

**Birkbeck BA History of Art,  
Final Year Dissertation**

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**JOHN CONSTABLE'S *THE HAY WAIN*: A CASE STUDY**

**COMPARING THE ENGLISH AND FRENCH ATTITUDES**

**TO LANDSCAPE PAINTING IN THE 1820S**



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**Abstract**

The critical spectator's response to John Constable's *The Hay Wain* will be used to compare cultural attitudes to art in London and Paris in the early 1820s. The analysis is based on a variety of sources including a little known summary of the reviews in England and France at the National Art Library. The comparative analysis of these two cultures through their response to a single work shows that some of the reactions were shared but there were significant differences. I will suggest that the common themes reflect shared cultural assumptions about art and the differences tell us something about the unique aspects of each culture.

The analysis is based on the response of what I have called the 'critical spectators', namely those people who wrote their reaction or whose reaction was recorded and they include magazine and newspaper critics, dealers and artists. Their views do not necessarily reflect the views of the majority of society so we must draw our conclusions carefully. Their reactions in both countries tended to be polarized, that is they were either very positive or very negative and the negative criticism typically found fault with the technique—the surface finish, use of colour and what were called 'white spots'. More significantly, in England the polarization reflected personal opinion and in France it was politically based and took the form of two schools of thought—the academic establishment which tended to be neo-classical and the young Romantics who were trying to bring about change.

Art in France was part of the state and Louis XVIII and Charles X used culture for propaganda purposes and appropriated the neo-classical style of David and adapted it to provide academic authority through its imperial and classical references. But the new regime was also about change and counterrevolution and the new Romantic style and *plein air* painting of Valenciennes also appealed to the loyalists. With the return of the monarchy following the end of the Napoleonic War everything British had become fashionable and British painters were seen to be unconventional, vigorous and innovative. The resolution was to become the *juste milieu* but in the early 1820s the British landscape artists appeared to offer both change, with its promises and dangers, and the stability of a royalist tradition.

Modern commentators often contrast the mixed response *The Hay Wain* received in London in 1821 with the apparently first-class reception in Paris only three years later as evidence for Constable's influence on the early development of modern art. However, the evidence presented here suggests the gold medal was awarded partly for political reasons and the reaction of Delacroix may have been overstated. Nevertheless, the strong reaction invoked by Constable's paintings tells us a great deal about the cultural assumptions and role of art in both countries in the early 1820s.

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**TO LANDSCAPE PAINTING IN THE 1820S**

In 1821 the Royal Academy exhibited John Constable's *The Hay Wain* (see Figure 1) with the title *Landscape: Noon* and it was exhibited three years later in the Louvre.<sup>1</sup> It therefore provides us with the opportunity to compare the response to a single work of art in two cultures at about the same time. By comparing the responses we find that there are common concerns but also concerns that are uniquely French that relate to the political situation at the time.

The common concerns tell us what the critical spectator in France had in common with his counterpart in England.<sup>2</sup> *The Hay Wain* was controversial and so highlights many of these concerns including the importance of surface finish, the role of the sketch, whether to paint direct from nature or follow the Old Masters, and the changing role of the academies and their approach to art theory, particularly the hierarchy of genres and the importance of line over colour. The critical response in France also included the award of a gold medal and Eugène Delacroix's alleged repainting of his *Massacre at Scio*.

The primary sources used here are Constable's letters and a typescript copy of newspaper and magazine articles in France and England produced by R. Beckett in 1962 and stored at the National Art Library.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> J. Egerton, *The British School* (London: National Gallery Publications, 1998), p. 42 and L. Parris and I. Fleming-Williams, *Constable* (London: Tate Gallery, 1991), pp. 39-40.

<sup>2</sup> The term 'critical spectator' is used to distinguish between those who recorded their judgement concerning works of art and those who produced such works, although some, such as Delacroix, did both. All the critical spectators are male, a fundamental cultural bias that is not explored further.

<sup>3</sup> R. Beckett, *Correspondence and Other Memorials of John Constable, R.A., Volume XX* (unpublished typescript, 1962). The French reviews were translated by V. Shafe.



Figure 1: John Constable, *Landscape: Noon (The Hay Wain)*, 1821, oil on canvas, 130.2 x 185.4 cm, National Gallery, London

### **The Art World of the 1820s**

In France art had a state function and art criticism was therefore directly or indirectly political. Art was controlled by the *Académie Royale des Beaux Arts* which had been established over 180 years and was part of the state apparatus for promoting the prestige of France.<sup>4</sup> The Revolution resulted in its role being split into administration, handled by the *Institut National* and teaching handled by *L'École des Beaux-arts* but in practice little changed and in 1816 the *ancien-régime* title of 'Académie Royale' was restored.<sup>5</sup> It was an intensely political organisation as is indicated by the first round of the 1816 *Prix de Rome* judging which was overturned to make sure a pupil of the Davidian school did not win the prize.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> A. Boime, *Art in an Age of Counterrevolution 1815-1848* (London: The University of Chicago Press, 2004), pp. 15-16.

<sup>5</sup> A. Boime, *The Academy and French Painting in the Nineteenth Century* (London: Phaidon Press, 1971), p. 15.

<sup>6</sup> Boime (2004), p. 15.





Figure 2: Pierre-Henri de Valenciennes,  
*Study of Clouds over the Roman Campagna*,  
c. 1787, oil on paper on cardboard, paper support: 19 x 32.1 cm  
National Gallery of Art, Washington, DC

One example of the politicisation of art in France was that although the neo-classical propaganda adopted by Napoleon was quickly acquired by Louis XVIII and Charles X the neo-classical artists associated with Napoleon were killed or went into exile. The new monarchy was about change and counterrevolution and the new Romantic style also appealed to many loyalists. The resolution between the neo-classical and Romantic schools was eventually to become the *juste milieu* style but in the early 1820s the British landscape artist appeared to offer both change, with its promises and dangers, and the stability of a royalist tradition.

