

Save the Children

Fire and Water: Turner and Constable

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- Good morning everyone and thank you for coming. There is currently an exhibition of Turner and Constable at Tate Britain until the **12th April**. It celebrates the **250th anniversary** of Constable and Turner's births. When you go round the exhibition you will see the phrase "**Fire and Water**" is displayed on the wall. It is taken from a **1831 review** in the **Literary Gazette** to describe the difference between the two artists and I decided to take it as the theme for this talk.
- Turner is the fiery one, sun, heat, light, always looking to the future and Constable is water, calm, smooth and looks to the past.

NOTES

- **THE FIRE AND WATER QUOTATION**

- "Fine Arts. Exhibition of the Royal Academy. No. 162 Caligula's Palace and Bridge. J. M. W. Turner, R.A.; No. 169 Salisbury Cathedral from the Meadows. J. Constable, R.A.— **Fire and Water. If Mr. Turner and Mr. Constable were professors of geology, instead of painting, the first would certainly be a Plutonist, the second a Neptunist. Exaggerated, however, as both these works are,— the one all heat, the other all humidity, — who will deny that they both exhibit, each in its own way, some of the highest qualities of art? None but the envious and ignorant.**" *Literary Gazette*, 14 May 1831, p. 315.
<https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=hvd.32044092531235&seq=317>

- **WHAT WERE PLUTONISTS AND NEPTUNISTS?**

- In the early Victorian period (transitioning from the late 18th century), Plutonists and Neptunists were proponents of two opposing theories regarding the origin of the Earth's rocks and geological features. The debate centred on whether water (Neptunism) or internal heat (Plutonism) was the primary agent of change.
- **Neptunists** (Water-Based Theory) were led by German mineralogist Abraham Gottlob Werner in the late 18th century, Neptunists believed that a massive, primordial ocean once covered the entire Earth. They argued that all rocks, including crystalline rocks like granite and basalt, precipitated or settled out of this universal ocean as it subsided. They believed that the Earth's history was a linear, catastrophic process—a "series of layers" laid down by water, including Noah's flood.
- **Plutonists** (Heat-Based Theory) championed by James Hutton (and later supported by Charles Lyell), Plutonists argued that heat from the Earth's interior was the driving force behind geological formations. They believed that rocks, particularly igneous rocks like granite and basalt, were formed by intense, molten heat (magma) below the surface and then forced upward. They supported "uniformitarianism," believing that the same slow processes of erosion, sedimentation, and volcanic activity seen today have always been shaping the Earth. They introduced the concept of "deep time," arguing the Earth was infinitely old, rather than a few thousand years old.
- **The Debate and Resolution:** The debate was often fierce in the early 19th century, with Neptunists mocking Plutonists, and vice versa. A key point of contention was basalt, which Neptunists believed was a sedimentary deposit and Plutonists correctly identified as crystallized from lava. By the 1830s, the Plutonist view prevailed, supported by the work of Charles Lyell, which established that the Earth's surface changes gradually through heat and volcanic action. While Neptunism was rejected as the primary theory for all rock, modern geology combines elements of both: metamorphic/igneous processes (Plutonism) for crystalline rocks, and aquatic deposition (Neptunism) for sedimentary rocks.

THE FILM

Mr. Turner (2014)

- Director: Mike Leigh
- Star: Timothy Spall as J.M.W. Turner

- Release: October 2014 (UK), December 2014 (US)
- Awards: Timothy Spall won Best Actor at Cannes Film Festival 2014
- Critical Reception: Highly acclaimed, nominated for 4 Academy Awards (including Best Cinematography)
- What it covers: Turner's later life (roughly 1825-1851), including his relationship with his housekeeper Hannah Danby, his affair with Sophia Booth (the "Mr. Booth" pseudonym), his eccentric behavior, and his artistic genius
- It was a major, widely-released film that gives a remarkable portrait of Turner as a grunting, difficult, but brilliant artist. Spall's performance is extraordinary.
- However, although Turner is often portrayed - including in this film - as taciturn and grunting the historical Turner was actually **witty, sociable, and deeply engaged with the scientific and artistic elite**. He gave lectures, hosted dinners, and was known for his sharp tongue - as Constable discovered in 1831! His reclusiveness came mainly at the end of his life, when he simply wanted peace and privacy with **Sophia Booth**. The 'Mr. Booth' disguise wasn't about misanthropy - it was about protecting a quiet domestic happiness after decades in the public eye.

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Joseph Mallord William Turner (1775–1851),
Self-portrait, 74.3 x 58.4 cm, Tate



Ramsay Richard Reinagle, *John Constable* (1776–1837),
c. 1799, 76.2 x 63.8 cm, National Portrait Gallery

Joseph Mallord William Turner (1775–1851), *Self-portrait*, 74.3 x 58.4 cm, Tate
Ramsay Richard Reinagle (1775–1862), *John Constable* (1776–1837), c. 1799, 76.2 x 63.8 cm, National Portrait Gallery

- Here they are—the portraits you see on entering the exhibition.
- **Turner** was the son of a barber and wigmaker in Covent Garden. A child prodigy, he was shrewdly managing his own gallery by his twenties, complete with a peephole to vet visitors before deciding whether to greet them. He even trained a parrot to shout out rude comments to visitors he didn't like. He was an enthusiastic international traveller, constantly sketching across Britain and Europe. He crossed the Alps multiple times, sometimes in dangerous conditions, to witness the sublime power of nature.
- He maintained a highly secretive private life, never marrying but he had two daughters (Evelina and Georgiana) by the widow . For the last 15 years of his life, he lived under the pseudonym "Mr. Booth" with a widow named Sophia Booth in Chelsea—a fact completely unknown to the Royal Academy.
- **Constable** was very different. Born into a wealthy family—his father was a miller and corn merchant—his decision to become an artist was difficult. He was a late starter: Turner was already a full Academician at 27, while Constable had to wait until he was 52.
- Constable believed painting should be a "branch of natural philosophy." His famous outdoor oil sketches of clouds are inscribed with meteorological data—date, time, wind direction, atmospheric conditions. He was a deeply traditional Tory who **opposed the Great Reform Act** of 1832 (a "slippery slope to anarchy

and disorder"). In his paintings, he deliberately presents an idealised, peaceful view of the English countryside, largely omitting poverty and agricultural unrest.

NOTES

- Reinagle and Constable were students together at the Royal Academy. This portrait was probably painted when he stayed with Constable in East Bergholt during the summer of 1799.

LITTLE KNOWN FACTS

TURNER:

- He had a **pet parrot** that he taught to scream abuse at visitors to his gallery
- Turner was **so secretive** that when he died, his housekeeper thought he was someone else entirely - she knew him only as "Mr. Booth"
- He **refused to paint by commission** at the height of his career, preferring complete artistic freedom
- Turner's father worked as his **studio assistant** until his death, grinding pigments and stretching canvases - their relationship was extraordinarily close.
- He once remarked that he **disliked married men** because they were always thinking of "duty to their wives and their families, or some rubbish of that sort" rather than making sacrifices for art.
- He **owned extensive property** in London as investments, **including brothels**, which he occasionally visited to collect rent himself.
- He left the bulk of his estate to **build an almshouse** for male decayed English artists who had fallen on hard time but his family contested the will and won on a technicality.
- And a counter to the "Red Buoy" incident he once painted over his painting with a dark wash as it was overpowering the work of a young artist displayed next to him.
- He gave money to the widow of a friend to support her anonymously. And he sometimes bought back a painting from a patron who had fallen on hard times for more than he was paid for the work.
- He had two daughters **Evelina** turner (1801-1874) and **Georgiana** Turner (1811-1843) by **Sarah Danby** (born Sarah Goose) widow of the composer John Dandy who died in 1798. It was an on-off relationship that lasted until

about 1813. Sarah would have lost her pension from the Royal Society of Musicians if she had lived permanently with Turner or remarried.

- Born: 23 April 1775, at 21 Maiden Lane, Covent Garden, London, England.
- Died: 19 December 1851, Chelsea, London, England.

CONSTABLE:

- He was a high Tory who opposed the great Reform Act of 1832. Showed no sympathy for the poor, regarded children working as part of the natural order where "people know their place". He and his family profited from enclosure despite its impact on the poor and was only concerned about the threat the Swing Riots and Luddite insurrections posed to his family and his "rural bliss".
- He was devoted to the Church of England and feared political reform would diminish its authority, a view reinforced by his close friend archdeacon John Fisher.
- He **painted the same tree** ("Flatford Old Tree") obsessively throughout his career.
- In 1812, the house Constable shared in **Soho caught fire**. He famously **rushed back** into the burning building to save a pregnant woman and then ran to the attic to rescue a servant's purse.
- Constable had a famously **difficult personality** and was known to "**utter sarcasms which cut you to the bone**." He was often **grumpy and lacked diplomacy**.
- Constable's **cloud studies** were so scientifically accurate that meteorologists in the 20th century could identify specific weather patterns
- He **detested teaching** but was forced to do it for money, calling his students "**unfeeling and heartless**"
- After Maria's death, he wore **only black clothes** for the remaining 9 years of his life. He was obsessively involved in the lives of his seven children as they grew up.
- He worked in his father's corn business as a young man where he was known as the "**handsome miller**". He often boasted that he could still judge the **quality of flour** by sifting it between his thumb and forefinger.
- He was such a **perfectionist** that he sometimes over-worked paintings until they became muddy and heavy.
- Born: 11 June 1776, East Bergholt, Suffolk, England.

- Died: 31 March 1837, Hampstead, London, England.

THEIR RELATIONSHIP:

- In the early days he was friends with Turner and was in awe of his talent. In 1813 after a Royal Academy dinner he was "a good deal entertained with Turner" and noted that while Turner was "uncouth," he possessed a "**wonderful range of mind**". He once famously asked a friend, "Did you ever see a Turner and not wish to possess it?".
- When Constable was finally elected as a full Royal Academician in 1829—an honour Turner had achieved 27 years earlier—**Turner personally visited Constable's house to congratulate him**. The two reportedly spent the evening together until 1:00 am and parted "mutually pleased with one another". It all went wrong in 1831 when Constable related a Turner to a less prominent spot and again in 1832 with the "Red Buoy" incident. Constable was so devastated that he barely spoke for the rest of Varnishing Day
- Turner once deliberately outbid Constable at an auction for a Claude Lorrain painting just to prevent Constable from having it.

TURNER'S VIEW OF WOMEN

- Turner never married, but he lived a double life. For years, he had a relationship with **Sarah Danby**, a widow with whom he likely fathered two daughters, **Evelina and Georgiana**. However, he never publicly acknowledged them and kept them financially at arm's length.
- Later in life, he found a different kind of stability with **Sophia Caroline Booth**, a twice-widowed **landlady in Margate**. He lived with her in **Chelsea** under the pseudonym "**Mr. Booth**." While he clearly valued her companionship and care, he kept her hidden from his "professional" life at the Royal Academy.
- Turner was often **criticized for his figure drawing**; his contemporaries joked that he couldn't paint a human being to save his life. However, his **private sketchbooks** tell a different story.
- **The Erotic Sketches**: Turner produced hundreds of explicit, erotic sketches of women.
- **The Ruskin Scandal**: A famous (though now debated) art history anecdote claims that after Turner's death, his greatest champion, John Ruskin, discovered these "obscene" sketches and burned many of them to protect

Turner's reputation as a "sublime" artist. Ruskin was reportedly horrified that the man who painted the "Sun of Venice" could also obsess over the physical reality of the female body.

