

Constable

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John Constable was a late starter as an artist. He did not become seriously interested and inspired until his late teens. His early efforts show no particular talent but display ineptitude coupled with painstaking efforts. He always worked hard and took his task very seriously. His father, a no-nonsense businessman did not take well to his interest. Painting could be a past time but hardly a profession. Nevertheless he suffered him a small allowance enabling him to study at the academy. Born in 1776 he was well into his mid-twenties before he had caught up and acquired the necessary technical skills in the early years of the 19th century. But he worked hard, nevertheless he was thought about many as not a professional painter but an amateur, and official recognition was late in coming, in spite of him having some influential painters as patrons, such as Beaumont and Farington. Part of the reason was that he was solidly upper middle-class, and that safety net, however, reluctantly supplied, gave him a certain independence from commercial pressures. In fact, for many years he was unable to derive any income from his painting save the intermittent and unexpected stray sale. However, being solidly ensconced in the upper middle-class, in a society which was intensely class-conscious and characterized by great inequalities in wealth, did not secure him from want and the need to struggle. His courtship of a certain Maria Bicknell, was continuously frustrated by the opposition of her parents and maternal grandfather, on the grounds that he was an unsuitable match. They were not able to overcome the obstacles until an inheritance from his father in 1816 gave him a measure of financial independence. The courtship that lasted for seven years, but which did not prevent him from pursuing his painting, resulted in a happy marriage with a brood of six children, but ended after little more than a decade by the untimely death of his wife from consumption. His ability matured during the years of struggle, and success and recognition gradually came his way. His legitimacy as a painter was very much tied up with the institution of the Royal Academy inaugurated by George III, an institution that also gave social standing to the elite of painters, who could be considered as gentlemen. Full membership into that august body would not come his way until 1729 when he was already a widower. And it was to the Royal Academy he turned when it came to exhibitions, on which his professional life centered.

Constable was a landscape painter, this was not held in very high regard. The most prestigious painting was historical painting, which were supposed to have a message intended to elevate the minds of the spectators. A landscape only provided background to the historical scene itself, the careful conception of which constituted the real challenge to the painter. When it came to landscapes, the wild ones, showing not only beauty but sublimity, a concept beyond beauty, proposed by Edmund Burke in *On the Sublime and the Beautiful*, were accorded the highest esteem, while Constable preferred the simple, non-assuming ones, accessible just around the corner. While Burke's aesthetics had a great influence, Constable preferred that of Alison, expounded in *Essays on the Nature*

and Principles of Taste, in which the author stressed that beauty of an object was not so much intrinsic as related to the happy associations that they engendered. Constable's taste was not for unspoiled nature, which in a sense is timeless. but for nature as shaped by man. He drew inspiration from Claude Lorraine as well as Joshua Reynolds, whose influence in shaping the Royal Academy led to his domination of British Painting long after his death, but I would say that he owed more significantly to the Old Dutch and their genre paintings, with particular emphasis on Ruisdael. Constable was a naturalistic painter, meaning that he emphasized the importance from observing directly from nature, and thus avoid the despicable mannerism that skilled painters invariably relied on, when they eschewed direct observation. Thus he was constantly doing field work, spending days out in the open, constantly making sketches. This brought about an intimate knowledge not only of form but also of function. He took a more than cursory interest in meteorology as he made numerous studies of clouds, he knew about Newtonian optics, putting the knowledge to intermittent use, but above all he understood what farm-life was all about, knowledge that suffuse all his paintings. At that time painting was not primarily a matter of self-expression, as it would become in the 20th century, but was in the nature of a serious objective study. As noted what fascinated Constable was to depict the humanly fashioned landscape, in which humans invariably are present doing their tasks. The environment in which you are born and bred imprints itself deeply on you, and in the case of Constable, it was East Anglia, in particular his home village East Bergholt, to which he constantly returned during his years of struggle and courtship. After his marriage, settling in London, other scenes, by necessity was foisted upon him. In a sense, what emotionally drew Constable into painting was the desire to recall and recreate the happiness of his childhood. Thus the landscape paintings of Constable are historical in a very direct sense. They are not artificial recreations of important historical moments, whose sublimity was considered to be particularly conducive to elevate minds, but present not only a particular place, but above all a particular moment and time. The moment may be a sunny morning, a windy noon, or a hot afternoon, but the time is unmistakably the early 19th century. Those paintings of Constable, provide just as with the Dutch genre paintings a window into the past, and as such possess a charm, which by its nature is more liable to be enhanced than worn through by the passage of time. When you look at a landscape by Constable you see not only trees and clouds, which from the human perspective at least, are timeless, but you step into a vanished world which at the time of Constable was disappearing with the advent of the industrial revolution which would profoundly change the English countryside as well as its social structure. The vicarious nostalgia those paintings may instill in you, was to Constable a real one. He painted what he loved and saw disappear. It is a rural landscape as of yet unsullied by mechanization, where the soil is cultivated by hand and horse, interspersed with canals, not roads nor railway tracks. Where the majority of buildings stem from the 17th and 18th centuries and when those bygone centuries were still felt in the marrow. Needless to say Constable was deeply conservative, he mourned the passing of an age to which he was deeply committed since childhood. He abhorred the prevalent radicalism, finding its expression in riots and newspaper comments, holding in high esteem the feudal order and the authority of the Church of England, the latter finding its most eloquent expression in his paintings of the Salisbury Cathedral, whose bishop, he

