

*J*OHN CONSTABLE AND THE
THEORY OF LANDSCAPE PAINTING

RAY LAMBERT

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1

*A*pproaches to Constable

Introduction

This chapter sets out the main ideas that have motivated and structured the approach of this book. To put these contributions in their art historical context, the first section summarises some of the trends in the recent Constable literature. Subsequent sections outline the terms in which I look at Constable as genuinely an intellectual artist whose thought about the nature and purposes of landscape painting was instrumental in his achievements. The last section lays out my approach to analysing how paintings work through compositional structures, which introduces a vocabulary of formal analysis based on a modern theory of visual perception. This art critical apparatus complements the history – intellectual and contextual – of Constable’s approach to landscape.

The Mainstream

One body of recent literature constitutes the mainstream of Constable studies. These writers have been responsible for the catalogues to the two retrospectives at the Tate Gallery in 1976 and 1991. They pay close attention to the biography, which they relate to detailed consideration of individual paintings. Cormack, presenting a populist version of this school of thought, argues that Constable can be properly studied biographically because of the dependence of the art on the life.¹

The core of the critical position of the mainstream is connoisseurial, based on close study of individual pictures. The analyses concentrate on how far the

pictures are accurate representations of real scenes, from the viewpoint taken by the artist before the original motif. The 1991 catalogue editors, Leslie Parris and Ian Fleming-Williams, apply this method consistently in their entries on individual pictures. These are much fuller than the discussions in the 1976 catalogue, which they jointly edited with Conal Shields. The earlier catalogue had the benefit of an introductory essay, which presented some more general thoughts on the bases of Constable's art. The absence of such an essay in the 1991 catalogue is curious, signifying a retreat from any theoretical approaches to Constable. Instead, the analysis of the exact conditions of production of individual paintings is highly developed. The overall reading of Constable's career shows in the way the exhibition was hung and the presentations of the catalogue entries. The themes are locations including the villages of Suffolk and the places in Salisbury and other towns that feature as the subject matter of Constable's paintings. This shift in emphasis from the chronological basis of the 1976 exhibition shows a response to the studies of Constable published between 1976 and 1991. The major monograph of the period is Michael Rosenthal's,² and he concentrates on the relationship between the painter, and the locales depicted in his work. Despite adopting this framework, the 1991 catalogue editors oppose explicitly most of the ideological interpretations that Rosenthal and others applied to Constable's work in the period between the two retrospectives.

The mainstream writers are essentially pursuing a teleology of landscape painting in which the ultimate end is a straightforward representation of exactly what was in the artist's immediate line of sight. The implicit aesthetic judgement is that amendments to these "raw" observations of nature should be kept to a minimum, and their evident role in Constable's exhibited works are often described with an air of regret. One example may be sufficient to demonstrate this unannounced premise. The catalogue entry for the 1991 exhibition on *The Lock* (Fig. 1) includes the following remark:

a view of Flatford Lock from across the mill-pool on the right bank near the mill-house... in all of Constable's big canal scenes he felt the need in the composition for large tree masses, presumably to balance the areas of open sky. In two of his pictures there were no such groups where he wanted them, so in one, the 1822 *View on the Stour*, he resorted to invention... and in *The Lock*, he invented some of the trees in the group and adapted an early study for the rest.³

This description neatly characterises the mainstream way of reading Constable's paintings. Invention is "resorted" to, rather than being natural and integral to

