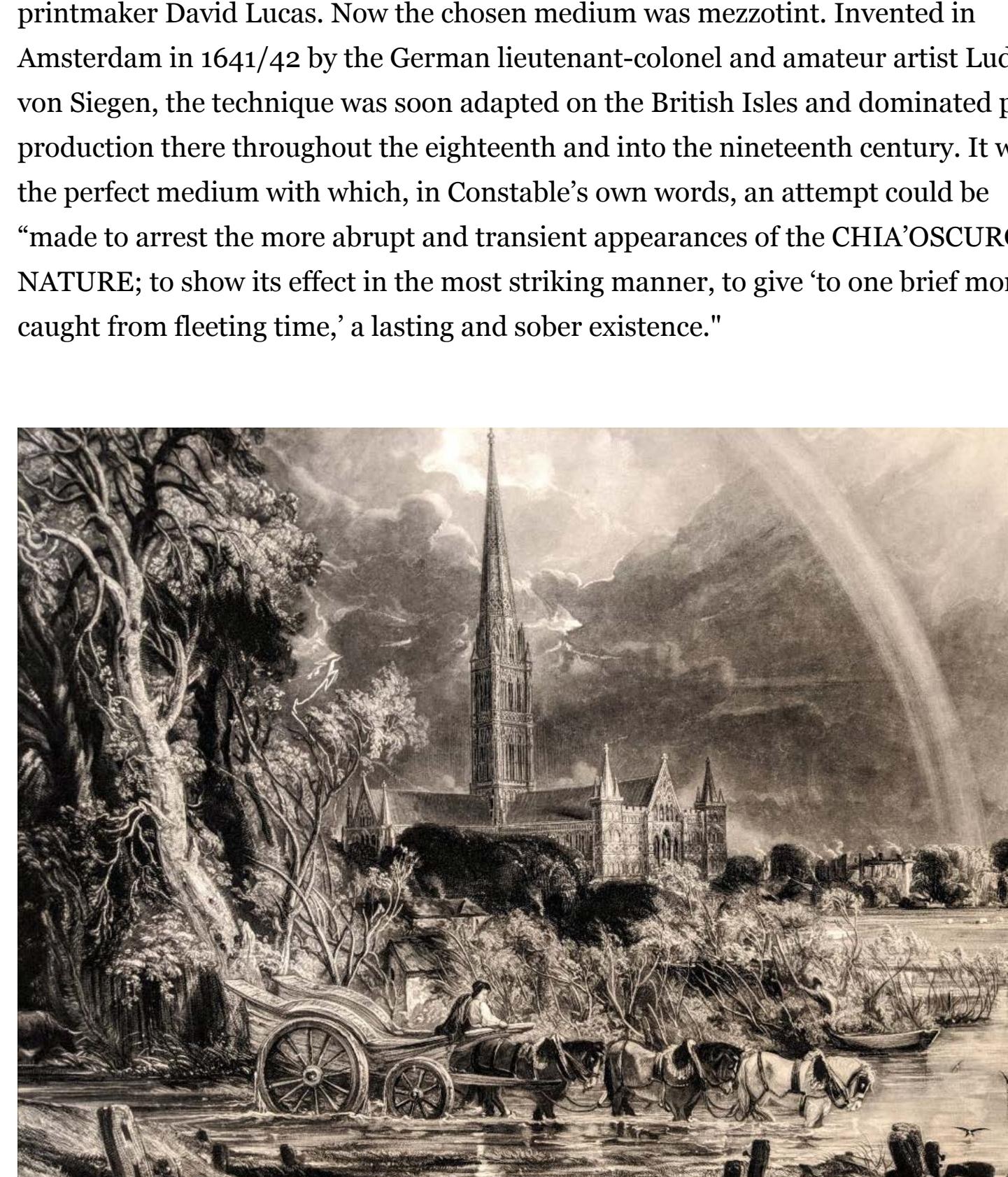


# C.G. BOERNER

DEALERS IN FINE ART SINCE 1826

