

THE GREAT LANDSCAPES

CONSTABLE

TATE BRITAIN, 1 JUNE – 28 AUGUST 2006

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John Constable *The White Horse* 1819 © The Frick Collection, New York

TEACHER AND STUDENT NOTES WITH KEY WORK CARDS

DOUBLE-SIDED A4 CARDS WITH INTRODUCTORY INFORMATION, FULL COLOUR IMAGES, DISCUSSION POINTS, LINKS AND ACTIVITIES. FOR USE IN THE GALLERY OR CLASSROOM. SUITABLE FOR TEACHERS OF ALL KEY STAGES AND OLDER STUDENTS.

BY KIRSTIE BEAVEN

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Introduction to Constable: The Great Landscapes

This major exhibition at Tate Britain offers the first opportunity to view John Constable's great six-foot exhibition canvases together. These 'six-footers' are some of the most familiar images in British art, including *The Hay Wain* 1821.

Constable decided to start painting very large landscapes to attract more notice at the annual Royal Academy exhibitions, where the works of art were hung close together and often very high up. Constable also wanted to project his own ideas about landscape on a large scale, which was more in keeping with the achievements of celebrated 'classical' landscape painters.

Just as important are the full-scale sketches Constable produced for most of his final exhibition pieces. These six-foot sketches were unprecedented at the time. Perhaps these sketches are what show him most as an avant-garde or 'modern' painter, struggling to re-think the demands of his art in an entirely new way. By displaying these full-scale sketches together with the corresponding finished pictures we not only gain an insight into Constable's working practices, but can also explore their role in the development of one of the most well-recognised British artists of any period.

Visiting the Exhibition

Exhibition tickets for school groups of more than ten students are available in advance only at a cost of £4 per student and teacher (we ask for payment to be received two weeks before the visit). As tickets are limited it is essential to book well in advance.

To book a group in, please call the Education Bookings line on **020 7887 3959**.

To avoid overcrowding, all groups with more than thirty students will be split and entry to the exhibition will be staggered at one-hour intervals.

You are welcome to use the Schools Area to have lunch or to use locker spaces; please book these at the same time as your tickets (there is limited space available).

As all exhibitions at Tate can get busy you cannot lecture in the exhibition rooms, but you can discuss works in a conversational manner with groups of no more than six students at a time. If possible, brief your students before they enter the exhibition, and if you have a large group, we recommend that you divide them into smaller groups and perhaps follow the suggestions in this pack.

About the Teacher and Student notes

This short pack is intended as an introduction to the exhibition and it covers three works in depth. It offers ideas and starting points for visiting teachers to use with all age groups, as well as for A-level and GCSE students to use on their own. Some of the activities or discussion points can be used as preparation for a visit, some are for use in the exhibition itself, and others will be more suited to class work after your visit.

The works discussed are reproduced at A4 size so you can print them out and use them as a resource in the classroom. The notes aim to give a few jumping-off points to explore not only the featured works but also the exhibition as a whole.

Other Resources

In the final room of the exhibition, there are two interactive screens which reveal some surprising discoveries about Constable's working processes. One shows an x-ray uncovering painted-out details while the other shows how Constable made the transitions from small preliminary sketches to his six-foot canvases. There is also reading material available in this room.

In addition to the exhibition leaflet, there is also an audioguide which gives further information about the works on display.

The catalogue, priced at £24.99 in paperback, is available in the Tate shop, which also has a range of books, journals, postcards and other related materials.

The Key Work Cards for *Teachers: Landscape and Environment*, available for £9.99 from the Tate shop, might also be a useful complement to this exhibition.

There is also a collection display on John Constable upstairs in Room 11.

Websites

Tate Online www.tate.org.uk

Tate Learning www.tate.org.uk/learning

This site includes a dedicated area for teachers and group leaders as well as similar resource notes for other major Tate exhibitions.



John Constable *Scene on a Navigable River* 1816–1817 © Tate

'I SHOULD PAINT MY OWN PLACES BEST'

Constable to John Fisher, 1821

JOHN CONSTABLE

Flatford Mill 'Scene on a Navigable River' 1816–1817

Oil on canvas

© Tate

Background

John Constable was born in East Bergholt, Suffolk, in 1776. He was the son of a prosperous corn and coal merchant and his family intended that he would join the business, but even early on in life he was determined to become a painter.

