



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

VOLUME ONE

Edited by Sarah Lees

With an essay by Richard Rand
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James Rosenow, Zoë Samels, and Fronia E. Wissman

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64

64 | The Wheat Field 1816

Oil on canvas, 54.6 x 78.1 cm

Lower center: John Constable. / 1816.

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

2007.8.27

Between the extremes of the exhibited six-foot canvases, completed from full-size sketches in Constable's London studio, and the small, portable oil sketches prepared on both paper and canvas in the open air, and never intended for public viewing, are the artist's finished oil paintings worked in front of the motif for the annual Royal Academy exhibition. Of these, *The Wheat Field* is an important example of Constable's relationship to the fields around his child-

hood home and his representation of rural Suffolk for a London audience.

Having gone untraced for many years, the painting was rediscovered in a private American collection by Charles Rhyne in 1988. Leslie Parris and Ian Fleming-Williams vividly described the impact of its finding in the 1991 Tate exhibition catalogue: "first sight of the painting itself was a breath-catching experience: nobody had prepared us for so many carefully delineated figures in one Constable landscape."¹ Even before its rediscovery, the painting was regularly discussed in the Constable literature as a work exhibited both at the Royal Academy in 1816 and then a year later at the British Institution.²

Although Parris and Fleming-Williams were most struck by Constable's attention to the figures engaged in harvesting the wheat, the overriding concern of the artist and his faithful correspondent, Maria Bicknell,

was his ability to spend his summer painting outside. True to the pattern established during the previous few years, Constable left London for Suffolk in July. Having been back home for a week, on 13 July, Constable was able to report to Maria that “I think I never saw dear old Bergholt half so beautifull [*sic*] before as now—the weather has been so delightfull.”³ Ever encouraging, Maria concluded her response: “proceed with your painting, how much you must enjoy it in the open air after Mr. Dawe’s room.”⁴ Constable’s next letter, dated 27 August, is the source for the much-repeated line “I live almost wholly in the feilds [*sic*] and see nobody but the harvest men.”⁵

Over the course of the next few months, tension between the competing pressures of work and love are voiced in their exchange of letters. Although he had assured Maria that his “mind [was] never long absent from you,” Maria had to write twice before receiving a response from the artist.⁶ As attuned to the conditions for painting in the open air as the artist himself, and fishing for an explanation for his silence, Maria was led to comment: “How charmed you must be with this long continuance of fine weather. I should suppose for many seasons, you have not painted so much in the open air, nature and you must be greater friends than ever.”⁷ To which Constable, at last, responded: “I have as you guess been much out of doors.”⁸ A month later, Maria lamented: “How very strange it is you do not write to me.”⁹ In Constable’s explanation, we see the artist working against the clock: “I have been so much out, endeavouring to catch the last of this beautifull [*sic*] year, that I have neglected almost every other duty. I have put rather a large landscape on hand than ever I did before and this it is my wish to secure in a great measure before I leave this place.”¹⁰ It is highly likely that the “rather . . . large landscape” is *The Wheat Field*.

While there exists a series of sketches that Constable drew upon for both *Dedham Vale: Morning* (W. H. Proby collection)¹¹ and *Flatford Mill from the Lock* (David Thomson collection),¹² there are no known oil sketches for *The Wheat Field*. A number of pencil drawings depict gleaners in positions similar to, but not exactly the same as, those in the painting.¹³ The dearth of preparatory material, however, is, in part, made up for by a number of finished paintings exhibited at the Royal Academy in the two years prior that show Constable working in the same fields.

In a double chronological sense, Constable’s *The Stour Valley and Dedham Village* (1815; Museum of

Fine Arts, Boston)¹⁴ is prefatory to the *The Wheat Field*. Exhibited the year before at the Royal Academy, this painting depicts the same field at an earlier stage in the hay-making cycle—in this case, plowing the field to prepare it for sowing. An identical black-and-white dog appears in both paintings, as well as in an oil sketch of a cart and two horses (Victoria and Albert Museum, London).¹⁵ Although there are numerous oil sketches and pencil drawings related to this painting, it, like *The Wheat Field*, was painted on site.

