

Showcasing big works, and big charms of nature

by Robert L. Pincus

The exhibitions at London's Royal Academy were thick with art and artists. How was an ambitious painter to gain acclaim and command higher prices for his work? John Constable's answer: Work really big.

He made landscapes that evoked the scale of the lush country scenes he painted. These canvases are about 6 feet wide and a little less than 5 feet high.

Constable's ambitiously scaled pictures brought him the acclaim he sought - and deserved. They also earned him membership in the Royal Academy, an honor that had eluded him until 1829, when he was 53.

A likely reason was the lingering prejudice against landscape painters: History was considered a superior subject. But it seems that Constable's were just too grand to ignore.

He thought there was another reason, too. For him, artists were either innovators or imitators. And because he was an innovator, he reasoned, recognition was harder won. But won it was, and he is now seen as one of the great 19th century British landscape artists along with J.M.W. Turner.

For the first time, the largest works by this major painter have been united. The show had its premiere at London's Tate Gallery and has now arrived in Southern California. The third and last venue for "Constable's Great Landscapes: The Six-Foot Paintings" is the galleries of the Huntington Library, Art Collections and

Botanical Gardens in San Marino, Calif.

BIG WORKS - 'The White Horse,' done in 1819, marked the debut of John Constable's huge landscapes in London. CNS Photo courtesy of the Huntington Library.

He believed in an ideal, firmly engrained in the British psyche, of a landscape in which nature and industry could exist in harmony. And he painted it with utter conviction. Perhaps this is why he is still one of the most beloved artists in England. His native Stour Valley is called Constable Country.

Of course, conviction alone wasn't going to produce the sort of landscapes Constable aspired to paint. He was incredibly rigorous, too, not only producing numerous studies of sky and favored scenes but unprecedented oil sketches too. These were nearly the same size as his finished canvases and they are on view along with the finished pictures.

Seen together, the 6-foot works make for fascinating viewing. In his studies, he is remarkably modern, using fluid brushwork that has prompted Constable scholar Sarah Cove to write in the exhibition catalog that "Constable's oil sketches ... have earned him the title 'the Jackson Pollock of the 1830s' for the wild use of thick impasto and flecks of pure color."

He is an accidental modernist, given the thick, fluid brushwork that loosely defines trees, startling clouds, architecture and figures in his big, late oil sketch "Stoke-by-Nayland" (circa 1835-37). But there's no evidence that Constable saw such work as anything other than preparatory pictures, detailed road maps to his destination: the polished picture.

"Nature is the fountain's head," Constable said, "the source from whence all originality must spring." And true to that claim, he devoted a lot of time to painting out of doors. Cloud studies were a particular passion.

Though he left the family's prosperous milling business behind, he gave his father's mill and surrounding places a lasting presence in his art. "The Mill Stream" (circa 1810-14), a gorgeous early picture, captures the beauty of the area, with its full trees, richly reflected light on the water, the presence of a small boat on the water and the soft geometry of a house that Constable pictured again in one of iconic big pictures, "The Hay Wain."

Constable was a kind of poetic realist, who was intent on basing his picture on close observation and yet is often cited for his comment that "Painting was another word for feeling."

In the end, it's the finished 6-foot works that are the most impressive and seductive paintings. Between 1819 and 1825, he made six of them, all centering on scenes along his beloved river Stour. They share an idyllic quality, even when people are toiling, as in "The Lock" (1824).

Though the subject isn't his personal state of contentment, the mood of the paintings parallels this happy period for him and his wife, Maria, but by 1824, her health was in decline and four years later, she died from tuberculosis.

His grief was intense: "A void is made in my heart that can never be filled in this world."

His choice of a landscape with an architectural ruin, "Hadleigh Castle" (circa 1828-29), seems to be driven by this melancholy state of mind. But the oil sketch and finished canvas aren't dour, they're dramatic, with the crumbling towers giving way to sweeping banks of clouds.

Within two years, Constable was in a redemptive mood. He painted Salisbury cathedral with its spire climbing high into the picture and the pale arch of a rainbow reaching from the top of the painting to the horizon.

As the exhibition catalog says, he praised this same quality in a famed landscape by the Dutch painter Jacob van Ruisdael, "The Jewish Cemetery," which "attempted to tell that which is outside the reach of art."

Constable was reaching for the same in this late picture, "Salisbury Cathedral From the Meadows." Still, for most of his career, he thought nature was enough. He conveyed the many facets of the physical world so eloquently that we still feel his passion for it in his art. Every cloud and tree in these pictures still speaks for him.

IF YOU GO

"Constable's Great Landscapes: The Six-Foot Paintings"

When: Through April 29

Where: The Huntington Library, Art Collections and Botanical Gardens, 1151 Oxford Road, San Marino, Calif.

Tickets: \$15; \$12, seniors, \$10, students (12-18); \$6, youth (5-11)

Contacts: 626-405-2100 or www.huntington.org

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