- When a female artist once praised his work, Turner famously replied with a gruff, "**Socially, I am a dog**," as if to warn her that he had no interest in the "polite" society that women of his era were expected to navigate.

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John Constable (1776-1837),
sketch of Flatford Mill,
Tate Britain

John Constable (1776-1837), *Flatford Mill (Scene on a Navigable River)*, 1816-17, 101.6 × 127 cm, Tate Britain

- What's not to like, long hot summer days. We take landscape for granted as a subject but in the early nineteenth century it was a lowly genre. The **majority of painting** exhibited at the Royal Academy were **portraits** of the great and the good with a few history paintings. It was one of the lower genres, just above still life.
- So why did landscape become popular? The nineteenth century became known as the century of the landscape. I think there are three main reasons, **nostalgia, patriotism and emotion**.
- For the first time in history a large portion of the population **moved to the cities** and landscape paintings became a sort of **escape hatch** through which the urban middle class could reclaim the air, light and scenes they had lost.
- **Second, Britain was at war** with France for over twenty years and **Europe was cut off**. Landscape painting became seen as a **patriotic activity** both artists were intensely patriotic but saw it differently, **Turner** gave us **the power of the British Empire** at sea and **Constable** gave us **our hallowed soil**.
- Finally, for many reasons the 18th century **Age of Reason** was giving way to the 19th century **Age of Feeling, Romanticism replaced Neo-Classicism**. The most **important truths** became each individual's emotions and feelings. Landscape became a **mirror for human feelings** and **Turner** became **master of the Sublime** and **nature as power**. Constable pioneered **Naturalism, nature as**

truth through our **feelings**. Constable said, "**Painting is but another word for feeling.**"

- And we see it all here in this quiet masterpiece.
- (CLICK) One little known fact is that **Constable used a drawing frame** to ensure accuracy. It consisted of a sheet of glass in a frame that he would fix to his easel. He would then paint on the glass with oil paint exactly over what he could see through the glass. He would then press a sheet of paper on the wet paint and draw the scene you see here on the back while holding the paper up to the light (re-reversing the image). He would square up the paper, as you see, to enable him to transfer the shapes to his large-scale canvas. He did this to accurately establish the overall perspective (CLICK). He added the horse, the people and the others details later.
- A final footnote to this painting., The scene is misleading as 1816, the year it was painted, was known as the '**Year Without a Summer**'. The previous year, the Indonesian volcano **Mount Tambora** exploded in the largest eruption in recorded history. Forty-one cubic kilometres of ash were sent into the upper atmosphere, blocking the sun and cooling the planet. In England, this resulted in a cold summer, heavy rains, bright yellow skies and the failure of the harvest. Thousands of ex-soldiers returning from Waterloo added to the families travelling across the UK begging for food and famine was common in the north and southwest Ireland.

NOTES

- **A New Realism.** Along with his contemporary and fellow Royal Academician J.M.W. Turner, John Constable raised the profile of landscape painting at a time when the public and the art establishments preferred portraiture and historical subjects. Constable was not illustrating the social conditions of the countryside but evoking childhood memories. He had enjoyed an idyllic boyhood that he wanted to capture that feeling. He wrote that for him '**painting is but another word for feeling**'. These childhood scenes, in his own words, '**made me a painter, and I am grateful**'; '**the sound of water escaping from mill dams etc., willows, old rotten planks, slimy posts, and brickwork, I love such things.**' He wrote, "**When I sit down to make a sketch from nature, the first thing I try to do is to forget that I have ever seen a picture**", by which he meant an Old Master with their prescribed composition and brown foliage and grass. Although he eventually became a Royal Academician he was not commercially

successful and sold only twenty paintings in England in his lifetime. Critics found his colours too bright and objected to '**spotting the foreground all over with whitewash**' and his 'snow'. However, he won a gold medal in Paris for *The Hay Wain* in 1824, had a profound influence on the French Romantic painters and sold twenty paintings there in just a few years.

- **Social Background.** This is Flatford Mill by John Constable. What can we see? An idyllic scene of a summer's day in rural Suffolk. In the foreground two boys are untying two barges from the tow horse to pole them under Flatford bridge to the left, just out of the picture. We see a wonderful Constable sky with scudding cumulus clouds against a pale blue sky. Unlike earlier artists Constable showed real places, the bright colours of nature and natural skies and sunlight.
- **Hunger.** However, the scene is misleading as 1816, the year it was painted, was known as the 'Year Without a Summer'. The previous year, the Indonesian volcano Mount Tambora exploded in the largest eruption in recorded history. Forty-one cubic kilometres of ash were sent into the upper atmosphere, blocking the sun and cooling the planet. In England, this resulted in a cold summer, heavy rains, bright yellow skies and the failure of the harvest. Thousands of ex-soldiers returning from Waterloo added to the families travelling across the UK begging for food and famine was common in the north and southwest Ireland.
- **Corn Laws.** To make matters worse, following the end of the Napoleonic War, Corn Laws were introduced and these fixed the price of corn and therefore the price of bread at an artificially high level. This favoured farmers and millers like the Constables as it meant their prices could not be undercut by cheap foreign imports. The result was famine, dissent and riots which led to the Peterloo massacre, a suspension of habeas corpus, restrictions on press, new Poor Laws which introduced the workhouse, and in the 1830s the Swing Riots and the Tolpuddle Martyrs.
- **Marriage.** In 1816, Constable has other things on his mind. In 1809, he had fallen in love with his childhood friend **Maria Bicknell** but their engagement was opposed by her grandfather, **Dr Rudde**, as Constable's allowance was insufficient to maintain her and he considered the Constable's socially inferior. In 1816, Constable's father and mother died and he inherited a sixth of the estate. The marriage was approved and they married in October [at St Martin-in-the-Fields]. Their **honeymoon** was a tour of the south coast including **Weymouth and Brighton** and it was during his honeymoon that

he developed a new technique of using brighter colours and freer brushwork. The summers of 1816 and 1817 were the last time he lived in East Bergholt for an extended period and the last time he painted the Suffolk countryside direct from nature.

- **A "Ghost" Horse Removed:** X-rays of the painting *Flatford Mill (Scene on a Navigable River)* have revealed that Constable originally painted a horse on the tow-path, which he later painted over and replaced with the figures of two boys.

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J.M.W. Turner (1775-1851), *Snow Storm: Hannibal Crossing the Alps*, 1812, height: 144.7 × 236 cm, Tate Britain

J.M.W. Turner (1775-1851), *Snow Storm: Hannibal Crossing the Alps*, 1812, height: 144.7 × 236 cm, Tate Britain

- What a contrast. Turner elevates landscape to history painting, the highest genre. This monumental work depicts Hannibal crossing the Alps, but the painting is an exercise in the **Sublime**—the terrifying power of nature. A massive vortex of snow and storm threatens to swallow the Carthaginian army.
- Interestingly, Turner's inspiration was not the Alps, but a storm he witnessed in **1810 while visiting Yorkshire**. An anecdote recalls Turner sketching the storm on the back of a letter, declaring (to his host's son Hawkesworth Fawkes), "**In two years you will see this again, and it will be called Hannibal Crossing the Alps!**"
- A little-known detail: Hannibal himself is nearly invisible—a minute figure **riding an elephant** on the distant horizon, dwarfed by the elements. Turner's *Fire* was also political. Exhibited during the **Napoleonic Wars**, the painting was a **prediction of Napoleon's demise**, the **hubris of empire**. By making the human leader insignificant, Turner argued that **nature—and change—are always the ultimate victor**. He reinforced this by attaching lines from his own gloomy poem, *The Fallacies of Hope*—a poem he quoted throughout his life but which has **never been found**.
- To emphasise hubris, he shows **Salassians**—fierce Gallic Celts—killing and robbing stragglers from Hannibal's army.

NOTES

- **Edmund Burke** published ***A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful*** in 1757. It was a hugely influential work, not least for landscape painting. Burke drew a sharp distinction between the **Beautiful** (smooth, gentle, pleasurable — think Constable's pastoral Suffolk) and the **Sublime** (vast, dark, threatening, awe-inspiring)
- These are the lines from ***Fallacies of Hope***:

*"Craft, treachery, and fraud — Salassian force,
Hung on the fainting rear! then Plunder seiz'd
The victor and the captive, — Saguntum's spoil,
Alike became their prey; still the chief advanc'd,
Look'd on the sun with hope; — low, broad, and wan;
While the fierce archer of the downward year
Stabs in the back, and smites him with his breath.
In vain each pass, ensanguin'd deep with dead,
Or rocky fragments, wide destruction roll'd.
Still on Campania's fertile plains — he thought,
But the loud breeze sob'd, 'Capua's joys beware!'"*

- The painting illustrates the historical crossing of the Maritime Alps in 218 BC during the Second Punic War.
- The presence of these tribesmen is based on historical accounts by ancient historians such as Polybius and Livy, who recorded that local Alpine tribes ambushed Hannibal's rearguard and stole supplies.
- The Salassians (or Salassi) were a fierce Gallic (Celtic) or Ligurian tribe who inhabited and controlled the strategically important Aosta Valley in the Alps during the Iron Age and Roman period.
- **The Three Punic Wars:**
- **First Punic War: 264-241 BCE**
 - Fought primarily over control of Sicily
 - Rome won and gained Sicily
- **Second Punic War: 218-201 BCE**
 - This is when Hannibal crossed the Alps (218 BCE)
 - Hannibal's famous campaign in Italy
 - Battle of Cannae (216 BCE) - Hannibal's greatest victory

- Rome eventually won under Scipio Africanus
- **Third Punic War: 149-146 BCE**
- Rome destroyed Carthage completely
- "Carthago delenda est" ("Carthage must be destroyed")
- **A Political Parody:** Exhibited during the Napoleonic Wars, the painting is a subtle mockery of Jacques-Louis David's Napoleon Crossing the Alps. While David painted Napoleon as a heroic leader, Turner portrays the contemporary, hated Napoleon (as Hannibal) as a small, irrelevant figure, dwarfed by a catastrophic, chaotic storm.
- **First Appearance of the "Vortex":** This painting is considered the first in Turner's career to feature his signature, dramatic, swirling, oval composition—a technique he would later refine in works like ***Snow Storm: Steam-Boat off a Harbour's Mouth*** (1842).
- **The "Historiated Landscape":** The painting is a "historiated landscape," where Turner elevated the status of landscape painting (often considered inferior to history painting at the time) by embedding a dramatic, ancient historical narrative into the scene.
- **An Accompanied Poem:** Turner, who often wrote poetry to accompany his works, accompanied this painting with lines from his own, unfinished epic, *The Fallacies of Hope*, which emphasized the futility of human ambition against the forces of nature.
- **Prophetic Timing:** The painting, which shows an army destroyed by a winter storm, was finished just as Napoleon was suffering massive losses due to winter storms during his 1812 invasion of Russia.
- **Hanging Demands:** Turner was notoriously picky about the exhibition of his work and insisted that *Snow Storm* be hung "low on the wall" to ensure viewers experienced the proper angle and immersion into the vortex.
- **Failed Original Intent:** It is highly unusual for a British artist to portray their enemy (Napoleon) as the heroic Carthaginian general Hannibal. Instead, this, and later works like *Dido Building Carthage*, was a subtle, symbolic commentary on the danger of unchecked power.