Despite this politicisation the hold the academies had over the art world was not absolute and by the beginning of the nineteenth century there was an anti-academic reaction across Europe and the anti-establishment artistic 'genius' became common.<sup>7</sup>

Landscape painting was well established in France even in the eighteenth century with leading exponents such as Claude-Joseph Vernet. In 1817 a *Prix de Rome* for landscape was introduced although it was only awarded every four

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<sup>7</sup> M. Craske, *Art in Europe 1700-1830* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), pp. 42-48.

years to prevent it becoming too popular.<sup>8</sup> The award was established by neo-classicists of the revolutionary generation, such as Pierre-Narcisse Guérin, teacher of both Theodore Géricault and Eugène Delacroix and it attracted as many participants as history painting.

The first landscape *Prix de Rome* was won by Achille-Etan Michallon who had studied under Pierre-Henri de Valenciennes, one of the most advanced landscape theorists of his day who placed great emphasis on working *en plein-air* and on *l'étude*. Figure 2 shows a study of clouds Valenciennes made in 1787 some 34 years before Constable's cloud studies.<sup>9</sup> His book of 1800, *Elémens de la Perspective Pratique* became internationally popular and 'was the Bible for the future Barbizon painters'.

In England the art world was commercial rather than political and although the Royal Academy emulated some the practices of the *Académie* it was not state funded and had to hold an annual exhibition to raise money. Sir Joshua Reynolds, the first President of the Royal Academy, laid out the rules for producing fine art in his series of fifteen lectures (the *Discourses*) between 1769 and 1790.<sup>10</sup> These rules included rigorous academic training and the study of the Old Masters.

Like the *Académie* Reynolds followed the 'hierarchy of genres' originally formulated by André Félibien in 1667.<sup>11</sup> This saw history painting as the pinnacle of artistic endeavour, followed by portraiture, genre painting, landscape and still life. Reynolds's lectures concentrated on history painting and the equivalent of the *Prix de Rome* for landscape did not exist in England.

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<sup>8</sup> Boime (2004), pp. 452-461.

<sup>9</sup> Boime (1971), p. 136.

<sup>10</sup> B. Taylor, *Art for the Nation* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1999), pp. 20-28.

<sup>11</sup> C. Harrison, *Art in Theory 1648-1815* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2000), pp. 108-118.



Figure 3: Full-size sketch for *The Hay Wain*  
c.1820, oil on canvas, 128 x 184 cm, Victoria and Albert Museum

Many regarded landscape painting, particularly topographic landscape as morally empty as it involved no imagination. However, there were subdivisions; in France two types of landscape painting were recognised, rural landscape which used colour and heroic-classical landscape which included classical references.<sup>12</sup> Turner, the leading landscape artist in England, created a similar distinction in his *Liber Studiorum*. Turner also gave a series of lectures at the Royal Academy on landscape as a background to history painting but compared to France the theoretical debate concerning landscape painting was limited.

During the nineteenth century landscape painting undermined the role of the academy, not because it involved going out-of-doors but because it meant learning by looking at nature rather than going through the academic training programme. As Hans Belting said,

*In the nineteenth century the artist went out into the open air in order to see nature differently from the way it had been handed down to him by a canon or a workshop tradition.<sup>13</sup>*

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<sup>12</sup> Boime (2004), p. 453.

<sup>13</sup> Hans Belting, *The End of the History of Art?* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1987), p. 24.



Figure 4: Sketch used for *The Hay Wain*, c.1820, oil on paper on panel, 12.5 x 18 cm, Paul Mellon Collection

Valenciennes's pupil Jacques Deperthes went so far as to suggest landscape was of greater social value than history painting as only the educated could appreciate history painting while landscape enjoyed a broader audience.<sup>14</sup>

Ray Lambert points out that Constable had a thoughtful approach to painting and developed what he called a Grand Theory, first referred to in a letter to Fisher in 1825.<sup>15</sup> Constable in a letter to Maria in 1814 refers to Rev. Archibald Alison's theory of associationism and Lambert points out that this provides an explanation of how landscape can communicate religious and moral feeling which thus sets it above still life and portraiture and puts it on the same level as history painting. Through its unity of composition a painting can control the 'beholder's part' in the creation of meaning and elevate the response from the aesthetic to the moral and religious.

Constable also attributes poetic value to colour and chiaroscuro and so equates these painterly elements with the classical liberal art of poetry. Lambert argues that by the mid-1820s Constable had developed a Grand Theory that enabled landscape to represent moral feeling in a way previously only associated with history painting in the grand manner.<sup>16</sup> This was done through the expression of universal qualities inherent in the representation of specific

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<sup>14</sup> Boime (2004), p. 456.

<sup>15</sup> R. Lambert, *John Constable and the Theory of Landscape Painting* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2005), pp. 47-53.

<sup>16</sup> Parris and Fleming Williams, *Constable*, Tate Gallery, 1991 in Lambert (2005), p. 52.





Figure 5: John Constable, *A Rowing Boat Moored by a River Bank*, c.1809-11, black chalk on blue-grey paper, 9 x 12.6 m., Courtauld Institute

locations in a 'scientific' way. However, the critics and other commentators do not seem to have been influenced by Constable's theories but by his aesthetic appeal and by expressing a 'truth to nature' lacking in the Old Masters.

These new ideas concerning the role of landscape offered opportunities not just to artists antagonistic to the academy and its rigid control, but to skilled artists who had failed the rigorous training programme and artists looking for a wider audience.