As a boy, he learnt to paint under a local amateur artist, John Dunthorne, and then, aged twenty-three, he joined the Royal Academy Schools in London. The Royal Academy was the most important art establishment of the time. It was the place to exhibit your work and to gain recognition not only amongst your peer group, but also the wider public.

The first painting Constable exhibited at the Academy was a landscape. Comparing it to the other works on display (which often were formulaic, following strict rules of composition and colour palette) he decided he would work directly from nature, which he called 'the fountain's head, the source from whence all originality must spring'.

Constable worked each summer in Suffolk, painting the landscape of his childhood: his father's mills at Flatford and Dedham, the lane he had walked to school or views of the working countryside around him. Although his parents preferred him to paint portraits, as it was much more lucrative, Constable's main concern was to work in the open air (en plein air), responding to the local landscape.

This painting shows a view of Constable's father's mill at Flatford. Corn was ground here and then taken by barges along the Stour and then sent on to London by ship. Returning barges would bring other cargoes such as coal. The two barges here are being disconnected from their horses so that they can be poled under the footbridge in the foreground.

Constable worked on a number of sketches of this view from slightly different points, focusing on various details before working up a composition. He then used a grid to scale up the drawing to the six-foot canvas.

Discussion

- How do you think Constable felt painting this scene? Why might he have chosen to paint views that he was really familiar with? If you were to make a painting of your childhood area, what might it include? How would that be similar or different to what Constable's view shows?
- At the time that Constable was making his great paintings of rural landscapes, there was a lot of change going on in the countryside. The introduction of machines which did work that had previously been done by people made a lot of the workforce redundant, forcing them into poverty. This led to many protests against mechanisation, which went as far as 'machine-breaking'. Can you see this in Constable's work? Why do you think that is? Can you think of any similar situations today?

Activities

- Sit outside and draw a scene you know really well. Look hard and think about what details you feel are important to show in it. Look at it from different viewpoints and make lots of drawings.
- Make a small drawing (of anything you like) on a sheet of A4 paper. Mark out a grid over the top of your drawing – make each square 3cm x 3cm. Now grid up an A3 piece of paper with boxes 6cm x 6cm and enlarge your drawing box by box to the new sheet.
- Work from the sketches you've done outside and make a painting taking in what you think are the most important details from all your sketches. Try and make the finished painting tell a story about the place.



John Constable *Chain Pier, Brighton* 1826-7 © Tate

'BRIGHTON IS THE RECEPTACLE OF THE FASHION AND OFF-SCOURING OF LONDON'

Constable to John Fisher, 1824

JOHN CONSTABLE

Chain Pier, Brighton 1826–7

Oil on canvas

© Tate

Background

Constable lived in Brighton for much of his time between 1824–1828, for the health of his wife Maria.

During this time, Brighton grew from a south coast fishing village to a trendy seaside resort. It became a fashionable destination as a result of its popularity with the Prince Regent, who built the famous Royal Pavilion there. The chain suspension pier opened in 1823 as a landing place for steam boats from Dieppe.

Although the title of this painting suggests the subject is the new pier, Constable is also commenting on the changes he saw going on around him – what he saw as the vulgarisation of an old coastal site.

Constable famously disliked Brighton's 'vulgarity', writing to his friend John Fisher:

'The magnificence of the sea, and its...everlasting voice, is drowned in the din and lost in the tumult of stage coaches... and the beach is only Piccadilly ...by the sea-side. Ladies dressed and undressed – Gentlemen in morning gowns and slippers on ... all are mixed together in endless and indecent confusion...'

Constable preferred the huge sky and the fishing boats which he described as 'picturesque'. The contrast of old and new, natural and 'unnatural' is a central aspect of the painting and this panoramic view suggests Constable had a real fascination with the unfamiliar modern setting.

The picture received mixed reviews when Constable exhibited it at the Academy in 1827 and it failed to find a buyer. However, JMW Turner certainly noticed it – he painted a view of the Chain Pier for a carved room at Petworth soon after seeing Constable's painting.

