



Collection Selection Box
Trees in British Art

V&A

Introduction

Trees have played an important part in the development of the landscape painting tradition in Britain, and around the world. Representations of trees range from the portrait-like to the visionary. Their delicate proportions, complicated textures and dynamic movements in the undulating currents of the wind have made trees an attractive subject for artists looking to demonstrate their technical ability across a variety of mediums, from pencil to watercolour to printmaking. An artist could make use of the picturesque atmosphere provided by a wooded area, where the play of light and shade can provoke different impressions. The often abstract entwining of branches and trunks provides a great variety of elements with which the artist can play with. Trees have also become evocative subjects in the work of romantic painters, where rural and wooded scenes become the focus of vivid explorations of colour and imagination.

In the first half of the 19th century, the publication of drawing manuals and the popular practice of sketching outdoors led to a much more scientific approach to tree drawing. John Constable (1776 – 1837), who did much to raise the stature of the landscape genre, was known for his particularly painstaking approach in his almost biographical depiction of trees in his work. In the same period, the romantic painter Samuel Palmer (1805 – 81) utilised trees as a vessel for his belief in the spiritual belief of landscape. His work was highly influential on Paul Nash (1889 – 1946) and his brother John Nash (1893 – 1977) and their seminal landscape work later in the 20th century.

Tracing the depiction of trees and wooded areas through art can also tell us broader stories about society. Attitudes towards landscape can be observed in the changing depiction of individuals within wooded areas, where people increasingly appear to use woods as spaces of leisure and recreation rather than as places of resource and work. We can even trace trends in the landscape gardening preferences of the land-owning upper class (or upper class families) by analysing the placement of trees in the highly cultivated landscapes captured in paintings they commissioned of their grand country estates and surrounding area.

Trees themselves are also rich in symbolism, built up over centuries of their interaction with society and culture. Mature trees, especially ancient oaks, have been depicted as emblems of continuity and the freedoms guaranteed by the British constitution. But trees have also become the focus for activities considered dangerous by ruling authorities. The liberty tree was a symbol of revolution, and the Tolpuddle Martyrs, whose attempts to found a trade union in 1834 led to their arrest and transportation to Australia as convicts, met under a sycamore tree.

'Into the Woods: Trees in Book Illustration' was on display at the V&A from June 2017 to January 2018. This resource was put together as part of a nationwide programme led by the Woodland Trust to mark the launch of the Charter for Trees, Woods and People in November 2017. The importance of appreciating and caring for our natural environment is increasingly recognised as the effects of the climate crisis are felt around the world.

There are three boxes available containing material related to trees in British Art. The contents of these boxes range from the 18th century to the recent past and provide an overview to the breadth of methods and meanings behind depictions of trees and demonstrating their versatile and pivotal role in the development of the landscape painting tradition. The objects have been selected by Christiana Payne, Professor Emerita of History of Art at Oxford Brookes University. Her book, *Silent Witnesses: Trees in British Art, 1760 – 1870* was published in September 2017.

Trees in British Art – Box 1

			
Samuel Hieronymous Grimm (1733 – 94) Fairlop Oak and Fairlop Fair 1774 England Watercolour Museum no. P.65-1921	Thomas Hearne (1744 – 1817) The River Teme at Downton, Herefordshire 1785 – 86 England Indian ink and sepia Museum no. 2933–1876	Francis Towne (1739 – 1816) Convent of St Efremo, 1781 Naples, Italy Watercolour Museum no. D.954-1904	John Constable (1776 – 1837) Trees at East Bergholt 1817 England Pencil drawing Museum no. 256-1888

		
Samuel Palmer (1805 – 81) Landscape with a Barn Shoreham, Kent 1828 England Watercolour Museum no. P.88-1937	John Nash (1893 – 1977) Whitelaf About 1928 England Watercolour Museum no. P.24-1928	Irvine Loudon (1924 – 2015) Wytham Oak 1992 England Etching on paper Museum no. E.49-2018

Samuel Hieronymous Grimm (1733 – 94)
Fairlop Oak and Fairlop Fair
1774
England
Watercolour
Museum no. P.65-1921



The Fairlop Oak in Hainault Forest, near the East End of London, was a famous tree celebrated for its role in bringing a community together, even long after the tree itself had died. The annual Fairlop Fair was founded around 1720 by Daniel Day, an eccentric philanthropist. In 1775, having made the move to England from Paris, the Swiss-born watercolourist Samuel Hieronymus Grimm exhibited this watercolour of the fair, in which the fairgoers look well-to-do and decorously behaved.