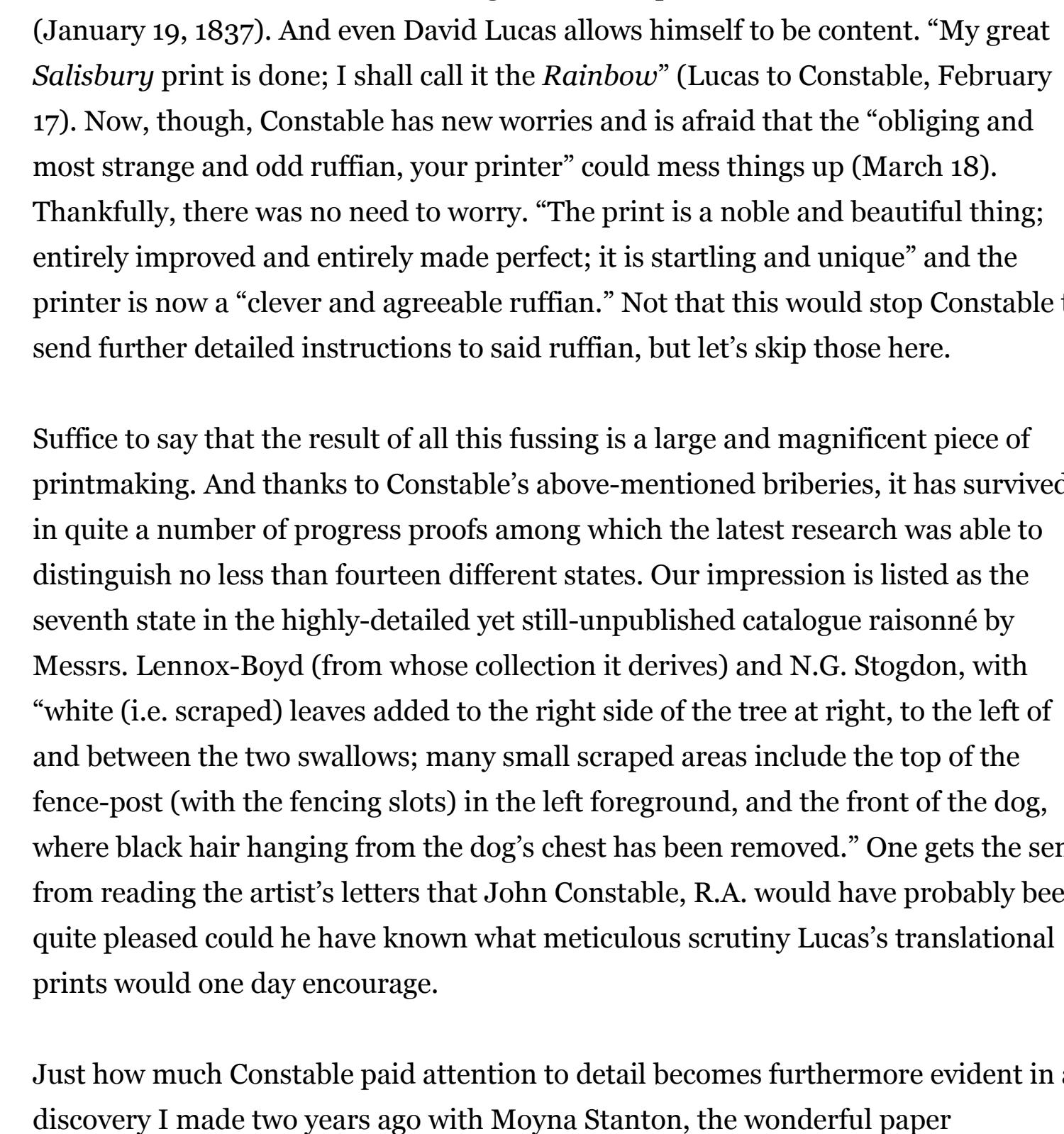
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15 September 2020

