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The Remarkable Story of the 'Six- Foot Sketches'

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Some of the most challenging questions about Constable’s art concern the meaning of his so-called ‘six-foot sketches’. What was their purpose? What was their relationship to his matching exhibition pictures? Are they preparatory studies or alternative versions of the exhibited paintings? Do they disclose the ‘real Constable’?¹ To what extent do they constitute an unprecedented form of art? Why is there not a single reference to the idea of full-size sketches in Constable’s voluminous correspondence, even with his family and intimate friends? Why, at auction, did they sell at almost giveaway prices? Why has a distinguished authority described them as ‘Constable’s supreme achievement’, and even ‘the greatest thing in English art’?² Why has the authenticity of so many of them been doubted even by leading scholars? Why has it taken so long for them to be considered as a group? To what extent do we understand them even today?

Identifying the Full-Size Sketches

Even identifying which objects should be considered large, full-size sketches is problematic. In spite of C.R. Leslie’s defining 1855 statement that ‘Constable made a sketch of the full size of every large picture he painted’,³ we are still struggling to identify the sketches to which Leslie referred. Often called Constable’s ‘six-foot sketches’ by later authors, only six of his large, full-size sketches correspond closely with this measurement.⁴ Of the others often thought of as part of the series, one is significantly larger,⁵ and two are about a half-foot shorter.⁶ In addition, three are under five feet, thus clearly not six-footers, though as large, full-size sketches, they are instructive to consider as part of the series.⁷ Two of these large, full-size sketches, one exactly six feet, date from the last decade of Constable’s life, calling attention to the endurance of this concept in his mind and working procedure.⁸

We recognise quickly that more important than the exact six-foot length was the unprecedented concept of painting a large studio sketch on a separate canvas the same size as a matching finished painting. In other ways, the six-foot sketches vary greatly. Even the full-size sketches for *The Hay Wain* c.1820 (no.36) and *The Leaping Horse* c.1824 (no.46), which for decades served almost exclusively to represent this aspect of Constable’s art, are so different in appearance, complexity and purpose, that very few things can be said that apply equally to both.

There are other, even more challenging, reasons that scholars have been slow to identify the full-size sketches to which Leslie referred. As discussed in the sections below, some of these sketches have not been included in past publications because they were unknown to the museum and academic worlds; others because they were judged not to be by Constable; still others because they were considered unfinished paintings rather than full-size sketches.

References during Constable’s Life

How were Constable’s large, full-size sketches seen and understood during his life? Astonishingly, the concept of a full-size sketch is never mentioned in Constable’s extensive correspondence, even with his intimate friend, Archdeacon John Fisher, with whom he regularly discussed his artistic ideas. During Constable’s life, there are two nearly certain and two possible references to individual full-size sketches, though these must be surmised from related information.⁹ We long to know to what extent Constable considered his large,



FIGURE 15

full-size sketches private. Did he show them to, or discuss them with, intimate friends or visitors to his studio?

Various friends, collectors, dealers and artists visited Constable at his studio at No. 35 Charlotte Street in London, though there is no evidence of what they saw.¹⁰ Some recent authors have written that the existence of the full-size sketches was ‘probably unsuspected even by his friends until some were included in the 1838 sale’,¹¹ but this is surely too categorical. It is nearly certain that the full-size sketch for *View on the Stour near Dedham* c.1821 (no.38) was seen by Fisher. In a note to Fisher on a now lost piece of paper, recorded by Leslie, Constable refers to an earlier version, probably the full-size sketch. This is a rare and instructive description by Constable of the changes from, in all probability, one of his full-size sketches to the matching painting (nos.38, 39):

The composition is almost totally changed from what you saw. I have taken away the sail, and added another barge in the middle of the picture, with a principal figure, altered the group of trees, and made the bridge entire. The picture has now a rich centre, and the right-hand side becomes only an accessory.¹²

Constable’s note describes compositional changes, partly details, but more importantly the overall structure and impact of the image.

