CONSTABLE TEACHERS’ RESOURCE

Learn more about the exhibition Constable: The Making of a Master at the home of creativity
20 September 2014 – 11 January 2015
Key Stage 3-4: Art & Design

The exhibition is supported by the Friends of the V&A
With thanks to Winsor and Newton

Introduction

John Constable was born in 1776 and raised in East Bergholt, Suffolk. Trained at the Royal Academy, he went on to become one of Britain’s best-known landscape painters. Constable created his compositions from a close observation of the natural world and a strong art historical knowledge. The exhibition Constable: The Making of a Master examines how these two strands combined to shape his work.

Constable’s drawings and oil sketches, often annotated with details about the weather, were made outside (‘en plein air’). They were vital points of reference for the finished works developed in his studio. He also copied paintings and prints by artists he admired to improve his practice. He read broadly, reaching back to Renaissance artists such as Leonardo da Vinci for advice on ‘How to paint a Night-piece’. He also learned from essays by 18th-century British artists, including William Hogarth and Joshua Reynolds. This resource offers introductory questions and suggested activities to deepen students’ understanding of Constable’s practice.

Pre-visit activities

• Constable wrote, ‘We see nothing till we truly understand it’. Discuss what he could have meant by this. How is this statement reflected in his work?
• The exhibition includes work by many of Constable’s favourite artists, including Claude Lorrain, Nicolas Poussin, Peter Paul Rubens, Jacob van Ruisdael, Thomas Gainsborough, Richard Wilson and Thomas Girtin. Create an image bank of landscapes by these artists. Compare and contrast these works with examples of Constable’s paintings to identify similarities in composition and technique.

The Museum visit

School groups are requested not to work in groups or draw in the exhibition. We recommend using this resource and accompanying activity sheets to introduce key ideas for students to discuss in pairs in the exhibition. Please visit the Paintings gallery on Level 3 to sketch and take notes from landscapes in the collection.

Observing Nature

Constable believed in ‘a close and continual observance of nature’ and often worked outside, drawing in a sketchbook or making quick oil sketches. He was particularly interested in the play of light and shadow, and studied clouds and the effect of changing skies on the land and sea beneath. He made detailed studies of leaves and flowers as reference for his large compositions.

Learning from Others

Constable’s artistic development benefited from the support of well-connected acquaintances. Art collector Sir George Beaumont allowed the young artist access to study and copy from his collection. In 1796, artist John Cranch provided Constable with a list of ‘Painter’s Reading’, including essays by Hogarth, Reynolds and Anton Raphael Mengs. Constable collected almost 2000 ‘painter’s etchings’ and 1000 engravings during his lifetime. He collected mainly Dutch, Flemish and French landscapes.

Constructing Compositions

Constable’s oil sketches were not intended for exhibition. Usually, a small sketch was scaled up for a final composition but Constable, uniquely, worked on full-scale sketches, ‘a large canvas will show you what you cannot do, a small one will only show you what you can’. Constable repeatedly modified his compositions to improve the impact of the final painting. For example, The Leaping Horse, 1825, has a number of changes from its full-scale sketch, including the removal of a tree on the far right and the addition of Dedham church tower on the skyline.

Follow-up activities/find out more

• To find out more about Constable and see examples of his sketchbooks and oil sketches, go to www.vam.ac.uk/page/j/john-constable/
• Keep a cloud diary: sketch the sky daily for a week, recording the light, temperature, and wind direction. What do you notice? Describe the different skies you have drawn.
• Constable sometimes positioned a sheet of glass between himself and a view, traced the scene onto the glass, transferred the image to paper, then canvas. Use acetate on clear clipboards or a window to recreate this process.
• A Constable topic box is accessible through the Prints & Drawings Study Room. Booking is essential. For information on group visits, please go to http://www.vam.ac.uk/content/links/study-rooms/
Find a Constable painting and/or drawing that includes the sky and clouds.

– How has the artist depicted light and shadow?
– How would the day feel if you were in that scene?
– How has the artist created a sense of atmosphere or mood?

Find examples of Constable’s paintings that include trees, rivers and rocks.

– From one material (oil paint) Constable has depicted a huge variety of natural materials (bark, leaves, water and stone). How has the artist used shade, hue and brushwork to capture their different qualities?
– How would you describe his depiction of each of these natural materials to someone who couldn’t see the painting?
LEARNING FROM OTHERS

Select an artwork by Constable and a nearby artwork by another artist.

– Why do you think Constable was interested in this artist’s work?

– What lessons did Constable learn from this artist? Think about the subject matter, composition and techniques used.

– Discuss the benefits and disadvantages of taking inspiration from other artists.

– Which artists inspire you?
CONSTRUCTING COMPOSITIONS

Select a painting by Constable.

– Which part of the painting grabs your attention first? How has the artist drawn your eye to this area?

– How has the composition been structured? Identify strong horizontal, vertical and/or diagonal lines that run across the scene, such as the horizon, tall trees, church spires, rainbows or passing clouds. How has the artist used these intersecting lines to balance the composition?

– How much of the picture plane has Constable devoted to the foreground, the middleground and the background? How does this arrangement of space influence the way that you look at the painting? Does the scene feel close or distant? Do you feel you are in the landscape, or looking in from the outside?

– What change could you make to the composition to shift the viewer's attention to another part of this painting?