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

VOLUME ONE

Edited by Sarah Lees

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and technical reports by Sandra L. Webber

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70 | **Cloud Study** c. 1821–22

Oil on cream laid paper, mounted on canvas, 27.5 x 32.7 cm (sheet size), 27.6 x 33.7 cm (stretcher size)
Gift of the Manton Foundation in memory of Sir Edwin and Lady Manton
2007.8.34

71 | **Study of Clouds over a Landscape** c. 1821–22

Oil on laminate cardboard, mounted on canvas, 24.4 x 29.5 cm (board size), 28.2 x 30.7 cm (stretcher size)
Gift of the Manton Foundation in memory of Sir Edwin and Lady Manton
2007.8.35

72 | **Cloud Study** c. 1821–22

Oil on laminate cardboard, 23.8 x 30.2 cm
Gift of the Manton Foundation in memory of Sir Edwin and Lady Manton
2007.8.58

Constable's significance in the narrative of modernism is attributed, in large part, to his sketches, both large and small. Within this category, his studies of skies—their clouds, precipitation, and atmospheric effects—have long stood as evidence of the artist's immersion in the natural environment and his uncanny ability to record the world he observed so intensely. The artist's project to represent nature unmediated by the conventions of academic models has been central to Constable's status as English painting's answer to the Romantic poetry of William Wordsworth and others. This same attitude toward nature has also been a key aspect of the characterization of Constable as the artist-scientist whose interest in empirical observation testifies to his status as a modernist. Constable's practice of inscribing drawings and oil sketches with details of time, location, date, and conditions provides proof that his record of the natural environment was both visual and scientific.

It was not until Constable rented a house in the London suburb of Hampstead that he embarked on a sustained examination of the sky and its cloud formations, often recording the time and date. Although John and Maria had settled in central London after their long-delayed marriage in 1816, by August 1819,

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his wife's fragile health necessitated their rental of Albion Cottage. They subsequently returned nearly every summer to Hampstead's fresh air, north of the bustle and dirt of the city. Over the course of the spring and summer of 1821 and 1822, Constable painted dozens of studies of the clouds over the heath.[1] The sheer volume of the results of his undertaking can be gauged from his report to John Fisher on 7 October 1822, that he had made "about 50 careful studies of *skies* tolerably large."[2] Not all the sketches Constable painted in 1821 and 1822 are known today. Not surprisingly, however, the task of evaluating those that are accepted and the interpretation of their place within the artist's oeuvre, as well as their importance to nineteenth-century European painting in general, have attracted scholars well beyond the field of the history of British art.[3]

One subject of debate has been the circumstances that prompted Constable to turn his attention from the earthly realm to that above the horizon.[4] From the time of the publication of Charles Robert Leslie's biography in 1843, the immediate impetus for this extraordinary effort has been linked to an exchange of letters between Constable and his friend and patron.[5] On 26 September 1821, Fisher wrote to Constable to tell him that a "grand critical party" had found fault with the sky in *Stratford Mill* (The National Gallery, London), the second of Constable's six-footers exhibited that year at the Royal Academy.[6]

Constable's response is well known, but worth repeating. First acknowledging his own deficiency, the artist pleads the case for the importance of the sky within the landscape tradition:

> *Certainly if the Sky is* obtrusive—*(as mine are) it is bad, but if they are evaded (as mine are not) it is worse, they must and always shall with me make an effectual part of the composition. It will be difficult to name a class of Landscape, in which the sky is not the* 'key note,' *the* standard of 'Scale,' *and the chief* 'Organ of sentiment.'[7]

He then disparages the contemporary practice of using a "white sheet" as a model for the sky, countering with the perceptive observation:

> *The sky is the* 'source of light' *in nature—and governs every thing. Even our common observations on the weather of every day, are suggested by them but it does not occur to us. Their difficulty in painting both as to composition and execution is very great, because with all their brilliancy and consequence, they ought not to come forward or be hardly thought about in a picture—any more than extreme distances are.*[8]

Constable concludes by again referring to his difficulty in achieving the naturalistic effect to which he aspires:

> *I say all this* to you *though you do not want to be told—that I know very well what I am about, & that my skies have not been neglected though they often failed in execution—and often no doubt from over anxiety about them—which alone will destroy that Easy appearance which nature always has—in all her movements.*[9]

This letter is often cited and analyzed extensively. For our purposes, it is important to emphasize that while Constable consciously struggled with the execution of his paintings, he persevered in his attempt to translate onto his canvases his adherence to the "natural painture" that he had pledged to follow years earlier. Further, it is impossible to overstate Fisher's importance as a sounding board for Constable's theories and practices, as exemplified in this series of letters.

