

# John Constable

## Landscapes of the soul

(detailed) John Constable, *Salisbury Cathedral from the Meadows*, 1831, oil paint on canvas 153,7 × 190cm

Tate: Purchased by Tate with assistance from the National Lottery through the Heritage Lottery Fund, The Manton Foundation, Art Fund 2013  
Photo: Tate

Exhibition organised  
in collaboration with Tate, UK



**Reggia di Venaria**

25 October 2022

5 February 2023

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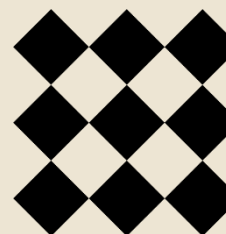
# JOHN CONSTABLE

## LANDSCAPES OF THE SOUL

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*Reggia di Venaria continues its exploration of the theme of landscape, launched in 2021, proposing, for the first time in Italy, an exhibition dedicated to (1776-1837), one of the greatest representatives of English Romantic painting*

**Reggia di Venaria, Rooms of the Arts**  
**from 25 October 2022 to 5 February 2023**  
*Curated by Anne Lyles*



Following the grand exhibition *Infinite beauty. Landscape in Italy from Romantic painting to contemporary art* (which closed in February 2022), Reggia di Venaria continues the exploration of the **theme of landscape** launched in 2021, broadening the horizon to include Europe and proposing, first the first time in Italy, an exhibition dedicated to **the famous English artist John Constable** (1776-1837), one of the greatest representatives of English Romantic painting, together with Joseph M. William Turner.

The exhibition tells the story of the famous painter's artistic career, chronologically tracing it through **the works of the Tate UK**, and is organised in collaboration with this prestigious institution, within the framework agreement signed last year with Fondazione Torino Musei - GAM Galleria d'Arte Moderna di Torino.

The exhibition comprises **over fifty works**, ranging from sketches and small paintings executed **en-plein-air**, in an early Impressionist manner, to the most important and expansive Romantic landscapes, such as his famous **Stratford Mill**, portraying places close to the artist's home village of Dedham Vale, in the county of Suffolk.



**Places of affection**, of considerable sentimental importance to this great painter who - unlike the equally famous Turner, who was a very keen traveller - never left his beloved England and **portrayed Nature in a “picturesque” key**, to use the well-known terminology of philosopher Immanuel Kant's Aesthetics. Thus distinguishing himself from Turner - a painter of the “Sublime”, of a Nature that charms but also inspires fear and even terror in Man, like a sea storm, or a blizzard - Constable portrays a **welcoming, reassuring** Nature in which one can relax peacefully.



JOHN CONSTABLE, *Yarmouth Jetty*, after 1823, oil on canvas.  
Tate. Donated by George Salting in 1910.

While Turner travelled incessantly from Britain throughout continental Europe, Constable focused his painting on **places closely associated with his life and family**. His pictures present the lush, pleasant countryside of Suffolk, where he was born and grew up, along with the beautiful towns of Salisbury, Hampstead and Brighton which he visited in the company of family and friends. Emblematic places in the history of his “**affections**”, as written by his principal biographer Charles Robert Leslie.

The exhibition also features works by **Constable's contemporaries**, some of whom were “rivals”, such as Turner, John Linnell, Benjamin West and others, whose work intersects with and is comparable to that of Constable

The **Tate** owns **the world's most important collection of Constable's works**. The exhibition covers the entire chronological span of his production and includes landscapes, drawings, watercolours, etchings and portraits. After this visit to the Reggia di Venaria, the works will return to the Tate in the UK and will not be seen outside England again for quite some time.

The exhibition layout, designed by **Studio Fludd**, interprets the theme of **contemplation of the landscape** in a minimalist and atmospheric key. The use of colour is developed through harmonies and contrasts, seeking a **balance between rich and ethereal tones**, combined and revealed by unprecedented juxtapositions. Constable's works inspired **a quest for iridescent atmospheres**: semi-transparent clouds interact in the rooms with the opaque softness of the painted surfaces

The quality of the colour was supported by **Rezina**, a Turin-based brand of reference in the field of finishes, which chose **Little Greene**, a company of excellence in the British craftsmanship which collaborates with the National Trust, the organisation that defends the UK's historical and artistic heritage, as international partner for this project.



JOHN CONSTABLE, *The Gleaners, Brighton*, 1824, oil on paper.  
Tate. Donated by Henry Vaughan in 1900.

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## THE THEMATIC SECTIONS

John Constable was born in 1776 in the village of East Bergholt, in the County of Suffolk, in that south-eastern part of England known as East-Anglia. His father owned a mill in Flatford, near East Bergholt, and hoped that his son would continue the lucrative milling business after his death. John, however, wanted to become an artist and, in 1799, his father allowed him to attend the Royal Academy of Fine Arts in London.

