Samuel Palmer was a major figure in English Romantic painting. **William Vaughan** looks at the intuitive expressiveness of the artist

Visionary sight

Samuel Palmer (1805–81) was among the most original artists of the early 19th century. It was a time when British landscape painting was at its height, dominated by figures such as Turner and Constable. Palmer was a younger contemporary of these stars, and his approach was very different. He shared their fascination with the study of nature but used it to convey a sense of spiritual elation at the wonder of creation. Inspired by the painter and poet William Blake, he developed a unique form of 'visionary' landscape, in which nature becomes transformed, its colours richer and its forms bolder. His creativity found its greatest expression between 1827 and 1835, during a reclusive period of living in the Kent village of Shoreham, where he produced such marvels as *The Magic Apple Tree* and the British Museum's *Cornfield by Moonlight* (above).

Palmer was a Londoner, born in Surrey Square off the Old Kent Road. The son of a dreamy bookseller and lay Baptist preacher, he was brought up in a household steeped in literature and religion. Very early on he showed talent as a visual artist. His development was prodigious. By 1819, aged only fourteen, he was already selling work and exhibiting at the Royal Academy and the British Institution. It seemed that he had a promising career ahead of him as an accomplished painter of attractive rural scenes. The high quality of work in his one surviving sketchbook from this period certainly confirms this.

Palmer, however, found popular landscape painting unchallenging. Fortunately he was quickly introduced to an alternative approach by fellow landscape painter John Linnell. Although a sharp-eyed naturalist himself, Linnell appreciated the visionary and venerated Blake, whom he introduced to Palmer in 1824. The meeting was to transform Palmer's life and art. Thrilling to Blake's own work, Palmer also followed Blake in admiring the firm draughtsmanship and expressive forms of artists of the 15th and early 16th centuries, notably Michelangelo and Dürer. In particular, Palmer became fascinated by the vigorous visual language of early engravings and set out to emulate it in his own work. Nothing shows this change more fully than the extraordinary sketchbook of 1824 (see p.34). Palmer's manner of sketching could hardly be more different. Whereas in his earlier work he explored atmosphere and tonalities, here he stresses lines and textures. In one drawing, he turns the crown of a tree into a unique pattern of fascinating complexity – at once individual and infinite. Although much work from this exciting period has been lost, there is a set of six sepias at the Ashmolean Museum, Oxford, that show how Palmer used his new vision in finished works. All show local, intimate forms of scenery transformed by a fresh perception. In *Valley with a Bright Cloud* (see p.34) a tender spring day is enlivened by the exhilarating appearance of a bright cloud looming through the trees.

At about this time Palmer drew together a group of like-minded young artists. Calling themselves 'The Ancients' they turned their backs on the modern world and sought what they called the 'revival of art' by going back to the Middle Ages. They were one of the earliest of the 'breakaway' artistic groups that have become such a pattern in modern art. In many ways they were the precursors of the Pre-Raphaelite brotherhood.

Still in his twenties, Palmer also sought to withdraw from modernity physically, by retiring to Shoreham. He first visited the Kent village probably in 1824, but lived there more or less permanently from 1827 to 1835, accompanied occasionally by members of 'The Ancients'.

Above left: *Cornfield by Moonlight, with the Evening Star*, by Samuel Palmer, *c.*1830; right: *A Hilly Scene*, by Samuel Palmer, *c.*1824–6 (©Tate Gallery)

Above: *Tree Studies* from Palmer's sketchbook, begun in February 1824; above right: *The Lonely Tower*, an etching of 1879; below right: *The Valley with a Bright Cloud*, 1825 (Ashmolean Museum, Oxford); below: *Classical River Scene*, *c.*1878

This was where Palmer was able to realise his vision most fully. Nowadays we wonder at the boldness of this work – so original for an artist working in the early 19th century – apparently predicting so much that was to take place in art afterwards. We have to remember, however, that most of what we admire in Palmer was painted effectively for himself. Fortunately he had a legacy from his grandfather which enabled him to paint for a time without need of commission. Not that there was anything amateurish about his art. He was completely serious in his profession and exhibited regularly. Towards the end of his time at Shoreham – when funds were running out – he strove to produce works which would have a broader appeal, combining his wonder at the mysteriousness of nature with a carefully controlled and highly accomplished

manner of painting. The result was some of his finest creations, such as the *Sleeping Shepherd*, with its mesmerising moonlight. But he had no more luck selling these than his most experimental work.

Palmer left Shoreham in 1835, returning to London. He began to travel – first to the West and Wales and then in 1837 to Italy. His painting, while remaining high in quality, became more conventional. It was a period, as he later put it, when 'real life began'. He married and had three children. Times were hard, but gradually professional recognition came. He developed a beautiful, melancholic, yet lyrical style as a watercolourist (bottom left) and also became respected as an etcher, a printing method he began to practise around 1850.

In 1861 Palmer was deeply traumatised by the death of his favourite son, Thomas More, after a long and painful illness. He became reclusive, retiring to Redhill in Surrey. Yet this new retreat also brought a return to vision. This is perhaps best seen in a cycle of illustrations for works by John Milton, first painted in watercolours of which some were then turned into etchings. One of these, *The Lonely Tower* (above), is widely regarded as his late masterpiece. It comes from Milton's *Il Penseroso* and depicts the 'lonely tower' in which the poem's narrator spends his nights studying the stars. There is a haunting mood to this finely wrought print that later caused the poet W.B. Yeats to speak of Palmer's 'mysterious wisdom won by toil'.

Palmer was rediscovered in the early 20th century when his experimental Shoreham works became a talisman for artists like Graham Sutherland and John Piper who were seeking to forge an art that was both modern and expressive of a British visionary tradition. Now the British Museum is holding an exhibition to celebrate the bicentenary of the birth of this great British painter. It is time for him to be rediscovered yet again.

'Vision and Landscape: The Art of Samuel Palmer (1805–81)' is on view to 8 January. The exhibition is sponsored by the American Friends of the British Museum. The catalogue is published by BM Press (£25). For events and gallery talks, see Museum's 'What's On' or www.thebritishmuseum.ac.uk.