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Discover Constable AND *The Hay Wain*

A new exhibition at the National Gallery brings together paintings that influenced Constable's *The Hay Wain*. We look into the making of the famous work along with the artist's practice.
By *Estelle Lovatt FRSA*

BEFORE CONSTABLE (1776-1837) artists painted landscapes. They did, of course, although not as the main subject of the painting in its own right. Instead, they painted the landscape as a backdrop for a picture that had a historical narrative, allegorical story, biblical scripture or portrait fronting it.

However, Constable made landscape his main subject matter, constantly returning to the beloved rural landscape of his youth to sketch and paint cattle, sheep, horses, donkeys and dogs all living in harmony with man and farmer next door to windmills, barges, carts, scythes and pitchforks.

The artist wasn't charmed by the regulated city parks. Constable avoided their formal artificially cultivated space, saying, "It is not beauty because it is not nature." Hence the painter escaped to wilder landscapes, wanting, "a lovely, lively and soothing subject" to paint. He wanted to capture the pleasurable experience of actually being outside in nature, every day, under sunshine or storm. To feel the wind over his face as, "a calm and exhilarated effort, fresh and blowing." For, "painting is but another word for feeling."

This exhibition explores the social, political and artistic context of the English landscape during the time Constable painted *The Hay Wain* with paintings from the National Gallery's permanent collection of Old Masters that influenced Constable. They include William Blake, John Linnell, George Morland and William Mulready, all showing rural life at the time.

The actual site of *The Hay Wain* is the village of Flatford, Dedham Vale, Suffolk, which is approximately a mile from Constable's birthplace, the next-door village, East Bergholt.

With much artistic license and absolute pictorial invention, Constable painted *The Hay Wain* beginning with a sketch in Suffolk, where he said he'd spent a "careless boyhood that made me a painter." It's one of his great six-foot Stour paintings in which Constable creates the most perfect panorama in ways never quite managed by landscapists before.

It leads the eye back and forth, from foreground to background, around the middle field and into the far distance via Flatford Mill, a watermill used for grinding corn that had been operated by the Constable family for nearly a hundred years. Subsequently, the millpond at Flatford on the River

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OPPOSITE John Constable, *The Hay Wain*, 1821, oil on canvas, 130.2×185.4cm **TOP** John Constable, *Sketch For The Haywain*, 1820, oil on canvas, 12.4×17.8cm **BELOW** William Blake, *The Shepherd*, in *Songs of Innocence and of Experience*, 1789, relief etching, 18.4×12.1cm

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Stour view is one that Constable knew extremely well. Taking his sketchbook everywhere, Constable was always drawing, believing, “practice makes pleasure.” *The Hay Wain* was painted from many sketches and actual full-scale sized *alla prima* oil studies of the view, made over many years in Suffolk. He drew and painted rapidly, to understand and establish the most picturesque, balanced composition before committing to canvas. It took Constable five months to paint *The Hay Wain* in the warm summer afternoons of the haymaking season. Originally, he’d titled it *Landscape: Noon*. Its new title, *The Hay Wain* refers to the wooden wagon (wain) used to transport the dried meadow grass (hay). The empty wagon is making its way through shallow waters to cross through the meadow onto the other side, where haymakers, harvesters, farmers and farmhands go about their daily work. He later finished it in his studio in Hampstead, London.

Despite being a student of the Royal Academy of Arts, Constable broke away from the traditions of academic art pioneering a radical, much looser, freer, less formal style. He believed that “you cannot paint landscape using only imagination, and you cannot paint landscape using only reality.” He wrote notes on the back of his sketches as aide memoires, to record, guide and remind him of the date, time, weather conditions, morning dew, late night moon, atmosphere and feelings he encountered, “to give,” as he said, “one brief moment a lasting existence.” These weren’t for public attention or scrutiny. They were to be seen by no one but him. So you can imagine he’d be quite perplexed as to how popular his unfinished sketches are viewed today, as forerunners to Impressionism and Expressionism.

His technique and practice were unique in both method and style. He scrubbed his canvas with an underpainting ground of warm light red-brown before establishing tonal values of complimentary greens. Using a palette knife to blend his oil paint, he’d apply a range of marks, piled up fat and scraped down lean. He used large brushes to dot, dab, dig, poke, splash and scratch into his paintwork before his fingers spread his paint thicker or smeared it even thinner. Constable said he mixed more than a

THIS PAGE TOP Richard Parkes Bonington, *A Wooded Lane*, 1825, oil on millboard, 27.9x22.9cm
BOTTOM John Constable, *The Wheat Field*, 1816, oil on canvas, 54.6x78.1cm **OPPOSITE PAGE TOP** John Linnell, *Woody Landscape*, 1824, oil on wood panel, 24.7x32.2cm **OPPOSITE PAGE BOTTOM** John Constable, *Willy Lott’s House*, 1802, oil on canvas, 33.7x42.5cm



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thousand different greens, just to capture grass and needed more than only one dark tone to capture the intricate dense beauty that is mother nature, realising, as he said, “there’s no such thing as a brown tree.” When *The Hay Wain* was first exhibited at the Royal Academy in 1821, it wasn’t appreciated much and didn’t sell. Nonetheless, when hung at the Paris Salon in 1824, the French Romantic artists loved it for its realism and it was awarded a Gold Medal by the French King, Charles X, to much acclaim. As the Industrial Revolution took hold in the 19th century, the rural areas began to be seen as not places to work but as an escape. As early as 1890, the travel agent Thomas Cook was even running day trips to what was soon to be dubbed Constable Country for its views of England’s glorious rural bliss. With *The Hay Wain* and his other landscapes, Constable made the rustic Suffolk surroundings of his childhood forever iconic.

Discover Constable and *The Hay Wain* 17 October 2024 to 2 February 2025 nationalgallery.org.uk
Walk Constable’s Hampstead to see where he finished *The Hay Wain* on a guided tour of where he lived and painted estellelovatt.eventbrite.com