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John Constable (1776-1837),
The Mill Stream,
 1814,
 71.1 × 91.5 cm,
 Christchurch Mansion, Ipswich

John Constable (1776-1837), *The Mill Stream*, 1814, 71.1 × 91.5 cm, Christchurch Mansion, Ipswich

- Where Turner sought the global and the ancient, Constable looked at **Water—the lifeblood** of his own village. **The Mill Stream** captures a view from the forecourt of his **father's mill at Flatford**.
- In 1814, **Constable was 38**, still financially dependent on his father, and forbidden from marrying **Maria Bicknell** because of his lack of success. While **Turner was a celebrated prodigy**, Constable was a late bloomer, stubbornly painting the same few acres of Suffolk. In fact, at this stage you could say he was a failure. But he never gave up and he had a clear focus, he said, "**The sound of water escaping from mill-dams, etc., willows, old rotten planks, slimy posts, and brickwork, I love such things**"—and added that **they made him a painter**.
- This painting was a blueprint for **The Hay Wain**. He hadn't yet painted his six-footers, the making of him as an artist. He had to paint his six-footers entirely in the studio, but this was painted **largely en plein air—a radical departure**. Constable used his sheet of glass technique to capture the scene accurately. The boy and the boat are key balancing additions and he was meticulous in the detail, note the **distinctive brick bread oven** attached to Willy Lott's House and the woman washing something in the river behind the cottage.
- One tiny detail you can only see in the original and even then it is difficult. There is a kingfisher swooping over the river consisting of a single brushstroke

of red/orange and two of blue to the right of the woman behind Willy Lott's cottage.

- Over the next two years, **both his parents died and he inherited £4,000**—just enough to get permission to marry Maria in 1816. It was not until 1819, when he was 43 that his first six-footer, ***The White Horse***, was exhibited and was a major critical success, leading to his election as an **Associate of the Royal Academy**.

NOTES

- The mill was not solely a corn mill during this period, but part of a wider industrial complex that included a dry dock for building barges and a storage granary.
- **Willy Lott's Almost Lifetime Quarantine:** The neighbour whose house is featured, Willy Lott, was born in that house and reputedly never left it for more than four days in his entire 88-year life.
- **The Forgotten Saviour:** The Mill was saved from total ruin in the 1920s by a man named Thomas Parkington, whose role in preserving the historic site was forgotten for nearly a century before a memorial stone was rediscovered in 2021.
- **The Six-Footers:** Following the success of *The White Horse* (1819), Constable painted five more large canvases depicting the Stour: *Stratford Mill* (1820), *The Hay Wain* (1821), *View on the Stour near Dedham* (1822), *The Lock* (1824), *The Leaping Horse* (1825).
- **Constable's Parents' Deaths:**
 - **Mother** - Ann Constable: Died March 1815 (aged 67)
 - **Father** - Golding Constable: Died May 14, 1816 (aged 77)
- **Marriage to Maria Bicknell:**
 - October 2, 1816 at St Martin-in-the-Fields, London
- So the sequence was:
 - March 1815 - Mother Ann dies
 - May 1816 - Father Golding dies
 - Constable inherits approximately £4,000 (about 1/6th of the estate)
 - October 2, 1816 - Marries Maria (finally gets grandfather's approval due to inheritance)

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https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Mill_Stream



J.M.W. Turner
(1775-1851),
***Dido Building
Carthage***,
1815,
155.5 × 230 cm,
National Gallery

J.M.W. Turner (1775-1851), *Dido Building Carthage*, 1815, 155.5 × 230 cm, National Gallery

- In ***Dido Building Carthage***, Turner's Fire takes the form of a blinding, golden sunrise. This is Turner at his **most ambitious and academic**
- —he isn't just painting a landscape; he's competing with **Claude Lorrain**, the great seventeenth-century master.
- The painting depicts the rise of a classical empire, but it's infused with the Sublime. Turner considered this his "chef d'oeuvre"—his ultimate masterpiece. He was so attached to it that he refused to sell it, even for the massive sum of £2,500, famously saying he wanted it to be his "winding sheet"—his burial shroud.
- Look closely at the foreground: small boys playing with a toy boat represent the future naval power of Carthage, a subtle nod to Britain's modern naval supremacy in 1815.

NOTES

- In his first will of 1829 he specified ***Dido Building Carthage*** and *The Decline of the Carthaginian Empire* should be bequeathed to the National Gallery, with the condition that they be hung permanently alongside Claude's ***Seaport with the Embarkation of the Queen of Sheba*** and ***Landscape with the Marriage of Isaac and Rebecca*** (known as "The Mill"). In his second will of 1831 he substituted ***Sun Rising Through Vapour*** for *The Decline of the Carthaginian*

Empire (which is therefore now in Tate Britain). The story of being buried in *Dido Building Carthage* is allegedly in an early draft that he abandoned.

- According to Virgil's *Aeneid* (pronounced "uh-nee-uhd"), Dido was a Phoenician princess, daughter of the King of Tyre. She married her uncle Sychaeus (pronounced "sih-KEE-uhs"), a wealthy priest, but her brother Pygmalion, who had become king, murdered Sychaeus in secret out of greed for his gold. She fled with her supporters to North Africa and the local berber king agreed she could have as much land as could be covered by an ox hide so she cut it into thin strips which surrounded a hilltop large enough to found a city. Later Aeneas, the Trojan hero, lands and Venus causes Dido to fall in love with him. Later he is reminded his destiny is to found the Roman race in Italy so he leaves and Dido commits suicide on a funeral pyre.
- **A "Nonsense" Painting according to Ruskin:** Despite Turner's personal affection for the painting, the renowned art critic John Ruskin, a staunch supporter of Turner, did not like his early classical works. Ruskin categorized *Dido Building Carthage* and its sister painting, *The Decline of the Carthaginian Empire*, as "nonsense pictures," considering them heavily detailed, poor in colour, and lacking genuine observation of nature.
- **A Legal Battle Over the Legacy:** Turner's will was famously contested by his relatives, which delayed the final acquisition of the painting by the National Gallery until 1856, five years after his death.
- **It Must Be Hung with Specific Rivals:** In his will, Turner stipulated that *Dido Building Carthage* and his *Sun Rising through Vapour* must hang in perpetuity next to two landscapes by the 17th-century French painter Claude Lorrain (*Seaport with the Embarkation of the Queen of Sheba* and *The Mill*). This was to prove that his work was equal to, or better than, the Old Masters.
- **Hidden Symbolic Details:** The Toy Boat: In the lower-left, children play with a toy boat. This is a subtle, almost melancholic hint by Turner regarding the future fall of the empire—symbolizing that the great naval power of Carthage was once fragile and childlike.
- **Dido's Strength:** While often viewed as a tragic figure, Turner paints Dido as a commanding, powerful ruler, inspired by a contemporary opera.
- **The Tomb:** On the right, the tomb being built for Dido's first husband, Sychaeus, acts as a dark foreshadowing of her eventual doom.

- **The "Opera" Connection:** The depiction of Dido, in a blue dress and diadem, is believed to have been inspired by a recent operatic performance of the story, giving her a more theatrical, commanding presence rather than a purely classical one.
- **It Is Part of a 10-Part Series:** Dido Building Carthage was not a standalone subject; it was one of roughly 10 major paintings Turner created about the rise and fall of the Carthaginian empire, reflecting his obsession with the fleeting nature of human endeavor.
- **A "Jigsaw Puzzle" of Perspective:** Art critics note that the perspective in the painting is intentionally tricky, almost like a "jigsaw puzzle." The viewer is meant to feel that they are looking up at the buildings in the foreground but down on those in the distance, creating multiple spatial, immersive experiences.

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J.M.W. Turner (1775-1851), ***Dido Building Carthage***, 1815, 155.5 × 230 cm, National Gallery



Claude Lorrain (1604/1605–1682), ***Seaport with the Embarkation of the Queen of Sheba***, 1648, 149.1 × 196.7 cm, National Gallery

Claude Lorrain (1604/1605–1682), *Seaport with the Embarkation of the Queen of Sheba*, 1648, oil on canvas, 149.1 × 196.7 cm, National Gallery

- An incredible anecdote: Turner eventually left this painting to the National Gallery on the "Claude Condition"—it had to be hung forever alongside Claude's ***Embarkation of the Queen of Sheba***. It was a bold, arrogant act of 'Fire', ensuring he would be judged alongside the greatest landscape artist of the past.

NOTES

- The Queen of Sheba is mentioned in the Bible, the Koran and in Ethiopian tradition. She may have ruled over a kingdom that straddled the Red Sea, today's Yemen and Ethiopia. She is known for her intellectual curiosity and sovereign power and is said to have visited King Solomon to engage in a battle of wits.
- According to Ethiopian tradition she and Solomon had a son who became the first Emperor of Ethiopia creating the "Solomonic Dynasty," which ruled Ethiopia until 1974.



John Constable (1776-1837),
Cloud Study, Hampstead,
1822,
24.1 × 29.9 cm,
Royal Academy

John Constable (1776-1837), *Cloud Study, Hampstead*, 1822, 24.1 × 29.9 cm, Royal Academy

- While Turner was mythologizing the Mediterranean, Constable was "skying" on Hampstead Heath. Between 1821 and 1822, Constable produced nearly 100 oil sketches of clouds, treating the sky as his laboratory.
- Constable was deeply influenced by **Luke Howard's** revolutionary **1803** essay, ***On the Modifications of Clouds***, which gave us the names **cumulus**, **stratus**, and **cirrus**. While Turner travelled thousands of miles for inspiration, Constable believed he could find the infinite by looking straight up. He famously stated, "**The sky is the source of light in nature—and governs everything.**"
- A little-known fact: Constable inscribed the back of these sketches with precise **meteorological data**—date, time of day, direction of wind, temperature. To Constable, a cloud wasn't a poetic symbol; it was a physical phenomenon requiring **clinical understanding**. This marks the moment landscape moved from being a backdrop to being a branch of natural philosophy.

NOTES

- In 1802, Luke Howard presented a paper ***On the Modification of Clouds***, classified clouds using Latin terms based on their appearance, creating a foundational system still used today. It was published the following year. His three main, foundational classifications were **cirrus** (curl of hair), **cumulus** (heap), and **stratus** (layer). He also identified **nimbus** (rain cloud) and combined them

to define others like **cirrostratus** and **cirrocumulus**. He chose Latin so the system would be adopted globally. Goethe was so impressed he wrote a series of poems about the man who “**distinguished the indistinguishable**”.

- Constable lived in several places across his life, moving between Suffolk and London as his career developed.
- **East Bergholt**, Suffolk — **1776 to 1799**. He was born here on 11 June 1776 and spent his childhood and early adult years in the village, working in his father's mills and making his first serious attempts at painting. East Bergholt remained the emotional centre of his imaginative life long after he left it.
- **London** — from 1799, aged 23, onwards. He entered the **Royal Academy Schools in 1799** and began dividing his time between London and Suffolk, spending winters in the city and **summers painting in the Stour Valley**. For many years he lodged in various addresses in central London.
 - **Keppel Street**, Bloomsbury — 1817 to 1822. After his **marriage to Maria Bicknell in October 1816**, they honeymooned in Weymouth and Brighton then set up home here. This was his first settled domestic base in London.
 - **Charlotte Street**, Fitzrovia — 1822 to 1837. He moved to 35 Charlotte Street in 1822, and this remained his **principal home and studio for the rest of his life**. It is where he did much of his major work including the six-footers. **He died at in Charlotte Street** on 31 March **1837, aged 60**.
 - **Hampstead** — summers from around 1819. From 1819 he regularly rented accommodation in Hampstead for the **summer months**, partly for **Maria's health**, and it was here that he made his famous cloud studies. After **Maria's death in 1828** he continued to spend time in Hampstead.

