Constable, the Forgotten Genius

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Volume 20, Number 81, Winter 1975–1976

URI: https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/55062ac

Cite this article
New Orleans is a town rich in French heritage. However, few people realize that it was actually a French Canadian, Jean-Baptiste Le Moyne, sieur de Bienville, who founded the famous city. Bienville's father, Charles Le Moyne, was a native of Dieppe who had immigrated to Canada from a young age and had made a fortune in trading. He was versed in Indian languages and received many estates in feudalism. One of these, Longueuil, was opposite Montreal, and when the King raised him to nobility he took the title of Sieur de Longueuil. Each of his twelve sons was given land in Louisiana. His brother, Bienville, accompanied him and on March 2, 1699, the French Canadian explorers discovered the mouth of the Mississippi River. Seven years later, in 1706, Bienville died of a yellow fever attack.

Bienville continued to explore the area, although it was not until 1718 that he led a party of about 50 men up the Mississippi River to a place that he called Portchain, where he landed and began to clear the ground of trees and brush to build crude shelters. The new town was officially named Nouvelle-Orléans, or New Orleans, in honour of the King of France's grand-uncle, Philippe, Duc d'Orléans, Regent of France.

A French engineer, Adrien de Pauger, arrived in the colony in 1720, and he laid out the initial settlement which was called Vieux-Carré, or French Quarter as it is known to-day. The city was designed like a French mediaeval town, with a central square facing the Mississippi, the Place d'Armes, now called Jackson Square, and government offices and homes of the official residences frontal the square. The streets of the Vieux-Carré were laid out in a grid from the square and the area comprised approximately 100 blocks.

The first homes were crudely built of split cypress slabs and palmetto thatched. However, later buildings were much more elaborate. The warm-spirited Frenchmen lived good lives importing everything from fine chandlery to opera singers to the “New France” as New Orleans was called.

The city flourished until 1762, when Louisiana was ceded to Spain. Although the French always steadfastly clung to the original Vieux-Carré while the Spanish, Americans, and other settlers began branching out in a crescent around the city, the French influence did become somewhat intermingled with the other settlers. Napoleon regained Louisiana for France in 1803 and sold it to the United States later that year.

Two devastating fires in 1789 and 1794 practically wiped out the original French Quarter. On Good Friday in 1789, when all pious native lights, candles, a breeze lift the altar hangings of a house on Chartres Street. The ensuing fire lasted five hours and destroyed more than 400 homes, which amounted to nearly four-fifths of the town. Then six years later, a second great fire came which destroyed over 200 structures. The original French town virtually disappeared. It was succeeded by a mostly Spanish-influenced city, and during the War of the League of Augsburg was one of the few French commanders who fought the English with success.

The French Quarter to-day includes grand hotels, famous restaurants, storied night-clubs and shops from simple grocery stores to antique emporiums with near-priceless inventories. But even more than just an area for tourists, the French Quarter is a fine residential neighborhood where mansions are maintained in excellent repair. Until recently, the area was enforced to make sure property owners in the French Quarter maintain their buildings properly and no architectural changes are permitted without special permission from the Vieux-Carré Commission, the architectural governing body of the area.

The French Quarter is one of the most popular tourist attractions in America, with its famous Jackson Square flanked by the Presbytere and Cabildo, now fine museums. St. Louis Cathedral and its Ponchartrain Buildings are the first apartments built in the United States where people still live on the second and third floor and shops are maintained on the first floor just as it was centuries ago. The French Quarter to-day includes grand hotels, famous restaurants, storied night-clubs and shops from simple grocery stores to antique emporiums with near-priceless inventories. But even more than just an area for tourists, the French Quarter is a fine residential neighborhood where mansions are maintained in excellent repair. Until recently, the area was enforced to make sure property owners in the French Quarter maintain their buildings properly and no architectural changes are permitted without special permission from the Vieux-Carré Commission, the architectural governing body of the area.

One of the most outstanding homes in the French Quarter is located at 828 Burgundy Street. It is a handsome stuccoed home owned by a young attorney, Michael K. Tarver. Records from the Historic New Orleans Collection show that the land transactions date back to the French period. The house was built in 1852. It was constructed during what is considered to be the greatest architectural period in the history of New Orleans — the quarter-century between 1835 and the Civil War. The economy was booming and the city built during this period than at any time before or since.

