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Changes in the Appearance of Paintings
by John Constable

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Abstract

This paper reviews the remarkable diversity of changes in the appearance of paintings by one artist, John Constable. The intention is not simply to describe changes in the work of Constable but to suggest a framework for the study of changes in the work of any artist and to facilitate discussion among conservators, conservation scientists, curators, and art historians. The paper considers, first, examples of physical changes in the paintings themselves; second, changes in the physical conditions under which Constable's paintings have been viewed. These same examples serve to consider changes in the cultural and psychological contexts in which Constable's paintings have been understood and interpreted

Introduction

The purpose of this paper is to review the remarkable diversity of changes in the appearance of paintings by a single artist to see what questions these raise and how the varying answers we give to them might affect our work as conservators, scientists, curators, and historians. [1] My intention is not simply to describe changes in the appearance of paintings by John Constable but to suggest a framework that I hope will be helpful in considering changes in the paintings of any artist and to facilitate comparisons among artists. To this end, I have selected examples and formulated my discussion of them less to present unpublished material on Constable (though there is a fair amount of this along the way) than to

further discussion among conservators, conservation scientists, curators, and art historians on the complex and overlapping questions of this symposium.

As a first stage in designing a framework for considering the diverse types of changes that have taken place in the appearance of paintings, I have followed the useful suggestion in the call for papers by dividing the types of changes in the appearance of Constable's paintings into three categories: first, physical changes in the paintings themselves; second, changes in the physical conditions under which the paintings have been viewed; and third, changes in the cultural and psychological contexts in which Constable's paintings have been understood and interpreted.

As I shall argue in the conclusion, these three types of changes are interdependent. All three are involved in every judgment we make about the appearance of paintings and every action we take as a result. In this paper, however, I shall examine separately only the physical changes, the first two types, incorporating the cultural and psychological contexts from time to time rather than treating them separately.

Physical Changes in Paintings

In thinking about changes in the appearance of paintings, we may be inclined to think exclusively of later changes, changes following the completion of a painting by the original artist and his workshop. But I should like to draw attention to the facts that, first, the most important changes in the appearance of paintings take place during their original

creation, second, that there may be several different stages at which a painting may be said to have been finished by the original artist, and, third, that some of the physical changes following the so-called "completion" by the original artist may have been anticipated, accommodated for, even intended by the original artist.

Changes Made by the Original Artist

Let us consider certain aspects of Constable's working procedure. Taken to the extreme, of course, every new stroke of paint constitutes a change in the appearance of a painting, and it should be one of the leitmotifs of this symposium that relatively minor physical changes can be among the most important aesthetically or as documentation. When Constable added the tiny windmill, no more than one-half inch tall, at the far right edge of his 'Double Rainbow, East Bergholt Common' (Victoria and Albert Museum R117), he not only established tremendous depth in the landscape but identified the scene. [2] If that small detail were somehow lost, let us say accidentally damaged or covered by a frame, much of the space and personal meaning of the sketch would collapse.

But let us begin with examples of major alterations by the original artist. Probably the most famous compositional changes within Constable's oeuvre are the changes in his six-foot, 1825 R.A. exhibition piece, 'The Leaping Horse' (Royal Academy GR25.1); most famous because the painting, its full-size sketch and two brilliant preparatory wash drawings [3] have all been available in London from the turn of the century, and because Constable's own description of at least one of these

changes, documented in his correspondence, [4] was published in Leslie's famous *Life* [5] shortly after Constable's death, and in this century was more fully developed and popularized by Kenneth Clark. [6] In comparing Constable's full-size sketch, at the V&A, with the finished painting, we see that, in the final painting, he has removed the willow tree at the right, the cow drinking, the right side of the prow of the main barge, the figure poling the main barge, and the entire prow of a second barge just entering the picture at the extreme left of the painting. All of these changes were made not, as we might suppose, between the sketch and painting, but in the finished painting itself, where each of these *pentimenti* can be seen today with the naked eye under good lighting. More important for my point here, at least some, perhaps all, of these changes had not yet been made when the painting was exhibited in April 1825 at the Royal Academy. Constable's journal entry of September 7th, following the R.A. exhibition, records: "set to work on my large picture. Took out the willow stump by my horse, which has improved the picture much--almost finished--made one or two other alterations". [7]

One of the things I should most like to know about 'The Leaping Horse' is whether or not Constable allowed the evidence of those changes to be visible when he showed the painting to fellow artists and prospective clients. Although Constable increasingly retained evidence of the creative process in his paintings, my guess is that he never wished major compositional *pentimenti* to show in any finished painting, a point which we shall return to when considering changes wrought by time and conservation. It seems at least possible, however, that Constable never considered this painting, and perhaps others, quite finished. If true, the

rejected prow of the barge at the extreme left may never have been fully obliterated.

Conveniently, 'The Leaping Horse' also provides evidence for two other types of changes in Constable's work. [8] If we look carefully at the extreme right of the canvas, we see a vertical crease just to the right of the tower of Dedham Church, marking the previous edge of the painted area before Constable enlarged the painting slightly by unfolding the strip of canvas folded around the stretcher bar at the right. A similar strip of unfolded canvas is visible along the left side. This unfolding of both sides of the canvas would have required restretching on a new, larger stretcher. In addition, Constable added a separate, 64 mm strip of canvas across the entire top of the painting. In a surprising number of cases, Constable followed a similar procedure, either unable to contain his original conception within the size canvas he had provided himself or else unable to resist expanding the scene itself as he worked.

A year previous, Constable had made similar but more dramatic changes to the size and shape of the full-size sketch for his vertical, 1824 R.A. exhibition piece, 'The Lock', in the collection of the Philadelphia Museum of Art (M'28-1-2, GR24.2), where over the years I have received extensive help and advice from Marigene Butler and her staff. [9] In comparing the canvas now folded over the left edge of the stretcher with that folded over the right edge, we discover that there is no paint on the left edge, whereas the canvas now folded over the right edge retains green paint similar to that immediately next to it on the face of the canvas, suggesting that the left edge is original but that the strip of

canvas now folded over the stretcher bar at the right was previously part of the surface of the painting. Presumably, at least a small additional portion of canvas farther to the right was removed at the same time. [10] This is the only instance of which I am aware in which there is evidence that Constable reduced the size of a canvas; and even here the intention seems to have been to convert a horizontal format into a vertical, possibly larger, sketch, because Constable has added a strip of canvas across the top, extending the painting surface about 286 mm. Most revealing, however, is the way in which Constable has done this. After unfolding the top edge of the original canvas, he added the new horizontal strip of coarser canvas, gluing it under the top edge of the original canvas. No stitch marks are visible in the clear x-radiographs, indicating that Constable was here working on a large oil sketch on canvas as if with paper.

For a clear example on paper, we may look at Constable's 1834 watercolor sketch of 'Cowdray House' (British Museum 1888-2-15-31, GR34.32), where the paint and pencil drawing on either side of the vertical division are clearly discontinuous, and the 70 mm vertical strip at the right therefore added, though not overlapped as in the full-size sketch for 'The Lock' discussed above.

One other aspect of his working procedure, which we have seen documented for 'The Leaping Horse', seems to have been common procedure for Constable. The evidence from his correspondence confirms that he continued to work on major canvases, even after their initial exhibition at the Royal Academy. Given the importance of the annual R.A.

exhibitions for his reputation and advancement within the Royal Academy and the fact that he rested his reputation on his six-foot landscapes, one might have expected Constable to have brought his major exhibits each year to a state as near full realization as he could achieve. But he was notoriously slow in starting, laborious in his preparation, experimental in his approach to each problem; therefore continuously equivocal about matters of composition, finish, and effect; and he demanded of himself the ongoing discovery of effects seen in nature but never before on the canvas of any painter in the world. For these reasons, he found it especially difficult to bring his major six-foot landscapes to completion in time for the Royal Academy exhibitions or, in some cases, perhaps ever.

Immediately after submitting 'The Leaping Horse' to the Academy, Constable wrote to Fisher:

I have worked very hard--and my large picture went last week to the Academy--but I must say that no one picture ever departed from my easel with more anxiety on my part with it. It is a lovely subject, of the canal kind, lively--& soothing--calm and exhilarating, fresh--& blowing, but it should have been on my easel a few weeks longer. [11]

As we have already seen, within the year Constable did return the picture to his easel and, as it turned out, for more than a few finishing touches.