In the changed circumstances of the 1790s, when public gatherings raised fears of sedition, attempts were made to curb the fair. In 1805 a fire, lit by picnickers, accidentally destroyed much of the Fairlop Oak, and it was finally blown down in a gale in 1820. The fair continued, however, on the open space left by the tree and in the surrounding forest. It only ceased when the area was enclosed and the trees pulled down. The wood of the Fairlop Oak itself found a new role: it was used for the pulpits of a church at St Pancras. In 1837 *The Times* commented on this: *This tree was the contemporary of the Druids, and from its noble size probably was itself once the object of worship, having the parasite mistletoe removed from its branches by the golden sickle. That it should now be in the centre of Christian worship must excite reflection in all who are acquainted with its 'strange history'.*

Thomas Hearne (1744 – 1817)
The River Teme at Downton, Herefordshire
1785 – 86
England
Indian ink and sepia
Museum no. 2933–1876



In the 18th century, landowners and landscape gardeners in Britain devoted much time and resources to planting trees in order to create pleasing compositions, contrasting one species with another for the best effect. By the end of the century, the work of the prolific landscape gardener

'Capability' Brown came to be considered artificial, and the scholar Richard Payne Knight was among those who preferred a wilder use of trees. Reflecting this shift, the term 'picturesque', describing a landscape of idyllic beauty featuring prominent natural wildness, was brought into fashion in landscape painting by the writer William Gilpin in the late 18th century.

Thomas Hearne originally trained as an engraver until after an extended trip to the Leeward Islands of Antigua with Governor Sir Ralph Payne, when the painting of British topography and medieval architecture became his principal artistic preoccupation. Hearne painted a series of watercolours for Richard Payne Knight of his estate, Downton Vale in Herefordshire. Payne Knight had cut a path along both sides of the gorge adjoining his park. Apart from the occasional figure, paths, and the bridges, most of Hearne's watercolours suggest a 'natural' landscape, one in which the trees have propagated themselves, and in which the walker can immerse him or herself in the grandeur of rocks and water. Hearne later provided the illustrations for Payne Knight's didactic poem *The Landscape* (1794), in which he put forward his ideas regarding the picturesque and their application in landscape gardening.

In this scene, young ash trees arch gracefully over the river, and a rickety bridge provides a picturesque motif. The broad path on the right looks comfortable enough, but the rock-cut steps ascending into apparently impenetrable undergrowth introduce a more sinister note, suggesting the terror which was part of the romantic notion of the Sublime, a feeling of awe inspired by the natural world.

Francis Towne (1739 – 1816)
Convent of St Efremo, Naples
1781
Naples, Italy
Watercolour
Museum no. D.954-1904



Francis Towne spent much of his career as a drawing master in Exeter, where he had a successful teaching career instructing predominantly wealthy amateurs who would patronise his work. He struggled to make a name for himself as an oil painter, unsuccessfully applying for Associateship of the Royal Academy eight times, but is now much appreciated for his elegant watercolours, in which the precise lines and carefully balanced forms suggest a precocious abstraction. This drawing was made when Towne visited Naples with fellow artist Thomas Jones.

British landscape painters, visiting Italy in the 18th century, found the distinctive shapes of the trees very useful for giving an authentic touch to their pictures. The slender silhouettes of the cypresses on the left, and the umbrella-like forms of the stone pines behind the building are particularly evocative in this drawing of a convent near Naples.

John Constable (1776 – 1837)

Trees at East Bergholt

1817

England

Pencil drawing

Museum no. 256-1888



John Constable, alongside J.M.W Turner, are traditionally regarded as the foremost painters of their time who worked to raise the standing of landscape depiction to an equal footing with historical painting. While Turner's oeuvre was more wide-ranging, Constable singular approach was unrivalled, as he restricted his subjects to places he knew intimately, predominantly those in and around the Suffolk countryside.

In addition to his paintings, Constable's numerous drawn studies of trees were particularly painstaking in their attention to detail. They are invariably portraits of actual trees, and as far as we can tell they are remarkably accurate.

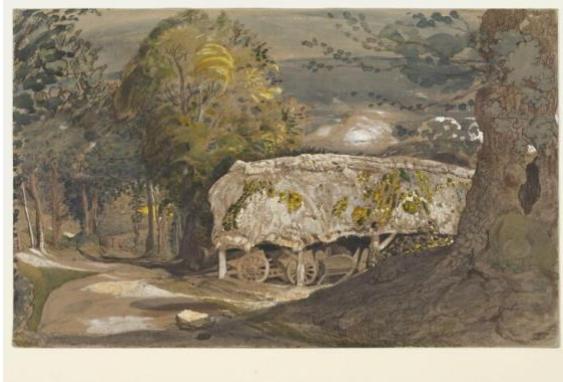
This careful drawing of black poplar trees on the towpath near Flatford Mill was made on the 17th October 1817. Constable's painting, *A Scene on a Navigable River* (Now known as Flatford Mill, Tate Britain) had been shown at the Royal Academy earlier that year, but had come back to Constable unsold. He was evidently dissatisfied with his painting of the trees and made this drawing to assist himself in a repainting of part of the canvas. The drawing is on the same scale as the painting, and it is faintly squared for transfer.