Mr. Tarver purchased the lovely three-story mansion in 1969 and immediately began carefully restoring it to its original splendour. The house covers the entire lot, 30 by 175 feet deep. The large mahogany doors are by French carpenter, the marble entrance is by French masons, featuring a formal double parlor each 19 by 19 feet square, dining room, garden room, kitchen, bedroom-study-sitting-room, and bath. The second and third floors have been converted to apartments and the slave quarter in the rear is now an efficiency apartment.

The house has a fireplace in each room with the original Italian-imported marble mantels. All of the woodwork is cypress and the flooring is oak. The double parlors can be separated by huge folding doors. Ceilings are 14 feet high.

In furnishing the home, Mr. Tarver used fine French antiques in the double parlors. Much of the furniture dates back to the grandeur of Louis XV and XVI. An outstanding Bergere suite of furniture is featured in the second parlor. The marble-top tables are Louis XV with fine candelsticks from the same period on the fireplace. Prints on either side of the fireplace are Paris Dans Sa Splendeur. The rugs in the double parlors are copies of Aubusson rugs made especially for Mr. Tarver. The chandelier is from Belgium. A Victorian screen adorns the corner.

The walls in the double parlors are painted beige-mauve and the woodwork is white.

In the dining-room Mr. Tarver chose to use a warm orange sherbet colour on the walls to create a setting for his country French pine table and chairs. The cane seats are covered in a bright plaid fabric. A fruitwood Louis XVI buffet with steel hardware is the only other furniture in the room. An eighteenth century oval painting hangs over the buffet. It is titled La Fête champêtre — Outing in the Country. The brass chandelier is American. Floors are of brick. Chinese porcelain plates are featured on the mantel.

The bedroom is actually a multi-purpose room that also serves as a study and a sitting-room. A hand-painted suite-covered screen hides the brass bed and brings it back to the Louis XVI period. This room is one of the most interesting features of the house. A comfortable chaise lounge and a pair of chairs create a comfortable seating pattern. The table in between the chairs and chair is Louis XV. The lamp on the table is a bronze military figure, as is the lamp on the desk.

Prints on the wall are eighteenth century French Revolution public notices.

The room is a cream colour and the carpet is a needle-point design in grey.

## Constable, the Forgotten Genius?

By Jean-Loup Bourget

Constable was born in 1776, a year after Turner. His bicentenary will be celebrated in London (Tate Gallery, February-March 1976) with great splendour, as was that of Turner. But the Turner commemorations (the enormous Turner exhibitions in the Royal Academy and the Tate Gallery, and soon followed by an exhibition of watercolours in the British Museum) gave rise to numerous preposterous and unjustified statements to the
general effect that Turner is the greatest English painter, the only British painter of international stature. Ten years ago, David Piper spoke of "the three geniuses of English Romantic painting: Constable, Turner and Blake". He added that, while Constable might not have been the author of the best individual works, he was nevertheless the most important of all British painters (Painting in England, 1947). He included Hogarth, Gainsborough, Stubbs, Wright of Derby, Cozens, Dadd, Rossiter, Burne-Jones, Bacon, ... are unquestionably "of international stature". Certainly, there seems to be little doubt that Constable, Turner and Blake constitute a trio of the most remarkable for their time. But there seem to be almost nothing in common but their genius.

The obvious dissimilarity between Constable and Blake hardly needs to be emphasized. However, some of the statements they made echo each other in a curious and contradictory way. Witness Blake's dictum: "Israel delivered from Egypt is Art delivered from Nature and from Imitation." To which Constable replies: "The art of seeing nature is a thing almost as much to be acquired as the art of reading the Egyptian hieroglyphics." Blake and Constable, to quote the philosopher of the Equations of Life (1855), are in agreement when they affirm the imperative need to escape from Nature, whereas Constable seeks to penetrate it further, but with a sense of humility, Nature being a (difficult) text to decipher. In another connection, it will be seen that Constable did not view imitation any more favorably than did Blake.

