

Sir Matthew SMITH (Halifax 1879 - London 1959)

Fruit on a Blue Plate

Watercolour. Laid down.

226 x 294 mm. (8 7/8 x 11 1/2 in.)

In an account of a visit to Matthew Smith's studio in London in 1957, an anonymous journalist wrote, 'How joyously the red and blues of his later still-lifes sing together! How interesting is the combined impression of the artist's personality, surroundings and works! These were my thoughts after a recent visit to Sir Matthew Smith…to the visitor's eye [the studio] was full of atmosphere, with its easels and rows of canvases and the 'properties' – jugs, bowls – there was one asymmetrical fruit dish of French manufacture, a basket in porcelain which he handled with particular affection – oranges, lemons and quinces…the quince (at a momentary loss for its English name he referred to it in a manner recalling his many years spent in France as "coing") that appears so often as an exhilarating yellow, and an element of design in his still-lifes. These solids of nature occupy him more, nowadays, than the flowers he used to paint so well.' By this time Smith was working almost exclusively on paper, producing works aptly described by his biographer as 'marvelously rhythmic and joyful.'

Among similar watercolours by Smith is a Still Life with Apples and Pears, formerly in the Tim Ellis collection and sold at auction in 2014, as well as a Still Life with Fruit in a Bowl which appeared at auction in 1972.

Artist description:

Described by Augustus John as 'one of the most brilliant and individual figures in modern English painting', Matthew Smith was born in West Yorkshire and came to art only when he was in his twenties. He was enrolled at the Manchester School of Art from 1901 to 1905 before continuing his education at the Slade School of Fine Art in London, where he studied between 1905 and 1907. In 1908 he made his first trip to France, visited the artist's colony at Pont-Aven in Brittany. He remained in France for the next few years, taking a studio in Paris, briefly studying at the school established by Henri Matisse just before it closed down, and showing three paintings at the Salon des Indépendants of 1911 and again in 1912. By now in his thirties, Smith also spent some time in the town of Grez-sur-Loing, south of Paris, which had long hosted a thriving community of foreign artists. In 1914 he visited England on what was intended to be a brief visit, but the outbreak of the First World War prevented his return to France. He worked from several studios on Fitzroy Street in London, meeting his neighbour Walter Sickert and initiating a lifelong friendship with the sculptor Jacob Epstein, who eventually came to assemble a fine

collection of Smith's work. Smith exhibited with the London Group from 1916 onwards, although he did not become a formal member of the Group until 1920. After the war he returned to Grez-sur-Loing and there befriended the older Irish artist Roderic O'Conor, who was to exert a profound influence on his work. He also met Vera Cuningham, a fellow artist who became his model and lover, and inspired a major series of paintings of nudes over the next few years. Smith continued to work between England and France, painting in Cornwall, Somerset, Brittany, Grez and Paris, and regularly sending works to the London Group exhibitions. Among his admirers were the influential art critics P. G. Konody and Roger Fry, who acquired his paintings for the Contemporary Art Society.

Smith spent much of his career in France, and, in many respects, may be regarded as a Continental artist as much as a British one. As John Russell has noted, 'Matthew Smith loved France, lived in it for a great part of his life, did his best work there, and was distinctly more at home in Paris, in Gréz-sur-Loing, in Aix-en-Provence and in Dieppe than anywhere else.' It was in large part as a result of his early exposure to contemporary French art as a young painter that Smith adopted the vibrant colour palette that characterizes so much of his work; as Russell points out of the artist, it was in France that 'he learned to liberate and intensify his colour at a time when most English painting was darkened and congested.' Smith exhibited at the Salon des Indépéndants in 1924 and had his first one-man show at the newly-opened Mayor Gallery in London two years later, although sales were few. More successful gallery exhibitions followed, however, at the Reid and Lefevre Gallery, the Warren Gallery and at Arthur Tooth & Sons, who became his primary dealers. It was during the 1920s that Smith began to achieve a measure of both commercial and critical success, and in 1928 the Tate Gallery acquired its first work by the artist, a flower piece. In 1933 Smith settled in Cagnes-sur-Mer in the South of France, and worked there for the next two years, producing mainly landscape paintings, before moving to a studio in Aix-en-Provence in 1936. Apart from regular gallery exhibitions, his work was shown at the Carnegie International Exhibition in Pittsburgh in 1930 and the Venice Biennale in 1938, when he exhibited twenty-three paintings.

The artist spent the Second World War mainly in London, where among his closest friends was Augustus John, although he seems to have painted very little, having been devastated by the death of both of his sons in the early years of the war. The first monograph devoted to his work appeared in 1944, by which time he had begun painting again, and in 1950 he had a second exhibition at the Venice Biennale. Three years later a major retrospective of his oeuvre was mounted at the Tate Gallery, and soon after this he received a knighthood. Although his poor health meant that he largely stopped painting in oils after 1955, he continued to produce works on paper in pencil, pastel and watercolour. Smith died in September 1959, and a memorial exhibition was held at the Royal Academy the following year. In 1974 the artist's heir Mary Keene presented a large collection of his paintings, drawings, watercolours, pastels and sketchbooks, amounting to over a thousand works, to the Corporation of London; these are today in the Guildhall Art Gallery.

Smith's work was much admired by his fellow artists. As his friend Francis Bacon wrote of him, in the introduction to the catalogue of an exhibition of Smith's work at the Tate Gallery in 1953, 'He seems to me to be one of the very few English painters since Constable and Turner to be concerned with painting – that is, with attempting to make idea and technique inseparable…I think that painting to-day is pure intuition and luck and taking advantage of what happens when you splash the stuff down, and in this game of chance Matthew Smith seems to have the gods on his side.' On the occasion of same Tate exhibition, the artist Patrick Heron praised Smith as 'Easily the most important English painter of his generation…he understands, as few other English painters living do, the true potentialities of colour, which he is able to use at once with scientific accuracy and an exciting emotional effect. Only in a master of colour do these two functions of colour coincide, so that structure and form are actually begotten of colour in its fullest saturation, and vice versa…With Matthew Smith the means of expression are as articulate and fluent as those of any British painter since Constable, and they are perfectly adjusted to his ends – which are not strange, or ambitious, or grandiose, but humble and in the most exciting sense, materialistic – concerned to praise the actual and the everyday.' In later years, the sculptor Henry Moore similarly expressed his opinion that Smith stood alongside John Constable, J. M. W. Turner and Walter Sickert as the best painters England had produced.