

Samuel PALMER (Newington 1805 - Redhill 1881)

The Vintage: An Illustration for Charles Dickens's Pictures from Italy

Pencil, pen and brown ink and grey wash, heightened with white, on paper laid down on a thin card.

Signed S. PALMER at the lower right.

138 x 77 mm. (5 3/8 x 3 in.)

In March 1846, at the recommendation of the art dealers and print publishers Colnaghi's, Charles Dickens approached Samuel Palmer and asked him to supply vignette illustrations for his forthcoming book Pictures from Italy, for which he would be paid twenty guineas. (As Dickens noted, in a letter written to his publishers Bradbury and Evans on 16th March 1846, 'I have thought it best to go to Colnaghi's, and ask if they could find me any clever young artist who has been to Italy, and has brought home a portfolio of such sketches as I want. I did so on Saturday and he assures me that he has little doubt of sending some such gentleman to me tomorrow.') Palmer produced four small illustrations for the book; depicting the Colosseum, the Villa d'Este at Tivoli, a street of tombs in Pompeii and a vineyard scene. This drawing is a preparatory study for the last of these, which, integrated with the text, appeared on the final page of the book [see image]. Although it was the only one of the four illustrations not to bear a title, it has generally been known as The Vintage.

Dickens seems to have been pleased with the illustrations, and when Palmer asked if his name might be included on the title page of the book as the illustrator, he replied in a letter to the artist: 'I beg to

assure you that I would on no account dream of allowing the book to go to Press, without the insertion of your name on the title page. I placed it there myself, two days ago. I have not seen the designs, but I have no doubt whatever (remembering your sketches) that they are very good.'

As Raymond Lister has written of the present sheet, 'As was usual, Palmer drew the subjects for Pictures from Italy on the woodblocks and these drawings were of course destroyed as the block was engraved; but master drawings exist, of which this is one. The contrast between them and the finished engravings is enormous: the drawings are executed as delicately as miniatures, while the engravings are of mediocre quality…The Vintage is the most poetic of the designs. Its conception - as a frame for the reading matter - was probably derived from similar arrangements in Blake's Songs of Innocence and Experience, and the figure in the tree at the right picking fruit may be paralleled by figures in plate 2 of 'The Ecchoing Green' and on that of 'The School-Boy' in the same work, and in plate 2, 'The Argument' in The Marriage of Heaven and Hell. More general influences in these designs may be traced to Claude.'

Another scholar has noted of the illustrations to Pictures from Italy that, 'although Palmer's illustrations are capable of standing alone aesthetically as pleasing Italian scenes, taken in conjunction with the text, they dramatize inadvertently Dickens's perception of the country as a land of physical and moral decay, unlikely to be regenerated by its political or religious leaders. Though the artist's representations of 'The Street of the Tombs: Pompeii' and 'The Colosseum of Rome' appear separate from the text, not integrated with it like the other two designs, they nevertheless reinforce the author's association of past ruins with the desolation of the present rather than the grandeur of antiquity. Similarly, the cypresses linking the avenue leading toward 'The Villa d'Este at Tivoli, from the Cypress Avenue' evoke their traditional associations with death as well as beauty. Only the concluding 'Vineyard Scene', a suitable visual accompaniment to Dickens's closing hope that a more noble race might rise from these ruins, is wholeheartedly optimistic with its explicit associations of rebirth and renewal.'

All four preparatory drawings by Samuel Palmer for Dickens's Pictures from Italy were once part of an album or scrapbook of English drawings by various artists that belonged to Caroline Scott Ellis (1786-1874), the daughter of the art dealer Paul Colnaghi, in 1858. The drawings from this album later appeared at auction in London in 1963. Two of Palmer's drawings for Pictures from Italy, depicting the Villa d'Este at Tivoli from the Cypress Avenue and The Colosseum of Rome, are today in the Pierpont Morgan Library in New York. Another, less finished drawing by Palmer also intended for Dickens's Pictures from Italy - a pencil sketch of a View in the Campagna, likewise in the Pierpont Morgan Library - may have been engraved for the book, but never appeared in the printed edition.

