





Paint like:

# Constable

Let's use digital tools to explore the methods of the great landscape artist John Constable

## Tutorial info

-  Artist  
Jeff Johnson
-  Time needed  
3 hours
-  Skill level  
Intermediate
-  On the CD  
Line sketch

For the last two years I have been running after pictures, and seeking the truth at second hand. I have not endeavoured to represent nature with the same elevation of mind with which I set out, but have rather tried to make my performances look like the work of other men... there is room enough for a natural painter. The great vice of the present day is bravura, an attempt to do something beyond the truth."

With this statement, John Constable (1776-1837) turned his back on the prevailing styles of the time in order to re-dedicate himself to wresting some visual truths from his beloved English countryside. Born in the river village of Suffolk, young Constable had become intimately familiar with his environs, making many trips out into the fields and woods to sketch and paint. His love of simple, un-manufactured pastoral beauty never left him, and indeed many of his most famous paintings are of settings he grew up around. In fact, the area around Suffolk is called 'Constable country'.

While his peers were busy in their studios creating their scenes of nature from imagination, he began to actually venture outside to plan and execute whole paintings based on keen observation of what he actually saw. He began to make visual notation of fleeting light and weather effects for use in later works, and developed a very scientific approach to investigating these phenomena first hand. This was a true revolution in thinking and studio practice. Along with a handful of other like-minded artists, he ushered in an approach that led to the great Impressionist movement, which elevated the study of natural light and atmospheric effects to the same level that realistic depiction of the human form had obtained during the Renaissance.

His name brings to mind massive six-foot canvases, but did you know that most of his works were rather small? A good





## Tutorial Paint like Constable

deal of his outdoors work was done on canvases he could tuck under his arm. His oil sketches are a prized part of his legacy owing to their highly expressive and nuanced brushwork. Just look at one of his cloud studies and you will see how brave an experimenter he was. We have often thought that his ability to suggest complex form and content on small canvases with what we would call shorthand notation informed his trademark brushwork and surface treatment.

In this tutorial, we are going to use elements from three of Constable's works, and add on a fair bit of our own scenery to boot. We will borrow the river and grounds from *Flatford Mill (Scene On A Navigable River)* 1816-17, the wagon and folks from *The Haywain* 1821, and the glorious sky from *Wivenhoe Park, Essex* 1816. You may be thinking that blending those elements into a cohesive whole would be challenge enough, but we will be given a full third of the canvas upon which we will extend the scene à la Constable! This will offer a fun test of our understanding of his approach and style, for not only must our subject matter be styled in a fashion similar to that of the master, but also our very handling of paint in creating form and light.

Constable is known for innovations in painting, like using sharp dabs of white to simulate dew, putting dots of red in foliage to activate the green and using broken strokes to create facets that suggest natural light. Re-creating some of these techniques in digital media requires

[RIGHT]  
**Cloud study**  
Constable studied the sky and clouds in paint throughout his career. His rapidly executed oil studies attempted to capture oft-fleeting effects of light, form and atmosphere. The result of such efforts is perhaps the largest single body of such studies in all of Western art

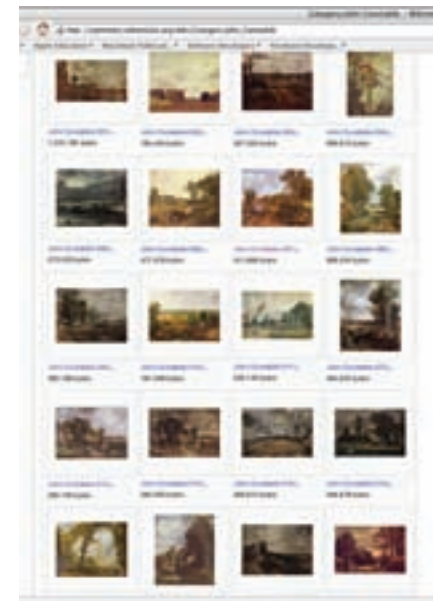


making good use of the right tools. The Wet Oily brush is perfect for working up the basic values, as a loose treatment with it immediately begins to layer textures and colour variation. We will throw in a Spatter Airbrush in places (hey, the only reason he didn't use one is there was no such thing at the time!) to simulate the spattery flicking of paint he sometimes used. The Grainy Blender will come in handy as we progress, as it creates a lovely texture, as well the Oily Blender and the Round Blender brushes.

