

Over 200 handwritten pages by visionary artist Samuel Palmer acquired by Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge

Letters offer new insight into the later life of the artist following the death of his son

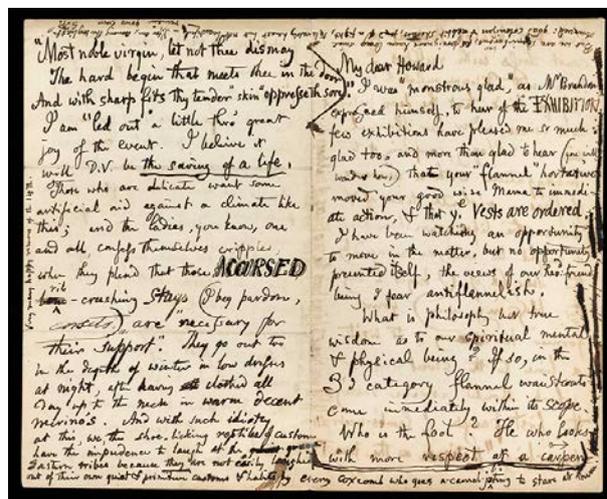
47 handwritten letters comprising over 200 pages by the artist Samuel Palmer have been acquired by the Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge. The letters span over 16 years, the last one shortly before the artist's death, and give a new impression of his personality in later years: far from being melancholy, they show an extraordinary zest for life.

Little appreciated in his lifetime, Samuel Palmer (1805-1881) is now acknowledged as one of the most innovative and influential British artists of the nineteenth century. Inspired by the visionary genius of William Blake, Palmer took landscape painting beyond the confines of naturalism to create a 'Christian pastoral', a vision of nature and the countryside imbued with a transfiguring spiritual significance.

Palmer's last twenty years are often portrayed as a time of quiet reclusion in the aftermath of his elder son's death, described by Palmer as 'the catastrophe of my life'. The letters challenge this view, showing the artist found ways to cope with his intense grief, and still had a great passion for work, a sense of self-effacing humour, and that his a deep seriousness was tempered always by a love of the absurd. They are signed *S. Palmer, Samuel Palmer, S.P., Nogo, Mr Fearing, Blind Infancy, Vanity of Vanities, Nobody, A good-for-nothing-little-baby-scamp who is ashamed to sign his name*, one includes a small sketch.

Idiosyncratic but never aloof, the letters are peppered with capitals, elaborate lettering, exclamation marks, crossing outs and postscripts, and speak of a man still brimming with ideas and a burning desire to communicate.

The letters are written to two brothers that Palmer had known as children: the Revd John Preston Wright and Thomas Howard Wright. He maintained a fond, genial relationship with both men as they assumed adult life as a clergyman and an Oxford don. Palmer had met the Wright brothers as boys when he moved to Furze Hill House in Redhill, Surrey, shortly after his son's death in 1861. He saw them during university vacations and spent long evenings with them, their conversations ranging over every imaginable subject, as in these letters. In his biography of Palmer, Raymond



Letter written by Samuel Palmer © Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge

Lister states that the visits of John Preston Wright at Furze Hill especially 'were among Palmer's greatest consolations'.

The series represents Palmer in many moods, from the philosophical to the playful. They touch on a wide range of subjects including religion, the 'dearly-longed for' Blake Exhibition of 1876, music, a visit to Coleridge's house in Highgate, loneliness, and poetry; they allude to William Blake, Milton, Shakespeare and others; and contain a wide range of meditations on art, life and philosophy - "all the best poets are out of the body while they write though the bodily hand holds the pen" Palmer muses in one letter.

The purchase has been funded by the Friends of the Fitzwilliam Museum. Founded in 1909 by Director Sydney Cockerell, the Friends is the earliest supporters group to be established in a British art institution.

The acquisition adds to the Museum's existing 150 Palmer letters, along with notebooks, memoranda and other documents in the Archive of John Linnell. The impact of the artist John Linnell (1792-1882) on Palmer's work was transformatory. Palmer wrote that 'It pleased God to send Mr Linnell as a good angel from Heaven to pluck me from the pit of modern art'. Palmer married Linnell's daughter Hannah, and the Linnell archive includes letters written by Samuel and Hannah while on honeymoon in Italy.

Tim Knox, Director of the Fitzwilliam Museum commented: "The Fitzwilliam is rare among museums for being able to represent both the art and documentary heritage of artists in its collections. We also have rich holdings of letters, account books and other archival material for other major artists, notably Sir Joshua Reynolds, John Constable, George Romney, Edward Burne-Jones, and William Morris. These historic archives are irreplaceable and as we approach our bicentenary in 2016, they show our continued commitment to research."

A selection of the letters will be on display at the Fitzwilliam Museum in its Gallery 3 and a painting by Palmer can be seen in the adjacent Gallery 2. Currently Palmer's *The Magic Apple Tree* (painted at Shoreham, Kent, c. 1830) is the centrepiece of the Fitzwilliam's exhibition *Watercolour: Elements of Nature* - this famous pastoral scene is the most celebrated example of Palmer's belief in the abundance, generosity and beauty of God's creation.

A selection of Samuel Palmer's letters will be on display from 8 September until 29 November.

Watercolour: Elements of Nature runs to 27 September. Admission to the Museum is free.

- Ends -

For further information and images contact the Press Office:

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Notes to editors:

The Fitzwilliam Museum, Trumpington Street, Cambridge CB2 1RB
FREE ADMISSION

OPEN: Tuesday - Saturday: 10.00 - 17.00
Sundays and Bank Holiday Mondays: 12.00 - 17.00
CLOSED: 24-26 & 31 December, 1 January and Good Friday.

Founded in 1816 the Fitzwilliam Museum is the principal museum of the University of Cambridge and lead partner for the University of Cambridge Museums (UCM) Major Partner Museum programme, funded by The Arts Council. The Fitzwilliam's collections explore world history and art from antiquity to the present day. It houses over half a million objects from ancient Egyptian, Greek and Roman artefacts, to medieval illuminated manuscripts, masterpiece paintings from the Renaissance to the 21st century, world class prints and drawings, and outstanding collections of applied arts, ceramics, coins, and Asian arts. The Fitzwilliam presents a wide ranging public programme of major exhibitions, events and education activities, and is an internationally recognised institute of learning, research and conservation.

The Fitzwilliam is celebrating its 200th anniversary in 2016.
www.fitzmuseum.cam.ac.uk

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