



**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,  
James Rosenow, Zoë Samels, and Fronia E. Wissman

*Nineteenth-Century European Paintings at the Sterling and Francine Clark Art Institute* is published with the assistance of the Getty Foundation and support from the National Endowment for the Arts.



The Getty Foundation



Produced by the Sterling and Francine Clark Art Institute  
225 South Street, Williamstown, Massachusetts 01267  
[www.clarkart.edu](http://www.clarkart.edu)

Curtis R. Scott, Director of Publications  
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Designed by Susan Marsh  
Composed in Meta by Matt Mayerchak  
Copyedited by Sharon Herson  
Bibliography edited by Sophia Wagner-Serrano  
Index by Kathleen M. Friello  
Proofread by June Cuffner  
Production by The Production Department,  
Whately, Massachusetts  
Printed on 135 gsm Gardapat Kiara  
Color separations and printing by Trifolio, Verona

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Distributed by Yale University Press, New Haven and London  
P. O. Box 209040, New Haven, Connecticut 06520-9040  
[www.yalebooks.com/art](http://www.yalebooks.com/art)

Printed and bound in Italy  
10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Sterling and Francine Clark Art Institute.

Nineteenth-century European paintings at the Sterling and Francine Clark Art Institute / 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, James Rosenow, Zoë Samels, Fronia E. Wissman.

volumes cm

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 978-1-935998-09-9 (clark hardcover : alk. paper) —

ISBN 978-0-300-17965-1 (yale hardcover : alk. paper)

1. Painting, European—19th century—Catalogs. 2. Painting—Massachusetts—Williamstown—Catalogs. 3. Sterling and Francine Clark Art Institute—Catalogs. I. Lees, Sarah, editor of compilation. II. Rand, Richard. III. Webber, Sandra L. IV. Title. V. Title: 19th-century European paintings at the Sterling and Francine Clark Art Institute.

ND457.S74 2012

759.9409'0340747441—dc23

2012030510

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## John Constable

English, 1776–1837

### 53 | Stratford Saint Mary from the Coombs

c. 1800

Oil on canvas, 48.5 x 65.1 cm

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

2007.8.9

The view of the village of Stratford Saint Mary, probably painted between 1800 and 1801, is the earliest Constable oil sketch in the Clark collection. In the summer of 1800, Constable returned home to East Bergholt from London after his first year, having advanced from a probationer to a student at the Royal Academy Schools. Although the sketch is not dated, it bears affinities with a group of four watercolor panoramas now in the Victoria and Albert Museum and the Whitworth Art Gallery that Constable painted for Lucy Hurlock on the occasion of her marriage to Thomas Blackburne on 22 November 1800.<sup>1</sup> Indeed, one of these four scenes of the Stour Valley takes as its subject the same village.<sup>2</sup> In both the oil sketch and the watercolor, the fifteenth-century church of Stratford Saint Mary is seen in the distance, right of center. Although the Stour River provides a middle-distance

echo of the horizon line in the watercolor, here its reflective surface cuts a diagonal swath spanning the canvas. And while the precision of the watercolor relates to the tradition of topographical depictions of the English landscape, the lack of detail in the oil sketch has led some to deem this work unfinished.<sup>3</sup>

In his dilution of the pigment and its thin application onto the surface of the canvas, Constable seems to be transferring the transparency associated with watercolor to his oil painting. The effects that he achieves with this medium in the oil sketch, however, contrast sharply with the precisely drawn and colored panoramas. This method of paint application is particularly effective in his rendering of the Stour with its mirror-like surface that reflects the full-grown trees on the border of its far bank. Strikingly, the reflective properties of light and water are entirely absent from the watercolor depictions of the village. The oil sketch retains the generalized sky of the panorama, marking it as an early work. Likewise, Constable indicates the buildings that constitute the village with their most basic shapes. The structures are subsumed in the cloudy trees, with little more than their brown triangular rooftops and rectangular chimneys emerging.

The only building shown from the ground up is Stratford Mill, at the left of the canvas. It is Constable's earliest depiction of the paper mill that would become the subject of his second six-foot canvas, exhibited at the Royal Academy in 1820 as *Landscape*, a work the artist

frequently asked to borrow back from its owner, John Pern Tinney.<sup>4</sup> Yet even this building is a simple combination of triangles and geometric components readable as roof, chimney, window, and façade. Constable has similarly reduced the distant tower of the church, outlined by surrounding foliage, to its rectangular essence. Two years earlier, he had looked in detail at the church, producing an ink and watercolor drawing (private collection), and in two further pencil sketches (Victoria and Albert Museum, London), the tower constitutes the most visible element of the church.<sup>5</sup> Compared to Constable's repeated depictions of East Bergholt and Dedham, however, the village of Stratford Saint Mary was not a frequent subject for the artist.