This practice of continuing to paint on his six-foot exhibition pieces is documented beginning with his first, the 1819 'White Horse'. In a letter to Fisher of July 2nd that year, Constable wrote of 'The White Horse' : "It

has served a good apprenticeship in the Academy and I shall avail myself of it by working a good deal upon it before it goes on a second to the British Gallery". [12]

Constable's major exhibit the next year, the six-foot 'Stratford Mill' (National Gallery GR20.1), was also returned to his easel, even though, in this case, it was already owned by and hanging on the wall of a private collector. In a letter of October 2nd 1823, Fisher wrote to Constable that its owner, John Pern Tinney, was willing to lend Constable the painting to be worked on further, but that:

He dreads your touching the picture. This of course is not his own thought . . . But it is the suggestion of Lewis the engraver. "There is a look of nature about the picture,' says Lewis," which seems as if introduced by magic. This, when Constable gets it on his easel, he may in an unlucky moment destroy". [13]

The documentary evidence suggests that Constable may have had something of a reputation for this practice. Another collector, John Sheepshanks, wrote to Constable in March 1833, referring probably to his version of 'Hampstead Heath: Branch Hill Pond' (Victoria and Albert Museum R301, GR28.2). [14]

The Picture you will not be sorry to hear grows upon me, since I got it--and I am already forming excuses, whenever you shall ask for it back, either to touch upon, or varnish--having resolved, that it must neither be the one, or the other—. [15]

The most specific technical description of Constable's retouching appeared six decades after Constable's death in Robert Leslie's generally reliable introduction to his 1896 edition of his father's *Life of Constable*.

Constable, no doubt, in certain of his later works employed the palette knife freely, but it was never used until he had secured the drawing, tone, and effect of the picture with the brush. [¶] During the last years of his life he, at times, also touched upon some of his earlier pictures in this way as they hung on the walls of his studio, leaving for a moment a work on his easel to do so. [16]

We cannot be certain which works Robert Leslie is referring to, but Constable's inscription on the back of a watercolor of 'Old Houses on Harnham Bridge, Salisbury' (Fig.1, Victoria and Albert Museum R240, GR21.72), does provide one documented example of his retouching a work ten years later. It reads: "Old Houses on Harnham Bridge. Salisbury Novr. 14 1821." and "retouch at Hampstd. the day after the Coronation. of Wm. 4th, at which I was present--being eleven hours in the Abbey". Since the coronation of William IV and Queen Adelaide took place in Westminster Abbey September 8th, 1831, the watercolor must have been retouched almost ten year after first drawn. Martin Hardie, who first published this information, suggested that the original drawing was probably only a pencil beginning, [17] but the watercolor is consistent with Constable's handling of other watercolors and oils of 1821, and the retouching, though probably over refreshed watercolor, is most notable for the bravura scratching out. For a somewhat parallel situation among

Constable's oils, I would suggest that Constable returned to his six-foot sketch for 'Stratford Mill' (Yale Center for British Art B1983.18 GR20.2), sometime after having been elected a full academician in February 1829, and touched up the entire canvas, after which he felt justified in signing the painting boldly in reddish paint "John Constable RA/London". Reynolds considers the signature probably false, but it seems to me very much in character and the finishing of the sketch too advanced for 1820, the date he exhibited the finished version (National Gallery GR20.1). On several occasions, Constable attempted to borrow the exhibited version back from its owner. It seems reasonable that he might have worked up the sketch partly as an alternative for himself and visitors to his studio, if not for public exhibition.

Constable's careful pencil drawings and detailed oil studies from nature served him as something of a naturalist's notebook, the quarry from which he drew when developing his landscapes and filling them with human incident and staffage. It is doubtful that he would have altered any of these detailed records of his native scenes. Some of his freer drawings, watercolors, and oil sketches, seem to have been valued in the same way, as records of, for example, specific weather effects, and therefore would not have been altered by the artist. Others, however, seem to have been thought of more as compositional studies for possible paintings, and these seem more likely to have been altered in the process of developing exhibition pieces in his studio. Moreover, the evidence suggests that Constable increasingly thought of his finished paintings as part of an ongoing attempt to embody his full experience of nature. Thus they constituted something of a continuing experiment in which density

of experience was increasingly valued. Repeatedly painting scenes from his childhood and youth, often returning to scenes first sketched over twenty years before, Constable was continuously reviewing his own experience, reinterpreting his favorite landscapes from increasingly mature and reflective perspectives. It is understandable that such an artist, especially one who preferred to keep most of his sketches and studies around him and who sold relatively few of his finished paintings, might think of his earlier work as an active participant in his current projects and might return to it with his brush as well as his mind.

What does this mean for us in practical terms? As historians (and I believe we are all to some extent historians), when we stand in front of a painting by Constable, we must be prepared for the possibility of two different paintings on the same canvas. We must be prepared to visualize an earlier painting, begun and finished in a single campaign of painting, representing a single, coherent stage in Constable's earlier career; though to see this painting we may have to imaginatively remove later retouching by Constable himself. And we must be prepared to see the painting as we have it today (excepting of course natural deterioration) as possibly a later interpretation by Constable of his earlier subject. In cases such as the 'Harnham Bridge' watercolor and, in my view, the 'Stratford Mill' sketch, this later reworking could transform an entire picture.

My chief concern here, however, is that we must be prepared to see occasional sketches and paintings that are not "finished" statements but rather records of ongoing experiments that have come down to us not necessarily at a "unified" stage. For example, the palette knife work in

the lower-left of Constable's oil sketch of 'Dedham Vale from the Coombs' (private collection), [18] seems likely, to me at least, to be a later addition by Constable himself, possibly applied when he was struggling with the lower-left corner of his first six-foot landscape, which we shall turn to shortly. We are fortunate indeed that this palette knife work, admittedly different in character from the rest of the sketch, has never been removed, because during the seventies when the sketch was having difficulty finding a buyer, the palette knife work was frequently described in salesrooms as an addition by a later artist. Apart from the unlikelihood of anyone other than the original artist attempting to add to the sketch in this way, the palette knife work is fully characteristic of Constable's hand. As curators and conservators, then, we must be careful not to remove later touches, even if on top of varnish, unless they are clearly not in the original artist's hand, even though the painting may appear to us initially discordant, unlike our general conception of the artist's work. One of the themes of this paper, to which I shall return, is that the more unexpected some aspect of a Constable painting is the more it may convey a unique artistic experience and the more valuable it may be for our view of the artist and, therefore, the more important for us to understand as historians and to preserve as conservators.

In addition to changes made as part of his normal working procedure, Constable occasionally painted one image completely over a previous image on the same canvas. In this view of 'The Thames Valley from Hampstead Heath' (Yale Center for British Art B1976.7.17, GR25.35), we see the ghost-like, unrelated image of 'Salisbury Cathedral from the Close' beneath (the composition familiar from Constable's

painting, dated 1820, at the V&A). [19] Vastly more important are two examples that I have published recently, both of which present serious cleaning problems which have yet to be addressed.

The earlier of the two, Constable's first six-foot sketch, at the National Gallery of Art, Washington (605, GR19.2), for his 1819 'White Horse' (Frick Collection GR19.1), completely covers an unrelated image. X-radiographs made for me in 1984 at the National Gallery of Art revealed for the first time that the 'White Horse' sketch was painted over a previously unsuspected image of 'Dedham Vale from the Coombs'. The highly detailed bridge and buildings at the center of the Dedham Vale image, nearly identical to those in Constable's well-known, early study of the scene (Victoria and Albert Museum R63), are convincing evidence that the Dedham Vale image was not intended to be a six-foot sketch but rather was the beginning of a six-foot landscape painting, Constable's first attempt at the type of painting on which he later said he rested his reputation. Since the x-radiographs suggest that this was a promising beginning, it is difficult to understand Constable's decision to cover the unfinished 'Dedham Vale' painting with an unrelated sketch instead of retaining it for study and perhaps completion later. His financial situation at the time would not seem to have made one canvas and stretcher of such value if he had wished to save the unfinished painting. Completely covered by his own 'White Horse' sketch, the 'Dedham Vale' painting may now be seen only in x-radiographs and other types of laboratory images.

Given the importance of the 'White Horse' sketch, it is unthinkable that it will ever be cleaned off to reveal the unfinished 'Dedham Vale'

painting beneath. Indeed, I cannot think of any instance in which I should advise removing any overpainting or later retouching by Constable in order to reveal an earlier image or earlier stage of the same image. But one can easily hypothesize cases (indeed they surely exist or have existed for other artists) where the painting beneath is so important and the painting on top seemingly so incidental that we might be tempted to remove the overpainting, even though convincingly in the artist's own hand. With the exception of extreme cases where an artist may have gone insane late in life or had fits of drunkenness in which he splashed whitewash on his paintings, I should like to lend my support (partly to see if there are counter examples with which other participants in this symposium may be familiar) to the general principle that no overpainting or later retouching convincingly by the original artist should ever be removed, no matter how seemingly incidental or "out-of-character" the overpainting or retouching and no matter how important the image covered. This would mean that we would have to be prepared to preserve, and I hope display, if such a picture existed, a major six-foot sketch by Constable over which he had sketched a few prominent, unrelated and seemingly crude lines.

