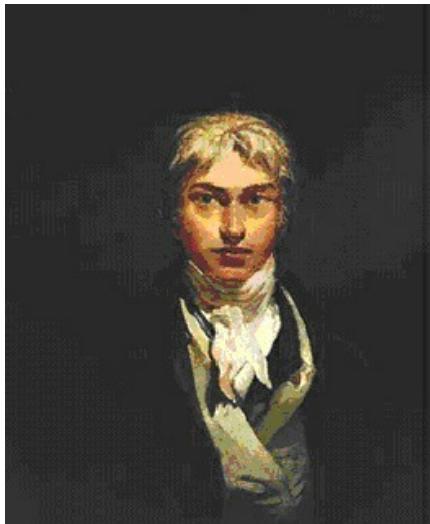


Constable, Turner and the Rise of British Landscape Painting

Texts and background notes

Barry Venning - 11 January 2017



JMW Turner: Self Portrait



R.R. Reinagle: John Constable



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Constable, Turner and the Rise of British Landscape Painting

For most of the eighteenth century (with a very few exceptions) British art had a much lower profile, internationally speaking, than those of France or Germany. It was taken as axiomatic by many European writers and artists that the true genius of Britain was for literature and not for the visual arts. The foundation of the Royal Academy in 1768 was intended to address the lowly regard in which British painting and sculpture was held on the continent. Every two years, in the Discourses he delivered to the Academy's students, its first President, Sir Joshua Reynolds (1723-92), exhorted his audience to produce art worthy of a great nation and to show conclusively that whatever France or Germany had to offer, the British could equal it. John Constable (1776-1837) and Joseph Mallord William Turner (1775-1851) were both students at the RA and Turner is known to have heard Reynolds speak on at least one occasion. They revered him, learned from him and regarded it as their duty to play their part in establishing a British tradition of painting.

During Reynolds's lifetime, however, it was widely believed that only historical painting could be regarded as truly great; landscape, the genre to which Turner and Constable were both drawn, was regarded as one of "the lesser walks of art" and even the Academy's Professor of Painting, Henry Fuseli (1741-1825) once gave a lecture in which he stigmatised it as "map-making". Turner and Constable were intensely ambitious, and neither was prepared to accept the inferior position to which their chosen branch of painting had been assigned. Both men's careers represented a quest not only for personal and professional success, but also to demonstrate conclusively that landscape painting could be as expressive,

as intellectually demanding, as morally rigorous as historical painting. Although they had these aims in common, the means by which they pursued them were very different: Constable favoured the intense study of the English scenery that he knew and loved the best, and which we now refer to as ‘Constable country’; Turner, by contrast, sought to produce a body of landscape painting that was far wider in its range of meanings and subjects than someone like Fuseli would admit.

By the time Turner died in 1851, he and Constable had shown that the British could succeed as painters. Both artists had a considerable reputation on the continent and, in Turner’s case, America as well. They also began to undermine the academic idea that paintings could be ranked and valued solely by their subject matter. If further proof of their achievements were needed, one could not do better than visit the Frick Collection in New York, a superlative collection in which Turner’s *Harbour of Dieppe* and Constable’s *White Horse* hold their own in the company of major works by Rembrandt and van Dyck.



Turner: *The 5th Plague of Egypt*, exh. 1800, Indianapolis Museum of Art



Constable: *The White Horse*, exhibited 1819, Frick Collection, New York



Constable: *Dedham Vale: Evening*. July 1802. V & A

Texts

Sir Joshua Reynolds. *Discourse X/IV.* Delivered 1788 (Just after the death of Gainsborough)

I am well aware how much I lay myself open to the censure and ridicule of the academical professors of other nations in preferring the humble attempts of Gainsborough to the works of those regular graduates in the great historical style. But we have the sanction of all mankind in preferring genius in a lower rank of art to feebleness and insipidity in the highest.

Sir Joshua Reynolds. *Discourse IV.* Delivered 1771

Claude Lorraine....was convinced that taking nature as he found it seldom produced beauty. His pictures are a composition of the various draughts which he has previously made from various beautiful scenes and prospects. That the practice of Claude Lorraine.... is to be adopted by landscape painters, in opposition to that of the Flemish and Dutch schools, there can be no doubt, as its truth is founded upon the same principle as that by which the historical painter acquires perfect form.

John Constable. Letter to John Dunthorne (29 May 1802)

There is room enough for a natural painture. The great vice of the present day is bravura, an attempt to do something beyond the truth. In endeavouring to do something better than well, they do what in reality is good for nothing. Fashion always had, & will have, its day — but truth (in all things) only will last, and can only have just claims on posterity.

John Constable. Letter to Rev. John Fisher (23 October 1821)

Still I should paint my own places best; painting is with me but another word for feeling, and I associate "my careless boyhood" with all that lies on the banks of the Stour; those scenes made me a painter, and I am grateful; that is, I had often thought of pictures of them before ever I touched a pencil, and your picture ['The White Horse'] is one of the strongest instance I can recollect of it.

JMW Turner. Annotations in his copy of John Opie's *Lectures on Art*, c. 1807

He that has that ruling enthusiasm which accompanies abilities cannot look superficially. Every glance is a glance for study, contemplating and defining qualities and causes, effects and incidents, and [this] develops by practice the possibility of attaining what appears mysterious upon principle. Every look at nature is a refinement upon art; each tree and blade of grass or flower is not to him the individual tree, grass or flower, but what [it] is in relation to the whole – its tone, its contrast and its use, and how far [it is] practicable.....[The painter admires] nature by the power and practicability of his art and judges of his art by the perceptions drawn from nature.

Further Reading

The literature on Turner and Constable is vast and the best way in is probably to begin with a more general and recent study of the artists and then to use the bibliographies in those books as springboards for further exploration and research. What follows is a highly selective sample of the literature.

Turner

Gage, J. 1969. *Colour in Turner: Poetry & Truth*. Thames & Hudson. London (The book that completely changed the image of Turner)

Gage, J. 1987. *JMW Turner: a wonderful range of mind*. Yale University Press. London and New Haven

Shanes, E. *Young Mr Turner: the first forty years*. 2016. Yale University Press. London and New Haven. (The first volume in a magisterial biography of the artist)

Smiles, S. 2006. *The Turner Book*. Tate Publishing. London
Venning, B. 2003. *Turner (Art & Ideas)*. Phaidon Publishing.
London and New York

In addition to the above, Ian Warrell has been responsible for curating a brilliant series of exhibitions on various aspects of Turner's work, most of them held at Tate Britain.

Constable

Evans, M. 2014. *John Constable: the making of a master*. V & A Publishing

Lyles, A. 2006. *Constable: the great landscapes*. Tate Publishing. London

Rosenthal, M. 1986. *Constable: the man and his landscape*. Yale University Press. London and New Haven

Vaughan, W. 2nd ed. 2015. *John Constable (British Artist Series)*. Tate Publishing. London



Constable: *Cloud Study*, 5th September 1822, National
Gallery of Victoria (Inscribed '10 o/c, looking SE')

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