This same field is also depicted in the painting exhibited at the Royal Academy in 1814 now known as *A Summerland* (private collection),¹⁶ the title that Constable used for the mezzotint published in the fourth number of *English Landscape Scenery* (1831). This title refers to the practice of leaving a plowed and harrowed field to lie fallow for the summer in preparation for sowing the following winter. When Constable first exhibited the painting, he called it *Landscape: Ploughing Scene in Suffolk* and appended a couplet from Robert Bloomfield’s *The Farmer’s Boy*: “But unassisted through each toilsome day, / With smiling brow the ploughman cleaves his way” (“Spring,” lines 71–72).¹⁷ Both the couplet and the title with which he exhibited the painting at the Liverpool Academy that same year (*A Landscape—Ploughman*) identify a solitary plowman, disregarding the second plowman in the lower right.

This second plowman, as well as Constable’s citation of *The Farmer’s Boy*, links the 1814 scene to *The Wheat Field*, where Constable again positioned a distant plowman at the left margin of the canvas. Further, when he exhibited *The Wheat Field* at the British Institution in 1817, he altered the title to *A Harvest Field; Reapers, Gleaners* and brought further attention to the occupation of the figures by including three additional lines from Bloomfield’s popular poem: “Nature herself invites the reapers forth; . . . / No rake takes here what heaven to all bestows: / Children of want, for you the bounty flows!” (“Summer,” lines 132, 137–38). Just as Maria had referred to the intimate relationship between Constable and nature, so, too, does Bloomfield describe Giles, the titular farmer’s boy, and his relationship to nature as expressed through his work in the fields, following him from Spring through the succeeding seasons. Together with the title recorded at the British Institution, the three lines Constable cited juxtapose the work of the reapers, who cut the wheat for the farmer who owns the fields, and the gleaners, the poor who gather the leftover sheaves.

These literary choices reflect the composition of the painting. While only the tops of the reapers are visible above the full-grown wheat, the gleaners—two women and a child—stand, bend over, and kneel in the foreground. The standing gleaner holds her wheat as if it were a bouquet of wildflowers, belying the grueling work involved in her labor. With the inclusion of the lines from Bloomfield, however, Constable makes clear that these gleaners are inheritors of a long-standing rural tradition, recorded in the Old Testament story of Ruth and Naomi.

Constable was familiar with Nicolas Poussin's explicit linkage of the biblical story with the harvest associated with the summer, and referred to Poussin's *Summer, or Ruth and Boaz* (1660–64; Musée du Louvre, Paris) in his third lecture at the Royal Institution, which he delivered on 9 June 1836.¹⁸ Although he spoke with admiration of another painting from the series of four seasons, *Winter, or The Deluge* (1660–64; Musée du Louvre, Paris), in this painting, Constable does not follow the classical landscapist's model of elevating a rural scene to the level of history painting. Rather, Constable's depiction of the harvest scene shares with Pieter Bruegel the Elder's *The Harvesters* (1565; The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York) "a new humanism, at once pastoral and vernacular."¹⁹

Michael Rosenthal has interpreted Bloomfield's verses as a critique of early nineteenth-century agricultural reforms, such as enclosure, that threatened the livelihood of the rural poor, an attitude of nostalgia he argued Constable shared with the poet.²⁰ Writing before the rediscovery of *The Wheat Field*, John Barrell also examined Constable's painting in the context of contemporary poetry. To Barrell, paintings such as *A Summerland* and *The Stour Valley and Dedham Village* are the visual equivalents of the Romantic poet's rejection of the Pastoral, where man is in harmony with nature, and the adoption of the "severest Georgic";²¹ that is, the poetic form named for Virgil's four-book *Georgics*, which describe the labor and travails associated with agriculture. This is expressed, according to Barrell, by Constable's diminutive depiction of the laborers: "Only by being kept at a distance are men in Constable's paintings able to be seen as at one with the landscape, and as emblems of the contentment and industry which ideally were the basis of England's agricultural prosperity."²²