The 'White Horse' sketch covering the 'Dedham Vale' image is itself an image of exceptional importance, Constable's first six-foot sketch and, as far as I can tell, the first example in the history of art of a large, full-size oil sketch on one surface done in preparation for a finished painting of the same size on another surface. In a recent article. [20] I argued that the layering of these two images on this one canvas proves that the 'White Horse' sketch was not, as we might suspect, the beginning of

another painting, later aborted, but rather was consciously begun by Constable as a full-size sketch in preparation for a finished painting of the same scene on a separate canvas of the same size. The lack of any intermediate ground, that is, a ground over the Dedham Vale image in preparation for the 'White Horse' sketch, [21] and the considerable impasto of the unfinished 'Dedham Vale' painting underneath would have made it impossible for Constable to have achieved the kind of thin development of foliage, with brown ground showing through in areas, that he realized in his finished painting of 'The White Horse' at the Frick Collection.

As such, the Washington sketch for 'The White Horse' becomes the key object for understanding the origin of Constable's unique and justly famous "six-foot" sketches. There is no need to summarize that portion of the article here, but we may note that the unusually severe compression of impasto resulting from previous relinings (confirmed by the severe moating), the possibility of extensive repainting, and the unusually heavy coat of discolored varnish, make it impossible to do a close reading of one of the key canvases in Constable's career and indeed in the history of oil sketching. In its present condition I do not consider the 'White Horse' sketch a displayable object and indeed I do not believe it has been on display since it was removed for examination in 1984. Tests done for me in the Paintings Conservation Department at the National Gallery of Art reveal that beneath the heavily discolored varnish is a lovely, light blue sky, similar to that in Constable's beautifully preserved six foot sketch for 'Stratford Mill' (Yale Center for British Art B1983.18, GR20.2) the next year. I believe there is still much to be

learned from this picture and hope very much that David Bull will soon take the picture in hand for a slow, studious cleaning.

The last example I should like to discuss of physical changes made to a painting by the original artist embodies an unusual complex of changes. In the 1988 catalogue of the Constable exhibition at the Salander-O'Reilly Galleries in New York, I described the physical history of the vertical painting, 'A Wooded Bank with an Open Book and Distant View of Water' (Fig. 2, Beaverbrook Art Gallery, Fredericton, New Brunswick No59.353); [22] aided by x-radiographs (Fig. 3) made at the Owens Art Gallery, Sackville, New Brunswick, and by the detailed examination report prepared by Cathy Stewart at the Canadian Conservation Institute, Ottawa. [23] Previous to technical examination, however, one could already see on the surface of the painting, or for that matter even in good black-white photographs, that the present image covers an earlier portrait of 'Simcox Lea', known from a finished painting in a private collection (Fig. 4, GR30.18). This is clearer of course in the x-radiographs, which I believe have convinced those who previously questioned the attribution to Constable. The x-radiographs along with laboratory examination establish that the present canvas is composed of five pieces, butt-joined and then stitched together. The large central panel, on which most of the now ghost-like image of Simcox Lea fits, corresponds exactly to the size of the finished 'Simcox Lea' portrait. Without here reviewing the entire argument, available in the 1988 catalogue, it seems likely that Constable added the vertical strips along both sides in order to accommodate the full figure, having again allowed the development of his composition to outgrow the size of his original

canvas (though why Constable, in this case, cut off the tacking edges of the original canvas rather than unfolding them, according to his usual practice, is unclear). Since Lea seems already to have paid for the frame, it is possible that this was cause enough for Constable to take up a new canvas for the final portrait. A more decisive explanation may be provided by Lea's granddaughter, who recorded the story that Lea questioned Constable: "Why did you paint me, a careful family man, sitting under a tree in a thunder-storm?" "Sir", replied Constable, "when everybody has entirely forgotten you, this picture will be valuable for my thunder-storm". [24] It seems clear that Lea was here describing his portrait on the Beaverbrook canvas, which indeed has a thunderstorm, perhaps more terrible as a result of Lea's rejection. In addition, the x-radiographs show that the figure has largely been scraped down before being overpainted. Constable obviously elected to remove Simcox Lea rather than his thunderstorm from the Beaverbrook picture and to take up a new canvas for the final portrait, which obligingly has a lovely background all sunshine and light.

It is not necessary here to describe the final image painted over the Beaverbrook portrait, but we should note first that whatever the meaning of this unique and emotionally charged image, it could provide an important opening for understanding the psychology of Constable's late work, and secondly that the painting has suffered greatly from previous restoration and possibly from extensive overpainting by other hands, making it difficult to read the interplay of the two images with confidence. There is extensive damage to the paint layer including serious compression of impasto during previous relining, and the present

coat of yellowed varnish is exceptionally thick and glossy. When, previous to the 1988 exhibition, the painting was examined in the Paintings Conservation Center at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, Dorothy Mahon and John Brealey, who kindly examined the painting for us, recommended against even a light cleaning. If I understood them correctly, they felt that previous restoration was so extensive that the painting would fall apart if cleaning were attempted. However, given the fact that the painting is clearly a sketch and was probably left in an uneven state by Constable, it seems reasonable to ask why the painting should hang together. Why would it not be wise to remove the heavy coat of yellowed varnish, the build-up of dirt and old varnish in the paint crevices, the awkwardly applied and poorly matched overpainting, and to see more nearly the picture as Constable left it?

Changes Made by Others

Turning now from changes made by the original artist to changes in the appearance of Constable's paintings made by others, let us look first at examples of changes by patrons, dealers, other artists, and past restorers. Then, on a more positive note, we shall consider several examples of changes by recent conservators.

Changes made to satisfy the wishes of a patron while a painting is in process would normally have been made to show the patron's person or possessions in a more flattering light. Thus, Constable substituted deer for offending cattle (still visible as *pentimenti*) in the foreground of his country house portrait of 'Englefield House, Berkshire' (private

collection GR33.1) for Benyon de Beauvoir, and almost certainly lightened and opened the sky in his painting of 'Salisbury Cathedral from the Bishop's Grounds' (Frick Collection GR26.18) for Bishop Fisher. Once a painting is finished, however, the owner of a painting often treats the picture as private furniture and may employ other artists to make changes without the knowledge, much less the approval, of the original artist. In the well-documented case of Constable's 1814 R.A. exhibition piece, 'A Summerland' (private collection H.193), the purchaser, John Alnutt, later hired John Linnell to repaint Constable's sky. Then, astonishing as it may seem to us today, ten years after the original purchase, Alnutt took the painting back to Constable requesting that he cut down the height to match a landscape he had recently purchased by Augustus Callcott, requesting that he also repaint his sky. The reduction never took place because Constable painted an entirely new picture (Yale Center for British Art B1977.14.41, GR24.81) the requested size as a substitute. Since Constable reclaimed his earlier version (which is about 90mm taller than his second, substitute version), it seems likely that Constable would have repainted the sky for himself, so that what we see now is probably the third sky on the same canvas.

Among the many changes in the appearance of Constable's paintings that must have been made by picture dealers, the following incident is recorded by Constable's close friend and biographer, C. R. Leslie, describing Constable's over 7 foot 1832 R.A. exhibition picture, 'Waterloo Bridge, from Whitehall Stairs, June 18th, 1817' (Tate Gallery GR32.1).

What would [Constable] have felt, could he foresee that, in little more

than a year after his death, its silvery brightness was doomed to be clouded by a coat of blacking, laid on by the hand of a picture dealer! Yet that this was done, by way of giving tone to the picture, I know from the best authority, the lips of the operator, who gravely assured me that several noblemen considered it to be greatly improved by the process. The blacking was laid on with water, and secured by a coat of mastic varnish. [25]

Among works on paper altered by dealers and past owners, including in years past even distinguished museums, less valued drawings verso have suffered especially. On the verso of a sketchbook page, the sensitive drawing of 'Two Views of a Countyman Lying Down' (Yale Center for British Art B1977.14.6125 verso) [26] was marked through to indicate that the page was to be matted showing the drawing on the other side. In another verso drawing, perhaps undervalued because the scene had not been identified, one of Constable's earliest drawings of 'Dedham Vale from the Coombs' (Fig. 5, Hornby Library, Liverpool B62-18 verso) [27] was partially covered by hinged tape and marked by two ink stamps. For many years, of course, it was common practice to paste drawings down in the process of matting, thereby completely obscuring drawings on the back. Happily, many Constable drawing have been lifted in recent years, often revealing drawings which have suffered surprisingly little damage. Where museum stamps have unfortunately been used in the past, small ink stamps (as in this example at the Louvre), [28] have obviously been less damaging than larger punches (as here from Exeter). [29]

As conservators frequently point out, many of the most devastating and irreversible changes in the appearance of paintings have been caused by previous restoration. In a distressing number of cases, Constable's brilliant impasto has been compressed by previous relining, transforming the heightened touches that would have conveyed the artist's most intense response to a dramatic sunset or the break of a wave, into flattened blobs. We need to look at those examples which have somehow escaped the ruthless relining, so common in earlier times, to see what the quality of Constable's impasto can be in a well-preserved oil sketch, such as this lush 'Hampstead' example (Fig. 6, Yale Center for British Art B1976.7.103, GR21.64).

