

Constable's *Salisbury Cathedral from the Meadows* Q&A

Between Amy McKelvie (Curator, Schools and Teachers) and
Amy Concannon (Assistant Curator British Art, 1790 – 1850)



Salisbury Cathedral from the Meadows 1831 John Constable (1776 – 1837) © Tate, London 2013
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1. What three words describe the *Salisbury Cathedral from the Meadows* painting for you?

Ambitious, dramatic, ambiguous.

2. If you were to change the artwork in some way, what would you do / add / takeaway?

Constable found it difficult to judge when a work was finished and kept working on *Salisbury Cathedral* even after it had been shown in public – I often wonder what it looked like when it was first exhibited in 1831. Technical research carried out by looking very closely at the surface of the painting has shown that he likely re-worked the area to the left of the tree, where the church of St Thomas and rooftops of other buildings in the city can be seen – cracks to the surface have occurred where thick, wet paint was applied over almost-dry paint (oil paint takes some time to dry), suggesting he went back to re-work this area. It is also possible that his pigments have darkened over time so, along with the cracks, it's now one of the more difficult parts of the work to read. Out of curiosity I would therefore wish this area was lighter and more defined.

3. The Aspire partnership has enabled the painting to travel to both rural and urban settings, how do you think these different contexts impact on how people look at the artwork and what they experience?

Everyone brings their own experiences and ideas to an artwork and it's impossible to pre-empt what different people will see when they look at *Salisbury Cathedral from the Meadows*. Some who view it will know the landscape – or even live in it, as the painting is being shown in Salisbury – but whether the viewer knows the landscape or not, lives in a city or lives in the countryside, the painting presents itself as a window onto another world entirely, the world as seen by Constable. It's a world painted in thick, textured paint that takes some adjusting to – step too close and it's hard to make things out, go too far away, and you lose sight of the detail. Regardless of what elements speak to people the most – be it the cathedral, the field, or the figures – the painted surface is something we've all got to scrutinise before we can experience the world as Constable presents it.

I should also add that no two galleries are the same. Lighting, wall colour, temperature and sounds all impact on how we experience an artwork and are things that curators and gallery staff consider carefully when displaying works of art.

4. Can you describe the journey of the painting from its arrival at Tate Britain to the gallery walls? Who is involved? What do they do?

The painting travels in its own bespoke wooden box, which we call a crate that is fitted out with foam inside to keep the painting in place and buffer against vibrations when it's on the road. Upon arrival at the gallery, it will be met by a team of specially-trained art handlers, who will carefully wheel the box off the truck and into the gallery space. The box will be left unopened overnight so that the painting can acclimatise to the strictly controlled levels of temperature and humidity in the gallery space – sudden changes of climate can cause the canvas and its wooden stretcher to shrink or expand, which could cause damage to the paint on its surface.

The next day, the art handlers will carefully open the box and lay the painting up against a wall for inspection by a conservator, who is trained to analyse its condition and administer treatments if needed. They look for any change in its appearance, however small: for example noting whether cracks on the surface have appeared, or have grown, or whether flakes of paint have lifted off. Overall, *Salisbury Cathedral* is in good condition – remember, it's nearly 200 years old! When it first came to Tate it received an all-over clean with a saline solution, which gently removed a layer of dust and dirt that had accumulated on the surface. It won't need cleaning like that again for some time. Conservators also inspect the frame, looking to see whether any new chips to the moulding (the wooden carving) or the gold-leaf gilding have occurred in transit. When moving the painting art handlers use gloves to prevent oil and dirt from their hands damaging the frame because oil from skin dulls the gilding.

The curator will confirm the position the painting will hang in before the art handlers take measurements, drill holes in the wall for the painting's special fixings to be hung off, and make sure the painting is fitted securely. The curator then works with lighting technicians to achieve a scheme of lighting that allows the painting to be seen clearly but which does not exceed a level of lux (measure of light) that would damage the painting. Lighting can also be used to create an atmosphere. A label, which the curator has written, and which will have been printed beforehand is then fixed to the wall and, when the tools are tidied away, the space is opened to the public.