Provenance:

Removed from a scrapbook containing drawings by various artists, belonging to Mrs. Caroline Antoinette Scott (née Colnaghi), in 1858
Mrs. Dovell
Her sale ('The Property of Mrs. Dovell'), London, Sotheby's, 18 December 1963, lot 174 (bt. Leger for £230)
Leger Galleries, London
Acquired from them in 1968 by Raymond Lister, Cambridge
The Fine Art Society, London
Richard L. Feigen and Co., New York
Michael and Judy Steinhardt, New York.

Exhibitions

Cambridge, Fitzwilliam Museum, Samuel Palmer and 'The Ancients', 1984, no.91; London, Leger Galleries Ltd., Samuel Palmer, 1992, no.10.

Literature:

Raymond Lister, 'The Book Illustrations of Samuel Palmer', The Book Collector, Spring 1979, p.70; Raymond Lister, Samuel Palmer in Palmer Country, East Bergholt, 1980, illustrated p.40; Raymond Lister, Samuel Palmer and 'The Ancients', exhibition catalogue, Cambridge, 1984, pp.66-67, no.91; Raymond Lister, The Paintings of Samuel Palmer, Cambridge, 1985, illustrated pl.53; Raymond Lister, Samuel Palmer: his life and art, Cambridge, 1987, pp.146-147, fig.60; Raymond Lister, Catalogue Raisonné of the Works of Samuel Palmer, New York, 1988, p.151, no.412(iv).

Artist description:

The son of a bookseller, Samuel Palmer lost his mother at an early age and was raised by a nurse, who introduced him to poetry and, in particular, the works of John Milton, for whom he was to have a lifelong passion. His only artistic training came in the drawing lessons he took as a youth, and it is due largely to a number of early encounters with other artists that his style developed. In 1822 he met John Linnell and, through him, was introduced to William Blake two years later. Both artists were to be formative influences on the young Palmer, with Blake, in particular, becoming a mentor and lifelong inspiration. Palmer's devotion to landscape is evident from his earliest works, and by the second half of the 1820s he had begun to produce richly worked scenes of the countryside around Dulwich in London, treated as a kind of mysterious, fruitful and dreamlike garden.

This 'visionary' approach to the pastoral English landscape found its fullest expression when Palmer was living in the village of Shoreham in Kent, where he settled in 1826. The highly finished paintings and drawings of the Shoreham period, in the late 1820s and early 1830s, are regarded as the peak of Palmer's early career. Painted and drawn in a rich combination of media, and characterized by an intensity of imagery and sentiment, his Shoreham works went against much of what was conventional in the landscape art of the day. (As David Blayney Brown has noted, 'The inspired fantasy of Palmer's Shoreham landscapes is unique in English art and can be matched only in the work of continental Romantics like Caspar David Friedrich and Philipp Otto Runge.' At Shoreham, Palmer was associated with a small group of like-minded artists, including George Richmond and Edward Calvert, who called themselves 'The Ancients', but none were quite so committed to this radical vision of landscape as he was.

This resolutely single-minded and somewhat uncommercial approach could not last, however, and Palmer's style began to change in the mid 1830s. He moved back to London and began travelling further afield, to Devon, Somerset and North Wales, in search of landscapes to paint. Following his marriage to Linnell's daughter Hannah in 1837, and a two year honeymoon in Italy, Palmer's work became distinguished by a brightness and clarity inspired by the light of the Mediterranean. The finished Italianate landscapes that he produced over the next three decades, executed in a rich technique of watercolour, gouache and gum arabic, are among his most attractive and appealing works.

In 1843 Palmer was elected an Associate of the Old Water-Colour Society, becoming a full member in 1854, and although he exhibited there annually, he found few patrons and had to work as a drawing-master to supplement his income. In 1865, however, he received his most important commission, for a series of very large watercolours illustrating Milton's poems L'Allegro and Il Penseroso, from the solicitor Leonard Rowe Valpy. Palmer worked on these impressive watercolours over the next sixteen years until his death, and they account for some of his finest late work. He also produced a series of largely monochrome drawings, in pencil, charcoal, chalk, watercolour and ink, which were intended to illustrate his own translation of Virgil's Eclogues. His skill as a draughtsman never faltered and was much admired into his old age; indeed 'by the end of his life he was as effective – if less widely acknowledged – a master of bravura watercolour as any of his exhibiting contemporaries.'