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of John Constable**

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# Introduction

The topic of my academic writing is the changes in works of John Constable, the British artist. Constable's changes in works were caused by several factors, and the main of them is the wedding with Mary and her death. And I am going to consider the question: what influence his wife had on his career.

The actuality of my topic is in the fact that no British artists are included in Russian school programs, including John Constable, the majority of teenagers and adults don't know about them. After all, such artists as Gainsborough, Turner, affected the development of some genres of painting. John Constable, in turn, affected impressionism formation.

In the first chapter I am going to tell you some introductory information about Constable, his family background, his abilities and possibilities to paint. And from this moment the problem of my writing starts: John is meeting of his future wife. I will find out how it affected his life as an artist.

In the second chapter I come back to the style of paintings by Constable. It is important, because we need to compare his styles of painting before and after meeting his wife and after her death. Also I will tell you some information about Constable's style of painting portraits in order to understand the psychological aspect of his art better.

The third chapter is devoted to Constable's works after his wife's death, and to his revolution in the genre of landscape painting and the ways, in which Constable influenced the French school of impressionism.

So, questions which I am going to answer at the end of my work: which changes were there in Constable's works, and how his wife affected them.

# Chapter 1

*“I should paint my own places best.  
Painting is but another word for feeling...”*

(1)



From the first chapter I hope to find out how John started painting, what society thought about his works, what style of painting he developed after wedding.

John Constable was born in 11 June **1776** in Suffolk in the family of Golding Constable, the miller.

He was the fourth one of 6 children. The future artist had the luck to get a quite good education for those times for a person from not aristocratic family.

Constable's father, Golding Constable, supposed that John should follow his steps. But in **1795** John decided to become a professional artist. John's decision to become a painter frightened his parents. They considered drawing as an unreliable employment, not capable of providing the son with a full life. But John held the ground.

In a year Constable started taking lessons from the London artist John Thomas Smith. People considered Smith as a rough, crude man. But he appeared to be a good teacher and managed to prepare Constable in three years for the entrance to The Royal Academy of arts.

Finally in **1799** John arrived in the Royal academy in London. After that artist's father reconciled the choice of the son and gave him a small amount of money.

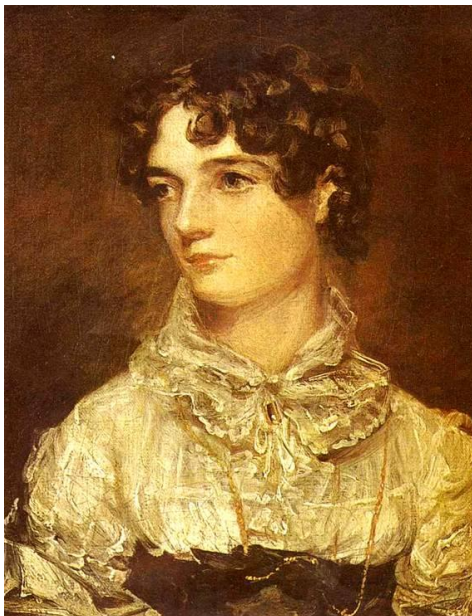
John appeared to be a diligent student. He attentively studied anatomy, made copies of works of old masters. He started being interested in landscapes and there is no wonder, because the artist had grown in rural solitude and loved this solitude more than anything. It should be noted that landscape painting was considered the lowest

genre of painting those days. Landscape writers were someone like people travelling through the country in search of rich aristocrats - customers.

Constable admitted that he perceived the world not as much as by school lessons, as by the use of observation of nature. About his native land he said: "I love here each fence, each stub, each footpath"<sup>(2)</sup>.

In **1801-1806** John Constable was travelling to find something that he wanted to paint. From each trip the artist brought a set of sketches of watercolour and oil and then worked with them in his workshop. Before his graduation from the Academy, Constable wasn't satisfied with his style of drawing.

For the last few years he couldn't sell any landscape! To live financially the artist started painting portraits and selling them for two guineas apiece<sup>1</sup>. But apart from



creative tortures and material disorders love came to Constable.

