Yale Center for British Art, New Haven, gift of  
Mr and Mrs Paul Mellon in 1977



*Salisbury Cathedral from the Bishop's Grounds* 1823  
oil on canvas 87.6 x 111.8 cm  
Victoria and Albert Museum, London, gift of John  
Sheepshanks in 1857

During a visit to Salisbury in 1811, Constable made three drawings of the cathedral: from the southeast, the southwest and the east. He used the view from the southwest in 1823, twelve years later, as the compositional basis for an oil painting: *Salisbury Cathedral from the Bishop's Grounds*.

Constable painted this work for his friend Bishop Fisher of Salisbury. The bishop is shown in the left foreground, pointing out the sunlit cathedral to his wife, as one of their daughters, Dorothea, walks along the path towards them. Near the reflective pond in the foreground Constable included cows, which contribute a peaceful, pastoral element to the composition.

An arch of trees frames the spire of the cathedral, and a lower arch of foliage partly obscures the building. The framing device of the trees directs the viewer's eye from the right foreground, diagonally to the central left tree and then to the sunlit background. Constable wrote: 'Does not the Cathedral look beautiful amongst the Golden foliage? its silvery grey must sparkle in it'.

This work was Constable's most important exhibit at the 1823 Royal Academy exhibition and it was well received by critics. However, the passing storm clouds over the cathedral spire, which give movement and contrast to the scene, were not appreciated by the bishop, who may have thought that in presenting the cathedral under a cloud Constable had created an image that reflected the changing attitudes to religion that were current at the time.

In July 1824 the bishop asked Constable to over paint the dark cloud, but rather than doing so he painted a second version for the bishop, a full-scale replica with a sunnier sky, and the trees thinned-out and no longer meeting in an arch above the cathedral spire. It is interesting to note that by this time Constable had employed an assistant, John Dunthorne Junior, to block in the structure of his compositions.

### Further information

- Salisbury Cathedral was built between 1220 and 1265, with the tower and spire added at the beginning of the fourteenth century. It is the tallest spire in England, being 123 metres tall. The cathedral is 145 metres long and 70 metres wide, and the height of the interior is 25 metres. About 3 acres of glass were used for the windows and 60 000 tons of Chilmark stone were used in the construction. The view Constable painted in this work was created in the eighteenth century, when the boggy land was drained and an ancient cemetery covered over.





*Salisbury Cathedral from the Bishop's Grounds*  
1823  
oil on canvas 87.6 x 111.8 cm  
Victoria and Albert Museum, London, gift of  
John Sheepshanks in 1857

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1

*Clouds* 5 September 1822  
oil on paper laid on cardboard 37.0 x 49.0 cm  
National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne, acquired through the Felton Bequest in 1938

2

*Study of clouds* 28 July 1822  
oil on paper 29.2 x 48.2 cm  
The Frick Collection, New York, bequest of Henrietta ES Lockwood in memory of her mother and father, Ellery Sedgwick and Mabel Cabot Sedgwick in 2000

3

*Cloud study: evening* 31 August 1822  
oil on paper 47.0 x 58.0 cm  
Birmingham Museums and Art Gallery, gift of John Feeney in 1929

4

*Cloud study*, 6 September 1822  
oil on paper 24.4 x 30.7  
private collection



2



3



4

Constable's wife, Maria, developed tuberculosis soon after their marriage. By 1818 her illness had prompted them to rent a house at the airy village of Hampstead, on the northern slopes above London. Here the family stayed for long periods and Constable was introduced to a new landscape of horizontal vistas, huge skies and extensive views over the Heath. The rural economy of this area was based on quarrying rather than agriculture, contrasting with the contained, undulating, arable landscape of the Stour Valley, the subject of so many of Constable's earlier landscapes.

In 1821, after he converted a small shed in the garden into a workshop, Constable began his 'skying' – a systematic series of oil studies of changing skies at Hampstead Heath. In the summer of 1822 he painted about fifty studies of clouds.

In these sky studies Constable captured the passing effects of changing light and atmospheric effects. He inscribed them with the time of day, date, wind direction and weather conditions under which they were painted, and his inscriptions and the official weather conditions recorded for that day often coincide completely.

No other artist of the time (with the exception of perhaps Turner) emphasised the importance of these transient natural phenomena. Many just used the sky as a backdrop; however, for Constable the sky was, as he stated, a 'key note' and 'standard of Scale', it was the 'Chief organ of Sentiment'. Constable often discussed his belief in the expressive importance of the sky in his paintings, and its ability to dictate the mood of a landscape. He stated: 'The sky is the "source of light" in nature – and governs everything'.