As soon as the Napoleonic War ended there was a great deal of travel and an interchange of these ideas between artists. For example, John Crome visited Paris in 1814 and met Jacques-Louis David, David Wilkie also visited the same year, John Sell Cotman visited Normandy three times and in the other direction Théodore Géricault visited in 1820 to help with the display of his *Raft of the Medusa*.<sup>17</sup>

However, this interchange of ideas was not entirely symmetrical; young French artists saw English art as vigorous, exciting and novel, and not bound by the stifling conventions of the *Académie* but English artists mostly looked to Italian and Dutch art. Constable was typical in seeing French art as decadent

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<sup>17</sup> S. Lodge, 'Géricault in England', *The Burlington Magazine*, Vol. 107, No. 753 (Dec., 1965), p. 616, P. Noon, *Constable to Delacroix* (London: Tate, 2003), p. 30 and D. Brown, 'Crossing the Channel' in P. Noon (2003), pp. 46-65.



Figure 6: Detail of the Dog in *The Hay Wain*

and described French art as 'an excrescence' and he used the term 'French taste' to mean the opposite of good taste.<sup>18</sup>

### **The Sketch and Surface Finish**

We shall see that *The Hay Wain* was criticised most severely for its surface finish as paintings for exhibition were expected to have a perfect surface (*facture*). The conventional and firmly held academic view was that in order to be displayed a painting had to exhibit an appropriate level of detail in the key areas and it had to have all trace of the painting process eliminated. This was a difficult and time-consuming procedure that required years of training and for which there was no shortcut. For the academician a properly finished painting was not just aesthetically correct but morally correct as it demonstrated the care and duty required of all true artists.<sup>19</sup> The breaking of this smooth, polished academic *facture* into *taches* (patches) of paint symbolized the breaking of the academic stranglehold on art. We can see Constables use of *taches* in a close up of *The Hay Wain* (Figure 6).

A rough surface finish also implied the painting was a sketch. An artist working from nature, such as Valenciennes, laid great emphasis on the sketch but only as part of the academies' formal training and it was never regarded as

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<sup>18</sup> Lambert (2005), p. 176.

<sup>19</sup> Boime (1971), p. 9.

a finished work (*fini*). There were different types of sketch—the *ébauche* was the preliminary base of the finished work whereas the *étude* was usually in a smaller format and served as a guide to the composition of the final painting. Early, often just outline sketches were known as *croquis*.

Constable's full-size sketches which he used for his six-footers were unique; they could be seen as a type of *ébauche* but painted on a separate canvas and worked up much closer to a finished work or as a full-size *étude* (Figure 3). Constable also produced conventional sketches or *études* such as Figure 4, as well as *croquis* (Figure 5). It is clear, therefore, that Constable's exhibited work was not a sketch but the result of careful planning and preparation.

### **The Critical Response to *The Hay Wain* in England**

English art criticism in the early nineteenth century consisted of personal opinion and little detailed analysis. Ivy describes the critics as, 'A motley crew, many still veiled in anonymity, they praised and blamed according to personal preferences...no reviewers seriously challenged the hierarchic view of the genres.'<sup>20</sup> As we shall see an exception should be made for John Ruskin who, like the French critics, based his review on a theoretical framework.

Constable received very mixed reviews throughout his life but prior to 1820 most criticism was supportive and encouraged him to improve his technique. Starting with the response to *The Hay Wain* in 1821 many critics complained about Constable's surface finish 'powdered with white' and how he must have employed a 'dredging box', to create his 'dashing lights, and broken tints, and strawling limbs [*sic*]' and so produce an effect 'most disagreeable to the eye'. By the late 1820s the criticism had expanded from a specific complaint about white spots to a broader complaint about the whole surface finish until, with *Hadleigh Castle* in 1831, we get the 'accursed bespotting blanc d'argent, or

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<sup>20</sup> J. Ivy, *Constable and the Critics 1802-1837* (Woodbridge, Suffolk: The Boydell Press, 1991), p. 6. Ivy uses the Beckett (1962) unpublished typescript as her source for the English critical reaction but she does not include the French reaction in her book.



Figure 7: Detail of *The Hay Wain* showing 'white spots'

white-wash splashing, as Mr. Turner will have it'.<sup>21</sup> Some reviews were extreme, for example, *The Gentlemen's Magazine*, May 1829, commented on a Constable as '...an execrable taste, having no resemblance to any appearance in Nature.'<sup>22</sup>

However, these negative views must be balanced against the praise, 'extraordinary pencilling [painting]', 'vivid spirit', 'glittering freshness', 'nearer to the look of nature than any modern landscape whatever', 'an extraordinary example of verisimilitude'.<sup>23</sup> He was certainly not ignored as his biographer Charles Leslie maintained and by 1834 he was receiving the highest praise such as 'we know of no one whose works we contemplate with greater satisfaction.'<sup>24</sup>

*The Hay Wain* was the first painting to be criticised for white spots and the most negative reaction was in *Bell's Weekly Messenger* which asked 'why all this

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<sup>21</sup> Ivy (1991), p. 47.

<sup>22</sup> Ivy (1991), p. 46.

<sup>23</sup> Ivy (1991), p. 40.

<sup>24</sup> *The Gentleman's Magazine*, March 1834 in Ivy (1991), p. 4.



piebald scrambling [sic] in the finishing, as if a plasterer had been at work where the picture hung.’<sup>25</sup> He speculates that Constable might have intended the painting to be viewed from a certain distance but concludes ‘This is certainly an affectation and a trickery of art unknown to our best painters...We can examine Claude, Ruysdael or Poussin almost with a microscopic-eye.’ The *Literary Gazette* criticizes ‘a want of effect in this landscape, arising principally from those scattered and glittering lights that pervade every part.’<sup>26</sup>

Constable did further work on *The Hay Wain* after it was exhibited to remove the ‘powder’ and this indicates that Constable may have taken notice of the critics and modified the painting. We can see white spots in the painting today, for example, the leaves of the central tree, the wagon and the river (Figure 7) but it is not clear how the painting looked when first shown. Constable also saw the need to ‘subdue a few lights’ in *The White Horse* (exhibited 1819) and another critic commented on the ‘busy and flickered’ finish of *Stratford Mill* (exhibited 1820) so it could be a technique Constable started experimenting with as early as 1819.<sup>27</sup>

We find that even Constable’s most positive reviews often make some comment about the surface finish, such as Robert Hunt in *The Examiner* who thought he had represented nature more closely ‘than any modern landscape whatever...We challenge the Dutch Masters to show us any thing better than this.’ and had a ‘sky never at any time seen exceeded.’<sup>28</sup> Although Hunt mentioned what he called the ‘catching lights’, which may be a reference to white spots, he saw these as merely a ‘slight flaw in a diamond’ and objected when he saw Constable had removed them by the time *The Hay Wain* was exhibited at the British Institution in 1822.