For a long time it was thought that these trees were elms, and they have only recently been identified as black poplars, a relatively rare tree. Constable's friend, the etcher Jacob George Strutt, described the black poplar as a classical tree, held by the ancients to be sacred to Hercules. He wrote that in calm weather 'drops of water ... hang upon its leaves, with the refreshing coolness of a summer shower.'

Comparison with other drawings by Constable of the same trees shows that he delineated their branches very accurately, recording idiosyncrasies that might have been seen as defects, such as the stumps on the foreground tree where branches have been cut off, and the irregular silhouette of the further tree.

Constable made many beautiful drawings of trees. Some of the best examples are in the Victoria and Albert Museum's collection: Elm Trees in Old Hall Park, East Bergholt (1817) (Museum no. 320-1891) and Fir Trees at Hampstead (1820) (Museum no. 251-1888) may also be seen in the Prints & Drawings Study Room, on request.

Samuel Palmer (1805 – 81)
Landscape with a Barn Shoreham, Kent
1828
England
Watercolour
Museum no. P.88-1937



Samuel Palmer was a key figure in the English Romantic painting movement. Trees acted as vehicles for his belief in the spiritual dimension of landscape, where everyday scenes take on mystical overtones. In the later 1820s and early 1830s Samuel Palmer lived at Shoreham in Kent, producing imaginative, nostalgic visions of a rural paradise. He received little attention in his lifetime, but has been much admired since his work was discovered by the neoromantics, a group who employed similarly imaginative approaches to landscape depiction, in the 1920s.

This is one of a series of drawings made for Palmer's older friend and mentor John Linnell. Linnell commissioned studies from nature of the scenery around Shoreham in an attempt to curb the wilder excesses of Palmer's deliberately unrefined style. Using watercolour and body colour, a thick opaque form of watercolour, Palmer gives a vivid impression of the varied textures on the barn roof and the dramatic contrasts of light and shade in this sunny landscape. On the right, an ancient hollow tree, probably an oak, provides a symbol of refuge. In another set of drawings made in the same year, Palmer studied the ancient oaks at Lullingstone Park. He wrote to Linnell of the difficulties he encountered: 'I have just been trying to draw a large [oak tree] in Lullingstone; but ... the moss, and rifts, and barky furrows, and the mouldering grey, tho' that adds majesty to the lord of forests; mostly catch the eye before the grasp and grapple of roots; the muscular belly and shoulders; the twisted sinews'.

John Nash (1893 – 1977)
Whiteleaf
About 1928
England
Watercolour
Museum no. P.24-1928

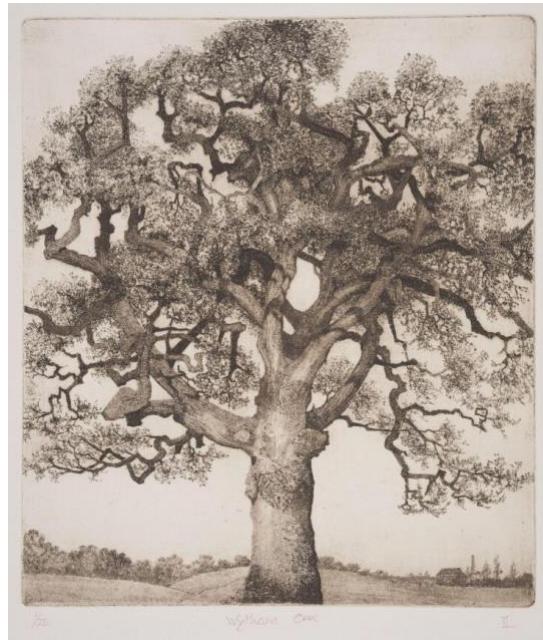


John Nash, whose brother Paul was also an acclaimed artist, is best known for his work produced during his appointment as an Official War Artist during World War One. He would later become accomplished with an atmospheric, ambiguous approach to landscape painting influenced by the work of his associates in the Bloomsbury group of modernist artists.

Nash was a sensitive painter of trees. Both John and Paul had great admiration for Samuel Palmer and his approach to landscape painting with its mystical associations. In the 1920s John Nash painted trees and woodland at Whiteleaf, Princes Risborough. He was fascinated by the stark contrasts visible in landscape in the winter, when the structure of the trees was revealed, and by the feeling of inner calm produced by the interior of a wood.