One of the proposals that I hope will result from this symposium is the recommendation that a systematic record be kept of those works by each major artist which display what certain types of sketches and paintings looked like, as closely as we can tell, during the years immediately following their creation. I am aware that, among conservators and curators, there is some sharing of information along these lines so that, at least in major museums, conservators often travel to study closely related works in other museums before treating works in their own collections. It would benefit all of us if this information were recorded not only by conservators but also by art historians, who often have privileged access to private collections which sometimes house paintings that have survived in remarkably fine condition. If works, or aspects of works, in especially fine condition or displaying distinctive physical problems were recorded and if possible photographed by both conservators and art historians and this information made available to

everyone conserving or doing research on works by the artist, surely we would all benefit.

As with relatively minor changes made by the original artist, so seemingly minor physical changes made by previous restorers can be among the most influential aesthetically or for documentation. What appears at first to be a threatening sky toward the right in this emotionally charged sketch of 'East Bergholt Common' (private collection H133) [30] may well be instead, as Simon Parkes, the private New York conservator, has suggested to me, the result of overcleaning of the upper-right quarter in the past so that the black ground in that portion may show through more than Constable intended. The vertical transition just to the left of center, which makes no sense as part of a Constable cloudscape, supports this idea. If we compare this 1983 slide with one taken following the cleaning a few years ago, we see that the right hand portion of the sky has been slightly retouched in order to suppress this distinction. Happily, the sketch has also been reframed so that we now see nearly the entire sketch at both sides and along the bottom. More of this when we discuss changes in the appearance of paintings resulting from changes in the conditions under which paintings have been viewed.

With this last example we turn to changes made by recent conservators. I realize, from conversations with my friends in painting conservation departments, that the very phrase "changes by recent conservators" may sound offensive to some. But every physical modification we make to a painting changes it, even when our aim is conservation with the least possible intervention. Surely we should

acknowledge this and recognize ourselves as participants in the ongoing process of changing the appearance of paintings. Properly practiced, this is a noble undertaking, of which conservators can be justly proud. Another leitmotif that I hope will play through this symposium is the realization that we are not simply looking at the subject of changes in the appearance of paintings from a position of academic reserve but are instead active participants in the process, from which we cannot escape, nor should we wish to.

In those rare cases where paintings seem to have escaped the attention of previous restorers, recent cleanings have revealed paintings which seem very close to our understanding of how an artist's paintings would have appeared, let us say, a few years after completion. The dramatic rediscovery and cleaning of Constable's 1812 Royal Academy exhibition picture, 'A Water-mill', or, as we should now title it, 'Flatford Mill from the Lock' (private collection H124), [32] has returned to us not only something very close to Constable's vivid color, but more importantly the complexity and subtlety of his paint surface, barely visible through the badly discolored varnish before the sensitive 1979 cleaning by Robert Scott Wiles at the Corcoran Gallery, Washington. We see now Constable's increasingly fluid use of rich pigment and the subtle variation of his touch, evoking the moist atmosphere of the river valley. We shall return to this picture later when considering changes in the materials of paintings.

Another more recent cleaning, in 1984 by David Kolch, then at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, has revealed the original colors and

tonal coherency of 'A Farmhouse near the Water's Edge' (Frederick S. Wright Art Gallery, University of California, Los Angeles, on loan to the Los Angeles County Museum of Art GR34.77) [33] and has, I hope, finally put to rest the doubts that have so often been published regarding the authenticity of this very late sketch. The important role of conservation in affecting judgments of authenticity is not, I suspect, fully appreciated.

I would like now to consider another splendid cleaning by David Kolch, the 1985 cleaning of Constable's late, five-and-a-half-foot 'Stoke-by-Nayland' (Chicago Art Institute GR36.19), [34] which raises the important issue of interpretive cleaning. I was privileged to study the painting for several days toward the end of the cleaning, in the Paintings Conservation Department of the Art Institute, in the company of Rick Brettell, William Leisher, Timothy Lennon, and Inge Fiedler, who helpfully analyzed several paint samples for me. In the process of a more extensive cleaning than the painting had received at least since 1922, the brilliant colors and brushwork of the painting were revealed more fully than at any time during the three decades I had admired the picture. However, one rather jarring tonal juxtaposition had surfaced during the course of the cleaning. Just to the left of the dark tree mass was a large, fairly bright, white cloud. Because this tonal juxtaposition seemed out of balance with the overall tonal coherency of the painting, the decision was made to clean the white cloud mass less fully than the rest of the painting, thereby establishing a more harmonious tonal order. This does agree with our sense of what a late Constable painting should look like. However, although the picture has always been published as an unfinished painting, I have been convinced for many years that it is a late sketch, in

fact the last of Constable's famous and revolutionary, large, full-size sketches. If this is so, the juxtaposition of the bright cloud and dark tree mass would be less surprising and we might be inclined to clean the painting less selectively. Our concept of what a painting should look like cannot help but influence our cleaning of it.

Normal Changes in the Materials Used

Painting materials naturally change in various ways, altering the appearance of paintings. Some of these changes were understood and welcomed by Constable; others were feared but chanced anyway. About other changes we cannot be sure; they seem not to have been anticipated.

Two quotes document Constable's expectation that time would improve his paintings in certain ways. Because the quotes presuppose that he had already observed such changes in his paintings, he was obviously describing changes that take place in the "short time" he mentions. In a draft of a letter, which seems to be dated March 8th 1834, probably to a prospective client, Constable wrote from Hampstead:

It was with the greatest pleasure I heard of your visit to my painting room. . . . It is much to my advantage that several of my pictures should be seen together, as it displays to advantage their varieties of composition and also of execution, and what they gain by the mellowing hand of time, which should not be forced or anticipated. Thus my pictures, when first coming forth have a comparative

harshness which at the time acts to my disadvantage.” [35]

The second quote comes from a book published forty-five years after Constable's death, but recording the reminiscences of one of Constable's fellow artists, his younger contemporary, Solomon Alexander Hart. Hart wrote:

Calling upon Constable, one day, I found him with a palette-knife, on which was some white, mixed with a viscous vehicle, and with which he touched the surface of a beautiful picture he was painting. Upon expressing my surprise, he said, "Oh! my dear Hart, I'm giving my picture the dewy freshness of nature, and he contended that the apparent crudeness would readily subside, and that the chemical change which would ensue in a short time would assume the truthful aspect of nature. [36]

On the other hand, Constable surely feared the potential changes resulting from bitumen, of which he would have been well aware because of the well-known deterioration of Sir Joshua Reynolds' paintings resulting from his extensive use of bitumen. It seemed unlikely that Constable, an exemplary craftsman, would have risked use of such a substance. I had been concerned for some years with the discrepancy between Constable's enthusiastic descriptions of his vertical 1835 R.A. exhibition piece, 'The Valley Farm' (Tate Gallery 327, P41, GR35.1), and modern criticism of the painting. Typical is John Walker's description in his 1978 monograph:

What lovely words, "silver, ivory, and a little gold"! Alas, there is in the

painting itself very little of any of these. Perhaps so much reworking has dimmed the brightness of the colors, which now seem somewhat drab. The beautiful pigmentation, which distinguished his masterpieces of the 1820s, has been replaced by a granular surface, rough and pitted. [37]

There is no mention of bitumen in the six page entry for 'The Valley Farm' in the 1981 catalogue of *The Tate Gallery Constable Collection*, [38] nor any mention of the discrepancy between Constable's description and the picture's present appearance.

As you have guessed, Constable's descriptions of the painting are quite different. We take time for only one quote. In a letter of December 10th 1835 to Robert Vernon, the owner of the painting, Constable wrote:

I beg to apologize for keeping the picture, but I venture to do so . . . as I work on it every day and much for the better. . . . I cannot but feel obliged, by your allowing it so long to remain with me, as it has enabled me to carry my style as far as it is [possible] at least [in] my hands at present. . . . This picture is in all respects my best and will give me the fairest chance of doing so. Certainly the "Lock" is a striking "composition" but cannot compete at all with your picture, in color, brightness or richness, of the chiaroscuro--nor in finish and delicacy of execution. [39]

As far as I can tell, no one had considered the possibility that Constable and modern critics were looking at two quite different paintings, [40] one

glowing with the brilliant, translucent effects of fresh bitumen, the other depressed with the dull, dark, wrinkled effects of deteriorated bitumen. Exactly those areas which Constable most wanted to bring to life are now deeply depressed.

