



**NINETEENTH-CENTURY EUROPEAN PAINTINGS
AT THE STERLING AND FRANCINE CLARK ART INSTITUTE**

VOLUME ONE

Edited by Sarah Lees

With an essay by Richard Rand
and technical reports by Sandra L. Webber

With contributions by Katharine J. Albert, Philippe Bordes, Dan Cohen,
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Kelly Pask, Elizabeth A. Pergam, Kathryn A. Price, Mark A. Roglán,
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68 | Distant View of Salisbury Cathedral 1821

Oil on panel, 17.3 x 25.6 cm
1955.684

This open-air sketch of Salisbury Cathedral must be considered an authentic work, dating from Constable's most innovative period of his initial six-foot canvases. Although the uncharacteristically feathery trees of the foreground have raised doubts, the combined evidence of the inscription, provenance, and the sketch itself indicate that the work came from the artist's hand.

The inscription, written in ink on the reverse of the original panel support, reads: "Painted on the spot / Nov. 19th 1821 / John Constable A R A." As Graham Reynolds has shown, this inscription identifies the work as the one lent by the widow of John Constable's son, Captain Charles Golding Constable (who had been born the same year that his father painted this sketch), to the South Kensington Museum between 1880 and 1883. In the museum's list it is described as "Oil painting: sketch of Salisbury Cathedral from the fields . . . Dated 1821."¹ On Mrs. Constable's manuscript list, it is called "Salisbury Cathedral. Painted out of doors the 19th November 1821."² This same work was sold as part of his son's estate in 1890.

The period beginning with his long-awaited marriage to Maria Bicknell in 1816 saw Constable living in London. Although his native Suffolk continued to

form the subject matter of some of his most important contributions to Royal Academy exhibitions, notably his first six footer, *The White Horse* (1819; The Frick Collection, New York),³ Constable based those compositions on his earlier sketches and studies. In contrast, Hampstead Heath and Salisbury were subjects he studied directly.

Constable first visited Salisbury in 1811, staying with Dr. John Fisher (1748–1825), who had been appointed Bishop of Salisbury four years earlier. Not surprisingly, the first drawing he made on this occasion was of the Gothic cathedral's spire and the southwestern transept (Victoria and Albert Museum, London).⁴ It was on this visit that Constable met and formed a lasting friendship with the bishop's nephew, John Fisher (1788–1832). Constable's high opinion of the bishop's nephew is clear from his 1822 letter in which he calls him "a gentleman & a scholar and a real lover of the art, whose only wish is to see it advance."⁵ Their correspondence over the years gives invaluable insight into the artist's ideas and working methods.

Constable was again hosted by the bishop on his second trip to Salisbury in 1816; on his third, extended visit from 13 July until 22 August 1820, he stayed with the younger Fisher and his wife, Mary, at Leadenhall, the prebendal residence at the southwestern corner of the Close. That his wife and two children accompanied him explains the length of his stay. A considerable number of drawings, oil sketches, and paintings document the time he spent with the Fishers in 1820.⁶

On his return visit in November 1821, however, he produced only the small oil sketch in the Clark and the larger *Harnham Gate, Salisbury* (Yale Center for British Art, New Haven), in which the spire of the cathedral peeks out on the far left. Although Reynolds has detailed the problems with dating the latter to 1821,⁷ it seems logical that these two works were painted at the same time. The Clark sketch looks from the southwest toward the cathedral. This view is one that takes its position slightly further afield than in other southwestern views, such as the large-scale, open-air sketch in the National Gallery of Art, Washington.⁸ Nevertheless, it is also a prospect drawn slightly closer than those taken from Harnham Ridge, such as *A View of Salisbury from the South* (1820; Musée du Louvre, Paris).⁹ Constable, therefore, would have passed through Harnham Gate to take up his position for the Clark sketch.