The first order of business will be to bring all of the elements together in a

simple line drawing. Then, using a colour palette sampled from a set of the best web reproductions we could find, we will rough in the entire painting, starting with the sky and working forward in nice, manageable steps. We will be working 'wet on wet', always painting into midtones with darks and lights. Once we have a working rough, we will work back into the canvas, adding textures, highlights and details that help create a sense of light and atmosphere. The end result should, if we do our due diligence, be distinctly reminiscent of the work of the master himself. Good luck to all of us!

[BELOW]  
**Simple strokes**  
Just look at how simply this study is put together, yet how much information it holds about the kind of day and quality of light!



**Wikimedia**  
Wikimedia has 35 good-quality large images of Constable's works. They have good colour and many have the kind of detail that one needs in order to see how they were painted

## Collecting the elements

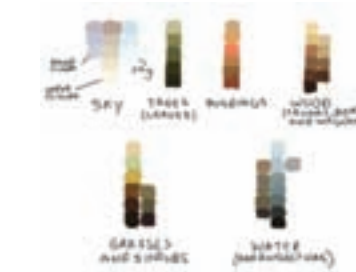
Gather together all the pieces you need for your work



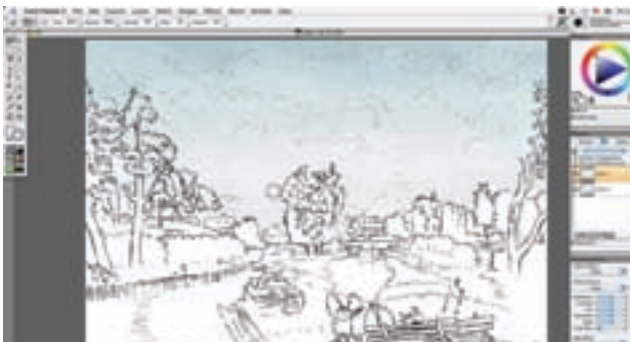
**01 Let's go England** You can try rough composition using grabs from the web. In terms of the narrative, we decided to have our boatman crossing the river with a tether (rather than a pole as in the original) as if it were a ferry crossing. There to meet him will be mom and pop, and their rickety wagon. Make your own or use the line sketch on the CD.



**02 Making a line drawing** First, create a new Default layer and set it to roughly 70% Opacity. Then using a size 7 Charcoal Pencil, draw in the major details. To complete the scene, place the various elements of water, land, buildings, trees and sky following the compositional themes we described earlier. Next comes a Variable Spatter Airbrush and paper white to paint back some lines in the clouds and water so they are more easily covered later.



**03 Putting together a colour scheme** The images on the web vary considerably in quality where colour is concerned. The same holds for reproductions in general. We scoured the net for some versions of our three Constable paintings that seemed to have a solid range of hues and values, and sampled colours directly from them using the Eyedropper tool. The result was this fairly warm colour scheme.



**04 Painting some sky** Each of the steps in this tutorial are designed to add texture and enliven the colour variation. This simple preliminary is no exception. The three tones of sky are applied loosely with a 60+ Variable Spatter Airbrush on a separate Darken layer. Most of the sky will be covered with clouds, but layers of paint to follow will either pick up some of those blues, or only partly cover them. Wet-on-wet painting is a process of painting into colours, so we will always rough in a ground from here on in.



**05 Look at the clouds** Next up are the clouds. Using a 25 Wet Oily brush and painting on a new Default layer, rough in the midtones of the clouds. Bring out the Variable Spatter Airbrush again for a few transition areas. Consult the sky references and carry the rhythms of the original into the new sky as well.