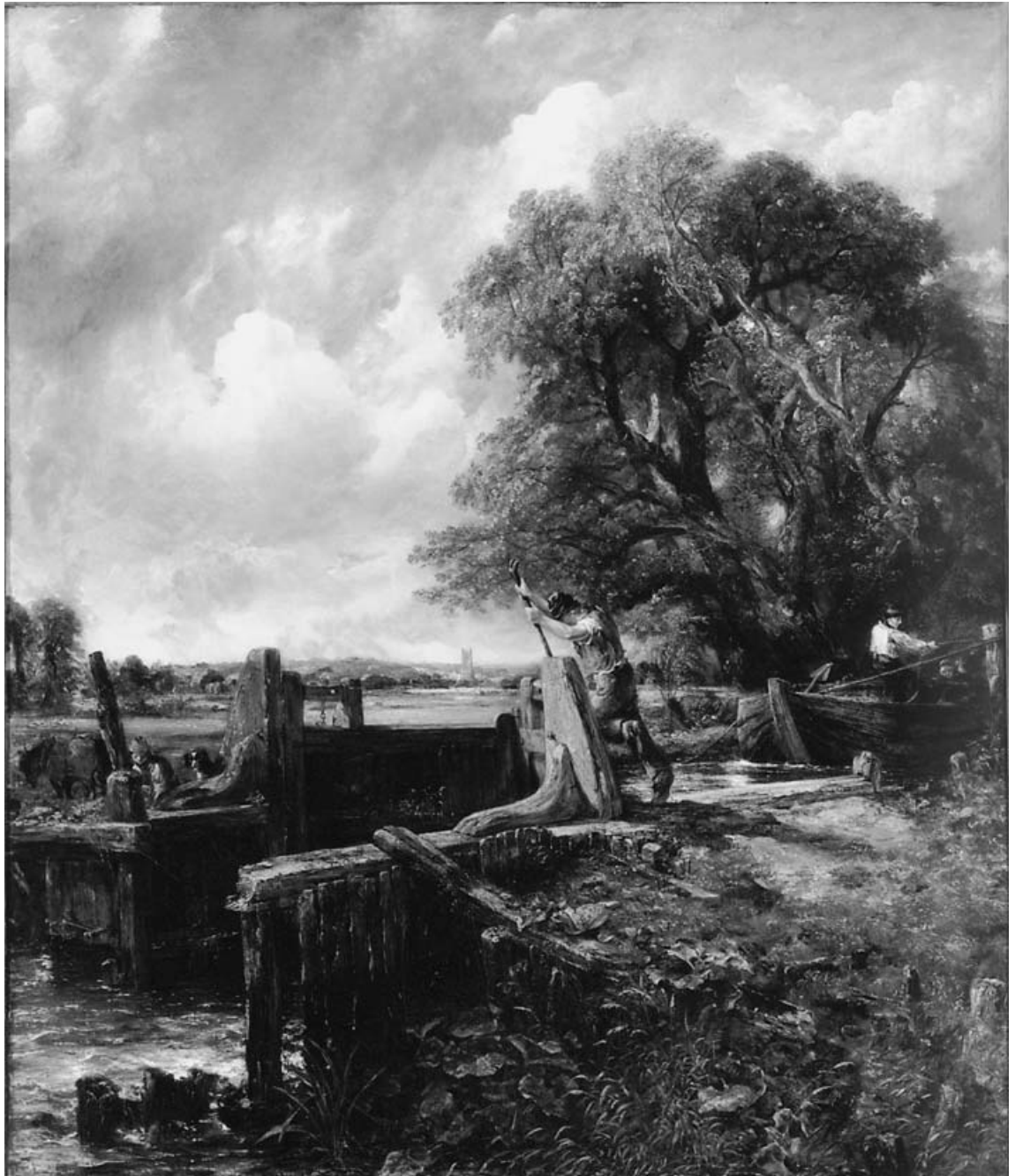


picture making. I argue throughout this book for the absolute centrality of invention and composition to Constable's theory and practice.

As if to consolidate this point of view, the 1991 exhibition hung oil sketches and preparatory works as if on an aesthetic par and level of art historical importance with the major exhibited pictures. There is indeed sometimes an air of apology for the latter. This attitude reflects a widely held view that the sketches are Constable's major contribution to British art because of their supposed greater spontaneity. This critical position has an historical context. Constable as well as other early-nineteenth-century landscape painters has come to be evaluated through an impressionist filter. Earlier art practices that included open-air oil sketching have been interpreted as precursors of impressionism and privileged in critical discourse as a result. As will emerge, Constable's own aesthetic was bound up with new ways of achieving the status, for an English painter, of the great masters of landscape, and the finished works for exhibition were his *raison d'être* as a painter.

