

Explore the painting

John Constable

Salisbury Cathedral from the Meadows 1831



Salisbury Cathedral from the Meadows 1831
John Constable (1776 – 1837)
Photograph © Tate, London 2013

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When this painting was exhibited at the Royal Academy, Constable quoted nine lines from *The Four Seasons: Summer* (1727) by Scottish poet James Thompson to expand on its meaning.

*As from the face of heaven the scatter'd clouds
Tumultuous rove, th'interminable sky
Sublimar swells, and o'er the world expands
A purer azure. Through the lightened air
A higher lustre and a clearer calm
Diffusive tremble; while, as if in sign
Of danger past, a glittering robe of joy,
Set off abundant by the yellow ray,
Invests the fields, and nature smiles reviv'd*

James Thompson, *The Seasons: Summer* (1727)

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The poem tells the mythical tale of young lovers Celadon and Amelia. As they walk through the woods in a thunderstorm, the tragic Amelia is struck by lightning, and dies in her lover's arms. The poem has a religious message: it is an exploration of God's power, and man's inability to control his own fate. It is also a poem of hope and redemption. The rainbow appears as a 'sign of danger past'.

The subject has clear resonances with Constable's own personal grief. His wife Maria died of tuberculosis in 1828, after just twelve years of marriage. It is likely that the poem had special significance for the young couple. When Maria was unsure whether or not she should marry Constable, he quoted lines from the poem to her, to allay her fears.

Explore the details

Cathedral

When Constable painted Salisbury Cathedral, the future of the Anglican Church was in doubt. He shows the Cathedral under a black cloud, lightning striking the roof – will it survive the storm? The spire – which Constable described as 'dart[ing] up into the sky like a needle' – pierces through the darkness into a patch of light, perhaps suggesting his hopes for the future of the Church.

Storm Clouds

When this painting was first exhibited, a reporter for *The Morning Herald* complained that 'the sky is in a state of utter derangement'. Others described it as 'chaos'. It is a key part of the painting's meaning. For Constable, the sky was more than just a backdrop. It can be used to convey mood and changing emotional states. The sky here is often seen as an expression of the grief and anxiety he felt at this time. His wife Maria had died of tuberculosis in 1828, and he was deeply concerned about the troubles facing the Anglican Church. The vigorous brushwork adds to the emotional charge.

Rainbow

Constable once said 'nature... exhibits no feature more lovely nor any that awaken a more soothing reaction than the rainbow'. The rainbow represents a glimmer of hope in turbulent times, a sign that the storm is passing.

Leadenhall

The rainbow ends at Leadenhall, home of Constable's close personal friend, the Archdeacon John Fisher. This is no coincidence: Fisher had provided comfort and emotional support to Constable in his grief after the death of his wife, and it was Fisher that first encouraged Constable to paint Salisbury Cathedral. He died just a year after the painting was first exhibited.

Wooden Bridge

Constable was fascinated by the humblest details of rural life. 'Old rotten planks, slimy posts, and brickwork, I love such things' he wrote in a letter to John Fisher. The paint here is thick and coarse suggesting the natural texture of the wooden bridge, a simple detail which most artists of the day would have overlooked.

St Thomas' Church

Just visible through a clearing in the trees is the parish Church of St Thomas. The Church can't actually be seen from this viewpoint, so why has Constable drawn attention to it? Is it purely for compositional reasons, or is there another explanation? The answer is uncertain.

Horse and Wagon

Constable believed that no landscape was complete without traces of everyday life. He would fill his sketchbooks with small details which he would later include in his paintings. Here a horse-drawn wagon crosses the river Nadder. This vignette is often compared to *The Hay Wain* (1821), one of his best known paintings. The sheepdog appears in other paintings by Constable, such as *The Cornfield* (1826).