



**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

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Kelly Pask, Elizabeth A. Pergam, Kathryn A. Price, Mark A. Roglán,
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Details:

TITLE PAGE: John Constable, *Yarmouth Jetty* (cat. 73)

OPPOSITE COPYRIGHT PAGE: Jean-Baptiste-Camille Corot, *Bathers of the Borromean Isles* (cat. 89)

PAGE VIII: Pierre-Auguste Renoir, *Woman Crocheting* (cat. 267)

PAGE X: Claude Monet, *Seascape, Storm* (cat. 222)

PAGE XII: Jacques-Louis David, *Comte Henri-Amédée-Mercure de Turenne-d'Aynac* (cat. 103)

PAGE XVI: William-Adolphe Bouguereau, *Nymphs and Satyr* (cat. 33)

PRECEDING PAGE 2: Jean-Léon Gérôme, *Snake Charmer* (cat. 154)



54

54 | Woodland Scene Overlooking Dedham Vale
c. 1802–3

Oil on canvas, 77 x 65 cm

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

2007.8.10

Unlike the panoramic expanse of Constable's view of *Stratford Saint Mary from the Coombs* (cat. 53), an array of full-leaved trees confronts the viewer in

his *Woodland Scene Overlooking Dedham Vale*. This depiction of a small portion of the Suffolk woodlands, painted just a few years later, both alludes to and contrasts sharply with the formal constructions of the classical landscapes of Claude Lorrain (1604/5–1682). The landscapes of the seventeenth-century French painter were much admired and collected by connoisseurs in England and had a pervasive influence on English artists of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Constable, too, admired Claude, and several of his works in the Clark's collection register the artist's continued preoccupation with his predecessor.

With its vertical format and looming tree dominating the right side, the composition of this painting is clearly indebted to Claude's *Landscape with Hagar and the Angel* (1646; The National Gallery, London), which Constable had studied in Sir George Howland Beaumont's collection. Constable had made copies after works by Claude as early as 1795, the year he probably first met Beaumont, a collector and amateur artist.¹ In its composition as a whole, however, *Woodland Scene* shows Constable attempting to move away from the conventions that characterize seventeenth-century landscape painting. While Claude uses the calm, silvery water feature to lead the viewer carefully back toward the light-suffused mountains, Constable blocks any easy access to the valley beyond the screen of trees. Further, while Claude's scene retains a narrative subject, Constable eliminates any explicit reference to the Bible or classical mythology. Rather, *Woodland Scene*, with its solitary figure dwarfed by his surroundings, shows man (and metaphorically the artist) making his way in nature that confounds easy passage.

At left, under the pointed arch formed by the younger growths, the distant horizon line can be glimpsed; at the extreme right, a path through the woods curves into the scene. The difficulty of visually penetrating this dense woodland is embodied in the image by the red-coated figure who must valiantly forge his way up the steeply inclined path. Constable suggests that it is a complicated journey. Rather than a direct route, the path extends along the forest floor, at the bottom edge of the painting, before curving off the canvas's right edge to reappear in a second S-curve and then, once again, extend out of sight. In this way, Constable suggests the continuation of the woods beyond the canvas, even as the trees themselves impede any sense of forward progress through the landscape.

Thomas Gainsborough's *Cornard Wood, near Sudbury, Suffolk* (1748; The National Gallery, London), with its two off-center routes through the East Anglian woodland, has been cited as an immediate precedent to Constable's compositional choices.² But the claustrophobic effect Constable achieves in his work marks a break from Gainsborough's traditional horizontal arrangement of the landscape. In *Woodland Scene*, the height of the trees and the incline of the pathway are suited to the upright orientation of the canvas. Constable frequently chose the vertical format for his Suffolk scenes. His *Dedham Vale from the Coombs* (1802; Victoria and Albert Museum, Lon-

don) is a particularly apt point of comparison with the *Woodland Scene*.³ In this work, dated by Constable's daughter Isabel to September 1802, the artist has transposed Claude's *Hagar and Ishmael* more literally onto the Dedham Valley. In place of a biblical subject, Constable inserts Dedham Church as the distant landmark. The clear atmosphere and fresh coloration are also reminiscent of the sylvan air of Claude's paintings. In contrast, the browns and ochers of the *Woodland Scene* contribute to the challenging topography of this more experimental canvas.

Technical evidence confirms that the artist was trying out new ideas in this work. Both the exposure of an earlier tacking edge at left and the 1992 X-radiographic examination by Dr. Nicholas Eastaugh demonstrate that for this scene Constable had cut down a larger canvas on which he had earlier painted a horizontal landscape.⁴ The change in orientation is still perceptible; the slight shift in tonality that runs through the sky and just to the right of the first group of trees at the left indicates that the original horizon line divided what is currently the left third of the canvas from the right two-thirds.

