



**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,
Kathryn Calley Galitz, Alexis Goodin, Marc Gotlieb, John House,
Simon Kelly, Richard Kendall, Kathleen M. Morris, Leslie Hill Paisley,
Kelly Pask, Elizabeth A. Pergam, Kathryn A. Price, Mark A. Roglán,
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Details:

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in one sitting. The green bands in the landscape look like a thin glaze over a paler color. Under magnification, small blue particles are visible in the sky, suggestive of the pigment Prussian blue.

1. Leslie Parris first discussed the 1891 sale in Parris 1983, p. 223. A slightly more detailed account appears in Fleming-Williams and Parris 1984, p. 90.
2. See Reynolds 1973, pp. 3–5. In Fleming-Williams and Parris 1984, p. 85, the authors cite an article in the *Spectator* from 15 Sept. 1888 that the gift was made on the basis of a prior agreement between Isabel, Minna, and Lionel.
3. R 13.14.
4. R 13.27.
5. Maria Bicknell to John Constable, 25 Aug. 1813, in Beckett 1962–70, vol. 2, p. 111.
6. R 13.12, 13.15, 13.17.
7. R 15.22, 15.23, 00.16, 08.11.
8. R 10.28, 14.36.
9. *Gentleman's Magazine* 1819, p. 484.
10. John Constable to Maria Bicknell, 18 Sept. 1814, in Beckett 1962–70, vol. 2, p. 132.
11. Colquhoun had consigned the works from Isabel Constable's collection to Christie's; it is therefore unclear whether he owned them or was acting as an agent.

63 | Osmington Bay 1816

Oil on canvas, 23.3 x 30.6 cm

Gift of the Manton Foundation in memory of Sir Edwin and Lady Manton

2007.8.31

Constable's relationship with Maria Bicknell, whom he married after a seven-year courtship, is central to his biography as the archetypal Romantic painter. Her grandfather's opposition to their relationship, their long-delayed marriage, her fragile health exacerbated by frequent pregnancies, her death in 1828, and his unrelieved grief not only contributed to Constable's emotional state, but often determined his physical location and choice of subject. *Osmington Bay*, painted while the couple was on their honeymoon on the Dorset coast in October and November 1816, stands at a pivotal moment in the artist's relationship with Maria, as well as in his career. Indeed, Graham Reynolds divides Constable's oeuvre between the



Fig. 63.1. John Constable, *Two Studies of a Shepherd* (verso of *Cottages*), 1816. Pen and ink on cream wove paper, 8.1 x 11.6 cm. Sterling and Francine Clark Art Institute, Williamstown, Massachusetts. Gift of the Manton Foundation in memory of Sir Edwin and Lady Manton (2007.8.30)

early years before his marriage and the later years when he had settled in London after marrying. In addition, the painting, formerly in the collection of Dr. John Fisher, highlights the importance of this friend and patron in the artist's life.

The granddaughter of Dr. Rhudde, rector of East Bergholt, Maria Bicknell (1787–1828) met the aspiring artist while on one of her periodic visits to Suffolk, and, in 1809, their relationship began in earnest. Constable probably became friends with John Fisher (1788–1832), the nephew of the Bishop of Salisbury, in 1811 while the artist was visiting the bishop for three weeks in August and September. Both John Fisher and Maria Bicknell were assiduous correspondents with the artist, intersecting at the important moment of 1816 when Fisher offered to marry the couple and proposed they spend their honeymoon with him and his own new wife in Osmington, where Fisher had been given the position of vicar by his uncle earlier that year.