Nineteenth-Century Evidence

It is nearly certain that several of the large, full-size sketches were listed in the auction catalogue of the Constable family collection at Foster and Sons in London in 1838, one year after Constable’s death.¹³ This was the first public showing of these sketches, but there is no evidence that they made any impression, and those that sold went for almost giveaway prices. The first secure descriptive reference to any of the large, full-size sketches appeared in the 1843 first edition of C.R. Leslie’s *Memoirs of the Life of John Constable*, in which Leslie was describing Constable’s *The Leaping Horse* (no.47), exhibited at the Royal Academy in 1825.¹⁴

Before he sold them in 1853, the dealer D.T. White showed *The Hay Wain* and *The Leaping Horse* sketches to viewers, including the French landscape painter Constant Troyon (fig.15), whom Henry Vaughan noted ‘came frequently to see these studies and desired much to

Figure 15
Constant Troyon
The Approaching Storm
1849
Oil on canvas
116.2 × 157.5 (45 1/2 × 62)
NATIONAL GALLERY OF ART,
WASHINGTON. CHESTER DALE
FUND 1995

Figure 16
Engraving of the full-size sketch
for *The White Horse* c.1818 (no.28),
from the *Magazine of Art*,
June 1883

become the owner of them had circumstance permitted'.¹⁵ Thirteen years later, in their 1866 *A Century of Painters of the English School*, Richard and Samuel Redgrave provided the first extensive description of any of the full-size sketches (see p.25), and the subject has been a fixture in Constable studies ever since. The Redgraves' two-page account far exceeds all other nineteenth-century descriptions of Constable's full-size sketches in length and perception, helping us to relive their experience of these remarkable paintings.¹⁶

The most influential event for the full-size sketches was the long-term loan in 1862 (bequeathed 1900) by Henry Vaughan of the full-size sketches for *The Hay Wain* and *The Leaping Horse* to the South Kensington Museum (which became the Victoria and Albert Museum in 1899), where, except for brief periods, they have been on display ever since.¹⁷ Moreover, the two matching finished paintings were given to London's National Gallery in 1886 (*The Hay Wain*) and the Royal Academy in 1889 (*The Leaping Horse*). Possibly because they provided such a convenient set piece, these two sketches and their matching exhibition paintings served for decades as the basis for all discussions of Constable's large, full-size sketches. While the recent ease of air travel has significantly reduced the problem of studying the full-size

sketches, we should note that one of them is in Paris (*Helmingham Dell*, R.30.3); one each are in Washington (no.28), New Haven (no.30), Philadelphia (no.40) and Chicago (no.68); and in Great Britain, one is at Anglesey Abbey near Cambridge (no.65), and one, previously at the Royal Holloway College, University of London, is in a private collection (no.38). A further possible full-size sketch, though more likely an unfinished painting, is in Melbourne (fig.8, p.28).

The lack of evidence relating to the history of these full-size sketches is emphasised by the fact that *The White Horse* sketch c.1818 was not recorded, as far as we know, until 1872, in the catalogue of the Old Master exhibition at the Royal Academy, in which, not surprisingly, it was listed with no mention that it might be a large sketch.¹⁸ An engraving of it, illustrated in the *Magazine of Art* in June 1883, shows that by then it had been extensively overpainted, no doubt to make it more saleable as a finished painting (fig.16).¹⁹ This is key evidence, indicating both that all overpainting of *The White Horse* sketch had taken place by 1872, and also that so few participants in the market understood the range of Constable's art or recognised his hand that uncharacteristic changes could be made without calling their authorship into question. The recent, thoroughly researched and



FIGURE 16

Figure 17
Full-size sketch of Salisbury Cathedral from the Meadows c.1829–31 (no.60) before cleaning
GUILDHALL ART GALLERY,
CITY OF LONDON



FIGURE 17

impressively skilled cleaning by Michael Swicklik at the National Gallery of Art, Washington, has provided the first opportunity for over a century to see approximately what the painting looked like during Constable's life, and to reconsider what it tells us about the origin of these famous sketches (figs.18, 19).²⁰

A somewhat comparable situation was the overpainting of most of Salisbury Cathedral in the full-size sketch for *Salisbury Cathedral from the Meadows* (fig.17), finally removed in 1951, forty-nine years after its bequest to the Guildhall Art Gallery in London.²¹ Such 'finishings' have contributed ever since to the confusion regarding the attribution of Constable's full-size sketches.