## Question

- Examine the skies in all of the paintings in this resource. If the skies were plain blue, how would this alter the mood of the paintings?





*Clouds* 5 September 1822  
oil on paper laid on cardboard 37.0 x 49.0 cm  
National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne,  
acquired through the Felton Bequest in 1938



*Study of 'A boat passing a lock' c. 1826*  
oil on canvas 103.5 x 129.9 cm  
National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne, acquired through  
the Felton Bequest in 1951

The subject of *Study of 'A boat passing a lock' c. 1826* is the same as the finished painting titled *A boat passing a lock*, of 1826. It shares the same general elements, with a boat ascending the river and a rainstorm in the sky. This work differs slightly, in that Constable painted the background in a looser fashion and did not include the dog in the right foreground. There is a *pentimento* (a change made by the artist) which suggests one of the posts at the entrance to the lock was originally higher than it appears.

Scholars have put forward a number of suggestions regarding the relationship of this work to the other painting and other versions of this subject. At first it was generally accepted as a preliminary oil study, however, it has been claimed that this painting might be an independent, finished work.

Whatever the purpose of this work, in painting it Constable used more finished brushwork, and greater definition and coherence than he frequently did in his preliminary full-scale sketches. He carefully modulated the light in the sky to create a sense of wind and weather, and he depicted the plants on the riverbank and the lock's wooden structure with considerable attention to detail.

It was through such spontaneous freedom and expressive handling of a rapidly painted sketch that Constable redefined the notion of a 'finished' picture. Two of Constable's large paintings – one being *The hay wain* 1821 – caused a sensation and excited French painters when exhibited in Paris at the Salon, because of their innovative use of character and scale usually reserved for history painting.

### Discussions

- Compare this and the following painting carefully and, using the zoom, look at the brushwork of both. Discuss the way in which Constable repeats seemingly spontaneous passages of paint.
- Visit the National Gallery of Australia's Constable website and examine the two drawings of this subject. Discuss how they differ from the paintings.  
[nga.gov.au/Constable](http://nga.gov.au/Constable)





*Study of 'A boat passing a lock'* c. 1826  
oil on canvas 103.5 x 129.9 cm  
National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne,  
acquired through the Felton Bequest in 1951



*A boat passing a lock* 1826  
oil on canvas 101.6 x 127.0 cm  
Royal Academy of Arts, London, Diploma work, accepted  
in 1829

In *A boat passing a lock* 1826 Constable depicted a boat ascending the River Stour at Flatford Lock. The boat is tied to a post, while the barefooted boatman or lock keeper opens the gates to lower the water level so that the boat can enter the chamber before being lifted to the upper level to continue its journey. The diagonal from the lower right directs the viewer's eye to the focal point: the red-clad figure. In the distance are Flatford Old Bridge and Bridge Cottage; the second lock gate and a barge can be seen on the right. A dog, present in a number of Constable's paintings, appears in the foreground. Although this peaceful scene is bathed in light, the stormy clouds and rain in the upper left corner suggest imminent change.

Constable had been repeatedly occupied with the motif of the Lock during the 1820s, and it could be regarded as his favourite subject. His conservative attitude towards social change and his belief in the British class system can be seen in the many paintings made of workers happily performing practical tasks. Figures in Constable's paintings are always in harmony with the landscape. Their actions are self absorbed and practical, belying the fact that during the winter of 1821 rural labourers in Suffolk reacted angrily to unemployment by breaking threshing machines and forming destructive mobs.

This painting was commissioned by Bond Street picture dealer and bookseller James Carpenter, in 1826. When Constable was elected a full member of the Royal Academy in 1829, he was expected to present a work to the Academy. Such was the value Constable placed on this work that he took it back from Carpenter to present to the

Academy, depositing 100 guineas with a banker until he replaced it with a work of the same size.

### Questions

- Do the landscapes of Constable do more than document an actual site at an actual time? Discuss in relation to this painting.
- Visit the Royal Academy of Arts website to read a brief history of the institution. When was the Royal Academy founded and who was its first president?  
[royalacademy.org.uk](http://royalacademy.org.uk)





*A boat passing a lock* 1826  
oil on canvas 101.6 x 127.0 cm  
Royal Academy of Arts, London, Diploma work,  
accepted in 1829



*Rainstorm over the sea* c. 1824–28  
oil on paper on canvas 23.5 x 32.6 cm  
Royal Academy of Arts, London, gift of Isabel Constable in 1888

Constable first visited Brighton in May 1824, when he took his wife there for the sake of her health. They took lodgings in Western Place on the edge of the town, near the sea. To begin with he was critical of Brighton, describing it as 'Picadilly by the sea side'. However – despite the social aspect, which he tried to ignore – he found new inspiration there and created a number of oil sketches that reflect his enthusiastic response to the moods of the sky and the effects of light on the sea.