Barrell interprets the physical distance and indistinctness of the figures as indicative of Constable's

remove from the life of the rural laborer. In contrast, an anecdote told by Charles Robert Leslie, and repeated by Rosenthal and Graham Reynolds in connection with *The Wheat Field*, presents the artist as very much a part of the Suffolk farming community. Leslie related how, as a fellow Suffolk native, Samuel Strowger, the head porter and model at the Royal Academy, vouched for the accuracy of the artist's portrayal of a "Corn Field with reapers at work" at the Academy's Hanging Committee. Leslie used Strowger's response to the committee's rejection or poor placement of the painting to emphasize that Constable represented a decided contrast to established artists of the day who knew nothing of rural farming practices.²³ From Constable's correspondence with Maria over the course of the summer of 1815, as well as his famous statement to John Fisher that his native landscape "made" him a painter, it is clear that the artist saw his work as an integral part of Suffolk life as it related to the working of the land.

A sign of the care Constable took with this painting and an indication that he himself was pleased with the result is the prominent inscription of his name and date below the bending gleaner. This inscription should be seen less as a signature—the clarity and substance of the letters is achieved by Constable's distinctive highlighting of the letters—and more as a calling card. These three-dimensionally rendered letters have a letterpress quality and are purposefully placed toward the center of the canvas rather than being buried amongst the branches and leaves at the right or left sides.

When the painting was exhibited in 1816 and 1817, the critical response ignored its subject and instead focused on Constable's technique. On the occasion of the Royal Academy exhibition, in a review that only rarely took note of the work of artists who were neither Associates nor full members of the Academy, the critic of the *Repository of Arts* commented, "From extreme carelessness this artist has gone to the other extreme, and now displays the most laboured finish."²⁴ As Judy Crosby Ivy has shown, reviews of Constable's exhibited works in this early part of his career often critiqued the artist's handling. These criticisms were written with an eye toward encouraging the young artist to correct his practice, an attitude that would become more disparaging after his election in November 1819 to Associate status.²⁵

Although he had called attention to Constable without identifying his works specifically in his review of the Academy exhibition, Robert Hunt gave greater consid-

eration to *The Wheat Field* when Constable submitted it to the British Institution the following year, writing:

*Mr. Constable here shews that he can screw up his resolution to conquer in some degree that inertness of mind, which, while an object of importance is aimed at, prevents its full success by the neglect of some valuable requisites of active performance. In plain words, his finishing and drawing are a little better than formerly, though still far below the standard of his colouring and general effect. These are beautiful, in as much as they are a close portraiture of our English scenery.*²⁶

Here, Hunt alludes to the academic debate between line and color, noting the artist's continued lack of skill in the fundamentals of draftsmanship. Nevertheless, Hunt's next sentence suggests that he believed that in the depiction of the landscape, and particularly in the landscape of England, color inevitably takes precedence and that Constable had succeeded in capturing that quality.

Most notable about this review, however, is Hunt's awareness of Constable's development over time. That Hunt had marked the progress of an artist who had yet to achieve the first step toward professional acceptance as an Associate of the Royal Academy, registers the interest Constable's works attracted when displayed at Somerset House or in Pall Mall. Indeed, the clarity of detail, the considered composition, and, above all, the artist's ability to transfer his immersion in the life of the field-worker onto the canvas make *The Wheat Field* a brilliant statement of Constable's early commitment to making the contemporary painted landscape a tangible product of his own fieldwork. EP

PROVENANCE Cheston family (possibly from the late nineteenth century); Morris Cheston, Jr., Philadelphia, by descent (until 1997);²⁷ [Agnew's, London, sold through Salander-O'Reilly Galleries, New York, to Curtis Galleries, 1997]; [Curtis Galleries, Minneapolis, 1997–2000, sold through Salander-O'Reilly Galleries, New York, to Manton, 12 Dec. 2000]; Sir Edwin A. G. Manton, New York (2000–d. 2005); Manton Family Art Foundation (2005–7, given to the Clark); Sterling and Francine Clark Art Institute, 2007.