The origins of the mainstream approach lie with the first biographer of Constable, Charles Leslie,⁴ whose 1843 memoir stressed Constable's differences from the "academic" tradition and quoted selectively from his sources in support of this point of view. For example, Leslie makes much of the importance for Constable of completing paintings "en plein air" to capture the exact appearance in observed conditions of light and atmosphere at a particular location. Leslie attributes to Constable a suggestion that he completed *Boat Building* (Fig. 2) on site. Much of the Constable literature has used this as evidence that the motif, the use of a particular place and time as the subject matter of major paintings, is the defining characteristic of Constable's art. This orientation is also rooted, in the mainstream analysis, in a period of intense engagement with the locales of Suffolk, shown by the abundance of oil sketches from the first decade of his working life.

Boat Building, however, is the only exhibited work for which evidence of completion in the open air exists, and even this is ambiguous because there are notable differences between a surviving drawing that gives the main lines of the composition and the painting. Leslie's biography, the founding text of the mainstream view, needs to be assessed with care. William Vaughan undertook such an assessment in an important paper in 1996.⁵ He has put Leslie's deliberate construction of the Constable myth in a context of cultural politics. Leslie was part of a group trying to defend British "naturalism" against the influence of continental "academic" painting. These champions of



1. John Constable, *The Lock*, 1824. Oil on canvas, 142.2 × 120.7 cm, Carmen Thyssen-Bornemisza Collection on loan at the Museo Thyssen-Bornemisza, Madrid. Photograph © Carmen Thyssen-Bornemisza Collection on loan at the Museo Thyssen-Bornemisza, Madrid.



2. John Constable, *Boat Building*, 1814. Oil on canvas, 20 × 24 1/2 inches. Board of Trustees of the Victoria and Albert Museum, London.

natural art needed a hero of the English school to bolster their case. Constable would fit the bill better if his sophistication of artistic thought, dependence on inherited art theory and ambitions to produce monumental pictures, were played down in favour of a vision of landscape as simple representation of the scene.

Lord Clark many years ago warned against the undervaluation of Constable's abilities and purposes as a producer of monumental landscape. He traces the development of the composition of *Landscape Noon (The Haywain)* (Fig. 3) from early drawings through preparatory studies and thence the exhibited picture. The process of developing the composition involves finding formal pictorial



3. John Constable, *Landscape Noon [The Haywain]*, 1821. Oil on canvas, 51.25 × 73 inches, National Gallery, London.

structures corresponding to the forms of nature: “In the exhibition picture the intervals are larger, the rhythms slower and an increased emphasis on horizontals confirms the sense of midday calm.”⁶ These compositional moves draw on and are validated by the traditions of landscape. Clark takes issue with the notion, popular even then, that the studies and sketches are the “real” contribution and the exhibition pictures tamed, almost emasculated, to try to please contemporary taste: “they are . . . evidence that he had studied the great masters . . . Rubens, Poussin, Claude, Ruisdael – and knew the value of the classical tradition.”⁷ Consistently with this conventional motivation, the outdoor oil studies were preparatory in a variety of senses. They are compositional or motif studies, for later use in studio-based paintings, but also, I argue, a form of aesthetic experimentation. In fundamental method, Constable did not differ from most of his predecessors in landscape in using drawings and painted scenes and objects from direct



observation in pieces worked up in the studio. He brought to bear a variant form of this practice, however, which owes a good deal to specifically British thought.