At the beginning of the twentieth century, Constable studies were brought suddenly into the modern era with the 1902 publication of Charles Holmes's major monograph, *Constable and His Influence on Landscape Painting*, which included the first chronological catalogue of the artist's work.²² In this catalogue, Holmes mentions five of the large, full-size sketches. His descriptions constitute the earliest statement that some of the full-size sketches capture 'pictorial breadth and harmony' more successfully than the matching finished paintings, which, he writes, sometimes suffer in the pursuit of detail.²³

Full-Size Sketches Versus Finished Paintings

During the twentieth century, critics and scholars have disagreed most about two aspects of Constable's large, full-size sketches: the authenticity, or not, of many of these sketches, and their superiority, or not, in relation to their matching finished paintings. During the first half of the twentieth century, critical and scholarly opinion moved swiftly to prefer the full-size sketches and, correspondingly, to denounce the more detailed exhibition pictures. In the 1930s and 1940s, three internationally recognised authorities voiced the most compelling claims for the full-size sketches. In a burst of critical enthusiasm, almost as if in competition, they described highly perceptive and deeply felt responses to the full-size sketches, set against rigid condemnation of the corresponding finished paintings.

In his *Reflections on British Painting* (1934), Roger Fry wrote that the influence of his ambience impelled [Constable] to spend most of his time in London elaborating those great machines which were

calculated to produce an effect in the Academy exhibitions. The habit of making these was entirely bad. They are almost always compromises with his real idea. He watered that down, filling it out with redundant statements of detail which merely satisfy an idle curiosity and inevitably obscures the essential theme ... Fortunately, however, he frequently did full-size studies for these pictures, and it is to those and to the sketches that we must turn to find the real Constable.²⁴

Even for those of us who do not agree with his denunciation of the finished paintings, Fry's fifteen short pages of Constable criticism constitute some of the most perceptive writing on his full-size images. Like others, he depended entirely on *The Hay Wain* and *The Leaping Horse* sketches. Two years later, in a brief foreword to an exhibition of English art held in Amsterdam, Kenneth Clark wrote:

His first versions (they cannot be called sketches) of *The Hay Wain* and *The Leaping Horse* are the greatest thing in English art, and it is tragic to think that much of his time was spent in making from them dull replicas, finished for exhibition according to the timid taste of the day.²⁵

Eleven years later, in two books published in 1947, Lionello Venturi provided the most extended presentation of this extreme critical view.²⁶

Objections to these views appeared soon after. In the preface to his 1951 edition of *Leslie's Life*, Jonathan Mayne provided an early rejoinder:

Some critics now even suggest that the oil-studies, which he made as preliminaries to all his larger paintings, not only are superior to the completed works, but were considered to be so by Constable himself. Such a view is in danger of missing the point. There is no documentary evidence for attributing it to Constable, and those who adopt it themselves tend to lose sight of one of his most remarkable powers – his architectonic ability to carry over into large compositions of an almost classical poise the admired lyricism of the sketches. The small sketches and the full-sized studies show us the substance of his art in its most immediately assimilable form; but they were made with one constantly expressed intention – the construction from them of large finished pictures; and it is in these, 'The Hay Wain', and 'The Leaping Horse', 'the Chain Pier', and the others, that we see the artist's capacities most fully expressed.²⁷

A telling refutation of the views of Fry, Clark and Venturi appeared in an excellent, seldom referred-to 1976 book, *Constable and His Country*, in which Alastair Smart wrote:

Certainly it is fantastic to suppose that Constable ever considered the brown and yellow meadows and blue-grey skies of the full-size sketch for *The Hay Wain* as in any sense a realization of his deepest feelings in front of nature.²⁸

The Purpose of the Full-Size Sketches

Closely tied to these conflicting values are different readings of the purposes for which the full-size sketches were made. In a famous passage, Basil Taylor wrote that 'the only certain conclusions are that we cannot establish the function of these paintings with any certainty'.²⁹ But let us try. There are several possible explanations for this unique practice, more than one of which is probably operative at any one time. Moreover, Constable's primary reason for continuing this practice, somewhat irregularly, for eighteen years, almost certainly evolved over time.