incidentally was on very friendly terms with, and whose nephew - John Fisher, turned out to be one of his bosom friends. And indeed, such a sentiment of political but above all social conservatism is easy to sympathize with, because the notion of an unending and unchanging happiness is indeed what we mean by the idyllic. However, there is an invariable irony, or if you prefer contradiction in this notion, and also of course in traditional conservatism per se. Once something is truly unchanging, it loses its interest by losing its fragility. It is the very fragility of something about to vanish, which will arouse our desire to have it preserved.

As a painter Constable was repeatedly criticized both by foes and friends alike as being 'unfinished'. Sketching is the way an artist tries out ideas. Sketching by its very purpose is incomplete and suggestive rather than instructive. Sketching has been done by artists immemorial, and it is only relatively late in the history of art, that taste has changed and the sketch is nowadays considered on par with a finished picture. This was definitely not the case at the time of Constable, when a picture worth of exhibition had to be fully worked out in all its details, leaving little if anything to the visual imagination of the viewer. Constable took this criticism seriously stem it from the expert or the public, especially as it was taken as a sign of haste and lack of sustainment. In particular his father, whose businesslike temperament thought in terms of diligence, urged his son to work harder. Yet certain aspects of this 'unfinishedness' he refused to compromise on, and which would eventually put his mark in the history of art, and in particular influence French 19th century painters. Thus some of the paintings of Constable may strike us today of pampering too much to the tastes of his contemporary audiences. On the other hand their sophistication should not be underestimated but can also be judged by the enthusiasm the work of Turner met with, work that seems still strikingly daring and 'unfinished' to us.

Constable was a gentleman, but perhaps not quite, being an artist at the heart. He did not always stick to decent company, his youthful friendship with the plumber, artisan and occasional landscape painter Dunthorne, aggravated not only his parents and in-laws, but also his wife. Although there came to fall-outs with his old friend he stayed true to him and employed one of his sons as an assistant. The reason is easy to understand. As a young isolated man with a burning interest in landscape painting, whom would he otherwise share it with in his limited community, but a fellow painter? Constable received no formal education, but was well versed in literature, with Cowper being one of his favorites, and having also developed a sympathy for Wordsworth. But a poet such as Lord Byron, would only be met with revulsion. How different was not his own quiet, monogamous life, from the radical and adulterous, even at times incestuous, one of Byron? He often thought of his own paintings as poems, and often quoted them in connection. His language could at times be uncouth, maybe even coarse, but above all he was feared and resented by the acerbic wit and merciless sarcasms with which he commented upon the efforts of his fellow painters. Such a refusal for social adaptability may have postponed his election to the Royal Academy. But one should also keep in mind the success of Turner, who by any means was not a gentleman, being the son of a barber, but who nevertheless, flaunting the conventions of polite society, never marrying his mistress, with whom he sired many children, found no obstacles in his critically and commercially successful career. Finally

Constable was sensitive, not to say prickly, susceptible to depression and despondency. He died suddenly during the night between the 30th and 31st of March 1837, not yet sixty one. The cause was in most likelihood a heart attack.

The book on Constable under review is mostly in the nature of a systematic presentation of his paintings, including their preliminary studies, giving very little biographical background and scant information on the actual techniques of his paintings, although some noteworthy comments on the philosophy of it.

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