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Constable, the Forgotten Genius

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Michael K. Tarver Residence

By Bonnie CRONE

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 city. Bienville’s father, Charles Le Moyne, was a native of Dieppe who had emigrated to Canada, then owned by England, and had made a fortune in trading. He was versed in Indian languages and received many estates in feoffment. 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 Canada. His brother, Bienville, accompanied him to Canada, and he laid out the initial town of New Orleans, in honour of the King of France’s grand-uncle, Philippe, Duc d’Orléans, Regent of France.

Iberville became a great hero in Canada. He entered the French navy, rapidly rising to a command, and during the War of the League of Augsburg was one of the few French commanders who fought the English with success. With a fleet of five ships he defeated a small English fleet in Hudson Bay and removed the English menace from the waters of northern Canada.

Throughout the entire history of Louisiana, Iberville and Bienville played important roles. Iberville became a great hero in Canada. He entered the French navy, rapidly rising to a command, and during the War of the League of Augsburg was one of the few French commanders who fought the English with success. With a fleet of five ships he defeated a small English fleet in Hudson Bay and removed the English menace from the waters of northern Canada.

Iberville set sail from La Rochelle with a crew of Canadians on two frigates, the Badine and the Marin. His brother, Bienville, accompanied him. On March 2, 1699, the French Canadians discovered the mouth of the Mississippi River. Seven years later, in 1706, Iberville 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 settlement on Pontchartrain, 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 today. The city was designed like a French mediaeval town with a central square facing the Mississippi, Place d’Armes. Bienville’s Church, government offices and other residences faced 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 ship cargo slabs and palmetto thatched. However, later buildings were much more elaborate. The warm-spirited Frenchmen lived good lives importing everything from fine chandeliers to opera singers to the “New France” as New Orleans was called.

The city grew 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 for $15 million.

Two devastating fires in 1758 and 1794 practically wiped out the original French Quarter. On Good Friday in 1758, when all plows native to candles, a breeze lifted the altar hangings of a house on Chartres Street. The ensuing fire lasted five hours and destroyed more than 200 houses, 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.

Iberville and Bienville, played important roles in the early history of Louisiana.

Vieux-Carré was designed like a French mediaeval town with a central square facing the Mississippi, Place d’Armes.

The French Quarter was an architectural gem. It is a city within a city and still retains the same unique flavour that characterized it for more than two centuries. Perfectly conceived and admirably suited to the needs of its early citizens, the straight, narrow streets and brick houses of its old town remain a monument to the people who first settled the Mississippi valley like no other city in the United States, except, perhaps, San Francisco.

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 the Pontalba Buildings, 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 today includes grand hotels, famous restaurants, boisterous 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 neighbourhood where mansions are maintained in their original elegance and smallness. Strict regulations are 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 1752. 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 there was a building boom lasting longer than at any time before or since.

Mr. Tarver purchased the property in 1969 and immediately began carefully restoring it to its original splendour. The house covers the entire lot, 30 by 175 feet deep. The house was built by Henry D. Bousquet, a noted New Orleans architect. The parlor is a French town virtually disappeared. It was succeeded by a mostly Spanish-influenced city.

Focal point of the parlor is an Empire secretary. The rugs in the double parlours are copies of Aubusson rugs made in France especially for Mr. Tarver. The chandelier is from Belgium. A Victorian screen adorns the corner.

The walls in the double parlours 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 an ambience of grandeur. 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 Fête champêtre — (Outing in the Country). The brass chandelier is American. Floors are of brick. Chinese porcelain plates are featured on the mantel.

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. This 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 exhibition at the Royal Academy and the Tate Gallery, and soon followed by an exhibition of water-colours in the British Museum) gave rise to numerous peremptory 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 spoiled his reputation with the idea that Reynolds was the first English artist of international status. But Constable had been rated in the public eye by the English public as the great one, and he was the only English artist of that stature. constsable's greatness, 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, 1978). He also has a special place in the English artistic tradition—Blake, for example, and Hogarth, Gainsborough, Stubbs, Wright of Derby, Cozens, Dadd, Rossetti, Burne-Jones, Bacon, are unquestionably "of international stature". Certainly, there seems to be little doubt that Constable, Turner, and Blake constitute a triumvirate, the more remarkable for being the three almost in common but their genius. The obverse 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 hieroglyphic." Blake and Constable are in agreement then on the equivalence of nature and art. Each considered the 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 Sloschua Reynolds". In his eyes, "Sir Sloschua" 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 brush to scenes of nature, to the open fields of England, to the tummular 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 abandonment. 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 Paint in England, 1978) does not see much resemblance between Blake's and Constable's art, but, for him, Nature was the antithesis, while Blake valued the inner fantasy one considers how little Reynolds and Constable equally detestable.

The Royal Academy persisted in preferring Constables as one of its members to await a mature age before being elected as one of its members. Assuredly, Constable did not view Imitation any more favorably than did Blake. But in his eyes, "Sir Sloschua" 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 brush to scenes of nature, to the open fields of England, to the tummular 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 abandonment. 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!).

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 Hadrian's Arch, a view of a distant summit of a hill, around which wheel Arthur Rimbaud's "chers corbeaux délicieux" (c. 1829, Tate Gallery); the surrealist 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 Turner's Waterloo Bridge: The State Opening in Victoria and Albert) gives a foretaste of Jack B. Yeats by its texture (the nervous brush-work, 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 in the rainstorm and the rainbow) (1812, Victoria and Albert), with its leaden sky, reminds one of a "non-formal" composition by Fauvist. 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 way it combines the impasto and the expressionist - Constable would have rendered admirably the eternal pools and rain of Lorrain. The very thickness of the paint, in so far as it is "impressionistic" at all, evokes such painters as Monticelli or Ziem (the study for The Leaping Horse (Tate Gallery) for example, or the Tomato Bridge: The State Opening in 1817, c. 1819, Victoria and Albert). The crude greens, menacing skies, bated and bobbled, the hollow, sodden paths foretell Vlaminck. And again, the calmness of the sketches, the daring palette and the broad, almost flat, brush stroke, recall the young Kandinsky (Stoke-by-Nayland, Tate).

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 total avoidance of landscape painting for Bonington, to give but one example. Such a quality can be seen in the sepias which, as it is 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 fakir abstraction. On the contrary, we return again to Stonehenge, flanked anew by the double rainbow.

(Translation by Elthene Bourget)