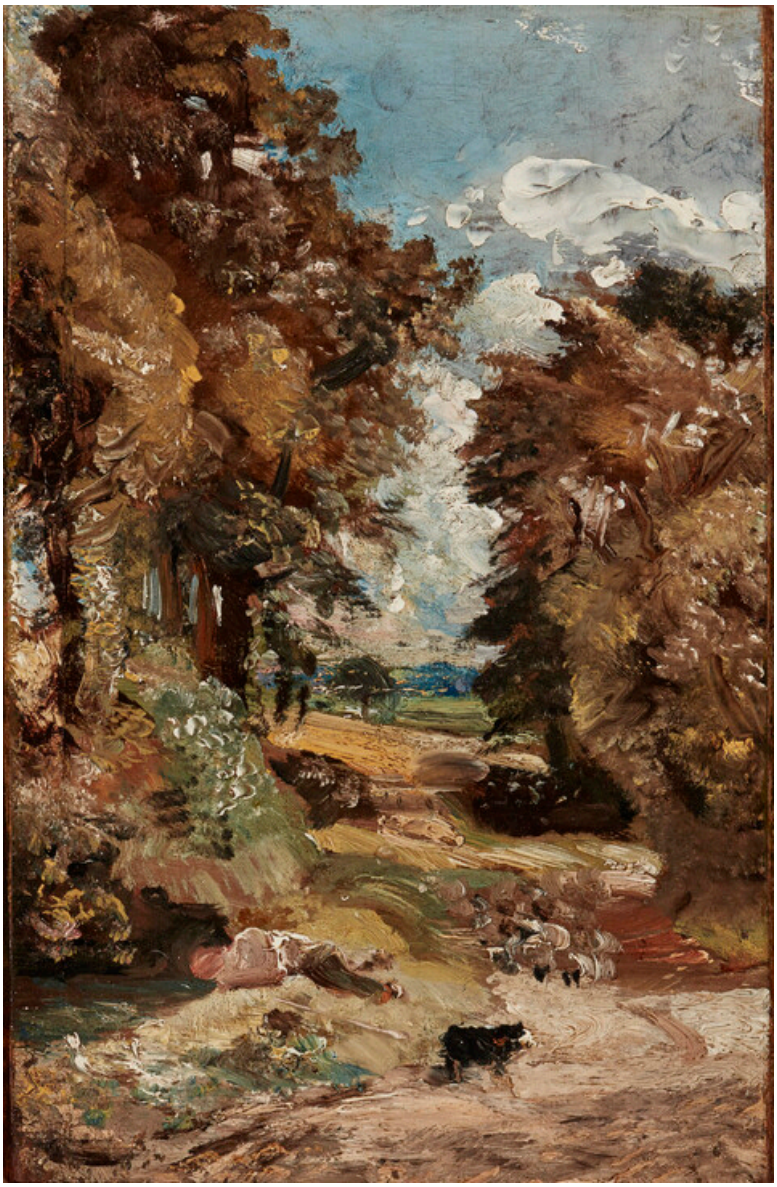

CATALOGUE ENTRY

The Cornfield

about 1816

John Constable

English, 1776–1837

oil on canvas

12-7/16 × 9-3/4 in.

(31.6 × 24.9 cm)

The Clowes Collection

2009.53

Marks, Inscriptions, and Distinguishing Features

None

Entry

1 On the occasion of an exhibition devoted to John Constable's paintings, drawings, watercolors, and mezzotints held at a New York gallery in 1988, critics commended the selection of works, with many specifically praising a newly attributed oil sketch lent by the Indianapolis Museum of Art, then on long-term loan from The Clowes Fund.[1] Reviewing the show, the art critic for the *New York Times* wrote: "The Cornfield, from around 1815...may be a missing sketch for an important 1826 panting of the same title.... It is a gutsy painting, turbulent and resolute, complete in itself, one of many in a show that makes Constable's achievement seem coherent and complete."[2] An equally admiring critic for the *New York Observer* declared: "Every painterly touch of the brush in this picture looks as fresh and delicious as the day it was painted."[3] These are fitting accolades for an artist whose attention to details of weather and atmospheric conditions was so keen that his fellow Royal Academician Henry Fuseli (1741–1825) once claimed Constable's landscapes "make me call for my great coat and umbrella."[4]