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J.M.W. Turner (1775-1851),
The Burning of the Houses of Lords and Commons, 1835,
92 × 123.1 cm,
Philadelphia Art Museum

J.M.W. Turner (1775-1851), *The Burning of the Houses of Lords and Commons*, 1835, 92 × 123.1 cm, Philadelphia Art Museum

- Twelve years later, Turner's **Fire became literal**. On **October 16, 1834**, the seat of British power went up in flames. The crowd's reaction was mixed—many watched in horror, but a section were **cheering and whistling**. Parliament was deeply unpopular due to legislation like the **Poor Law Amendment Act** of 1834 which changed the use and nature of the workhouse.
- The most **famous anecdote** of Turner's life occurred during the creation of this work. During "**Varnishing Days**" at the British Institution, Turner arrived with a canvas that was little more than a **daub of grey and white**. For three days, while other artists looked on in **stunned silence**, Turner essentially **painted the entire picture in public**, using brushes, rags, palette knives, and his fingernails. The complete opposite of Constable's careful approach.
- This was the ultimate Embrace of the moment—he was no longer just an observer of history; he was a performer of it. He turned a national tragedy into a spectacle of pure, golden light.

NOTES

- **Rented Boat Sketching**: Turner didn't just watch from the crowd; he hired a boat to get a closer view of the fire, sketching frantically in watercolour and pencil.
- **Dual Perspectives**: The two major paintings show different views: one across

the river (**Philadelphia Museum of Art**) and one, looking down the river (Cleveland Museum of Art). Both paintings were reworked on Varnishing Day.

- **Misidentified Sketches:** Some of his sketches in the Tate collection, originally thought to be the 1834 fire, were likely sketches of the 1841 fire at the Tower of London.
- **Volatile Materials:** Turner used fleeting pigments, including Carmine and various red lakes, which have faded over time due to his disregard for longevity in favour of immediate, intense colour, a fact that distressed critics like John Ruskin.
- **"The Admiral":** Around this time, neighbours dubbed him "The Admiral" because of his navy-style greatcoat, assuming the famously eccentric artist was a retired officer.
- **Artistic License:** While based on his, and thousands of others', eyewitness accounts, Turner heavily exaggerated the height and intensity of the flames to maximize the dramatic impact.
- **Unfinished Appearance:** Contemporary critics and gallery officials often viewed his finished, fiery, abstract-leaning paintings as "mere botches" or "rude beginnings," failing to appreciate his turn toward proto-Impressionism.

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John Constable
(1776-1837),
The Hay Wain,
1821,
130.2 × 185.4 cm,
National Gallery

John Constable (1776-1837), *The Hay Wain*, 1821, 130.2 × 185.4 cm, National Gallery

- Six years after Flatford Mill, Constable produced the **defining work of his career**. *The Hay Wain* is the most famous of his "Six-Footers"—a scale usually reserved for grand history paintings, but used here for a humble scene of Water and working life.
- A fascinating detail: the cart isn't "stuck." During hot summers, wooden wheels would shrink; the carter has driven the wain into the water to soak the wood, causing it to swell and keep the iron tires from falling off.
- The anecdote that defines their difference in success: *The Hay Wain* was ignored in England—it **failed to sell** at the Royal Academy. Only when a French dealer, **John Arrowsmith**, took it to the Paris Salon in 1824 did it become a **sensation**, winning a **gold medal** and influencing the French Romantics.
- While Turner was the darling of the British establishment, Constable found his **first modern audience abroad**. Unfortunately, Constable was so **committed to England** that he **never travelled** to receive the gold medal from Charles X. His wife **Maria was ill**, and he was a **shy, introverted person**. He said he would **"rather be a poor man in England than a rich man abroad."**
- In England, the painting was derided for "**Constable's Snow**"—the tiny flecks of white paint representing the dewy shimmer of wet leaves. To Constable, this was the Water of truth; to English critics, it was clumsy whitewash.
- **Pentimento**: A final point. We imagine Constable painted what he saw in one

go but there are in fact many changes, what we call pentimento. If you look very carefully at the centre foreground, just to the right of the dog, you can see a faint ghostly mark - this is a human figure that Constable originally painted but then covered over. As the paint has become more transparent over the past 200 years, this 'ghost' is slowly reappearing, revealing how extensively Constable revised his compositions to achieve that seemingly natural, spontaneous effect.

NOTES

- **A "Fictional" Idyllic Scene:** While *The Hay Wain* looks like an untouched rural paradise, it was a busy working commercial area. The "river" is actually the mill pond, and the "wild" nature was part of an active farming and industrial operation managed by Constable's father, Golding.
- **It was never a "Wain":** The famous painting *The Hay Wain* (originally titled ***Landscape: Noon***) actually depicts a **wagon** (a four-wheeled vehicle) not a "wain" (which is technically a term for a two-wheeled cart). The title was a nickname given by a friend.

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J.M.W. Turner (1775-1851),
The Fighting Temeraire, tugged to her last berth to be broken up, 1838, 1839,
 90.7 × 121.6 cm,
 National Gallery

J.M.W. Turner (1775-1851), ***The Fighting Temeraire, tugged to her last berth to be broken up, 1838, 1839, 90.7 × 121.6 cm, National Gallery***

- We have just seen the most famous Constable and this is one of the most famous Turner's. **Who here feels more like Turner - always chasing the next thing? Or more like Constable - returning to the same beloved place?**
- Let me set the scene for this painting. If you were **born** in the **1930s or 40s** think **how much the world has changed**. During **Turner's lifetime** the world **changed as much** if not more, from a largely rural economy in which spent their lives in the same village to an industrial economy with **railways, seaside holidays and urban slums**.
- He was born in 1775, at the **beginning** of the Industrial Revolution (1760-1830) and this had brought factories, steam power, gas lamps, affordable consumer goods, and an rapidly growing middle class. **In 1838** there was a **real feeling** that the world was **changing fundamentally** and changing forever. But there were many **terrible consequences**, standards of living **fell for most people**, child labour was expected and women had few rights.
- In this work, Turner's "Fire" is **both a funeral and a prophecy**. He depicts the **98-gun HMS Temeraire**, a first rate ship of the line, a hero of the **Battle of Trafalgar**, being towed to her final scrap heap by a small, dark, industrious steam tug. It is the ultimate image of **modernity as a transition**: the ghost-like elegance of the **Age of Sail** is being pulled away by the squat, mechanical power of the **Age of Steam**. Turner's "Fire" is concentrated in the **spectacular**

sunset, which acts as a funeral pyre for the old ship.

- Turner took **massive poetic license with the facts**. In reality, the Temeraire had **two tugs**, not one, and its **masts had already been removed** before it was towed. Turner kept the masts to ensure the ship looked like a "phantom" of its former glory. He also added a sunset, or, from the direction the ship headed, it was towed westward, it would have been a sunrise.
- Turner modified these lines from a poem by Thomas Campbell's "Ye Mariners of England":

The flag which braved the battle and the breeze

No long owns her

- This was literally true: Temeraire flies a **white flag** instead of the British flag, indicating it has been sold by the military to a private company.
- It is about the new technology replacing the old. **Tugboats were so new** there was not even a word for them and **Turner's use of the word 'tugged'** is the first ever recorded use according to the **Oxford English Dictionary**.
- He was so attached to this painting that he called it **his "darling"** and **refused to sell it** for any price, keeping it for his "**Turner Bequest**" to the nation. It represents his embrace of change; he **mourns the old, but he acknowledges the dark, power of the new world**.

NOTES

- The Temeraire (Téméraire is French for 'reckless', 'bold' or 'rash') was retired in 1812 and became a prison ship and storage depot and was decommissioned in 1838. She was towed 55 miles up river from Sheerness (Isle of Sheppey) to John Beatson's shipbreaking yard in Rotherhithe (near the Tower of London) to be broken into scrap.
- In the Age of Sail (17th–19th century), a ship of the line was the primary, heavily armed wooden sailing warship of the 17th to mid-19th centuries, designed to fight in a linear formation known as the "line of battle". They were categorised from First to Sixth rate.
- The British Royal Navy classified warships by "rates" based on gun count, crew size, and capability in battle. **First rates** (100+ guns, 3+ decks) were the largest, most powerful flagships; **Second rates** (90–98 guns, 3 decks) were powerful ships often used in fleet actions; and **Third rates** (64–80 guns, 2–3 decks) were the most common, versatile "ships of the line," with

the 74-gun ship being the standard.

- Regarded by Turner and critics as one of his greatest painting. In 2005 it was voted Britain's "greatest painting" (BBC poll). He never sold it and bequeathed it to the nation.
- The **Temeraire** came to the aid of the **Victory** in the battle of Trafalgar (1805).
- There is an unverified anecdote that Turner saw the **Temeraire** being towed to be broken up during one of his frequent trips to Margate to stay in the guesthouse, Harbour Arm (now the site of the Turner Contemporary Art Gallery by David Chipperfield) run by his accommodating landlady Mrs Sophie Booth. The scene is Romanticised. The masts had been removed, it was pulled by two tugs not one and Turner has added a sunset, or, from the direction, a sunrise.
- The great ship is painted in white, grey and brown and looks like a ghost ship that is pulled by a much smaller but stronger black tugboat. Sailing ships were being replaced by steam and steel so this represents the passing of an age.
- Turner used light and loose brushstrokes to invoke an elusive feeling of old age and nostalgia.
- **The Ship Was Already Stripped Bare:** In reality, by the time the Temeraire was towed to the breaker's yard in 1838, it was a "hulk"—a hollowed-out shell. The Royal Navy had already removed all three masts, the rigging, cannons, and all valuable timber. Turner painted the masts back in to give the ship a more dignified, ghostly, and "final" appearance.
- **Two Tugs, Not One:** Turner shows a single, small tugboat pulling the massive, 98-gun ship of the line. In reality, two steam tugs, the London and the Sampson, were used to tow the 2,110-ton vessel from Sheerness to Rotherhithe.
- **The Impossible Sunset:** The painting is famously set against a dramatic, fiery sunset. However, the Temeraire was towed up the Thames during the day, likely arriving at its destination in the early afternoon, not at dusk. Furthermore, because the ship was moving west towards London, the sun could not have been setting directly behind it in the east.
- **It Was Known as "Saucy," Not "Fighting":** While Turner used the dramatic nickname "The Fighting Temeraire" to enhance the painting's romantic appeal, the crew who served on her during her later, more mundane years

often referred to her as the "Saucy Temeraire".

- **The First Known Use of "Tugged"**: According to the Oxford English Dictionary, Turner's own subtitle for the painting—The Fighting Temeraire, tugged to her last Berth to be broken up—is the first recorded use of the word "tugged" to describe a steamship pulling another vessel.
- **It Was Turner's "Darling"**: Turner loved this painting so much that he refused to sell it, despite receiving many offers, including a reported blank cheque from a potential buyer. He called it his "darling" and bequeathed it to the nation upon his death.
- **A "Wrong" Tugs Construction**: To add to the dramatic effect, Turner placed the tugboat's black funnel in front of its mast, rather than behind it, allowing the soot-black smoke to blow backwards through the Temeraire's rigging. Contemporary critics criticized this as inaccurate to a tug's design, but it was a deliberate artistic choice to create a "foul" contrast against the "ghostly" white, elegant warship.
- **It Was Painted on a Recycled Canvas**: X-ray imaging has revealed that Turner painted The Fighting Temeraire over an earlier, abandoned marine scene, using a canvas that had already been used for another, larger sailing vessel.
- **Voted the Nation's Favourite**: In a 2005 poll organized by BBC Radio 4's Today programme, The Fighting Temeraire was voted as the nation's favourite painting.