**06 Darkness** Using the same brush, let's lay in the various darks from our scheme. We still have the originals to bounce off of, so the going is still easy. In order to frame a scene, a common compositional technique is to darken the outer edges of the picture somewhat, and indeed Constable did so on many occasions, so why don't we?

**07 Lighten up** Now we complete our preliminary sky with our lightest tones. The red arrows show the brush direction, namely away from the light source. Using the Wet Oily brush in this way creates an easily controlled edge. It is easy to feather with soft dabs across the edge. Leave the lightest value for last and feather it back. Merge the layers.



### One brush at a time, please

All of the various elements in this painting are going to be roughed in with the same brush (the venerable Wet Oily brush, located in Artists' Oils). Brushwork and brush sizes will vary according to necessity. One of the best ways to learn what a brush is capable of is to wrestle with it in various circumstances. Change its size and/or opacity. Try short stabs with it or skitter it across the surface. Look closely at the kind of edges it creates in each circumstance. Does it work painting into another colour? Is it suitable for detail work if made small enough? Answer these questions and others before you pick up the next tool.

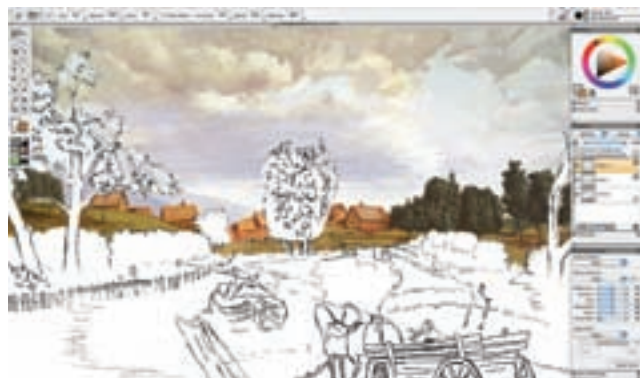
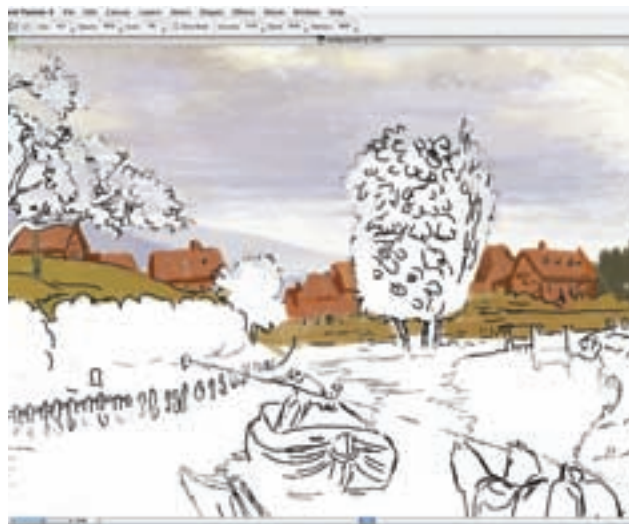
## Painting in the middle ground

Work your way through the image with your painting tools



**08 Down and out** With the sky and far hills roughed in, let's move forward. Next up is the middle ground, starting with the buildings, far trees and fields. The process will begin the same way, namely roughing in midtones of each on a Darken layer. A smaller version of our Wet Oily brush is called for. Something in the range of 10-12.

**09 Shadows** Next comes shadows and the darker tones. These are painted on a separate Default layer. Take a little time to cover the line drawing, even reworking some of the sky if needed. Loose strokes are fine, as we are trying to build texture. The close-up shows the kind of brushwork needed.



**10 Lighten up a bit** Now comes highlights, starting with the buildings. It is perfectly all right to fix details along the way, but this is just preliminary work so not too much time should be spent on any one thing. Try to create a uniform handling of the brush. It is a great brush for the look you see here. Merge and save.



### Squint

Sharp eyesight can be a positive hindrance when one is painting details. It is all too easy to lose track of the effects those details are having on the rest of the painting. Sure, zooming out can help, but area averaging can play havoc with the finer stuff. Zooming in and stepping back from the monitor is excellent for close-up work, but the best overall way to track the effect of a painterly flourish is to have as much of the canvas visible as possible and squint. It is literally one of the oldest tricks in the book of painting.