We should all have recognized that bitumen was most likely the problem simply by looking at the painting, but it was then very difficult to see under highly reflective glass, and I think we must all have supposed that Constable used only the most reliable pigments. Two sources led me to reconsider the possibility of bitumen. Anna Southall, who has helped me on a number of occasions in examining paintings in the Tate Collection, drew to my attention a 1960 technical examination report of 'The Valley Farm' in the files of the Conservation Department, which noted that "A heavy bitumen glaze has wrinkled and contracted" the surface. [41] Secondly, I reread a passage in Leslie's *Life of Constable*, in which he described an event in front of Constable's 1829 R.A. painting, 'Hadleigh Castle' (Yale Center for British Art B1977.14.42, GR29.1):

I witnessed an amusing scene before this picture at the Academy on one of the varnishing days. Chantrey told Constable its foreground was too cold, and taking his palette from him he passed a strong glazing of asphaltum all over that part of the picture, and while this was going on, Constable, who stood behind him in some degree of alarm, said to me "there goes all my dew". He held in great respect Chantrey's judgment in most matters, but this did not prevent his carefully taking from the picture all that the great sculptor had done for it. [42]

Although I had read this quote many times, it had never before struck me that if Leslie's account was correct, this established that Constable had bitumen (asphaltum) on his palette in 1829, at least for finishing touches. A year later, Leslie Parris kindly arranged for us to study 'The Valley Farm', in the company of Anna Southall and two other conservators from the conservation department, with the heavy glass removed and a movable flood light. It was clear that all of the dark brown areas were completely mat and cracked, as we had expected, but that the painting as a whole was much richer than one would have guessed. It is now possible at least to guess what the painting must have looked like on Constable's easel, very much I believe as Constable described it. This process of mental reconstruction was aided also by Richard Wolbers, who allowed me to have a sample of his bitumen, which Carol Christensen, at the National Gallery of Art, mixed in various ways so that we could try painting with it to see the effect of fresh bitumen. When thin it is very transparent, disperses well in oil, has excellent tinting strength, and a most ravishing tone. It is easy to understand why Constable would have been willing to risk its use. Moreover, Wolber's research has established that commercial bitumen, which became available about 1815, flows more easily and is less likely to crack, and that bitumen behaves differently depending on the medium with which it is mixed. [43] Constable may have thought that by using the new product, not mixing it with wax, and spreading it thinly, he could avoid any problem. Regrettably, in 'The Valley Farm', his use of bitumen caused a partial reversal in the effect he seems originally to have achieved.

In some cases, Constable seems not to have anticipated a potential problem with his materials. His 'Landscape with Goatherds and Goats' (Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney GR23.36), a remarkably exact copy after Claude, made in 1823 while Constable was staying with Sir George Beaumont at Coleorton, contains what appear to be black ink or oil lines, most notably outlining the knees of the main figure (Fig. 7). No such lines are visible in the original Claude, and given Constable's attempt to make as near a facsimile as possible, we may be reasonably sure that these black lines did not show when he finished his copy. They seem almost certain to be transfer lines which have come through over the years.

Likewise, the visible *pentimenti* of chimney and roof lines above their present position in Constable's 1812 R.A. exhibition picture, 'Flatford Mill from the Lock', discussed earlier, is unlikely to have been anticipated by Constable. Although we may wonder about the *pentimento* of the barge prow at the extreme left of the later and more loosely painted 'Leaping Horse', discussed at the beginning of this paper, there can be little doubt that in 1812 Constable would have completely covered the earlier, higher position of chimney and the mill roof when he exhibited this highly finished painting at the Royal Academy. When the painting was cleaned at the Corcoran Gallery in 1979, the *pentimenti* of chimney and roofs was suppressed, but, in keeping with standard practice at many museums, the earlier positions was allowed to show slightly (Figs. 8 and 9). It is a fair question for this symposium whether we should so value the physical object in its present condition, recording as it does a stage in the creation of the painting, that we should allow the *pentimenti*

to show in a painting such as this even though we can be nearly certain that the artist would have painted them out. The appearance of the painting has changed and so, it seems, have our values.

Changes in the Physical Conditions

Under Which Paintings Have Been Viewed

We turn now from considering physical changes in the paintings themselves to changes in the physical conditions under which they have been viewed. Again, our first concern is with the artist and with the conditions under which his paintings were viewed at the time. Whether we wish to recreate, as closely as possible, the original conditions under which Constable's paintings were viewed or to compare our own changed conditions to them, it is the original conditions that provide the basis for judgment. Happily, there is considerable evidence available in Constable's correspondence, especially in his letters to his wife, Maria, and to his closest friend, John Fisher.

Lighting

Among the various features of the physical environment for his paintings, Constable wrote most often and most revealingly about lighting conditions. With the exception of a few rare moonlight sketches from nature, [44] Constable seems to have painted landscapes only by daylight, turning to drawing by candlelight in the evening or on rainy days. [45] Any hour or any season would do, so long as the daylight was

adequate. His studio painting of landscapes also seems to have been limited to daylight hours. In a journal entry for Maria written in London, December 12th 1825, Constable wrote: "So dark that we had a candle on the table at 10. In the morning could not paint, but it does not signify as we are on the intricate outline of the Waterloo". [46]

Constable seems to have been equally concerned that his paintings be seen by good daylight by friends and potential clients, though over this he had less control. In another letter to James Carpenter also written from London in 1826, Constable wrote: "You see my little picture to a disadvantage, as the day is dark and I have by no means done my last to it". [47] And in a letter of December 1st 1835 to his close friend, Charles Leslie, Constable wrote: "Will you be so kind as to call for me on your way, tomorrow at 11 or 12, so that we go to the R.A. together--and this will give a fair opportunity of begging you to look at Mr. Vernon's picture by daylight", [48] that is, to see Constable's painting in his studio by late morning light.

Letters from his friend, John Fisher, probably provide further evidence of Constable's views on the preferred lighting for his pictures, because Fisher was clearly Constable protégé in art and anxious to please his elder friend. In two letters, he described in glowing terms the light on two of Constable large landscapes as Fisher had installed them in his home in Salisbury. On April 27th 1820, Fisher wrote:

Constables 'White Horse' has arrived safe. It is hung on a level with the eye, the lower frame resting on the ogee: in a western light, right

for the light of the picture, opposite the fire place. It looks magnificently. [49]

Six years later, Fisher wrote, probably from the same room:

The Cathedral [Constable's 'Salisbury Cathedral from the Bishop's Close', Victoria and Albert Museum R254, GR23.1] looks splendidly over the chimney piece. The picture requires a room full of light. Its internal splendor comes out in all its power, the spire sails away with the thunder-clouds. The only criticism I pass on it, is, that it does not go out well with the day. The light is of an unpleasant shape by dusk. I am aware how severe a remark I have made. [50]

Describing 'Stratford Mill' (National Gallery GR20.1), which Fisher had given to John Pern Tinney and perhaps helped him install in his home in Salisbury, Fisher wrote on February 16th 1822:

The light on your picture is excellent. It receives the South sun standing on the Western wall." In a sketch of the room, Fisher showed Constable's six-foot painting "hanging on a level with the spectator's head below a Venetian picture. [51]

The importance of viewing Constable landscapes by daylight was brought home to me dramatically in 1973 when I examined the Constable sketches in storage at the Louvre for the second time. In 1963, when I had first studied them, I had indicated that one of the little sketches, unframed, lying face up on a shelf, catalogued as "Constable genre," clearly

represented 'Old Bridge and Bridge Cottage from Flatford Lock' (Louvre RF1937-23, H172; although you may well be skeptical, the bridge and cottage are indicated in the center of the sketch). Moreover, I noted that this sketch was almost certainly an authentic Constable, though the dim, artificial light made it impossible to be sure. Perhaps still looking too much the student, I was unable to convince my curator-guide that we should take the sketch to daylight. For my visit in 1973, therefore, I arranged ahead of time to examine the sketches by daylight. The transformation was amazing; the sketch came together tonally, coloristically, spatially, and technically, and was clearly authentic. As you might guess, the other "Constable genre" sketches fell apart and looked even less convincing than they had in storage.

In the years since, I have made a point of examining Constable sketches and paintings by daylight whenever possible and must admit now to feeling terribly constrained when I am unable to examine a doubtful sketch in my hands, out of its frame, turning it in the sun, as Constable would have done. Here, for example, is a sketch that emerged from the Widener collection in 1988, representing the same stretch of land as the Louvre sketch, but here looking the opposite direction, 'Flatford Mill and Lock from the Towpath by Old Bridge' (private collection H617). [52] Although difficult to judge from the old photograph and doubted even after its reappearance, when seen in the sun it is clearly an authentic Constable, the open air sketch for Constable's 1817 R.A. exhibition piece, 'Flatford Mill' (Tate Gallery No1273, P14, GR17.1). Of course, there is no single, correct lighting condition for any Constable painting. In addition to the conditions under which it was painted, we

must consider the studio conditions under which the artist viewed the sketch when using it to develop an exhibition piece, the conditions under which Constable showed it to friends, and any hopes or expectations he may have had, however vague, for its later life. Even considering only the lighting conditions under which the sketch was painted, we must allow for the possibility that the sketch may have been in full sun and in shade at different times while the artist was working. For finished paintings, even those painted entirely in the open air, Constable would have known that they would be exhibited by indirect, indoor light. The conclusion that we cannot assume a single lighting condition, should not, it seems to me, lead us to accept all lighting conditions as equally appropriate. The evidence allows us to establish a limited range of possibilities and to develop a sense of how the artist himself would have evaluated each. Any other types of lighting conditions can then be seen in a specific relationship to those under which Constable made his decisions and those in which he intended his paintings to be exhibited.