The phrases ‘true to nature’ and ‘naturalism’ are often used by critics to describe Constable’s work but unfortunately they do not make clear exactly what

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<sup>25</sup> *Bell’s Weekly Messenger*, 28<sup>th</sup> May 1821, p. 165 in Ivy (1991), pp. 40 and 88-89.

<sup>26</sup> *Literary Gazette*, 2<sup>nd</sup> June 1821, p. 346 in Ivy (1991), p. 90.

<sup>27</sup> Ivy (1991), p. 43.

<sup>28</sup> Hunt, *Examiner*, 27 May, 1821, pp. 331-332 in Ivy (1991), pp. 40-42.

they meant.<sup>29</sup> It could be they thought his use of colour was more accurate than the browns and dark tones of Claude and Poussin or possibly his representation of trees, clouds and water were more suggestive of a particular moment rather than a generalised scene. This goes to the heart of the dilemma faced by landscape painters, should they learn from the Old Masters or sit in front of nature and try to reproduce what they saw.

Another resolution to this problem was described in *The Observer* which said that in *The Hay Wain* 'There is much skill shown in the performance, of which Ruysdoen [sic] has evidently been the model. It is however, original enough to escape the servility with which imitators are generally branded.'<sup>30</sup> In other words, as long as an artist makes a gesture towards an Old Master by using them as a model it is better to be original than merely an imitator and by this argument Constable's originality could be accepted. For some critics, however, he took originality to the point of affectation and trickery.<sup>31</sup>

### **John Ruskin's Response to Constable**

Ruskin critical analysis of Constable is interesting as he was the leading English art critic of the nineteenth century. However, he did not comment on Constable until later and when he did it was as a reaction to Leslie's biography in which he compares Constable with Turner.<sup>32</sup> Ruskin, as ever, leapt to Turner's defence and it is likely that Ruskin had seen few if any of Constable's paintings but based his comments on the mezzotints by Lucas in Leslie's *Life of Constable*.

As usual in a Ruskin review he starts with fulsome praise, he found Constable 'thoroughly original, thoroughly honest, free from affectation, manly in character, frequently successful in cool colour' but he then added the killing blow, he had 'a morbid preference for subjects of a low order' and he added 'I have never seen...any signs of his being able to draw.'

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<sup>29</sup> J. Ivy, (1991), p. 85.

<sup>30</sup> *The Observer*, 25<sup>th</sup> June 1821 in Ivy (1991), p. 90.

<sup>31</sup> Ivy (1991), p. 41.

<sup>32</sup> R. Beckett (1962), pp. 1848-56 (1-8).

Ruskin's view was that 'Paintings are not there to give you the feeling of walking in a shower or out in a field but to look beautiful' and this enabled him to conclude 'Turner is the greatest artist'. Interestingly, he adds that he would prefer to look out of a window at the Alps than look at Turner and this suggests an artist should aim at representing a view as if seen through a window. Ruskin even admits that Constable was better at this than Turner. However, he adds 'There are some truths, easily obtained, which give a deceptive resemblance to nature; others to be obtained with difficulty, which cause no deception, but give inner and deep resemblance.'

To emphasize this distinction further he claims Constable perceives as much as 'an intelligent fawn, and a skylark. Turner perceives at a glance the whole sum of visible truth.' For Ruskin 'truth to nature' involved 'truth to imagination' and morality more than verisimilitude.

### **The Hay Wain in France**

*The Hay Wain* was seen at the 1821 exhibition by Géricault and the writer Charles Nodier who praised it in his *Promenade de Dieppe aux Montagnes d'Ecosse*.<sup>33</sup> They promoted the painting in Paris helped by reports from several other French artists and this led to the Parisian dealer John Arrowsmith becoming interested.

Arrowsmith came over in 1822 and made an offer of £70 for *The Hay Wain*, but this was less than half the asking price and Constable turned it down.<sup>34</sup> In 1824 with the increasing anglomania in Paris, Arrowsmith returned and purchased it with *View on the Stour near Dedham* and a small painting of Yarmouth Jetty for £250 and he arranged to have the first two and a view of Hampstead Heath exhibited at the Salon that autumn.<sup>35</sup>

On July 8 *The Times* reported, 'Two landscapes from the pencil of Mr. Constable, the eminent English artist, have arrived at Paris...These landscapes

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<sup>33</sup> Ivy (1991), pp. 93-94 and 103.

<sup>34</sup> Lyles (2006), p. 142.

<sup>35</sup> Egerton (1998), pp. 47-48.

have attracted great attention at Paris, and are justly admired by the French painters.'<sup>36</sup>

They were first hung up high so they might be seen from a distance; but there was a reshuffling of the pictures at the beginning of October and they were then brought down in view of the interest they had aroused, to be hung in the Salon Carré, on the line, near a landscape by Watelet, leader of the academic school of landscape.<sup>37</sup>

The exhibition in the Louvre in 1824 became known as the British Salon because of the large number of British artists exhibited. At the conclusion of the exhibition Constable was awarded a gold medal by Charles X on the recommendation of Comte de Forbin, Director of the Louvre. Richard Parkes Bonington and Anthony Van Dyke Copley-Fielding were also awarded a gold medal and Sir Thomas Lawrence was awarded a *Légion d'honneur*. It has been suggested by B. Jobert that,

*Lawrence was...awarded the Légion d'honneur (and Constable a gold medal), perhaps more of an official tribute to his position than the actual recognition of his talent.*<sup>38</sup>

In the twentieth century the gold medal became part of the Constable myth of the Romantic hero; little appreciated in his own country but who went on regardless, pursuing his own vision, and eventually, after his death, became recognised as one of the founders of modern art.