In this simple scene he contrasts the colours and shapes of different types of tree in early spring. While some of the trees are bare, others are coming into leaf, and the evergreen bushes and low trees make contrasting dark silhouettes. The path leads to a fence, but beyond there is a tantalising glimpse of a sunlit valley.

Irvine Loudon (1924 – 2015)
Wytham Oak
1992
England
Etching on paper
Museum no. E.49-2018



Loudon combined a career in medicine with a career in drawing and etching. He took up sketching during the Second World War and later learnt to etch at the Oxford Printmakers Co-operative. He became an Associate of the Royal Society of Painter-Printmakers in 1995 and a Fellow in 1999. He exhibited mostly at Bankside Gallery, London; the Oxford Art Society and the Dolphin Gallery, Wantage. Irvine Loudon chose to depict buildings, architectural details as well as landscapes and landscape details.

Wytham Woods, Oxfordshire is an area of ancient semi-natural woodland that has been owned and managed by the University of Oxford since 1942. This print is typical of his work with its attention to detail and fine use of the technique of etching to bring out the dynamic textures of the tree's trunk and branches.

Trees in British Art – Box 2

			
<p>Paul Sandby (1731 – 1809) Forest Scene, Sheep Resting Late 18th – early 19th century England Painting with distemper Museum no. Dyce.744</p>	<p>John White Abbott (1764 – 1851) View near Canonteign, Devon 1803 England Watercolour Museum no. P.60-1923</p>	<p>John Constable (1776 – 1837) Study of Ash Trees 1817 England Pencil drawing Museum no. 252-1888</p>	<p>Richard Redgrave (1804 – 88) Parkhurst Woods 1865 England Watercolour Museum no. 184-1889</p>

			
<p>Richard Redgrave (1804 – 88) Study of Tree Stems at St George's Hill, Abinger About 1853 England Black chalk drawing Museum no. 211-1889</p>	<p>Andrew MacCallum (1821 – 1902) Study of Beeches at Epping 1858 England Watercolour Museum no. FA.348</p>	<p>Edmund George Warren (1834–1909) In the Wood 1866 England Watercolour Museum no. 42-1892</p>	<p>Graham Sutherland (1903–1980) Pecken Wood England 1925 Etching Museum no. Circ.635-1962</p>

Paul Sandby (1731 – 1809)
Forest Scene, Sheep Resting
Late 18th – early 19th century
England
Painting with distemper
Museum no. Dyce.744



Paul Sandby's older brother, Thomas (1721 – 98), was an eminent architect and topographical draughtsman. In 1743 he was appointed to the role of Deputy Ranger of Windsor Great Park, Berkshire, by the Duke of Cumberland, a position he held for the remainder of his life. Paul joined him here, and the two brothers became important pioneers of naturalistic tree painting in 18th century British art. This painting shows a beech wood in autumn, with a beautiful drift of copper-coloured leaves. The work is worn away in places, especially on the right.

In the 18th century wooded areas were primarily sources of food, fuel, timber and shelter. Pigs would be taken into the woods to graze on acorns, trees would be lopped for firewood and squatters would build makeshift cottages. In the 19th century the woods began to be seen as places for middle-class recreation, and groups were often shown picnicking under the trees in scenes such as this one.

Though Paul initially followed in the footsteps of his brother as a military draughtsman he found great success in his landscape painting and teaching roles. He was made a founding member of both the Society of Art and the Royal Academy, despite the general consensus of the period that considered landscape as an inferior genre.

John White Abbott (1764 – 1851)
View near Canonteign, Devon
1803
England
Watercolour
Museum no. P.60-1923



John White Abbott was a patron and pupil of the artist Francis Towne, supporting his artistic ventures through his work as an apothecary and surgeon in Exeter. He was an Honorary Exhibitor of landscape oils at the Royal Academy from 1793 – 1805 and from 1810 – 12.

This drawing of an ash tree clinging on gracefully to a rocky hillside, with further trees beyond, was completed on the 7th of September 1803. He has paid careful attention to the branching of the trees in this watercolour, but he has used conventional strokes to suggest the foliage. The painting is made on several sheets of paper stuck onto another sheet. It is likely that the drawing was done on the spot and the colour added later in the studio.

Ash trees were valued for their lightness and delicacy. Useful as a timber tree, the ash was common in woods and forests, but less often chosen as an ornamental tree because its season is relatively short: it is slow to produce leaves in the spring and loses them earlier than other trees in the autumn.

In *Forest Scenery* (1791), writer William Gilpin's multi-volume book on the picturesque and compositional qualities of the tree, Gilpin begins his section on the ash with the ancient Roman poet Virgil's line 'fraxinus in sylvis pulcherrima', meaning 'the ash is the most beautiful tree in the woods'. Gilpin further declared, in a much quoted characterisation, that the oak was 'the Hercules of the forest, the ash its Venus'.

