

Constable and Turner: an initial structural comparison

A structural comparison of Constable's *The Hay Wain* with Turner's *The Blue Rigi*, can start with a discussion of the reading directions in each of the paintings. In both cases the viewer's European reading left to right is pulled back into the paintings from the dynamic designs leading from the bottom righthand corners, back into the centres of the pictures. The course of the Stour and the wagon in the Constable, the shadow from the Rigi and the boat in the Turner.

In the case of Constable the eyes are then taken to the right near the mid-point across the depicted meadow and the hay-makers cutting and loading further wagons. In the case of the Turner the eyes are cut short at the midpoint by the edge of the lake as it skirts the base of the Rigi.

In both paintings the horizons are multiple, in Constable at the closest meadow hedge and then by the far edge and sky. In the Turner the lake edge and then the faintly multiple horizons of air and cloud and sky.

In both paintings there are foils to the dynamic, the dog in the Constable having come down the riverside path turning towards the wagon and the results in the Turner of gun shots from the right to the lake birds on the left signified by the rising white of water and the lifting birds. The highest focal point in both paintings is on the left, the house and the main group of trees in the Constable and the Rigi-Kulm, the highest of the six peaks of the Rigi massif, in Turner.¹

The overall feeling of Classical proportions in the Constable picture seems expanded horizontally and opened out in the Turner. This is deceptive in two ways. The perception of the proportions is encouraged by the different concentrations of depicted forms in the two scenes. The proportions of the Constable picture (1: 0.7) are in fact closely comparable to Turner's (1: 0.67) and both paintings differ from the proportions used by their lauded seventeenth precedents. For example, the pictures owned by George Beaumont, known to both Constable and Turner,² vary from 1: 0.6 (Rubens' *A View of Het Steen in the Early Morning*, ca. 1636) to 1: 0.8 (Claude Lorraine's *Hagar and the Angel*, 1646). Beaumont also owned Nicolas Poussin's *Landscape with a Man washing his Feet at a Fountain*, 1648 which has the proportions of 1: 0.74.³ Another pertinent comparison might be with some of the work by Richard Wilson. His works that may be said to have given attention to the works of Claude, even when depicting British scenes, sometimes have the proportions of 1: 0.8 (*Snowdon from Llyn Nantlle*, 1765-67 and *Pembroke Town and Castle*, 1765), but often his British examples (*Dolbadarn Castle*, 1760-65 and *River at Penegoes*, ca. 1750) are closer to 1: 0.7. A similar range of proportions (from 1: 0.7 to 1:

¹ Gerald Manley Hopkins climbed Rigi-Kulm in 1868, *The Journals and Papers of Gerard Manley Hopkins*. London: Oxford University Press, 1959. p. 170. A cogwheel railway was installed in 1871. Mark Twain walked up the slopes in 1878.

² Beaumont was one of Constable's former tutors. He was very critical of Turner's work. His collection of seventeenth century paintings was known to both Constable and Turner.

³ All three of these works by Rubens, Claude and Poussin were given to the National Gallery, London, where they still be viewed.

0.8) can be seen in the work of Joseph Wright of Derby. To state this more candidly, these innovative works by Constable and Turner show compositional attentions in their layout and conventions comparable to seventeenth century precedents, but their constructive measurements show an affinity to British examples.

Constable's composition, factured in his London studio, is reliant on his experience of living and drawing in the area of the Suffolk scene, the Stour River and Dedham Vale.⁴ The Stour river had become important to industry and in 1705 was part of the process of making the river navigable and linked to the new British canal system.⁵ Lighters (barges) were in operation on the system until the 1930s. The river formed part of the border between Suffolk and Essex, given emphasis in Constable's painting *The Leaping Horse* (1825) in which a horse and rider are jumping between the two counties. In the decade before 1821 Constable factured sketches of different aspects of the scene and factured small paintings, such as of Willy Lott's house (one dated 1816 in Ipswich museum, another dated ca. 1810-1815 in the Victoria and Albert Museum, a third in the Tate collection dated ca. 1810). He then factured a full size sketch in oil paint on canvas and researched for more information which the large sketch helped him understand as needed. In order to do this, away from the site, he wrote to his brother to obtain a drawing of the wagon from one of his colleagues and, I presume, conferred with a botanist in London to confirm the seasonal plant life.⁶ The full size sketch includes a shore-side horse and driver omitted from the completed work, and the completed work adds considerably to the plant life in the lefthand corner. In addition, after its first public showing at the Royal Academy exhibition in 1821, Constable repainted areas of the work. In particular it is evident that following his summer and early autumn studies of clouds at Hampstead, he repainted the sky in *The Hay Wain* to meet his new understanding of clouds. (*Cloud Study, Hampstead, Tree at Right*, now in the Royal Academy collection, dated 11th September 1821, depicting Cumulus clouds seems particular apposite.) His subsequent show of the painting in 1822 at the British Institute displayed a new painting.