Social Art History

Other approaches to Constable fall under the broad heading of social history of art, looking outside of the aesthetic purposes of the paintings in themselves to their social or sometimes psychological contexts. Recent reconsiderations of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century British landscape painting have concentrated on the social and economic aspects of land ownership. They see these relationships embodied, critically or complacently, in the pictures. As opposed to the connoisseurial angle, these commentators have considered paintings under the aspect of the social and political attitudes of the dominant class, acting as patrons. In Constable's case, these attitudes are usually taken to have been internalised into his own attitudes and allegiances, so that the absence of a social critique in his works is read as social and political conservatism. The interest of landscape in this view is mainly its subject matter. Consideration given to style and composition is about how these pictorial means are used to present the subject and its social or political references.

John Barrell, for example, in his 1980 book, examines the social meaning and ideological functioning of pastoral landscape paintings. His methodological base is in the work of E. P. Thompson and other Marxist historians of working-class life in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century England. He wants to deal with the actuality of life and the relationships between the rural poor and the ruling class, "and what place the poor are shown as occupying in the society of England seen as a whole."⁸

One of Barrell's main propositions is that there were moral and social constraints on depiction and that aesthetics was secondary, that is, that there were limits on the range of acceptable ways of representing social strata in paintings. These concerns lead Barrell to the issue of how far the rural poor depicted in Constable's landscapes are at work or leisure and how to read the moral status of their activities. The figures in Constable's pictures are generally engaged in some form of activity rather than pure leisure, but usually without much indication of strenuous effort. The figures are part of the landscape, on this view, in much the same way as the farm animals or carts, property, rather than intellectual inhabitants.

Michael Rosenthal builds on the themes considered by Barrell with an interpretation of Constable's landscapes as signifying the ideological and class roots of his personal position. The signifying role of representation of the natural world in his art is, Rosenthal argues, a "naturalisation" of the social status quo and offers a justification of the social order of the countryside and indirectly of the privileged position of Constable and his family.

Rosenthal started the fashion for delving into Constable's psychological state at different times to find the causes of important features of his paintings. The dramatic chiaroscuro of the major pictures of the 1830s he explains as a stylistic equivalent to depression, a dark state of mind, following the death of Maria Constable, his wife, in 1828. This led to a loss of confidence and purpose in his painting.⁹

This line of thought is unpersuasive, and instead, I offer in Chapter 6 an explanation of the chiaroscuro compositions of Constable's output of the 1830s as an achievement of a long-pursued aim of making grand and dramatic landscape art of local, characteristically English, scenes.

Also writing in the 1980s, Ann Bermingham¹⁰ applies an ideological interpretation of Constable and some of his predecessors in English landscape, along the lines presented by Barrell and Rosenthal. Her main contribution, however, is a psychological interpretation of the origins of Constable's subject matter and style. She approaches her subject through an explicit application of a psychoanalytic model of personal behaviour and sees the roots of his art in the dynamics of the family, which "both unifies the data of the biographical field and provides the means of internalising social categories in a personal history."¹¹ The paintings are in this view an embodiment in depicted land of the parent. The way that Constable treats the land in painting maps the artistic vision onto personal experience and enables Constable to sublimate the unresolved tensions in the relationship with his father. The tensions, it is argued, arose from the father's attempts to dissuade John from pursuing a career as an artist and instead to enter the family milling business.

In this reading, the artist's pictures are in important respects "caused" by the working out of the unconscious conflicts with his own family. An example is the 1800–2 *View from Golding Constable's House*.¹² She feels that this represents "a repetition of the original act of filial disobedience," a condition of mind with Oedipal overtones.¹³ Her interpretation derives from the absence in the picture of the topographically accurate farm buildings and garden, and their replacement with a winding track with two cows. The editors of the catalogue of the 1976 retrospective had an alternative explanation for the absence of the



specific foreground buildings, based on the sense of decorum of an aspiring painter. They argue, plausibly, that this part of the composition resulted from an aesthetic choice. Constable would have been reluctant, at that early stage, to admit such particularisations into a picture.

