

**Anne Gray and John Gage, with essays by Mark Evans, Ann Galbally, Conal Shields, and MaryAnne Stevens, *Constable: Impressions of Land, Sea and Sky* (Canberra: National Gallery of Australia, 2006) 364 pp., Hard Cover, AUD\$69 ISBN: 0642541566, a catalogue accompanying the exhibition of the same name and the simultaneous exhibition *Australia and Constable* at the National Gallery of Australia, Canberra, 3 March – 12 June 2006, and the Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa, Wellington, 5 July – 8 October 2006**

The National Gallery of Australia's recent groundbreaking duo of exhibitions, *Constable: Impressions of Land, Sea and Sky* and *Australia and Constable*, were accompanied by an impressively researched and beautifully designed catalogue whose value will remain long after the assembled works have been returned to the collections that lent them. At a time when the art of colonial Australia is increasingly exhibited in isolation from its European antecedents (witness the separation of the National Gallery of Victoria collections and the impending relocation of Old Masters from the collection of the National Gallery of Australia), this catalogue succeeds in illuminating the links between late nineteenth and early twentieth-century Australian landscape art and the British school, chiefly Constable. As the catalogue also shows, Australian and New Zealand artists throughout the twentieth century and up to the present have been fascinated by Constable's alluring and ethereal vision of nature.

Five richly illustrated essays on Constable and one on his impact in Australia, written by art historians and curators in Britain and Australia, precede more than a hundred brief catalogue entries for the exhibited works. Anne Gray, Assistant Director, Australian Art at the NGA, provides a valuable survey of the artist's *oeuvre*, noting the particular importance of his *plein-air* oil sketches, not only as preparatory exercises for larger finished works, but as highly evocative works of art in their own right. Poetic sketches of creamy clouds, slate grey rain, and orange sunsets constitute a particularly beguiling focus of the catalogue.

Further essays discuss Constable's approach to landscape, his critical reception, and his significant contribution to the Royal Academy. Mark Evans, Senior Curator of Paintings at the Victoria and Albert Museum in London, provides an interesting discussion of Constable's legacy to Britain's national collections, of which there is no greater testimony than the now handsomely re-installed Constables in the Victoria and Albert Museum. Ann Galbally, Emeritus Associate Professor at The University of Melbourne, provides an important contribution to the catalogue, dealing with Constable's significant influence on the development of the Australian landscape tradition, notably on Heidelberg School artists such as Tom Roberts and Arthur Streeton, which is in effect the *raison d'être* for *Australia and Constable*. Her fascinating essay presents a wealth of

new material gleaned from Australian library and museum archives on the admiration for the eminent British painter in a distant colony, and the attempts to collect his works for public collections here after Federation.

A scholarly catalogue such as this is an appropriate context to take stock of recent research and to re-assess attributions, especially for relatively modest works in distant collections frequently overlooked by scholars in the Northern Hemisphere. *Keswick, Lake* (cat. no. 4) from the NGV is a small painting whose attribution has been debated, but is here cautiously returned to Constable, in keeping with recent scholarship as well as the belief of its previous owner, the Constable scholar and Director of the National Gallery, London, Sir Charles Holmes.

Anne Gray rightly draws attention in her essay to the remarkably varied style and finish of Constable's oil sketches from nature. Thus, using these criteria to make distinctions between autograph sketches and those by followers is particularly fraught. Technical investigation of supports may help with such questions of attribution. A further three debated works in the NGV and two in the Art Gallery of South Australia were not included in the exhibition or discussed at length in its catalogue. Three of these, all sketches, share the known provenance of the uncontested *'The Quarters' behind Alresford Hall* (NGV, cat. no. 21) and like many of Constable's oil sketches on paper they have been laid down on sturdier supports, in these cases board, canvas, and wood. It appears Constable attached his paper sketches to auxiliary supports himself, as in *Autumnal Sunset* (cat. no. 12) where his brushstrokes extend from the paper onto the larger piece of canvas onto which it was glued, so the study of canvas types could help identify his works. Furthermore, the dimensions of these three sketches are each reasonably close to those of uncontested sketches, and Constable prepared his paper supports in batches, cut to certain sizes to fit within the lid of the paint box in which he painted them while working outdoors. The late curator and Assistant Director of the NGV, Ursula Hoff, recorded that the attribution of the sketch in Melbourne (NGV inv. 81/5) has only been considered uncertain by one specialist in the field, not yet categorically rejected, and the attribution of it and the similar works in Adelaide awaits a sustained technical, stylistic and historical investigation.

This catalogue makes its valuable contribution by highlighting a significant influence on the style of Australian landscape art, particularly in the nineteenth century, as well as constituting a substantial, generously illustrated monograph on Constable, and the very reasonable price for a hardcover volume should ensure it reaches the wide audience it deserves.

Hugh Hudson

The University of Melbourne