Constable, the Forgotten Genius

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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 emigrated to Canada as a young man and had made a fortune in trading. He was versed in Indian languages and received many estates in feoffment. One of these, Longueil, was opposite Montreal, and when the King raised him to nobility he took the title of Sieur de Longueil. Each of his twelve sons was given a different Indian name. They all lived in New France and adopted these names as titles. Most of them achieved renown in Canadian French colonial history, while two of them, Iberville and Bienville, played important roles in the early history of Louisiana.

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 from Rupert's Land and the northwestern Canada. A later victory off the coast of Newfoundland further enhanced his reputation. Becoming restless after the end of the war, he revived explorer La Salle's old plans for establishing a colony on the lower Mississippi, and was soon called to France, where King Louis appointed him to lead the expedition which was to found Louisiana.

Iberville sailed from La Rochelle with a crew of Canadians on two frigates, the Badine and the Marin. 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, 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 of the Ponchatoula, 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, Place d'Armes. The Place d'Armes now-called Jackson Square, 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 to-day 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 its grandeur of the old French way. 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 175 years. 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 New Orleans was building its grandest buildings 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 building is four stories high, fevered by about 100 French accessories in the room, including pillows covered in original Louis XVI needle-point tapestry on the canapé, and a pair of fine candlesticks from the same period on the fireplace. Prints on either side of the fireplace are Paris Dans Sa Splendeur.

The rugs in the double parlours are copies of Aubusson rugs made for this home 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 furnishing the home, Mr. Tarver chose to use a warm orange sherbet colour on the walls to create a more intimate atmosphere. The panelled walls, French doors, and French doors with brass gallery-rail. The two lamps on each side of the canapé are French bronze, and the pair of lamps next to the fireplace is Empire glass with an Egyptian-influenced gold leaf design.

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The bedroom is actually a multi-purpose room that also serves as a study and a sitting-room. A hardwood sunken-covered screen hides the brass bed and box as a backdrop for the Louis XV desk with brass inlets and a leather top. A comfortable chaise longue and a pair of chairs create a comfortable seating pattern. The table between the chaise longue and chair is Louis XV. The lamp on the table is a bronze military figure, as is the lamp on the desk.

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

CONSTANCE, THE FORGOTTEN GENIUS?

By Jean-Loup BOURGET

Constance 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 Tate in 1978 and the Turner 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 spoke true with regard to the 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, 1965, p. 64). However, allusions such as 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 trinity, the more remarkable for the fact that they have 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 are in agreement then on the equivalence of the two. Et tu, quidem, Emile Brion. But they are equally resolute in their refusal 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, "Sir 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 subject into a characteristic scene of the all-too-tumultuous 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!).

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