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John Constable (1776-1837),
The Cornfield,
1826,
143 × 122 cm,
National Gallery

John Constable (1776-1837), *The Cornfield*, 1826, 143 × 122 cm, National Gallery

- While Turner was contemplating modern technology, Constable was focused on **a single summer afternoon**. *The Cornfield* is an exquisite retreat into the **idealised English countryside**. It features a **young shepherd boy drinking from a stream** while his sheep head toward a **golden field of corn**. In 1826, England was reeling from the "**Panic of 1825**" (a massive stock market crash), but Constable's world remains perfectly still and sun-drenched.
- Despite appearing to be "true to nature," this is one of Constable's **most "composed" paintings**. The **gate** was actually **copied from a completely different location** near Flatford. More interestingly, the **botany is scientifically impossible**: the foxgloves (June/July blossoming) in the hedge wouldn't actually be in **bloom at the time** the corn was ready for harvest (late July/August). **Constable "cheated" to create a "Ye Olde England"** that was **more perfect than reality**. It was a desperate attempt to **create a "hit"**—he was **struggling for money** and hoped this traditional, nostalgic scene would **finally please the British public**. Ironically, **it didn't sell in his lifetime**; it was only bought by a group of his friends after his death to be presented to the National Gallery.
- **Constable's Sales**: In his lifetime he only **sold about 20 paintings in England** and another 20 in France. A shockingly small number considering he lived till he was 60, painted prolifically for 30 years was eventually a Royal Academician and won a gold medal at the Paris Salon. One of the great **injustices of art history**. However, he was his **own worst enemy**. He wasn't the gentle, nature-loving

painter of popular imagination. He was quarrelsome, suspicious, and difficult. After his French success in 1824, he quarrelled with his only dealer Arrowsmith over payment and essentially lost his only profitable market. In a few years Arrowsmith sold half of all the paintings Constable sold in his lifetime.

NOTES

- While based on Fen Lane between East Bergholt and Dedham, the scene is **not an exact, topographically accurate rendering**. Constable's son, Charles, pointed out that **the church tower and the cluster of red-roofed houses** in the distance did not actually exist in that spot. They were added to provide a distant focal point, a common practice for artists creating a "composed" landscape rather than a literal one.
- The prominent, dead trees on the left side of the composition do not appear in the preparatory oil sketch. They were added to the final painting to enhance the rustic, wild, and slightly melancholic atmosphere.
- The scene is a composite of different locations and memories, including elements from earlier studies rather than just the specific spot in Suffolk. The path, for instance, is a mix of observed detail and artificial composition designed to draw the viewer's eye through the painting.
- While not a mistake in the scene itself, contemporary critics criticized his technique. Constable used white, yellow, and red highlights to suggest flickering light and texture, which critics described as "**dots and dabs**" or "splashes". These white spots were often disparagingly called "Constable's snow" because they looked like fresh snow or lime drops rather than sunlight to 19th-century viewers.
- Botanical Anomalies (Mixed Seasons): While the painting is intended to depict a July day, it merges different temporal elements. For instance, the sheep and the drinking boy suggest a warm, dry day, while the heavy, low-hanging clouds (a "sun-shower") create an atmospheric tension that doesn't necessarily reflect a single moment in time.
- Technical analysis of the painting has shown that the signature is in very thin, transparent paint, which is not characteristic of Constable's usual handling of paint.
- The Cornfield is, ultimately, an "imagined" landscape, where Constable prioritised "naturalness" (truth to the feeling of the place) over strict "realism" (a topographically accurate map).

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J. M. W. Turner
(1775–1851),
*The Sun of
Venice Going to
Sea*,
1843,
61.6 × 92.1 cm,
Tate Britain

J. M. W. Turner (1775–1851), *The Sun of Venice Going to Sea*, 1843, 61.6 × 92.1 cm, Tate Britain

- This is *The Sun of Venice Going to Sea*. The **'Sun of Venice'** is the name of the **fishing boat** and it is going out fishing early one morning. Turner is subtly drawing out attention to painting: on the canvas sail of the ship is a **painted sun** which stands in front of the **real sun** of the painting but of course it is just all oil paint. So he is painting a painting of the sun on canvas that is hiding an imaginary sun in the sky. The buildings in the distance are the **dome of St Mark's**, the **campanile** and on the extreme left, the tower of **San Giorgio Maggiore**.
- Many critics at the time saw it as simply a jolly fishing boat going out to sea, but this idyllic scene of Venice is more pessimistic than it looks. Turner added **four lines of a poem** in the Royal Academy catalogue,
*Fair Shines the morn, and soft the zephyrs blow, | Venezia's fisher spreads his painted sail so gay,
Nor heeds the demon that in grim repose | expects his evening prey.*
- These lines refer to the **fall of Venice**, once a great power it is now a shadow of its former self; even in the nineteenth century just a tourist destination.
- This painting was one of the **favourites of** Turner's great supporter the pre-eminent Victorian art critic **John Ruskin**. Ruskin was **thrown out of the Royal Academy for making a pencil sketch** of this painting, a practice which was **strictly forbidden**. He was taken aback when a year later he went out on the

lagoon and saw in the early sunlight a fishing boat in full sail **looking exactly like** the painting.

- This is an example of late Turner when many critics felt he was **going mad**. They decried what they called his wretched verses and their effect on his mind and wished he would '**go back to nature**'. One critic made an interesting comment. He said that **most celebrated artists are ahead of their time but in time the world catches up with them, but Turner was so 'far out of sight ... he cannot hope to be even overtaken by distant posterity'**. How astute the observation but how wrong the conclusion.

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John Constable (1776-1837),
*Hadleigh Castle, The Mouth
of the Thames—Morning
after a Stormy Night*,
1829,
121.9 × 164.5 cm,
Yale Center for British Art

John Constable (1776-1837), *Hadleigh Castle, The Mouth of the Thames—Morning after a Stormy Night*, 1829, 121.9 × 164.5 cm, Yale Center for British Art

- If Turner's fire was public and political, Constable's water in 1829 was **private and shattered**. This painting marks the **end of Constable's happiness**. In 23 November **1828 aged 40**, his beloved wife **Maria died of tuberculosis**, leaving him with **seven children and a broken heart**.
- Hadleigh Castle is his retreat into mourning. For the first time, his "Water" (the mouth of the Thames) looks **cold and hostile**, and the central focus is a ruined tower—a direct metaphor for his own life. He famously said, "**I shall never feel again as I have felt, the face of the World is totally changed to me.**" **He wore black for the remaining nine years of his life.**
- Look at the **texture of the paint**. The "Constable's Snow" (the white flecks) that used to represent the "dewy freshness" of a Suffolk morning is now used to represent a **jagged, stormy light**. It is a work of personal dissolution.
- An anecdote from this time reveals his state of mind: when he was finally elected a **Full Academician in 1829** (at the age of 52), he was told by the Academy's President, Sir Thomas Lawrence, that he was **lucky to be elected** when there were "historical painters" on the list. Constable, grieving and bitter, felt the honour had come **too late to matter**, he wanted Maria to share the honour.
- By the mid-1830s, the gap between their reputations was a chasm: Turner was a wealthy, eccentric titan—"The man who could paint the sun." Constable

remained a "local" artist in many eyes, a grumpy widower obsessed over **"unimportant" English fields**. While Turner was invited to the finest estates, Constable was often found lecturing on landscape history, desperately trying to convince people that his art was a science.

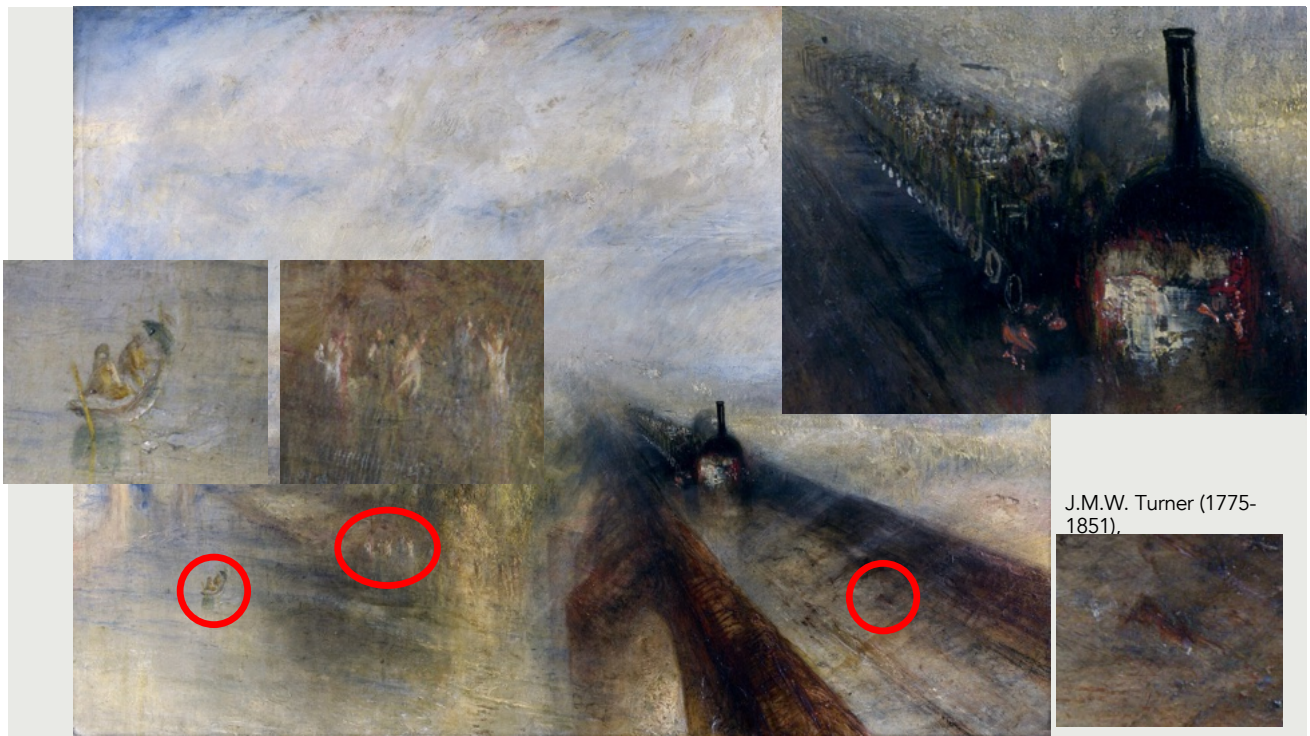
- However, when Constable was made a full Academician Turner made a visit to congratulate him and they stayed up till 1am talking and drinking.

NOTES

- By the mid-1830s, the gap between their reputations was a chasm:
 - **Turner (The Superstar):** Turner was a **wealthy, eccentric titan**. He was **"The man who could paint the sun."** Even though his late works were becoming increasingly abstract and confusing to the public, he was the undisputed king of the Royal Academy.
 - **Constable (The Underdog):** Constable remained a **"local" artist in the eyes of many**. He was seen as a grumpy, difficult widower who obsessed over "unimportant" English fields. While Turner was invited to the finest estates, Constable was often found lecturing on the history of landscape, desperately trying to convince people that his art was a science.
- Turner was embracing the global progress of the 19th century—**politics, steam, and empire**. Constable was dealing with the **reality of loss**—the realization that despite all the progress in the world, the **things we love most are fragile and fleeting**.
- For Turner, the "Fire" of his genius always came first. Women were providers of comfort like Sarah Danby. And later in life Sophia Booth, or objects of study, his erotic sketches, but they were never allowed to interfere with his painting.

