

CONSTABLE

IMPRESSIONS OF LAND, SEA AND SKY



SECONDARY STUDENT TRAIL

THE LOCK

Constable painted views of Suffolk, his birthplace, most of his life. In this room you can see a number of works of art that feature a lock on the Stour River in Suffolk.

Compare the two large paintings entitled *A boat passing a lock* (1826) and *Study of 'A boat passing a lock* (c.1826). What similarities and differences can you find?

Find three paintings where the artist has painted the sky in a similar way. Imagine these paintings with a clear blue sky. How would the mood differ?

Examine *A boat passing a lock* from the Royal Academy of Arts. Look at how Constable uses white paint to create a flickering effect.

The composition of this painting can be divided vertically into thirds. Find the structures that appear on these lines. The horizon is exactly half way on the vertical axis and, as in many of his paintings, the Church tower is centred exactly in the middle of the horizon. Note how the diagonals of the rain and the crowbar held by the lock-keeper, direct your eye to this distant focal point.

OLD MASTERS

Throughout his working life Constable was inspired by the work of other artists. In this room you will find, among others, references to Claude Lorrain, Teniers, Rubens, van Ruisdael and Cozens.

Examine *Landscape with goatherd and goats, after Claude* (1823) which is a copy of a work of art by Claude Lorrain. Look at how the trees frame the composition and create distant vistas. Find another work of art by Constable that uses this framing device.

Read the label for *The Vale of Dedham* (1827–28). Which artist inspired this painting?

Track the winding vista in *The Vale of Dedham* via the foreground bank and the river to the distant centred church tower and rain storm on the horizon.

Constable often used small brush strokes of red paint to direct the eye through the landscape and to emphasise the intensity of the greens and browns. Find all the red paint in *The Vale of Dedham*.

IMPRESSIONS

Between 1808 and 1816 Constable spent most of his summers at East Bergholt, sketching in the fields and the surrounding countryside. These rapidly executed, evocative sketches, were mainly painted in the open air – often depicting transient atmospheric effects. He kept them for the rest of his life as a library of images to which he referred in later paintings.

The desire to capture the immediacy of the landscape by flickering and gestural brushwork set Constable apart from his English contemporaries but inspired French artists who saw his work at the Paris Salon.

Compare Constable's brushwork in *Landscape study: Scene in a park* (c.1823) with *A storm off the Coast of Brighton* (1824). What sort of brushes or palette knives would he have used to make these sketches?

Look at *Rainstorm over the sea* (c.1824–28). Note how the vigorous brushstrokes, creating different layers of clouds, add depth to this image.

PLACE

Constable's choice of viewpoint, or where the artist stood in relation to the view, influences the impact of the finished painting. A high viewpoint gives a commanding overview in which distant objects are clearly seen. Constable often chose this perspective to reflect a sense of ownership when painting his family's property.

Look at *Kitchen garden at Golding Constable's house* (c.1814). This drawing was made from a first floor window at the back of the family home and enabled Constable to include the distant family windmill surrounded by hedge-enclosed farming land.

With a low viewpoint distant objects merge with the background, focussing our attention on the foreground.

In *Salisbury Cathedral from the Bishop's Grounds* (1823) this low viewpoint allows the soaring spire of the Cathedral to be framed within an archway formed by the trees, thereby emphasising its grandeur and religious significance.

Look at *Hampstead Heath with London in the distance* (c.1827–30) and compare the viewpoint with that of *A cottage in a cornfield* (c.1816–17). How does the viewpoint of these two paintings affect your reading of the image?

Constable sometimes painted the same view at different times of the year. Compare *The wheatfield* (1816) with *The Stour Valley and Dedham Village* (5 September 1814). What similarities and differences can you find?

CLOUDS

Constable observed the sky with unusual care and made detailed oil studies, often noting the exact time of day and the wind speed and direction. These studies were then sometimes used in his large oil paintings. Clouds indicate changing and sometimes dramatic weather conditions and Constable often used them to create a mood or atmosphere in his works.

This room displays a number of Constable's cloud studies made when he lived in Hampstead where the flattish landscape emphasised the scale and drama of the sky.

Look carefully at a couple of these studies and examine the surface. What sort of brushstrokes did he use to create the different types of cloud vapour? Note how the overlaying of one cloud on another creates an illusion of space.

PRINTS

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 as readily and therefore print as light areas. Read the room text to find out why Constable was interested in this process.

Look at the series of proofs of the print *Spring* (1829). What changes can you see between the first and the last progress proofs of this mezzotint?

Read the label for *A ploughing scene in Suffolk (A summerland)* (c.1824) and find out why Constable made two versions of this painting.

Compare the two versions of *The Glebe Farm* (1830) looking at the difference in paint handling between the two.

Read the label for *Old Sarum* (1834). Why do you think this place evoked a sense of doom and desolation for Constable and how does he convey this feeling in this watercolour and the mezzotint?



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