EXHIBITIONS London 1816, no. 169 as *The wheat field*; London 1817, no. 132 as *A harvest field; Reapers, Gleaners*; London 1991a, pp. 14, 17, 50–51, 64, 143, 151, 158, 160–63, 190, 205, 506, 511–12, no. 76, ill.; London 1991b, pp. 29–31,

pls. 24, 26, ill. on cover; New Haven–San Marino 2001–2, pp. 158–59, no. 44, ill.; Canberra–Wellington 2006, pp. 4, 8, 11, 30, 132–33, 142, no. 19, ill.; Williamstown 2007a, no cat.

REFERENCES *Repository of Arts* 1816, 358; Hunt 1817, p. 140; Leslie 1845, pp. 64–65, 71; Beckett 1962–70, vol. 2, p. 216; London 1976, pp. 96–97; Rosenthal 1983, p. 95, 100, 115; Cormack 1986, p. 102; Ivy 1991, pp. 39, 71–72, 76, nos. 16.4, 16.5, 17.2; Parris 1991, pp. 88, 90, fig. 4; Fleming-Williams 1994, p. 148; Reynolds 1996, vol. 1, pp. 215–16, no. 16.1, vol. 2, pl. 1267; London–Washington–San Marino 2006–7, pp. 102–4, 119, fig. 53.

TECHNICAL REPORT The support is a coarse canvas with a thread count of 14 threads/cm. It retains an old glue lining to linen having a thread count of 19 threads/cm and has been recently strip-lined with Beva 371 and a woven polyester fabric with a thread count of 19 x 38 threads/cm. The six-member pine mortise-and-tenon stretcher may be original, but most old labels have been removed and the surface has been cleaned. The linings seem to be structurally stable. A small set of dents in the paint and ground occurs just above the signature. Patches of wrinkled paint in the center right may indicate changes by the artist, made when the lower paint layer was still wet. The paint and ground layers also show age and traction cracks as well as stretcher creases. The painting may have been most recently cleaned about 2000. The varnish layers are glassy and slightly yellowed. Ultraviolet light shows older varnish residues scattered in the lower half of the picture, which also appears to have a toned restoration coating. There seem to be two levels of retouching, above and below the upper coating. Large areas of overpaint can be seen in the left and upper right sky, as well as a large zone in the wheat in the lower left quadrant. There is also some retouching along the treetops at the left. Some of the retouching in the sky is starting to look patchy and too light, probably due to the ongoing yellowing of the natural resin varnish below it. There is a vertical loss in the sky above the right tree line, and several triangular losses in the left sky. Some weave impression from the coarse original fabric was accentuated during the glue lining.

The ground layer is an off-white color and was probably commercially applied. The paint is quite thickly applied, making the detection of underdrawing difficult. There may be some thinly painted lines applied for the figures. Infrared examination reveals mounds or rounded shapes in the center of the wheat field, just to the right of the centrally placed women, which would indicate changes to the landscape, or possibly an abandoned lower image. The paint has a vehicular paste consistency. The paint is applied in multiple layers and built up quite thickly in most areas, although some of this may be due to the changes made in the landscape elements. Some figures and their shadows were applied over the wheat field's paint strokes. The abstract patterning in the wheat may have been completed in the studio. Some upper dark brown or black details look like ink work.