While the Bishop of Salisbury and his nephew were unwavering supporters of the artist, the rector of East Bergholt disapproved of his granddaughter's possible alliance with an unsuccessful painter. In the hopes of preventing a break with the wealthy clergyman, Maria's parents discouraged the romance, at times forbidding Constable from visiting them at their London home. The situation changed, however, with the death of his father on 14 May 1816 and his inheritance of a share of the estate; Constable then felt that his more secure financial position justified his proposal of marriage to Maria.¹



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Fisher, who had married Mary Cookson on 2 July, offered to officiate at the couple's marriage and proposed the date of 25 September.² Constable, however, was immersed in work on *Flatford Mill* (Tate Britain, London),³ as well as *Wivenhoe Park* (National Gallery of Art, Washington),⁴ and suggested delaying the ceremony.⁵ Maria's response is not recorded, but the wedding took place at Saint Martin-in-the-Fields on 2 October. The couple then traveled down to Osmington, Constable lured perhaps by Fisher's promise that "the country here is wonderfully wild & sublime & well worth a painter's visit," as well as the amateur's assurance that he would supply painting materials.⁶

Numerous pencil drawings and five oils survive from this interlude, the first coast scenes Constable painted. The drawings range from panoramic views of Weymouth and Osmington Bays (Whitworth Art Gallery, University of Manchester)⁷ to more detailed stretches of sections of the beach (Victoria and Albert Museum, London).⁸ The latter drawing depicts Portland Island, framed by Osmington Bay; in the oil, the island, connected to the mainland by the strip of Chesil Beach, marks the horizon and the vast expanse of sky above. While the drawing is related to the oil sketch of *Osmington Mills* (David Thomson collection),⁹ there are no extant drawings that depict the same view as *Osmington Bay*.

A similar composition, but taken from a higher

viewpoint, is the larger *Osmington and Weymouth Bays* (Museum of Fine Arts, Boston).¹⁰ Both paintings include an identical figure walking at the lower right, who, in the Boston iteration, is accompanied by a dog. In the Clark oil, the visible pentimenti of a shift in the position of the figure demonstrate the care with which Constable viewed the placement of the human presence within the composition. In addition, a related drawing (fig. 63.1) shows the artist recording two views of the same figure, in this case from the back. The final version of the figure, his right arm crooked and resting on his hip, his left hand holding the staff extended toward the ground, in effect combines the two pencil sketches. From the depiction of the figure with his staff nonchalantly raised behind his back, Constable retained the staff held in his left hand; and from the second depiction, he kept the crooked arm and lowered staff.

An oil sketch of *Weymouth Bay* (Victoria and Albert Museum, London)¹¹ depicts this stretch from a sea-level view, allowing the stormy sky to cast heavy shadows along the bay. The more serene view of *Osmington Village* (Yale Center for British Art, New Haven)¹² is the fifth oil of the neighborhood and shares with the Clark oil a Fisher provenance. Constable also painted portraits of John Fisher and his wife Mary at this time. It was in reference to either *Osmington Bay* or *Osmington Village* that Fisher wrote to Constable: "You painted me a little picture of Osmington which

was not in your box? Do you want it? Or may I claim my own? Perhaps Mrs. Constable has taken a fancy to it. If so I must waive my right.”¹³ As in many other cases, Constable borrowed back the work for an extended period. In exasperation, Fisher wrote with some sarcasm on 30 November 1822: “I thank you for returning so punctually the Osmington Coast & my little Salisbury Cathedral. I am quite resigned I shall *never* have them again.” However, the souvenir of their shared holiday in Dorset was back in Fisher’s possession by August of the following year.¹⁴

If Constable had borrowed the small painting with the intention of producing a larger version, there is no record that such a work was ever completed. He did, however, paint two larger views of *Weymouth Bay* (Musée du Louvre, Paris; and The National Gallery, London).¹⁵ Although these paintings are altogether stormier and depict a more rugged section of the coast, they share with Constable’s 1816 composition the large proportion of the canvas devoted to the sky.

