

John Constable, Salisbury Cathedral & John Fisher

On the 10th February 1829, John Constable finally realised his dream of becoming an Academician and later in the month he exhibited what is for many, his most 'Sublime' painting, *Hadleigh Castle*, that is the one that most eloquently expressed the emotional turmoil attendant to his wife's death just a few months earlier. In this painting, the three aspects of 'Chiaroscuro', as a natural phenomenon, a pictorial device and as a metaphor for the range of human emotions, were so instinctively combined by Constable, that for him, to an unprecedented degree, the act of painting became an instrument of self-confession. Indeed, Constable may have been the first painter, to apply the term Chiaroscuro, hitherto used in relation to art, to the appearance of Nature, highlighted by this remark to Fisher: 'I live by shadows; to me shadows are realities.'



Hadleigh Castle, oil on canvas, 48x64 inches, Yale Centre for British Art

Constable visited Hadleigh in 1814 at which time he made several sketches of the coastline of the Thames estuary. The picture was painted at Hampstead and before bringing it to the exhibition, he confessed his anxieties to Leslie, his friend and biographer, as he was still smarting after his election and Sir Thomas Lawrence's insensitive remarks on his admission to the Academy as an Academician, where he only defeated Francis Danby by one vote. When Constable made his official call upon Lawrence, the President of the Academy, Lawrence, 'Did not conceal from his visitor that he considered him peculiarly fortunate in being chosen as an Academician at a time when there were historical painters of great merit on the list of candidates.'

Coming at this time, the event was, as he said, 'devoid of all satisfaction'. He said that a few weeks after the vote he was still 'smarting under his election', because, as he remarked on another occasion, 'it had been delayed until I am solitary and cannot impart it',

The nine remaining years of Constable's life, involving the care of seven children, whose ages at Maria's death ranged from eleven months to eleven years, was to be a quite distinct part of his career, one in which his art, especially when the project in hand was most ambitious and demanding, gave him greater concern and anxiety than ever before.

Hadleigh Castle divided the critics more than any of his previous large compositions. Whilst there was some caveated praise, the principal concern was still the unfinished appearance. The full scale study in Tate Britain, with even more vigorous brush and palette knife work of the foreboding sky than the final painting, gives the study a visceral and emotional appeal. One can only guess at Constable's emotional state, so soon after his wife's death, but if any of Constable's paintings betray his state of mind, it is surely both these paintings.

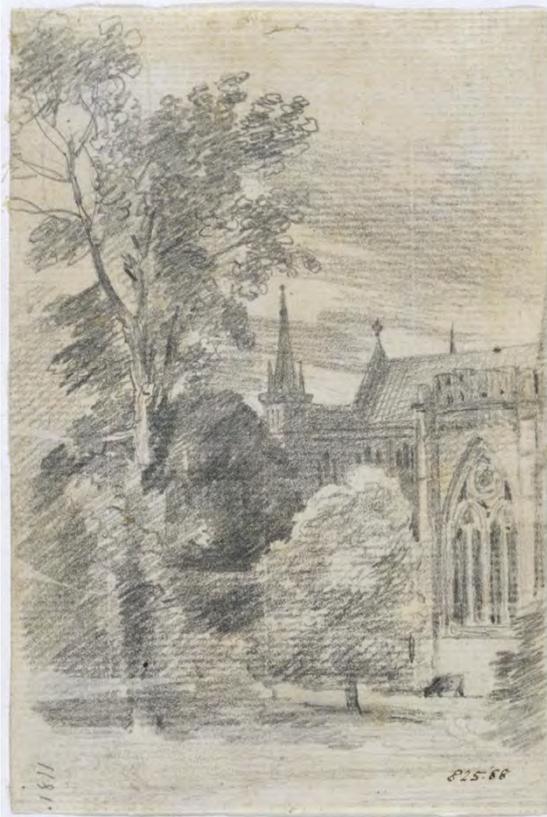
It was also from 1829 until his death in 1837, that Constable devoted considerable time, energy and money to the business of print-making and publishing. The principal outcome was a series of 22 mezzoprints engraved under his very close supervision, by the then young David Lucas and titled, *Various Subjects of Landscape Characteristic of English Scenery, from Pictures Painted by John Constable R.A.* Constable will have been well aware that his great rival, Turner had much earlier embarked upon and published several series of prints by this time, but unlike Constable, Turner himself was also a very competent print maker. His first and most famous series, the *Liber Studiorum*, was published between 1807-19. For both painters, these prints were a highly desirable way of furthering their careers.