Bermingham sees Constable's deference in artistic matters to Sir George Beaumont and Joseph Farington and to the examples and ideas of Gainsborough and Reynolds as being in conflict with the popular notion that he was an artistic revolutionary.¹⁴ She reads this deference as a substitution for the authority he denied to his father. An alternative interpretation, developed here, in Chapter 2, is that an adaptive adherence to many aspects of academic thought on painting is a considered intellectual position. The view we have of Constable as a maverick does not accord with his own self-perception or his relationship to the main institutions of art and to the founding fathers of British painting. His relationship with his father did not develop into antagonism either. John Dunthorne wrote to Constable as early in his career as March 21, 1802, to say that his father seemed more reconciled to the chosen path:

I have been with your father several times of late which we seldom part without mentioning you which I am glad to hear he speaks of your painting in quite a different way to what he formerly did.

The psychoanalytic reading of Constable's career as the working out of Oedipal tensions or the torments of familial disapproval does not have support from the biographical evidence.

Perception, Representation, and Style

Although radically opposed in most respects, the "mainstream" and "social art history" readings share a disregard for formal analysis of Constable's pictures. In this book, I aim to redress the balance and show the importance for Constable of the principles and practices of picture construction, the artifice of the art of painting. The principles of formal analysis used derive from a synthesis of a theory of visual perception with ideas about pictorial composition. This incipient theory of style provides a vocabulary for a fresh critical engagement with individual paintings.

The stimulus to find a framework of understanding of the problematic of Constable's way of representing the world in paint again comes from acute

questions raised by Conal Shields in his introductory essay to the 1976 Constable exhibition catalogue. He there raises some issues about the relationships between visual perception and pictorial representation in Constable's work, which have not yet been resolved or even seriously considered. He comments that the artist's approach to representation had been treated as intuitive, avoiding the problem raised by Gombrich in *Art and Illusion* of how the external world is perceived and that perception translated into convincing images. Yet as just discussed, much of the energy in Constable scholarship since 1976 has gone into social-historical or psychological readings of the life and pictures. There has been little coverage of the perception and pictorial imaging of the world under aesthetic imperatives in landscape painting.

A constructive way to address the issues raised by Shields is based on a theory of visual perception developed in the 1970s by the American psychologist, J.J. Gibson.¹⁵ This theory, dubbed "direct perception," derives from the insight that perception is an active rather than a passive activity, a purposive interaction between the perceiver and his environment. The dominant approach to the psychology of perception, by working in artificial, laboratory conditions, has missed the essentially active nature of the process. Gibson postulates that the visual environment for an individual is given by the flow of light to the eye, structured by its reflection from the things of the environment. This flow of information is conceived of as continuously picked up, not as a series of discrete retinal images that have to be processed by having three-dimensionality somehow added to them as a mental function, as postulated in much of perception theory. The retinal image plays only a transitory, physiological role in the perceptual process. We see by extracting from the continuous flow certain invariant patterns in the light that specify the permanent features of the environment or the invariant rules by which the structure of the light changes as we move our heads or bodies through space. Perception is about ecologically directed action. The idea of invariants may sound rather abstract and theoretical but covers things such as occluding edges, which conceal and reveal things beyond them as they move in space or as we move relative to them, thus specifying the continuity of the occluded objects. Another example is the texture gradient, where the apparent size of the units of texture diminishes at an invariant rate with distance from the percipient. Importantly for the application to understanding pictures, Gibson emphasises the perceptual awareness of the self. Ecological visual perception is of the world stretching out from each of us. To perceive is to perceive oneself in relation to the rest of the world. Of central importance in this "subjective" experience of perception is the ground plane, the horizontal