Yet while Constable's intent to work out technical problems that had presented difficulties in his achieving the aesthetic effect he desired was undoubtedly a primary motive behind his sky studies, there is also a strong case to be made for the significance of scientific advances in the first quarter of the nineteenth century. In his 1950 *John Constable's Clouds*, Kurt Badt was the first to argue that like Johann Wolfgang von Goethe (1749–1832), Constable knew amateur meteorologist Luke Howard's work on the classification of clouds.[10] By 1976, however, the authors of the catalogue of the Tate's bicentenary exhibition noted that this theory had been "discredited."[11]

The matter has been reopened by John E. Thornes, a meteorologist, who is currently the foremost proponent of the theory that meteorological publications were an essential aspect of Constable's own project. More specifically, he argues that the artist's notations to his copy of Thomas Forster's *Researches about Atmospheric Phenomena* (published 1812) prove conclusively that Constable knew Howard's work. Thornes acknowledges, however, that it is impossible, at this point, to determine whether he had read that work before or after he had embarked on his own stud-

ies.[12] At the end of his volume on the artist's skies, Thornes concludes that Constable "was probably the most meteorologically aware landscape artist of all time. The scientific truth of his painted skies is unsurpassed."[13] Thornes's opinion is not new. As early as 1902, Charles Holmes wrote, "[To] those who . . . are habitually accustomed to be observers of the weather . . . it will at once be evident that Constable, by his unflinching accuracy in sky-painting, fixes not only the day and the hour of his sketch, but the atmospheric condition of the district in which he made it."[14] Indeed, the cloud studies and their empirical accuracy are the basis for the claim of later generations that Constable's plein-air oil sketching merits his inclusion in the modernist pantheon.

The three studies of sky that Sir Edwin acquired between 1958 and 1997 well illustrate many of the elements that define the cloud studies as one of the most important series of personal works created by Constable. They also exemplify the difficulties associated with the attribution and dating of those works not bearing any inscriptions. All three were seen and accepted by Graham Reynolds, whose two-part catalogue of the artist's entire oeuvre has rightly been claimed as a landmark achievement.[15] All three are painted in oil on paper or thin cardboard and were subsequently laid down on canvas,[16] conforming to Constable's chosen support for these quickly executed works of highly mobile and changeable atmospheric conditions. Two of the studies are examples of those works in the series that have been defined as "pure," meaning that only the sky is depicted; the third includes a strip of land, which Reynolds has suggested includes "a path leading from the foreground towards Branch Hill Pond."[17]

Without inscriptions, more specific dating of these three sketches than to the years 1821 and 1822 is impossible. Nevertheless, Constable scholars have been able to draw tentative conclusions from the evidence of size and composition. Constable's pure sky studies seem to have been done principally in 1822. Furthermore, Robert Hoozee, the author of *L'opera completa di Constable* (1979), has observed that the studies Constable executed in 1821 measure about 24 x 29 cm and those from 1822 are on the larger sheets of about 30 x 50 cm.[18] The Clark's cloud studies both confirm and complicate this neat division, with only the measurements of *Study of Clouds over a Landscape* (cat. 71; 24.4 x 29.5 cm) and its combination of sky and land matching Hoozee's characteristics of the 1821 studies.