In **1809** John Constable fell in love with Mary Bicknell, old Constable's friend. Naturally, Constable and Mary Bicknell decided to get married. But Mary's family was against that idea, because John was too poor.

7 years later, in **1816**, when Constable's parents died, he was able to get married to his beloved, because he got a small inheritance. Nobody from their families came to the wedding ceremony.

Since that moment in Constable's life luck accompanied him! He was happy with his wife! Soon after the wedding and then after the birth of children the artist was actively engaged in portrait painting to support his family: never before there had been as many coming from under his brush portraits as in **1818**. So, we can visibly see the result of finding happiness in his family life. It encouraged him to be more productive and thus managed to bring him his first financial success. His portraits became more popular: he sold them for 15 guineas apiece. In his works of that time a new, more mature manner of the master was felt. But after **1819** Constable gained recognition as the landscape writer and painted fewer and fewer portraits.

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<sup>1</sup> 1 guinea = 21 shilling = 1 pound + 1 shilling

Also in **1818** Constable was appointed the director of the Charitable Society to support emerging artists. In **1819** he showed the exhibition of his first "six-foot"<sup>2</sup> work entitled "White Horse" [Appendix-1] at the Royal Academy. The picture received very favorable reviews by respected critics.

During the next few years, Constable wrote a series of "six-foot" paintings, which are considered to his greatest achievement. The best known one is "*The Hay Wain*". It was presented to the public at the exhibition in the Royal Academy in **1821**.

Not only English painters and critics met the work enthusiastically, but their French colleagues as well. Soon after, "The Hay Wain" was sold to a Parisian secondhand dealer John Arrowsmith for 250 pounds, a huge sum in those days.



Later, in **1824**, Arrowsmith put "The Hay Wain" at the Paris Salon where it made a sensation! One member of the audience said: "Look at this Englishman – there is visible every dewdrop on earth"<sup>(3)</sup>. Delacroix was so impressed by Constable's manner that he made some corrections to one of his own paintings! Following this success, many persuaded Constable to move to Paris, but he flatly refused: "First of all, – said the artist, – I cannot say any French word, but most importantly, I love England and I would rather be a poor man in England than a rich man abroad"<sup>(4)</sup>.

So, what conclusion can we draw out from the first chapter? We see how the presence of the wife influenced Constable's success. He wasn't married to Mary and he was poor and unfortunate, he wanted to write the homeland, but nobody bought his landscapes, and he had to paint portraits. And here he met his beloved, they got married, and the success started to accompany him! He started earning money by portraits, but later came back to his favorite landscapes. British and French artists noticed his paintings and John Constable became more popular. This is how wife's presence was reflected in his life.

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<sup>2</sup> width about two meters

## Chapter 2

*“My humble art can be found in any path”*

(5)

From the second chapter I hope to find out why Constable was unknown, what style made him popular, why his works are so extraordinary at first.

In the 19th century Constable achieved something, of which Gainsborough could only dream: he went to the country and became the painter of rural nature. According to one critic, Constable's life was so closely connected with his native mill, as life of a snail with a sink. His love to rural areas was boundless, humble, he reached full dissolution in it, and nature thanked him, opened to him what was hidden from indifferent eyes, and let into deep secrets of painting.

John Constable took nature in usual conditions and found inexhaustible wealth in simple motives: a hollow, a creek, a bridge through a stream, a road. Constable refused any nature idealization, he represented ordinary rural areas with all their freshness and variability. Constable drew landscapes on the basis of a huge number of plein-air etudes, and some pictures for the first time in the history of landscape he wrote from nature.

“Noise of the water escaping from under a mill dam, willows, old rotten boards, slippery piles and a bricklaying of walls – how I love all this. Shakespeare was able



to poeticize everything; he wrote how poor Tom found to himself a haven among sheep shelters and mills. While my hand holds a brush, I won't cease to draw such areas...”<sup>(6)</sup>  
– Constable said.

Art in this picture, *Flatford mill, 1817*, reached a high degree: the represented scene is quite convincing in the perspective depth, the

proportions and accuracy of separate details.

