

## The Artist's Almanac

October 2019

How often do we hear it today – *O, this heat! I'll be so glad when we get cooler weather?*

Not so fast! This September may have broken records for hot and dry, and summer was due to have ended on the 22<sup>nd</sup>, but you probably spend most of your time in the air-conditioned comfort of home, car, or office anyway.

Now just look outside; up to the sky. Are not those gorgeous cumulus clouds that tower above us or sail like galleons of light across our sky the most noble things we see? Our heat puts them there, and soon enough they'll be gone. Our skies will clear in fall and give way to leaden skies and all-day rain in winter. Then the flowers we gather will come from the supermarket.

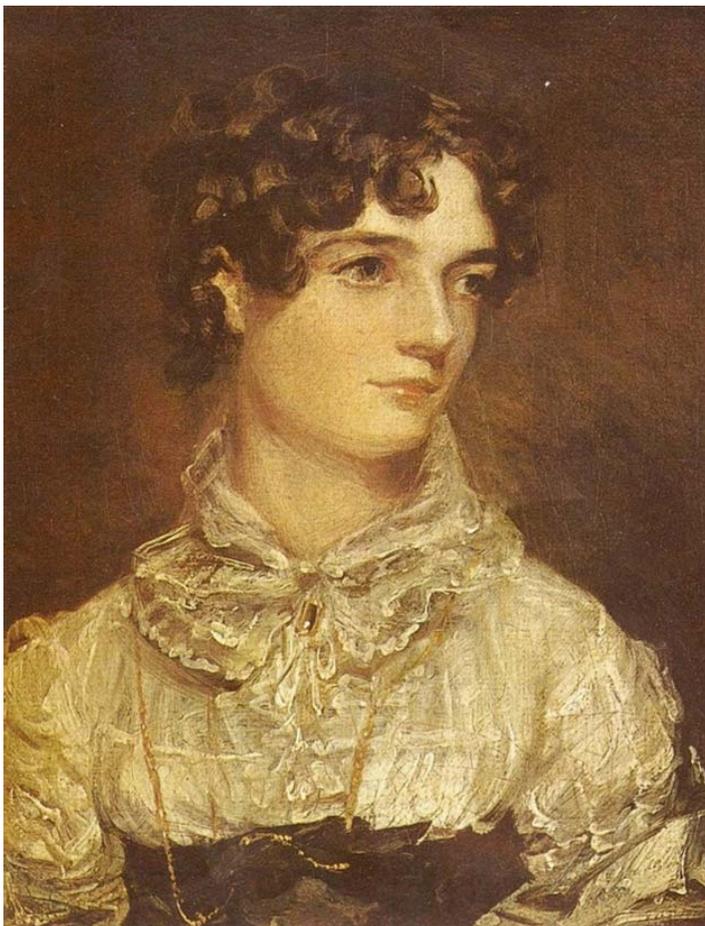
John Constable is my favorite artist. The art critic John Ruskin, whose father was a wine merchant, said that Constable *bottled* skies. Indeed, he spent one entire summer painting nothing but clouds, bringing skies into his studio to place them as backdrop to his magnificent *six-footers*. So gorgeous were they, they often overwhelmed his earthly subjects, leaving us gasping for air, as we sat transfixed before his painting of *The Haywain*.



Since earliest times mankind has looked upward for inspiration; the path of knowledge and the path of virtue lead upward. Our awe of the sky is owed to its immensity, incandescence, and immateriality, and the vertical dimension is deeply rooted in our metaphor, as when we refer to a good man as *upright* or a criminal as *down and dirty*.

Most of his paintings were done within a radius of a few miles of his home, of subjects surrounding his father's mill, and included dams, locks, livestock, dogs, horses, churches, and family members. His paintings initially did not sell in his native England, due to the everyday nature of his subjects there. The story was different in France; French artists Gericault and Delacroix admired his multicolor greens and sparkling touches of white which made his landscapes sparkle. His paintings created a sensation when they were exhibited at the Salon in Paris, and Charles X awarded him a gold medal. Many credit Constable with being a founder of French Impressionism.

Only now did the British take notice, began buying his paintings, and he was admitted to the Royal Academy. In 1816 he received an inheritance which allowed him to marry his childhood sweetheart, whom he had courted for years, Maria Bicknell. She was 28, John was 40. It was



Maria Bicknell by John Constable



John Constable by Daniel Gardner

truly a marriage of love, and they had seven children. But unfortunately, Maria began to show early signs of tuberculosis and they moved for a time to Brighton Beach in the hope that her lungs might improve in fresh sea air. It was not to be, and Maria died in 1828 after they had been married only ten years. She was only 40. John did not remarry, and like Bach, had a swirl of children around him as he attempted to paint and manage a household.

*The greater the love, the greater the loss.* Constable's letters during the 1830s were suffused with alienation and depression over the loss of his beloved Maria, complicated by the duties of raising seven youngsters on his own and aggravated by the critical attacks to which he and his great contemporary J.M.W. Turner were being subjected on account of their radical new approach to painting. Now his paintings, formerly suffused with light and color turned dark and melancholy. Increasingly he sought out ruins as subjects.



Salisbury Cathedral, before Maria's death



Salisbury Cathedral, after Maria's death. The rainbow represents hope for better times after his storms



John Fisher, Rector of Salisbury Cathedral, was Constable's best friend and Patron.



Constable's died of congestive heart disease on March 31, 1837. He once wrote to his friend Leslie, "My limited and abstracted art is to be found under every hedge, and in every lane, and therefore nobody thinks it worth picking up". He could never have imagined how influential his honest techniques would turn out to be. Constable's art inspired not only contemporaries like Géricault and Eugene Delacroix, but the Barbizon School, and the French impressionists of the late nineteenth century.