Hadleigh Castle, mezzoprint, David Lucas

In 1831 Constable began work on his monumental painting, *Salisbury Cathedral from the Meadows* and it was Archdeacon John Fisher, who encouraged Constable to take on this subject, following the death of his wife. However, the seeds may first have been sown as a result of his friendship with Fisher,

nephew of Bishop John Fisher, whom Constable had first met in London in 1798. In 1811, he visited the Bishop in Salisbury and spent several weeks, at the Bishop's palace. It is here that he first met the Bishop's nephew, John Fisher. It is from this time that the Cathedral, the City and its environs were to provide numerous subjects, the principal of four exhibits at the 1812 Academy exhibition being a Salisbury view, notwithstanding the beginning of a profound friendship, which Constable could utterly rely upon for the next twenty years.



Salisbury Cathedral from the South West, pencil, V&A

After the marriage of Constable and Maria Bicknell in 1816, the happy couple spent part of their honeymoon at Fisher's vicarage in Osmington, Dorset, close to Weymouth Bay and as Fisher himself had married only three months earlier, this must have been an especially joyful interlude. The happy resolution of his long emotional conflict and the need to provide for a family, provided a much needed impulse to enlarge the scale and scope of his work and as we have already seen, this marked the beginning of his 'Six-footers. Without doubt, the friendship and support freely offered by Fisher to Constable over a twenty-year period, was pivotal to the painter's equilibrium and essential to his emotional welfare after Maria's death in 1828. Fisher was the confidant and confessor he constantly needed and who was all the more helpful on account of his emotional stability and charitable detachment. With their differences went sympathies, pleasures and interests developed in common. They both enjoyed happy marriages, a conservative view of social affairs, a similar feeling for rural life, a sense of art and a resolute Anglican Christianity, which made Constable sure his works were a product of Godly inspiration.



Weymouth Bay, 1816, oil on paper.

In this atmospheric plein air study, of almost snapshot quality, we no doubt see his newly wedded wife Maria and John Fisher's wife standing on the beach looking out to sea, with what may be his friend, standing closer to the water's edge.



Salisbury Cathedral from the South West, 20th July 1820, pencil, V&A



Salisbury Cathedral and The Close, 1820, oil on canvas, V&A

A flurry of pencil sketches, watercolour and oil paintings followed in 1820, in preparation for the commissioned painting of Salisbury Cathedral for Bishop Fisher, *Salisbury Cathedral from the Bishop's Grounds*. As a gesture of appreciation to John Fisher, the Bishop of Salisbury, Constable included the Bishop and his wife in the canvas. Notice also the embellishment of reality as Constable has formed an arched tree canopy surrounding the spire.



Salisbury Cathedral from the Bishop's Grounds, 1820, oil on canvas, 44x35 inches, V&A



Salisbury Cathedral from the South West, 1811, black & white chalk on grey paper.

This first canvas, was largely based on the earlier black and white chalk drawing of 1811. Note the absence of the tree canopy in this composition. In early October 1820, the Bishop's daughter, Dolly, wrote to the painter, 'Papa desires me to say, he hopes you will finish for the exhibition, the view you took from our garden of the Cathedral by the waterside.'

After receiving an advance payment in November 1822 for the painting, destined for the drawing room of the Bishop's London home in Seymour Street, Constable eventually completed the work in time for the 1823 Academy exhibition. On the 9th May, he wrote to John Fisher:

'My Cathedral looks very well. Indeed, I got through that job uncommonly well, considering how much I dreaded it. It is much approved by the Academy and moreover in Seymour St, though I was at one time fearful it would not be a favourite there owing to a *dark cloud* – but we got over that difficulty. It was the most difficult subject in landscape I ever had on my easel. I have not flinched at the work, of the windows, buttresses etc, but I have as usual made my escape in the evanescence of the chiaroscuro.'