As Selby Whittingham has observed, Constable painted Salisbury Cathedral exclusively from the southern view. This vantage point allowed the artist to take advantage of the surrounding trees.¹⁰ His equation of the architectonic qualities of arboreal trunks with the elongated lines of the Gothic spire was typical of Constable's emphasis on the inherent spirituality of the English landscape. In this view, the cathedral nestles amidst the trees, with only the spire rising high above the foliage. The architectural details of the cathedral are barely suggested.

Constable's own inscription that the work was "painted on the spot" emphasizes the importance of direct observation to the artist's project. His dating of the picture to 19 November also places the work in the context of his life. A letter written to his wife just a few days earlier reveals that on 14 November, Constable went to Longford Castle, seat of the Earl of Radnor, "to see the Claudes."¹¹ The popularity of Claude Lorrain's classical landscape with the English gentry had a direct impact on the practice of landscape painting in England. For example, Richard Wilson, "the English Claude," transposed the compositional devices associated with the seventeenth-century painter onto his images of eighteenth-century country estates. Moreover, the picturesque qualities of Claude's two-dimensional views influenced the layout of the landscape itself at estates such as Henry Hoare's Stourhead in Wiltshire.

Constable's painting his native landscape through long and direct observation was motivated by a reaction to the artificiality of the strictly composed clas-

sical landscape. Although the trees of Constable's sketch function in a similar way to those of Claude, unlike the latter, Constable makes the passage from fore- to background more difficult. The water feature does not lead the eye through the middle ground. Rather, the viewer's passage is blocked by growth along the banks.

When considering whether to purchase this "exquisite small sketch," Sterling Clark noted that it had been painted on site.¹² Unlike his other work by Constable, the highly finished *Malvern Hall* (cat. 69), which he had purchased almost twenty years earlier, *Distant View of Salisbury Cathedral* shows Clark's appreciation of the plein-air innovations of the English painter who set the stage for the landscapes of the French Impressionists that dominated Clark's collection. EP

PROVENANCE Captain Charles Golding Constable, son of the artist (d. 1879); Mrs. A. M. Constable, his wife, by descent (1879–90, sale, Christie's, London, 23 June 1890, no. 75, as *Salisbury, Painted on the spot, Nov. 19, 1821*, sold to Dowdeswell);¹³ [Dowdeswell Gallery, London, from 1890]; Major Henry Lee Higginson, Boston (d. 1919); Alexander Higginson, Boston, by descent (from 1919); Mr. and Mrs. L. Denis Peterkin, Andover (by 1939); [Clyfford Trevor, New York, in 1945, sold to Clark, 19 Feb. 1945]; Robert Sterling Clark (1945–55); Sterling and Francine Clark Art Institute, 1955.

EXHIBITIONS Boston 1939, no. 20, pl. 10, lent by Mr. and Mrs. Peterkin; Williamstown 1958b, pl. 7; Williamstown 1959a, ill.; Williamstown 1981c, no cat.; New York 1988, pp. 38, 199, pl. 11.

REFERENCES Polley 1967, p. 31; Beckett 1962–70, vol. 2, p. 273n4, vol. 6, p. 82n1; Hoozee 1979, p. 119, no. 324, ill., as of doubtful attribution; Whittingham 1976, p. 53, no. 1; Reynolds 1984, vol. 1, p. 87, no. 21.74, vol. 2, pl. 276.

TECHNICAL REPORT Although this painting has been described as oil on paper mounted to panel, no paper was found in the layer structure of the support. It seems to be executed on numerous ground layers applied directly to a mahogany panel. The wood has since been chiseled to half its original thickness, probably to level the reverse in preparation for the oddly designed, partial mahogany cradle. There is a small split on the left side of the panel, which may account for the cradling. A small rectangle of dark, varnished wood on the reverse, bearing the black paint or ink inscription is, in fact, the only area of original thickness remaining on the panel. Chisel marks in the wood indicate that the inscription was carefully preserved during the thinning of the panel and that the cradle was built around it. The picture was possibly last cleaned at the time it was cradled, some-

time before Mr. Clark's purchase. The natural resin varnish is now moderately yellowed, and horizontal banding indicates it was brush applied. There is a small eruption and loss of paint 1.3 cm up from the lower edge.