Constable was one of the first artists of the Romantic movement to create landscape paintings drawn directly from nature rather than the idealized and dramatic depictions favored by other artists of the period and in taking this stance he pioneered Naturalism in Britain. His treatment of light, application of paint and his use of bright, naturalistic colors also set him apart.

In the 1830s Constable copied out a segment of a poem by Robert Brownfield, *The Farmer's Boy*. The last lines of it, speaking of clouds, describe them as

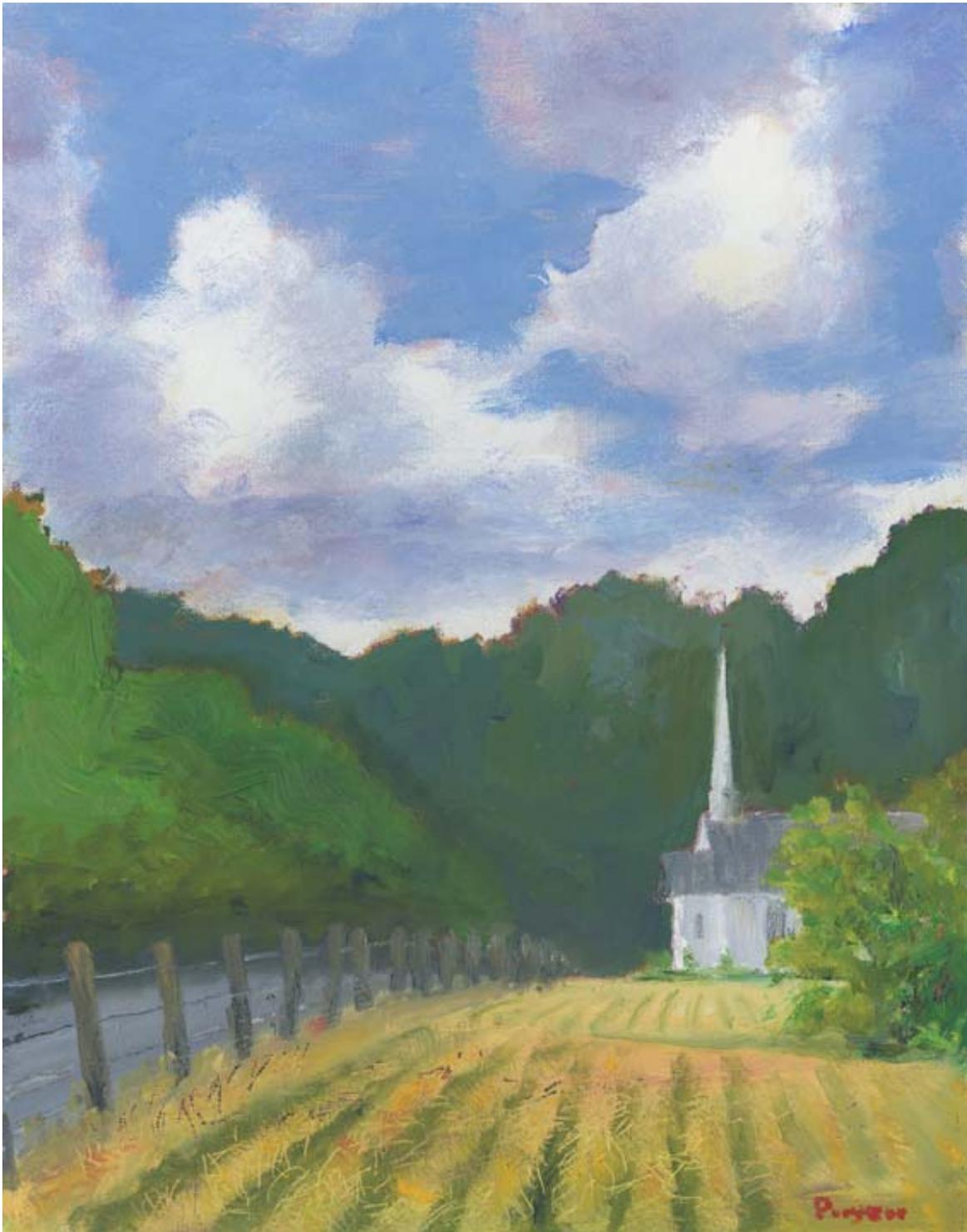
.... detach'd in ranges through the Air  
Spotless as snow and countless as they're fair;  
Scatter'd immensely wide from east to west,--  
The beautiful semblance of a flock at rest.  
These to the raptured mind --- aloud proclaim  
Their mighty Shepherd's everlasting name



Salisbury Cathedral, across the water meadows, watercolor painted in plein air, by Bill Puryear, 1985

In 1985 Claudia and I were in Salisbury and found the place to be magical. So moved by it Stonehenge, old Sarum, and the Cathedral, I decided to try a watercolor of it from the very spot where Constable painted it, looking across the water meadows. Seated on the wooden bridge, brush in hand, water at the ready, I, almost through, found myself surrounded by a clutch of teenage boys, who demanded to know what I was doing, offering advice, grabbing at the brush to make their own additions, I packed up and took it back to the Inn to finish it.

Back in Tennessee we had no haywains or cathedral spires scratching the skies searching for God, but we had hay in windrows in October and cumulus clouds sailing overhead. Here is a little country church, its spire reaching for the clouds, where people come to pray to the Shepherd who tends them.



Laguardo Cumberland Presbyterian Church, Bill Puryear

May you enjoy good art and good harvests!