**12 More shadows** Here is a shot of some shadows and darker areas being blocked in rapidly. Use short strokes to create as many facets as possible for the most realistic effect, even going over longish strokes cross-wise to break them up a bit.

**11 More of the same** Notice how quickly this all comes together? We are already halfway down the painting with our rough, and things are shaping up. Now come the near trees and shrubs, following the process of roughing in midtones on a Darken layer. Flatten the image, save and move on.



**13 More light** Now we need to add the highlights. As things get closer and more details become visible, paint more and smaller highlights as you move to the foreground. It is good at this point to take some time to make some interesting shapes at the edges of our flora.

## Midway, now what? What's left for you to do

### UP, UP AND AWAY

The diagonal these clouds make can be followed all the way to the edge of the canvas via the line of purplish clouds and details in the trees. It is nearly parallel to the ferry line and cuts across the strong diagonal of the river for some nice dynamic energy.

### HOUSING DEVELOPMENT

In searching through ways to complete the composition, we decided to simply continue some of the details found elsewhere, such as placing a few more buildings on a far slope. It seemed logical to do as Constable did, and integrate them into their surroundings by obscuring parts of each of them by the hill, shrubs and trees.

### GO TO THE (LIGHT) SOURCE

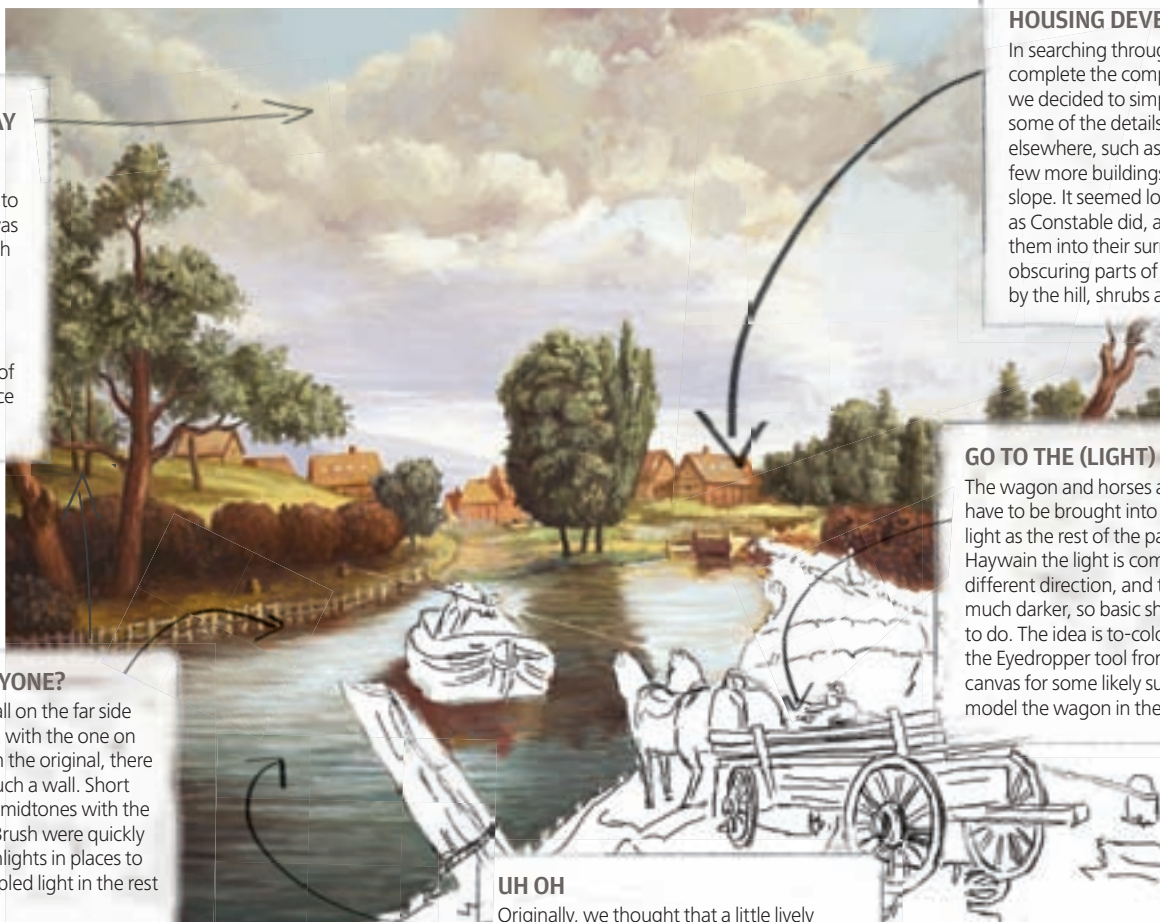
The wagon and horses are going to have to be brought into the same light as the rest of the painting. In The Haywain the light is coming from a different direction, and the values are much darker, so basic shapes will have to do. The idea is to colour pick using the Eyedropper tool from around the canvas for some likely suspects and model the wagon in the proper light.