1. London 1991b, p. 15.
2. See, for example, Rosenthal 1983, pp. 95, 100, 115, and Cormack 1986, p. 102.
3. John Constable to Maria Bicknell, 13 July 1815, in Beckett 1962–70, vol. 2, p. 146.
4. Maria Bicknell to John Constable, 20 July 1815, in Beckett 1962–70, vol. 2, p. 148. She refers to Constable's having spent much of his time immediately before leaving London painting the landscape background for George Dawe's portrait of Eliza O'Neill in the character of Juliet. This portrait (R 15.51) was exhibited at the Royal Academy in 1816 (no. 199).
5. John Constable to Maria Bicknell, 27 Aug. 1815, in Beckett 1962–70, vol. 2, p. 149.
6. *Ibid.* Maria wrote to Constable on 20 July and then again on 9 Aug. before the artist responded on 27 Aug.
7. Maria Bicknell to John Constable, 9 Sept. 1815, in Beckett 1962–70, vol. 2, p. 151.
8. John Constable to Maria Bicknell, 14 Sept. 1815, in Beckett 1962–70, vol. 2, p. 152.
9. Maria Bicknell to John Constable, 18 Oct. 1815, in Beckett 1962–80, vol. 2, p. 155.
10. John Constable to Maria Bicknell, 19 Oct. 1815, in Beckett 1962–80, vol. 2, p. 156.
11. R 11.2.
12. R 12.1.
13. See, for example, R 16.3–6.
14. R 15.1.
15. R 14.38.
16. R 14.1.
17. *The Farmer's Boy* was first published in 1800 and, by 1820, was in its fourteenth edition.
18. Leslie 1845, p. 314.
19. New York 1998–99, p. 390.
20. Rosenthal 1983, pp. 202–3.
21. Barrell 1980, p. 155.
22. *Ibid.*, p. 139.
23. Leslie 1845, p. 13.
24. *Repository of Arts* 1816, p. 358; reprinted in Ivy 1991, p. 71.
25. Ivy 1991, p. 40.
26. Hunt 1817, p. 140; reprinted in Ivy 1991, p. 71.
27. Morris Cheston may not have held sole ownership; his son-in-law, Raul Betancourt, Jr., also seems to have represented the family interests at times.

65 | Sketch for *The Opening of Waterloo Bridge Seen from Whitehall Stairs, June 18th 1817*

c. 1819

Oil on canvas, 16.5 x 23.2 cm

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

2007.8.48

66 | Waterloo Bridge Seen from Whitehall Stairs

c. 1829

Oil on canvas, 61 x 99 cm

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

2007.8.49

The three-day Battle of Waterloo in June 1815 marked the final defeat of Napoleon and the end of more than twenty-two years of war between France and Britain. The almost fifteen years it took Constable to complete his commemoration of the opening of Waterloo Bridge represented his personal battle with the challenges of monumental historical landscape painting. The two oil sketches of Waterloo Bridge in the Clark collection—one probably executed in 1819 and the other about ten years later—allow us to track the unprecedented period of gestation of Constable's 1832 *The Opening of Waterloo Bridge seen from Whitehall Stairs, June 18th 1817* (Tate Britain, London),¹ his most unusual six-foot canvas.

Although it is not known definitively whether the artist attended the opening ceremony led by the Prince Regent, Constable doubtless witnessed the preparations for the festivities on his daily visits to the Royal Academy exhibition of 1817. The annual exhibition was held at Somerset House, which fronts the Thames just east of the bridge and is visible in both sketches at the north end of the new bridge. Although the close geographic link between the Neoclassical edifice erected between 1776 and 1786 and the bridge designed by John Rennie is shown in Constable's oil sketch *Somerset House Terrace from Waterloo Bridge* (Yale Center for British Art, New Haven),² the artist chose a location further west along the Embankment to view Waterloo Bridge starting with his earliest conception of the present subject.

Three drawings that Graham Reynolds has dated to