John Constable (1776 – 1837)
Study of Ash Trees
1817
England
Pencil drawing
Museum no. 252-1888



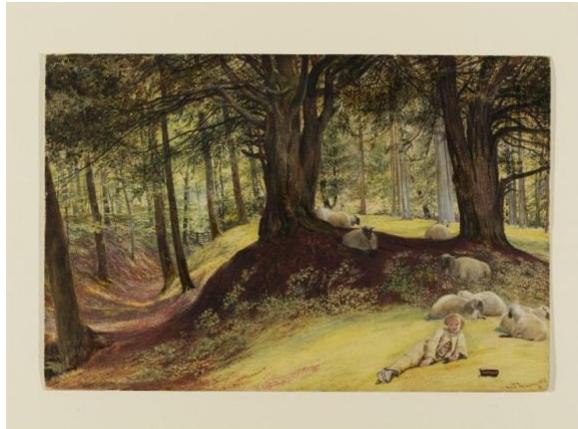
According to his biographer, Charles Robert Leslie, the ash was Constable's favourite tree. He was not alone in this preference: Joseph Holden Pott, who wrote the important *Essay on Landscape Painting* (1782), was full of praise for the ash. He wrote 'The ash is the most elegant of all trees, affording to the painter an opportunity of displaying the neatness and precision of his pencil more than any other ... its slender and graceful branches admit the light through all parts ... and, when well handled upon canvas, afford a sharpness and delicacy not to be equalled.'

This drawing was made in Hampstead, and dates from 1819 or 1820. Later on, in his lectures on landscape in the 1830s, Constable spoke at length about the indignities inflicted on a beautiful ash tree, almost certainly the one represented in the foreground of this drawing:

'Many of my Hampstead friends may remember this young lady at the entree to the village. Her fate was distressing, for it is scarcely too much to say that she died of a broken heart. I made this drawing when she was in full health and beauty; on passing some time afterwards, I saw, to my grief, that a wretched board had been nailed to her side, on which was written in large letters, 'All vagrants and beggars will be dealt with according to law.' The tree seemed to have felt the disgrace, for even then some of the top branches had withered. Two long spike nails had been driven into her sides. In another year one half became paralysed, and not long after the other shared the same fate, and this beautiful creature was cut down to a stump, just high enough to hold the board'.

The V&A holds two other drawings of an ash tree (Museum nos. 843-1888, 1248-1888), which Constable would have used as illustration to his lectures. The first is similar to this one though is drawn on blue paper emphasising the mid-tones of the illustration, while the second shows a tree with a board nailed to its trunk.

Richard Redgrave (1804 – 88)
Parkhurst Woods
1865
England
Watercolour
Museum no. 184-1889

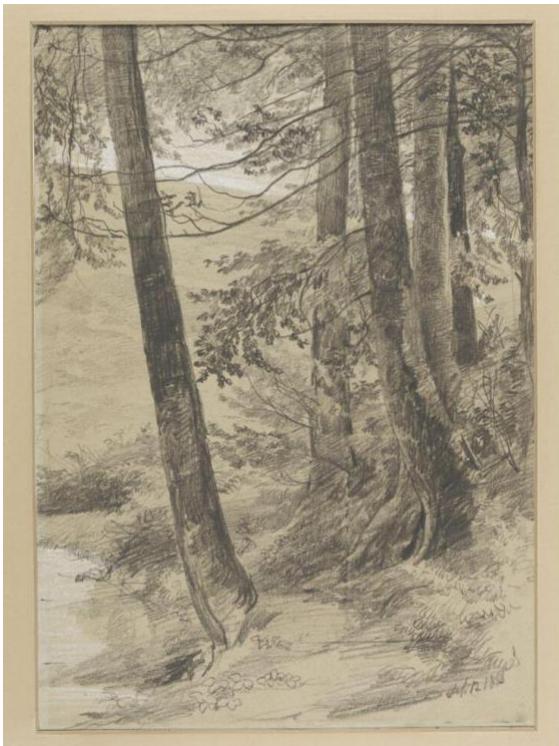


In the mid-19th century, the cool recesses of the woods were seen as desirable retreats from the heat and crowds of the cities. They became increasingly important as recreational areas for the middle and eventually lower class. Artists responded to these changes by producing appealing representations of forest glades, with sunlight shining through leaves and chequered shade on the ground.

Richard Redgrave was the first Keeper of Paintings at the South Kensington Museum, which in 1899 became the Victoria and Albert Museum. He had a very successful career as an administrator, but he was also renowned in his lifetime as a landscape painter. In 1853 a critic admired his exhibits at the Royal Academy, writing that 'Mr. Redgrave abounds in woodland scenery, touched with a lightness and an airiness which we look for in vain elsewhere.'