2 With its fresh and spontaneous brushwork; idyllic, agrarian subject; and apparent plein-air facture, *The Cornfield* typifies the qualities that led the noted early twentieth-century German art critic Julius Meier-Graefe to call Constable "the father of modern painting, if it is to have a father at all."[5] In the foreground, a young shepherd stretches out on a grassy knoll, quenching his thirst at a stream. His sheepdog stands at attention beside him, while his flock—represented by splotches of white and black—stands in a cluster nearby. A gate leads to the wheat field, known as Fenbridge Field, in the background, and beyond it (unseen in the sketch) lies the river Stour. The paint is applied in thick swirls and dragged brushstrokes, and the clouds appear to have been applied with a palette knife, spread across the surface of the sky like frosting. Much like the landscape for which it was a sketch (fig. 1), this charming oil study is a celebration of rural life and a nostalgic recollection of preindustrial agrarian society.

Figure 1: John Constable (English, 1776–1837), *The Cornfield*, 1826, oil on canvas, 56-19/64 × 48-1/32 in. The National Gallery, London, Presented by subscribers, including Wordsworth, Faraday and Sir William Beechey, 1837, NG130.

3 Having been first rejected by the leading Constable expert Graham Reynolds in 1966 on the basis of photographs,[6] as well as by Robert Hoozee in his 1979 catalogue raisonné of the artist's work,[7] this bravura oil sketch was reconsidered by Charles Rhyne, a professor at Reed College and an authority on the artist. Rhyne believed the work to be an authentic Constable sketch from nature, presumed to be missing.[8] According to him, *The Cornfield* was the first plein air study for Constable's celebrated painting of the same name, shown at the 1826 Royal Academy exhibition in London.[9] As such, Rhyne dates it to about 1814–1816, based, in part, on stylistic similarities to *Flatford Mill ("Scene on a Navigable River")* (fig. 2). Rhyne compares the Clowes sketch to a second larger, mid-stage preparatory sketch in the Bacon collection.[10] Although multiple copies exist of the National Gallery picture, which was readily available for Academy students to copy, Rhyne points to a number of features in both the Clowes and Bacon sketches that are not present in the finished painting or in the print made after it. For example, in both studies, the tree at far left is full and leafy, while in the National Gallery picture it appears as a pollard oak. Also, a distinct highlight on the path in the right foreground is absent in the final version. Such details, explains Rhyne, prove that the Clowes sketch is preparatory rather than a copy. It is somewhat unusual that the Bacon sketch lacks the shepherd, sheepdog, and flock of the Clowes sketch, but Rhyne insists that this does not undermine the attribution to Constable.

Figure 2: John Constable (English, 1776–1837), *Flatford Mill ("Scene on a Navigable River")*, 1816–1817, oil on canvas, 40 × 50 in. Tate Gallery, London, Bequeathed by Miss Isabel Constable as the gift of Maria Louisa, Isabel and Lionel Bicknell Constable, 1888, N01273.

4 In 1991, *The Cornfield* was lent to the Tate Gallery for the museum's Constable exhibition, and its place in the artist's oeuvre was discussed by the curators Leslie Parris and Ian Fleming-Williams.[11] Like Rhyne, they accept the sketch as autograph: "Although some of the handling is unusual—the swirl of knife work in the sky and some of the wriggled impasto—there seems to be a reasonable case for accepting this as a preliminary sketch by Constable for the painting he exhibited in 1826, no. 165." Parris and Fleming-Williams note that the treatment of the tacking edges, which have been turned up to create a larger surface on which to paint, is typical of the artist. However, they identify the Clowes sketch as a studio work of about 1826 and consider the Bacon sketch to be the first study, made from nature in about 1817. More recently, Reynolds, in his catalogue of *The Early Paintings and Drawings of John Constable*, revised his original opinion to support Rhyne's identification of the Clowes sketch as the first plein air study for *The Cornfield*.[12] Like Rhyne, he dates it to about 1816.

5 The view depicted in *The Cornfield* held great personal meaning for Constable, who once claimed "I associate my 'careless boyhood' with all that lies on the banks of the Stour. Those scenes made me a painter and I am grateful."[13] The path is probably Fen Lane, which Constable took from home to school as a child. Charles Golding Constable (1821–1879), the artist's son, wrote of the picture in 1879: "[*The Cornfield*] was taken in the lane leading from East Bergholt (my father's native village) to the pathway to Dedham across the meadows, a quarter of a mile from East Bergholt Church, and one mile from Dedham Church, as the crow flies. The little church in the distance never existed; it is one of the rare instances where my father availed himself of the painter's license to improve the composition."[14] However, another Constable scholar, Attfield Brooks, has proposed that the church might be Higham (upstream from Stratford St. Mary), although its design does not include a stair turret.[15] In the Clowes sketch, the church appears only as a dot of lavender gray on the horizon.