Turner's composition is one of many depicting the Rigi. *The Blue Rigi* was factured as part of one of his summer campaigns in the period 1840 to 1844 in which he 'deepened and extended his acquaintance', as John Gage put it, 'with the north shore of lake Geneva, and, in particular with the whole range of the central Alps ...'⁷ He factured two series of altogether fifteen watercolours, which

⁴ The origins of the river name Stour are from Anglo-Saxon and then Middle English. The name could mean 'fierce water' but here is no agreement about his and certainly its contemporary 'fierceness' varies considerably. Fierceness does not describe the river in Constable's picture.

⁵ An Act of Pariliament in 1705 gave rights for the River Stour (Stower) to be made publicly navigable from the estuary at Manningtree, Essex, to Sudbury, Suffolk and a Joint Stock Company was formed of London and Suffolk investors to raise capital to cut and manage the river.

⁶ In 1824 Constable met Henry Phillips, a botanist and horticulturist working in Brighton and who specifically advised Constable on his painting *The Cornfield*, 1826 (now in the National Gallery). I make the conjecture that he may have conferred with other botanists during his time in London.

⁷ John Gage. *J.M.W. Turner. A Wonderful Range of Mind?*, New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1987, p. 62-65.

he prepared for a select group of collectors in 1842 and 1843. Nine of these were subjects in the area of the lakes Zug and Lucerne. *The Blue Rigi* was factured directly in front of the view depicted and probably done in one sitting. He may have added the foreground at a later sitting. The detail of the atmospheres and their visual effect on the distant mountain demonstrate the need to as much as possible complete the work in one sitting. It is worth noting however that this tonal layering requires interim drying times. To accommodate this requirement Turner had early in his career adopted a 'scale practice'. This led to a simplification of the choices on the palette and a preparation to undertake more than one picture at the same site. While one picture was drying 'he could apply dabs or washes of a recently used mix of paint to a large number of other designs before eventually returning to the initial – by-now dry – image and a new mixing of darker paint'⁸ upon the painting to continue that facture and its successors.

One of the significant features of the Rigi massif is the horizontal rock ledges and grass strips surrounding the mountain, which give it its name from Old High German, horizontal stratification and gird or pleat, put in place by the composition of sedimentary and conglomerate rocks. This is one of the features that at a distance across the lake comes and goes in the shifting airs so that Turner's painting becomes a report of the moment and energy of the light and air conditions. The reflective and assembled nature of Constable's achievement, factured with many long breaks over 12 months contrasts Turner's immediacy or at least the apparent immediacy, but what may in fact take an hour or more. These differences of duration in the facture are comparably also differences of scale (Constable's picture is about four times larger than Turner's picture) and materials. The studio materials for oil painting provided an extensiveness, but also a preparedness. The open air facture with watercolour was achieved with the limits of a wallet of watercolour blocks,⁹ a handful of brushes and perhaps rags and a can of water. The differences achieved are partly contingent on these factors.

Allen Fisher, July 2018.

⁸ Eric Shanes. 'J.M.W. Turner: The Finished Watercolour as High Art' in *Turner. The Great Watercolours*, London: Royal Academy of Arts, 2000, p. 13.

⁹ In 1780 William Reeves invented hard cakes of soluble watercolour and thus enhanced the opportunity to use the medium when travelling.