Docent Talk 3-10-08
Constable, Turner, and 19th-century British Landscape

(SLIDE) For my lecture today, I'm going to be discussing some ways in which to think about nineteenth-century British landscape painting. As you know, The Huntington holds works by two of the most important British landscape painters of the period – John Constable and J.M.W. Turner. In my talk today I will demonstrate how you can use our Constable and Turner landscapes to discuss conventions of landscape painting with your tour groups. These conventions include issues of artistic technique and process, ideas of place and sentiment, and especially the concept of naturalism. You can easily use your discussion of these conventions to link up to the standards you have been working with, such as "elements of art" and "principles of design." As you'll remember from my talk last month, in which we spent time practicing visual analysis on Van Dyck's portrait of Anne Kirke, one of my main goals in this training is to show you how you can engage in a meaningful discussion about many of these issues by simply looking at the paintings and teasing out the visual clues the artist has given you. What you'll be doing now is translating the analytical skills you learned with regard to portraiture to landscape painting.

When the Huntington Gallery reopens to the public again this May, visitors will be able for the first time to trace a roughly chronological history of British art in the upstairs galleries. The entire West Wing of the second floor will be devoted to our holdings of 19th-century British art, from the Regency to the Arts and Crafts. One of the things this new display will allow us to do, is to place 19th-century British landscape painting within the context of this history. Most of you will remember how in the previous display our Constable six-footer, *View on the Stour Near Dedham*, hung in the Main Portrait Gallery, as a sort of landscape anomaly among all the full-length portraits. The large Turner *Grand Canal* was also downstairs, just outside the Portrait Gallery, on the way to the restrooms. This hang made it somewhat difficult to discuss landscape painting as a concept, which is unfortunate, since it is one of Britain's most important contributions to 19th century art. **(SLIDE)** In the old Huntington Gallery display, the large Constable and Turner paintings were also separated from other works by these artists in our collection. As you know, The Huntington owns several small paintings by Constable, including a beautiful oil sketch, as well as a smaller Turner landscape. In the new installation, *View on the Stour* and *The Grand Canal* are moving upstairs, and are going to be reunited with the other works by these artists in our collection.

(SLIDE) In the new display, Constable's *View on the Stour* will be hung in the South West Gallery upstairs. Many of you will remember this as the former Regency Room, and in fact it worked out spatially that most of our early nineteenth-century material will be on display in this room when we reopen. This painting belongs to Constable's series of great six-foot canvases, which he exhibited between 1819 and 1825. Ours was exhibited in 1822. It depicts a scene along the Stour River in southeast England. A pair of barges are being poled along the river in the near middle distance. We see a man in the barge nearest the picture plane in a white shirt and red cap pushing his pole into the river bottom to propel the craft along. Other figures simultaneously push and pull with the same goal in mind. To the left, another barge, with its sail hanging limp, is moored to the river bank. A white horse stands nearby. To the right, just a bit further back in the scene, we see a woman crossing a bridge near a cottage. A rowboat is resting on the bank below this. In the far middle distance, a forth barge, this one under sail,

plies along a bend in the river as it winds its way through fields of golden grass. Farther back, a church tower marks the spot of a small village, barely visible.

Let's think for a moment about elements of Constable's technique. Our description of the painting should allow us to highlight the way the artist has constructed the picture – the composition, one of the principles of design defined as the overall organization of the work of art. We see that Constable has organized the picture not only into the foreground, middleground, and background elements that we described above, but also that he has divided it vertically as well and filled each space with separate incidents which are, from left to right, the barge at rest, the two center barges being pushed apart, and the bridge and cottage. Here, we also notice that the canvas is divided roughly in half, between landscape and sky.

So what is the effect of these compositional choices? As we discussed last time, our responses to the visual cues of a picture are worth teasing out a bit. How do we react to Constable's division of the canvas in half between sky and land? Because so much real estate is devoted to the sky, we pay special attention to it. We can see that it is a bright day; the sky is filled with billowing clouds that cast shadows across the fields and are mirrored in the still water of the river. Constable has created this effect by painting the water not as a swatch of blue, but with many different colors, that reflect all the elements of the landscape. Where sunlight shines through the clouds and hits the water, you see areas of bright white reflection. Where there are clouds, you see deeper colors, including green and brown and red. In the clouds themselves you see touches of yellow highlight where the rays of the sun pass through. In the grass and reeds near the bottom edge of the picture plane, Constable paints dots of white here and there in an attempt to recreate the sparkling changing effects of sunlight as it moves across a landscape. (Critics at the time complained of what they called "Constable's snow" and this is what they meant, the non-representational flecks of white paint that are not meant to depict any specific object but rather to evoke the sensation of movement and change, such as shifting light and blowing wind.) Constable's attention to these details gives the impression that the painting shows a realistic view of nature. This is an example of naturalism. One of the major conventions of 19th-century landscape painting is an interest on the part of artists to strive for a realistic depiction of natural phenomena. Your school groups can compare the effects of nature that Constable mimics on his canvas with those they may have noticed in the garden as they walked to the gallery – reflections, shadows, highlights, dappled sunlight falling, wind rustling through the leaves of the trees, dew sparkling on blades of grass.