Figure 18
Full-size sketch of *The White Horse*
c.1818 (no.28) before cleaning
NATIONAL GALLERY OF ART,
WASHINGTON



FIGURE 18

Figure 19
Full-size sketch of *The White Horse*
(no.28) after cleaning
NATIONAL GALLERY OF ART,
WASHINGTON



FIGURE 19



FIGURE 20

Figure 20
**The Valley of the Stour
(Dedham from Gun Hill)**
c.1805–9
Oil on paper laid on canvas
48.8 × 59.8 (19 1/8 × 23 1/2)
The river, buildings and bridge in the
centre of this sketch are clearly
visible on the x-ray of *The White Horse*
(fig. 21).
VICTORIA AND ALBERT MUSEUM,
LONDON

Figure 21
X-ray of the full-size sketch of
The White Horse (no.28), showing
the image of the abandoned
composition of *Dedham from Gun Hill*
underneath
VICTORIA AND ALBERT MUSEUM,
LONDON

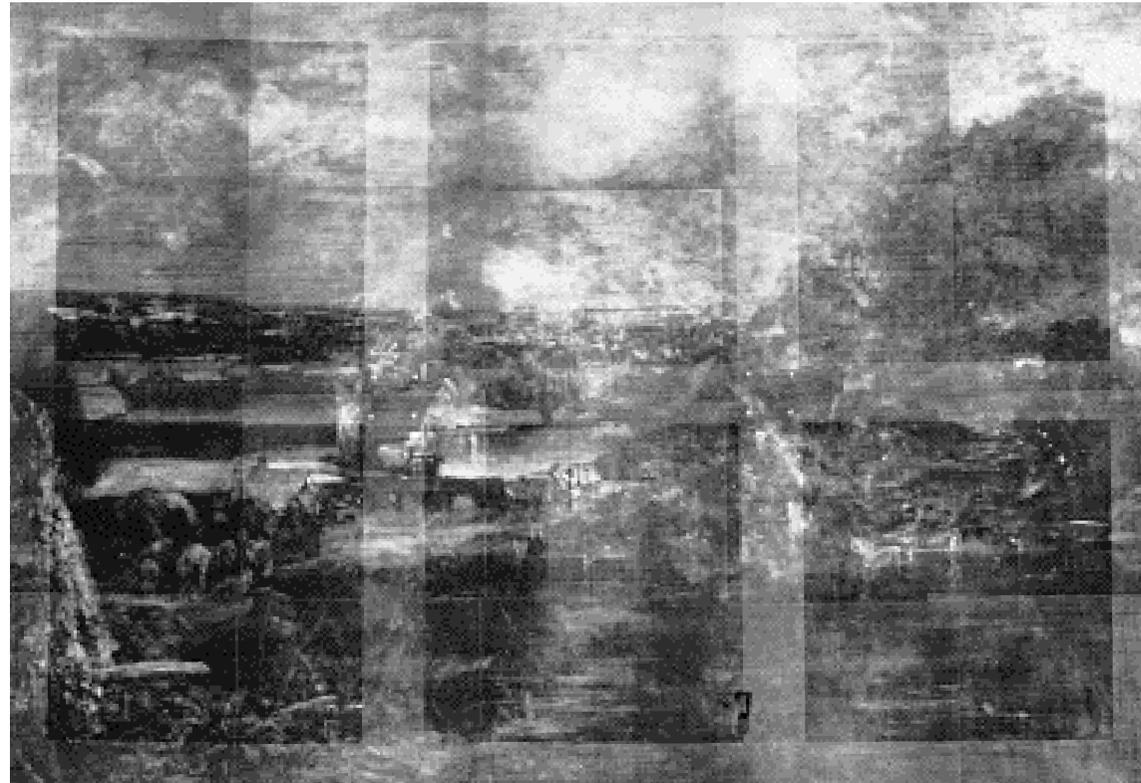


FIGURE 21

Figure 22
Full-size sketch
of *Stoke-by-Nayland*
c.1835-7 (no.68)
THE ART INSTITUTE
OF CHICAGO,
MR AND MRS W.W.
KIMBALL COLLECTION