In June 1824 the Bishop, who had never liked the dark cloud, asked Constable to improve it, either to paint the cloud out, or make another version. Although he was forced to neglect other work, Constable decided to take the latter course, but sadly the Bishop died in May 1825, just before the painting was completed. The revised version remained with the Bishop's descendants until purchased by the Frick in the early 20th century. Now the tree canopy is more open and the sky brighter, thus addressing the Bishop's concerns of the gloominess of the original; now a wonder of architectural draughtsmanship.



Salisbury Cathedral from the Bishop's Grounds, 1825, 44x35 inches, Frick, New York

On receiving the painting, John Fisher reported to Constable:

'The Cathedral looks splendidly over the chimney piece...its internal splendour comes out in all its power, the spire sails away with the thunder-clouds.'



Study of the Trunk of an Elm Tree, 1821, oil on paper, V&A

Over the years that Constable was involved with his Salisbury Cathedral paintings, other subjects in the natural world attracted his attention. *Study of an Elm Tree* is just such a work, of the most precise detail, that would remind one of similar paintings by Albrecht Durer eg *The Great Piece of Turf*. Constable probably painted this remarkable sketch, of almost photographic quality in Hampstead. The artist's friend and biographer C.R.Leslie recalled:

'I have seen him admire a fine tree with an ecstasy of delight like that with which he would catch up a beautiful child in his arms.'



The Great Piece of Turf, 1503, watercolour, pen and ink on paper, Albrecht Durer, Albertina, Vienna

The simplicity of the composition belies the mastery of Durer's technique in this exquisite watercolour, rightly regarded as a masterpiece.



Water-meadows near Salisbury, 1829, oil on canvas, 18x22 inches, V&A

Painted in front of the scene, during one of his last visits to Fisher and when his friend was, on the evidence of their letters, trying to bring Constable back to a state of equable feeling and self-possession. When he sent the work for exhibition at the Academy in 1829, instead of its being hung without question, Constable now being an Academician, it was placed before the selection committee, who rejected it, one of the members calling it 'a nasty green thing.' When

the artist, who was present as a member of the hanging committee, declared that the picture was painted by him, the President, Martin Archer Shee, insisted that it should be admitted, but Constable refused to allow the original decision to be overturned.



View from the Library of the Archdeacon's house, Leaden Hall, 1829, oil on paper, V&A

Fisher was certainly instrumental in persuading the bereaving Constable, recovering from the death of his wife to come to Salisbury. Whilst there he painted several oil on paper studies before the scene, *View from the Library of the Archdeacon's house, Leaden Hall*, being just such a work. The subject of *Salisbury Cathedral from the Meadows* was most likely conceived during this visit. In August, Fisher wrote to him:

‘The great easel has arrived and waits his office. Pray do not let it be long before you come and begin your work. I am quite sure the “Church under a Cloud” is the best subject you can take. It will be an amazing advantage to go every day and look afresh at your material drawn from Nature herself.’



Salisbury Cathedral from the Meadows, 1832, oil on canvas, 60x38 inches, Tate Britain

The view depicts the river Avon in the foreground with Leadenhall, Archdeacon Fisher’s residence, on the right obscured by trees and the grounds of King’s House on the left. The position of St Thomas’ on the extreme left, has been manipulated for compositional effect, as it would not have been seen from this viewpoint. The cart is not the same as the one in the, *Hay Wain*, being instead a Wiltshire one, with high backed curved sides and known locally as a Bow Wagon; symbolism of *Sharon crossing the River Styx*? And of course the ubiquitous sheep-dog in the foreground.

It is the painting that he most wished to be remembered for, as it represented for him the culmination of his artistic achievements, whilst also being a fitting memorial to his wife and later as it so transpired, Fisher himself, who died in 1832. Fisher referred to the painting as, ‘*The Church under a Cloud*’, a reference to the Act of Catholic Emancipation of 1829 and other political reforms, which the conservative Fisher and Constable feared as a threat to the stability of the status quo in English Society.

