

John Constable: His Path of Changing British Art

Early Career

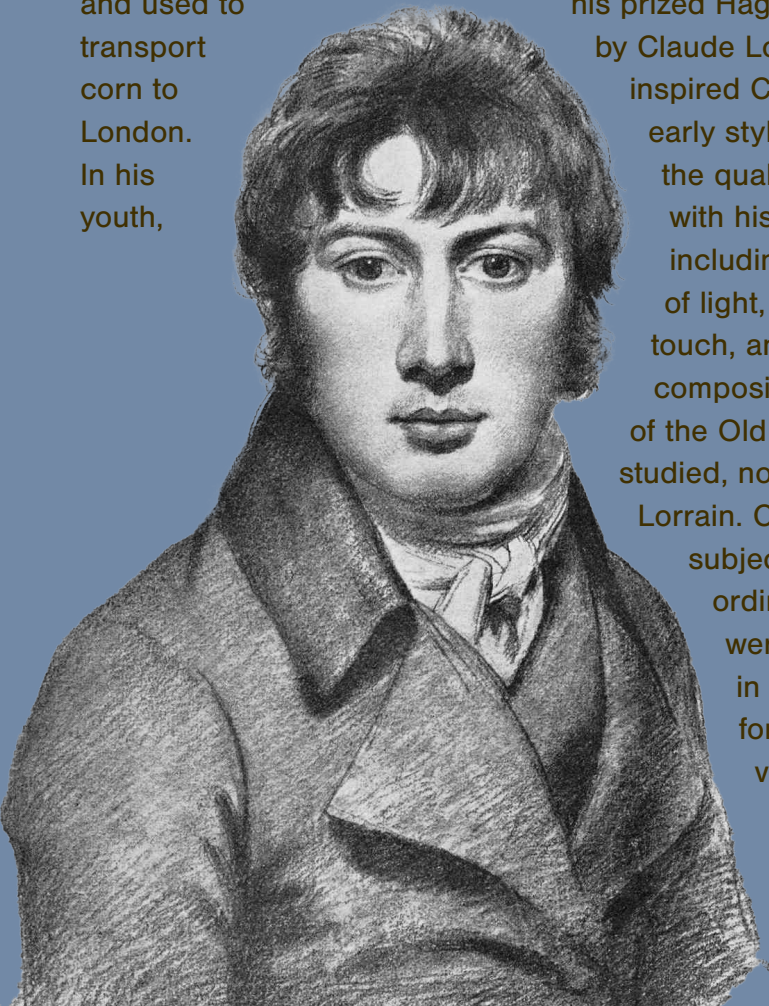
John Constable (11 June 1776 – 31 March 1837) was born in East Bergholt, a village on the River Stour in Suffolk. His father was a wealthy corn merchant, owner of Flatford Mill in East Bergholt and, later, Dedham Mill. His father also owned his own small ship, *The Telegraph*, which he moored at Mistley on the Stour estuary and used to transport corn to London. In his youth,

Constable embarked on amateur sketching trips in the surrounding Suffolk countryside that was to become the subject of a large proportion of his art. These scenes, in his own words, “made me a painter, and I am grateful”; “the sound of water escaping from mill dams etc., willows, old rotten planks, slimy posts, and brickwork, I love such things.” He was introduced to George Beaumont, a collector, who showed him his prized *Hagar* and the *Angel* by Claude Lorrain, which inspired Constable. His early style has many of the qualities associated with his mature work, including a freshness of light, color and touch, and reveals the compositional influence of the Old Masters he had studied, notably of Claude Lorrain. Constable’s usual subjects, scenes of ordinary daily life, were unfashionable in an age that looked for more romantic visions of wild landscapes and ruins. He did, however, make

occasional trips further afield. In order to make ends meet, Constable took up portraiture, which he found dull work-though he executed many fine portraits. He also painted occasional religious pictures, but according to John Walker, “Constable’s incapacity as a religious painter cannot be overstated.”

Maturity

Although he had scraped an income from painting, it was not until 1819 that Constable sold his first important canvas, *The White Horse*, which led to a series of “six footers”, as he called his large-scale paintings. He was elected an Associate of the Royal Academy that year, and in 1821 he showed *The Hay Wain* (a view from Flatford Mill) at the Academy’s exhibition. Theodore Gericault saw it on a visit to London and was soon praising Constable in Paris, where a dealer, John Arrowsmith, bought four paintings, including *The Hay Wain*, which was exhibited at the Paris Salon of 1824, winning a gold medal. In his lifetime Constable was to sell only twenty paintings in



England, but in France he sold more than twenty in just a few years. Despite this, he refused all invitations to travel internationally to promote his work, writing to Francis Darby: “I would rather be a poor man [in England] than a rich man abroad.”

After the birth of her seventh child in January 1828, Maria, his wife, fell ill and died of tuberculosis that November at the age of forty-one. Intensely saddened, Constable wrote to his brother Golding, “hourly do I feel the loss of my departed Angel-God only knows how my children will be brought up...

the face of the World is totally changed to me”. Thereafter, he always dressed in black and was, according to Leslie, “a prey to melancholy and anxious thoughts”. He cared for his seven children alone for the rest of his life.

The Rise of the Landscape

Studying the English painter John Constable is helpful in understanding the changing meaning of nature during the industrial revolution. He is, in fact, largely responsible for reviving the importance of

landscape painting in the 19th century. A key event, when it is remembered that landscape would become the primary subject of the Impressionists later in the century.

Landscape had had a brief moment of glory amongst the Dutch masters of the 17th century. Ruisdael and others had devoted large canvases to the depiction of the low countries. But in the 18th century hierarchy of subject matter, landscape was nearly the lowest type of painting. Only the still-life was considered less important. This would change in the first decades of the

19th century when Constable began to depict his father’s farm on oversized six-foot long canvases. These “six-footers” as they are called, challenged the status quo. Here landscape was presented on the scale of history painting.

Outside Sketches to Studio Paintings

The Hay Wain does include an element of genre (the depiction of a common scene), that is

the farm hand taking his horse and wagon (or wain) across the stream. But this action is minor and seems to offer the viewer the barest of pretenses for what is virtually a pure landscape. Unlike the later Impressionists, Constable’s large polished canvases were painted in his studio.

He did, however, sketch outside, directly before his subject. This was necessary for Constable as he sought a high degree of accuracy in many specifics. For instance, the wagon and tack (harness, etc.) are all clearly and specifically depicted, The trees are identifiable by species, and Constable was the first artist we know of who studied meteorology so that the clouds and the atmospheric conditions that he rendered were scientifically precise.

The Changes of England

Constable was clearly the product of the Age of Enlightenment and its increasing confidence in science. But Constable was also deeply influenced by the social and economic impact of the industrial revolution. As the cities and their problems grew, the urban elite, those that had grown rich from an industrial economy, began to look to the countryside not as a place so wretched with

poverty that thousands were fleeing for an uncertain future in the city, but rather as an idealized vision.

The rural landscape became a lost Eden, a place of one’s childhood, where the good air and water, the open spaces and hard and honest work of farm labor created a moral open space that contrasted sharply with the perceived evils of modern urban life. Constable’s art then functions as an expression of the increasing importance of rural life, at least from the perspective of the wealthy urban elite for whom these canvases were intended. The Hay Wain is a celebration of a simpler time, a precious and moral place lost to the city dweller.

Cited Source

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