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J.M.W. Turner (1775-1851), *Rain, Steam, and Speed - The Great Western Railway*, 1844, 91 × 121.8 cm, National Gallery

- *Rain, Steam and Speed* shows an early locomotive of the Great Western Railway crossing the River Thames on **Brunel's** recently completed **Maidenhead Railway Bridge**. The painting is also credited for allowing a glimpse of the Romantic strife within Turner and his contemporaries over the issue of the technological advancement during the Industrial Revolution.
- In this late masterpiece fire is found in the belly of a steam engine. He shows a train hurtling along, a marvel of modern engineering. Here, modernity **isn't a threat**; it is a sensory explosion. Form dissolves into a blur of atmospheric light, capturing the **physical sensation of velocity**—something no artist had ever attempted.
- (CLICK) According to legend, Turner was inspired while travelling in a storm on the Great Western Railway. He allegedly stuck his head out of the carriage window for ten minutes in the pouring rain to "experience" the atmosphere, only to sit back down and declare that he finally understood what speed looked like. Third-class wagons, shown here, were completely exposed to the elements, second class had a roof but no windows and first class were completely enclosed and comfortable..
- (CLICK) In the path of the oncoming engine, if you look very closely at the bottom-right of the tracks, there is a tiny hare running for its life. The hare, the fastest animal in nature, is about to be overtaken by the "Fire" of man's

machine. It is Turner's subtle commentary on the passing of the natural world in the face of industrial progress.

- (CLICK) On the river we see a rowing boat with an artist in it sketching the shore (CLICK) and on the shore is a group of what appear to be bacchanalian dancers perhaps representing the old world being replaced by the new world of steam or are they celebrating the passing train?

NOTES

Great Western Railway Fares (London to Bristol, c. 1844)

The journey was approximately 118 miles and took about 4 hours by express train.

Approximate Fares: First Class: £1 10s (30 shillings / £1.50)

Second Class: 15s to £1 (15-20 shillings)

Third Class: 7s 6d to 10s (7.5-10 shillings)

Weekly Wages: Skilled tradesman: 25-30 shillings/week

Factory worker: 10-15 shillings/week

Agricultural laborer: 8-10 shillings/week

Middle-class clerk: £50-100/year (roughly £1-2/week)

So for a working-class person: Third class = nearly a week's wages

Second class = 1-2 weeks' wages

First class = 3-4 weeks' wages

For comparison: Loaf of bread: 6-8 pence, pint of beer: 3-4 pence and a decent meal: 1 shilling

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<https://www.nationalgallery.org.uk/paintings/joseph-mallord-william-turner-rain-steam-and-speed-the-great-western-railway>



John Constable (1776–1837),
Salisbury Cathedral from the Meadows,
1831, 151.8 × 189.9 cm,
National Gallery

John Constable (1776–1837), *Salisbury Cathedral from the Meadows*, 1831, 151.8 × 189.9 cm, National Gallery

- Constable's painting was solid, dependable England combining *The Hay Wain* scene, even down to the dog, with a vision of the Church of England under a dark stormy cloud rescued by a rainbow. The prophet Ezekiel described the radiance surrounding God as having the "**appearance of a rainbow in the clouds on a rainy day**".
- **The rainbow is meteorologically impossible** as the sun must be directly behind the observer (also at 42° it is too tall for the time of day). Constable, the "scientific" painter, broke his own rules of truth to nature to create a moral truth. He needed that rainbow to provide a sense of divine protection for the Cathedral.
- On the left is St Thomas's church which cannot, in fact, be seen from this location. Constable added it to show the church from the greatest to the local parish and in this church is a "Doom" painting showing Christ seated on a rainbow.

NOTES

- Constable used various elements on the left side of the painting to convey a "sense of place" and personal meaning following the death of his wife, Maria:
- **The Church of St Thomas:** Seen on the left side of the painting, this church is actually not visible from this specific location in real life. Constable added it to

the final composition, possibly to strengthen the visible presence and importance of the Anglican Church. He felt the Church was "under a cloud" due to the **1829 Catholic Emancipation Act** and impending electoral reforms. Interestingly, in St Thomas's there is a "Doom" painting showing Christ seated on a rainbow.

- **The Grave Marker:** Located in the foreground, this structure serves as a clear symbol of death.
- **The Elder Bush:** Added at the base of the tall ash tree on the left, the elder bush with white blossoms was described by Constable as an "**emblem of death**".
- **The Ash Tree:** Dominating the left side, the ash tree is often interpreted as a **symbol of resurrection or life after death**, contrasting with the grave marker and elder bush.
- **The Stormy Sky:** The dark clouds on the left threaten the small church tower and nearby houses, reflecting Constable's personal grief and his concerns regarding potential parliamentary reforms that might reduce the power of the Church.



J. M. W. Turner (1775–1851),
Caligula's Palace and Bridge,
1831, 137.2 × 246.4 cm, Tate Britain



John Constable (1776–1837),
Salisbury Cathedral from the Meadows,
1831, 151.8 × 189.9 cm, National Gallery



J. M. W. Turner (1775–1851),
Vision of Medea,
1828, 172.7 × 248.9 cm, Tate Britain

J. M. W. Turner (1775–1851), ***Caligula's Palace and Bridge***, 1831, 137.2 × 246.4 cm, Tate Britain

John Constable (1776–1837), ***Salisbury Cathedral from the Meadows***, 1831, 151.8 × 189.9 cm, National Gallery

J. M. W. Turner (1775–1851), ***Vision of Medea***, 1828, 173.7 × 248.9 cm, Tate Britain

- It is these three paintings positioned in this way at the Royal Academy exhibition of 1831 gave rise to the expression **"Fire and Water"**: used to describe the two artists in the ***Literary Gazette*** and elsewhere.
- It arose from a twist of fate, in 1831, Constable was the **"Hangman"**—that is the member of the Royal Academy committee responsible for deciding where paintings were placed on the walls. He decided to place his ***Salisbury Cathedral from the Meadows*** between two Turner's, ***Caligula's Palace***, and ***Vision of Medea***.
- Turner complained about the insertion of Constable's painting between his works but this argument was nothing compared with what happened the following year as we shall see next.
- Constable obviously felt his painting could stand between two celebrated masterpieces by Turner. Although, Turner's paintings shone with fire some found them too mythological too far from the real world.

NOTES

- While Turner's sky is a golden haze, **Constable's is a violent storm**. He includes a rainbow. This is his "Water" of hope—a **desperate, symbolic "Retreat" into the idea that even in the modern storm, the Church and friendship provide an anchor**. Constable gave us the **Water of the Past**: he saw the **storm clouds gathering over England** and he **clung to the things that don't change**—the stones of a cathedral, the path of a river, the memory of home. He resisted the chaos to find a deeper, personal truth.
- Compare it with Turner's "Fire" is at its most prophetic. He returns to the theme of the **"Rise and Fall of Empires,"** depicting the **ruins of the Roman Emperor Caligula's palace**. The "Fire" is the **golden, hazy light** that seems to melt the very stone of the ancient world.
- Just as he did with Carthage, Turner is using **the "Fire" of history to warn 1831 Britain**. At a time of intense political agitation (the lead-up to the Reform Act), Turner is showing that **even the most decadent and powerful empires eventually dissolve** into the light of the past. Notice how the bridge and palace are barely there. Turner is moving **toward his final phase**, where **modernity for him means the total dissolution of form**. He is embracing the idea that nothing—not even the strongest empire—is permanent. Turner gave us the **Fire of the Future**: he saw that **the old world was melting away**, that **empires fall**, and that the only thing constant is change and light. He embraced the **chaos of progress**.
- **We don't have to choose between them. We need Turner's fire** to drive us forward into the unknown, and **we need Constable's water to remind us where we come from**. Together, they didn't just paint the English landscape; they painted the very struggle of what it means to be modern."
- "Turner's is a golden vision... Constable's is a stormy reality... The one is all fire, the other all water."

Medea

- Princess Medea helped Jason perform numerous "impossible" deeds using her magic including killing her brother. She had two sons with Jason and he abandoned her to marry Glauce for political power. Medea sent her a robe and crown laced with poison that burned her to death with her father and murdered her two sons to ensure Jason had no heirs. She fled to Athens in a chariot drawn by dragons. She was later exiled after trying to murder the King's son Theseus.

Turner's Wealth:

- By 1844, Turner was extremely wealthy. His estate was worth approximately £140,000 at his death (1851). This is equivalent to £23 million today when using the Consumer Price Index but £100 million in comparative labour earnings and in terms of share of GDP it was equivalent to many hundreds of millions today.

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https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Caligula's_Palace_and_Bridge



John Constable (1776–1837), *The Opening of Waterloo Bridge ('Whitehall Stairs, June 18th, 1817')*, c. 1831-1832, 130.8 × 218 cm, Tate Britain

John Constable (1776–1837), *The Opening of Waterloo Bridge ('Whitehall Stairs, June 18th, 1817')*, c. 1831-1832, 130.8 × 218 cm, Tate Britain

- The following year Constable exhibited this enormous canvas, over seven feet in length, and the result of 13 years of planning. It commemorates the opening of Waterloo Bridge - and the second anniversary of the Battle of Waterloo – on 18 June 1817.
- It is an **obsessive, detailed look at the pageantry of the present** and the stability of the state. It shows the **Prince Regent arriving by water** in the Royal Barge on the right to open the new bridge on the **second anniversary of the Battle of Waterloo**. It is a work of immense "Water"—the Thames is filled with **glittering barges** and a sense of civic pride.
- In the distance is tWaterloo bridge shown at the moment a celebratory gun salute has been fired for the occasion. The black smoke on the right shows the industrialisation of the south bank. The tower to the right of the bridge has been identified a the Shot Tower.
- Despite its bright, celebratory appearance, the painting is an architectural retreat in the sense that he has **meticulously rendered the old Whitehall buildings** to contrast with the new bridge, trying to bridge the gap between the **old London he loved** and the modern city that was rapidly expanding.

NOTES

- The prominent bow-fronted building shown in the left foreground is **5 Whitehall**

Yard. It was also known as Fife House, which at the time of the event in 1817 was the **home of the Prime Minister, Lord Liverpool**. In the painting, spectators are seen gathered on its balconies to witness the Prince Regent embarking on the Royal Barge.

- A shot tower is a tall, vertical structure used to manufacture spherical lead shot for muskets and shotguns through a process called the "drop shot" method. There is a well-known surviving shot tower in Crane Park, Twickenham.
- ArtUK, "Over seven feet in length, this is the largest of Constable's exhibition canvases and the result of 13 years of planning. It commemorates the opening of Waterloo Bridge - and the second anniversary of the Battle of Waterloo – on 18 June 1817, an occasion celebrated with tremendous pomp and ceremony which Constable attempted to recapture in a whole series of drawings and oil sketches, dating from 1819 onwards. Constable moved from Suffolk to London in 1817 and presumably witnessed the festivities, but it was another two years before he conceived the idea of capturing the event on canvas. The subject offered Constable, a staunch royalist, the opportunity to record for posterity a significant historical occasion. The picture shows the Prince Regent about to board the Royal barge at Whitehall stairs."

