

timeoff

THE BIGGER PICTURE

Constable's giant landscapes have been united for the first time, writes Olivia Daly

A new exhibition at Tate Britain is challenging the widely held view of one of England's best-loved painters as a creator of 'chocolate box' scenes. 'Constable: the Great Landscapes' brings together his biggest paintings – works that, in fact, reveal him to be a groundbreaking innovator.

"People associate Constable with the unspoilt British countryside and it's interesting that, today, he would still recognise most of the places he knew so well," says Anne Lyles, the exhibition's joint curator. "But in his own time these paintings were shocking from a technical point of view. They were seen as 'brushy' and unfinished – really avant-garde stuff."

Among the 70 works in the exhibition, which is free to Partners, are Constable's nine 'Great' landscapes – so called because they are all at least six-feet wide. These paintings have been brought together for the first time (they were never shown together even in the artist's lifetime) and include the six River Stour pictures, among them *The Hay Wain* (1820–21), *Hadleigh Castle* (1829; pictured above left) and *Salisbury Cathedral from the Meadows* (1831).

The works are all from the second half of Constable's career, from 1819 until his death in 1837. Constable was tortured by feelings of failure and by competition from other artists, but it's a myth that his gifts were ignored in his own lifetime. In fact, contemporary critics wrote a great deal about his work, and he sold lots of paintings, although the later, larger works were harder to sell because of their size. He even repeated some of his most popular images for customers. "He had seven children – life was expensive," says Anne. "If he hadn't been successful they would have lived in poverty."

Seeing the six River Stour works in sequence brings to life how Constable develops the theme of his beloved Suffolk countryside. The exhibition includes a map, centred on Flatford Mill, which shows that many of the scenes are




within just a few hundred yards of each other. But Constable didn't set out merely to record these scenes. "These works certainly aren't the early nineteenth-century equivalent of photographs," says Anne. "The landscapes made him a painter, but only his earlier images were painted out 'in the field'. After he married in 1816 he painted in his studio from sketches and from memory. Many of the scenes have gradually become distorted, and are more dramatic compositions than accurate records. For instance, in *The Leaping Horse* [pictured above, inset] he has 'moved' the spire of Dedham church."

Alongside the nine large landscapes are the preliminary oil sketches – also six-feet across – that Constable worked on before moving on to the final canvas. An interactive feature shows

visitors how he would have gradually built up from a tiny pencil sketch with a grid, transferring markings to a small oil sketch, then a six-foot sketch, then to the final painting. "It's unusual for an artist to make such large sketches – most stuck with the smaller studies – but Constable clearly found that this technique suited him," Anne explains. "As in the paintings, the vigorous brushwork in the sketches was completely new at the time. The study for *Hadleigh Castle*, which he painted after his wife Maria died at the end of 1828, is particularly 'loose' and looks very modern. This style is probably a reflection of his grief; he had married his childhood sweetheart and was absolutely devastated by her death."

The exhibition, which is the result of nearly four years' planning by its curators, is, as Anne says modestly, "pretty special". Two of the six River Stour pictures, for instance, belong to American galleries – the Frick Collection in New York and The Huntington in San Marino, California – which have never lent works in this way before. Three of the paintings have come from the National Gallery in London.

"Constable has a big following among living artists, including Lucian Freud, but his modernity doesn't strike us immediately. I'd like the things we've brought together in this exhibition to change perceptions, especially among young people. 'Chocolate box' couldn't be further from the truth."  *'Constable: the Great Landscapes'* is at Tate Britain, Millbank, London, until 28 August. The Partnership has corporate membership of the Tate, giving Partners free admission. Call the dedicated JLP booking line on 020 7887 4955 to reserve tickets.

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PAINTINGS: HADLEIGH CASTLE (1829), YALE CENTER FOR BRITISH ART; THE LEAPING HORSE (1825), ROYAL ACADEMY OF ARTS