The concept of the “master printer” is usually seen as something fairly modern. One thinks of Père Cotelle who worked for the lithography studio of Édouard Ancart where Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec explored new ways to use color in lithography; or of the lithographer Auguste Clot who helped the Nabis artists to translate their visual ideas; or of Roger Lacourière who lead Picasso to a deeper understanding of the centuries-old intaglio process. Today one can’t really conceive of contemporary printmaking without master printers. On the contrary, artists who make their own graphic work are more the exception than the rule—Georg Baselitz, the young Anselm Kiefer, or Christiane Baumgartner come to mind (among plenty of others, I am sure). Yet one should not forget that in 1619, a decade before Rembrandt opted for the do-it-yourself route—and by doing so became one of the greatest graphic artists in history—, Rubens had already set up a printmaking studio in Antwerp where trained specialists helped him spread his fame via prints. While he relied on the technical acumen of the printmakers, he was anything but hands-off during the process. Rubens’s involvement could even be overwhelming, repeatedly correcting proof impressions in pen and ink or oil and brush. As Peter Parshall once aptly remarked about Christoffel Jegher, the only *Formschneider* Rubens ever worked with to explore the possibilities inherent in the medium of woodcut, “if there was a psychotherapist in Antwerp who specialized in blockcutting anxiety, then Jegher must have been his best patient.”



Christoffel Jegher, *Infant Christ with John the Baptist*, first state (of three), retouched by Rubens (Bibliothèque nationale de France)

Two hundred years later, another such productive albeit complicated collaboration took place between the English landscape painter John Constable and the printmaker David Lucas. Now the chosen medium was mezzotint. Invented in Amsterdam in 1641/42 by the German lieutenant-colonel and amateur artist Ludwig von Siegen, the technique was soon adapted on the British Isles and dominated print production there throughout the eighteenth and into the nineteenth century. It was the perfect medium with which, in Constable’s own words, an attempt could be “made to arrest the more abrupt and transient appearances of the CHIA’OSCURO IN NATURE; to show its effect in the most striking manner, to give ‘to one brief moment caught from fleeting time,’ a lasting and sober existence.”

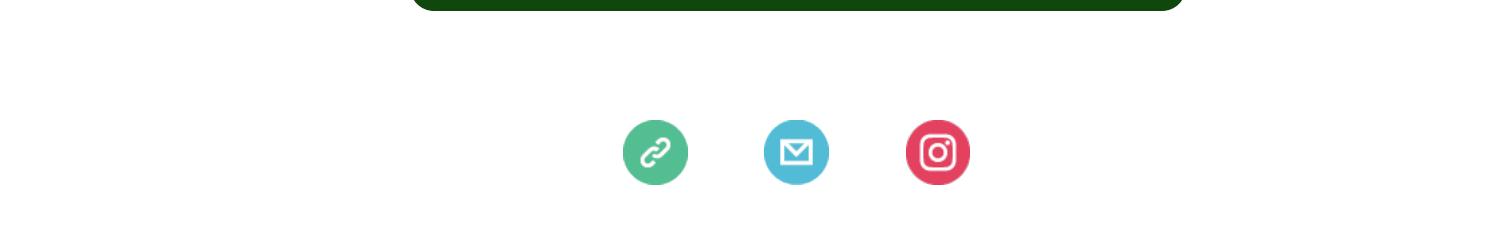


*Salisbury Cathedral from the Meadows* is the culmination of Lucas’s efforts in translating Constable’s art into print. And as much as he could ever be, Constable was happy with the result—indeed so much that he urged Lucas to print a number of progress proofs for him. After showing such a proof impression to his fellow academician Charles Robert Leslie, Constable wrote to Lucas: “Leslie is so much impressed with the proof, that he would give any money to possess one; so am I, and would give anything to possess two at least. Now would you mind printing a few, five or six? Would it hurt the plate? I know that you don’t like to do so, but I would gladly pay all expenses. It never can nor will be grander than it is now; it is awfully so” (June 30, 1834). By February of the following year, however, Constable believed it to be “too heavy, especially when seen between [Lucas’s earlier prints] the *Lock* and the *Drinking Boy*. Yet we must not break it up, and we must bear recollection that the sentiment of the picture is that of solemnity, not gaiety, nothing garish, but the contrary; yet it must be bright, clear, alive, fresh” (February 15, 1835). Poor Lucas, here he is, being asked to combine solemnity with a fresh brightness—and it will be another 103 years before Sigmund Freud arrives in London . . .

