

John Constable's 'The Hay Wain' 1821



Medium: oil on canvas

Size: 130.2 x 185.4 cm

Location: The National Gallery (London)

ART HISTORICAL TERMS AND CONCEPTS

Subject matter: Based on an actual site near Flatford, Suffolk on the river Stour.

"I associate my careless boyhood to all that lies on the banks of the Stour. They made me a painter." The cottage shown on the left belonged to Constable's father, and was rented by a tenant farmer called Willy Lott who was born in there. The hay wain, a type of horse drawn cart ("wain" is an old word for wagon), is crossing the river at a ford to continue into the fields. The two workers riding on the wagon have stopped to let the horses drink, but more importantly to stabilise the wagon. In the summer heat the metal rims of the wheels expanded, and the wooden wheels contacted causing the wagon to wobble. Only a local country boy like Constable would have known these details of rural life. The time of year must be between June and August: haymaking season as in the background, we can see workers. This is therefore a Georgic landscape (i.e. a working productive landscape, rather than a pastoral one). Wisps of smoke curl from the chimney and there is a woman beside the house drawing water from the river and a man fishing in the rushes. The scene is harmonious yet the cloudy, windswept sky seems to indicate the possibility of rain so certainly evokes English summertime weather. By 1821 this quintessential English countryside scene was nostalgic, and remains so today.

Constable wanted to make landscape as important as history painting and believed "God Almighty's Daylight" was as valuable, spiritually and morally as

ancient history. He wanted his viewers to feel the freshness of nature. His paintings are naturalistic yet imbued with feeling: *"I should paint my own places best - painting is but another word for feeling."*

Formal elements:

This is a large scale naturalistic landscape yet the scene is not topographical. Constable has made alterations to the shape of the river, and the extent of the banks, in order to create a composition with greater breadth to show humanity in harmony with nature. The dog leads our eye towards the focal point of the cart. The horizon line is placed on the golden section. Constable conveys the immediacy of a particular time and place through light and colour. Working with a predominantly natural, earthy colour palette, he used the red of the fisherman's outfit, and housen (leather collars) of the horses to complement and enliven the greens, as well as his signature white highlights for a fresh effect. The play of light with clouds moving to the right, and the sun coming from the right casting shadows over the land is consistent, as are the reflections in the water. The looming dark cloud suggests a change in the weather. The painting was originally entitled 'Landscape: Noon'. A sense of deep space is created by the curve of the water's edge leading to the low horizon line and expansive sky, also by the diminishing scale of figures from foreground to background.

CULTURAL, SOCIAL, TECHNOLOGICAL AND POLITICAL FACTORS

Constable was born in East Bergholt, and lived most of his life in Suffolk. His famous landscapes are mostly of the local countryside. A homely and nostalgic feel pervades the painting, explained for by the fact that his father owned the land, lived in the mill-house (located out of sight, behind the viewer to the right in the Haywain). Constable was part of the wealthier, land-owning class and was supported in his early struggle to be an artist by wealthy and generous friends. Studying Constable is helpful in understanding the changing meaning of nature during the industrial revolution. Landscape had had a brief moment of glory amongst the Dutch masters of the 17th Century with Ruisdael for example (an influence on Constable) but in the 18th century hierarchy of genres, landscape was nearly the lowest type of painting, only still-life was considered less important.

In the first decades of the 19th century, Constable began to depict his father's farm on oversized canvases. These "six-footers" challenged the status quo. Landscape was presented on the same scale as history painting.

Was Constable responding to the shift that the industrial revolution brought about? As the cities and their problems grew, the urban elite began to view the countryside as ideal, not as a place wretched with poverty that thousands were fleeing for a future in the city. The rural landscape became a place of one's childhood where the good air and water contrasted sharply with the perceived evils of modern urban life. In the 1820s when Constable painted this there were many agricultural problems, soldiers returning from the Napoleonic Wars were unable to find work, there was economic depression

and social unrest. Labourers were restricted to their own parish through the Settlement Act and Trespass Act, so could not go to look for work, and the earlier Enclosure Acts had reduced common land. The introduction of agricultural machinery led to riots, and farms were burned and machinery smashed. None of this is visible in Constable's image of an earlier time.

DEVELOPMENTS IN MATERIALS, TECHNIQUES AND PROCESSES

Constable first made a number of open-air sketches of parts of the scene over several years. For example, the dog, the fisherman, and the boat all exist as separate sketches. He made many of the cloud studies for this painting on Hampstead Heath in London. *"It will be difficult to name a class of landscape in which the sky is not the key-note, the standard of scale and the chief organ of sentiment."* These small broadly executed sketches were composed into a small very expressive sketch using palette knife and brushes (Yale) before the large, full scale oil sketch (Victorian & Albert) painted on a light brown ground on canvas with rapid brushstrokes and flecks of white highlights. The final version maintains the composition, begins with a mid tone of green, then adds stronger contours and more naturalistic stronger colouring often through scumbling. The mid green shows through the blue-green, yellow-green, hence breaking up the surface. The resulting 'six-footer' landscape has a very spontaneous feel, with areas of impasto, despite the fact that it had been so carefully arranged.

WAYS IT HAS BEEN USED AND INTERPRETED BY PAST AND PRESENT SOCIETIES

This picture is extremely popular today and reproduced widely. It has become an icon of nostalgia for the 'traditional English countryside', in which humanity and nature are in harmony before industrialisation. However it was not particularly well received in England during his life time as it was too radical, breaking with the tradition of the idealised historical landscape. In the tradition of Claude Lorraine. *"One complained that he dots and dabs and grubs and splashes, more strangely in each succeeding year"; and the white flecks he used to suggest flickering light were disparagingly referred to as 'Constable's snow' (Tate).*

He failed to sell the painting after it was exhibited at the Royal Academy. He turned down an offer of £70 (without the frame) as too low, and was hurt and depressed. However, he did have considerable success in Paris after he exhibited it at the Salon of 1824. It caused a furore and Constable was awarded a Gold Medal by King Charles X. It was a major influence on Delacroix, and the Barbizon School of landscape painting, and through them influenced Impressionism. The French Impressionists were to be very much influenced by his ideas about sketching outdoors and observing the effects of nature. It is now regarded as a Romantic painting as it is highly individual, subjective, personal vision of the world, with a sentiment for a specific place.

In 1949 Kenneth Clark called *The Haywain* *"an eternally moving expression of serenity and optimism."*

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Sketch for 'The Hay Wain' c.1820

Full-Scale Study, Victoria & Albert Museum

Oil on paper on panel

Courtesy the Yale Center for British Art, Paul Mellon Collection