FIGURE 22

In an article on *The White Horse* sketch at the National Gallery of Art, Washington, I attempted to describe why Constable seems to have begun this practice.³⁰ New x-radiographs had revealed a previously unsuspected image of *Dedham Vale from the Coombs* beneath *The White Horse* sketch (fig.21, p.45).³¹ Judging by the X-rays, it looked as if, in attempting his first landscape at so large a size, Constable had failed to pull the composition together and had clearly stopped work on the canvas. It seems likely that, before beginning another six-foot exhibition piece, he decided to work out the problems first in a large sketch. Perhaps a slightly smaller sketch would have served but, with a full-size, rejected canvas at hand, he re-used it. Judging by the fact that he did not cover much of the *Dedham Vale* image with ground before beginning *The White Horse* image, it is likely that he began *The White Horse* image consciously as a sketch, not intending it as the beginning of an exhibition piece. We cannot be certain of Constable's intentions, but it seems probable that his methodical working process and need for step-by-step progression from open-air drawings, sketches and studies to finished exhibition paintings help us to

understand his seminal decision to paint a six-foot sketch and then to paint an exhibition painting of the same subject on a separate canvas of the same size.³²

Because the finished painting of *The White Horse* was such a success at the 1819 Royal Academy exhibition, and because it led to Constable's election as an Associate of the Royal Academy, it is easy to understand why Constable continued the practice of a full-size sketch for his RA exhibits for at least the next year or two. But what about after Constable began to gain confidence with his six-foot paintings? It appears that the function of the full-size sketch primarily as preparation for a finished painting was evolving. John Sunderland has put extremely well one possible explanation for Constable's later, fuller development of his paintings and full-size sketches:

It ... seems possible that as Constable grew older the extensive working and reworking of a canvas and the resultant complex texture of paint layers took on a meaning of its own for him, so that he found it difficult to stop adding to the depth and richness of his work.³³



FIGURE 23



FIGURE 24

Figures 23–5
Details from the full-size sketch for *Stoke-by-Nayland* c.1835–7 (no.68)
THE ART INSTITUTE OF CHICAGO, MR AND MRS W.W. KIMBALL COLLECTION

Full-Size Sketches Misinterpreted as Paintings

In his 1855 *Hand-Book for Young Painters*, Leslie wrote that: Constable made a sketch of the full size of every large picture he painted, and as these sketches are sometimes complete in effect, though not in detail, they are sometimes mistaken for pictures, and a false notion is therefore conveyed of his Art.³⁴

The most dramatic and informative example of this mistake concerns the full-size sketch for *Stoke-by-Nayland* (figs.22–5; no.68). The misinterpretation of this full-size sketch as a painting lasted for over sixty years after its entry into a public collection in 1922. Moreover, recognition that it was a full-size sketch rather than a painting did not result from misleading overpainting by other hands or information later discovered through X-ray study.

Until 1986, no scholar had mentioned that the large *Stoke-by-Nayland* might be a full-size sketch. It had even served as the exemplar of Constable's late style in world histories of art. In his landmark *History of Art*, first published in 1962, H.W. Janson included an illustration of *Stoke-by-Nayland*, about which he wrote: 'The full-scale compositions of Constable's final years retain more and more of the quality of his oil sketches.'³⁵ In the 1993 edition of his *History of Painting, Sculpture and Architecture*, first published in 1976, Frederick Hartt continued to illustrate the picture and wrote: 'One of these late pictures is *Stoke-by-Nayland*, of 1836–37 ... The symphonic breadth of the picture ... bring[s] to the finished painting the immediacy of the color sketch.'³⁶

In 1986, I was invited to the Art Institute of Chicago to confer on the cleaning and technical study of the picture, and to lecture and write an article on it for their *Bulletin*. Although the article was never published, the Art Institute retains a copy in their files and I shared it with other Constable scholars.³⁷ I could see no reason to think it a finished or nearly finished painting. There was no documentary evidence to support the idea. In fact Leslie's oft-quoted statement that 'The large picture of "Stoke" was never painted' no longer presented a conflict, since Leslie was presumably referring to a painting rather than a full-size sketch.³⁸ The X-ray and technical study, while of value for comparison with other works by Constable, produced nothing to indicate that it was either a sketch or painting.