A further contradictory echo is to be found in their respective attitudes. Blake called the president of the Royal Academy "Sir Sloshua Reynolds". In his eyes, "Sloshua" symbolized all that he loathed in the artistic establishment of the time. The latter-day incarnation of the Grand Manner, both classical and baroque, Italian and French. On the other hand, Constable is responsible for The Cenotaph (1836, National Gallery, London), which represents a monument to Reynolds flanked by busts of Michelangelo and Raphael. At the same time, however, Constable has turned his subjects from the heroic to the heroic; the human to the monumental or winter landscape; the cenotaph is surrounded by a wood of leafless trees where a passing deer majestically turns its back on the monument. Hence the impression of emptiness, death and abandon. What dominates here is not Reynolds' presence, but rather his absence multiplied. Assuredly, Constable did not bear the same hatred as Blake towards the Royal Academy, but he was so little appreciated by his contemporaries that he had to await a mature age before being elected as one of its members (27 years after Turner!)

The word "impressionist" is now associated with the career of Monet. In his autobiography, the artist wrote: "I am not always exempt from the sugariness, the added spice of the Picturesque (according to neo-classical theory, the two categories were absolutely distinct), and this is never true of Constable. To him, the Picturesque and the Sublime were equally foreign. Only then, how much more exploited do we see today the visionary, singing the glory of the Industrial Revolution (the famous Rain, Steam and Speed, which the National Gallery jealously refused to lend to the Royal Academy for the great retrospective of 1974-75), and the painter of pastoral England? Basili Taylor has claimed that Constable's interest in the mezzotint of Thomas Bewick, a grateful remembrance of a rural countryside destined to be modernized and destroyed by technological progress. I am not entirely convinced that this is so; Constable's vision is not always idyllic. Moreover, the canals and locks which he depicts in painting are themselves a part of the Industrial Revolution.

What strikes me above all is that the frequently held view of Turner and Constable as "precursors" of impressionism lacks any real basis. Some of Turner's canvases are undeniably "abstract". Let it be said, however, that this cannot be easily applied to Constable and is not exclusive to Turner. His intentions (the Sublime is always in mind) have nothing in common with the fundamentally realistic aims of the impressionists. Constable's position is different: there can be no doubt that he was concerned with the same order as were Monet and Cezanne, but the order of life. In terms of form, Constable's naturalism is not without its surprises. Witness the astonishing Study of Tree Trunks (c. 1821, Victoria and Albert Museum), "shot" from above, which heralds Caillebotte's composition (Boulevard du Haut, 1880, or those of Bonnard or Vuillard, a technique generally ascribed to "Japanese influence".

A more intimate acquaintance with Constable's work will reveal that the epithet which best describes him is not "impressionistic", but, in fact, expressionist. This is particularly evident in some pictures of his maturity: Sketch for Hadleigh Castle (1835, Victoria and Albert), the summit of a hill, around which wheel Arthur Rimbault's "chers corbeaux délicieux" (c. 1829, Tate Gallery); the surrealistic watercolour Stonehenge (1835, Victoria and Albert). On even closer inspection, this trait is seen to be omnipresent in his work. The Leaping Horse (Tate Gallery), for example, or those of Bonnard or Vuillard (c. 1825, Victoria and Albert) gives a foretaste of Jack B. Yeats by its texture (the nervous brushwork, and by its composition (in the foreground, a brownish mass, restless trees and sky — a scene in sombre hues brought out by two patches of brilliant red) and by its subject (the horse); the Brueghel and the Rimbaud (1812, Victoria and Albert), with its leaden sky, reminds one of a "non-formal" composition by Fautrier. If certain works suggest impressionistic leanings, it might be that they evoke the ceramics of the Paris-Auteuil workshop. The link is the grainy texture and the sky — Constable would have rendered admirably the eternal pools and rain of Lorraine. The very thickness of the paint, in so far as it is "impressionistic" at all, evokes such painters as Monticelli or Ziem (for the study for Leaping Horse (Tate Gallery), for example) and his companion: the order of Nature. In other words, Constable's naturalism is not always idyllic. Moreover, the canals and locks which he depicts in painting are themselves a part of the Industrial Revolution. At times, this art based on the humility of the naturalist approach reaches clearly visionary heights. It is a false humility, to be sure, since it derives from a highly-principled sense of inwardness, and explains Constable's almost exclusive preference for Botticelli, to give but one example. Such a quality can be seen in the sepia-wash which, it thought, depicts a View on the Stour: Dedham Church in the Distance (c. 1830, Victoria and Albert), and which might have been signed ... Victor Hugo. Constable has no cause to envy Turner's facetious abstraction. On the contrary, we return again to Stonehenge, flanked anew by the double rainbow.

(Translation by Ethlne Bourget)