

Samuel Palmer, Leaf from a sketchbook, pen and brown ink, c 1824-5

The leaves from Palmer's most important surviving sketchbook include many ideas for visionary landscapes that were never executed. Here, a pilgrim passes a biblical herdsman, perhaps Job, and his flock.

SAMUEL
PALMER
AND THE
PASTORAL
VISION



Colin Harrison, Senior Curator of European Art at the Ashmolean Museum in Oxford, describes how the English 19th-century artist Samuel Palmer was deeply influenced by the poet and painter William Blake. Palmer's sublime paintings of the 1820s placed a new emphasis on the harmony of nature, reinterpreting traditional subjects entirely afresh, placing the Holy Family not in the Holy Land, but in the English countryside.

In one of his minor works, the preface to *Milton: a Poem* (1804–10), the English poet and artist William Blake (1757–1827) created a vivid contrast between the England of the Industrial Revolution, exemplified by the 'dark Satanic Mills', and the England of the Second Coming of Christ, a land of 'mountains green', 'pleasant pastures', and 'clouded hills':

I will not cease from Mental Fight,
Nor shall my Sword sleep in my hand:
Till we have built Jerusalem,
In England's green & pleasant Land.

Despite these visions of a 'green and pleasant land', landscape played only a minor role in Blake's own pictures. It was left to his most eminent disciple, Samuel Palmer (1805–81), to illustrate Blake's ideal.

Palmer's education was essentially literary. His father was a bookseller, and he was taught at home by his nurse, Mary Ward, a simple woman whom Palmer

described in later life as being 'ripe in that without which so much is often useless or mischievous: deeply read in her bible and *Paradise Lost*'.¹ Among his favourite authors were the standard classics such as Shakespeare, Chaucer and Spenser, but he reserved a special place for John Milton (1608–74): he was able to recite long passages of *Paradise Lost* from memory, and greatly admired the early poems – *Lycidas*, *Comus*, *L'Allegro*, and *Il Penseroso*. He found 'all my dearest landscape longings embodied' in the Jacobean playwright John Fletcher's *Faithful Shepherdess* (1608–9).² His artistic education was deeply conventional, until 1824 when fellow English landscape painter John Linnell introduced him to Blake. It was not the grand Dante illustrations on which Blake was working that impressed Palmer, but the earlier illustrations for a schoolboy's edition of Virgil's *Eclogues*, 'visions of little dells, and nooks, and corners of Paradise; models of the exquisitest pitch of intense poetry'.³

The effect on Palmer's art was immediate. The sketchbook he began in 1824 is full of intensely individual studies of landscapes, figures and animals drawn with no consideration for conventional proportion or perspective. The earliest mature painting by Palmer depends on these studies: the *Rest of the Holy Family* (c 1824–5) was painted in the technique that Blake had called 'tempera', incorporating quotations from Blake and Albrecht Dürer (1471–1528), and this most traditional of subjects was reinterpreted in a wholly new way: for the Holy Family is placed, not in Egypt, but in the English countryside, specifically in the Darent Valley near Shoreham in Kent.

Palmer followed this early work with some of his greatest masterpieces, in which his vision of the English landscape is seen at its most intense. The six drawings in sepia ink made in 1825 exemplify his originality. The technique, of ink mixed with thick gum to give the appearance of the chiaroscuro woodcut, was wholly new, and never repeated. His imagery, although ostensibly literary – there are quotations from Virgil, Chaucer, Shakespeare and other authors attached to all these landscapes – derives from a close study of Old Master prints, from Blake, and from an intense examination of the countryside around Shoreham.

All these landscapes show man in completely harmonious communion with nature under the watchful tutelage of the Anglican church. For, as Palmer noted:

Landscape is of little value, but as it hints or expresses the haunts or doings of man. However gorgeous, it can be but Paradise without an Adam. Take away its churches, where for centuries the pure word of God has been read to the poor ... and you have a frightful kind of Paradise left – a Paradise without a God.⁴

The drawing that perhaps epitomises Palmer's vision is *The Valley thick with Corn* (1825), which evokes lines from Psalm 65: 'Thou crownest the year with thy goodness; and thy paths drop fatness ... and the little hills shall rejoice on every side.' For, although essentially Christian, Palmer's vision combines the abundance of God's bounty with a neo-Platonic interpretation of man's relationship with nature.

