HOGARTH, CONSTABLE, TURNER

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The paintings illustrated in the following pages have been selected to give Bulletin readers a taste of what they may find in the exhibition of Masterpieces of English Painting which has been sent to America by the British Government and which will be shown at the Metropolitan Museum from January 24 to March 16.

Wisely restricted to three outstanding English artists, the exhibition brings to us some of the greatest paintings by Hogarth, Constable, and Turner. These give a stimulating survey of the artistic development of each and make admirably clear his eminent position in the history of painting. For each of these men was a pioneer whose influence was felt far beyond the confines of his time and place. Hogarth turned against the conventions and empty flattery of court painters to seek for realism with an honesty and originality that revolutionized portraiture and injected a penetrating satire into subject painting. Constable and Turner, in an effort to capture the transitory appearance of things, experimented in the use of unmixed pigments to produce effects of light and initiated a technique which reached its full development in the work of the French Impressionists.

Of the three only Hogarth shows to advantage in reproduction, for his work, more than half a century earlier than the others', still belonged to the tradition that sought to transfer to canvas the permanent fact of persons and objects, to make them real with line, form, and texture, to give them space and depth by the use of carefully worked out perspective and a deft arrangement of planes. His genius is nowhere more powerfully displayed than in the famous series of six paintings of The Marriage à la Mode, lent by the Tate Gallery. In these, as in his earlier series showing the progress of Harlot and Rake, Hogarth holds up to ridicule and scorn the follies and vices of mankind. They are story-telling pictures par excellence, an endless source of discovery and delight; they are also masterpieces of artistry and taste. One has but to compare them with the typical English conversation piece, then so much in vogue, to appreciate Hogarth's mastery of this style of composition. In the conversation piece as conceived by most English painters the figures, in charming but stilted poses, are held together by little more than a family tie; whereas Hogarth's paintings present innumerable characters and their intricate settings miraculously woven into a compact, integrated, and expressive whole. In contrast to these carefully planned and executed compositions by Hogarth is his well-known sketch of The Shrimp Girl. It is spontaneous, fresh, and gay—seemingly dashed off in a moment. In its brilliant immediacy it heralds the nineteenth century, whose foremost masters in England were Constable and Turner.

They were born within a year of each other, Turner in 1775, and Constable in 1776, and both in their early work pay homage to the
great French landscape painter Claude Lorrain; but they soon developed along widely divergent paths. Constable, to whom the look of England was a constant source of joy and inspiration, became as eloquent in her praise as her most lyrical poets. His great landscapes, The Hay Wain of 1821, The Leaping Horse of 1825, Hampstead Heath of 1830, are all landmarks in his slow but steady progress. These landscapes embody his experiments to catch the evanescent moment: the shimmering brightness of a sunny day with dew still sparkling in the grass or the gathering darkness of a sudden storm. The experiments themselves are shown in the group of sketches lent by the Victoria and Albert Museum, sketches so fresh, so vigorous and powerful in spite of their small scale, as to be preferred by many to the more detailed and carefully worked-over paintings.

In Turner's work no effort, no laborious progress can be traced. After a meteoric but traditional start with such Claude-like paintings as Sun Rising through Vapour he leapt into a new world of poetry and imagination brilliantly translated into paint. Of his entries in the Royal Academy Exhibition of 1828 Constable wrote, "Turner has some golden visions, glorious and beautiful; but they are only visions, still they are art, and one could live and die with such pictures in one's house." And later, "Turner has outdone himself; he seems to paint with tinted steam, so evanescent and so airy." A taste for Turner's paintings is as personal as his art. His late works are abstractions—lyrical and passionate; they are his unique contribution and on them his reputation rests. Although such paintings do not photograph and must be seen to be enjoyed, his famous Rain, Steam, and Speed has been included in the illustrations here. It is hoped that it will serve as a stimulating reminder to those who have enjoyed seeing it in England and as a provocative invitation to those who have yet to see it for the first time.
William Hogarth. The Shrimp Girl. Lent by the National Gallery, London
BElOW: Hampstead Heath. Lent by Victoria and Albert Museum, South Kensington