*Rainstorm over the sea* c. 1824–28, a spectacular oil sketch that looks directly out to sea, is one of the most remarkable open-air sketches Constable painted during his visits to Brighton. He captured the fleeting effect of a rainstorm at sea, with thunderous black clouds surrounding a shaft of sunlight, which breaks through the clouds on the left to light up the horizon. The scale of the tiny boats visible in the distance emphasises the awesome nature of this storm. Dynamic, vertical torrents of rain have been painted quickly and energetically, capturing the transient nature of this weather event. It is possible that Constable's anxiety about his wife's health inspired the darkness of this image, with its impending storm and drama.

To create these oil sketches Constable sat within the landscape and painted directly on paper in the lid of his painting box, which was resting on his knees.

### Activity

- Using soft pencil or charcoal, make your own impression of a stormy sky from nature.





*Rainstorm over the sea* c. 1824–28  
oil on paper on canvas 23.5 x 32.6 cm  
Royal Academy of Arts, London, gift of Isabel  
Constable in 1888



*The Vale of Dedham* 1827–28  
oil on canvas 145.0 x 122.0 cm  
National Gallery of Scotland, Edinburgh, purchased from  
the Cowan Smith Bequest Fund with assistance from the  
National Art Collections Fund in 1944

*The Vale of Dedham* 1827–28 was Constable's last major painting of the Stour Valley. He often created his unique vision of the landscape by looking at landscapes from the past. *Landscape with Hagar and the Angel*, painted by Claude Lorrain in 1646, was a favourite work that Constable had admired since he first saw it at George Beaumont's London house around 1800. The Claudian composition of framing trees and overlapping landscape sections, leading the eye into the distance, are evident in this painting.

Constable depicted Dedham Vale framed by trees, looking eastwards from Gun Hill, down along the course of the River Stour towards the sea, with the tower of Dedham Church and the village in the middle distance, and Harwich and the coast beyond. It was a subject that had interested Constable for many years. The trees on the right are balanced in the left foreground by an old stump sprouting new growth – a compositional invention to direct attention to the distant landscape, and a symbol of regeneration. In the foreground is the figure of a gypsy mother, wearing a red jacket, nursing her child beside a fire. Constable often painted a small red detail in the foreground as a compositional device, to attract the eye and contrast with the green of vegetation.

His unusual and original painting method, in which he used palette knives and fingers, as well as many different brushes, gives variety to the painted surface. This energetic process created a sense of immediacy, as if wind and light were moving through the image. The white-topped clouds

convey the feel of summer sunshine, the flickering leaves suggest wind in the trees, and the glistening light on the ground describes the effect of the shower of rain that has just passed.

The year 1828 was an emotional one for Constable: his seventh child was born, his wife's health deteriorated and, despite one last visit to Brighton in May, she died of pulmonary tuberculosis in November. In one of his many letters Constable wrote: 'Hourly do I feel the loss of my departed Angel ... Nothing can supply the loss of such a devoted, sensible, industrious, religious mother, who was all affection ... I shall never feel again as I have felt, the face of the world is totally changed to me'.

### Discussion

- The term 'picturesque' has been used to describe the appearance of Constable's paintings. Discuss in relation to this painting.



# CONSTABLE

IMPRESSIONS OF LAND, SEA AND SKY

*The Vale of Dedham* 1827–28  
oil on canvas 145.0 x 122.0 cm  
National Gallery of Scotland, Edinburgh, purchased from  
the Cowan Smith Bequest Fund with assistance from the  
National Art Collections Fund in 1944





*Hampstead Heath with London in the distance* c. 1827–30  
oil on canvas 64.1 x 94.6 cm  
private collection

In 1818 Constable had moved his family to Hampstead, an airy and clean place, away from the pollution of London. His wife's tuberculosis worsened despite the change of environment. In 1827 Constable moved with his family to live at another house in Well Walk, Hampstead. Constable told his friend Bishop Fisher that the house was 'to my wife's heart's content ... our little drawing room commands a view unequalled in Europe – from Westminster Abbey to Gravesend'.

