

A Worshipful Observation

John Constable vies with J.M.W. Turner for the title of England's greatest painter. Further, his landscapes have had a respectful international audience ever since the 1820s, when Eugène Delacroix saw Constable's work on view in Paris. Astounded by the vibrancy of the Englishman's palette, Delacroix gave his own colors more variety and a higher key. Four decades later, these developments helped the Impressionists toward their innovations. Thus, Constable has an oblique connection to Claude Monet. Painters like Constable reassure us with this kind of secure art-historical position, yet the comfort and familiarity we

feel in looking at the works of this particular exemplar of greatness can be misleading. If we're not careful, we may overlook the fact that Constable owes some of his strength to the fact that he is, on occasion, an exceedingly odd painter.

Over the centuries the English have shown two distinct attitudes towards artists. On one hand, they have supported foreigners who represent the mainstream of European culture: figures like Hans Holbein and Anthony Van Dyck. On the other, they save their full, long-term approval of home-grown practitioners for those who possess a degree of eccentricity. Of course we're so used to thinking of

Constable and Turner as major figures that we're inclined to overlook everything strange in the beauties they offer. Has any painter, including Monet, ever been as sublimely persnickety as Constable in the act of recording sunlight and its nuances? Some of his daubs of white and shimmery yellow may be petals. Then again, they may be sudden flecks of light, careening off the dew-soaked grass. Constable's accuracy of observation is an endless source of ambiguity, and that is why one's reading of his imagery shifts and builds, like the weather in the southeastern region of England known as Constable country. His



John Constable's *The Opening of Waterloo Bridge*: the structure is soothing, and the heavily worked surface brings the painting to convincing life.

world centers on the counties of Suffolk and Essex, though Constable country is first of all a territory of the imagination. Here vision is enhanced by the act of looking. The eye helps to create what it sees; this can feel more than a little unsettling.

As part of the recent *Britain Salutes New York* extravaganza, the Metropolitan Museum put on an exhibition of sixty-four Constable paintings. The occasion was the 200th anniversary of the Treaty of Paris, which ended hostilities between England and America once and for all, or so the festival promoters said; they seemed to overlook a fracas that broke out around 1812. Seven years old at the time of the Treaty, Constable was 26 when he first exhibited at the Royal Academy. Painting and exhibiting steadily for the rest of his life, he died in 1837 just short of his sixtieth birthday. The show at the Metropolitan covered every stage of his career. Among the major paintings in the show was a full-sized sketch for *View on the Stour near Dedham* (1822), one of the six immense canvases on which Constable staked his public reputation. At the other extreme were a number of cloud studies, executed in an inspired hurry on small sheets of paper.

Britain Salutes New York also included the Morgan Library's show of portrait drawings made by Hans Holbein at the court of Henry VIII. Holbein, who arrived in England from southern Germany by way of Basel, Switzerland, stands opposed in nearly every way to Constable. The portraitist was widely traveled, a citizen of Europe, while the landscapist of two centuries later hardly ever left his corner of England. Constable once visited the Lake District to the north, but found it uncongenial. He never set foot on the continent. Holbein brought the refinement of sixteenth-century Humanism to Henry's court, where few—save his friend, the beleaguered churchman Thomas More—had a full appreciation of his art. Constable gives us the illusion that the meadows and valleys, the gentle hills and meandering rivers of his world have somehow eluded the pressures of history and ambitious thought. His own ambition turned him toward the immediacies of ex-

perience.

By speaking of the peculiar vividness with which Constable's hand responded to his eye, I don't mean to suggest that he was a primitive. Far from it. In large compositions and small, his painting shows an easeful mastery of the grand traditions of Western art. Constable was active during the years when landscape was recognized, even by the heel-dragging French Academy, as a major genre. Landscape achieved this status by incorporating the magisterial forms and devices invented by the Renaissance and elaborated by the Baroque and its aftermath—periods in which meadow, mountain, and sky were made to serve as backdrops for heroic figures. It took nearly a century and a half for these motifs to step forward, fully acceptable as subjects in their own right. Constable did as much as any painter to win this recognition for landscape. His art is central to the genre, for it reaches back to the seventeenth-century pastorals of Claude Lorrain and the Dutch even as it leads forward, in a roundabout

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way, to the Impressionists.