With the encouragement of Linnell, later to become his father-in-law, Palmer applied his visionary style to more ostensibly literal studies from nature. Despite his determination 'never [to] be a naturalist by profession',⁵ Palmer produced some of his most memorable images by drawing in front of the motif. They were always imbued with religion and emotion, and the best of them has something supernatural, an intensity of observation and feeling far beyond Linnell's prescription. Even in these drawings, Palmer associated external nature with descriptions he had found in his reading. Unlike the drawings made in emulation of the Old Masters, these nature studies have an extraordinary chromatic range, from brilliant orange to fuliginous black.

Parallel with his experiments with high colour, Palmer continued to explore the possibilities of monochrome, exhibiting a group of what he referred to as 'blacks' at the Royal Academy of Arts, London, in 1832. The subjects were often the shepherds and sheep described in Virgil's *Eclogues*, but the style was still indebted to Blake. Gradually, however, Palmer's youthful self-confidence waned, worldly cares preoccupied him, and he began to heed Linnell's advice to prefer naturalism over imagination. In 1835, he left Shoreham for good, and it was not until the 1860s that he resumed his most visionary style. By this date, he was married, had lost two children, and had settled in Redhill, a busy railway junction in Surrey, where he 'read, or drew, or dreamt of the past'.

William Blake, *Thenot and Colinet*, wood engraving for RJ Thornton's *Pastorals of Virgil*, London, 1821

opposite top: Although Blake's illustrations were modest in scale and ambition, they were among his few landscapes, and had an enormous influence on Palmer and other young artists.

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Samuel Palmer, *Landscape with the Repose of the Holy Family*, oil and tempera and pen and ink on panel, c 1824–5
above bottom: This traditional subject is firmly placed in the Kent countryside – a preliminary drawing records that the hillside is based on Shoreham Paddock.

Samuel Palmer, *The Valley thick with Corn*, pen and brush in dark brown ink mixed with gum, varnished, 1825

The motif of a reader in a landscape is traditional in English art, and is here placed in the countryside of the Darent Valley near Shoreham in Kent.



Samuel Palmer, *Early Morning*, pen and brush in dark brown ink mixed with gum, varnished, 1825

The group of harvesters nestling in the fold of the hill epitomises man's harmony with nature, their home on the horizon.

Samuel Palmer, *Shepherds under a Full Moon*, pen and brown ink, brush in Indian ink, with bodycolour and gum, c 1829–30

Although it is indebted to Blake's illustrations to Virgil, Palmer's monochrome introduces a mystic quality that is wholly original.



Palmer's last years were taken up with two main projects: the completion of his translation of Virgil's *Eclogues*, and the production of a series of eight large watercolours illustrating Milton's *L'Allegro* and *Il Penseroso*. The watercolours, and the etchings derived from them, marked a return to the visionary landscapes of the Shoreham period. In *The Lonely Tower* (1879), the most personal of these works, Palmer strove for 'poetic loneliness';⁶ while he described *The Bellman*, of the same year, as 'a breaking out of village-fever long after contact – a dream of that genuine village where I mused away some of my best years, designing what nobody would care for, and contracting, among good books, a fastidious and unpopular taste.'⁷ ▢

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Samuel Palmer, *Oak Tree and Beech, Lullingstone Park*, pencil, pen and brown ink, and watercolour, heightened with gouache, and gum arabic, on grey paper, 1828

In a letter, Palmer wrote that 'Milton by one epithet, draws an oak of the largest girth I ever saw; "Pine and Monumental Oak"; I have just been trying to draw a large one in Lullingstone; but the poet's tree is huger than anything in the park.'

NOTES

1. Raymond Lister (ed), *The Letters of Samuel Palmer*, Clarendon Press (Oxford), 1974, p 823.
2. *Ibid*, p 1012.
3. AH Palmer, *The Life and Letters of Samuel Palmer, Painter and Etcher*, Seeley & Co. (London), 1892, p 15.
4. *The Letters of Samuel Palmer*, op cit, p 516.
5. *Ibid*, p 36.
6. *Ibid*, p 695.
7. *Ibid*, p 970.

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