### FENCING, ANYONE?

The retaining wall on the far side was a solid tie-in with the one on the near bank. In the original, there is a hint of just such a wall. Short gesture stabs of midtones with the trusty Wet Oily Brush were quickly followed by highlights in places to suggest the dappled light in the rest of the painting.

### UH OH

Originally, we thought that a little lively play of the sparkling water and tree reflections would be enough here, but a little something else may have to be included to add a bit more to the overall level of interest.



## Water works

Reflections and shadows create realistic water



**14 Thirsty?** Now we begin to paint in the water. Open up another Darken layer and bring the Wet Oily brush up to about 20 pixels. Time to start laying in horizontal strokes of midtone, starting with a greenish hue. The water is mirroring nearly everything in the picture at some place or another, so the reflections will have to, well, reflect that. That is why there are so many colours in our water palette.



**15 Shadows and dark reflections** Once the Darken layer is dropped and the document saved, move on to adding the darker values with the same horizontal strokes. Notice how a little brown makes the blue in our midtones come out. The Wet Oily brush leaves a fairly sharp edge at the beginning of a stroke, so when necessary go back along the stroke to a point past its beginning to soften this edge a bit.



**16 Bright reflections** Now, using the lightest tones, we paint into our midtones in the areas reflecting the most light, not bothering to completely cover up what is underneath. Do this stage on a separate Default layer, so you can modify some edges without disturbing the rest of the work.

## Colouring the detail

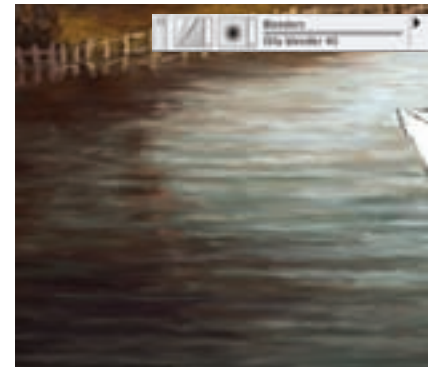
Now for the carriage, horses and people

### Layer cake

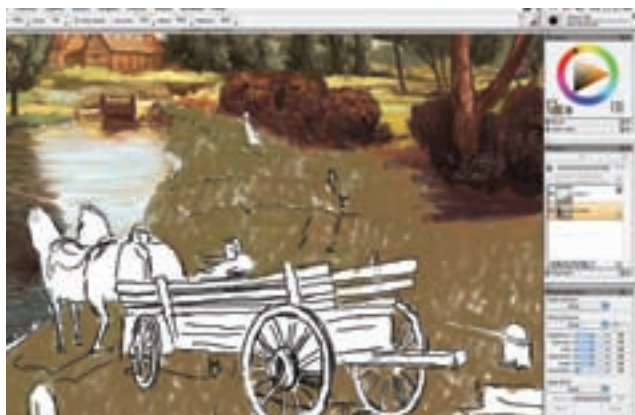
Nothing frees one up to experiment with paint more than the sure knowledge that what is underneath can be easily retrieved if things go south. Layers are indispensable for many other purposes as well. It can be extremely useful to create an effect on the canvas and erase passages of the unaffected top layer to reveal the effect with precise control.



