

# JAMES MACKINNON

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## **Samuel PALMER**

London 1805-1881 Redhill

### ***Oxen ploughing in a capriccio landscape with La Vocatella***

Pencil, watercolour, bodycolour and gold paint on buff paper

39.1 x 50.2 cm 15 3/8 x 19 3/4 inches

In this magnificent watercolour, previously unknown to the literature on Palmer, the artist introduces the ploughman and his oxen into a beautiful evocation of his recent stay in Italy. The ploughman was to be an important element in later composition.

Dr. Colin Harrison of the Ashmolean Museum, Oxford has dated this work to the years following the artist's return from his honeymoon trip to Italy in 1838-39 with his wife Hannah, daughter of John Linnell.

This work is of great importance as the earliest known watercolour work in which Palmer depicted the ploughman with two oxen, a subject to which he returned many times. He has here combined the motif with a capriccio view of the chapel of La Vocatella at Corpo di Cava outside Naples, backed by a tall marble Gothic church. No other drawing exists among Palmer's watercolours of the period which takes such an imaginative subject.

This watercolour is a carefully considered composition in combining three elements of Palmer's work, the rustic scene, the observation of nature and finally the architectural backdrop. Of these, the first two are the most important as Palmer is at his best an artist of the imagination, here bringing together all three in a single composition, the town and its capriccio building part hidden by the vegetation and the massive rock round which wind almost unseen steps. But it is the ploughman and his oxen which are the focus for the viewer.

Palmer's elaborate underdrawing is found throughout this watercolour, describing in detail the oxen, ploughman, landscape and architecture, and in particular the extraordinary passage of vegetation in the right foreground. The artist has combined all this with free handling of both watercolour and gouache, and also, remarkably, employed gold to highlight passages in the vegetation. This is highly unusual and possibly unique in his work.

## **Background**

Samuel and Hannah Palmer travelled as newly-weds to honeymoon in Italy, arriving in Rome in November 1837. Their letters home both to his family and to hers, the Linnells, contain full details of their travels and it is evident that the area near Corpo di Cava and the chapel at La Vocatella both charmed them and provided subject matter for Samuel. Palmer completed three watercolours of the chapel recorded by Lister in which the campanile appears, but in the present drawing he has added the elaborate marble chapel. The Palmers had stayed in Milan on their trip south and been impressed by the great marble cathedral with all its decorative

spires, which may have been the inspiration for this building. It also recalls Santa Maria della Spina beside the Arno at Pisa which they are unlikely to have seen.

The Palmers spent considerable time at Corpo di Cava, and on 16 September 1838 Samuel wrote to George and Juliet Richmond '*...and at Corpo di Cava where we are 'apt to stick' I have got a large drawing of the town and convent and about a dozen smaller subjects besides hints outlines and memoranda in my little sketch books which I now always carry about with me*'. George Richmond bequeathed these sketchbooks to Samuel's son, A.H. Palmer, who subsequently destroyed most of them.

### **The Ploughman**

It is no surprise that the first evidence of Palmer's interest in the ploughman dates from 1825 during his Shoreham period. His drawing of '*A rustic scene or A young man yoking an ox*' (Ashmolean Museum, WA1941.102) fits well with the rural subject matter of those years. But it is evident that the artist's interest in oxen and ploughing was re-awakened by his travels in Italy. Lister's catalogue raisonné mentions various studies of oxen under no. 337, citing Palmer's letter to Linnell of 15 January 1839 '*it is incumbent on us to get studies of some of the most picturesque figures – and of the Roman oxen – superior to any others – and pure remnants of ancient pastoral and agricultural life*' (Letters, p. 271).

Under no. 338 Lister quotes Palmer's lengthy letter to the Linnells of about 20 August 1839 '*The Perugia oxen are said to be very fine – if so I shall have one harnessed in a plough with a man in proper action and drawn it in different views – I have learnt the general build of the animal which will be very useful. We stayed in Tivoli till we could get conveyance and I had two oxen to draw in a large cave*' (Letters, p. 369).

Lister places the early date of 1835-6 on Palmer's small wash drawing (no. 237) of '*Rising with the Lark or Ploughing with oxen*' (BM 1913-0528-57). He then notes that it is apparently the working sketch for the etching E9 and that it is also probably the sketch for the watercolours nos. 610 and 611 of c. 1863. It seems more probable, noting that the drawing is squared for transfer, that it too dates to the 1860's and is therefore a much later production.

Bibliography: R. Lister, *Catalogue Raisonné of the Works of Samuel Palmer*, C.U.P., 1988  
*The Letters of Samuel Palmer*, ed. R. Lister, Oxford, 1974