There is of course the additional, difficult question of how our viewing of Constable's paintings is affected by the relatively low, artificial lighting conditions, under which we, quite rightly, are normally obliged to look at Constable's paintings today. We cannot know how the artist would have responded to any forms of electrical light, but the comments in his correspondence suggest that even fairly strong artificial illumination would not have provided the quality of light he felt necessary for his paintings. My own experience is that the difference between artificial lighting at the low levels appropriate to galleries today, even when mixed with filtered daylight, and, on the other hand, reasonably full indirect

daylight, is much greater than most people who do not have the opportunity to experience the difference first-hand would suppose. Seen under good indirect daylight in the conservation studio of the Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art, Kansas City, Constable's 1830 'Helmingham Dell' (55.39, GR30.1) leaps to life, revealing its monumental form and vibrant surface. [53]

An overall understanding of Constable's art suggests that Constable's landscape paintings seem especially artificial under flat, low-level, electric light, and that the 'chiaroscuro of nature', so essential to his view of landscape, is most deeply felt when we, as viewers, even inside a gallery, have a sense of the gradually shifting light overhead and are occasionally treated to a view of his landscapes under fairly full natural light. Unacceptable as it may be from the point of view of preservation, I have no doubt that our experience of Constable's landscape paintings is greatly heightened by an occasional burst of intense daylight.

As we are all aware, these differences in the appearance of paintings under different lighting conditions pose questions not only for what light should be used for research and display but also for conservation. When we inpaint a Constable open air painting, for example, should we do this by the reasonably full daylight under which it was painted, by the good indirect daylight under which he wished to exhibit it, under artificial lighting conditions similar to those in our gallery, or by the excellent, clinical lighting available in our laboratories?

I pose one final moral question for us. Many of us would accept the restriction imposed if an artist were to write on the back of his or her painting: "I realize that my painting is vulnerable and will deteriorate without varnish, but I prefer that this painting be destroyed rather than varnished." But what if this artist were to write instead: "I have painted this landscape partly to cover the earlier image on the same canvas. The privacy of this earlier image is part of the artistic integrity of this painting. I wish the painting to be destroyed rather than viewed under laboratory lighting, such as infra-red reflectograph, which would reveal the earlier image, even if seen by only one other person." Would we respect the artist's restriction on laboratory lighting conditions?

Hanging, etc.

Constable's correspondence provides evidence for other types of changes in the physical conditions under which his paintings were viewed. In one fascinating letter of June 30th 1813 from London to his then future wife, Maria, Constable described the colors he has chosen for the drawing room and studio of his house in Charlotte Street.

We are now repairing the house here with a thorough painting, and I shall leave orders about the back drawing room. The paper will be a sort of salmon color and the sofa & chairs crimson (by Lady Heathcote's advise). I think they will suit pictures but I am indifferent about show--though all insist upon it. . . . My front room where I paint shall be done with a sort of purple brown from the floor to the ceiling--not sparing even the doors or doorposts, for white is disagreeable to a

painter's eyes, near pictures". [54]

Most of Constable's comments on the hanging of his paintings in the company of others concern the standard complaints of crowding and being hung in inferior positions at the Royal Academy, but three letters are especially revealing. In addition to the draft of a letter quoted earlier, in which Constable wrote probably to a prospective client, pointing out that his paintings were best seen together because "it displays to advantage their varieties of conception and also of execution, and what they gain from the mellowing hand of time"; [55] Constable mentions details of hanging in two letters to Fisher, the first written about July 10th 1823:

You have made an excellent purchase of a most delightfull work. It is a pearly picture but its tone is so deep & mellow that it plays the very devil with my landscapes. It makes them look speckled & frost bitten, but I shall make my account of it, as I am now working for "tone". [56]

In another letter to Fisher, written December 17th 1824, Constable reported on the reception of two of his six-foot landscapes ('The Hay Wain' [National Gallery GR21.1] and 'View on the Stour near Dedham' [Henry E. Huntington Library and Art Gallery, San Marino GR22.1]) when exhibited at the Louvre earlier that year. In this revealing quote, he described a change in the appearance of his painting during the first few weeks of the exhibition resulting from their rehanging, commenting especially on the viewing distance for his paintings:

My Paris affairs go on very well. The pictures in the Louvre did not keep the ground they first took-but though the director (the Count Forbain) gave them very respectable situations in the first instance--yet on their being exhibited a few weeks, they so greatly advanced in reputation that they were removed from their original situations to a post of honor--the two prime places near the line in the principal room. I am much indebted to the artists for this alarum in my praise--but I will do justice to the Count. He is no artist (I believe) and he thought "as the colors were rough, they must be seen at a distance"--they found their mistake as they then acknowledged the richness of the texture--and the attention to the surface of objects in these pictures.

[57]

We value too little, I suspect, the opportunity of seeing the same paintings in different hangings, and pay too little attention to what can be learned from the changing appearance of paintings under different lighting conditions, against different colors, in the company of different paintings, and viewed from different distances. Happily, the increasing number of in situ studies and frame studies, etc., are beginning to correct this situation, but most art history writing still treats paintings as if they, or perhaps their photographs, exist in an environmental void.

Changes in Cultural and Psychological Contexts in Which Paintings Have Been Understood and Interpreted

A comprehensive review of changes in the appearance of Constable's paintings requires attention to the changing contexts in which they have

been painted, collected, bought and sold, preserved and restored, exhibited, and studied; for example in symposia such as this. [58] The fact that the cultural and psychological contexts for Constable's paintings are not discussed separately in this paper will not suggest, I hope, that they are in any way peripheral to the technical work of conservation. Quite the contrary; all technology serves human values. What we preserve and how is largely a result of what we value, as I have attempted to demonstrate in the body of this paper.

Conclusions

Even in the relatively few examples we have examined, we have observed an extraordinary diversity in the types of changes that have taken place in the appearance of paintings by one artist, John Constable. Along the way, we have noted how some of these changes relate to others within the work of the same artist; how, for example, darkened bitumen might affect our changing critical response to 'The Valley Farm', or how twentieth century values might persuade us to retain visible evidence of the roof lines in 'Flatford Mill from the Lock', even though the artist had deliberately painted them out. In addition, we may wonder what might be learned by comparing changes in the appearance of paintings by one artist with those in paintings by other artists; to see, for example, if the physical changes in Constable's 'Opening of Waterloo Bridge' and Turner's 'Helvoetsluys' (private collection), [59] which hung beside each other at the 1832 Royal Academy exhibition, are comparable enough, especially in the reds, that we can re-experience the famous competition between the two pictures. [60] Or we may wish to compare the different ways in

which art historians, curators, conservators, and conservation scientists evaluate a certain type of change; to see if we can understand why a curator or conservator might have had 'Stoke-by-Nayland' cleaned as a displayable example of Constable's late painting while an art historian might value the same object, cleaned somewhat differently, as a document of Constable's working procedure. As a framework for stimulating such comparisons, let us look now at the draft outline I have been following.

I. Physical changes in paintings

A. Made by the original artist

1. Original working procedure
 - a. Seemingly minor changes
 - b. Significant alterations in composition, etc.
 - c. Slightly enlarging canvases by unfolding and restretching
 - d. Significant changes in the size and shape of canvases through cutting, stitching and pasting
 - e. Finishing, pulling together tonally, etc.
 - f. Varnishing
2. Continuing work on paintings following exhibition and/or sale
3. Significantly later development of paintings
4. Scraping down, covering paintings with a new ground, or overpainting with a new image.
5. Destruction of entire canvases

B. Made for/by others

1. For patrons
2. For dealers

3. By other artists
 4. Through accident or vandalism
 5. By past restorers
 6. By recent conservators
- C. Normal changes in the materials used
1. Anticipated and provided for by artist
 2. Feared by artist
 3. Not anticipated by artist
- D. Natural catastrophe, war, etc.

