

Fit for Purpose: 30 years of the Constable Research Project

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Sarah Cove examining a newly discovered Constable oil study in 2016, Cottage with a Windmill and Rainbow, c.1832-34 (Private Collection © Constable Research Project. All Rights Reserved)

The Constable Research Project (CRP) was established by Sarah Cove thirty years ago this year to study John Constable's oil painting materials and techniques. Initially working in collaboration with the Victoria and Albert Museum and a private donor, the study was soon widened to include fully attributed works from most of the UK and US East coast galleries as well as prominent private collections. To date over 250 oils from 1799 to 1837 plus two paint boxes and Constable's final palette have been examined.

The CRP was one of the first research projects to systematically examine the works of a British painter. The main aim was to deepen our understanding of Constable through a thorough study of his working methods and materials. It was also hoped that the knowledge gained would have a wider application in assisting scholars with questions of dating and attribution. These ambitions have been more than realised. Throughout the project collaborations with Constable scholars, conservators and technical art historians, a forensic paper historian and conservation scientists have cross-fertilised internationally to provide some of the most ground-breaking and accessible 'technical art history' yet produced for a British artist. This has been widely disseminated by the author in conservation and art historical journals, conference papers, saleroom catalogues, several TV programmes and most notably major exhibition catalogues, such as those for 'Constable' (Tate 1991) and 'Constable's Great Landscapes' (Tate & USA 2006-7).

This paper will discuss:

Technical art history: The highlights of 30 years of the CRP demonstrating the effectiveness of an in depth study of the work of a single artist in terms of developing a secure chronology through the dating of materials and techniques and how this acts as an aid to attribution.



*A macro-photograph of the elderflower bush beside Willy Lott's house in the 'six-foot' sketch for The Hay Wain, 1821
(Victoria & Albert Museum © Constable Research Project. All Rights Reserved)*

A tool for attribution: Recently a protocol has been established enabling the public to contact Sarah Cove directly with enquiries regarding possible new attributions. Clients can now access her expertise at different levels- working in close collaboration with leading Constable scholars, she has been instrumental in the discovery of more than a dozen 'new' Constables in the past two years.

Fuelling popular opinion and raising the profile of technical art history: People think they know Constable through images on chocolate boxes and biscuit tins but often they don't really understand his most familiar works! Sarah Cove is on a mission to open the eyes of the public to Constable as the 'Jackson Pollock of the 1830s'. Through publications, lectures and TV appearances she aims to demonstrate just how radical his extraordinary technique was for his time and to show that in many ways he is the true 'Father of Modern Painting' through his influence on the French 19th century landscape tradition that led to Impressionism, Cezanne and ultimately Picasso!