

*SAMUEL PALMER*  
*Going to Evening Church*

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*1874*

Gerrish Fine Art  
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# Samuel Palmer (1805–1881), ‘Going to Evening Church’, 1874



Watercolour over pencil, body colour, scratching out and gum arabic. Signed Samuel Palmer (lower left).

12 x 27½ inches (30 x 70 cm)

## Provenance

- J. W. Overbury, bought from the artist 1874
- Mrs O. M. Pilcher
- J. G. Pilcher
- Sotheby's, 14 November 1991, lot 126, where purchased by A. A. Schumann
- Private Collection

## Literature

Lister, Raymond, 'Catalogue Raisonne of the works of Samuel Palmer', p. 208, no. 669 (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1988)

## Exhibited

- Society of Painters in Watercolour, London, 1874 (91) titled 'Old England's Sunday Evening'
- Grosvenor Gallery, London, Winter Exhibition
- Graves Art Gallery, Sheffield, 1961, Samuel Palmer ... An Exhibition of Paintings, Drawings and Etchings (72)

In this watercolour, Palmer depicts a breathtaking landscape, basking in the warm glow of a late summer evening. Dreamlike in its conception, this rural idyll forms the backdrop to a bucolic scene of country folk making their way across a bountiful cornfield towards a church, the spire of which can be seen towering above the trees. The sea below reflects the last glories of sunset. In the background, a cliff line rises to meet with wispy clouds and a phantasmagorical evening sky, whose pinks, vermilions, yellows and purples contrast harmoniously with the calm sea, which stretches below into the distance.

Palmer painted 'Going to Evening Church' while living at Furze Hill, his Gothic villa in Redhill, Surrey. He retreated here in 1862, after the death of his beloved son Thomas More Palmer, and would remain there for his final two decades. Campbell-Johnston writes of this period, "Palmer withdrew into the peaceful world of his study as he had once withdrawn to the seclusion of a rural valley and it was there, amid loved books and artistic treasures, amid prayers and meditations and rambling memories, that he rediscovered a lost vision. It might not have been as fervid as it had been in Shoreham, but during the Furze Hill exile of the final part of his life he worked on the finest pictures he had created since his youth".<sup>1</sup>

The paintings of his final two decades represent a distillation of everything that had come before in terms of both subject and style. The subject of 'Going to Evening Church' specifically recalls his earlier Shoreham painting, 'Coming from Evening Church', 1830, bought by the Tate Gallery in 1922 (illustrated right). The cornfields, church and devoted country folk are also a feature of many other Shoreham period works such as 'Cornfield and Church by Moonlight', c.1830, and 'A Cornfield Shoreham, at Twilight', c.1831-32. The landscape however seems to be an invented one, an amalgamation of remembered scenery experienced first-hand on his travels in Kent, Wales, Devon and Italy. Palmer sinks "slowly down through the



Samuel Palmer (1805-1881), 'Coming from Evening Church', tempera, chalk, gold, ink and graphite on gesso on paper, 1830 © Tate, London 2019



Samuel Palmer (1805-1881), 'The Valley Thick with Corn', pen and dark brown ink with brush in sepia mixed with gum arabic, 1825 © Ashmolean Museum, University of Oxford



Samuel Palmer (1805-1881), 'A Rustic Scene', pen and dark brown ink with brush in sepia mixed with gum arabic, 1825 © Ashmolean Museum, University of Oxford

sediments of his memory...he drew together the images that had informed and shaped his own life...the pastoral beauties of the Ancients' Kentish valleys, the tall craggy skylines of his Welsh sketching trips; the luminous seascapes of tramps around Devon; the thick moted sunlight of an Italian honeymoon".<sup>2</sup>

Palmer was a devout Christian throughout his life, yet his move to Redhill coincided with a period of decline in religious observance in British society, spurred on by events such as the publication of Charles Darwin's 'On the Origin of the Species' (1859). This development challenged the very core of Palmer's religious sensibilities and added to his growing disdain for the present age. While living in Redhill, Vaughan notes, "he was mounting...a display of art intended to address the present in an exemplary mode. It was the duty of the artist, he felt, to attempt a sort of imaginative restitution for the shortcomings in society. He subscribed more than ever at this time to that Romantic position in which the artist shows the present the loss it is suffering. This was the message he found so appealing in the writings of Ruskin".<sup>3</sup> Thus, for Palmer, presenting an inspiring vision of religious worshippers in 'Going to Evening Church', was intended to encourage a return to the Christian values he held so dear. He wrote that churches "are, to the Christian's eye, the most charming points of an English landscape – gems of sentiment for which our woods and green slopes, and hedgerow elms, are the lovely and appropriate setting". The painting is essentially a wishful vision of a now threatened religious community, at one with nature, which Palmer so desperately wished to preserve.

The composition and palette of 'Going to Evening Church' are important factors in enabling Palmer to create such a powerfully poetic image, however, the extraordinary variety of his painterly technique is equally significant. The watercolour washes are thin and reveal the extensive pencil work underneath. Some passages

were then articulated with brush-point and overall heightening was achieved by small scratches and areas of bodycolour. Above all the richness is attained by varied applications of gum arabic, which in some areas has been applied very freely with a palette knife.

Palmer clearly held this particular work in high regard, as he selected it as his sole exhibit for the Old Water Colour Society exhibition of 1874. The work was immediately acquired by Joseph Overbury, a stock-broker, who owned several other Palmers, including an important early group of six sepia drawings created in 1825, which are now in the Ashmolean Museum, Oxford (two of these are illustrated opposite). Overbury's introduction to Palmer had been through the senior partner of his firm, James Giles (a cousin of Samuel Palmer), who gave him Palmer's extraordinary tempera with oil painting 'The Sleeping Shepherd', 1833-34 (Lister 179). Overbury loaned this painting, and 'Scene at Underriver' or 'The Hop Garden' (Lister 170), to the memorial exhibition held at The Fine Art Society in 1881.