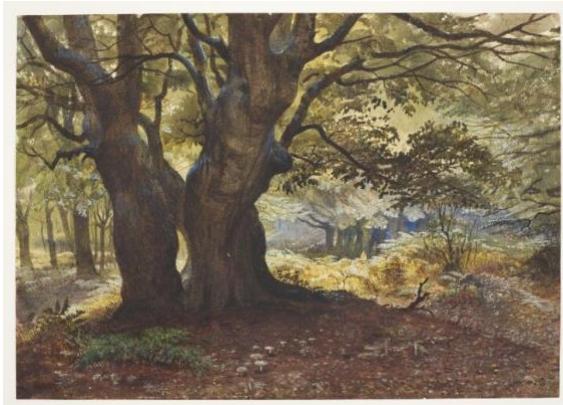
Redgrave had a house at Abinger, Surrey, where he painted landscapes for recreation. This is one of the exquisite small works which remained in his collection and were donated to the museum after his death. It demonstrates a highly sophisticated understanding of filtered, dappled and reflected light in a beech wood. Two mature yew trees, their roots clinging to exposed earth banks, provide a dark foreground feature, against which the sunlit grass and beech leaves look all the more dazzlingly bright. Sheep rest under the trees and a small boy, looking rather too well dressed to be a shepherd, lies in the sunlight, gazing towards the observer.

Richard Redgrave (1804 – 88)
Study of Tree Stems at St George's Hill,
Abinger
About 1853
England
Black chalk drawing
Museum no. 211-1889



Redgrave painted many woodland scenes, and this is one of the chalk drawings he made in preparation for them. Here he pays particular attention to the stems of the trees, probably young Scots pines. He has tried out different methods of shading on the tree trunks, using vertical, horizontal and diagonal strokes. The drawing is dated, lower right: the date of 12th September is clear, the year less so but it is probably 1853.

Andrew MacCallum (1821 – 1902)
Study of Beeches at Epping
1858
England
Watercolour
Museum no. FA.348



In the 1850s, the Pre-Raphaelites introduced a more detailed method of painting from nature, influencing many other artists. The writings of the leading critic John Ruskin, and the availability of woodland photography, also encouraged the delineation of foreground detail, such as the ferns and mushrooms seen here. The beech woods of southern England were a popular place for recreation and subject for artists during the 19th century.

Andrew MacCallum, born in Nottingham was originally apprenticed into the hosiery firm his father worked for, William Gibson & Sons. At the age of 22 he became a student of the new Nottingham School of Design, and he established himself as a landscape painter and teacher.

MacCallum's study of two old beech trees, their branches intertwined, is executed in thick body colour, a thick opaque form of watercolour, allowing for a strong contrast between the dark trunks and the bright sunlight beyond. Epping Forest, being close to London, was a popular sketching ground for artists. In the 1870s campaigns were fought to preserve it from development for housing, ensuring that it would be available to the public in perpetuity.

Edmund George Warren (1834—1909)

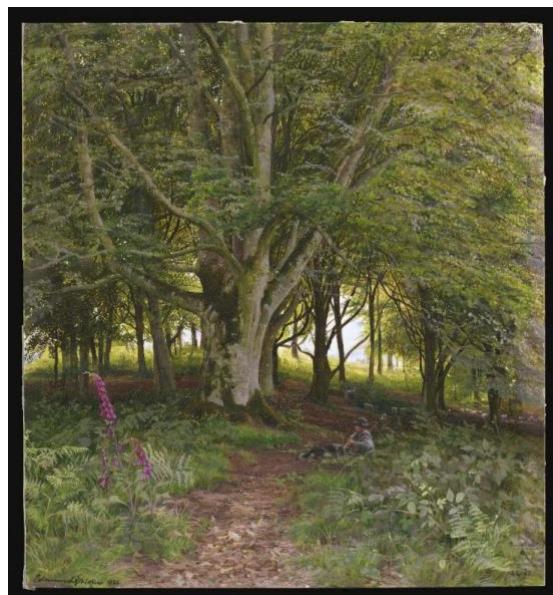
In the Wood

1866

England

Watercolour

Museum no. 42-1892



Edmund Warren followed in the footsteps of his father Henry (1794 – 1879), a painter who was made President of the New Society of Painters in Water Colours in 1839. Edmund was noted for his intensely detailed treatment of woodland scenes. He was accused of creating his work from copying photographs, but his work shows more detail than a photograph could have achieved in the period.

Here again, the foreground of dead leaves, brambles, ferns and foxgloves is expertly executed. A sense of repose is provided by a shepherd boy with his dog and pipe (though he seems rather far away from his sheep). The glimpses of the edges of the wood, with sunny fields, a cottage roof and distant blue hills, add to the idyllic effect.