The first possible reference to the present work is found in the sale catalogue of the amateur Suffolk painter Thomas Churchyard (1798–1865). Number 110 of the 5 July 1862 auction at Christie's is entitled *The village of Stratford—a sketch*.<sup>6</sup> Unsold in 1862, Reynolds noted that it was possibly number 67 of the posthumous sale conducted by Benjamin Moulton at Churchyard's home in Woodbridge, 28 March 1866.<sup>7</sup> At this time, the title given was *View at Dedham* with measurements of 25 x 18 inches, a reversal of the sketch's dimensions. Churchyard was a lawyer whose career competed with his pursuit of painting, both as an artist and as a collector.<sup>8</sup> Reynolds has identified three other works by Constable that Churchyard owned: *View at East Bergholt* (Yale Center for British Art, New Haven); *Willy Lott's House* (Ipswich Museums and Galleries Collection); and *Flatford Mill* (private collection).<sup>9</sup> EP

**PROVENANCE** Thomas Churchyard (possibly his sale, B. Moulton, Woodbridge, 26 Mar. 1866, no. 67, as *View at Dedham*, sold to Pearce);<sup>10</sup> The Shipping Federation, London, given to Devitt, 1914; Sir Thomas Land Devitt (1914–d. 1923); Miss Devitt, his daughter, by descent (from 1923); private collection; sale, Sotheby's, London, 20 Nov. 1985, no. 82; Elm-erside Ltd.; private collection, England; [Salander-O'Reilly Galleries, New York, sold to Manton, 9 June 1999]; Sir Edwin A. G. Manton, New York (1999–d. 2005); Manton Family Art Foundation (2005–7, given to the Clark); Sterling and Francine Clark Art Institute, 2007.

**EXHIBITIONS** Sudbury–London 1991, no. 59; Williamstown 2007a, no cat.

**REFERENCES** Reynolds 1996, vol. 1, p. 28, no. 00.17, vol. 2, pl. 102.

**TECHNICAL REPORT** The original support is a moderate-weight canvas with a weave of 13 x 16 threads per cm. The

painting has been recently lined, perhaps in the 1990s, with Beva 371 adhesive to two layers of bleached linen with a weave of 16 threads per cm. The middle canvas has been trimmed to the edges of the painting. Remnants of brown paper lining tape suggest that an older aqueous lining was removed prior to the installation of this one. The six-member mortise-and-tenon-stretcher probably dates to the earlier lining. The painting was clearly lined face down, which induced scattered dimples across the surface. An area of jumbled paint in the center water area marks an old flaking site. A fine network of age cracks spreads throughout the surface. Traction cracks occur in the green and blue areas along with a bull's-eye crack system from a blow in the lower right quadrant, which also shows abrasion. There is substantial abrasion in both the sky and the landscape, and there may be some fading of the darker colors. The varnish was probably partially removed at the time of the new lining. Ultraviolet light fluorescence in the foreground indicates that some older natural resin varnish was left in place. The present coating has an even sheen. One vertical raised thread or crack in the right center sky is quite visible in reflected light. There are many small retouchings in the sky on top of the varnish, including two round areas about 1.9 cm wide. Older retouches can be seen below the varnish in the landscape colors.

The ground is comprised of a thin salmon-pink layer over an off-white layer, the upper layer possibly locally applied by the artist. The salmon color may appear only under the lower landscape area. Small areas of graphite underdrawing can be seen with the naked eye and are barely visible using infrared light. These include a roofline and upper window located above and to the right of the pink peaked roof in the center of the image, a building near the water on the far left, and a large branched form in the upper right sky, possibly related to another image started on this canvas before the present one. In general, the paint layer is so thin and sketchy that the picture looks unfinished.

1. R 00.4–7.

2. R 00.5.

3. See Sudbury–London 1991, p. 22.

4. *Stratford Mill* was no. 17 in the exhibition. The painting is now in the National Gallery, London (R 20.1).

5. R 98.5, R 13.17, and R 15.37.

6. Churchyard put fifteen paintings up for auction at this time, including four others catalogued as by Constable.

7. Reynolds 1996, vol. 1, p. 28. At this sale, there were three other works listed as by Constable: *Willy Lott's House*, *East Bergholt*, *Flatford Mill*, *A Beautiful Sketch*; and *Bergholt Heath*. They were all displayed in the drawing room.

8. Notehelfer 1999, p. 531; see also Morfey 1986.

9. R 13.23, R 16.23, and R 16.111.

10. The painting was offered for sale at Christie's, London, 5 July 1862, no. 110, as *The Village of Stratford*, but was bought in.