

LANDSCAPES WITH ATMOSPHERE

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GAINSBOROUGH, CONSTABLE, AND TURNER: THE MANTON COLLECTION

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COWS STAND NEXT TO A WHITE COTTAGE in the woods; a boy leads a donkey and dogs; sailboats are grounded by a still shore. You wouldn't think such pacific scenes would have a decisive impact on the history of art, but in England in the late-18th and early 19th centuries, they challenged the status quo of stiff portraits and grandiose compositions by the likes of Joshua Reynolds and James Thornhill. In many striking ways, the works of John Constable and J.M.W. Turner presaged the innovations of the impressionists, the heart of the Clark collection.

The works here, curated by Richard Rand, are selected from a generous gift from former AIG chairman Sir Edwin Manton containing some 200 artworks plus an endowment worth some \$50 million. The Clark will be renaming its research building

Constable and two by Turner) to make an impressive triumvirate.

Manton, who died in 2005, was born in "Constable country"—Constable was from East Bergholt, Suffolk—and his affinities for the painter are a boon to Clark visitors, who get to see the actual tin box containing bladders of pigment Constable used. There are more than two dozen works by Constable here, as well as more than a dozen by Turner, both oils and watercolors, and a sampling of other important British painters of the period such as Richard Parkes Bonington and Thomas Girtin.

Many of the works are unsigned "sketches"—informal paintings that give us insights into the refreshingly modern inclinations of these artists. Constable painted outdoors; Turner used his hands and even fingernails when painting. According to Clark senior curator Richard Rand, "Mr. Manton liked those more casual works that showed the artist's process and his creative thinking."

One of England's greatest painters, John Constable was only tepidly appreciated by his countrymen during his lifetime. Nineteenth-century art connoisseurs criticized his innovative use of stippled light pigments as "Constable's snow." Yet he was

slashes and dabs of paint, producing a remarkable sense of movement and giving limitless depth to air and water.

Other highlights include some of the Gainsboroughs, one in black chalk and watercolor and dipped in skimmed milk; and Turner's gorgeous oil *Off Ramsgate*, where the artist's love affair with light is on full display, and his *Falmouth*, a small multifaceted watercolor.

However, this is not Simon Schama's dynamic, political Turner, but rather the crowd-pleasing, teatime one. (A recently aired episode from Schama's series *Power of Art* on PBS was devoted to Turner's apocalyptic *Slave Ship (Slavers Throwing Overboard the Dead and Dying, Typhoon Coming On)*.) Still, Turner's astonishingly broad styles and moods are evident, from Gothic drama in the watercolor *Melrose* to a suggestively confectionary oil, *What You Will*, showing a group of figures dressed as characters in Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night*. Where Constable stayed true to his region in England, Turner traveled extensively, as Rand explained, "experiencing storms at sea as well as avalanches and snowstorms in the Alps. In many ways the two artists provide a full spectrum of how British artists at this time viewed nature."

But what, exactly, were those views? With these sometimes nostalgic scenes, one has to dig a bit, and one weakness of the exhibit is that there is no text to explain the historical context. A visitor could leave without realizing that this was the period of the Industrial Revolution, abolition of slavery, and war with France (although *Constable's Sketch for Opening of Waterloo Bridge* and *The Houses of Parliament on Fire* in watercolor make oblique reference to the national scene). As Schama explained, this was a period during which the chasm between imaginary and real Britain yawned wide, with "massive unemployment, hunger, anger." National identity and insecurity played a role in the development of landscape painting, but with a curatorial assumption that the paintings speak for themselves as acquisitions, none of that turmoil is evident.

Like other personal collections, the Manton collection doesn't completely hold together in the public view—Thomas Rowlandson's *The Subscription Club Room*, while an interesting satirical cartoon, seems out of place, and Samuel Palmer's *The Setting Sun* is garishly sentimental. Overall, though the exhibit makes for an enticing preview of the wonderful things the Clark is sure to do with its new cache of British art. ■



A worthy subject: Constable's *Salisbury Cathedral from the West* (1829).

in honor of the Mantons, and the gift comes at a time when a major expansion is already underway (the Stone Hill Center, designed by renowned Japanese architect Tadao Ando, will contain a new gallery, classroom, outdoor cafe, and conservation center). And at this moment of growth, the Clark, strong in French impressionism and American art, adds significantly to their collection of British art (they already had two works by

admired by French painters, and what's striking is how much his atmospheric oils anticipated our contemporary biases: He felt that England's landscapes were just as worthy of great art as were classical subjects. He shows us how the ordinary can be extraordinary with a beautiful quintet of *Cloud Studies* from the 1820s. *Study for Flatford Mill From the Lock* and *Sketches for the Opening of Waterloo Bridge* use dramatic