The Victoria and Albert Museum also holds Warren's masterpiece, Rest in the Cool and Shady Wood (Museum no. 1212-1886), a very large watercolour which was exhibited to great acclaim at the New Society of Painters in Watercolour in 1861.

Graham Sutherland (1903 – 80)

Pecken Wood

1925

England

Etching

Museum no. Circ.635-1962



Graham Sutherland began his career producing etchings of rural life before transitioning to painting, finding success in both landscape and portraiture. He is also known for his depictions of bomb damage during his period as an Official War Artist, and his design for the tapestry in the new Coventry Cathedral.

During his student years Sutherland was one of a group of young artists in the printmaking school of Goldsmith's College in South London who were excited by the works of Samuel Palmer and sought to emulate their intensity of vision. In this rural scene the dark wood on the left, and the tall, spindly trees in the distance create a magical atmosphere, with its suggestion of a timeless agricultural cycle.

Trees in British Art – Box 3

			
<p>John Robert Cozens (1752 – 97) Gardens of the Villa Pamphili, Rome About 1782 Italy Watercolour Museum no. P.41-1934</p>	<p>Samuel Palmer (1805 – 81) Nocturnal landscape with full moon and deer About 1829 – 30 England Pen and ink drawing Museum no. E.644-1920</p>	<p>John Constable (1776 – 1837) Oak Tree in a Hayfield About 1810 – 19 England Pencil drawing Museum no. 357-1888</p>	<p>John Constable (1776 – 1837) Root of a Tree at Hampstead 1831 England Pencil drawing Museum no. 352-1888</p>

			
<p>Samuel Palmer (1805 – 81) Page from a sketchbook 1824 England Pen and pencil drawing Museum no. E.3512-1928</p>	<p>Samuel Palmer (1805 – 81) The Primitive Cottage, Shoreham About 1829 England Pen and ink drawing, heightened with white Museum no. E.452-1953</p>	<p>John William North (1842 – 1924) 1914 in England 1914 England Watercolour Museum no. P.12-1914</p>	<p>Paul Nash (1889 – 1946) Broken Trees, Wytschaete 1917 England Ink and chalk drawing Museum no. P.7-1960</p>

John Robert Cozens (1752 – 97)
Gardens of the Villa Pamphili, Rome
About 1782
Italy
Watercolour
Museum no. P.41-1934



John Robert Cozens made two trips abroad in the company of patrons, who employed him to paint watercolours of the places they visited. In 1776 he went to the Swiss Alps and Italy with Richard Payne Knight; in 1782 he went to Italy with William Beckford, the eccentric owner of Fonthill in Wiltshire.

Beckford was a great lover of trees. When in Rome he found the heat and the noise overwhelming, and he sought solace in the peaceful villa gardens. He and Cozens shared a taste for melancholy, and so the dark cypress trees in this watercolour would have held particular appeal for them. Cypress were associated with death, and often planted in graveyards or next to tombs.

Cozens' work was described by artist John Constable as being 'all poetry'.

Samuel Palmer (1805 – 81)
Nocturnal landscape with full moon and deer
About 1829 – 30
England
Pen and ink drawing
Museum no. E.644-1920



This is one of the monochrome paintings Palmer produced during his time at the Shoreham in Kent, England. It is likely that the landscape was drawn from nature in this area. This series of works often includes the moon, billowing clouds and solitary figures. Palmer was striving to express the otherworldly effects of moonlight, and the fantastic forms of the trees play an important role in his vision. The dense and freely-drawn trees are silhouetted against the bright full moon, and their forms seem to sway in movement, as if they are just as alive as the human figure standing in the foreground.

Samuel Palmer is one of the most poetic of British painters, his paintings are evocative, suggestive, dreamy. He wrote about reading 'a Great Gorge of old poetry to get up the dreaming'.

John Constable (1776 – 1837)
Oak Tree in a Hayfield
About 1810 – 19
England
Pencil drawing
Museum no. 357-1888



Constable rarely drew or painted oak trees: he seems to have preferred ash, elm, willow and poplar. This was unusual for his time, and somewhat puzzling, given Constable's great affection for trees. 'Portraits' of individual trees were a recurring subject in Constable's work. The year of this drawing is unknown, but Constable has noted on the back that it was done on 22 July, in the afternoon.

It is a beautifully composed study. The spreading canopy of the oak tree frames a view of haycocks in a field; the labourers with their scythes shelter underneath it perhaps enjoying a lunch break. The drawing suggests a stable rural world in which everyone knows their place.

John Constable (1776 – 1837)
Root of a Tree at Hampstead
1831
England
Pencil drawing
Museum no. 352-1888



Constable made this drawing on 22 September 1831. He was, presumably, impressed by the tenacity of the tree and the way it hangs on to a stony hillside. The drawing dates from a time in the artist's life when he was suffering ill-health, and was saddened by the deaths of old friends. In July of the same year, he wrote that his loss 'makes one cling to what is left'.