The effect the artist achieved by eliminating any indication of the terrestrial realm is clear from a comparison of the *Study of Clouds over a Landscape* and the two pure sky studies. Badt interpreted the "skyscapes" as a reflection of the artist's own effort to express pure feeling through nature—that is, the sky as "the chief organ of sentiment."[19] While Constable's sketches in general and his cloud studies in particular leave the viewer in no doubt that the artist was deeply imbued with the belief that nature was observable and, therefore, understandable, the pitfall of interpreting Constable as an artist devoted merely to facts is clear from Badt's conclusion that the artist "was inclined temperamentally to matter-of-factness."[20] Thus, Badt denigrates Constable's "finished" paintings and privileges the sketches. Although none of Constable's post-1822 finished works exhibit a one-to-one correspondence with the sky studies, it has been customary to judge these "finished" skies against those that came before the artist's two years of study, usually to the detriment of the pre-1822 works.[21] Perhaps the most important difference is that the skies of his sketches, as exemplified by the three Clark works, were painted in less than an hour; whereas the skies of his exhibited paintings were necessarily revisited over a period of weeks, months, and even years.[22]

The remarkable effect these cloud studies have had on twentieth-century admirers of Constable's work is clear in Sir Edwin's own account. Having acquired the *Cloud Study* (cat. 70) from Leggatt Brothers the month before, Manton reported to Peter Johnson, a principal of that dealership, that "you will be amused to know that the best place to look at it is lying on the floor, since one gets the best impression of the light coming from behind the clouds that way!"[23] EP

PROVENANCE Cat. 70: Constable family, by descent, sold to T. Maclean, 1896, as agent for Kay; Arthur Kay (from 1896);[24] H. A. J. Munro of Novar; Capt. Briscoe, Longstowe Hall, sold to Leggatt's; [Leggatt's, London, sold to Manton, 2 June 1958]; Sir Edwin A. G. Manton, New York (1958–d. 2005); Manton Family Art Foundation (2005–7, given to the Clark); Sterling and Francine Clark Art Institute, 2007.

Cat. 71: [Possibly Galerie Sedelmeyer, Paris]; private collection; [Deborah Gage (Works of Art), Ltd., London, sold to Manton, 4 Nov. 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.

Cat. 72: Private collection (c. 1960–97, sale, Sotheby's, London, 9 July 1997, no. 90, sold to Ackermann & Johnson, London, Ltd., as agent for Manton); Sir Edwin A. G. Manton (1997–d. 2005); Manton Family Art Foundation (2005–7, given to the Clark); Sterling and Francine Clark Art Institute, 2007.

EXHIBITIONS Cat. 70: New York 2004, no. 18; Williamstown 2007a, no cat.

Cat. 71: New York 2000, ill.; Williamstown 2007a, no cat.

Cat. 72: Williamstown 2007a, no cat.

REFERENCES Cat. 70: Reynolds 1984, vol. 1, pp. 111–12, no. 22.57, vol. 2, pl. 378; Parris 1994, pp. 51–52, no. 15, ill.; Thornes 1999, p. 275.

Cat. 71: Parris 1994, p. 53, no. 16, ill.; Reynolds 1996, vol. 1, p. 245, no. 22.73, vol. 2, pl. 1461; Thornes 1999, p. 276.

Cat. 72: None

TECHNICAL REPORT Cat. 70: The support is a sheet of thick laid paper having visible chain lines running vertically through the paper and spaced about 2.5 cm apart. The paper has an old glue lining to canvas with a coarse weave of 13 x 16 threads per cm, and may have an intermediate secondary layer of thin paper-board below the paper. There are a few slight paper creases or fold damages in the primary support. The back of the canvas is very grimy with two water stains. The two lower corners of the paper sheet have visible pinholes, while the upper corners are filled and inpainted, probably covering old holes. The surface is very slightly concave. The top right corner and the upper left edge are lifting from the canvas mount, although the rest seems stable. The painting was cleaned in 1990 by John Bull, and a small amount of inpainting was done, visible in ultraviolet light in the top of the dark center cloud, and in the upper right corner. There is some lumpiness and dimpling because the mounting was done face down.

There is no ground layer, and paper fibers are visible below the blue paint near the top edge. There was no detectable underdrawing, with only the left fill or insert in the cloud visible under infrared light. The paint is very evenly applied in a paste consistency. There are small air bubbles in the white/cream color as if the paint had been emulsified or possibly rained upon while the artist continued to work. There is gritty paint in some strokes, and brush hairs are stuck in the surface.