*Hampstead Heath with London in the distance* c. 1827–30 is one of a number of views that Constable painted of London with the dome of St Paul's Cathedral visible in the distance. He probably based it on a smaller outdoor study of the subject that he painted soon after his arrival at this house. The animated sky, with its broad band of sunbeams, complements the uncultivated landscape of the Heath, with its winding pathways leading the eye to the distant, glowing city of London on the horizon.

### Activity

- Look carefully at this painting and examine the different types of brushstrokes used to depict clouds, rays of light, heath, trees and the far distant glowing city.





*Hampstead Heath with London in the distance*  
c. 1827–30  
oil on canvas 64.1 x 94.6 cm  
private collection



*The Glebe Farm* c. 1830  
oil on canvas 59.7 x 78.1 cm  
Tate, London, bequeathed by Henry Vaughan in 1900

changes that this act would make to rural English life.

When his good friend and patron Bishop Fisher of Salisbury died in 1825, Constable decided to paint *The Glebe Farm* c. 1830 in his memory. He included the church of St Mary the Virgin at Langham, where Fisher had been rector when Constable met him in 1798. Constable did not make an accurate depiction of the scene but combined a view of the church with the image of a nearby farmhouse.

Constable painted the view along a valley with water in the foreground, a cow drinking, tall trees to the left and the farmhouse beside the church tower on a hill to the right. He based the farmhouse on a small oil sketch he had made c. 1811–15, rather than from nature. He often used his own paintings as a 'pictorial dictionary', taking elements from one work and using them again in another. So the fresh, spontaneous quality of many of Constable's paintings, which suggests a direct link between real life and the painted surface, is in fact carefully constructed.

The image of Glebe Farm was a favourite with Constable. He painted four versions between 1826 and 1830, all from memory, as change was occurring in his harmonious, pastoral world – where man, religion and nature were in balance.

### Activities

- Visit the National Gallery of Australia's Constable website and compare this painting with the third version of *The Glebe Farm* painted in 1830.  
[nga.gov.au/Constable](http://nga.gov.au/Constable)
- Use the internet to find out about the 1832 Reform Act. Constable and his friends were anxious about the





*The Glebe Farm* c. 1830  
oil on canvas 59.7 x 78.1 cm  
Tate, London, bequeathed by Henry Vaughan  
in 1900



*Old Sarum* 1834  
watercolour with scraping out, on two conjoined sheets  
30.0 x 48.7 cm  
Victoria and Albert Museum, London, gift of Maria Louisa  
Constable, Isabel Constable and Lionel Bicknell Constable  
in 1888

Old Sarum, a mound one-and-a-half miles north of Salisbury, was an Iron-Age hill fort, later occupied by the Romans, the Saxons and the Normans. The Normans built a castle within the perimeter of the mound and a cathedral below it, but disputes between soldiers and priests, along with inadequate water supply, led to the building of New Sarum, the present city of Salisbury, in 1226. The old cathedral was dismantled and a new one built at Salisbury, and the old settlement began to fade away. By Constable's day, Old Sarum was a desolate and deserted place.

He wrote that Old Sarum had once been the political and religious centre of the kingdom, but that the 'once proud and populous city' had become a barren waste, 'tracked only by sheepwalks', where 'every vestige of human habitation, have long since passed away'.

In his watercolour *Old Sarum* 1834 Constable painted a solitary shepherd in the foreground, in front of the expansive open plain and mound of Old Sarum. He presented this scene under a dramatic and powerful sky, with light breaking through thunderclouds.

This is one of Constable's most significant watercolours. He conceived it as an exhibition piece, uniting his direct personal vision of landscape with a broader, historical idea, suggesting destruction and oblivion. Shown in 1834, it was the first work of the kind that he ever exhibited at the Royal Academy and it demonstrated his mastery of the watercolour medium.

On 31 March 1837 Constable was busy finishing a painting of Arundel mill and castle. A friend visiting in the afternoon

noted that Constable seemed unwell. Later that night, after returning from an errand, he went to bed. He read himself to sleep but woke in great pain. He died within half an hour, at the age of sixty.

### Activities

- Look how Constable uses diagonals on land and also in the dramatic sky to direct the viewer's eye to the far distant horizon on the left, directly above the shepherd with his flock and dogs. The mound of Old Sarum is positioned centrally to stabilise this dynamic composition.
- Use the zoom to examine the way Constable handles watercolour paint on paper.





*Old Sarum* 1834  
watercolour with scraping out, on two conjoined  
sheets 30.0 x 48.7 cm  
Victoria and Albert Museum, London, gift of  
Maria Louisa Constable, Isabel Constable and  
Lionel Bicknell Constable in 1888