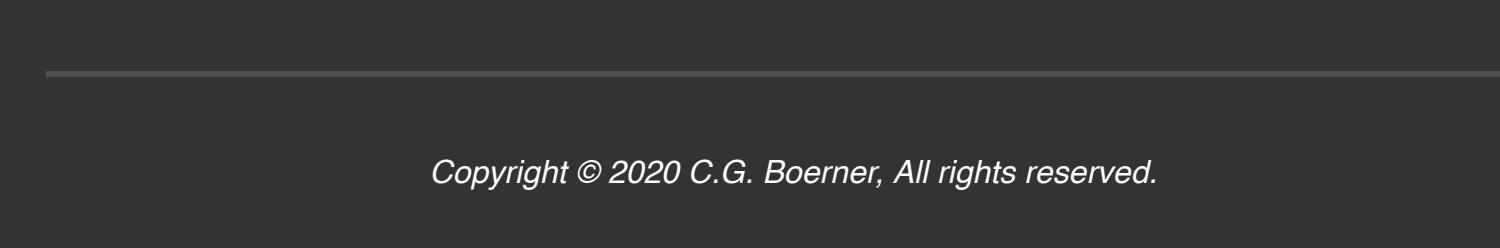
Of special concern was the rainbow: “If it is not exquisitely done—if it is not tender, and elegant—evanescent and lovely, the highest degree—we are both ruined” (September 6, 1835). In early 1837 Lucas is still scraping away on the plate but Constable was relieved: “The bow is grand whole, provided it is clear and tender.” (January 19, 1837). And even David Lucas allows himself to be content. “My great *Salisbury* print is done; I shall call it the *Rainbow*” (Lucas to Constable, February 17). Now, though, Constable has new worries and is afraid that the “obliging and most strange and odd ruffian, your printer” could mess things up (March 18). Thankfully, there was no need to worry. “The print is a noble and beautiful thing; entirely improved and entirely made perfect; it is startling and unique” and the printer is now a “clever and agreeable ruffian.” Not that this would stop Constable to send further detailed instructions to said ruffian, but let’s skip those here.

Suffice to say that the result of all this fussing is a large and magnificent piece of printmaking. And thanks to Constable’s above-mentioned briberies, it has survived in quite a number of progress proofs among which the latest research was able to distinguish no less than fourteen different states. Our impression is listed as the seventh state in the highly-detailed yet still-unpublished catalogue raisonné by Messrs. Lennox-Boyd (from whose collection it derives) and N.G. Stogdon, with “white (i.e., scraped) leaves added to the right side of the tree at right, to the left of and between the two swallows; many small scraped areas include the top of the fence-post (with the fencing slots) in the left foreground, and the front of the dog, where black hair hanging from the dog’s chest has been removed.” One gets the sense from reading the artist’s letters that John Constable, R.A. would have probably been quite pleased could he have known what meticulous scrutiny Lucas’s translational prints would one day encourage.

Just how much Constable paid attention to detail becomes furthermore evident in a discovery I made two years ago with Moyna Stanton, the wonderful paper conservator at the Cleveland Museum of Art. We were closely examining a fine presentation copy of Lucas’s *Various Subjects of Landscape, Characteristic of English Scenery, from Pictures painted by John Constable, R.A. of 1829–32*. Many of the impressions in this set had been touched-up by Constable with black or grey wash. When we looked at the impression of *Old Sarum* we realized that here, too, all the birds in the sky were drawn-in and not printed.



Yet seeing the bird furthest to the right through a microscope, we noticed to our astonishment that one of the wings was not drawn but, in fact, a tiny woodchip caught in the pulp of the paper.



It’s not difficult to imagine what happened. Checking the set he was planning to give to his neighbor Dr. Reeve, an old schoolmate from Dedham Grammar School in northeast Essex, not far from Constable’s home county of Suffolk, the artist must have noticed the dark speck in the bright sky. Unable to scratch it away without ruining the surface of the paper, he took his finest brush and, with a quick stroke, transformed it into a bird—to which he then added some fellow birds for good measure and company. Now if this discovery is not print nerd’s delight, I don’t know what is. In my excitement I promptly created the hashtag #printnerdsdelight on Instagram which, two years on, is on the verge of going viral: it has already been tagged nearly 50 times!

prints by Lucas after Constable