Discussion

- Do you know a place that is changing? Perhaps there are new houses being built on fields or buildings being knocked down to make way for new developments, like the Olympic Village. What do you think about places becoming 'fashionable' to visit? What do you think it's like to be a local person in a place like Ibiza, for example? What are the pros and cons?
- What do you look for in a holiday destination? Constable obviously was more interested in the working life of Brighton; the fishing boats, the fishermen and their families. The quote above shows that he didn't like the way Brighton was so busy and similar to London. Does he show us that in the painting? In what ways? What does he focus on?

Activities

- Constable not only gives us a broad view of the scene, he also focuses in on the details, like the fish in the basket. Look closely at these tiny details of the painting. Focus in on one area of the painting and make a drawing of it so that it fills your page.
- Constable was fascinated by the weather and especially by recording the changes in the clouds. Make a cloud diary of your own. At a set time each day go outside or look out of your window and make a note of what the clouds in the sky are like. You could make sketches, estimate how much of the sky is covered by clouds or try and describe what the clouds look like. There are special names for types of clouds – look them up on a weather website and see if you can classify the clouds you see.
- This painting plays down the holiday side of Brighton. Imagine you work for the Brighton tourist board. Come up with a campaign to counteract this image and invite people to come and visit Brighton – a slogan, a poster, maybe even a television or radio advert.



John Constable *The Opening of Waterloo Bridge (Whitehall Stairs, June 18th, 1817-1832)* © Tate

'I AM IMPRESSED WITH AN IDEA THAT IT WILL RUIN ME'

Constable to John Fisher, 1824

JOHN CONSTABLE

The Opening of Waterloo Bridge

'Whitehall Stairs, June 18th, 1817' 1832

Oil on canvas

© Tate

Background

It took thirteen years for Constable to complete this painting. As you can see from the rest of the exhibition, for him, it was an unusual subject – not a rural or coastal landscape. Instead it shows the processional opening of London's new Waterloo Bridge in 1817.

In the background are many London landmarks while in the foreground, the Prince Regent, accompanied by soldiers, sailors and the Lord Mayor, is embarking on the royal barge.

Constable experimented over and over again with this subject in 1819 and 1820, but then put it aside. By 1824 he had begun another version and in November 1825, obviously still struggling with it, complained to his close friend John Fisher that, 'my Waterloo...like a blister begins to stick closer and closer and to disturb my nights.'

In 1826 he started again on the composition, changing the view slightly, but once again he stopped painting returning to it only in 1829, and not producing this final version until 1832.

This painting is an example of how Constable didn't always stick exactly to what he saw in front of him when he was making his outdoor sketches in the final composition. Some of the landmarks in this view weren't even built when Waterloo Bridge was opened, so it wasn't meant as a historical record. Instead, Constable was interested in emulating the great river views of the artist Canaletto. Canaletto was the master of painting waterways, and Constable had seen and was inspired by his Venetian and Thames views.

Before the opening of an exhibition at the Royal Academy, artists were allowed 'varnishing days' to retouch their paintings, ready for the viewing. After seeing this painting, JMW Turner added an intense red to one of his own works hanging nearby, responding to the vibrant colours of Constable's canvas.

Discussion

- Constable has painted an event that he thought was particularly important. What important event would you paint a picture of? What buildings would you include? What people would be in it? Why is it a significant event?
- How does this painting make you feel? What do you think Constable wanted you to feel? What is it about the painting that makes you feel that way – the colours, the composition, the sunlight...?

Activities

- When it was exhibited, the rich and exciting colours in this painting obviously attracted the eye even in the crammed Royal Academy show. Are they the colours you would associate with London? Tate Britain is right on the Thames and from the Millbank Steps, you can see across the river. Make a colour painting or pastel drawing of the scene you can see. Compare it with the colours in *The Opening of Waterloo Bridge*.
- Do a bit of research and try and find out what all the buildings you can see in this painting are (there is some help in the gallery, or on the website). Can you find out if these buildings are still standing, or used for the same thing as when Constable painted this picture?
- Make an imaginary cityscape sculpture. Draw out a plan of the important buildings your city needs and then make a 3D model. Produce a key, like the one in the gallery, showing what each building is.