Thus, judgment depended on visual comparison with other late sketches and paintings. For comparison, from the 1830s there are no fewer than five finished landscapes over four feet (over 1.2m), two of them certainly finished in 1835 and 1836, in addition to two under four feet finished in 1836 and 1837.³⁹ None of them look anything like the Chicago sketch, nor do any of them suggest an underpainting with the character of the Chicago canvas. On the other hand, the vigorous handling, brilliant work with the palette knife and thick impasto of *Stoke-by-Nayland* accord closely with full-size sketches such as the Tate's *Hadleigh Castle* c.1829 (no.56), nearly identical in size, and with other sketches from the 1830s. The fence, plough and cart, and the position of the reclining figure, which are sometimes interpreted as later, inept finishings by another hand, do not accord with details in Constable's finished paintings, but are natural as integral parts of a boldly painted sketch and are consistent with his other late full-size sketches. The evidence seemed clear and I described it as such in two 1990 articles.⁴⁰ The next year, in their catalogue of the major Constable exhibition at the Tate Gallery, Parris and Fleming-Williams provided

an extensive summary of these findings and support for its identification as a full-size sketch entirely in Constable's hand.⁴¹

It is instructive to ask how it was possible that this misleading concept for so important a painting (illustrated in histories of world art, not just nineteenth-century or British art) survived until 1986. There was no evidence or comparative material to support the misinterpretation. We must recognise first that traditional attributions, dating and other judgments have a certain standing, justified or not, and tend to be continued until evidence appears to the contrary. Partly because it was not in London, the sketch had never been studied in depth by British scholars. Because Constable's full-size sketches are so greatly reduced in illustrations, the distinctive character of his remarkable technique can only be fully experienced in front of the original canvases (figs.23–5). I was privileged to study the *Stoke* picture for three days out of its frame in the Conservation Department at the Art Institute, in consultation with outstanding professional conservators; ideal conditions for studying a painting and not one that can often be provided.⁴²

It seems clear that the main reason for the misinterpretation was the oversimplified concept that Constable's handling of paint became bolder and freer late in life. This survey-type generalisation, true of Constable's sketches but not of his detailed and intensely worked finished paintings, needed a major finished painting as an exemplar. The Chicago *Stoke-by-Nayland* made it possible to tell the story.

In a few cases, it has even been claimed that in 'Constable's late style ... the difference between a sketch and a finished exhibition piece is almost nonexistent'.⁴³ Constable's known RA painting exhibits from the last years of his life were *Salisbury Cathedral from the Meadows* 1831 (no.61), *The Opening of Waterloo Bridge* 1832 (no.67), *Englefield House* 1833 (Private Collection; R.33.1), *The Valley Farm* 1835 (Tate, R.35.1), *The Cenotaph* 1836 (fig.13, p.38), and *Arundel Mill and Castle* 1837 (Toledo Museum of Art, Ohio; R.37.1), all extensively developed and finished, unlike any of his sketches.

Authenticity

As discussed above, the question of whether any given work is by Constable or not has troubled the market, museum practice, and



FIGURE 25

Constable scholarship since the artist's death. His large, full-size sketches have been at the centre of this debate.

Evidence from documentation and, increasingly, from technical studies, have played an important role in judgments of authenticity.⁴⁴ However, all types of evidence require interpretation and can be misleading if taken on their own. It is too rarely explained that there are many ways to prove that a painting is not by an artist, but only one way to show that it is. All other characteristics of a painting, including technical evidence, can be true also of a contemporary copy. Documents are often unreliable. Only the hand of the artist is unique to the artist's work, and the more distinctive the artist's hand the more reliable the judgment. Constable's hand is very distinctive, but it is also very varied. Judgments depend above all on scholars who have looked long and hard, and critically, over many years, at the full range of original works by a given artist. For one who has lived through forty years of such experience, I am amazed at the extent to which these judgments have been clarified and refined over the years, not only for Constable but across the full range of world art.