When first exhibited at the RA in 1831, having been hung by himself between two Turner paintings, one of which was the renowned *Caligula’s Palace*, (page 11), it received mixed critical reviews, the Times deeming it masterly, but, *spoiled by clouds as no human being ever saw* and, *spotting the foreground all over with whitewash*; another deemed it, *Chaos*. And so Constable returned to his canvas to work his, *Wonders*, reporting to a friend that, *he had much increased its power and effect*, exhibiting it again at other

venues, the British Institution in 1833, where before sending it, he wrote to his fellow painter, friend and confidant, Charles Leslie:

‘I have much to do with the great Salisbury and I am hard run for it...I have got the Great Salisbury into the state I always wished to see it – and yet have done little, or nothing – “it is a rich and most impressive canvas” if I see it free from self-love’

In August 1834, before sending the painting to Birmingham, he wrote again to Leslie:

‘I have never left my large Salisbury since I saw you. It would much, very much, delight me, if, in the course of today, you see it for a moment. I cannot help trying to make myself believe that there be something in it, that, in some measure at least, warrants your (too high) opinion of my landscape in general.’

And again exhibited in London in 1836. In this manner, it became the painting that Constable most laboured over.



The Rainbow Landscape, 1636, oil on panel, 53x92 inches, Peter Paul Rubens, Wallace Collection

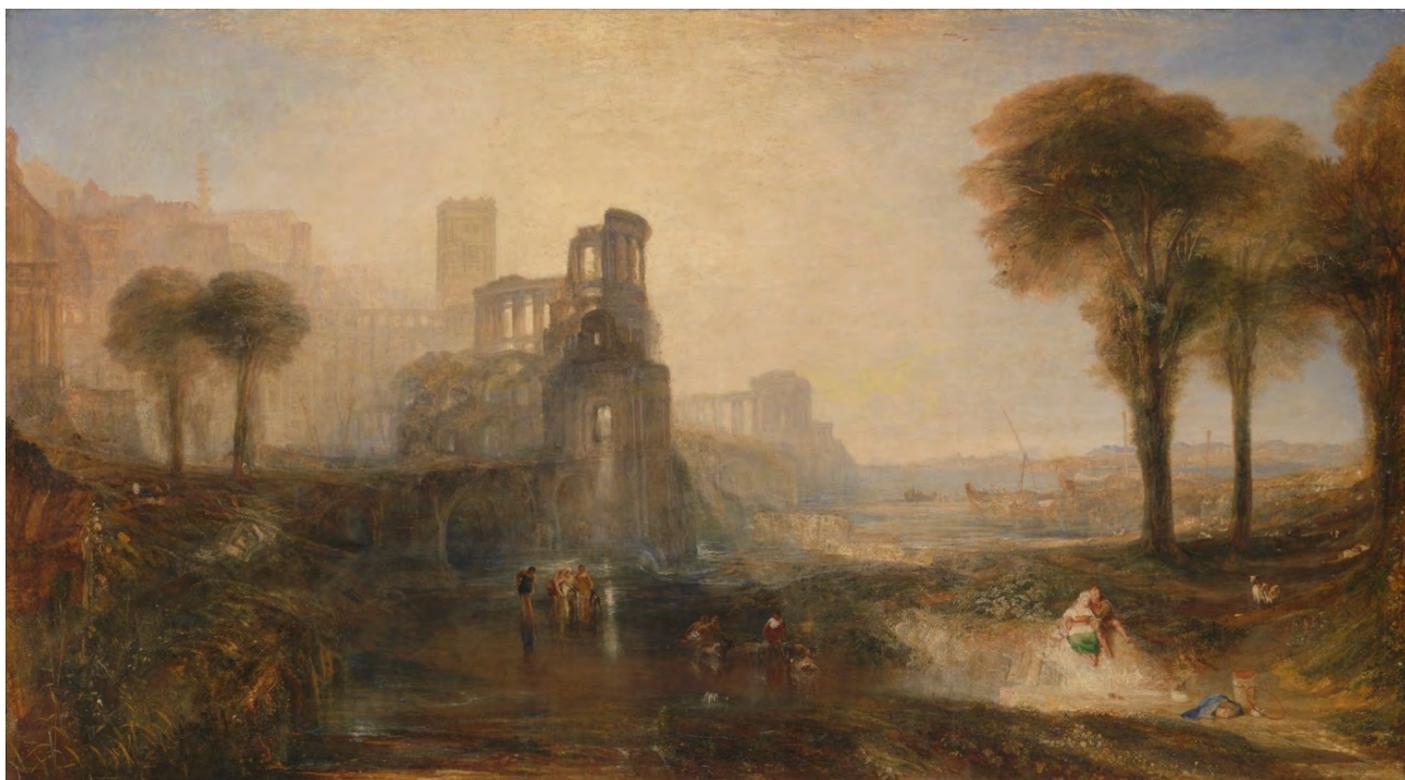
Rubens *Rainbow Landscape*, which Constable will have seen in London, was undoubtedly an influence, but there had been other precedents for such paintings, most famously Jacob Ruisdael's monumental *Jewish Cemetery*, of which Constable must have known and almost certainly have seen a print thereof.