This watercolour is one of the finest examples from the later years of Palmer's career ever to come to the market, drawing together his vision of Arcadian England, expressed in the work of his early years in Shoreham, the poetic imagery and richness of his middle years, and the virtuosity of technique of his final years.

#### Endnotes

1. Campbell-Johnston, Rachel, 'Mysterious Wisdom The Life and Work of Samuel Palmer', Bloomsbury, 2011, p. 299
2. Campbell-Johnston, Rachel, 'Mysterious Wisdom The Life and Work of Samuel Palmer', Bloomsbury, 2011, p. 306
3. Vaughan, William, 'Samuel Palmer Shadows on the Wall', Yale University Press, 2015, p. 334

#### Bibliography

- Blayney Brown, David, 'Samuel Palmer 1805-81: Catalogue Raisonne of the Paintings and Drawings, and a selection of prints in the Ashmolean Museum', Oxford, 1983
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- Lister, Raymond, 'Catalogue Raisonne of the works of Samuel Palmer', Cambridge University Press, 1988
- Palmer, Alfred Herbert, 'The Life and Letters of Samuel Palmer, Painter and Etcher', Seeley & Co, 1892
- Vaughan, William, 'Samuel Palmer Shadows on the Wall', Yale University Press, 2015
- Vaughan, William, Barker, Elizabeth & Harrison, Colin, 'Samuel Palmer Vision and Landscape', British Museum Press, 2005

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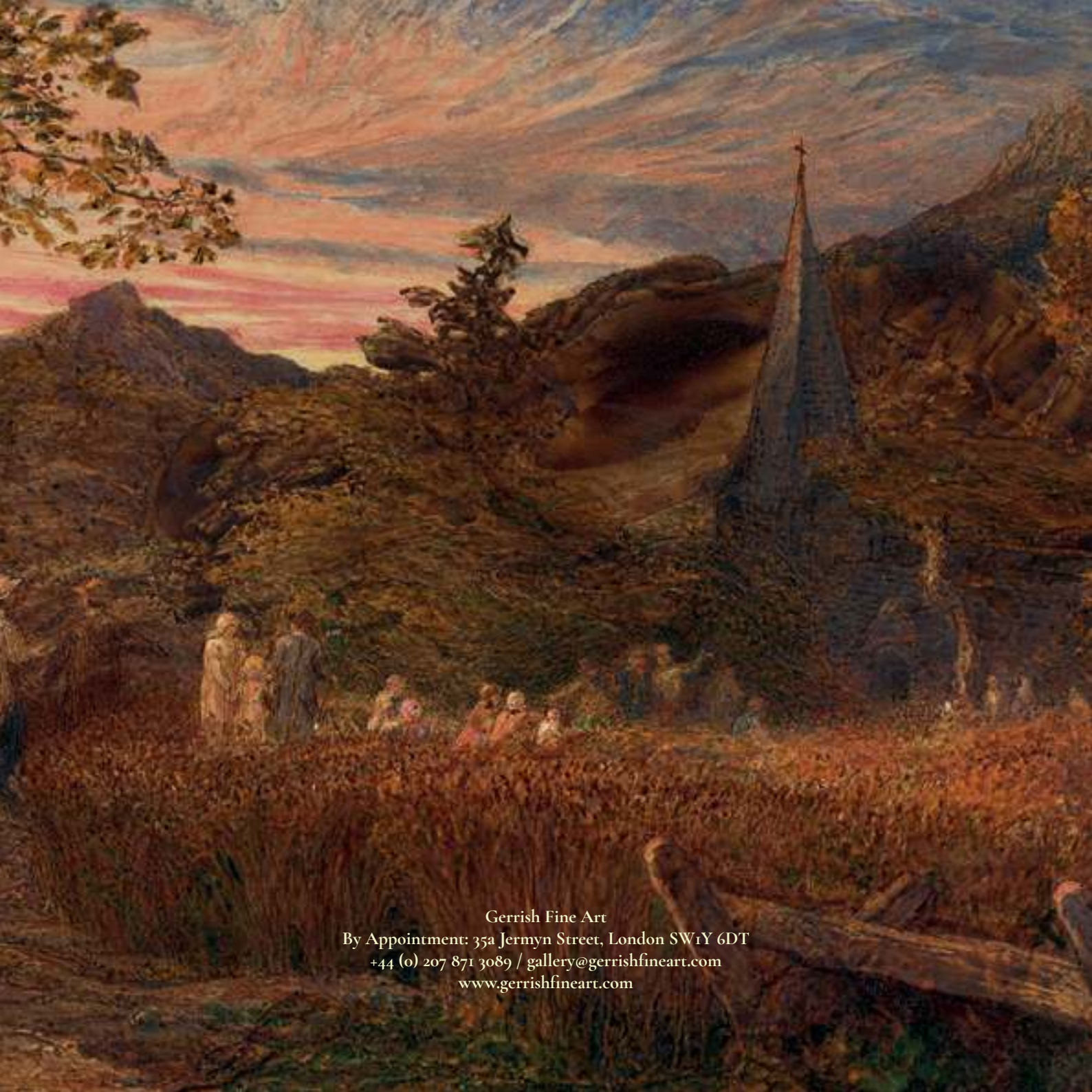
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