Charles X had been brought up in Britain and owed his return to the throne to Britain and so at this state controlled exhibition at which he awarded 99 gold medals it is not surprising that three were awarded to British artists.<sup>39</sup> As well as Britain's defeat of Napoleon allowing Louis XIII and his supporters to return to power the successful English political and industrial systems were potential role models. British art was regarded as new and England was the

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<sup>36</sup> Ivy (1991), p. 110.

<sup>37</sup> R. Beckett, *John Constable's Correspondence IV* (London, Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1952), p. 199.

<sup>38</sup> B. Jobert, 'A la recherche de l'école anglaise: Lawrence, Wilkie and Martin, three British artists in Restoration France' in C. Payne and W. Vaughan (eds.) *English Accents Interactions with British Art c.1776-1855* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2004), p. 128.

<sup>39</sup> Boime (2004), p. 443.



innovator, 'the first to tread the path'.<sup>40</sup> The subject of *The Hay Wain* was also appreciated as Restoration France longed for images of rest and peace and for many years haymaking had been regarded as a cheerful activity.<sup>41</sup>

On June 19 Delacroix recorded in his *Journal*: 'Saw Cogniet, and the picture by Géricault, also the Constables. It was too much for one day. That Constable did me a world of good. Came home about five o'clock, Spent two hours in the studio. Great want of sex. I am utterly abandoned.'<sup>42</sup> The first three sentences are often quoted in isolation to show Delacroix's debt to Constable but the complete quote suggests he had other pressing concerns that day and as it is the only reference to Constable that year his written reaction tells us little.

The relevance of Delacroix's reaction is that it is widely reported that as a result of seeing Constable he repainted his *Massacre of Scio* (Figure 8).<sup>43</sup> Nowhere does Delacroix make such a claim and the first reference is in 1855. The account we know today was written in 1856 by, Villot, who did not know Delacroix in 1824 and who wrote two conflicting accounts. An examination of the painting suggest it may have been the foreground rather than the landscape that benefited from Constable's technique and the contrast between foreground and background is in direct opposition to Constable's ideas (see Figure 9).

For Constable the French reception was rewarding both financially and emotionally. Constable was represented in Paris by Arrowsmith who introduced another Parisian dealer, Claude Schroth at a time when no British dealer bought any of his works.<sup>44</sup> Within a few years both Arrowsmith and Schroth had gone out of business but for a short period, when Arrowsmith alone bought twenty paintings, Constable sold more paintings than he ever sold in England.<sup>45</sup> The

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<sup>40</sup> C. Payne and W. Vaughan, *English Accents* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2004), p. 252.

<sup>41</sup> Boime (2004), p. 444.

<sup>42</sup> E. Delacroix, *The Journal of Eugène Delacroix* (London: Phaidon, 1995), p. 49.

<sup>43</sup> M. Florisoone 'Constable and the "Massacre de Scio" by Delacroix', *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes*, Vol. 20, No. 1/2 (Jan.-Jun. 1957), pp. 180-185.

<sup>44</sup> G. Reynolds, *Constable: The Natural Painter* (London: Cory, Adams & MacKay, 1965), p. 97.

<sup>45</sup> Beckett (1952), pp. 175-211.



Figure 8: Eugène Delacroix, *Scène des massacres de Scio; familles grecques attendant la mort ou l'esclavage*, Salon de 1824, 419 x 354 cm, Louvre

dealers in Paris had done more than anyone to promote British artists in Paris and they 'engineered the foreign presence in the Louvre galleries.'<sup>46</sup>

### **The Critical Response to *The Hay Wain* in France**

Art criticism was much more extensive in France and the writer was more often named and was more likely to be a literary, thoughtful and knowledgeable authority on art. Critical opinion was divided into two camps based on the political allegiance of the newspaper in which it appeared.<sup>47</sup> This division had come to a head with the debate about the rejection of Géricault's *Wreck of the Medusa*.

Stendhal in *Journal de Paris* clearly summarises the two sides of the argument. One side is judging 'according to David', and demands every figure

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<sup>46</sup> Noon (2003), p. 99.

<sup>47</sup> Beckett (1962), p. 1824(7).