For nearly 200 years it has been assumed that the rainbow in *Salisbury Cathedral from the Meadows* was present in the final painting from the start, but the meteorologist and art expert, Professor John Thornes, believes that the rainbow was not in fact added until specifically the afternoon of 25th August 1832, after hearing of the death of his dear friend, John Fisher, finishing the image of the bow over Leadenhall, his friend's house. However, according to Thornes, such a bow should have been smaller of a height of 22 rather than Constable's 42 degrees. There is of course further symbolic significance, the reference to Noah's Ark and the Flood, symbolising hope after the storm and God's beneficence.

The painting, which meant so much to Constable was eventually sold after his death to Samuel Ashton for 500 guineas, in whose family it remained until purchased by the Tate in 2013, out of which grew the Aspire Program.



The Jewish Cemetery, 1650's, oil on canvas, 56x74 inches, Jacob Ruisdael, Detroit Institute of Arts



Caligula's Palace, 1831, oil on canvas, 54x96 inches, Turner, Tate Britain



The Opening of Waterloo Bridge as seen from Whitehall Stairs, 1832, oil on canvas, 82x50 inches, Tate

Waterloo bridge, designed by Charles Rennie, was opened by the Prince Regent on 18th June 1817. The Royal party had embarked upon two barges from Whitehall Stairs, next to Fife House, then the residence of the PM, Lord Liverpool, who received the Prince there, before the ceremony. The departure of the procession of craft is the moment depicted in this painting. It was apparently thirteen years since he had first conceived of the composition. Many false starts followed and next to, *Salisbury Cathedral, from the Meadows*, no painting gave him more anxiety, as the exceedingly long gestation period confirms; the ceremonial opening may have been one of the later additions, larger and hence more panoramic. Throughout, Fisher provided his usual support, although on this occasion, one has the feeling that Constable really didn't have his heart in the project and had a premonition that the painting would not be a success. In *The Opening of Waterloo Bridge*, we see Constable getting as close as he ever did to producing a painting with an historical narrative, with some similarity to the topographical style of Canaletto, although in painting style, more akin to Guardi.

On varnishing day, after it had been taken to the Academy, and hung next to Turner's sea-piece, *Helvoetsluys, The City of Utrecht, 64, Going to Sea*, Constable intensified his reds in the foreground of what he was to call his 'Harlequin's jacket.' Turner, on seeing the effect of Constable's painting, fetched his palette and added to his 'Grey Sea Picture', a round spot of Vermillion, later to be adjusted to form a buoy, which caused even the vermilion and lake of Constable's work to look weak. Constable re-entered the room just as Turner had left it. 'He has been here' said Constable, 'And fired a gun'

Coming some 15 years after the event, the painting did not have the impact that Constable had hoped for, but not in all honesty anticipated. Whilst reviewers, most of whom commented on the vigorous handling, were mainly appreciative of it, the critic of the Morning Chronicle, as in previous years, attacked the work violently, beginning his notice, 'What a piece of plaster it is.'



Salisbury Cathedral from the Meadows, 1837, Mezzoprint, David Lucas

This large print of arguably Constable's finest painting, is regarded as the greatest achievement of one of the closest collaborations between a painter and a print maker in the history of British Art and transformed the painting into an even more dramatic scene. Although dated 20th March 1837, owing to Constable's constant last-minute alterations and changes of mind, the plate did not in fact go to press on that day, but was to remain unpublished for another 11 years, after Constable's sudden death only ten days later. In February 1837, he wrote to Lucas:

'I have much anxiety about the bow – it has never been quite satisfactory in its drawing to my eye. John (Dunthorne) and I have now clearly and directly set it out'

And even on the day before his death, his mind was still occupied by the print:

'I am quite pleased to see how well you are preparing for the new bow. The proof is about what I want – I mean that you took hence. I took the centre from the elder bush – a blossom to the left – you will do possibly the same.... We cannot fail of this plate with a proper bow.'

