



# CHRISTIE'S

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**CHRISTIE'S ANNOUNCES THE SALE OF A WORK OF GENIUS BY**

**JOHN CONSTABLE**

*Defining* **BRITISH ART**



**London** – A work of genius by John Constable, R.A. (1776-1837), the full-scale six-foot 'sketch' for *View on the Stour near Dedham*, circa 1821-22, will be offered alongside other masterpieces by Reynolds, Leighton, Lowry, Spencer, Bacon and Freud in [Christie's 250<sup>th</sup> anniversary](#) *Defining British Art* sale in London on 30 June (Estimate on Request: in the region of £12-16 million). The work, the last great six-footer sketch in private hands, clearly illustrates why Constable was considered the father of British Modernism and why the French painters, particularly the Impressionists, revered Constable as an instinctive painter of nature and the elements.

**Jussi Pykkänen, Global President of Christie's International:** *"Not since Constable's Lock have we had the opportunity to work with a painting of this calibre by one of the titans of British painting. To stand in front of this expansive work, is to understand why the great British modern painters and even the French Impressionists revered Constable as their spiritual mentor. Constable famously said that "Painting is but another word for feeling" and later that "I do not consider myself at work unless I am before a six-foot canvas". Visitors to Christie's in June will be able to see a rarely exhibited masterpiece by Constable which perfectly describes his passion for paint and his ability to paint dramatic landscapes on the grand scale. It is fitting that Christie's should be given the opportunity to sell this masterpiece in our Defining British Art sale which marks the 250<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the founding of this great institution."*

**John Stainton, International Director and Head of British Old Master Paintings at Christie's,** added: "*In his celebrated series of full-scale sketches Constable gave full rein to his artistic expression, freed from the necessity to work on a high level of 'finish' in the manner contemporary taste demanded. Kenneth Clark, Director of the National Gallery 1934-1946, for good reason described them as 'the greatest thing in English art'. This example, the last to remain in private hands, was bought privately over twenty years ago, having last appeared on the market at Christie's in 1883. It survives in astonishingly fresh condition, allowing the viewer to fully appreciate the energy, passion and skill of the most celebrated painter of the English landscape.*"

### **CONSTABLE'S 'SIX-FOOT' CANVASES**

The six large-scale canvases of the Stour valley that Constable exhibited at the Royal Academy between 1819 and 1825 define his artistic maturity and secured his professional reputation. Including several of his most celebrated works, notably *The White Horse* (1819; New York, Frick Collection), and *The Hay Wain* (1821; London, National Gallery), they represent a distillation of Constable's profound emotional and artistic response to the scenery of his native Suffolk. The group shows a radical shift from his earlier work, both in the sheer ambition of their scale and in the unprecedented working method, with the introduction of a full-size sketch for each composition to realise his artistic vision.

### **THE SIGNIFICANCE OF CONSTABLE'S FULL SCALE SKETCHES**

Constable's use of full-scale sketches would appear to be unique in Western art. This full-scale sketch for the fourth work in the series, *View on the Stour near Dedham* (San Marino, the Huntington Library, Art Collection and Botanical Gardens) which was exhibited at the Royal Academy in 1822, is the last of the full-scale sketches to remain in private hands. Constable's determination to execute landscapes of such size arose from his wish to elevate the 'natural scenery' to which he was so devoted onto a far more ambitious scale, more in keeping with the achievements of the classical landscape painters he so admired. He also wanted to achieve the professional and critical success at the Academy that had largely eluded him, scale being an important factor in gaining the attention of the Academy establishment and critics. Underlying these twin ambitions was a new imperative to achieve commercial success, given his marriage in 1816 to Maria Bicknell and the costs associated with keeping a family in London, where he had moved that year.

The significance of these full-scale sketches in relation to the finished pictures and in the wider context of Constable's *oeuvre* and artistic legacy, was emphasised in John Gage's essay in the exhibition catalogue for 'Constable: The Big Picture', *The Great Landscapes* exhibition at Tate Britain, London, the National Gallery of Art, Washington D.C., and The Huntington Art Gallery, San Marino, between 2006 and 2007. Gage argued that what was ground-breaking, and in Gage's mind constituted Constable's '*most original contribution to landscape art*' (ibid., p. 25), was not the small *plein-air* sketches, upon which his reputation as an innovator has largely rested since the late 19<sup>th</sup> century but instead the development of the full-size sketch. Kenneth Clark, Director of the London National Gallery 1934-1946, heralded these as Constable's '*supreme achievement*' and '*the greatest thing in English art*' (K. Clark, *Landscape into Art*, London, 1961).

### **THE LAST FULL-SCALE SKETCH TO REMAIN IN PRIVATE HANDS**

Constable appears to have started work on the picture in early autumn 1821. The scene shows the stretch of the River Stour upstream from Flatford Mill and Lock, looking towards Flatford footbridge, with Bridge Cottage on the right and the tower of Dedham church in the distance. In his three previous full-scale sketches Constable had transferred most of the figures from the sketch to the finished picture and then painted them out should they interfere with the balance of the composition. In *View on the Stour*, however, most of his important alterations were executed on the sketch itself, some

of which are now discernible in the paint surface as *pentimenti*: most notably the removal of the sail on the central barge and a figure at its stern, as well as the figure and additional cattle on the bridge, which were painted out by the artist, but traces of which remain in the rich surface of the paint. These *pentimenti* add texture to the surface and give us an insight into the artist's creative process as he grappled with his composition.

At this particular juncture in the River Stour series Constable was striving to create a more ambitious and focused design and the role of the full-scale sketch was crucial to achieving this. While the figurative element in the first three of the large River Stour pictures is somewhat understated, in the next three paintings the figures take on a more emphatic role, adding dynamism to the composition. *View on the Stour* is clearly a pivotal work in this development.

## JOHN CONSTABLE

John Constable was one of the most original artistic forces to emerge in European painting of the early 19<sup>th</sup> Century. The impact of his work, like that of his near contemporary Turner, continues to reverberate in Britain, and internationally. His commitment to focusing on pure landscape as the principal subject of his art, without any overt historical, religious or mythological references, combined with the idiosyncratic technique he developed to render it, challenged the artistic orthodoxies of the day and have inspired generations of artists ever since. As Lucian Freud noted at the time of the exhibition *Constable: Le Choix de Lucian Freud*, held at the Grand Palais in Paris, 2002-03, *'I may be quite wrong, but I can't see Van Gogh's Boots without Constable behind them. I don't mean it's an immediate link but, to me, that kind of interest, observation and indulgence are things that exist in Constable.'*

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**PRESS CONTACT:** Hannah Schweiger | 020 7389 2964 | [hschweiger@christies.com](mailto:hschweiger@christies.com)

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*Images available on request*

## Notes to Editors

**2016 marks Christie's 250th anniversary** which will be celebrated with a series of events and exhibitions. As the world's leading art business, Christie's has continued to be recognised as innovators in the art market, continually evolving and curating sales to create different perspectives of the art market and collecting trends. Over the last 250 years, Christie's has expanded its reach beyond the headquarters in London. Since 2012, Christie's has also included regular online sales across all collecting categories. [www.christies.com/250](http://www.christies.com/250)