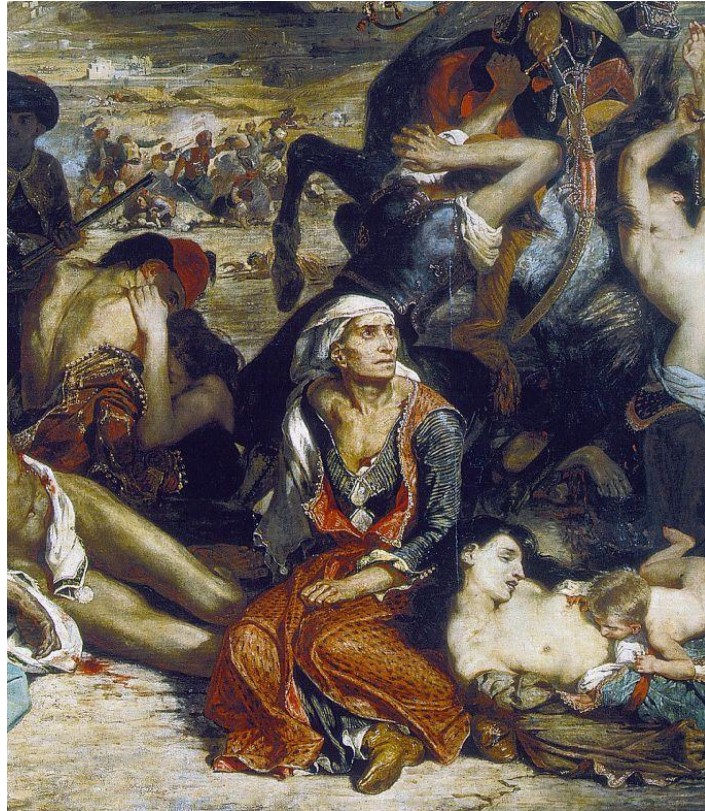


Figure 9: Detail of *Scène des massacres de Scio*

painted must be a 'copy of a statue' which viewers should admire even if it puts them to sleep.<sup>48</sup> On the other side of the argument magazines such as *Le Constitutionnel* use 'beautiful but vague phrases' but in the end defend the new ideas. Later in the year Stendhal dismisses Lawrence as 'quite mediocre' but admires Constable's 'magnificent landscapes' and says France has nothing to compete with them. He regards his 'delightful landscape' as the mirror of nature and feels 'it quite destroys the grand landscape of M. Watelet, which is placed alongside'.

The following week Stendhal again writes about Constable's paintings and how their 'truth has a charm that immediately grabs you and draws you into the painting.' Stendhal expands on what he means by 'truth' and denies it exists in classical paintings. He goes on to say 'In the paintings of the old school the trees

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<sup>48</sup> Stendhal, *Journal de Paris*, 30 August in Beckett (1962), p. 1824(7).

have style; they are elegant but they lack truth. M. Constable on the contrary is true like a mirror.'<sup>49</sup>

The conservative critics were headed by Étienne Delécluze, writing for the *Journal des Débats* and the liberals by Adolphe Thiers writing for the *Le Constitutionnel*.

Delécluze was an anglophobe who lamented French artists abandoning antiquity for the Gothic and 'fog of London'.<sup>50</sup> He admires *The Hay Wain* for its 'vivacity', 'frankness' and a 'truth of colour which cannot be praised too highly'.<sup>51</sup> However, he claims it has a feigned naiveté which he finds disagreeable. He points out that the objects can only be recognised by their colour and like a piece of music that is all harmony he feels they do not amount to anything. This is a common theme among French critics who expect forms to be delineated by line. Delécluze says he will suspend judgement until he sees an English artist use the same style to paint some 'calm, majestic and enchanting sites in Italy' so they can be compared with the *Polyphemus* of Poussin and the *Windmill* of Claude Lorrain.

On the other side of the debate Thiers, writing in *Le Constitutionnel* says that 'the landscapes of Mr. Constable...are much superior to everything we produced this year.' He dismisses the other critics and argues it is full of lightness and truth and the French should show their superiority by being honest and recognising a true genius.<sup>52</sup>

An article from a now unknown French newspaper headed *Deux paysages anglais de M. Constable de Londres* describes Constable's style as dangerous as it 'frees artists from all strict study'.<sup>53</sup> It recognises that it was 'Painted in a style so different from that of our school' and it recognises the 'vigour and richness of tone' but the clouds are described as 'large balls of cotton rolling one over the other' and the trees as 'enormous cauliflowers.' It then presents the dilemma

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<sup>49</sup> Beckett (1962), pp. 1824 (8-9).

<sup>50</sup> Noon (2003), p. 15.

<sup>51</sup> Beckett (1962), pp. 1824 (9-10).

<sup>52</sup> Beckett (1962), p. 1824 (12).

<sup>53</sup> Lord Windsor, *John Constable, R.A.*, London 1903, pp. 63-67 in Ivy (1991), pp. 108-9. This French article is included by Ivy as Constable saw a translation and it was published later in English.



many critics faced, if you admire *The Hay Wain* then that must mean 'the celebrated Poussin is nothing in your eyes, mere dotage.'

Later in the year Constable wrote to Fisher summarising his views of his wife's translation of this article and others.<sup>54</sup> It is interesting that he treats the criticism lightly; he finds them very amusing but 'shallow and feeble.' He glosses over the negative points saying 'they want the objects more formed' and he notes they equate the paintings to 'harmonious warblings of the Aeolian lyre, which *mean* nothing' but he manages to see all this as 'the highest *praise*' as he feels they are equating his painting to poetry. He adds a positive note that he has heard that landscape students 'say on going to begin a landscape, Oh! this shall be—a *la Constable!!!*'

Constable sees English criticism as negative even when it is mostly full of praise but he sees French criticism as positive even when it is mostly or even entirely negative. This probably reflects the low opinion he has of the 'shallow and feeble' French criticism and he was also being praised by Arrowsmith and selling well in France at the time.

A. Jal wrote a dialog *L'Artiste et le Philosophe, entretiens critiques sur le Salon de 1824* in which an artist and a philosopher debate Constable work.<sup>55</sup> The artist starts by describing Constable's style as wild and peculiar ('*la manière sauvage et bizarre*'). The artist shows the philosopher Constable's pictures and he claims they are very good, 'nature itself', 'it is a landscape seen through a window'. The artist complains that the 'illusion disappears if you get nearer...he has calculated his effect like that of a stage set.' The artist also complains that art must have beauty as well as represent objects. We see here similarities with the argument put forward by Ruskin.

In an article in the *Gazette de France* M. Chauvin describes the English method as 'all due to magic and optical illusions' and adds that Constable's

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<sup>54</sup> Beckett (1952), pp. 200-201.

<sup>55</sup> A. Jal, 1824, pp. 292-5 in Beckett (1962), p. 1824 (14).

technique owes much to that of the chief stage set painter of the *Opéra*.<sup>56</sup> This second reference to stage scenery positions Constable not as an artist but as a mere tradesman.

