

The Artist's Almanac

June 2004

A dripping June sets all in tune - Anon

June, and we are well on to summer.

The calendar is right. Early June is spring; late turns summer. Sweet peas and new potatoes are in, and our palette is surprised anew by the pleasure of fresh squash and green beans on the same plate. Corn and tomatoes look promising for July, and roses are in their glory.

The gardener eyes the sky. As cumulus towers above, rain becomes a localized affair, and he calls his neighbors to see who won the water lottery.

The artist collects clouds. One once observed that heaven would be unimaginable without them. Clouds are towers for our imaginations to climb, and they add drama to any landscape. Constable bottled them for later use, John Ruskin wrote, as his own father bottled wine, opening them later as he needed them. Ruskin called clouds the only natural subject unchanged by man.

Constable sketched clouds daily. We have our cameras, which will catch any moving drama. But the camera, like a willing bird dog, always ready, often points rabbits and not quail. A dumb machine, it lacks subtlety, and can only concentrate on one thing at a time: either the dazzling glow of the cloudbank against a silhouette of black trees, or turgid crimson storm skies backing a mellow row of summer trees. In the garden the camera produces purple pictures of blue flowers in a trick known as the *ageratum effect*.

The artist knows that art informs nature. Unless he adds value to what he sees and photographs, he may as well be fishing. The head and eye move at enormous speed and the mind flattens the horizon the camera records as curved.

The mind has its tricks as well. Columbus discovered the world is round, but the mind still resists the curved horizons the camera presents to it, and is dizzied by 360-degree pictures. The camera's inability to capture the mind's spirits, emotions, or flying saucers says something about both.

The artist has more tricks than the camera. He creates the illusion of depth with clever lies utilizing perspective, color, scale and atmosphere. True reality is found by the artist who, steering between banal reality and castles in the clouds, finds the spirit of the matter. That is the role of the artist in June.

*Thou crownest the year with thy goodness:
and thy clouds drop fatness.
They shall drop upon the dwellings of the wilderness:
And the little hills shall rejoice on every side.
The folds shall be full of sheep:
The valleys also shall stand so thick with corn,
that they shall laugh and sing.*

Psalm 65, v.12, The Book of Common Prayer