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JOHN CONSTABLE: CLOUDS
by
Barbara Wood-Prince

I am the daughter of Earth and Water,
    And the nursling of the Sky;
I pass through the pores of ocean shores;
    I change, but I cannot die.
For after the rain with never a stain
    The pavilion of Heaven is bare,
And the winds and sunbeams with their convex gleams
    Build up the blue dome of air,
I silently laugh at my own cenotaph,
    And out of the caverns of rain,
Like a child from the womb, like a ghost from the tomb,
    I arise and unbuild it again.

From “The Cloud” by
Percy Bysshe Shelly
(Published 1820)

The appeal of clouds to the Romantic minds of the late 18th and early 19th century is in perfect accord with their love of the changeable, the indefinite, the distant and the mysterious. Yet this ‘Age of Reason’ was compelled to study, analyze and probe for answers to these mysteries. Scientific investigation did not diminish the Romantic’s view of nature, but rather enhanced the feeling of wonder experienced when the complexities of the natural world were contemplated.

John Constable clearly experienced this feeling of wonder when observing the clouds of his native England. Glancing through a collection of prints of his work, even the casual observer cannot miss the repeated emphasis on the sky. His skies are never the clear azure blue of mountainous countries, but rather the cloudy overcast or blustery skies common to England and especially to East Anglia where he lived and worked. His early attempts to paint these cloud-filled skies were less than successful, but ultimately he became one of the most outstanding cloud painters in the history of art.
Clouds had been considered by many artists before Constable's time, but these earlier painters treated clouds in a very different way, that is merely as props—the thrones of saints, the elevators of angels or the playthings of putti. Later, as landscape painting developed, clouds became increasingly important as elements of composition.

Poussin, Claude, Titian and Rubens were all touched by the beauty of clouds, and they used them in their paintings for compositional balance or to achieve dramatic effect. Their clouds were not realistic, for the true nature and attributes of clouds did not concern them. The first group of artists to devote intense attention to the real nature of clouds seem to be the Dutch painters of the 17th century, especially Jacob Van Ruysdael (1628-82) and Albert Cuyp (1620-91) (Badt 3).

No major advances in the painting of clouds were made in the 18th century, but toward the end of this period Luke Howard, an English amateur meteorologist, made a study of clouds which had a profound impact on the art of the 19th century. Howard wrote an essay, *On the Modification of Clouds*, in which he classified and named the types of cloud formations: stratus, cirrus, cumulus, nimbus, etc. This nomenclature was immortalized in the cloud poems by Goethe who was deeply impressed with Howard's work. Goethe was also interested in the study of atmospheric phenomena, and he produced scientific writings on meteorology as well as drawings of cloud formations. He urged the artists of his day to study Howard's classifications in order to represent these natural forms more accurately. His goal was truth to nature through a heightened understanding of reality (Badt 9-12).

The Norwegian artist Johan Christian Dahl (1788-1857), founder of the Norwegian school of landscape painting, and the German Romantic painter Karl Blechen (1798-1840) followed Goethe's suggestions. A number of their cloud studies can be seen in the Art Museum at Goteborg, and at the National-Galerie, Berlin. There is no evidence directly linking Dahl and Blechen to Constable, but they all probably shared the common influences of Howard and Goethe (Badt 23).

John Constable was born on June 11, 1776 in East Bergholt, Suffolk, England. His father was a prosperous corn merchant in the Stour River valley, and John developed a passionate and long-lasting devotion to this area. For some time he worked in his father's mills, but from an early age he longed to be an artist. While working for his father he had an opportunity to observe first-hand the workings of the mills, the system of waterways and locks used to transport the corn, and also the farmers and their animals who were so much a part of the local scenery. His keen observation of these elements was heightened by a deep
affection for them, and this feeling permeates all his artistic renderings. His work as a windmiller also provided an opportunity to study the changing atmospheric conditions so crucial to the farming process. That he observed these phenomena with an acute eye is evident from his detailed descriptions of the weather which often accompany his sketches.

Constable’s early career was not particularly successful and he was often discouraged, but with stubborn determination, he continued to work at his art. Finally in 1799, at the age of 23, he was admitted to the Royal Academy School (Leslie 6-8).

In spite of diligent hard work, Constable’s experience at the Academy was not productive. While he admired the Academy as an institution, he rebelled against its concepts, feeling its landscapes to be secondhand. He also became homesick. He complained that the city sky was not clear and he longed for the peaceful scenes of his childhood. In 1802, he returned to Suffolk, and from that time Constable was never far from his beloved homeland (Gadney 7-18).