An anonymous article in the loyalist *L'Oriflamme* wondered why so many praised Constable 'to the skies' as his paintings look as if they have been created using the technique recommended by Leonardo da Vinci of throwing a paint soaked sponge at a canvas to make a painting.<sup>57</sup> The article goes on to point out that 'We don't know...where his figures begin and where they end.' It begrudgingly praises his 'simplicity and grandeur and understanding of space' but is concerned that young artists would be seduced by the new style as it was thought it did not require the years of dedicated formal training that underpinned French art.

The artists Paul Huet, Dupré, Rousseau and Cabat, the main members of the movement to reform art were delighted with Constable's work and with the help this brought to their own attempts. Paul Huet said that Constable's work was an important event in the development of French art and although Géricault had pronounced his work masterpieces ('chef d'œuvre') in Paris they suffered the fate of anything novel—enthusiasm on the one hand and scorn on the other.<sup>58</sup> The Romantic Movement was entering a 'feverish period' and Huet maintained that the admiration of young artists, although there were few of them, was unlimited. He also said 'it was necessary to go back to Rembrandt to find such bold execution.'

One French commentator, Amadée Pichot wrote, 'It is not certainly without a feeling of mortification, that I proclaim the superiority of the English landscape painters over ours.'<sup>59</sup> Delacroix later wrote 'It seems to me the

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<sup>56</sup> M. Chauvin, Salon de mil huit cent vingt-quatre, *Gazette de France*, 1825, p. 176 in Beckett (1962), p. 1824 (16).

<sup>57</sup> Anonymous, *L'Oriflamme* 1825, pp 107-8 in Beckett (1962), p. 1824 (17). In fact, Leonardo recommended looking at a wall spotted with stains to gain inspiration for novel landscape patterns, see Leonardo da Vinci, *The Notebooks of Leonardo Da Vinci* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1999), p. 178. The article may refer to Alexander Cozens's technique of "blotting" published in 1785.

<sup>58</sup> Beckett (1962), pp. 1824 (20-21).

<sup>59</sup> P. Noon, 'The Finest Poetic Description' in *Constable to Delacroix* (London: Tate, 2003), p. 192.

English School is young, that they seek to be natural, while we seek to imitate other paintings.’<sup>60</sup>

### **The Interaction between Constable and the Critical Spectator**

Constable was always very aware of advancing his career and during the 1810s he seems to have responded to criticism by working on his technique and starting his six footers to gain a better position in the Academy’s exhibition.<sup>61</sup> However, despite all the reviews and Constable’s extensive correspondence, we cannot ‘confirm or disprove that any alterations in his handling were a direct response to the criticisms rather than a result of his own personal search.’<sup>62</sup>

By 1824 Constable felt his success in life was pretty certain partly because he had sold three large pictures to strangers and he was being praised by Arrowsmith.<sup>63</sup> According to his correspondence Constable was driven by a search for originality in order to establish his ‘own ground’ and in 1825 he wrote to Fischer,

*I deeply feel the honour of having found an original style & independent of him who would be Lord over all—I mean Turner—I believe it would be difficult to say that there is a bit of landscape that does not emanate from that source.*<sup>64</sup>

This indicates how much concern Constable felt about finding a unique style and one that would not be regarded as derivative of Turner.<sup>65</sup> He eschewed bravura and flashy technique so he had to find a representation that was distinctive yet followed the precepts of Reynolds and the Old Masters.<sup>66</sup> We know that Constable wanted to become an academician and this may have driven his search for a unique style. He did eventually become an academician in

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<sup>60</sup> Delacroix, 1858 in C. Payne (2004), p. 252.

<sup>61</sup> Ivy (1991), p. 40, J. Gage ‘Constable: The Big Picture’ in Lyles (2006), p. 20 and Beckett (1962), p. 1812 (1).

<sup>62</sup> Ivy (1991), p. 40.

<sup>63</sup> Beckett (1952), p. 157.

<sup>64</sup> Constable, Fisher letters, p. 208.

<sup>65</sup> Constable was a late starter and his first work was not exhibited until 1802 when he was 27, the year that Turner, who was only a year older, was made a Royal Academician, see A. Lyles, *Constable: The Great Landscapes* (London: Tate Publishing, 2006), pp. 33-34.

<sup>66</sup> J. Hayes, *British Paintings of the Sixteenth through Nineteenth Centuries* (Washington: National Gallery of Art, 1992), p. 28. Constable revered Reynolds and the Old Masters, see Lambert (2005), pp. 29 and 173.

1829, by a single vote, but the public recognition he desired continued to elude him despite the many positive reviews he received in the English press.

This desire for recognition raises the question of why Constable persisted with his much criticized surface finish. Modern reviewers see it is part of Constable's genius and so regard his refusal to change as an example of his integrity. However, at the time nothing was fixed and so his persistence indicates it had become part of his 'original style.' In a letter to Fisher with reference to the way in which *The Hay Wain* was moved closer to the spectator by Count Forbain Constable surmises that the Count, not being an artist placed them at a distance from the spectator as the 'colours were rough' but 'they found their mistake as they then acknowledged the richness of the texture—and the attention to the surface of objects.'<sup>67</sup>

It was often assumed that the pictures should be viewed far enough away for the rough surface finish to become invisible, for example, the comments equating it to a stage set. However, Constable's comments indicate the correct viewing distance is the one where the spectator can observe both the surface texture and the pictorial representation.

There is some uncertainty about whether he did make changes to the surface finish of *The Hay Wain* as after it was first exhibited he took it back, as was his normal practice, and did further work on it and, significantly, he wrote to Fisher he had 'washed the *powder off*.'<sup>68</sup> However, even if he did make changes he continued to develop his trademark style during the 1820s. There is no space to explain the development of Constable's style in the light of critical comment but in summary there were four elements, the intensity and range of colours, the rough surface finish, the 'white spots' he used to add sparkle and the use of full-size sketches to create a unified composition.

