

Constable and the landscape tradition

John Constable is one of the most well known artists associated with the British countryside. Born in 1776, he is particularly famous for his landscape paintings of the Stour Valley in East Suffolk which offer a different perspective on the landscape to that of other paintings of his time. I propose that this alternative portrayal of the countryside is a result of an understanding of farming and interest in the 'real work' of food production.



A Wind Gust, Jacob van Ruisdael, mid 17th century

By the time Constable was painting in the nineteenth century, landscape painting was a well-established tradition. It originates from Dutch painting in the seventeenth century and the English word 'landscape' comes from the Dutch word 'landschap' meaning 'a patch of cultivated ground' (this reference to cultivation reminds me of similarities between artists and farmers, and that the landscape is *produced* by acts on the landscape: physically in acts such as farming; perceptually as in art).



Landscape with Apollo guarding the herds of Admetus, Claude Lorrain, 1645

As well as the Dutch, English landscape painters were influenced by the work of a French painter, Claude Lorrain. He too made panoramic views of the rural world the very subject of his paintings. However, the landscape scenes he depicted are imaginary. They feature angels and characters from classical and biblical stories, rather than people from contemporary rural life.

English landscape painters went in search of extreme landscapes to inspire their art. However, Constable's work differed from that of Claude, and these 'Romantic' artists such as James Ward (below). His paintings typically feature real places and the gentle landscapes of southern England, rather than mountains and desolate moors of far-away places.



Gordale Scar, James Ward, 1811-1815

The oil sketch *Willy Lott's House* depicts a farmer's cottage near Constable's family home. A dog runs out at the front and as I look at the painting, I have a sense of what it might have felt to walk up that path, with Willy's dog coming to greet me. In another painting, *The Cornfield*, a lane leads from the front or 'foreground' of the painting towards fields, and a village beyond. In both paintings, attention has been given by Constable to the physical impressions all around; from the moody shifting clouds and the different qualities of light in the sky to the texture of the foliage above and the roughness of the ground below.



The Cornfield, John Constable, 1826

Art historians call Constable a painter of 'realism'. In the place of Claude's angels and mythical characters, Constable depicts 'real' people, doing 'real' things. A boy sips from a stream; men drive carts across a river; distant figures gather corn. Even when we do not see them physically represented, the presence of people is implied by a gate to a field, a turning windmill or a farmers' dog.



Stour Valley and Dedham Church, John Constable, 1814-1815



Boat-building near Flatford Mill, John Constable, 1815

Constable's father was the owner of a small estate which he farmed, and of businesses transporting coal and grain along the river Stour. John Constable grew up with a strong understanding of the work of the countryside, and I believe that this was a primary influence on his art. As his paintings focus on human labour, the rural world is not a place of wonder, but of industry, such as farming.



Mr and Mrs Andrews, Thomas Gainsborough, 1748-1750

The painting *Mr and Mrs Andrews* by Thomas Gainsborough represents a different perspective on the land. Although the sheaves of corn in the bottom right hand corner, and sheep in the distance behind the couple show the land as being under agricultural production, it also presented as a kind of object. This is particularly pronounced as the couple who feature in it are also the couple who own the land (I explore this theme further in the next essay *Livestock Paintings after Robert Bakewell*). By contrast, Gainsborough's painting highlights the significance of Constable's art. Unlike the painting *Mr and Mrs Andrews* in which the land is an object - of wealth as well as sight - Constable's paintings of the Stour Valley make the land, through the work which takes place in it, a Place.

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