

Colin Harrison - John Constable, Willie Lott's House from the Stour

COLIN HARRISON: My name is Colin Harrison. I'm the Senior Curator of European Art here in the Ashmolean Museum in Oxford. And today, I'm going to be talking about John Constable's Willy Lott's Cottage.

It was probably painted in the early 1820s. But it is a scene that was familiar to Constable all his life. His father owned the mill, Flatford Mill, next door to the cottage.

And the cottage appears very frequently in Constable's work. In fact, it seems that the first time he depicted it was in 1802. This was probably painted in his studio in London.

It was based on careful studies from nature that he'd made, both in pen and ink and black chalk. And if we look at the painting in detail, we can see just how microscopic some of the touches are. It's full of wonderful details.

Here, we have jay or a jackdaw flying over the river. Here, we have a number of little figures. We have no evidence, but it is very likely that the people depicted in this landscape were people who were local residents at Flatford and nearby, and that they would have been known to Constable most of his life.

In spite of the seeming naturalness of the scene, the composition is, in fact, very sophisticated, with the zigzag of the river going away over to the left and the emersion of the building, the Willy Lott's cottage, almost subsumed by these great trees on the right-hand side. One of the most pleasing aspects of the picture is the way that the reflections are painted in the river. It's a very, very lively painting. But also, it gives an atmosphere of tranquillity, which is something that Constable was very deliberately aiming at.

The scene itself is painted in a relatively restrained palette - green, brown, and white - with lowering clouds, wonderful clouds that Constable so often concentrated on in his landscapes. The details of the foreground, indeed, individual leaves that you can see on the tall trees on the right-hand side, are painted rather microscopically, which is unusual for Constable painting on a much larger scale, such as in the six-footers of the same sort of period.

The series of six-footers that he began in 1819 were large landscape paintings of Suffolk, six feet by about four and a half. This was a scale unprecedented at the Royal Academy at this time.

Another interesting aspect of the painting is that, in the earlier composition of 1814, we can see a ferry. In this painting, it seems to have become the ghost of a ferry. Whether Constable in fact painted it out or whether it has disappeared over time, we don't know.

At this stage of his career, Constable was generally painting landscapes, but was not very successful financially. And so he was obliged to paint portraits. It wasn't until these six-footers,

the first one exhibited in 1821, that he really came to public prominence, and he was able to make a decent living from selling these large paintings.

We don't know who the original owner of this painting of Willy Lott's cottage was. But it is very likely that Constable was able to sell it privately during the 1820s, and that it was actually made for sale, and not as a sketch that he would keep in his studio for future reference.

Constable was much influenced by examples of Dutch art that he saw, both in private collections and eventually in the National Gallery. And his new naturalism was quite a radical departure from landscape painting in the first half of the 19th century, which generally depended, even with JMW Turner, on classical models. Constable very much looked to the naturalistic style of Hobbema and Ruisdael, and translated it into the glorious pictures of English scenes, notably in Suffolk and Essex, the 'Constable country' that we are now so familiar with.

Constable was an extremely ambitious artist, and, in fact, wished to be considered the equal of the history painter when he was showing at the Royal Academy, history painting considered the highest level of painting, intellectually equal with literature and with music. Landscape and still life painting were considered lesser genre. And Constable had great ambition that landscape painting should be considered on the same level as history painting.

Like his near contemporary JMW Turner, Constable was very conscious of printmaking in promoting his reputation. So he collaborated during the 1830s and '40s on a series of mezzotints with the mezzotint maker David Lucas, which were eventually published as various fascicles of English landscape scenery. And by the time that the whole series was reprinted by Bohn in 1855, it became possible for almost any middle-class household to have reproductions of Constable's landscapes in the form of mezzotints.

One of the mezzotints in the English landscape scenery was Willy Lott's Cottage, a composition very similar to the painting in the Ashmolean. The painting was actually allocated to the Ashmolean Museum by Her Majesty's government in lieu of inheritance tax in 2014. It was a very important acquisition for the Ashmolean, because, although we had a number of oil sketches, we didn't have a finished painting.

The provenance of the painting is extremely interesting. We don't know who the first owner was. But it was clearly made for a relatively middle-class household.

It's first recorded in North America, probably the first work by Constable to reach North America. And it was eventually given to the New York Public Library, who sold it in 1956. It then was repatriated to England, and has been in the Ashmolean Museum since 2014.

The painting hangs in a gallery devoted to 19th-century art, and, in particular, to the landscape painting. It's surrounded by masterpieces by JMW Turner, and, in particular, by early works by Samuel Palmer, who, from a very different tradition - he was a disciple of William Blake - also painted the English countryside in a very idiosyncratic and individual way.

Constable's landscapes are so readily identifiable with the countryside of Suffolk that it became known, even during his lifetime, as 'Constable country'. It is important not only to recognise that the countryside is changing rapidly as we become increasingly overpopulated, but also that Constable's representation was already, in the 1820s, rather nostalgic. He ignored the fact that, in the early 1820s, there were riots in the Suffolk countryside over the introduction of mechanical means of harvesting and so forth.

Willy Lott's Cottage is a far cry from the dark, satanic mills that William Blake portrayed in his poetry. And it is significant that Constable also ignored the whole question of industrialization in England in the earlier part of the 19th century. And he identified in a very conservative way with the idea that the countryside was, in some sense, God's paradise on Earth.