During the next twenty years, as Constable continued to pursue his unique landscape vision, his technical skill advanced considerably and he began to master his medium. With dedication and single-mindedness he strove toward greater naturalism. His strokes became more emphatic, his colors more intense. He began to “work” the paint on the picture surface. This development is most evident in the small outdoor oil sketches he painted on the spot. The skies became distinctly more dramatic with clouds tinged with grey, blue, and even yellow. During this period Constable produced the first of his Salisbury Cathedral paintings (Reynolds).

Much has been written about Constable’s influence on French art. His work was appreciated much more in France than in England and he had numerous commissions from abroad. The high point came in 1824 when The Hay Wain and View on the Stour were displayed at the Salon. The Hay Wain had been admired some years earlier by Gericault when he saw it in London, and he was instrumental in bringing it to the Salon. Here it received great critical acclaim and was awarded a gold medal by Charles X. So impressed was Delacroix that he repainted parts of his Massacre de Scio which was also shown at the Salon that year. Using Constable’s technique of “broken tints, often applied with small, crisp dry touches and sometimes with a vertical striation or fracture which gives further life to the texture of the paint,” Delacroix brought more light and drama to his composition (Reynolds 97). Constable’s innovative approach had an important impact on the development of French landscape painting.

The numerous preparatory oil sketches which Constable produced have attracted and received much appreciative comment in recent years. Instead of
being considered "studies," as Constable thought of them, they were now seen as "complete" works. They vary in style from smooth-flowing strokes to a mosaic pattern of dabs and dashes of color. The obvious speed with which these sketches were painted points to Constable's growing confidence and surehandedness. However, when these themes were worked out on a large, finished scale, the effect was less spontaneous and dramatic.

Sky and clouds are an important part of almost all of Constable's works. He himself said,

> The landscape painter who does not make his skies a very material part of his compositions, neglects to avail himself of one of the greatest of his aids... The sky is the key note, the standard of the scale, and the chief organ of sentiment... The sky is the source of light in nature, and governs everything; even our common observations of the weather are altogether suggested by it (Leslie 85).

Constable lamented his own lack of skill with cloud effects:

> The difficulty of skies in painting is very great, both as to composition and execution, because with all their brilliancy they ought not to come forward, or, indeed, to be thought of any more than extreme distances are; but this does not apply to phenomena or accidental effects of sky because they always particularly attract... My skies have not been neglected, though they have often failed in execution... Certainly, if the sky is obtrusive, as mine are, it is bad; but if it is evaded, as mine are not, it is worse; it must and always shall be with me an effectual part of the composition (Leslie 85).

About 1818-20, Luke Howard published a book called The Climate of London which contained the "Essay on Clouds." Kurt Badt, author of John Constable's Clouds, considered it likely that Constable was aware of Howard's book as soon as it appeared. Constable had a strong interest in the natural sciences, including geology and astronomy, and this treatise on meteorology would have attracted his attention. It seems quite probable that this work was the stimulus which prompted Constable to undertake his cloud studies of 1821 and 1822 (Badt 1).

As early as 1806 Constable had made notations on the backs of his sketches indicating the prevailing weather conditions. He continued to follow this procedure with his cloud studies. His own keen observations of clouds were enhanced by his newfound knowledge of the internal structure of clouds, and of the natural forces which govern their various formations.
With typical determination and single-mindedness, Constable began to produce a prodigious number of what might be called 'skyscapes'. This portion of his oeuvre can be considered separately because it is so different from the rest. It illustrates as perhaps no other group of his paintings does, his obsession with the chiaroscuro of nature (Taylor 199).

When he wrote to his lifelong friend and confidant John Fisher in 1821, he said "I have done a good deal of Skying..." (Leslie 85). A year later he reported to Fisher that he had produced "about fifty studies of skies, tolerably large to be careful" (Leslie 93). Most of these are oil on paper. They show either no land at all, or the thinnest possible strip of land at the bottom of the picture. Many bear notations about the particulars of the weather. The following is a typical sample:

5th of September, 1822. 10 o'clock, morning, looking southeast, brisk wind at west. Very bright and fresh grey clouds running fast over a yellow bed, about half way in the sky. Very appropriate to the coast at Osmington (Leslie 94).

Whether or not Constable gave titles to his cloud studies is not clear, but the titles they have subsequently received give us some of the flavor of their character: Cloud Study, Sunset, Study of Cumulus Clouds, Strato-cumulus Clouds, Dark Cloud Study, Evening Landscape After Rain, Study of Cirrus Clouds. All of these studies were painted between 1820 and 1822, and most are now part of the collection of Mr. and Mrs. Paul Mellon.

Another cloud study, dated 1821 and now in the Yale Center for British Art in New Haven, includes this careful notation:

25th Sept. 1821, about 2 to 3 afternoon looking to the north—strong wind at west, bright light coming through the clouds which are laying [sic] one on the other (Rosenthal, fig. 177).