supportive surface stretching out in all directions. This not only provides our feeling of groundedness but is also the reference plane for experience of up and down, earth and sky. The invariant information that establishes the ground plane includes particularly texture gradients, regularly diminishing perceptual visual angles of the constituent parts of the ground surface – stones, tarmac, paving stones, and so on. We see the sizes of the objects of the world against this regular pattern, and this accounts, in ecological perception theory, for the phenomenon of size constancy. We see objects at a distance in relation to their background and in relation to the ground plane. So things seem larger than their retinal image because of their constant relationship to the constituents of their surroundings. The translation, through some sort of visual projection, from three-dimensional experience to two-dimensional simulation in pictures is greatly assisted by using static information abstracted from the shifting optic array of the real world, which specifies the ground plane and thus the “subjective” position of the spectator relative to the fictional depicted scene.

Gibson’s theory is also concerned with perception of meaning in the environment, through the concept of affordances. This is the proposition that perception is of the meanings of things in themselves, not of bundles of discrete attributes, which again have to be fitted with meaning from memory. The meaning of the things of our environment comes from what they afford – for survival, use, pleasure, danger, or whatever.

In a paper from the late 1980s, John Steer¹⁶ has argued that Gibson’s theories have applications in the history of art, especially to questions of style. This, he suggests, should come from the study of which bits of visual information are chosen by artists of various times and places to use for their representations of the world. The pattern of structured light reaching the eye constitutes the “information space” of visual perception and Steer’s suggestion is that style is about the process of selection from the information space of certain attributes to bring to the viewer’s attention. The two-dimensional, fictive world of a painting can be created with a few graphic equivalents for the complexities of visual experience. The painter does not need to replicate some approximation to the retinal image, as the dominant theories of perception suggest a painting aims to do.

Visual perception itself is selective. We do not and cannot attend to all the available visual stimuli at any point in time. The direction of our attention is motivated, in the direct perception approach, by our changing needs from the surrounding environment, that is, by factors affecting survival or use and our purposes more generally. A picture is a fictive version of a perceivable world. The representational artist has to select which recognisable things to include

in his fictions and how to put them together into a coherent whole. His choices of what set of visual information to deploy and its arrangement and relationships in the picture direct the viewer's attention selectively. As an example of the broad stylistic currents that this model elucidates, Steer has nominated the differences between Venetian art based on the world rendered as colour patches and the Florentine-Roman school, with its concern for drawing and the three-dimensional structure of individual forms. Another such distinction popular in the literature is that between Italian Renaissance painting's volumetric concerns and the emphasis in the art of northern Europe on the way surfaces reflect and refract light. The application of this model to the history of painting denies the idea of a linear historical development towards an art that is more representative of visual perception in some quantitative sense. Constable's art has often been presented as more naturalistic than that of his predecessors or, usually more implicitly, his contemporaries, which is a highly problematical idea considered from this point of view. The type of representation that painters deploy is an aspect of stylistic preferences.

To give an example of Constable's style in comparison with a predecessor, we can look at the *Haywain* (Fig. 3) against Gainsborough's *Market Cart* (Fig. 4). Both pictures have a similar theme, an agricultural vehicle moving through a rural locale. Gainsborough gives his picture a sense of motion against Constable's more poised and still figural composition. Gainsborough's horse and cart strain forward towards us, but they are held perceptually in space by the gaze of the wood-gathering peasant. Even the leaves of the trees appear moving and windblown. The figures are set in contrast against a solid background of trees, which close most of the pictorial space, leaving one Claude-type lateral view into a blue distance. Constable creates a more open space and distributes his pictorial elements in a more dispersed way across and into his picture space. I think it is difficult to argue, however, that Constable's painting is more naturalistic, more like the world than is that of Gainsborough. They simply choose to emphasise different aspects of the world and to deploy them in different sorts of pictorial composition.

Meaning

John Steer finds as well that Gibson's notion of affordances offers a way into the problem of "the ways in which visual images mean things."¹⁷ It can do this through the recognition that representation of physical objects in paintings carries with it the affordances of those objects that are then an integral part of the