II. Changes in the physical conditions under which paintings have been viewed

- A. Under different lighting conditions
1. By sunlight
 - a. With the painting
 - (1) In full sun
 - (2) In mixed sun/shade
 - (3) In shade
 - b. Time of day
 2. By mixed daylight/artificial light
 3. By artificial light
 - a. Candles
 - b. Gas
 - c. Electrical (varying color temperature, etc.)
 - (1) Incandescent
 - (2) Floods and spots
- (3) Fluorescent

- (4) Quartz
- (5) Ultraviolet
- (6) Infra-red

- B. Viewed through an optical device or not
- C. How framed or not framed
- D. Hung at different heights, angles, etc.
- E. Displayed against different colored backgrounds
- F. Displayed beside other paintings, etc.
- G. Location
 - 1. Out-of-doors
 - 2. In the artist's studio
 - 3. First exhibitions at the R.A. and B.I.
 - 4. In private collections
 - 5. At auction
 - 6. In permanent museum collections
 - a. On display
 - b. In storage
 - 7. In later temporary exhibitions
 - 8. In conservation laboratories

III. Changes in the cultural and psychological contexts in which paintings are understood, interpreted, displayed and treated
(Because this subject is so vast and permeates all aspects of changes in the appearance of paintings, it is not separately outlined here.)

This list is drawn almost entirely from Constable's work, though we have had time to consider only a sampling of examples here. I have no illusion

that this would be an adequate outline for every artist or situation, and I look forward during the symposium to seeing other concerns emerge from the paintings of other artists or from the perspectives of other disciplines. The very fact that some portions of such an outline would be superfluous for certain artists but would require expansion for other artists points up the variety in the types of changes paintings by different artists have undergone.

This outline, which may at first appear excessively detailed, could of course be more so. Its intent is to help us think about these changes in an orderly, even systematic way. The cosmos of culture is in many ways parallel to the cosmos of nature, immensely complex but nevertheless orderly and capable of being understood if we wish to do so. For example, although the varying lighting conditions under which paintings by a given artist have been viewed over the years may seem to justify whatever type of lighting we may wish to use today, it is often possible to identify and evaluate the types of lighting under which the paintings in question have been seen at various times and places and thereby to make more thoughtful choices and to explain to the public just what they are seeing and why.

Set against the fact that these changes can be categorized and thereby, to some extent, dealt with as type problems, is the fact that every painting is unique. For Constable, each act of seeing, each act of drawing or painting, was a new experience, the occasion for a singular focus on the world and a unique creation on paper, board or canvas. Therefore, each painting by Constable presents a unique problem for us

to understand, and we must strive to adjust our understanding and practice to this situation. We must strive to make our art history and our conservation object specific.

To accomplish this, we must also attend to the specific time, place, and conditions under which each object is studied and treated. It may seem obvious to us now, but it is amazing how often old conservation reports and photographs, even those in major photo archives, are not dated, and it is therefore often difficult to establish when even major physical changes took place. Some time ago I began noting the conditions under which I viewed each object as I was cataloging it, and in two recent catalogues, [61 I have indicated, as a regular part of each entry, the conditions under which each object was studied: in many cases "Fully examined out of frame by good daylight," but for some "Examined framed off wall by good daylight," and in one case "Entry based on excellent color transparency, photograph of back, and information provided by Sotheby's". Along the same lines, I have been attempting, for some years, to persuade museum curators to cross out the section on their catalogue sheets that reads "Condition" and to write instead "Physical History of the Object." What we should like, ideally, is surely not simply a report on the present condition (simply one stage in an ongoing process) but rather a full, chronological history of all physical changes in a painting from the time it was painted until the present. In my entries, I now always try to list when, where, and by whom a painting was relined, cleaned, or otherwise treated. Once we accept this as a category of information to be provided, as a regular expectation for all major catalogues, I think we will be surprised at how much of this

information can be reconstructed, especially as the records of retired private conservators become more available. [62]

Other types of records would also contribute to our joint enterprise. As many of you know, an extensive record of Constable's work, based on thorough technical examination of a large number of his sketches and paintings, has been developed in recent years by Sarah Cove. [63] This study has already produced important results and, of course, such a large, systematic body of technical information will be invaluable as a basis of comparison for any Constables to be studied and/or treated in the future.

In addition, before any painting is treated, it would be helpful if the curator and conservator in charge could read any statements by the artist and contemporaries relevant to the artist's studio practice and to the appearance, technique and physical make-up of the artist's paintings, but we art historians have been very slow to provide this information. In 1984, I drew up for discussion at a colloquium at the National Gallery of Art, Washington, a sample of the type of record I should recommend we keep for any significant artist. I should be happy to provide at cost a xerox of the document ('A History of Technique: John Constable, A Trial Study') to anyone who would like one.

One of the central ideas that I assume we shall return to in various ways during this symposium is the interdependency of the three types of changes mentioned in the call for papers and adopted as the major divisions in my outline. Just as our judgment of a painting's authenticity

is influenced by the physical state of the painting and the conditions under which it is seen, so the type of tonal coherency which a conservator attempts to achieve in cleaning a painting is influenced by the attribution of the painting and its relation to other paintings attributed to the same artist. Cultural and institutional norms for whether a portrait or landscape is valued more for its evidence of the artist's hand or for the image of the person or place represented (different, for example, in an art museum than in a portrait gallery or historical society) help determine how a painting is cleaned and the extent to which it may be restored. We do not consider physical changes in a painting first, then changes in the conditions under which it is viewed and finally changes in the paintings cultural and psychological context; nor do we proceed in the opposite direction. Whether we are aware of it or not, all three types of changes are involved in every judgment we make, every action we take. This makes all of our art history and curatorial judgments, all of our conservation and conservation science, a great deal more complicated but also, I hope you will agree, quite a bit more interesting.

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- JCC II *John Constable's Correspondence II: Early Friends and Maria Bicknell (Mrs. Constable)*, R. B. Beckett (ed), Suffolk Records Society, Vol.VI (1964).
- JCC III *John Constable's Correspondence III: the Correspondence with C. R. Leslie*, R. B. Beckett (ed), Suffolk Records Society, Vol. VIII (1965).
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- Rhyne 1981 Rhyne, C S, "Constable's Drawings and Watercolors in the Collection of Mr. and Mrs. Paul Mellon and the Yale Center for British Art: Part I, Authentic Works," *Master Drawings*, XIX, 2 (Summer 1981), pp 123-45, pls 1-17.
- Rhyne 1988 Rhyne, C S, "Discoveries in the Exhibition," in *John Constable, R.A. (1776-1837)*, Salander-O'Reilly Galleries (1988), pp 11-27.
- Rhyne 1990 Rhyne, C S, "Constable First Two Six-foot Landscapes," *Studies in the History of Art*, 24, National Gallery of Art (1990), pp 109-29.

Notes

1. Because this paper is to be given as a symposium lecture, I have written it as such, raising questions for discussion at the symposium and referring to details in Constable's paintings which, in my lecture, will be illustrated with detail color slides. For illustrations of the paintings and drawings discussed, see the references given in parentheses after the title of each work in the text.

2. The identification of this scene is secured by correspondence of the detail of the windmill with the same detail, including the red roof immediately to the left, in Constable's 1815 painting, 'Golding Constable's Kitchen Garden' (Ipswich Borough Council 1955-96.2, H213).

3. GR 25.1-25.4.

4. JCC II p. 385.

5. Leslie p. 145.

6. Clark, K, 'Constable; 'Study for The Leaping Horse', in his *Looking at Pictures*, Holt, Rinehart and Winston (1960), pp.110-121.

7. JCC II pp 385-87; see also JCC IV pp 100-101, 171, and 271.

8. I have discussed and illustrated some of these aspects of 'The Leaping Horse' previously in "A Slide Collection of Constable's Paintings: The Art Historian's Need for Visual Documentation", *Visual Resources*, IV, 1 (Spring 1987). See pp 56-58, figs 3-4.

9. Jean Rosston, then Mellon Fellow in Conservation at the Museum, was especially helpful with 'The Lock'.

10. Strangely, the right edge of the canvas, in its present condition, does not appear to have been either cut or torn, but rather cracked off. See

also Richard Dorment, *British Painting in the Philadelphia Museum of Art, from the Seventeenth through the Nineteenth Century*, PMA (1986), no.11.

11. JCC VI 1968, pp 197-98.

12. JCC VI 1968, p 45.

13. JCC VI 1968, p 134.

14. GR 28.2.

15. JC: FDC 1975, p 133.

16. C. R. Leslie, *Life and letters of John Constable, R.A.*, R C Leslie (ed), Chapman and Hall (1896), p xiii.

17. Martin Hardie, "Constable's Water-Colours," in *The Old Water-Colour Society's Club: Twelfth Annual Volume 1934-1935* (1935), p 9.

18. H32. See also Rhyne-Studies, note 60.

19. GR 20.48.

20. Rhyne-1990. This article includes extensive technical information for this painting, based largely on examination helpfully carried out for me by Sarah Fisher and Charlotte Hale and paint samples analyzed by Eugena

Ordonez.

21. In 1985 at the Art Institute of Chicago, Rick Brettel showed me Picasso's "Blue Guitar ", in which Picasso had painted directly over a figure below without an intermediate ground. Brettell pointed out that such a procedure required powerful control.

