

SAMUEL PALMER

1805–1880

CROSSING THE COMMON – SUNSET



Watercolour

7 ¼ x 16 inches; 184 x 406 mm

Painted 1848

Collections: Charles Sumner, Bishop of Winchester (1790-1874) purchased from the Society of Painters in Water Colours in 1848; Leger Galleries, London, 1966; Private collection, purchased from the above; Leger Galleries, London, 1980; P. B. Warner, purchased from the above; Lowell Libson Ltd. 2006; Private collection, acquired from the above to 2025

Literature: Raymond Lister, *Catalogue raisonné of the works of Samuel Palmer*, 1988, p. 158, cat. no. 442;

Exhibited: London, Society of Painters in Water Colours, 1848, no. 251, 'Crossing the Common – Sunset', £10; London, Leger Galleries, *English watercolours 1789 – 1922*, 1966, no. 33; London, Leger Galleries, *English watercolours*, 1980, no. 26; London, Leger Galleries, *Samuel Palmer*, Loan exhibition, 1992, cat. no. 14

This beautifully wrought, carefully finished watercolour was exhibited by Samuel Palmer at the Society of Painters in Water Colours in 1848. Titled *Crossing the Common – Sunset*, the subject-matter presents a neat distillation of the themes that drove Palmer's work throughout his career. The panoramic format, richly worked in watercolour shows a peaceable, productive landscape at the close of day, in the foreground a wagon and herdsman return home along a limpid river, the sun is setting behind a distant stand of trees illuminating the sky with a vivid lilac sunset. Preserved in exceptional condition, this luminous watercolour is a fine example of a middle-period exhibition work, which was acquired in 1848 by the Bishop of Winchester, Charles Sumner.

Following the return to Britain from his Italian honeymoon in 1839, Palmer concentrated on establishing his reputation, both critical and commercial. He did so by producing richly worked watercolours inspired by his travels in Britain and Italy. In 1843 Palmer was elected an associate member of the Old Watercolour Society. As William Vaughan has pointed out, his election had a profound influence on the work he produced, moving him away from oil painting and the complex world of the Royal Academy. In the face of stiff competition in the exhibiting societies, Palmer developed a distinctive and easily recognizable panoramic format, known as his 'little-long', filling these intensely worked watercolours with pyrotechnic lighting effects. In this way, his exhibited watercolours differed from many of his most successful contemporaries, who delighted in the broad, washes of watercolour, Palmer by contrast produced jewel-like works. Palmer himself noted to the critic P. G. Hamerton that he became 'a water-worker only by accident', his own preference being for: 'water-colour as it appears in tempera and, on a small scale, in the old missals.' In this way, Palmer's exhibited watercolours have something of the enamelled quality of illuminated manuscripts.

Palmer received great critical admiration for his luminous exhibition watercolours. The Pre-Raphaelite artist, critic and collector Frederic Stephens, characterised Palmer as 'the painter of the Dorian mood', Poussin had notably used this analogy to suggest works which were 'grave, severe and full of wisdom.' As Elizabeth Barker has noted 'for Palmer's contemporaries... his mature landscapes presented a learned (but unaffected) synthesis of the stern, the classical, the simple, the natural, harmonious and refined.'¹ The present watercolour neatly encapsulates these ideas, showing a panoramic, rural scene at the end of the day. The timeless action of the rural labourer returning home with his herd and flock as the sun sets defies immediate temporal identification: Palmer creates an image that could be ancient or modern. This sense of rural rhythm and contentment appealed to Victorian collectors and the present watercolour was acquired from the 1848 exhibition by Charles Sumner, Bishop of Winchester.

¹ William Vaughan, Elizabeth Barker and Colin Harrison, *Samuel Palmer 1805-1881: Vision and Landscape*, exh. cat., London and New York (British Museum), 2005, p.192.

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Samuel Palmer
The Watermill
Watercolour
20 1/8 x 28 inches; 513 x 712 mm
Painted c. 1848-9
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