While paintings of the landscapes and river views of Suffolk are central to our image of Constable the artist, his depictions of the English coast were popular in his own time. As one of the earliest records of Constable’s encounter with the junction of water, sky, and cliffs, *Osmington Bay* holds an especially significant position in his transition from emerging to established, confident artist. This assurance, after years of experimentation with painting in front of the motif, can be seen in the expansiveness of the Dorset coast in *Osmington Bay*, a breadth that belies the limited confines of the small canvas. EP

PROVENANCE The artist, given to John (d. 1832) or Mary Fisher, Osmington; Osmond Fisher, their son, by descent (d. 1914); Osmond Philip Fisher, his son, by descent (1914–d. 1937); Mrs. Osmond Philip Fisher, his wife, by descent (1937–d. 1957); Hilda M. Burn, great-granddaughter of John and Mary Fisher, by descent; [Hazlitt, Gooden & Fox, sold 1973, to private collection]; sale, Christie’s, London, 21 Nov. 1980, no. 73, sold to Spink; [Spink, London, sold to Manton, 28 Feb. 1981]; Sir Edwin A. G. Manton, New York (1981–d. 2005); Manton Family Art Foundation (2005–7, given to the Clark); Sterling and Francine Clark Art Institute, 2007.

EXHIBITIONS Manchester 1956, p. 21, no. 34, lent by John Fisher; London 1976, pp. 98–99, no. 147, ill. p. 98 and opposite p. 80; London 1991a, pp. 170–72, no. 82, ill.; Williams-town 2007a, no cat.

REFERENCES Beckett 1952a, p. 136, fig. 8; Beckett 1952b, p. 5; Beckett 1962–70, vol. 6, pp. 127–28; Hoozee 1979,

p. 109, no. 226, ill.; Parris 1994, pp. 44–46, no. 13, ill.; Reynolds 1996, vol. 1, p. 229, no. 16.80, vol. 2, pl. 1340.

TECHNICAL REPORT The support is a moderate-weight canvas with a flat weave of 13 threads/cm. The painting has an old glue lining of 19 threads/cm and a recent linen strip-lining of 16 threads/cm attached with Beva 371. The latter was applied during a 1990 treatment by John Bull to allow the picture to be restretched when the original insect-damaged stretcher was replaced with the present pine five-member mortise-and-tenon stretcher. The painting seems structurally stable. Small stretcher cracks in the upper left and right suggest that the original stretcher bars were narrower than the present ones. Age cracks in a small squiggly pavement pattern throughout the paint follow the original canvas weave. The painting was cleaned of grime and discolored varnish in 1990, and there are small retouches along the edges and in the sky.

The visible ground layer is a pinkish buff color, which can be seen as part of the sandy color of the beach. There was no underdrawing detected, but in normal light, the figure at the far right appears to have been moved 1.3 cm to the right by the artist, perhaps after being completed in the original position. The paint is a paste consistency throughout, creating an opaque layer that covers most of the ground layer. There are low-level impastos in the clouds and waves, and small brushes were used except for the sky, which is more broadly blended with large brushes.

1. R. B. Beckett explains the settlement of Golding Constable’s estate: Abram managed the family business and distributed the profits to his siblings. Constable could thus rely upon an annual income of about £200. See Beckett 1962–70, vol. 2, p. 185.
2. John Fisher to John Constable, 27 Aug. 1816, in Beckett 1962–70, vol. 6, pp. 28–29.
3. R 17.1.
4. R 17.4.
5. John Constable to Maria Bicknell, 12 Sept. 1816, in Beckett 1962–70, vol. 2, p. 203.
6. John Fisher to John Constable, 27 Aug. 1816, in Beckett 1962–70, vol. 6, p. 29.
7. R 16.53.
8. R 16.54.
9. R 16.79.
10. R 16.81.
11. R 16.78.
12. R 16.58.
13. John Fisher to John Constable, 15 Dec. 1817, in Beckett 1962–70, vol. 6, p. 35.
14. John Constable to John Fisher, 18 Aug. 1823, in Beckett 1962–70, vol. 6, p. 105.
15. R 19.9; 19.10.