Constable knew landscape's past through prints, in part, and also through an acquaintance with pictures in English collections. Much of this legacy exasperated him—particularly details which seemed wrongly observed. Grass, he pointed out more than once, is green, not the mellow brownish hue it so often takes on in highly prized old canvases. Yet Constable structures a landscape much as Claude Lorrain and his innumerable followers do. There is, for instance, the matter of foreground, middle ground, and background. Naturally enough, this three-part arrangement doesn't appear in Constable's renderings of clouds, nor do all his preliminary sketches show it. Nonetheless, when he presented a major canvas, the entire machinery of high-style landscape was always in place and in good working order.

Constable built his pictures conservatively, then embellished their surfaces with observations so alert they count—even now—as radical. Thanks to that alertness, which was widespread in the early nineteenth century, landscape stepped up to new levels of prestige.

In 1817, the Prince Regent presided over the opening of the Waterloo Bridge, which spans the Thames in commemoration of the British victory over Napoleon. Constable witnessed the ceremony and, fifteen years later, painted it. One of his few city scenes, this is hardly a picture of congested metropolitan space. In fact, the scene is as open to the sky as any of his paintings of Hampstead Heath or Brighton Beach. *The Opening of Waterloo Bridge* turns a view of London into one of Constable's characteristic river scenes. The flag-draped barges and St. Paul's distant silhouette seem almost out of place. Vessels nearest the lower edge of the painting establish the foreground, and point to the middle regions of the canvas where the royal entourage embarks. To the left, the river bank reaches toward distant stretches of water and sky. This pictorial structure is soothing in its familiarity—and vigorous too, for it is charged with all of Constable's mastery of traditional landscape. However, the painting's most convincing life is in its rough, heavily worked surface.

Step back the requisite distance, and the roughness becomes the scintillation of a radiant afternoon. Contemporary eyes find even more pleasure in the artist's study for this painting: rougher still, it is even more vibrant. In his own time, Constable was criticized for leaving his canvases unfinished, and there is no denying that their textures can perplex. It is sometimes difficult to bring these flickering images into focus. The same can be said of Turner's later works. Yet there are moments when Turner seems to transmute matter into sheer light. His art brought him to a threshold, beyond which stood the Angel of The Revelation. Constable, as usual, stayed closer to home. Instead of turning objects into light, he made light itself seem as palpable as foliage, river banks, and barges. ■

Nancy Goldner

Real Life Is Unrealistic

If one were to choose the century's greatest ballet, it would be George Balanchine's *Agon*. The tour de force, standing with no precedent and no progeny, would be Frederick Ashton's *Enigma Variations*. Presented by Britain's Royal Ballet during a week's layover in New York, en route to the Far East, it was ample reward for an otherwise silly repertory, some of it, alas, by Ashton.

Enigma Variations achieves what no other dance has. Conceived in non-narrative terms, it nevertheless plays like a novel, imparting the kind of information novels do, and using the novel's multi-faceted attack. In describing character, this ballet necessarily describes society, and vice versa. It exists in the present while successfully assuring the viewer it will move forward in time to a conclusion. We begin some novels with a slight panic: wanting immediately to know through which characters the theme will be stated, we reject the

writer's staking-out of the territory as a false lead. In *Enigma Variations* Ashton's surveillance of the territory

**The ballet has art
as well as life on
its mind.**

becomes, in a sense, the main theme, a fact that may alienate some from this masterpiece. But like the best of novels, *Enigma Variations* is immediately upfront about the protagonist's identity. When the curtain goes up he's standing alone in the middle of the stage while others stand at the sidelines in dimmer light.

Pondering a music score, his stance is suggestive, yet natural. The arrangement of the others around the garden set is drawn from real life, too. One lady reclines in a swing. At a table at the other side of the garden a man and woman converse over the last sip of tea. A few people stand at

the back, chatting under a trellis leading away from the garden. A gentleman sits in a chair, doing, as far as one can tell, nothing. The illusion of reality is established at once and is never lost. That it is never lost is the miracle of *Enigma Variations*, for its structure is the antithesis of realism.

Enigma Variations is a string of variations in which each character comes on and does his dance. The format is straight out of nineteenth-century convention, in essence no different from the third-act wedding divertissement beloved by choreographers because it was the moment they could forget story and get on with the dance. In *Enigma Variations* Ashton gets to eat his cake. He takes a convention profoundly antagonistic to realism and twirls it round to serve realism—at least, to cohabit with it. In so doing he makes *Enigma Variations* a full dance experience as well as a dramatic one.

The man at stage center looking at

LESLIE E. SPAT



The cast of *Enigma Variations* provides a full and dramatic dance experience.