Decisions regarding authorship are forced by the appearance of new works on the market. All but one of Constable's full-size sketches had reappeared before the second half of the twentieth century and, although scattered, were on public view. Then, in 1983, the newly discovered full-size sketch for *Stratford Mill* c.1819–20 (no.30) came up for auction.⁴⁵ Experts were divided over its attribution to Constable, indicating the extent to which judgments regarding Constable's full-size sketches were unsettled, until the publication the next year of Graham Reynolds's definitive catalogue, *The Later Paintings and Drawings of John Constable*.⁴⁶

Problems of attribution are most comprehensively pressed by research for and publication of scholarly catalogues. During the past half-century, a series of major Constable catalogues have appeared. The great leap forward was provided by the publication in 1960 of Reynolds's catalogue of all paintings and drawings in the Victoria and Albert Museum.⁴⁷ Although this catalogue produced no new information directly on any of the full-size sketches, the astonishingly detailed contextual material has been essential for all later Constable studies.

Sixteen years later, the Tate Gallery mounted the first comprehensive exhibition of Constable's work, a highly successful exhibition with a catalogue by Leslie Parris and Ian Fleming-Williams.⁴⁸ For the study of the full-size sketches, most important was not only the addition of the full-size sketch of *View on the Stour near Dedham* c.1821 (no.38), at that time still in the collection of Royal Holloway College, London, but, even more so, the inclusion of the finished painting of *Hadleigh Castle* 1829 (no.57), on loan from Mr and Mrs Paul Mellon. This allowed, for the first time, comparison of a major full-size sketch with its matching painting, other than the standard *Hay Wain* and *Leaping Horse* comparisons. The *Hadleigh Castle* pair had recently been illustrated on facing pages in a splendid double-page spread, along with a small drawing and oil sketch on which they were based, in Basil Taylor's innovative *Constable* volume of 1973 (fig.26).⁴⁹ Previously, only one publication had illustrated any full-size sketch and matching painting on the same or facing pages.⁵⁰

Remarkably, the next major catalogue was written by a Belgian scholar and published only in Italian. In his 1979 *L'opera completa*

di Constable, Robert Hoozee doubted or questioned four of the full-size sketches.⁵¹ These were doubts that had been shared, often verbally, among other scholars, so that Hoozee's bold approach was instrumental in opening up the debate that had been hovering behind the scenes. In addition, his volume was notable for including, for the first time, illustrations (very small) and brief catalogue information for all twelve of the full-size sketches.⁵²

In 1981, the Tate Constable Collection catalogue by Leslie Parris was published, providing large colour illustrations and detailed catalogue information for all works in the Tate Constable Collection by and previously attributed to Constable.⁵³ This included a six-page review of all information related to the full-size sketch for *Hadleigh Castle* (no.56), the type of in-depth study needed for each of the full-size sketches.⁵⁴ Amazing as it may seem, this entry included the first publication of an X-ray photograph for any of these full-size sketches, many of which have multiple changes. These x-radiographs, taken in 1975, revealed that strips of canvas, about 4 inches (10cm) wide, had been added to the left side and bottom of the main canvas, which were then painted as part of the overall composition. In his 1981 entry for the full-size sketch, Parris presented reasons for concluding that 'there can be little doubt that someone other than Constable was responsible for the additions'. In his catalogue raisonné of Constable's later paintings and drawings, published three years later, Graham Reynolds disagreed, reaffirming that the two strips were painted by Constable. Strangely, no paint samples had been taken to determine if the paint on the added strips was significantly later than that on the main canvas. In connection with the current exhibition, the picture was thoroughly re-examined by Tate conservator Natasha Duff, paint samples and new x-radiographs taken. Duff has recently published her research on-line as part of a series of Tate papers, presenting convincing evidence that the paint on the strips is significantly later than that on the main canvas, very likely early twentieth-century additions. She proposes that the strips were probably added as part of a project, instigated by the art dealer and connoisseur Percy Moore Turner, to restore the picture before it was sold to the National Gallery, London, in 1935, perhaps because at that time the sketch was thought to be the exhibited version (see nos.53–7).⁵⁵