5. As curator, if there were no limitations, which artwork/s would you choose to place alongside *Salisbury Cathedral from the Meadows* and why?

So many! I'd love to go back in time and see it displayed at the Royal Academy in 1831, where it would have been hung frame-to-frame with hundreds of other paintings, all clamouring for our attention, including one by J.M.W. Turner in Tate's collection, *Caligula's Palace and Bridge*, which hung nearby that year. I'd also love to see all his six-foot paintings hung in one room so as to compare almost twenty years of paintings on that scale – it'd have to be a big room, though!

6. Which contemporary artists would you want to look at in relation to *Salisbury Cathedral from the Meadows*? What is the connection or point of departure?

Lucian Freud is well known for his admiration of Constable's work, particularly his portraits stating: 'I've always thought it completely loopy for people to go on about portrait painters, English portrait painters, and not to have Constable among them.'

Despite initially feeling that Constable's work was both 'ridiculous' and 'soppy', Freud became especially taken with Constable's *Study for the Trunk of an Elm Tree* c.1821, a work he tried copying, but gave up because it was so difficult (Freud went on to produce the etching *Elm Tree after Constable* in 2003). However his love of Constable's work did not deepen until later, and arose out of an understanding of the feeling behind the work. This is perhaps where the resonances between Constable and Freud are most clearly demonstrated, in the relationship between artist and subject: just as Constable's landscape paintings demonstrate a close focus on place and the changing face of nature, so his studies of people encourage an intimate view of an individual and depict something of their relationship with the artist.

Whenever I see Leon Kossoff's work I think of Constable. Kossoff was inspired by Constable, and made a print after *Salisbury Cathedral from the Meadows* (www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/kossoff-from-constable-salisbury-cathedral-from-the-meadows-plate-1-p20318) but it's in Kossoff's paintings that I see a synergy. Both artists put such energy into their work via the thickly-laid paint, which we call impasto. It gives an almost sculptural quality to the works. There's a work by Kossoff in Tate's collection featuring Spitalfields church, which is painted in a cool colouring and bends so as to be seen within the square canvas but still towers above the street (www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/kossoff-christ-church-spitalfields-morning-t06735), reminding me of Salisbury Cathedral's towering spire and the cool atmosphere of Constable's painting. In others like *Willesden Junction, Morning in October* (www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/kossoff-willesden-junction-morning-in-october-l02671), Kossoff presents an expanded perspective – a panoramic view – which takes in lots of elements. Constable was also aiming for this expanded view in *Salisbury* (you can't really see everything you can see in the painting from his supposed vantage point). Another point of common interest between the two is atmospheric effect. Both these works by Kossoff contain reference to the time of day they depict, something Constable often did, too.



Top: *From Constable: Salisbury Cathedral from the Meadows (plate 1)* 1996–7

Middle: *Christ Church, Spitalfields, Morning* 1990

Bottom: *Willesden Junction, Morning in October* 1971

Leon Kossoff (b. 1926) © Leon Kossoff

Another is David Hockney, whose thoughts about Constable in 1976 were captured in a work in Tate's collection, *For John Constable* (www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/hockney-for-john-constable-p03184), a specially-commissioned print series to celebrate the bicentenary of Constable's birth. Of Hockney's recent works I'd like to see *Salisbury Cathedral* in tandem with Hockney's work featuring East Yorkshire on a monumental scale. I think Constable was trying to achieve a similar kind of all-encompassing immersion I felt when I saw some of the huge pictures – and video installations – by Hockney in his 2012 Royal Academy exhibition, *A Bigger Picture*. There's perhaps some parallels to be drawn between the two artists' use of perspective, too. Neither artist necessarily always adheres to what's optically and geometrically precise but rather exploits perspective as a way to draw you in and through the landscape.

7. *Salisbury Cathedral from the Meadows* is often referred to as a 'masterpiece', what does that mean to you? What makes a masterpiece? Who decides?