Cat. 71: The support is a thin laminate cardboard that is slightly out of square. The painting retains an old glue and linen lining and a five-member mortise-and-tenon stretcher of considerably larger height. The lining has a thread count of 17 threads per cm, and has stains and darkening visible across the back. In 1993, John Bull removed a cosmetic restoration 2.5 cm wide along the lower edge and covered the blank gesso fill with paper tape; he probably also cleaned the surface. There are pinholes in corners, several old creases in the cardboard, and a horizontal split at the right side. The lower right corner is crushed and delaminating, with lifted layers of the cardboard and tacks coming loose. Some separation between the two supports is visible along the right edge, which looks ruffled, and near the lower left corner. There are anomalous paint daubs and debris stuck in the paint layer. Some old solvent abrasion reveals the lower off-white ground color. New inpainting is detectable in ultraviolet light in the lower right corner, the old crease, a scratch, areas of the lower left sky, and the edges. The surface is lumpy in reflected light, and may be the result of the cardboard's texture combined with an uneven ground application.

The cardboard surface has a lower off-white ground layer and an upper pinkish brown layer, probably applied by the artist. The upper color shows throughout the sky, and despite the two ground layers, the surface is fuzzy and fibrous under low magnification. The ground application appears to be quite uneven and has left a secondary wavy lip along the top edge, and a generally bumpy surface. No underdrawing was found. The brushwork is very thin and sketchy, with slight impastos in the denser white clouds and a few foreground details. There appear to be several human hairs embedded in the paint layer. Hog bristles are scattered in the paint surface, and brushstroke sizes suggest brushes up to 0.6 cm or more in width.

Cat. 72: The support is very thin laminate cardboard, less than 0.1 cm thick, which is presently float-hinged like a work on paper. Apparently once mounted to a canvas that is now removed, the fabric imprint remains on the back in a residual glue layer. The cardboard is fragile and brittle, with creases along the top and distortions in the lower right quadrant. The support has taken on a slight convex curl due to the glue covering the back. There is abrasion along all edges from an earlier framing system, and some early debris is stuck in the surface. Some gold leaf deposits along the top edge have been excised with a sharp scalpel, damaging the paint. Old filled and inpainted creases and losses on the right side are now visible. Age cracks are evident in the more thickly applied paint. Flake losses in the far right cloud show the blue paint below. There are obvious newer retouches in the upper right corner and the right edge area. The natural resin varnish is discolored and has a dull luster. The varnish looks very dense in ultraviolet light, which also shows additional older retouches below the coating. In reflected light, the support surface and paint still have a slight weave impression from the old lining process.

There appears to be no ground layer, and the fuzzy nature of the fibrous support is visible in thinly painted passages. No underdrawing was detected. The color is applied several layers deep and blended in the sky using a blue and pinkish color. There are slight impastos in the clouds, which display the only visible brushwork, with some strokes up to 1 cm wide. Off-white hog's bristles were embedded in the paint.

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1. Annotated sky studies are dated July through Nov. of 1821 and Apr. and July through Sept. of 1822. During these two summers, the Constables rented No. 2 Lower Terrace. A complete listing of the inscriptions on Constable's sky studies is given in Table 10 of Thornes 1999, pp. 60–61. Leslie Parris and Ian Fleming-Williams estimate that Constable painted nearly one hundred such studies between 1821 and 1822. See London 1991a, p. 228.
2. John Constable to John Fisher, 7 Oct. 1822, in Beckett 1962–70, vol. 6, p. 98.