The artist used a similar procedure with *Dedham Vale* and *A Lane near Dedham* (both 1802; Yale Center for British Art, New Haven).⁵ These two paintings are known to have been made from two parts of a single piece of canvas, which in its original dimensions would have measured just a few centimeters larger than *Woodland Scene*, itself among the largest canvases Constable painted in these years. In addition, these works, along with the pencil drawings of the same years, show Constable deeply engaged with the landscape of Suffolk in the months when he returned home between his studies at the Royal Academy. Together they constitute the visual evidence for the artistic project he laid out in an often-quoted letter dated 29 May 1802. Constable wrote to his early painting companion John Dunthorne outlining his rejection of the training he had been receiving at the Academy. Rather than copying works by established masters, he pledged to "make some laborious studies from nature."⁶

The painting's sale history sheds light on the Constable family's attempts to safeguard the artist's posthumous reputation. In this case, evidence in the form of annotations on an 1864 Christie's sale catalogue establishes that a member of Constable's family believed *Woodland Scene* to be an autograph work. In this catalogue, a work titled *In the meadows, near*

Dedham (no. 116), has a written annotation crossing out the initial “J” and abbreviation “R.A.”, with the initials “L.B.” inserted instead, presumably re-attributing this work from John Constable to his youngest son Lionel Bicknell Constable.⁷ It is possible that these annotations were even made by Lionel himself. There are, however, no amendments to the text to the description of the Clark painting, which is catalogued as *A Woody Landscape* (no. 54). Thus, in 1864 *Woodland Scene* was confirmed to be the work of the elder Constable. EP

PROVENANCE John Palmer, London;⁸ possibly F. J. Armitage;⁹ sale, Sotheby’s, 1970s, sold to Dallas; [David Dallas, England]; [Deborah Gage (Works of Art) Ltd., London, sold to Manton, 22 Oct. 1993]; Sir Edwin A. G. Manton (1993–d. 2005); Manton Family Art Foundation (2005–7, given to the Clark); Sterling and Francine Clark Art Institute, 2007.

EXHIBITIONS Bramley n.d., as *Woodland scene*;¹⁰ New York 2000, ill.; Williamstown 2007a, no cat.

REFERENCES Parris 1994, p. 16–18, no. 1, ill.; Reynolds 1996, vol. 1, p. 53, no. 03.59, vol. 2, pl. 219.

TECHNICAL REPORT The support is a slightly coarse canvas with a weave of 13 threads per cm. It has a very old glue lining with a weave of 19 threads per cm, and the back of the fabric is brown and stained. The five-member stretcher probably dates to the old lining, which may have been done for or by Constable. Radiography done by Nicholas Eastaugh in 1992 reportedly confirmed that the picture was painted over the fragment of another image, in which the sky appeared in the right half of the present painting. This idea is supported by small remnants of blue paint that are visible at the extreme right edge and in abraded strokes. Conservator John Bull, when he examined the painting in 1993, stated further that it was part of a larger canvas that was cut up and reused. The left and bottom edges were originally tacking margins from an earlier stretching, which suggests that Constable turned them up for inclusion in the new surface when the painting was lined for him. The tack holes associated with these early tacking margins are now filled and inpainted. The supports are quite brittle and slightly dished, with a weave impression and stretcher creases. The tacks have rusted through the fabric, and the lining is separating at the lower left and top edges. The upper left sky has a dent, and there is old lifted and disrupted paint in several spots, which looks like flexing or handling damage. Several small areas of scratched-out paint occur in the sky, some with patches of black, some possibly retouched. There are traction cracks where upper colors lie on top of the first sky color along the right edge. There are age cracks throughout, a few quite deep and lifted. Some old dents are filled and inpainted. The picture was probably cleaned sometime in the last thirty years, and

solvent abrasion has damaged the thinly painted passages. There are several patches of old natural resin varnish, seen as dense ultraviolet light fluorescence in the lower left corner, center trees, and upper left foliage. The recent varnish is only slightly yellowed, and the surface reflectance is even and slightly matte.

The visible ground layer is salmon pink, possibly applied by the artist to cover part of a lower image. The lower ground layer looks off-white. There was no underdrawing discovered, but in infrared light, one can quickly detect the vertical band of pale paint running underneath the right half of the image, beginning at 25.4 cm from the left edge. The wide brushstrokes along the right half are presumably related to this possible earlier image or to covering it up. The final paint is very thin and diluted, as if with turpentine, with small dots of heavier paint scattered about for detail. There is no precision brushwork anywhere, and impastos appear almost accidentally in a few clouds and tree bark highlights.

1. For example, Constable made a drawing after an engraving of Claude’s *Embarkation of Carlo and Ubaldo* (R 95.4). In his estate sale, no. 48 was catalogued as his copy after Claude’s *Hagar and the Angel*. R. B. Beckett explores the influence of Sir George’s drawings on Constable, as well as Constable’s influence on his mentor, in Beckett 1957.
2. See typescript catalogue entry by Deborah Gage, 17 Sept. 1993, in the Clark’s curatorial files. Interestingly, years after Constable painted this work, his maternal uncle, David Pike Watts, owned *Cornard Wood, near Sudbury, Suffolk*. See Egerton 1998, p. 72.
3. R 02.7.
4. See also John Bull’s condition report dated 7 Sept. 1993, in the Clark’s curatorial files.
5. R 02.11 and R 02.12.
6. John Constable to John Dunthorne, 29 May 1802, in Beckett 1962–70, vol. 2, p. 32.
7. This annotation was discovered by the painting’s previous owner David Dallas when he examined Christie’s original copy of the sales catalogue. See Parris 1994, pp. 17–18.
8. The work was offered for sale at Christie’s, London, 14 Mar. 1864, no. 54, as *A Woody Landscape*, but was bought in.
9. The name F.J. Armitage appears on a label on the stretcher.
10. This exhibition is known only through a label on the stretcher.