6 The season is clearly summer, perhaps July or August, and about midday based on the position of the sun and shadows. The relationship between the masses of foliage along the right and left margins has been adjusted between the two sketches and the final composition to achieve a more Claudian sense of balance. The shepherd boy may also recall seventeenth-century precedents: perhaps the figure of Narcissus in Claude Lorrain's *Landscape with Narcissus and Echo* (fig. 3), which had been in the collection of Sir George Beaumont (1753–1827), one of Constable's patrons, according to Michael Rosenthal,[16] or the young shepherd in Gaspard Poussin's *Landscape Near Albano* (about 1670; London, National Gallery), which Constable saw on exhibition in 1822. Some elements, such as the pigeon flying into the pollard oak in search of its mate, derive from Constable's earlier paintings, while others—the attentive dog looking up in the foreground, for example—are entirely new.

Figure 3: Claude Lorrain (French, 1600 or 1604/1605–1682), *Landscape with Narcissus and Echo*, 1644, oil on canvas, 37-1/4 × 46-47/64 in. The National Gallery, London, Presented by Sir George Beaumont, 1826, NG19.

7 Unlike *The Leaping Horse* (1825; London, Royal Academy of Arts), a painting modeled on a full-size sketch, Constable's final version of *The Cornfield* relied only on the Clowes and Bacon studies as templates. On 8 April, Constable wearily wrote to his dear friend John Fisher:

8 > I have dispatched a large landscape to the Academy—upright the size of my lock—but a subject of a very different nature—inland—cornfields—a close lane—kind of thing—but it is not neglected in any part the trees are more than usually studied and the extremities well defined—as well as their species [?stems]—they are shaken by a pleasant and healthful breeze—"*at Noon*"—"while now a fresher gale, *sweeping with shadowy gust the feilds* [*sic*] *of corn*" &c &c.... I am much worn, having worked very hard—& have now the consolation of knowing I must work a great deal harder. Or go to the workhouse. I have however work to do—& I do hope to sell this present picture—as it has certainly got a little more eye-salve than I usually condesend [*sic*] to give to them.[17]

9 Constable was evidently pleased with the work, and contemporary critics concurred: a review by Robert Hunt appeared in the *Examiner* on 2 July 1826, which praised the painting's "saphire [*sic*] sky and silver clouds, its emerald trees and golden grain, its glittering reflexes of sun-light among the vegetation; in fine, its clear, healthful, and true complexion, neither pale, nor flushed, nor artificial."[18] However, *The Cornfield* did not find a buyer at that or any other exhibition. It remained in Constable's studio at his death in 1837, when it was purchased for the National Gallery by a group of subscribers, led by Sir William Beechey (1753–1839), for £315 (£35,533 in 2019 pounds).[19] When it was accepted on 9 December—given as a memorial to the artist—it became the first work by Constable to enter the museum's collection. *The Cornfield* is considered the most iconic Constable in the museum after *The Haywain* (1821; London, National Gallery).

10 Recent art historical consensus about the significance of the artist's oil sketches places *The Cornfield* squarely among Constable's autograph works. What the Clowes sketch may lack in sweeping vistas, as compared to the full-scale painting, it compensates for in charm and spontaneity. "Painting is but another word for feeling," said Constable, in one often-quoted letter to his friend John Fisher. "It is the business of a painter to make something out of nothing, in attempting which he must almost of necessity become poetical."[20]

Author

Molly Dorkin Taylor

Provenance

Sold in the artist's estate sale at (Foster and Sons, London) in 1838;

Radford.[21]

Probably (Thomas Agnew, London);[22]

Charles T. Eames, Boston, about 1885;

By descent to G.L Eames, Boston.[23]

Via (Ivan N. Podgoursky, Boston), to G.H.A. Clowes, Indianapolis, in 1937;[24]

The Clowes Fund, Indianapolis, from 1958–2009 and on long-term loan to the Indianapolis Museum of Art since 1971 (C10024);

Given to the Indianapolis Museum of Art, now the Indianapolis Museum of Art at Newfields, in 2009.