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https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Opening_of_Waterloo_Bridge



John Constable (1776–1837),
The Opening of Waterloo Bridge ('Whitehall Stairs, June 18th, 1817'),
c. 1831–1832, 130.8 × 218 cm, Tate Britain



J. M. W. Turner (1775–1851),
Helvoetsluys; the City of Utrecht, 64, Going to Sea,
1832, 91.4 × 122 cm, Fuji Art Museum, Tokyo

John Constable (1776–1837), *The Opening of Waterloo Bridge ('Whitehall Stairs, June 18th, 1817')*, c. 1831–1832, 130.8 × 218 cm, Tate Britain

J. M. W. Turner (1775–1851), *Helvoetsluys; the City of Utrecht, 64, Going to Sea*, 1832, 91.4 × 122 cm, Fuji Art Museum, Tokyo

- This was when the conflict between them reach a peak. It was hung alongside the smaller less gaudy Turner work *Helvoetsluys*; (pronounced "HELL-voot-slouse") *the City of Utrecht, 64, Going to Sea*. On Varnishing Day, Constable's work, covered in bright, "snowy" accents and red flags, sat next to Turner's grey, muted seascape. Seeing his work overshadowed, Turner walked up to his own canvas and **painted a single bright red spot** —a buoy—in the middle of the grey water. That one stroke of "Fire" made Constable's entire **thirteen-year effort look "gaudy" by comparison**. Constable famously muttered, **"He has been here and fired a gun."**
- Critics called Constable's work **"a piece of plaster"** and other complained about his **"snow"**. Even his friend (Thomas Stothard) told him it **appeared very unfinished**. Critics loved the rivalry and on balance felt Turner's quick bold addition of colour was the sort of **brilliant move** one could expect from him.

NOTES

- *City of Utrecht* is the name of the ship. It was a "ship of the line" from the Dutch Navy. "64" refers to the number of cannons the ship carried. In naval terminology, a "64" refers to a third-rate ship of the line, which was a standard

type of battleship in the age of sail.

- Turner sold **Helvoetsluys** in his lifetime and it went through many private hands before it was bought by Fuji Art Museum in 1984 as the cornerstone of their European collection and it remains the most significant work of British art in a Japanese collection.

REFERENCES

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Opening_of_Waterloo_Bridge



J. M. W. Turner
(1775–1851)
***The Rising Squall,
Hot Wells, from St
Vincent's Rock,
Bristol,***
1792,
59.8 × 74 cm,
Private collection

J. M. W. Turner (1775–1851) *The Rising Squall, Hot Wells, from St Vincent's Rock, Bristol*, 1792, 59.8 × 74 cm

A FOOTNOTE

- Before I conclude with my final painting I would like to show you that art historical “facts” are changing all the time.
- If you open any art history textbook from the last hundred years, it will tell you that Turner’s first oil painting exhibited at the Royal Academy was this one, the famous ***Fishermen at Sea*** of 1796. Turner was 21 when he painted it and already a prodigy. As a Tate Guide I have often told visitors the story.
- BUT as of last year (2025), **the history books have been proved wrong.**
- (CLICK) This is Turner’s true debut oil. ***The Rising Squall, Hot Wells, from St Vincent's Rock, Bristol.***
- For 150 years, this painting was lost. It was mislabelled in a dusty catalogue as a watercolour. It was sold at a small country auction in 2024 for just over five hundred pounds (£524), thought to be the work of a second-rate amateur (a follower of Julius Caesar Ibbetson (1759-1817)).
- But when the grime of a century was wiped away, a signature emerged: **W. Turner**. This changed its value, to say the least. By July 2025, with its authenticity unanimously confirmed by leading experts, it sold at Sotheby’s for **£1.5 million** (£1.9 million with fees) compared with an estimate of £200,000 to £300,000.
- He painted this when he was **seventeen. Seventeen!** While **Constable was still hauling sacks of grain** in his father's mill, wondering if he’d ever be an artist,

Turner was already exhibiting at the Royal Academy.

- Look at the subject: it's **not a peaceful spa day** at the Hot Wells. It's a **'Rising Squall.'** Even as a **teenager**, Turner wasn't interested **in the calm**. He was already **chasing the 'Fire'**—the moment when the **wind whips the water** and the atmosphere swallows the land.
- The painting is **on display in the exhibition**. It stands as proof that Turner didn't just grow into his genius—he was **born into it**, already moving at a speed that Constable would spend his whole life trying to catch. We often describe Turner as a child prodigy but he never rested on his laurels, he said to his friend (George Jones):
 - **"I have no secret but hard work. This is a secret that many never learn, and they don't succeed because they don't learn it. My art is as I am because I have worked harder than most men, and I believe it would kill many if they worked as I do."**
- That is fire, for him art was an explosive, athletic feat. Constable complained of being worn out from painting, Turner thrived on it, he was energised by work, he travelled thousands of miles and produced 30,000 sketches, he worked from dawn to dusk.

NOTES

- Incidentally, the site in the painting—St Vincent's Rock—is exactly where the **Clifton Suspension Bridge** the ultimate symbol of Victorian engineering would eventually be built (building started in 1831, halted from 1843 and restarted in 1862 and completed in 1864) and Turner was always interested in the latest scientific advances and engineering.

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J.M.W. Turner (1775-1851),
Norham Castle, Sunrise,
c. 1845–1850,
91 × 122 cm,
Tate Britain

J.M.W. Turner (1775-1851), *Norham Castle, Sunrise*, c. 1845–1850, 91 × 122 cm, Tate Britain

- We come to the **twilight of both men's careers**. This was painted a few years before Turner died and a few years after Constable had died.
- **My closing theme is light**. they **both pursued light**, but from opposite ends, ultimately illuminating the entire spectrum for future artists.
- Turner and Constable **saw light not just as a tool**, but as a philosophy.
Constable, gave us **Truth, the dew on a leaf**, the sparkle of a rain-washed country lane.
- **Turner gave us Poetry. He chased the light of the sun itself—the chaotic, consuming light of the storm**, the sunset, the burning city. He gave us the light of the universal, the imaginative, the spiritual.
- This is Norham Castle on the Northumberland-Scottish border. Turner **painted it around 20 times over fifty years**, since 1797. **It started as a solid structure but it has become a ghost, it's dissolved entirely into the golden, radiating light of the sun**, the **near-total abstraction of form**.
- It was **never exhibited in Turner's lifetime**; it was found in his studio after his death. It represents a **private, spiritual breakthrough**. While the public still demanded recognisable "things," Turner was **moving toward a vision** where only light was real. An anecdote from his final years tells of him being found on his deathbed, turning toward the window and uttering his famous last words:

"**The Sun is God.**" In Norham Castle, we see that God, that Sun.

- **Wealth:** Turner died in 1851 leaving an estate of £140,000 about £23 million today (although on some measures hundreds of millions). Constable died with debts despite his inheritance.
- **Movie:** And it was Turner who got the **movie treatment** in **2014** with **Mike Leigh's 'Mr. Turner'** starring **Timothy Spall**, which won major awards. Constable has never had a feature film. Even in cinema, Turner's *Fire* proved more dramatic than Constable's *Water* - though I'd argue Constable's story of devotion, loss, and stubborn dedication to a single place is equally compelling, just in a quieter way.

NOTES

- Norham Castle is on the south bank of the River Tweed about 9 miles south-west of Berwick-upon-Tweed and 15-18 miles from Lindisfarne and Bamburgh Castle.

REFERENCES

https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Joseph_Mallord_William_Turner_-_Norham_Castle,_Sunrise_-_WGA23182.jpg



- Together, they completed **the spectrum of the English landscape**.
- So we **don't have to choose as they are complementary**.
 - **Turner's Fire drives us forward**—change is the only constant, empires fall, that we must embrace the chaos of progress.
 - **Constable's Water grounds us**—reminding us that some things endure: a path by a river, a cathedral's stones, the sanctuary of home.
- Together they didn't just paint England. **They painted the modern psyche**—forever **torn** between the **heat of ambition** and the **cool peace of belonging**.
- And perhaps that's why, **200 years later**, we're still here, still drawn to their work. Because we recognize ourselves in that ancient tension.
- **We are all fire and water.**
- Thank you. I have a few minutes for questions.

The End



J.M.W. Turner (1775-1851), *Dido Building Carthage*, 1815, 155.5 × 230 cm, Tate Britain



John Constable (1776-1837), *The Hay Wain*, 1821, 130.2 × 185.4 cm, National Gallery

- Let us examine the difference more closely.
- **Turner uses a classical myth to mirror the rising British Empire** (Celebrating the Future) **Constable uses a local mill to mirror the stability of the English countryside** (The Retreat to Home).
- **Turner's light is explosive** and symbolic (Fire). **Constable's light is atmospheric** and scientific (Water/Reflections).
- In *Dido Building Carthage*, Turner is performing a **grand act of "Fire" as prophecy**. By choosing the founding of Carthage—a great maritime empire that would eventually be **utterly destroyed by Rome**—Turner was sending a **chilling message** to post-Waterloo Britain. **In 1815, Britain felt invincible**, yet Turner was already **contemplating its eventual ruins**. He creates a visual paradox: the sun is rising on a new civilization, but the classical architecture is so grand it already feels like a monument to a lost age.
- Turner painted a **companion piece** just two years later: ***The Decline of the Carthaginian Empire***, now in Tate Britain. While the first painting is full of the "Fire" of a golden sunrise, the second is a **blood-red sunset**, showing the **empire collapsing**. Turner's "Fire" was a warning that the same sun that rises on an empire inevitably sets on it. To Turner, the **landscape wasn't just dirt and trees**; it was the **graveyard of civilisations**. He was looking **centuries into the future**, seeing the eventual decay of the British Empire at the very moment of its birth.
- While Turner looked at the collapse of empires, **Constable's "Water" was a desperate attempt to freeze time**. In 1821, the English countryside was far

from the peaceful idyll shown in *The Hay Wain*. It was a time of **massive rural discontent, post-war depression**, and the beginnings of the "**Swing Riots**" where **starving labourers burned haystacks** and smashed machinery. Constable, a staunch Tory, was **deeply distressed** by this **modernity**. He chose to paint a world where **the only machine is a wooden cart** and the only unrest is the shimmering light on the water.

- Constable was **airbrushing out the poverty** and the industrial chimneys of the 1820s to preserve a "**Ye Olde England**" that was already a ghost. While Turner embraced the "**Fire**" of **inevitable change**, Constable used "**Water**" to **create a sanctuary**. For Constable, the landscape was a **moral refuge**—a place where the social order remained clear and undisturbed.

NOTES

- The High British Empire can be dated from the Grand Proclamation in Delhi on 1 January 1877 to the flag-lowering in Delhi in 1947. The Peak: "The Empire on Which the Sun Never Sets" was from 1919 to 1922 when it covered roughly 25% of the Earth's land surface and governed about 20% of the world's population.



John Constable (1776-1837),
View of the back of Willy Lott's
House with Log-cutter, 1814,
29.2 x 24.4 cm

John Constable (1776-1837), *View of the back of Willy Lott's House with Log-cutter*, 1814, 29.2 x 24.4 cm

Inscribed upper left with the brush 'June 1814'; and, on verso (in a later hand), 'J. Constable [R.A.]', swept gilded frame inscribed on the slip "Willy Lott's House Flatford". The frame bearing a plaque inscribed with the artist's name "J. Constable" and dates "born 1776 died 1837".

- If Turner's story is about a **teenager storming the gates** of the Royal Academy, John Constable's story is the **exact opposite**: it is the story of a man who **looked at the same single cottage for forty years** until he truly saw it.
- Just one year before the 'Lost Turner' was found, **another discovery sent shockwaves** through the art world. In **2023**, in a private home on the island of **Guernsey**, a small, dusty painting was found tucked away in a dark corner of a dining room.
- This isn't a grand 'Rising Squall.' It's a **tiny, humble sketch of a cottage**. But this house is the most famous house in British art history: **Willy Lott's cottage** from *The Hay Wain*.
- Here is the difference: while **Turner was travelling the world**, chasing storms and crossing the Alps, **Constable was here**. In this one spot.
- He painted this **same house over and over** for decades. Why? Because while Turner wanted to capture the **Universe**, Constable wanted to capture the **Essence**. He believed that if you look at **one place closely** enough, with **enough love** and scientific precision, you can find the entire world within it.