The defining document for all Constable studies is now Graham Reynolds's four-volume catalogue raisonné, containing abundant colour illustrations and information for every work known and considered by Reynolds to be by Constable.⁵⁶ The entries for the twelve large, full-size sketches provide the comprehensive in-depth information necessary for any attempt to answer the questions posed at the beginning of this essay. The full-page, high-quality colour illustrations of every pair of full-size sketch and matching painting, wonderfully reproduced on facing pages, was itself a major contribution.⁵⁷ Reynolds reaffirmed the authenticity of all twelve of the large, full-size sketches.

By far the largest and most spectacular exhibition of Constable's art ever held was mounted at the Tate Gallery in 1991. The exhibition was matched by an equally spectacular catalogue by Leslie Parris and Ian Fleming-Williams, impressively bringing together much research from recent years and providing new information of their own.⁵⁸ It included eight of the twelve full-size sketches, the largest number ever brought together, possibly since the auction of works

Figure 26
 Related sketches
 for Hadleigh Castle
 (see nos.53–7) from
 Basil Taylor, *Constable:
 Paintings, Drawings
 and Watercolours*,
 London 1973, figs.120–3



FIGURE 26

from the family collection the year after his death. On display together for the first time were no fewer than four pairs of the full-size sketches with their matching paintings: *Stratford Mill* (nos.30–1), *The Lock* (nos.40–1), *Helmingham Dell* (Louvre, Paris, R.30.3; Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art, Kansas City, R.30.1), and *Salisbury Cathedral from the Meadows* (nos.60–1). Moreover, these were joined by two other pairs that had previously been displayed together: *The Leaping Horse* (nos.46–7) and *The Lock* (nos.40–1). Altogether six paired full-size sketches and matching paintings were on display. I had assumed that this was a once-in-a-lifetime experience.

Once again, attribution questions were brought to the fore by the full-size sketches. No fewer than four of Constable's large, full-size sketches, previously doubted in whole or in part by the catalogue's authors, were reaffirmed as genuine Constables. The reasons for the re-evaluation of these sketches were closely related. The authors described the basis for their revised judgment in the entries for the sketches. About the *Stratford Mill* sketch they wrote:

There are also passages that can only be described as crude ... Constable is working for his eyes only and does not need to spend time refining the details and solving every problem at this stage. It has taken students of the artist some time to accept this fact.⁵⁹ On the *Salisbury Cathedral from the Meadows* sketch they wrote: doubts, shared by the present authors, still remained as to the authenticity of the work. For some of the more awkward passages ... it is still difficult to find a satisfactory explanation. One or two similarly ungainly passages in a work of undoubted authenticity,

the 'Stratford Mill' sketch, have made it easier to accept such lapses in a preparatory sketch, however, and [the *Salisbury Cathedral from the Meadows* sketch] is now accepted as fully authentic.⁶⁰

About the *Stoke-by-Nayland* sketch they wrote:

Certain odd features ... were regarded by some writers as a ham-fisted attempt by a later hand ... to complete the picture. Rhyne convincingly proposed that [*Stoke-by-Nayland*] is in fact a sketch for a painting that Constable never executed and that it must therefore be accessed by different criteria ... Constable seems to have been willing to sacrifice many of his usual skills when trying to pull together the sketch for a large composition.⁶¹

Acceptance of these four works has made possible, for the first time, scholarly agreement for the full sequence of Constable's known large, full-size sketches.

The full story of Constable's six-foot sketches has only recently begun to emerge. Each time a new work appears in the marketplace, we face new judgments of authenticity and value. Each time a scholar publishes the results of in-depth research, we struggle to incorporate new evidence. Each time X-ray study reveals previously invisible alterations, we expand our view of Constable's creative process. Each time a newly formulated critical statement is presented, we are challenged to think anew. Each time an exhibition brings together works previously separated, new relationships emerge. Each time a restoration cleans away later overpainting or discoloured varnish, we must look again. This essay attempts to explore these evolving perspectives so that our own attempts to see these extraordinary paintings might be more richly informed.