At different times in the artist two parties of his nature fought: a realist and a romantic. Till **1820** he was a realist, after **1825** – the romantic prevailed. And in the twenties there comes the long-awaited period of harmony, and then masterpieces were created, but in works of less brilliant periods the genius of the Constable is shown too.

The relief invoice became also a distinctive feature of Constable's style. He used those tones which are the closest to the nature. Naturalism of composition, purity and freshness of color in Constable's works are combined with richness of shades, mobility of fractional brushstrokes.

Constable lived in rural areas, and because of that Constable could study atmospheric changes, influences of light, weather. He was almost the first artist, who understood that one area includes a set of landscapes – it depends on the time of a day, lighting. Constable influenced, in the way which I have already spoken, the next genres of art. When Claude Monet wrote a series of landscapes with a haystack differently shined, strictly speaking he continued Constable's deal.

Novelty of landscapes of Constable also became a result of his scientific interest in effects of reflected light which he carefully studied. Physicist Michael Faraday and chemist George Fild admired the works of the artist. Constable was able to distinguish color and light nuances and transferred numerous gradations of tone and color shades.



Constable's watercolors were also remarkably free for their time: the almost mystical *Stonehenge, 1835*, with its double rainbow, is one of the greatest watercolors ever painted.

Late recognition of Constable's creativity could happen because of



his essentially new, not meeting standards of the academic art, treatment of the nature. Constable's art had noticeable impact on the French romantic painting, played an important role in the formation of school of Barbizon, group of French landscape writers. Constable's creativity anticipated impressionist art.



From Constable's early portraits his relatives and patrons, with whom he was on friendly terms, look at us.

In **1806** Constable created the whole series of sketches representing people in ordinary situations. These live sketches of the Georgian era reflect observation of the author and his pleasure from high life. Constable was acute and possessed good sense of humour. He also often wrote nice young girls. But even the best ones of them aren't embellished — unlike secular beauties on Joshua Reynolds's or Thomas Lawrence's portraits. They are staying themselves in Constable's works.

Our conclusion out of the second chapter is the following. Landscape painting was considered in those days the lowest genre of painting. But Constable's art was quite different from the manner of painting that was popular at the time. He was painting his native areas without any idealization. His portraits were written in this way too. Because of Constable's love to nature, which was around him, scientific interest in effects of reflected light, supervisions over the nature, Constable anticipated the new genre of art – impressionism, where the main point was to capture the real world in its mobility and variability.

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<sup>3</sup> Portraits of Miss Tudor (1818), Mary Frir (1809), Charles Constable (1835)

## Chapter 3

From the third chapter of my academic writing I hope to find out, how Constable reacted to his wife's death, what changes were there in his works, why his works became darker.

In **1824** his hotly beloved wife had first signs of consumption. Constable stopped all work and took Maria Bicknell to Brighton - a resort place for pulmonary patients. There the couple spent some weeks. But Maria's health undermined, among other things, by frequent childbirth (in 12 years of marriage seven children were born) continued to worsen, and in November **1828** she died.

“Hourly do I feel the loss of my departed Angel – God only knows how my children will be brought up...the face of the World is totally changed to me...”<sup>(8)</sup> – Constable said.



Constable's work became darker and more dramatic as his career progressed.

For example, let's take *Obelisk to Reynolds, 1828*. Possibly, working over this picture, Constable thought not only of Joshua Reynolds who he undoubtedly respected, but also about his untimely deceased wife Maria.

After his wife's death Constable was in despair and only the titanic effort of will forced him to continue work. In **1829** John, at last, became the full member of Royal Academy of fine arts. The master immersed himself in teaching and organization of annual exhibitions of Academy. Then he was accepted to the publication of reproductions of the pictures which made an album under the name “English Landscape”.

“The last period of life and creativity, since **1824**, was again dual and inconsistent. These years were full of depression because of dangerous deterioration of health, death of the wife, and fears of destiny of children, and offensively arranged election in Royal Academy, and more and more growing and oppressing disbelief in his forces.