- It reminds me of William Blake's ***Auguries of Innocence*** and the lines:

To see a World in a Grain of Sand

And a Heaven in a Wild Flower,

Hold Infinity in the palm of your hand

And Eternity in an hour

- This sketch, made in 1814, shows the **raw, unedited 'Water' of his style**—the flickering light and **'dewy' atmosphere** that his **critics hated**. He was a man **obsessed with stability**. In a world that was changing, where the Industrial Revolution was tearing up the countryside, Constable held onto this one cottage like an anchor.
- **Turner** was the **fire that burns and moves on**; **Constable** was the **water that reflects the same trees** year after year, reminding us that even in an age of progress, some things remain still.

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https://www.martelmaidesauctions.com/auction-lot/john-constable-ra-english-1776-1837_784484fa12



J.M.W. Turner (1775-1851), *The Bay of Baiae, with Apollo and the Sibyl*, 1823, 145.4 × 237.5 cm, Tate Britain

J.M.W. Turner (1775-1851), *The Bay of Baiae, with Apollo and the Sibyl*, 1823, 145.4 × 237.5 cm, Tate Britain

- This pairing perfectly illustrates the diverging paths of their maturity: Turner became the "**International Visionary**," using his travels to **mythologize the world**, while Constable became the "**Domestic Scientist**," using his backyard to decode the mechanics of nature.
- Following the **end of the Napoleonic Wars**, Turner finally **reached Italy in 1819**. This work is the "Fire" of that experience—a **luminous, golden reimagining of the Bay of Naples**. Turner uses the classical myth of the **Cumaean** (pronounced "cue-MEE-uhn") **Sibyl**, who **asked Apollo for as many years of life as there were grains of sand in her hand but forgot to ask for eternal youth** and she withered into a tiny, skeletal figure. It is a work of expansive travel; Turner was a "**globalist**" who filled dozens of sketchbooks while traversing the Alps and the Italian coast.
- A delightful, little-known anecdote regarding this painting involves Turner's friend, the artist **George Jones**. Upon seeing the work, Jones told Turner that **the bay was not actually that large**—Turner had **exaggerated the proportions for dramatic effect**. In response, Turner jokingly wrote "W.L." (standing for "**White Lie**") on the frame. It reveals Turner's belief that artistic "Fire" and poetic truth were far more important than mere topographical accuracy. For Turner, travel wasn't about recording facts; it was about gathering the ingredients for a grand, universal fiction.

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John Constable (1776–1837),
The Leaping Horse, 1825,
 129.4 x 188 cm, Royal
 Academy of Arts

John Constable (1776–1837), *The Leaping Horse*, 1825, 129.4 x 188 cm, Royal Academy of Arts

- To understand Constable in 1825, one must **understand the "Six-Footer."** These were his "**Big Machines**"—monumental canvases intended to **command the walls of the Royal Academy** and **prove that a landscape** of a canal could be as "**important**" as a **painting of a King**. *The Leaping Horse* is arguably the **most dynamic** of these. It shows a **barge-horse jumping a low barrier** on the Stour towpath—a scene of local, "Water"-based industry elevated to heroic proportions. The fences were designed to keep livestock in but be low enough for a horse to jump. Barge horses on the River Stour were trained to leap over these three-foot-high fences while still attached to the towrope.
- The distant spire is the tower of **St Mary's Church in the village of Dedham, Suffolk**. Although the church is a real landmark where **Constable attended school**, its placement in the painting is not topographically accurate; Constable moved it for compositional and symbolic reasons
- Constable pioneered the **full-scale oil sketch**. Before committing to the final canvas, he would **paint the entire scene at life-size on a separate 6ft canvas** to work out the "chiaroscuro of nature." These sketches are often **more admired today than the finished works** because they are **wilder, more abstract**, and full of "Constable's Snow." An anecdote from this time reveals his perfectionism: he was so anxious about *The Leaping Horse* that he described the process as "**the struggle of a man for his life**." He was fighting to prove

that the retreat to the countryside was not a small subject, but a **monumental one**.

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https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Leaping_Horse



J.M.W. Turner (1775-1851),
Snow Storm—Steam-Boat off a Harbour's Mouth making Signals in Shallow Water, and going by the Lead, 1842, 91 × 122 cm, Tate Britain

J.M.W. Turner (1775-1851), *Snow Storm—Steam-Boat off a Harbour's Mouth making Signals in Shallow Water, and going by the Lead*. The Author was in this Storm on the Night the Ariel left Harwich, 1842, 91 × 122 cm, Tate Britain

- I have concentrated on landscape but Turner was in love with the sea and painted many seascapes. To experience the power of the sea Turner claimed that in 1842 he was **tied to the mast of Ariel for four hours in a violent storm**. The result was this painting, one critic called it "soapsuds and whitewash" ..
- John Ruskin, the leading English art critic of the Victorian era, though, wrote in 1843 in his book *Modern Painters* that the painting was "**one of the very grandest statements of sea-motion, mist and light, that has ever been put on canvas.**"
- Two years before he had painted ...

NOTES

- "Going by the Lead" means measuring the depth of water using a lead on a long rope marked in fathoms. "Making Signals" means flaring lights or firing guns) to signal there whereabouts. Both indicate a vessel in distress desperately trying to find the harbour mouth in a violent storm.

REFERENCES

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Snow_Storm:_Steam-Boat_off_a_Harbour's_Mouth



J.M.W. Turner (1775-1851), *Slavers Throwing Overboard the Dead and Dying—Typhoon Coming On ('The Slave Ship')*, 1840, 90.8 × 122.6 cm, Museum of Fine Arts Boston

J.M.W. Turner (1775-1851), *Slavers Throwing Overboard the Dead and Dying—Typhoon Coming On ('The Slave Ship')*, 1840, 90.8 × 122.6 cm, Museum of Fine Arts Boston

- In ***The Slave Ship***, Turner's lifelong embrace of the sea reaches a **horrific climax**. This isn't just a seascape; it is a scream of terror across the water. Turner was horrified by the **1781 Zong massacre**, where a **captain threw sick slaves overboard** to collect **insurance money**. Turner painted this specifically for the **1840 World Anti-Slavery Convention**, using his art as a weapon of modern political progress. The "Fire" here is the sunset—a blood-red sky that seems to be judging the atrocity below.
- If you look closely at the foreground, the water is filled with **shackled limbs and swarming fish**. Turner used a technique of "**scumbled**" paint—dragging dry, stiff colour over the surface—to create the spray of the "**Typhoon**." While earlier in his life the sea was a place of adventure, here it is a place of **modern moral reckoning**. A fascinating anecdote: when the great critic John Ruskin's father bought him this painting as a gift, Ruskin eventually **had to sell it because he found the subject so painful** to live with every day. It shows Turner's power to make the landscape an active participant in human sin.

REFERENCES

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Slave_Ship



John Constable (1776-1837),
Dedham Vale, 1828, 144.5 ×
122 cm, Scottish National
Gallery

John Constable (1776-1837), *Dedham Vale*, 1828, 144.5 × 122 cm, Scottish National Gallery

- While Turner's "Fire" in *The Sun of Venice Going to Sea* (1843) captures the shimmering, fragile dissolution of a maritime empire, Constable's *Dedham Vale* (1828) is the **ultimate monument of still water**—the steady, life-giving artery of his own history. This painting represents Constable's retreat at its **most sophisticated**. Exhibited in the year of his **beloved Maria's death**, it was the work that **finally secured his election as a Full Academician**. After decades of being sidelined, Constable reached back to a sketch he had made in 1802, returning to the **view of his youth** to find stability in a time of profound personal and national upheaval.
- Despite Constable's reputation for "**pure**" nature, this work is a **tactical masterpiece**. He deliberately used a "**Claudean**" composition—framing the valley with a large, dark tree on the left, a technique known as repoussoir—to mimic the Old Masters. It was a calculated move to **prove to the Royal Academy** that his "**humble**" Suffolk could be as grand and "classical" as the Italian landscapes of the past.
- By 1828, Constable was **financially secure** due to an **inheritance from Maria's father**, but he called it "**bitter money**" because **she was no longer there to enjoy it**. While Turner's Venice is a **prophetic vision** of empires sinking into the sea, Constable's Vale is a **desperate attempt to anchor the soul**. He wasn't looking at the end of an era; he was looking at the permanence of home. Where

Turner saw the **"Fire" of inevitable decay**, Constable used the "Water" of the Stour to argue that even when a life breaks, **the land remains a sacred, unchanging sanctuary**.

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[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Vale_of_Dedham_\(painting\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Vale_of_Dedham_(painting))



John Constable (1776-1837),
The Valley Farm, 1835, 147.3
 × 125.1 cm, Tate Britain

John Constable (1776-1837), *The Valley Farm*, 1835, 147.3 × 125.1 cm, Tate Britain

- A **late, deeply personal landscape** showing Willy Lot's cottage. A **nostalgic return** to the specific and beloved scene of his youth but in the distance at the gate is what has been called **the dark stranger, a portent of his death** two years later.
- While Turner was dissolving the world into light, Constable was desperately trying to reconstruct it from fragments of the past. ***The Valley Farm*** returns us to the site of his **greatest triumphs**: Willy Lott's house at Flatford. But the "Water" here is different; it feels **heavy, almost stagnant**. The figure in the boat being ferried across the stream. This is a chillingly insightful observation.
- By 1835, Constable was a **man out of time**. He was **physically frail and still deeply mourning Maria**. The figure in the boat is often interpreted as a ferryman, a classical symbol of the transition from life to death—**Charon ferrying us across the River Styx**. The "stranger" represents the **intrusion of the outside world**—and perhaps the inevitability of the end—into his private sanctuary.
- For forty years, the Stour Valley had been his retreat, a place where time stood still. But here, the "stranger" signals that the gate is finally being opened. **The "Water" is no longer a life-giving force**; it is a mirror reflecting the end of an era. **Constable was painfully aware** that the rural world he loved was being destroyed by **the "Fire" of the Industrial Revolution**, and his body was failing

along with it.

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https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Valley_Farm



John Constable (1776-1837), *Salisbury Cathedral from the Meadows*, 1831, 153.7 × 192 cm, Tate Britain

John Constable (1776-1837), *Salisbury Cathedral from the Meadows*, 1831, 153.7 × 192 cm, Tate Britain

- John Constable's *Salisbury Cathedral from the Meadows* (1831) is widely considered the masterpiece of his late career, an monumental "six-footer" canvas that the artist himself called "The Great Salisbury".
- The work is a profound "symbolic metaphor" reflecting Constable's turbulent personal life and political anxieties. Painted three years after the death of his beloved wife, Maria, its dramatic, stormy sky is often interpreted as an expression of his grief and "disturbed" state of mind. A meteorologically **"impossible" rainbow arches** over the cathedral, **ending at Leadenhall, the home of his close friend Archdeacon John Fisher**, serving as a tribute to their friendship and a symbol of hope.
- Beyond personal loss, the painting carries heavy political weight. At the time, **the Anglican Church faced threats** from the **Reform Act of 1832** and Catholic Emancipation. By depicting the cathedral **"under a cloud"** but pierced by a resilient spire, Constable symbolizes the **Church's endurance** through social upheaval.
- Technically, the painting is noted for its expressive **"thick, textured paint"** and use of palette knives, creating a visceral sense of nature's "wild energy". But it is still peaceful, bucolic and eternal.

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