Constable strives to recreate many of these elements in his paintings. In *View on the Stour*, you see the dappled light, sparkling water, golden sun, and cool shadows**.** But…is it real? One of the things you should stress to your school groups is that though Constable's painting looks realistic, it is not a depiction of reality. Naturalism is not nature; it is an artistic convention. Constable may have personally witnessed all of the elements you see in his picture. After all, the Stour Valley is where he grew up. However, this painting is not a simple translation onto canvas of what he saw. It is a carefully constructed artistic statement. Breaking down the elements of the picture into smaller components will help demonstrate this to your tour groups.

Earlier, we mentioned the division of the picture into three separate vertical incidents. However, if we spend a bit more time really looking at the painting, we find that we do not necessarily give equal weight to each incident. Where does our eye automatically go first? What appears to be Constable's focal point? You will notice that Constable has set up his picture so that our eye tends to travel directly to the center of the painting. What draws your

eye there? First, you see that the man in the middle boat is wearing a bright white shirt. In fact, it is the brightest element of the painting. The red cap he wears on his head doesn't hurt either in drawing your eye towards him. Look at the lines in the picture. Your groups can point out some of these. They should notice that there are diagonal lines pointing towards the center of the picture – the barge pole, the rake on the shore, even the moored rowboat. All of these lead your eye where the artist wanted you to look.

(SLIDE) It is clear that Constable was thinking about these directional markers when you look at the full-scale oil sketch he made for the picture and note the differences between it and the finished version. In the sketch, he painted a pair of boys fishing along the bank. In the finished picture, he has replaced the two boys with that rowboat. In the sketch there is no rake or pole. In fact, Constable wrote to his friend John Fisher that he made these changes to his composition in order to give it "a rich center." Clearly, what Constable was painting had more to do with the picture in his mind than the view from his window.

(SLIDE) Naturalistic landscape paintings are often described as if they were photographs – one to one reproductions of what the artist saw. Many people make the mistake of assuming that Constable painted his landscapes out of doors because they are clearly the result of a deep study of naturalistic effects. This is certainly true, but, as you can well imagine, in the case of the six-footers a *plein-air* approach is completely impractical. However, evidence suggests that Constable may have worked on some of his small oil sketches directly from nature. **(SLIDE)** Just cross the room from the *View on the Stour* we will display Constable's sketch of *Flatford Mill from the Lock*, from around 1811. Tiny images like this, which is all of 10 x 12 inches, would probably have been made on the spot. They served for Constable as experiential records of a moment spent out in nature. A sketch like this would have been used, along with hundreds of other similar sketches, as a sort of library from which he could draw when working in his studio. **(SLIDE)** In the new display, you can note the difference in technique between the sketch painted out of doors and the finished, highly worked exhibition picture. You will be able to compare the careful brushwork of *View on the Stour* to the quickly-applied, loose, flat strokes of *Flatford Mill*. Your groups may find it interesting that the picture painted directly out in nature appears less natural than the studio machine.

(SLIDE) Even the "natural" elements in *View on the Stour* can serve a function that has nothing to do with nature. Constable once said that the sky is the "chief organ of sentiment" in a landscape painting. Nature in and of itself does not have an emotional content, but an artist can infuse a picture with one. Humans have a tendency to assign moods to natural phenomena, such as storms, clouds, and sunshine. As we've said, Constable devotes a huge amount of space to the sky in his picture. If asked, your groups will all probably agree that the gentle clouds and glinting sunlight here are meant to convey a pleasant, happy mood.

Constable uses the elements of his painting to convey the way he feels about the scene he is depicting. Weather is one way he does this. Another is, again, through the organization of the composition. Because of the way he directs our eye, the focus is not as much on the landscape as it is on the activity of the figures in the center. Simply by noticing how Constable sets up his composition, we are able to understand that human activity is important to him. The barge workers he paints were important elements of the rural economy in which Constable grew up. His father was a miller, and these barges brought grain from his father's mill downstream. In some ways, this picture is a personal view of the place in which the artist spent his childhood and he emphasizes certain things that were important to him.