**17 Riding the waves** After painting in the darkest darks, lightly pull some midtones across those areas. Working back and forth with horizontal strokes plays lights and darks into one another at the edges of shadows, focusing on creating a shimmering surface.



**18 A new brush!** Out comes the Oily Blender 40. Worked horizontally along the waves and ripples, the Oily Blender smoothes out those harsh edges and helps create a nice glistening surface. Use a light touch, or take the opacity of the brush down a bit for control.



**19 The right bank** After saving the image, it is on to the right side of the river. Using a size 45 Wet Oily brush on a Darken layer, quickly block in the midtones. There is a good deal of colour variation in the original, so do a little consulting before moving on.



**20 Dark shadows** The darkest shadows in the painting will be in this area, but it is a good idea to build to the darks slowly, concentrating on colour variation and texture along the way. Merge and save.



**21 Light on grass** After blocking in the light areas with the large Wet Oily brush, reduce the size to about 9-10 and quickly paint in the brightest tones in the golden areas (as well as some light and dark colours in shadowy areas) as separate vertical strokes, creating a grass-like rhythm. Go around to all of the grassy areas in the picture and repeated this as needed.



**22 Last but not least** The final laying in of midtones! Like before, a large Wet Oily brush is used with quick, vigorous strokes to start building textures. Use a purplish grey for the two horses and a slightly more reddish brown for the barge.



**23 The darkening** Still on the same Darken layer as before, lay in the darker tones. Most of the wagon is in shadow, as well the posts and stump. We will be working these items a bit, so don't spend any time with edges at this point.

**24 Best for last** Now for some nice details using our brightest values. The trick in painting something small that looks like something big in the distance is to get the shape, local colour and basic lighting right. A dab of the right colour with the right shape in the right place can become a very expressive arm or hat or blouse.



**25 A little more focus** First order of business is to copy the picture and paste. Then via Effects>Surface Control>Apply Lighting, choose Warm Globe at the settings shown. Since the effect is isolated on a separate layer, it's a snap to gently erase a bit of the effect from places like the diagonal clouds and anywhere else it is not wanted.

## Getting it right

Tweak the colours and add the final touches



**26 Last big colour tweaks** Now for a little colour play. Open up a Soft Light layer and set it to 33% Opacity. With a large (70 or so) Variable Spatter Airbrush set to 25% Opacity, paint some light greens into the green highlights and in places on the water. It creates a subtle hue change suggestive of a warmer light. Shift the sky a bit more towards blue using the same method.

**27 Canvas** Create a duplicate layer and select the lower layer. Then, with Linen Canvas (located on the toolbox menu) as the paper choice, go to Effects>Surface Control>Apply Surface Texture. Go over the second layer, erasing lightly until just enough texture in just the right places shows through. Repeat the operation with Artists' Canvas very lightly in order to vary up the texture.



**28 The finish line** Now for some smaller details added with alternating Wet Oily and Impasto Oil brushes set to about four pixels each. The idea is to search around the canvas and add dabs of light and dark to flat areas. A little red in a field of green (or vice-versa) can really liven up a patch. Then comes the Grainy Blender 30 with a light touch following the stroke direction to blend them into the picture. Finished!



## Variation over time

One of the first questions when laying out a project is what kind of surface treatment will the painting have? This project was no different. In fact, surface handling was a big part of the plan. When one thinks of Constable, one thinks of atmosphere and light. His surfaces are richly varied, and his details are sometimes surprisingly sketch like. To develop a way of getting to our own set of details via painterly means, we began early by building up layers of overlapping hues and values with vigorous brushstrokes. Then more and more surface detail was added to create the kind of faceted, shimmering light one would expect to see in an image meant to evoke Constable, using smaller and smaller brushes and applying a couple of different blenders. We went so far as to layer canvas textures on top of one another in subtly amended layers to give the whole canvas a little controlled sparkle.

