

Catalogue Preface

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It is one of the curiosities of late eighteenth-century watercolor painting that the name of the Anglo-Swiss painter Samuel Hieronymus Grimm appears frequently in most histories of the genre, but no monograph on him has been published since 1941. That slender volume has remained the basic guide to Grimm's enormous body of drawings, sepias, and watercolors, despite a spate of new information that has come to light intermittently in recent years. The author of the monograph was Rotha Mary Clay, an unusual scholar to undertake the task. She appears to have had no formal training as an art historian, nor any experienced knowledge of the rich realm of watercolor painting. Born in 1878, she was the fourth of twelve children whose parents, the Rev. John Harden Clay and Elizabeth Spencer Bagnold, gave her the distinctive first name after the bucolic River Rothay in the Lake District. Although little is known about her childhood, there is no record that she was ever formally educated outside the family circle; she did not attend university and appears to have been self-taught, chiefly on the esoteric subject of medieval English social and theological concerns. Her first book, *The Mediaeval Hospitals of England*, was published in 1909, an extensive panorama of the importance of these institutions within a sociological context. It was fitting that in her list of thirty plates, two were by Grimm, *The Chapel of St Edmund, Spital-on-the-Street* and *The Chapel of St. Edmund the Archbishop, Gateshead*. Her second book, *The Hermits and Anchorites of England*, published five years later and still consulted, likewise included two drawings by Grimm as background illustrations but contained little commentary on them. For the following twenty-seven years, Clay published no works until her study of Grimm appeared.

Under these circumstances, it is evident that the standard Grimm monograph can be viewed with mixed results. The text itself is a mere one hundred pages, sometimes written in abbreviated paragraphs, or in the form of "examples" of his art with locations indicated according to sources available at that time. While Clay at once established essential chronological and biographical data on Grimm, especially his life before his London career when much of his most formidable works were produced, there is in retrospect only modest discussion of his art, even though the 118 plates she included are valuable visual records. Many of these were derived from works in private collections that can no longer be traced after seven decades, including various works in her own collection at the time but which have subsequently dispersed, some sold or donated to established English museums.

Since Clay's monograph appeared, Grimm's paintings continued to be included in various studies of British watercolors and in some exhibitions, but his works were hardly examined in scholarly papers or in the context of the development of watercolor topographical drawing in Britain. When he was cited, it was with some admiration in the scope of his remarkable achievement. In 1983, however, Paul Joyner of the National Library of Wales mounted an exhibition that included 109 works of his, mostly from his Welsh sojourn in 1777, while the sparse catalogue contained only thirteen illustrations. Of those in the exhibition, eighty-six came from the collection of the Library; the others from various collections in Britain. In the next two decades, mention of Grimm followed the same course, with various citations, pictures exhibited from time to time and histories proclaiming their intrinsic artistic, sociological and topographical value. Auction houses often had an isolated watercolor or drawing for sale, but the prices demanded revealed little appreciation for his art.

It is not surprising therefore that no exhibition wholly devoted to his works in a panoramic sense has been mounted either in England, his land of adoption, or Switzerland, his land of birth. One can account for this strange situation in many ways. The sheer breadth of his production was such that any selection is a significantly difficult task, all the more because many of his works are bound in books kept by different patrons. Another problem is that many of his works have been neither published nor photographed, making a study of his gigantic opus especially challenging. The present exhibition is consequentially a highly selective corpus of his works that derive from public and private collections, mostly in England where much of his art was commissioned and collected. Nevertheless, the material exhibited here is sufficient, one hopes, to revive interest in the extensiveness and importance of Grimm's work as a pioneer topographer and historian of English antiquities at a time when such considerations were still in their infancy.