Constable died on 30th March 1837 in Bloomsbury of a heart condition and was buried in the Churchyard of St John's, Hamstead.

Constable's painting was conservative in subject, but revolutionary in form. In his trial and tribulations, he is the 19th century painter most like Paul Cezanne, who 50 years later, expressed his deep love for Nature in his own inimitable way. The realisation of the image, the search for truth and the essence of place, the mental hardship of their perceived calling and being a perpetual student are ways in which a comparison with Paul Cezanne are well founded. It might not even be too fanciful to make a comparison with Vincent Van Gogh.

So, what is Constable's legacy? His connection with French 19th century painting have been wishfully exaggerated by those seeking to prove the historical influence of English painting and from a technical standpoint often misunderstood. Undoubtedly his reputation in the Paris art world of the 1820s was significant and we have already drawn attention to the influence on the painting of Gericault and Delacroix. However, there were many other English painters, many working in and around Paris, whose strong colour, vivid rendering of atmosphere and light as well as their free and vigorous paint handling, that supported the purposes of young French painters then seeking to revive the 'Rubeniste' tradition in their own school, Rubens being at the time a vital influence in English painting as well.

Delacroix was the most eminent of those who found inspiration and even technical guidance, but in truth it was the landscape painters such as Paul Huet, Constant Troyon, Charles Francois Daubigny, and Theodore Rousseau, of the so-called Barbizon School and the more loosely associated Camille Corot, for whom Constable's painting was most influential. *The Edge of the woods, Fontainebleau Forest*, is a fine example of Rousseau's mature style and certainly here there is a considerable similarity in the choice of motif and style.



The Edge of the woods, Fontainebleau Forest, 1852, oil on canvas, Theodore Rousseau, Metropolitan

There is now a huge demand in the contemporary art market for the studies/sketches, which for some critics, in their truth to Nature and spontaneity, confirm Constable as a painter, who heralded Impressionism. The most prized of these were retained by Constable's daughter Isobel before being sold on her death, or bequeathed to the V&A (examples Page 15). Whilst never designed to be exhibited, or sold, as previously highlighted, Constable is recorded as having said that he would sell corn, but not the field in which it grew. Roger Fry, the influential painter, critic and champion of modern art in Britain, remarked in his *Reflections on British Painting*, that every one of Constable's sketches 'is a discovery' and it is in these that we 'find the real Constable.' And Sir Kenneth Clark later pronounced them in his seminal *Landscape into Art*, to be 'a full record of his sensations....which are nowadays the most admired part of his work.'

However, the potential connection between Constable and painters of the next generation, members of the Impressionist circle, Monet, Sisley and Pissarro, is tenuous and probably accidental, as there is little, or no evidence that any of these painters had first hand experience of his painting. Whilst they shared Constable's passionate love of the natural world, the interest in light and aerial movement, the resulting paintings were very different. Whereas Constable had limited his work to Spring and Summer views, the Impressionists described every season of the year. However deeply committed the Impressionists were to the world they painted, their art has an emotional detachment and presents no response to what Constable had called the 'sentiment of Nature.'



Dedham Vale from Langham, 1812, oil on canvas, 8x13 inches, V&A



Hove Beach, 1824, Constable, oil on paper laid on canvas, 13x20 inches, V&A

On the other hand, quite unsurprisingly, Turner's later paintings seen by both Monet and Pissarro during their visit to London in late 1870, early 1871 in the National Gallery must have left an indelible impression. At the same time, Monet may have found Turner too Romantic and would no doubt have felt uneasy too at Constable's compulsion to project his most intense feelings into the behaviour of Nature.

The picture making techniques of Impressionism were at once more advanced and more traditional than his. The Impressionists extended the optical and suggestive power of colour far beyond his limited use of it, but they never applied the paint in that free, ferocious, irregular manner, which confounded his critics even if, like Constable, they were frequently criticised for their unfinished appearance. Here Constable might more reasonably be compared with Courbet's manner of landscape painting, where his vigorous paint handling by brush and palette knife attracted Paul Cezanne's attention. And is there a comparison to be made with some of Edouard Manet's early paintings, who never really considered himself an Impressionist, but who found himself 'guilty by association' in the eyes of the French Academy.