While he was very skilled in anatomical drawing, Constable's growth as an artist was slow. Wanting to establish himself in landscape painting, he encountered many difficulties in pursuing this option. Indeed, in the late 1700s and early 1800s, the representation of the “ideal” or “historiated” landscape prevailed, inspired by the work of great French masters like Claude Lorrain and Nicholas Poussin. Unlike the latter, **Constable liked to paint the landscape around him**, particularly that of his beloved hometown, in a way that was a direct and “truthful” as possible - a revolutionary idea at the time.

Despite having first exhibited his landscapes at the Royal Academy as early as 1802, Constable had to wait until 1819 to become an “associate” member and only became an Academician in 1829.

He married his first great love, Mary Bicknell, in 1816 and they had seven children. They settled in the London Borough of Bloomsbury in 1817. From that moment on, no longer spending much of his time in Suffolk, Constable began painting his landscapes in the studio, relying on memory.

He also began painting the new places he visited, and which had a connection with his family. When his wife fell ill with tuberculosis in 1819, Constable moved with his family to Hampstead, in the countryside north of London, to find cleaner and healthier air.

In 1824, he began going to the seaside in Brighton, on the English Channel, in the hope that the milder sea climate would contribute to his beloved wife's recovery. Mary, however, died shortly afterwards, in 1828, aged just forty. This was an extremely painful loss for him.



## 1. SUFFOLK

The area around East Bergholt and Flatford, where Constable had grown up, were **the places of his fondest childhood memories**. In 1821, recalling the Suffolk landscapes in a letter to his great friend, Archdeacon John Fisher, he wrote: *«Painting is but another word for feeling. I associate my carefree childhood with everything around the banks of the River Stour. They made me a painter and for that I am grateful»*.

Suffolk was **a farming region**, not highly regarded by the artists of the early 19<sup>th</sup> century. Thomas Gainsborough (1727-1788), an artist admired by Constable, had previously painted the same area. Views glimpsed through the woods or glimpses along country lanes.

Fen Lane, which Constable used to walk along every day to school in Dedham, became the subject of one of his unfinished paintings, dated 1817. He returned to the same subject in 1826, painting a larger version, ***The cornfield***, which he sent to the Royal Academy that same year and which is now one of his most famous paintings in the National Gallery in London. Constable also loved to paint his home in East Bergholt and the view he admired from his father's house.

## 2. PAINTING NATURE

Constable first began painting ***en plein air*** using the oil technique in 1802. This practice became his hallmark between 1809 and 1829. Previously used by seventeenth-century European artists mainly as a formative practice, for Constable, painting outdoors was much more important, a way of **capturing the essence of Nature**, which he described as *«the source from which all originality must spring»*.

Most of his oil sketches depicting nature were created on small canvases and primarily portray the landscape near Flatford Mill or slightly further afield. However, especially at the beginning of his career, Constable also produced larger *en plein air* works. In 1809, he painted the medium-sized ***Malvern Hall*** in just one day.

Between 1814 and 1817, he painted larger works, almost entirely in the open air. One example is ***Fen Lane, East Bergholt***, 1817, which has an unfinished background, which he had probably intended to finish upon returning to London. During this period, Constable developed the idea of painting large canvases known as “six footers” in his studio, drawing on memory alone.

J.M.W. Turner (1775 - 1851) also painted oil sketches along the banks of the River Thames, in the western part of London, in 1805, and small sketches in Devon, in 1813. However, unlike Constable, Turner never tried to paint more elaborate paintings in the open air.



JOHN CONSTABLE, *A Cornfield*, 1817, Oil on canvas.

Tate. Accepted by Her Majesty's Government in lieu of inheritance tax and assigned to the Tate in 2004.

### 3. EARLY INFLUENCES AND THE CONTEMPORARY PAINTERS

When Constable arrived **in London in 1799** to study painting, he had already had some **contacts with the art world** and very quickly established new ones. He became acquainted with Sir George Beaumont (1753 - 1827), an important collector and amateur painter, whose

collection of paintings by Great Masters he used to visit to copy landscape compositions, such as those by Alexander Cozens (1717-1786).

When he went to study at the **Royal Academy**, he met the American painter Benjamin West (1738-1820), whose lesson, according to which «*light and shadow never stand still*», would serve him well for the rest of his life. Like other British artists of the time, such as John Linnell and Cornelius Varley, Constable also sometimes resorted to the watercolour technique to capture the effects of rapidly changing light.

The famous landscape painter and contemporary of Constable, J.M.W. Turner, excelled in the watercolour technique and used it throughout his life. He travelled the European continent in search of “picturesque” subjects that could then be reproduced in etchings and sold to collectors interested in antique landscape works. Constable, on the other hand, preferred to use oil rather than watercolour and **never travelled outside Great Britain**.