22. Rhyne-1988, pp 21-23, color plate 2.

23. Partially quoted in Rhyne-1988, p. 21.

24. See GR30.18.

25. Leslie, pp.227-28.

26. Rhyne 1981, no 25, pl. 9a.

27. Previously unpublished. Pencil on off-white laid paper, soiled and foxed, opaque hinges covering the left corners, stamped "LIVERPOOL CITY LIBRARIES" and "HORNBY LIBRARY LIVERPOOL". 95 x 128 mm (trimmed). Verso of 'Flatford Mill from the Towpath near Old Bridge'. Coll: Hugh Frederick Hornby; by whom bequeathed to Liverpool 1899.

28. See the facsimile publication of three Constable sketchbooks (plus a fourth by Lionel Constable) at the Louvre (RF1870/08698, 08700, and 08701), in which most of the pages with drawings are stamped 'ML' inside an oval. *Constable and his Friends in 1806*. 5 vols. Paris: Trianon

Press; & Guildford Surrey: Genesis Publications, 1981.

29. Exeter Public Library, p42 (35). See Rhyne 1981, p142, note 18. See also GR23.75-79, 81; 25.16-17; 27:35-9; 34:53, 68; 35.20, 31; 36.12, with illustrations. More recently, the drawings in the Exeter Album have been expertly lifted from the sketchbook pages, treated and mounted by Heather Norville.

30. 'East Bergholt Common; View to the Rectory from the Fields Behind Golding Constable's House'. Rhyne-1988, p16, color pl on cover.

31. In 1988, Simon Parkes generously discussed with me his cleaning of a number of Constable sketches and paintings during the two or three previous years.

32. Shortly after its rediscovery, I informed other Constable scholars of the whereabouts of this painting and provided detail color slides showing the painting before and after the cleaning. I then used the painting as the centerpiece of a lecture, "The Substance of Constable's Art," given at the annual meeting of the College Art Association in America, San Francisco, 1981. This lecture was expanded as "John Constable: The Technique of Naturalism" and in 1981 given at the University of Oregon, Johns Hopkins, University of Delaware, Oberlin College, Metropolitan Museum of Art, and the Courtauld Institute of Art.

33. Hoozee lists it as a rejected work and describes it as an imitation of the sketch in the Phillips Collection (GR34.76).

34. GR36.19. Following this study, I presented a lecture, "Constable's Last Six-Foot Sketch," at the Art Institute of Chicago, bringing together for the first time all of Constable's representations of Stoke-by-Nayland and interpreting its meaning in Constable's art. The manuscript of a long article on the subject is on file at the Art Institute. I should be happy to make a xerox available at cost to anyone wishing a copy. The grounds for considering the Chicago canvas a sketch rather than an unfinished painting (or in one previous publication a finished painting) are presented in Rhyne 1990, note 45.

35. JCC IV 1966, p 129.

36. *The Reminiscences of Solomon Alex. Hart, R.A.*, A Brodie (ed), (1882), p 58.

37. John Walker, *John Constable*, Abrams (1978), p 150.

38. LP, no. 41.

39. JCC IV 1966, p 122.

40. I have presented this view of 'The Valley Farm' in a 1982 discussion at the Paul Mellon Centre for Studies in British Art, London, and in a 1984 lecture, "The History of Technique: John Constable a Trial Study," at the Center for Advanced Study in the Visual Arts, National Gallery of Art, Washington.

41. A summary of the report is dated 14 Jan. 1960. For an especially informative technical report on another painting at the Tate, see Anna Southall, "Flatford Mill" in *Completing the Picture: Materials and Techniques of Twenty-six Paintings at the Tate Gallery*, Tate Gallery (1982), pp 34-38.

42. Leslie pp 176-77.

43. For Wolber's work on bitumen see R Wolbers, "Developing Fourier Transform Infrared ISpectroscopy (FTIR) as an Aid in the Selection of Asphalt-containing Paint Films," in *Papers Presented at the Art Conservation Training Programs Conferences*, May 1/3, 1983, Cooperstown, New York, pp 103-22.

44. For a discussion of several, see Rhyne 1988, p16.

45. His nude studies would have been painted by gaslight at the life classes of the Royal Academy schools. See JCC III 1965, pp35-36.

46. JCC II 1964, p 421.

47. JCC IV 1966, pp 137-38.

48. JCC III 1965, p 132.

49. JCC VI 1968, p 53. This agrees with Constable's own directions for

the hanging of his 'Barge Passing a Lock', in which the light falls from the left. In a letter of August 30th 1833 to Brussels, he writes: ". . . I should much prefer the light coming from the left on of my picture, and if it were placed about level with the eye, should such a situation conveniently offer itself--" (*Constable the Art of Nature*, by Leslie Parris and Conal Shields, Tate Gallery [1971], p. 24.)

50. JCC VI 1968, pp 221-222.

51. JCC VI 1968, p 84.

52. Examined unframed by good daylight. Oil on canvas, cleaned, wax relined, and restretched by Lowy Co., Philadelphia, c.1987. 359 x 422 mm (stretcher). Label on back of frame: "P.A.B. Wiedner 508/94018/01" (that is sale 508, lot 01, Widener receipt no.94018). See LP pp72, 74, fig 7, and GR17.1, both published on the basis of the old black-white photograph.

53. Forrest R. Bailey, Paintings Conservator, was especially helpful during my visit in 1987. He shared with me his 1983 examination report (No 83.02.15), x-radiographs and photographs, showing that "the cleaning revealed the partial image of a deer underneath the cow [in the lower-left of the painting]. Because "the reflection of the cow in the water appeared to be original paint", "the 1830 mezzotint of the same scene also showed a cow", and "the cracks in the cow's nose conforms to the crack pattern in the painting", the partial remains of the deer were painted out and the cow repainted.

54. JCC II 1964, pp 109-10. In a letter of July 7th 1826 to Fisher in Salisbury, Constable writes: "Have you done anything to your walls? They were of a colour formed to destroy every valuable tint in a picture" (JCC VI 1968, p 222).

55. JCC IV 1966, p 129.

56. JCC VI 1968, p 124. Constable then identifies the painter as "G. de Vris, an artist contemporary with Rubens--& de Heem. . . ."

57. JCC VI 1968, p 185.

58. Although the words "reception theory" are never used, an information study has been published tracing Constable's multifaceted reception from his death until 1937: Ian Fleming-Williams and Leslie Parris, *The Discovery of Constable*, Hamish Hamilton (1984). See also my review in the *Burlington Magazine*, CXXIX (Feb 1987), pp 124-26.

59. Butlin and Joll, *The Paintings of J M W Turner*, YUP (1977) 2 vols, no 345.

60. Recounted by Robert C Leslie, in his edition of *Life and letters of John Constable, R.A.* by C R Leslie, Chapman and Hall (1896). See also JCC III, pp 69-70.

61. Rhyne 1988. I am told that the catalogue of the fifteen

"discoveries" in this exhibition was the first published catalogue of works from diverse collections to indicate the conditions under which each object was studied. This information is included also for every object in "Constable and Dunthorne", a catalogue produced for a small show of the work of John Dunthorne, Jr. that accompanied the Constable exhibition. This catalogue is scheduled for publication in 1990.

62. For example the papers of William Suhr, housed at the Getty Center for the History of Art and the Humanities, Santa Monica.

63. Cove S, "An Experimental Paintings by John Constable R.A., *The Conservator*, Vol 12 (1988), pp 52-56; "The Constable Project: Current Research into Materials," *Conservation Today: Papers presented at the UKIC 30th Anniversary Conference 1988*, pp. 59-63.

Captions

Except where noted, all photographs were taken by the author.

Fig 1 John Constable, 'Old Houses on Harnham Bridge, Salisbury', 1821/1831, showing retouching ten years after original watercolor.

Fig 2 John Constable, 'A Wooded Bank with an Open Book and Distant View of Water', 1829-c.1836.

Fig 3 Composite x-radiograph of central section of 'A Wooded Bank', showing image of portrait of 'Thomas Simcox Lea' covered over by present landscape. X-radiograph by Owens Art Gallery, Sackville, New Brunswick.

Fig 4 John Constable, 'Thomas Simcox Lea', 1830. Photo provided by owner.

Fig 5 John Constable, 'Dedham Vale from the Coombs', c.1808-12.

Fig 6 John Constable, detail of 'Hampstead Heath, looking towards Harrow, 1821, showing unflattened impasto brushstrokes.

Fig 7 John Constable, detail of copy after Claude's 'Landscape with Goatherds and Goats', 1823, showing black transfer lines outlining knees.

Fig 8 John Constable, detail of 'Flatford Mill from the Lock', 1812, showing *pentimenti* before 1979 cleaning.

Fig 9 John Constable, detail of 'Flatford Mill from the Lock', 1812, showing *pentimenti* after 1979 cleaning.