NB: This documentation of the provenance cannot be reconciled with an alphanumeric code of stenciled letters on the right stretcher member: 305GG; see Technical Examination Report. This code can be linked to a consignment of 62 paintings brought to Christie's, London, in April 1936 by "Mrs. H. Shirlaw" of Putney. Christie's "Daybooks" record that items from the Shirlaw consignment went to auction on 27 May 1936, although this painting presumably went back to the owner before the sale; for correspondence with Christie's Archives in August 2018, see IMA Provenance File C10024.

Exhibitions

John Herron Art Museum, Indianapolis, 1941, *Early British Masters*, no. 3;

John Herron Art Museum, Indianapolis, 1959, *Paintings from the Collection of George Henry Alexander Clowes: A Memorial Exhibition*, no. 15;

Indiana University Art Museum, Bloomington, 1963, *Northern European Painting: The Clowes Fund Collection*, no. 55;

Salander-O'Reilly Galleries, Inc., New York, 1988, *John Constable, R.A. (1776–1837): An Exhibition; Paintings, Drawings, Watercolors, Mezzotints*, no. 25;

Tate Gallery, London, 1991, *John Constable*, no. 164.

References

A. Ian Fraser, *A Catalogue of the Clowes Collection* (Indianapolis: Indianapolis Museum of Art, 1973), 98;

Robert Hoozee, *L'opera completa di Constable* (Milan: Rizzoli Editore, 1979), 152, no. 692, dated 1826 (rejected attribution);

Graham Reynolds, Charles Rhyne, and Julius Meier-Graefe, *John Constable, R.A. (1776–1837): An Exhibition; Paintings, Drawings, Watercolors, Mezzotints*, exh. cat. (New York: Salander-O'Reilly Galleries, Inc., 1988), 18–19, no. 25;

Michael Brenson, "2 Sides of Constable: Classic and Romantic," *The New York Times*, 13 May 1988;

Hilton Kramer, "Fine Show of Constable, Patron Saint of the Impressionists," *The New York Observer*, 6 June 1988;

Leslie Parris and Ian Fleming-Williams, *Constable*, exh. cat. (London: Tate Gallery, 1991), 300,no. 164;

Graham Reynolds, *The Times Literary Supplement*, 21 June 1991;

Graham Reynolds, *The Early Paintings and Drawings of John Constable* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1996), 232, no. 16.100, pl. 1360;

Judy Egerton, *National Gallery Catalogues: The British School* (London: National Gallery Press, 1998);

Ian St. John, *East Bergholt: Constable Country* (East Bergholt, Suffolk: Suffolk Walker, 2002), 31, fig. 42 (dated 1826);

Pierre Wat, *Constable* (Paris: Editions Hazan, 2002), 44–45, fig. 28.

Technical Notes and Condition

The canvas is supported by an old lining. Tacking holes are visible on the lower left and right sides of the painting, and a crease suggests that the original tacking margins were overpainted and incorporated into the composition. There are no observable pentimenti under IRR. The oil paint was applied using a wet-in-wet technique with pigments blended directly on the canvas in places. A medium-sized, hard-bristled brush was used in addition to a hard-edged tool, such as a palette knife. Although some areas of the composition are painted more thinly, in areas where impasto is present, it is well preserved.

Notes

1. Graham Reynolds, Charles Rhyne, and Julius Meier-Graefe, *John Constable, R.A. (1776–1837): An Exhibition; Paintings, Drawings, Watercolors, Mezzotints*, exh. cat. (New York: Salander-O'Reilly Galleries, 1988), no. 25.
2. Michael Brenson, "2 Sides of Constable: Classic and Romantic," *The New York Times*, 13 May 1988.
3. Hilton Kramer, "Fine Show of Constable, Patron Saint of the Impressionist," *The New York Observer*, 6 June 1988.
4. As Fuseli purportedly remarked to the artist Augustus Callcott upon seeing Constable's *Salisbury Cathedral from the Meadows*. See C.R. Lesie, R.A., *Memoirs of the Life of John Constable Composed Chiefly of His Letters* (London: Phaidon Press, 1951), 101.
5. As found in "Constable and the Present," *Modern Art: The Struggle for Painting*, vol. 1, 1906, reprinted in *John Constable, R.A. (1776–1837): An Exhibition; Paintings, Drawings, Watercolors, Mezzotints*, exh. cat. (New York: Salander-O'Reilly Galleries, 1988), 88.
6. Graham Reynolds, verbal communication with Mark Roskill, 1966. Reynolds's opinion was supported by Roskill in his unpublished "Clowes Collection Catalogue" from 1968. Reynolds suggested an alternative attribution to William White Warren (1832–1911/1912), dated about 1900.
7. Robert Hoozee, *L'opera completa di Constable* (Milan: Rizzoli Editore, 1979), 152.