#### **4. GETTING AWAY FROM TOWN. HAMPSTEAD COUNTRYSIDE AND HIS WIFE’S DISEASE**

In July 1819, Constable took lodgings for his family in **Hampstead**, in the countryside, so that his sick wife could benefit from the cleaner air. The family would return to Hampstead several times in the following summers, moving there more permanently in 1827, when Constable rented a house in Well Walk. At that time Hampstead was still a village, situated on a high plateau a few miles north of London, with which it was connected by a carriage service. He hoped, in this way, to be able to «*unite life in town with that in the country*».

Constable was immediately drawn to **painting the lanes, trees and hidden corners of Hampstead village**. He appreciated the open moorland with its winding paths, stretches of water, workers busy quarrying gravel and its dynamic, stormy skies. It was in Hampstead that the artist painted his **famous studies of the sky in oil**. Many of these feature detailed notes on the weather conditions at the time they were painted. **Cloud Study**, 1822, notes: «*27 Aug, 11 o’clock. Noon Looking to the west Big silver clouds South-westerly breeze*». The **accuracy of the representation** and the **high level of expression** are remarkable.





JOHN CONSTABLE, *Hampstead Heath, with the House called The Salt Box*, 1819-20 ca., oil on canvas.  
Tate. Presented by Isabel Constable in 1887.

## 5. BRIGHTON'S SEA AND SALISBURY CATHEDRAL

Between 1824 and 1828 Constable stayed extensively in **Brighton**, on the south coast of England. Doctors had recommended the sea air to cure his wife Mary's tuberculosis. On those occasions Constable went in search of **isolated beaches or less populated corners of the Downs**. Nevertheless, he decided to paint a crowded part of Brighton beach for one of his largest and most ambitious paintings, *The Chain Pier, Brighton*, exhibited at the Royal Academy in 1827. **Fashionably dressed tourists** mingle with **traditional fishermen** under a stormy sky

While Constable's stays in Brighton were due to family obligations, his **link with Salisbury** developed through his close friendship with two senior Anglican prelates of the local cathedral: Bishop John Fisher and his nephew, Archdeacon John Fisher.

He often stayed at a house called Leydenhall, in Cathedral Close, where, from one of the windows, he painted the skies that overlooked Harnham Ridge. It was there in 1829, the year after Mary's death, that Archdeacon Fisher encouraged the artist to devote himself to his work as a distraction

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from his grief and to paint a sweeping view of the Cathedral. ***Salisbury Cathedral from the Meadows***, 1831, is now one of Constable's most famous paintings.

## 6. THE LATTER YEARS

At the beginning of 1829, Constable was awarded the long-coveted prestigious title of **Academician of the Royal Academy**. He was now free to paint without having to worry about the reaction of critics.

Widowed and in poor health, he began to think about his legacy. He designed a series of prints, ***English Landscape***, 1830-32, reproductions of his works that best demonstrated the “Light and shade of Nature”, which he describes as «*powerful bodies of expression*».

The main focus in his latter years, however, remained oil painting. In 1832, he managed to finish the large canvas, ***The Opening of Waterloo Bridge***, which pays tribute to the Thames scenes painted in the 18th century by Canaletto. The painting was the cause of a **famous dispute with Turner** when it was exhibited at the Royal Academy in London that same year. Afterwards, Constable often returned to work on old subjects, including **imaginative features of a “picturesque” landscape**. The addition of the rainbow became his favourite theme. What all the later works have in common is the **highly expressive quality of the brushstrokes**.

Constable died suddenly in Bloomsbury in March 1837 and was buried next to his wife Mary in St John's Churchyard in Hampstead. A reporter, in the obituary, said «*what a huge loss for the Academy and the public; all his works, now that he is gone, will be held in the highest esteem he*». And they are.





JOHN CONSTABLE, *The Opening of Waterloo Bridge (Whitehall Stairs, June 18<sup>th</sup>, 1817)*, 1832 ca., oil on Canvas.  
Tate. Purchased with the support of the National Heritage Memorial Fund, Clore Foundation,  
Art Fund, the Friends of the Tate Gallery et al. in 1987.

## **INFORMATION AND ADMISSIONS**

### ***John Constable. Landscapes of the soul***

Reggia di Venaria, Rooms of the Arts, first floor

From 25 October 2022 to 5 February 2023

- ◆ **Full-price admission:** 12 euros
- ◆ **Discounted admission:** 10 euros | Groups of at least 12, max. 25 people
- ◆ **Young visitors:** 6 euros | Young visitors aged 6 to 20 and University students under 26
- ◆ **Schools:** 3 euros per student | Groups of at least 12, max. 25 students; free admission for 1 adult every 12 students
- ◆ **Free:** Children under the age of 6

For more information visit: [www.lavenaria.it](http://www.lavenaria.it)