Samuel Palmer (1805 – 81)
Page from a sketchbook
1824
England
Pen and pencil drawing
Museum no. E.3512-1928



This is a loose page from Palmer's 1824 sketchbook, the greater part of which is in the British Museum. It has drawings on both sides: on the other side of this sheet are sketches of a line of shrubs, with the trunks of two spindly trees along the bottom.

The 1824 sketchbook contains studies from nature interspersed with imaginative ideas for compositions. The tree forms are partly inspired by the work of German Renaissance artist Albrecht Durer, and partly from nature. Palmer has used pen and ink to give strong outlines, following the principles of his mentor, artist William Blake. Fine vertical strokes, circular loops, and tiny dots indicate the different textures of bark. This sketch of tree trunks exemplifies Palmer's idiosyncratic experimentation with different forms of outline as he tried out ways of drawing natural forms. Samuel Palmer was one of the most unconventional and experimental draughtsmen of his generation.

Samuel Palmer (1805 – 81)
The Primitive Cottage, Shoreham
About 1829
England
Pen and ink drawing, heightened with white
Museum no. E.452-1953



The fantastic tree shapes that appear even in Palmer's more naturalistic drawings do much to make them appear 'visionary', and help to explain why he was so much admired by Paul Nash. Nash famously said 'trees are people' but Palmer had anticipated this remark. In his 1824 sketchbook he declares 'sometimes trees are seen as men. I saw once a princess walking stately with a majestic train'

In his Shoreham period, Samuel Palmer deliberately adopted a 'primitive' style, aiming to see nature with a child's simple feeling and humility. His study of early Renaissance masters, particularly Albrecht Durer, and his admiration for the visionary poet and painter William Blake, led him to use strong outlines and exaggerated forms.

The museum also holds Palmer's well-known drawing of a tree in blossom 'In a Shoreham Garden' (about 1830). This may be viewed on request.

John William North (1842 – 1924)

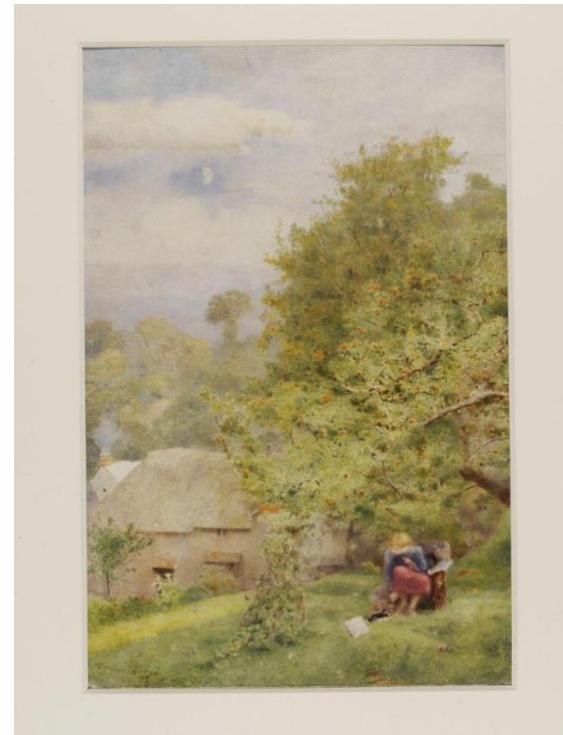
1914 in England

1914

England

Watercolour

Museum no. P.12-1914



Healthy trees can be symbolic of a peaceful, flourishing country. This watercolour was given to the museum by the artist in 1914. It represents an idyllic vision of England on the brink of World War One, the abundant apple tree and the thatched cottage reminiscent of the work of Samuel Palmer. North stated that the drawing 'especially illustrates a system of painting which is of great service where the extreme of finish is an advantage'. Ironically, however, parts of the watercolour have become fuzzy over time. This watercolour is in stark contrast to 'Broken Trees, Wytschaete' (Museum no. P.7- 1960) by Paul Nash, painted only a few years later, in the midst of World War One.

Paul Nash (1889 – 1946)

Broken Trees, Wytschaete

1917

England

Ink and chalk drawing

Museum no. P.7-1960



Nash often uses broken trees as a symbol of the loss of human life, and the devastation of the natural environment, caused by war. The sombre colouring and the threatening clouds create a hellish vision. The sun struggles to break through the clouds. Lengths of tree trunk lie shattered on the ground, like the bodies of dead soldiers. Wytschaete was the site of a battle in Belgium during World War One. The drawing is dated 2/11/17 on the back.