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<sup>67</sup> R. Beckett, *John Constable and the Fishers: The Record of a Friendship* (London, Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1952), p. 199.

<sup>68</sup> Ivy (1991), p. 42.

## Summary

The reception *The Hay Wain* received in Paris compared to London is seen as a significant event by modern commentators,

*At home they [Constable's six foot canvases] were treated with indifference. Shown in Paris they were acclaimed, recognized as revolutionary and took their place as forerunners of modern art.<sup>69</sup>*

In fact, as we have seen, the critical response to *The Hay Wain* was mixed in both countries although opinions were polarised for different reasons. In both countries the positive comments described his fresh, new approach and his truth to nature and the negative comments concerned his use of colour and his surface technique.

*The Hay Wain* reached Paris at a time when it had maximum impact because of the 'anglomania' and the active contemporary debate about whether artists should represent nature by working directly from nature or by copying the Old Masters. Reactions were divided into two political camps. We have seen how both camps were essentially debating the influence Constable might have on the whole of French art and training.

One camp headed by Delécluze regarded Constable's technique as a trick that created a pleasing verisimilitude but one that was essentially empty of meaning. Their concern was that young artists would be seduced into relying on these tricks and would not dedicate themselves to a formal academic programme of instruction. The other camp, representing the young landscape artists, such as Huet, was excited by the new technique and saw how it could be used to further their cause.

Modern commentators also mention the gold medal Constable was awarded in Paris as evidence of Constable's genius. However, many gold medals were awarded, two went to other British artists and Lawrence received the higher recognition of a *Légion d'honneur*. It is known that the Comte de Forbin secured the *Légion d'honneur* for Lawrence and that he admired the work of

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<sup>69</sup> S. Wilson, *Royal Academy of Arts Magazine*, No. 91, Summer 2006, p. 29.



Constable and Bonington.<sup>70</sup> We must therefore consider the possibility that the gold medal was awarded for reasons other than Constable's artistic ability, for example, as a result of the promotion of British art by Parisian dealers trying to create a market, the love of all things British at the time, the personal recommendation of the Comte de Forbin and, at the political level, a wish to thank Britain.

The other widely quoted event relating to Constable was that Delacroix was so impressed by the technique used in *The Hay Wain* that he repainted his *Massacre of Scio*. We have seen that although he may have done some reworking the evidence for any substantial repainting is inconclusive.

By the end of his life Constable appears to be 'a man convinced he had dismally failed to make his mark in his lifetime' although he justified this to himself by his belief that an artist that prospers in his lifetime 'jeopardizes his dignity, but also his chances of future and everlasting fame.'<sup>71</sup>

Constable has been criticized for ignoring the plight of the rural poor and his art does reflect the beliefs and concerns of a Tory land-owner but he did create a revolutionary style.<sup>72</sup> His anti-academic, anti-conventional and anti-traditional approach and their relationship with modern art are explored in Joel Isaacson's *Constable, Duranty, Mallarmé, Impressionism, Plein Air, and Forgetting*.<sup>73</sup> Constable uniquely combines the mundane with the controversial. Even today critics do not know if he is a chocolate-box sentimentalist or '...just a whirl of agitated paint that looks like nothing.'<sup>74</sup>

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<sup>70</sup> Noon (2003), p. 204 and Tate Online, 'Constable to Delacroix', <http://www.tate.org.uk/britain/exhibitions/constabletodelacroix/room6b.htm> (accessed 18 Sept 2006).

<sup>71</sup> Ivy (1991), pp. 53-54.

<sup>72</sup> A. Bermingham, *Landscape and Ideology* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1987), p. 90.

<sup>73</sup> J. Isaacson, Constable, Duranty, Mallarmé, Impressionism, Plein Air, and Forgetting, *The Art Bulletin*, Vol. 76, No. 3 (Sep., 1994), pp. 427-450.

<sup>74</sup> *The Independent*, June 2006.

## **Illustrations**

<b><u>Illustration</u></b> .....	<b><u>Page</u></b>
Figure 1: John Constable, <i>Landscape: Noon (The Hay Wain)</i> , 1821, oil on canvas, 130.2 x 185.4 cm, National Gallery, London .....	4
Figure 2: Pierre-Henri de Valenciennes, <i>Study of Clouds over the Roman Campagna</i> , c. 1787, oil on paper on cardboard, paper support: 19 x 32.1 cm National Gallery of Art, Washington, DC .....	5
Figure 3: Full-size sketch for <i>The Hay Wain</i> c.1820, oil on canvas, 128 x 184 cm, Victoria and Albert Museum .....	7
Figure 4: Sketch used for <i>The Hay Wain</i> , c.1820, oil on paper on panel, 12.5 x 18 cm, Paul Mellon Collection.....	8
Figure 5: John Constable, <i>A Rowing Boat Moored by a River Bank</i> , c.1809-11, black chalk on blue-grey paper, 9 x 12.6 m., Courtauld Institute.....	9
Figure 6: Detail of the Dog in <i>The Hay Wain</i> .....	10
Figure 7: Detail of <i>The Hay Wain</i> showing 'white spots' .....	12
Figure 8: Eugène Delacroix, <i>Scène des massacres de Scio; familles grecques attendant la mort ou l'esclavage</i> , Salon de 1824, 419 x 354 cm, Louvre .....	18
Figure 9: Detail of <i>Scène des massacres de Scio</i> .....	19

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*Stratford Mill* and its full-size sketch, *The White Horse* and its full-size  
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# Appendix

This appendix contains the French extracts from R. Beckett, *Correspondence and Other Memorials of John Constable, R. A.: Constable's Critics*, Volume XX (1962). These are held in typescript form in the National Art Library.

The document is a collection of English and French reviews of Constable's work and is indexed and page numbered by the year of the first publication of the review and page number within the year. Only the pages containing French have been included.