



“I should paint my own places best.” John Constable

English artist John Constable (1776–1837) spent most of his career painting pictures of his native countryside. Through close observation of nature, he developed a fresh approach to landscape painting by capturing effects of light, shadow, and atmosphere.

Wander into Constable's world in the exhibition *Constable's Great Landscapes: The Six-Foot Paintings*, on view in the National Gallery's East Building from October 1 through December 31, 2006.

John Constable, *Wivenhoe Park, Essex* (detail), 1816, National Gallery of Art, Washington, Widener Collection

who? what? how?

1

Tell me about the artist

John Constable was born in East Bergholt, a village nestled in the Stour River valley of Suffolk County in southeast England. Dotted with cottages, farms, and mills, the rustic countryside along the river captured his imagination early on.

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 an artistic career. At age 22, Constable went to London and enrolled in school at the Royal Academy, the leading British art society. There he studied the landscapes of old masters—Titian, Peter Paul Rubens, Jacob van Ruisdael, and Claude Lorrain—but 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. Working outdoors, he was able to observe the varying effects of light and record many details of the surrounding countryside.



above: John Constable, *John Constable*, c. 1799–1804
© National Portrait Gallery, London

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

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 is driving 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 affected 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.



right: John Constable,
The White Horse, 1818–1819,
National Gallery of Art,
Washington, Widener
Collection

below right: John Constable,
The White Horse, 1819, The
Frick Collection, New York,
Purchase

3

The Six-Footers

Working in his London studio from 1818–1825, 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 works “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 create 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 the sketches as a way to carefully plan the composition, determining how to arrange buildings, people, and animals in the landscape.

Compare *The White Horse* sketch to the finished painting: Are there similarities? What are some differences? Often Constable’s sketches are painted with looser, more spontaneous brushstrokes and thicker paint, and the finished paintings have a smoother surface and include more details. **Look for places where Constable made changes by adding, removing, or rearranging things.**



4

Constable’s Legacy

Unlike many of his contemporaries (including 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 personal responses to it. Constable’s paintings, however, did leave England—some six-footers were exhibited in Paris, where their expressive brushwork and atmospheric effects influenced French artists Théodore Gericault and Eugène Delacroix and, later, the young impressionists.

book nook

These books about clouds can be found at your local library or bookstore.

Cloud Boy

By Rhode Montijo | ages 2 and up

Little Cloud

By Eric Carle | ages 2 and up

It Looked Like Spilt Milk

By Charles G. Shaw | ages 4 and up

The Cloud Book

By Tomie De Paola | ages 4 and up

Elsina's Clouds

By Jeanette Winter | ages 4 and up

Weather and Art Activities

By Janet Sacks | ages 4 and up

How Artists See the Weather: Sun, Wind, Snow, Rain

By Colleen Carroll | ages 6 and up

Cloud Dance

By Thomas Locker | ages 6 and up

Eyewitness: Weather

By Brian Cosgrove | ages 8 and up

The Kids' Book of Weather Forecasting

By Mark Breen and Kathleen Friestad, illustrated by Michael Kline | ages 8 and up

The Cloudspotter's Guide

By Gavin Pretor-Pinney
ages 12 and up

try this! activity

“The sky is the source of light in nature—and governs everything.” **John Constable**



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

This work is on view in the West Building, Main Floor gallery 92.

Cloud Studies

Constable believed that landscape painters should combine direct observation, personal experience, scientific understanding, and imagination. Fascinated by weather, he studied the new field of meteorology. From working outdoors, 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 country house in Hampstead, where he had extensive views across the open countryside. There, between 1821 and 1822, he painted about a hundred oil sketches of clouds and skies. Carefully observing the various cloud formations and their movements, he recorded the sky during different conditions. 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.

Keep a cloud journal of your own. You don't have to go far to see the sky! (Don't forget to take an adult outside with you.)

Wander 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 awhile.

Study the sky. Describe the clouds—you can use the words below 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—shades of blue, grey, yellow, pink, red, orange, purple, and white.

Record your observations with pictures and words.

Make a drawing of the clouds in the sky. Next to your sketch, write the date, time of day, and a brief report of the weather.

Wonder what it would 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 for a year, or whenever you feel like enjoying nature or discovering a new cloud.