(SLIDE) This is very different from the way J.M.W. Turner conceived of his landscape paintings. *The Grand Canal: Scene – A Street in Venice*, as the full title of this painting indicates, is not a view of the rural countryside of England, or a scene from the artist's childhood home. It is an imaginative recreation of Shakespeare's play *The Merchant of Venice*, set in a carefully described view of the actual city. In the new display, Turner's 1837 painting will be only two small galleries away from Constable's *View on the Stour*. Some of you may choose to bring your groups in to see the Turner, and perhaps to compare and contrast the ways these two artists conceived of landscape painting.

(SLIDE) One of the first major differences between the two paintings is the format. While Constable used a six-foot wide horizontal canvas, Turner chose to paint his landscape on a vertical canvas. What is the effect of these different choices? In Constable's case, the wide canvas allowed him to show the sweep of the river valley and convey a sense of distance. Turner on the other hand used the verticality of the canvas to create a sense of the soaring buildings that tower above a viewpoint which is somewhere just above the water level in the foreground of the picture. It is almost as if the viewpoint Turner created was one in which we are bobbing along in a gondola with the rest of the figures in the painting.

One of the other most noticeable differences between the two paintings is the color palette. Constable chose a darker, greener and browner palette to help evoke the crisp freshness of a spring day in England. Turner uses a palette of soft blues, bright whites and rich golds, set off by touches of deep red, blue, and black. The scene these colors create is completely spectacular – the buildings in the background almost melt into the sky, which is touched with bright white clouds that seem to glint with reflected light from the city below. Turner achieves this effect by laying the clouds on thickly, possibly with a palette knife, to give them an enormous substantiality. The buildings in the background, on the other hand, are ethereal, barely sketched in, as if dissolving into the atmospheric haze. Turner's water is similarly thickly applied – crusty patches of gold, yellow, white, and blue. He has used the paint in this way to create the sensation of light bouncing off water. **(SLIDE)** Compare it to what Constable did with his white spots in the reeds of *View on the Stour*. Both of these artists were interested in effects of light. Both of these artists were pursuing a naturalistic landscape painting. The methods they used, however, are completely different.

(SLIDE) Venice was a city famous for the quality of its light. English travelers remarked upon the way the canals and the white marble buildings sparkled in the sun. The effect could be disorienting. Turner has filled the foreground of his picture with dozens of figures, many of whom are hard to distinguish from eachother. This differs from Constable's use of directional lines and bright colors to direct your eye toward the center of *View on the Stour*. Turner uses bright spots of color, such as the blue robe of the child on the left, the gold sails of the boats on the right, and the green reflections on the water in the foreground to confuse the viewers eye, and force it to wander all over the picture. With these multiple focal points Turner has tried to mimic the way bright sunlight sparkling on water can create a feeling of instability or even dizziness. The scattered touches of vivid color help create a prismatic effect. We are meant to be overwhelmed by the spectacle. It is not the pleasant, nostalgic mood Constable infused into his painting of his childhood home. Turner paints a foreign land, and wants us to be dazzled by it.

The feeling of fantasy the Turner creates reinforces the imaginary, literary subject matter of the painting. However, even though Turner exhibited this picture with the title "Scene – a Street in

Venice" it does not illustrate a specific scene in Shakespeare's play. The ostensible main action occurs in the lower right, where the moneylender Shylock demands his pound of flesh from Antonio. They are no larger than any of the other figures, nor does Turner give you any direction signposts to guide your eye toward them. This picture, then, is much more about the unique topography of Venice and its famous light. **(SLIDE)** In fact, Turner's paintings often seem to employ subject matter as little more than an excuse to paint stunning visual effects. The new display will present Turner's *Neapolitan Fisher Girls Surprised Bathing by Moonlight* from around 1840 in the same room as *The Grand Canal*. It is another picture in which Turner has spent more time dazzling the viewer's eye than in fleshing out his subject matter. In fact, without the help of the title it is difficult at first to figure out what the action of the scene even is. In this landscape, Turner appears most interested in capturing the effects of full moonlight shining upon water. He also contrasts this cool white light with the warm glow of firelight coming from the torch in the lower right corner and the erupting volcano in the left background. It is a completely different approach to naturalism than what we saw in Constable, but it is nonetheless the same impulse.

(SLIDE) In thinking about the different approaches to the depiction of natural effects used by Constable and Turner, we can start to tease out the fact that the convention of naturalism in 19th-century landscape painting is a moving target. In the new second floor display of the Huntington Gallery, we will be showing many landscapes that approach this concept differently. Among the works on display not far from Constable's *View on the Stour* and Turner's *Grand Canal* will be

- Richard Parkes Bonington's *View in Venice, with San Giorgio Maggiore* from 1826
- John Linnell's *A Fine Evening After Rain* of around 1815
- A new acquisition: Richard Redgrave's *Beside a Woodland Pond, Summer*
- And several examples of the work of French painters of the Barbizon school, including Jules Breton's *The Gleaners*