Perhaps in working out the problems of transmitting this effect to canvas, Constable remembered advice he once received from Benjamin West, president of the Royal Academy:

Always remember, sir, that light and shadow never stand still... In your skies, for instance, always aim at brightness, although there are states of the atmosphere in which the sky itself is not bright. I do not mean that you are not meant to paint solemn or lowering skies, but even in the darkest of effects there should be brightness. Your darks should look like the darks of silver, not of lead or slate (Leslie 14).
Constable's sky studies are perhaps the most direct and spontaneous of his works. When concentrating on this subject, he did not have on his mind the composition of Claude or the technique of Ruysdael, nor was he trying to satisfy the rigid requirements of the Royal Academy. He was painting from his own mind and heart subjects he thought were beautiful and fascinating. These skyscapes do not have the somewhat labored quality of the large, finished landscapes. They are a well balanced combination of careful observation and seemingly effortless execution (Taylor 29).

Constable had several goals in mind when he set out to extend his expertise with clouds. First, he wanted to pursue ‘truth to nature’ in his paintings. He felt that this realistic approach would inspire in the viewer the same loving response to nature that he himself felt. Secondly, by perfecting a large variety of cloud formations, he would expand his compositional range. Thirdly, he wanted to convey a stronger sense of mood in his paintings. He recognized that various weather conditions can effect an emotional response: overcast and still, bright and blustery, the fresh clean look after a storm, etc. Finally, clouds which by their basic nature indicate both prior and coming conditions, were perfect vehicles to express the concept of the passage of time. All of these elements were used to enhance his large compositions (Reynolds 86).

In *The Hay Wain* (1821, oil on canvas, 51¼ × 73 in., London, National Gallery), clouds are not used as much for composition as to give the viewer a feeling for the quality of the day. It is a bright day, but overcast. The sun is first filtered by a layer of high cirrus, then by lower, heavier cumulus clouds. Much light still floods the scene, but the shadows are not harsh. There is a lush, limpid quality to the picture that produces a feeling of calm and harmony, and shows his beloved countryside to great advantage.

The clouds in *Dedham Vale* (exhibited in 1828, oil on canvas, 55½ × 48 in., Edinburgh, National Gallery of Scotland) are very different, more definitive and powerful. By accenting their plasticity, Constable draws the viewer's eye, creating a strong element of composition. Here he gives a short course in meteorology showing the build-up of excessive moisture and heat into towering cumulus clouds, soon after to be cooled and fall back to the earth as rain. He clearly indicates the movement of these clouds across the sky, suggesting the passage of time.

Sometimes Constable's own mood and state of mind seem to be reflected in his treatment of the sky. *Hadleigh Castle* (exhibited in 1829, oil on canvas, 48 × 64½ in. From the collection of Mr. and Mrs. Paul Mellon) is a prime example. Here desolate, craggy ruins are painted with a backdrop of turbulent clouds. They are dark and ominous, reaching unbroken to the horizon. This picture was painted by Constable the year his beloved wife died. Yet for all his despair, Constable was a man of faith, and this element shows through as beams of light which somehow penetrate the clouds and brighten the far horizon. In the foreground, simple shepherds and farm animals are dwarfed by their environ-
ment but continue their humble routine. This points to Constable’s understanding of man’s place in nature as part of an ongoing Divine plan.

John Constable enjoyed only limited success in his lifetime, yet he made an important and pivotal contribution to the development of landscape art. Intellectually, he combined the 18th century concept of nature tamed by man and understood through science, with the 19th century feeling of being at the mercy of the elements which could only be feared and admired.

His technique shows a turning away from the stylized formality of traditional landscape painting. Stubbornly pursuing his own particular vision, he replaced the clear-edged, smooth surfaces with the dots and dashes that were to be in vogue fifty years later. The subjects depicted in Constable’s landscape are all associated with man’s control of nature: the division of land into farms, the rivers controlled by locks and mills, the cultivated fields and the man-made cottages. But these subjects usually cover only half of his canvas, the rest being devoted to the sky. Here the Romantic flair for the capricious and the untamable has full sway. Man’s carefully cultivated countryside is ultimately at the mercy of the elements.

Jonathan Mayne, editor of C.R. Leslie’s biography of Constable, sums up the artist’s importance:

In the final analysis Constable’s genius lies somewhere between the lyric and the heroic; the fact that he was perhaps the first painter in Europe to strike this balance in terms of romantic naturalism assures him a unique position in the history of art (Editor’s preface).

This ‘romantic Naturalism’ is most directly observed in his unparalleled skill with clouds, and it is this aspect of his work which continues to be the most celebrated.

**SELECTED BIBLIOGRAPHY**