

The Artist's Almanac August 2006

*Shut, shut the door, good John! Fatigued I said,
Tie up the knocker, say I'm sick, I'm dead,
The dog-star rages!*

Alexander Pope

February and August are opposites: cold v. hot; wet v. dry; dark v. light. They sit at opposite ends of the calendar and are unlike in every way, save one – they are everybody's least favorite months.

I speak today for August. While ponds turn scummy, creeks run dry, flowers look discouraged and lawns turn brown, this is also the month of green corn with fresh squash and tomatoes, and, for dessert, peaches, pears, figs and watermelons. Now is the time for pool parties, homemade ice cream, iced tea and class reunions.

The brightest star in winter's night sky is the dog-star, in the constellation Canis Major. So bright is it that the ancient Romans thought the earth received heat from it. In August it rises and sets with the bright sun and is thus invisible to us. Because it is in conjunction with the sun the ancients believed it added its heat to that of the sun's to broil us now.

Air conditioning has tamed August, unless we be housepainters or golfers. These days we do not have to sit outside after supper as I did as a boy with my father waiting for the window fans to pull the day's heat from the house. In those pre-TV days we would sit in lawn chairs in the quiet night and talk about life and kin. Silences were good then, punctuated only by the occasional passage of a distant car and the glow of his daily cigarette as the katydid chorus thrummed the trees.

Unlike Florida and Arizona, even our hottest nights in Tennessee are cooler than our days, and today New York City is 105 degrees - we a mere 95. My daughter's friend Jim who has just returned from Kuwait where he worked out in 135 degrees. He thinks the temperature here is fine. Hot is relative.



The glory of August is its clouds. While winter has only gray and blue skies with intervals of cirrus, we now have majestic cumulus boiling up to heaven above. Mere steam, the cynic reminds us, rising from the hotplate of the earth. Yet, which of us in a high altitude jet airliner has not walked amongst these divine castles in their dreams. Clouds are 100% water, and we 80%. Perhaps that is why we feel more kinship with them than earth, which is this month mostly dry clods. Man could not conceive of God without the glory of the skies.

John Constable was the master painter of clouds. He studied them, and sketched daily. He once spent an entire summer sketching and painting nothing but skies. His fellow artist, John Ruskin, son of a London wine merchant, said Constable bottled clouds as his own father once bottled wines. Constable would later pour them profusely across his huge canvases which sparked the impressionist movement in France and which, even today, astound the world with their fluid images.

August too, is in motion, from the early days of high windswept skies to those of inversion, when our hot, still, valley fills with stagnant air and we can no longer see the blue hills of the ridge to the north. The numbers and density of fogs and spider webs which now ambush our morning walks are used by upriver grannies to predict the number depths of snows. Nobody knows, of course, as nobody keeps score, as fogs turn to dew, dews to frost, frosts to snows. By then it is December and Christmas and nobody then can really recall the light and the heat of August



Cloud Study with Tree Tops and Buildings - John Constable, 1821

Coming Events

- December 2-4, *Fine Art In Brentwood* Show and Sale, Brentwood Academy, Brentwood