Any study of Constable would be incomplete, without some further reference to his complex personality. The close circle of loving relationships extending back to his happy, supportive childhood and into adult life with John Dunthorne, his amateur painting friend in Suffolk, the aristocratic connoisseur, Sir George Beaumont, then later, Archdeacon Fisher and finally his biographer, Charles Leslie, must also to some extent have helped form the egotism and the vulnerability, which Constable recognised as being inescapable parts of himself. When he was exposed to anything less than affection and loyalty, a most tender creature, like the hermit crab out of its shell, was revealed and he seems never to have managed to avoid hurt by adopting an attitude of detachment, or stoicism. In a similar fashion, he was unable to fully resolve the equation of Nature and art, his life invariably presenting itself to him in dialectic terms, as a problem of resolving the hardly reconcilable claims of his private and public worlds.

The principal obstacle to his marriage was a clergyman, who judged him a social inferior, when the same son of a tradesman was being amicably received in the palace of a bishop. Paintings found insufficient for high honour in the Royal Academy, where he had trained, were thought worthy to win a medal from the King of France. The impression gained by both his words and behaviour and indeed his work also, in the years following the intolerable sense of grief and loss, resulting from Maria's death, present a man in whom distress and disappointment had risen to a toxic level.

In terms of how he was looked upon contemporaneously, there were those who found him vain and conceited, his, 'always talking of himself and his work' and of him being 'unceasing in his abuse of others' and his sarcasm. His letters contain enough to suggest these charges were justified. His judgements could be brutally harsh, he could be defiantly argumentative and at times self-righteously self-assertive. Intimate friends however, knew the private man and enjoyed his affection, confirmed with no less conviction, Constable's capacity for love and charity and it is certain that the spiked and showy defences, which he erected against the world were seldom used more maliciously than the Hedgehog's prickles. As an example, on the death in penury, of his early friend, J. T. Smith, from whom he separated, believing him to be disloyal, he acknowledged his early obligation and immediately and privately sent his widow money.

His love of children was not an emotional indulgence, but rather typified his powerful compulsion to embrace all that he could trust in both life and the Natural world, with extraordinary wholeheartedness. His most composed, happily conceived and technically competent works were painted in those 'Happy Years', from 1817 to 1824, of which the serene *Dedham Lock and Mill* is a lesser known example. When the world was behaving most kindly, when his marriage was relatively undisturbed by Maria's ill health, when the critics were being most sympathetic and French interest in his art was strong and he was able to enjoy his friendships to the full, then he could say, 'I have a kingdom of my own, both fertile and populous.'

He disliked in other painters, not just the failure to be observant, inquisitive and knowledgeable, but the kind of pretentiousness, which comes from a superficial exploitation of easily conceived ideas, or experience. In this, as in everything else, he was a natural and insistent moralist.

In relation to his work, the most important of those personality traits, which are revealed in his letters was an enslavement, more often than not self-imposed, to anxiety. From his youth he was prone to suffer toothaches and headaches, which may, or not have been psychosomatic and in the last eight years of his life, without the support and love of his wife, he was frequently ill. Throughout his life, he



Dedham Lock and Mill, 1820, oil on canvas, 22x30 inches, V&A

had of course good cause and he could point to well founded reasons for his anxiety. At the start of his life, he was anxious about his choice of vocation and how slowly his talent developed, how his work attracted so little acclaim, whilst others, such as Francis Danby and Richard Parkes Bonnington achieved approbation so readily, as he thought. With the arrival of each new year and in the dark days of Winter, away from Nature, or at any rate from the inspiring greenness of the Spring and Summer landscape and as he strove to finish and assemble his works for exhibition, he would worry about their completion, his children as he called them and the response they would draw from peers and reviewers.

So, there we have it. John Constable, an artist, who is almost as much part of Englishness as Milton, Shakespeare, Blake, Wordsworth, or Elgar, whose iconic paintings adorn chocolate and biscuit boxes, to such an extent, that without care they become too familiar, even prosaic, but whose stature as one of the most revered exponents of British and European 19th century landscape painting in the Romantic tradition is assured.