The character and qualitative level of etudes of those years and big pictures again became not similar and unequal. All exhibitions of pictures of this time: “Salisbury Cathedral from water meadows” (1831) [Appendix-2], “The Opening of Waterloo Bridge seen from Whitehall Stairs” (1832) [Appendix-3], “Englfield House” (1833) [Appendix-4], “*Die Valley Farm*” (1835), “Obelisk to Reynolds” (1836) – bear in themselves the pressure of uncertainty and dissonance and strongly concede to the pictures of previous years. In them the confused, artificial composition, the heavy brown color which earlier was so alien to Constable, the strange ambiguity of space and the amorphy of drawing produce the impression that another artist wrote them or, at least, finished”<sup>(9)</sup> – A.D. Chegodaev wrote.



Constable died suddenly on 31 March **1837**. Doctors couldn't find the reason of his death and concluded that he died of indigestion, but though actually, it was a heart attack. For the third day after death his body buried on the London cemetery in Hempstead, near the grave of his darling Maria.

John Constable's creativity remained unnoticed in the homeland till the XX century. But it encouraged the development of the French painting. French masters of the XIX century collected his paintings, carefully studied them and admired his technique. John Constable's art promoted formation of a realistic tendency in paintings of the 19th century.

The collection of pictures and sketches of John Constable now takes a special place in Royal academy of arts in London.

The brilliant landscape writer, never leaving the coast of Britain, wrote to the friend: "I am given rise to write the blessed earth, my kind old England" <sup>(10)</sup>. Nevertheless, his works affected creativity of the largest French painters, from Delacroix to impressionists.

The artist stated the theory of the art in the preface to "English landscape" - to the collection of engravings from his pictures, left in **1830**, and in six lectures given from **1833** to **1836**.

From the third chapter we can draw out the next. Paintings of John Constable became dual, dark and inconsistent because of wife's death. We can see too much brown color in pictures of that time (since **1824**, when wife started being ill). And author said that face of the world is totally changed to him. But with that his career progressed. So, we can draw out that Mary Bicknell's death not only made his depression and works darker, but also made him more popular. After his wife's death Constable's style changed a lot and different from that one of all other landscape writers, laying a way to impressionism.

# Conclusion

So, what changes happened in Constable's creativity during his whole his life? What influence did Maria Bicknell have on Constable's creativity? The purpose of my work was to consider, what influence was rendered by Mary, Constable's wife, on his creativity. Making a conclusion from the work done, we understand what role love played here.

From the first chapter we understand that having met the love of all his life, Mary, and getting married to her, John found happiness. To support his family, John started painting portraits, but afterwards – came back to his favourite landscapes. His pictures, created during this period, started being greatly demanded. Constable's popularity grew.

The second chapter of my work describes Constable's manner of painting. His pictures were unpopular at first because of the novelty of his style, depicting of nature in all its freshness and variability. The society didn't like John as an artist because of his discrepancy to the settles laws of painting. However, when having earned enough money Constable created his famous six-foot canvas. All France admired them.

The third chapter considers Constable's works created after Maria's death of consumption. Full of grief, Constable didn't find a consolation in anything, except painting and children. His pictures of this period are gloomy and rather blurred, what makes them closer to impressionism. Good luck and glory don't leave the painter – John becomes a full member of the Royal Academy in London, gives lectures about the style of drawing.

It is possible to call John Constable the father of a realistic landscape of New time and the anticipator of impressionism. He was the first who rose against receptions of landscape painting dominating in his days, approving the value of the live real world surrounding the person.

I admire not Constable's canvas only, but his personality as well. I consider John the great person for several reasons. He fought all his life. At first he had to fight for his right to be an artist, then for his right to marry his beloved, and, finally, for his right not to follow as painting laws ruled. And each time John managed to achieve his goals. I consider Constable a great and brave person, because he did what he loved to.

# Appendix



*[1] White Horse, 1819*

*[2] Salisbury  
Cathedral from  
water meadows,  
1831*



*[3] The opening of Waterloo Bridge seen from Whitehall stairs, 1832*



*[4] Englefield house, 1832*





*Highgate view, 1830*



*Salisbury  
Cathedral  
from the  
Bishop's  
Ground,  
1823*



*Hadleigh  
Castle, 1829*



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