8. On 20 January 1988, Rhyne wrote to George Clowes's son Allen: "Having compared the slides I took of your oil sketch, *The Cornfield*, with slides of other related works, I am convinced that the doubts that have been expressed about its attribution to Constable are ill founded and that it is the sketch from nature by Constable, which Constable scholars have assumed was missing." Letter from Charles S. Rhyne to Allen W. Clowes, 20 January 1988, File C10024, Clowes Registration Archive, Indianapolis Museum of Art at Newfields. Rhyne's reassessment of the sketch led him to request it for inclusion in the planned exhibition of Constable's work at the Salander-O'Reilly Gallery in 1988.

9. Charles Rhyne, "Discoveries in the Exhibition," in Graham Reynolds, Charles Rhyne, and Julius Meier-Graefe, *John Constable, R.A. (1776–1837): An Exhibition; Paintings, Drawings, Watercolors, Mezzotints*, exh. cat. (New York: Salander-O'Reilly Galleries, 1988), 18. The National Gallery painting originally was titled *The Drinking Boy* by Constable in 1826, only later acquiring the name that it is known by today.

10. Hickman Bacon Collection, UK, measuring 23-1/2 × 19-3/8 in. A copy of the image was unobtainable at time of publication.

11. Leslie Parris and Ian Fleming-Williams, *Constable*, exh. cat. (London: Tate Gallery, 1991), 300.

12. Graham Reynolds, *The Early Paintings and Drawings of John Constable* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1996), 232. Reynolds had the opportunity to examine the painting firsthand with the museum's senior paintings conservator David Miller shortly before the 1988 exhibition.

13. Constable to the Rev. John Fisher, 23 October 1821; quoted in R.B. Beckett, ed., *John Constable's Correspondence*, vol. 6: *The Fishers* (London: Suffolk Records Society, 1968), 76–78.

14. Letter from Charles Golding to the *Art Journal*, 1869, 118.

15. Alastair Smart and Attfield Brooks, *Constable and His Country* (London, 1976), 107–119.

16. Michael Rosenthal, *Constable: The Painter and His Landscape* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1983).

17. Constable to the Rev. John Fisher, 8 April 1826; quoted in R.B. Beckett, ed., *John Constable's Correspondence*, vol. 6: *The Fishers* (London: Suffolk Records Society, 1968), 216–17.

18. Robert Hunt in *The Examiner*, London, 2 July 1826.

19. According to Bank of England inflation calculator. See https://www.bankofengland.co.uk/monetary-policy/inflation/inflation-calculator.

20. Constable to the Rev. John Fisher, October 1821; quoted in R.B. Beckett, ed., *John Constable's Correspondence*, vol. 6: *The Fishers* (London: Suffolk Records Society, 1968), 76–78.

21. Foster and Sons, London, *A Catalogue of the Valuable Finished Works, Studies, and Sketches of John Constable, Esq., R.A. Deceased*, 16 May 1838, part of lot 14 ("The Cornfield; a study from nature, for the picture in the National Gallery"). An annotated copy of this auction catalogue lists "Radford" as the purchaser.

22. Foster and Sons, London, *A Catalogue of the Valuable Finished Works, Studies, and Sketches of John Constable, Esq., R.A. Deceased*, 16 May 1838, part of lot 14 ("The Cornfield; a study from nature, for the picture in the National Gallery"). An annotated copy of this auction catalogue lists "Radford" as the purchaser.

23. Letter from G.L. Eames to Ivan Podgoursky, 24 September 1937, File 2009.53 (C10024), Clowes Registration Archive, Indianapolis Museum of Art at Newfields.

24. Letter from G.L. Eames to Ivan Podgoursky, 24 September 1937, File 2009.53 (C10024), Clowes Registration Archive, Indianapolis Museum of Art at Newfields.