3. See, for example, Damisch 1972.
4. Anne Lyles provides a useful survey of this debate in her chapter "'The Glorious Pageantry of Heaven': An Assessment of the Motives behind Constable's 'Skying,'" in New York 2004, pp. 29–54.
5. Leslie 1845, pp. 84–85. Leslie's biography is heavily dependent on Constable's correspondence with his friends and family. As Leslie Parris and Ian Fleming-Williams have shown, however, Charles Robert Leslie often edited his friend's statements in an effort to create an entirely positive persona. See Fleming-Williams and Parris 1984, pp. 31–35.
6. R 20.1. Fisher had bought the painting from his friend and gave it to his lawyer, John Pern Tinney, in appreciation for the positive outcome of a lawsuit Tinney had handled for him.
7. John Constable to John Fisher, 23 Oct. 1821, in Beckett 1962–70, vol. 6, p. 77.
8. Ibid.
9. Ibid.
10. Badt 1950.
11. London 1976, p. 127. Louis Hawes presents his counter-argument to Badt in Hawes 1969.
12. Thornes 1979.
13. Thornes 1999, p. 200.
14. Holmes 1902, p. 164.
15. Reynolds included *Cloud Study* (cat. 70) and *A Study of Clouds over a Landscape* (cat. 71) in his catalogues; on the occasion of the appearance of *Cloud Study* (cat. 72) at the July 1997 sale at Sotheby's, Henry Wyndham of Sotheby's confirmed to Peter Johnson (acting as Manton's agent) that Reynolds saw and approved of this *Cloud Study*.
16. *Cloud Study* (cat. 72) was once laid on canvas that was subsequently removed. See Technical Report.
17. Graham Reynolds to Deborah Gage, 4 Oct. 1993. In fact, as John Bull recorded in his treatment report of 7 Sept. 1993, "an early 'restorer'" had added an inch to the bottom of the canvas "to 'improve' the composition by adding a poorly painted row of hedges and foliage in the foreground to give the landscape more prominence." In Sept. 1993, Bull removed this later addition. See the Clark's curatorial file.
18. Hoozee 1979, pp. 121–23.
19. Badt 1950, p. 76.
20. Ibid., p. 99. Badt transferred Coleridge's criticism of Wordsworth's "matter-of-fact honesty" to Constable's public paintings. Only in the artist's sketches—"painted in the open air" did Badt believe the artist's "emotional excitement raised him above all doubts and scruples, in which his feeling was adequate to fill the excerpt of nature with sufficient details which his imagination produced in an uninterrupted flow." See Badt 1950, pp. 99–100.
21. For example, Badt wrote that the clouds in the *The Mill Stream* (Tate Britain, London; R 14.47) and *The Glebe Farm* (Victoria and Albert Museum, London; R 11.34) "had no independent life of their own" (Badt 1950, p. 52).
22. Constable's sketches epitomized the skill necessary to capture the fleeting effects of nature, especially that of weather conditions, and surely this practice should be seen as the precursor to Impressionism. In art history's often Franco-centric presentation of canonical works, it is the Impressionists and not Constable who are most closely associated with the virtuosity and radicalism of painting quickly. See, for example, London–Amsterdam–Williamstown 2000–2001.
23. Sir Edwin Manton to Peter Johnson, 11 July 1958, in the Clark's curatorial file.
24. The early provenance comes from an inscription on the back of the stretcher which reads: "Study of Sky (from Nature) / by John Constable RA Bought with a sketch-book / (thro T. Maclean) direct from the Constable Family 1896 / Arthur Kay."

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73 | **Yarmouth Jetty** c. 1822–23

Oil on canvas, 32.4 x 51.1 cm
Gift of the Manton Foundation in memory of Sir Edwin and Lady Manton
2007.8.36

Constable depicted the coast at Great Yarmouth several times, but the history of his connections to the town, and of his images of it, is limited. There is only one mention of Constable's visit to the site early in his career.[1] There are, however, three known paintings dating to about 1822–23 depicting Yarmouth jetty, including the present picture, acquired by Sir Edwin Manton in 2000.[2] In addition, David Lucas engraved the composition as *Yarmouth, Norfolk* for the fifth and final number of Constable's *English Landscape Scenery*.[3] Finally, one of the two paintings Constable contributed to the 1831 Royal Academy annual exhibition was *Yarmouth Pier*, a work that remains untraced.[4]

As Constable himself wrote, his paintings representing the sea, whether of the Norfolk coast or his scenes of Harwich Lighthouse, were "much liked."[5] It is easy to see why seascapes like *Yarmouth Jetty* were popular. The low horizon line and the blue tones harken back to the seventeenth-century Dutch seascapes of the Van de Veldes, whose paintings were themselves popular with British collectors. The expansive sky, the boats under sail, the activity along the