

John Constable



"I should paint my own places best." John Constable

1 Constable's Country

John Constable (1776–1837) was born in East Bergholt, a village nestled in the Stour River valley of Suffolk County in southeast England. He spent most of his career painting scenes of his native countryside. Dotted with cottages, farms, and mills, the rustic landscape along the river captured his imagination.

His father, a prosperous mill owner and coal merchant, encouraged him to join the family business, but Constable was interested in painting. After seven years, he was finally able to persuade his father to allow him to pursue a career in art. At the age of twenty-two Constable went to London and enrolled in the school of the Royal Academy, the leading British art institution. There he studied the landscapes of past masters—Titian, Peter Paul Rubens, Jacob van Ruisdael, and Claude Lorrain—but he soon decided that he should paint directly from nature.

Returning home to Suffolk each summer, Constable made drawings in the meadows he had known since childhood. Through the close observation of nature, he developed a fresh approach to landscape painting by capturing the effects of light, shadow, and atmosphere.

above: John Constable, *Self-Portrait (detail)*, c. 1799–1804, pencil and black chalk heightened with white and red chalk, © National Portrait Gallery, London

right: John Constable, *Wivenhoe Park, Essex*, 1816, oil on canvas, National Gallery of Art, Widener Collection



2 Wivenhoe Park

Major General Francis Rebow, a family friend, asked Constable to paint his country estate, Wivenhoe Park. Constable placed the house in the far center of the composition and featured the estate's park and pasture in the foreground. Look for a flock of birds flying above the elm trees, swans and ducks gliding across the pond, fishermen casting their net from a boat, and cows grazing or resting along the shady bank. On the far left, General Rebow's young daughter drives a donkey cart!

Painting mostly outside, Constable captured the radiance of a summer day with naturalistic details. Covering half the canvas with a bright sky, Constable carefully considered how the billowing clouds interact with the landscape: he painted the pattern of shadows cast by the clouds upon the estate, the play of light over the landscape, and the reflections of sky and trees in the water.



top (sketch): John Constable, *The White Horse*, 1818–1819, oil on canvas, National Gallery of Art, Widener Collection

bottom: John Constable, *The White Horse*, 1819, oil on canvas, The Frick Collection, New York, Purchase

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The Six-Footers

Working in his London studio from 1818 to 1825, Constable completed a series of scenes of everyday working life along the Stour River. He painted from his memories and earlier drawings, and he called the paintings “six-footers” because each canvas was approximately six by four feet in size.

The White Horse, his first six-footer, shows a barge transporting a horse across the river. Using poles, the men work hard to push the barge to the opposite bank where the horse’s path continues. These grand paintings of rustic country scenes attracted positive attention at annual exhibitions and helped Constable achieve recognition as an artist.

Painting on such a large scale proved challenging, so Constable developed a unique approach to creating the six-footers. He first made full-scale sketches in oil on canvas that allowed him to try out his ideas and experiment with painting techniques. Since a six-footer took months to complete, Constable used his sketches as a way to plan the composition and determine how to arrange buildings, people, and animals in the landscape.

Compare the sketch of *The White Horse* to the finished painting. Where are the similarities? What are some differences?

Constable often painted sketches with looser, more spontaneous brushstrokes and thicker paint, while his finished paintings have a smoother surface and include more details. Look for places where Constable made changes by adding, removing, or rearranging things.

“I do not consider myself at work [unless] I am before a six-foot canvas.” John Constable



4

Legacy

Unlike many of his contemporaries (including the British artist J.M.W. Turner), Constable never traveled outside of England. Throughout his life he remained inspired by the landscapes and places he knew and loved, recording both his direct observations of nature and his personal responses to it. Constable’s paintings, however, did leave England. Some of his six-footers were exhibited in Paris, where their expressive brushwork and atmospheric effects influenced French artists Théodore Géricault and Eugène Delacroix and later, the young impressionists.

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Cloud Studies

Constable believed artists should combine direct observation, personal experience, scientific understanding, and imagination to create landscape paintings. Fascinated by weather, he studied the new field of meteorology. He became aware of how cloud cover, the ever-changing sky, and atmospheric effects could influence the appearance of nature.

To retreat from the city, Constable took a house in Hampstead, where he could enjoy extensive views across the open countryside. There, in 1821 and 1822, he painted about a hundred oil sketches of clouds and skies. He recorded the sky during different conditions and carefully observed various cloud formations and their movements. Constable called these exercises “skying.” On the reverse of the sketches, he often noted the date, time of day, and direction of the wind. These cloud studies later helped him to integrate dramatic skies into his large paintings.

“The sky is the source of light in nature – and governs everything.”

John Constable

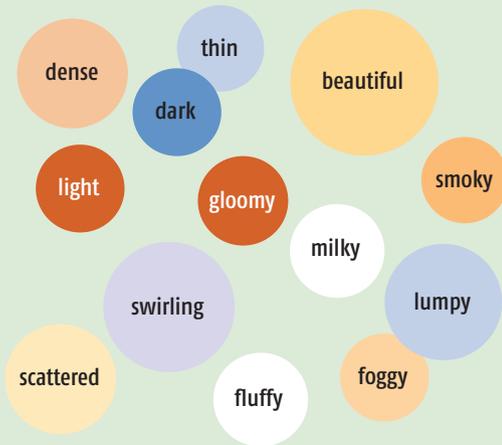


Keep a cloud journal of your own

With an adult, go outside and find a comfortable place to sit and view the sky. Take a pad of paper and colored pencils or crayons.

Look up and watch the clouds for a while.

Describe the clouds, using these words to get started.



What shapes are the clouds? How much of the sky is covered with clouds? Do they look high or low? List all the colors you see in the sky, from shades of blue and gray to yellow, pink, red, orange, purple, and white.

Record your observations with pictures and words

Make a drawing of the clouds in the sky. Write the date, time of day, and a brief report about the weather.

What would it be like to fly through the sky? Imagine what the earth looks like from up in the clouds.

Repeat this activity every day for a week, once a week or once a month for a year, or whenever you want to enjoy nature or discover a new cloud.

John Constable, *Cloud Study: Stormy Sunset*, 1821–1822, oil on paper on canvas, National Gallery of Art, Gift of Louise Mellon in honor of Mr. and Mrs. Paul Mellon