The excessive number of ground layers and the odd color seen in the middle layer suggest that the panel may have been used previously. While one often finds two layers of ground, here there appear to be five; two off-white ones against the wood, one blue, and two more pale layers just beneath the painting. A radiograph taken to investigate whether there might be a lower image was inconclusive, although there are anomalies in one or more layers. The ground layer just below the image is a pink tone similar to that seen on several other Constables in the collection. There is extensive underdrawing, possibly in graphite, some of which can be seen with the naked eye, such as the cathedral spire's initial position to the left of its final location. Under low magnification the thinly applied paint of the foreground and trees has a peculiar series of perfectly circular marks of varying small sizes. The most likely explanation is that the artist used some sort of emulsion-based paint, stirred or frothed until it was full of bubbles, which broke after the paint was brushed on the surface, leaving this tiny, interlocking pattern of rings of color.

1. See Reynolds 1984, vol. 1, no. 21.74, p. 87.
2. *Ibid.*
3. R 19.1.
4. R 11.12.
5. John Constable to John Fisher, 6 Dec. 1822, in Beckett 1962–70, vol. 6, p. 106.
6. See Reynolds 1996, vol. 1, pp. 241–42, and Reynolds 1984, vol. 1, pp. 50–57.
7. Reynolds 1984, vol. 1, p. 87, no. 21.75.
8. R 20.53.
9. R 20.24.
10. Whittingham 1976, p. 8.
11. John Constable to Maria Constable, 15 Nov. 1821, in Beckett 1962–70, vol. 2, p. 272.
12. RSC Diary, 19 Feb. 1945.
13. Mrs. A. M. Constable lent the picture to the South Kensington Museum, London, from 1880 to 1883. See Reynolds 1984, vol. 1, no. 21.74, p. 87.

69 | Malvern Hall 1821

Oil on canvas, 54.1 x 78.3 cm
1955.683

Constable is most closely associated with depictions of the more humble architecture of mills, Willy Lott's cottage, or the English ecclesiastical Gothic of Salisbury Cathedral. Nevertheless, a small subset of his oeuvre is the country-house portrait, which was a dominant category of English landscape painting in the seventeenth, eighteenth, and nineteenth centuries. Constable's renditions of Malvern Hall in Solihull, Warwickshire, are among his earliest and most elaborate essays on the theme, reflecting the close connection he had formed with the owner, Henry Greswolde Lewis (d. 1829). Lewis's family was, in turn, related to the Tollemaches of Helmingham, near Ipswich, one of the artist's first important patrons.

It was a Suffolk connection between the families, in this case the Dedham solicitor Peter Firmin, that led to the initial introduction.¹ Lewis's elder sister, Anna Maria, was married to Wilbraham, 6th Earl of Dysart, an avid collector. Firmin recommended Constable to the sixth Earl, who, in 1807, engaged the artist to copy family portraits hanging in their London residence at Hyde Park Corner.² That same year, Lewis commissioned his own portrait from Constable.³ Two years later, Lewis invited the artist to Malvern Hall to paint the portrait of Mary Freer, his teenage ward (Yale Center for British Art, New Haven).⁴

This first visit to Warwickshire provided the occasion for a significant innovation in Constable's painting method. Here, the artist, whose art-historical significance rests on the directness of his observations, painted his first full-scale work outside in a single day, *Malvern Hall, Warwickshire* (Tate Britain, London).⁵ This work, an exploration of the reflectivity of water, looks across the park to the south front of the house. Two drawings done on paper from the sketchbook Constable used in 1808 and 1809 are close-up views of the south front, one taking its vantage point from the west (private collection), the other from the east (private collection).⁶ An inscription on the former provides evidence for the dating of the Tate painting. On its verso, Constable wrote: "August the first made the / picture of the House from the / great pool." As the drawing depicts only the house and not its setting, this inscription must refer to the painting.⁷ The paint-