I have rarely felt comfortable referring to paintings as 'masterpieces' – in historic art, it's often a label that's added by art historians, curators or art dealers to denote a work of art that stands out amongst others. Often, too, it's a label applied long after the artist was alive and assumes a judgement based on criteria that the artist might not have agreed with. In the case of *Salisbury Cathedral*, however, I feel more confident that the term 'masterpiece' can be applied: he felt that way about this work, ensuring it was seen in multiple exhibitions and returning to it to make it 'his best' work. Upon his death, close friends of his thought the work should be the one chosen to represent him in the National Gallery, with one of those friends, fellow painter Charles Robert Leslie, believing it to represent 'the fullest impression of the compass of his art'. In other words, it was the most representative of what Constable hoped to achieve through his works.

8. In the Tate Schools and Teachers team we often quote Gabriel Orozco in relation to our practice:

'What is important is not so much what people see in the gallery but what people see after looking at these things, how they confront reality again'.

How does looking at *Salisbury Cathedral from the Meadows* change or impact on how you view at the contemporary world?

Looking at the painting, or indeed any by Constable, for a long time and then emerging out of the gallery and into the world I am always a little more aware of the sky, or the way that light and shadow play out and what I would do to represent the complex shadows of bushes in the park, say.

My study of the themes that were prominent at the time Constable painted it – of widespread dissatisfaction with the political order, of debates about the place of religion, of concerns for the overcrowding of cities – make me think, quite simply, that, when it comes to what worries our society, nothing much has changed in 200 years. Our newspapers and the Internet are still full of debates on those very topics.

9. What question/s would you ask the artist John Constable about the painting if you could?

That'd be a golden opportunity! I'd ask him if it was really finished; when exactly he added the rainbow, and why. I'd also ask him why he started it when he did. We have our ideas about his actions, but of course I'd like to know from him.

10. During a workshop for teachers at Tate Britain artist Emma Hart asked the group, 'what questions is this artwork asking you?'

She was asking the teachers to think about the questions a particular artwork was asking them about their own lives. Not so much about what the work might represent or symbolise but what it prompted in them, how it affected them.

It's a difficult question to answer, but I want to ask what questions *Salisbury Cathedral from the Meadows* is asking you right now?

It asks me to think about time and place in relation to my own life; how do the places I hold dear, or else know inside out, represent themselves in my mind, and how I might I share that information with others? It's a very enigmatic painting that keeps me thinking...and thinking...and I expect it will do so for a long time to come.

11. *Salisbury Cathedral from the Meadows* contains signs of both urban and rural life. What do we think Constable was trying to say about the countryside in *Salisbury Cathedral from the Meadows*?

Constable had grown up in the countryside, in East Anglia, and specifically in a working landscape of canals – his father owned a canal shipping business – and there are signs in *Salisbury Cathedral* that Constable is asking us to think about the landscape here in the same way that he showed his native countryside, as a place where man and nature worked harmoniously together under the moral guidance of the Church. The Church's presence is amplified here given the cathedral's size and centrality on the canvas, but, crucially, it is placed in close proximity to both the city and the countryside, as if to suggest the vital role the church should play in the day-to-day life of society. In the 1820s society was largely perceived to be breaking down. Constable's brother wrote to him of 'fires' and disorder in East Anglia as poorly-paid workers revolted against job cuts and rising food prices; there was also much debate about the place and the power of the church in British politics when Constable began to think about this painting. He talked of reform campaigners as 'vultures' and was fearful that the church – and by extension the livelihood of his best friend, who had been archdeacon at Salisbury – would be irreparably weakened by the angry feeling towards it. In *Salisbury Cathedral* the religious building physically connects city and countryside, emphasising the power Constable saw in it as a factor for uniting society and promoting good morals. Constable shows it weathering the storm, the rainbow offering hope, perhaps of a peaceful future. If this is really what Constable was aiming to represent, this was a bold statement to make at a time of such public debate but clearly one of enough importance for him to depict on this enormous, six-foot scale.

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