SMETHAM COLLECTION

Oxford Centre for Methodism and Church History

OXFORD BROOKES UNIVERSITY
SMETHAM COLLECTION

Historical Background

James Smetham (1821-1889) was an artist, poet, and teacher. He was born into a family with strong Wesleyan Methodist connections in Pateley Bridge, Yorkshire. In adulthood, he chiefly supported himself as a drawing master at Westminster College, London. There, he met Sarah Goble, a music teacher. They married in 1854, and had six children. He was a correspondent of Dante Gabriel Rossetti, John Ruskin, Ford Madox Brown, and others in Pre-Raphaelite circles; especially William Davies, who later edited his poems and letters. Smetham’s artworks, produced in a variety of genres and mainly small in scale, were not commercially viable during his lifetime. Most characteristic of Smetham’s artistic outputs were his prolific visual ‘squarings’ and literary ‘ventilators’. His mental health collapsed in 1877, and he spent much of the final decade of his life in seclusion. After his death, Sarah Smetham greatly encouraged his artistic legacy.

Custodial History

Having descended through the Smetham family, the collection was deposited with Westminster College c1997 and subsequently bequeathed to Oxford Brookes University by the artist’s great-great-grandson Bruce Smetham in 2016. The collection includes 46 original paintings and etchings by James Smetham, and seven further works by other artists at SME/1/1-4. Notebooks, sketchbooks, and correspondence of James Smetham are at SME/1/5-6. Volumes compiled by others (Sarah Smetham and William Davies) have been arranged at SME/1/7-8. Cuttings, modern notes, and other items added to the collection have been grouped together at SME/2/1. Materials created in support of the Smetham 2021 Bicentenary project are at SME/3/1.

Description

This collection comprises original artworks, notebooks, sketchbooks, and compiled volumes relating to the visual and literary output of James Smetham. SME/1/1 includes a self-portrait by Smetham and portraits of his family members. Other original paintings, watercolours and etchings in a variety of
genres are arranged at SME/1/2-3. SME/1/5/1-2,4 feature Smetham’s characteristic 'squarings' produced 1860s-1870s. An original 1865 letter from Dante Gabriel Rossetti to James Smetham at SME/1/6/1 discusses the religious content of Smetham’s artworks. SME/1/7 comprises volumes compiled by Sarah Smetham both prior to and following her husband’s death, and includes biographical accounts of the Smetham family and further original and copy correspondence. A volume of Smetham’s poetry transcribed by William Davies is at SME/1/8/1.

### Arrangement

- SME/1/1, portraits of Smetham family members
- SME/1/2, oils and watercolours by James Smetham
- SME/1/3, etchings and engravings by James Smetham
- SME/1/4, artworks by others
- SME/1/5, sketchbooks and notebooks of James Smetham
- SME/1/6, correspondence of James Smetham
- SME/1/7, volumes compiled by Sarah Smetham
- SME/1/8, volumes compiled by William Davies
- SME/2/1, other documents
- SME/3/1, Smetham 2021 Bicentenary Project

### Dates

1840s-[21st cent.]

### Extent

53 artworks, three boxes of manuscript volumes and other material
SME/1/1 – PORTRAITS OF SMETHAM FAMILY MEMBERS

SME/1/1/1
Subject: Self Portrait
Date: 1855
Medium: Oil on board
Size: 4" x 3"

SME/1/1/2
Subject: Sarah Smetham
Date: 1854-60
Medium: Watercolour
Size: 4.5" x 4"

SME/1/1/3
Subject: Sarah Smetham and Baby John
Date: 1855
Medium: Oil on canvas
Size: 36" x 28"

SME/1/1/4
Artist: James Smetham
Subject: Rev. James Smetham (the artist’s father)
Date: 1840s
Medium: Oil on Canvas
Size: 24" x 30"
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Reference</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Medium</th>
<th>Size</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>SME/1/2/1</td>
<td>Barn near Bridge</td>
<td>Unknown</td>
<td>Watercolour</td>
<td>4.5&quot; x 3.5&quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SME/2/1/2</td>
<td>“That Beadsman, Old”</td>
<td>1869</td>
<td>Oil on canvas</td>
<td>12&quot; x 18&quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SME/2/1/3</td>
<td>An English House</td>
<td>1869</td>
<td>Watercolour</td>
<td>8.5&quot; x 5&quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SME/1/2/4</td>
<td>Flora</td>
<td>Unknown</td>
<td>Watercolour</td>
<td>5&quot; x 8.5&quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SME/1/2/5</td>
<td>Girl and Lamb by Gravestone</td>
<td>Unknown</td>
<td>Oil on panel</td>
<td>7.5&quot; x 12&quot;</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
SME/1/2/6

Subject: The Lobster Pot Mender
Date: Unknown
Medium: Watercolour
Size: 7” x 20”

SME/1/2/7

Subject: Hugh Miller watching for his father’s vessel
Date: 1866
Medium: Watercolour
Size: 27” x 16”

SME/1/2/8

Subject: Man in Wood
Date: Unknown
Medium: Oil on board
Size: 6” x 14”

SME/1/2/9

Subject: The Organ Grinder
Date: Unknown
Medium: Watercolour
Size: 4.75” x 7.75”

SME/1/2/10

Subject: A Pheasant in the Wood
Date: Unknown
Medium: Oil on board
Size: 8” x 10”
SME/1/2/11
Subject: A Pilgrim at Stonehenge
Date: c1875
Medium: Watercolour
Size: 4” x 13.5”

SME/1/2/12
Subject: “Piping down the Valleys wild”
Date: c1876
Medium: Oil on canvas
Size: 6” x 14”

SME/1/2/13
Subject: A Quiet Meadow (Eastbourne)
Date: 1854
Medium: Oil on panel
Size: 6” x 10”

SME/1/2/14
Subject: Riders in Landscape
Date: Unknown
Medium: Oil on panel
Size: 3.5” x 12”

SME/1/2/15
Subject: The Rose of Dawn
Date: 1870s
Medium: Watercolour
Size: 12” x 6.25”
SME/1/2/16

**Subject:** The Rose of Dawn  
**Date:** 1870s  
**Medium:** Oil on panel  
**Size:** 8.5" x 5"

SME/1/2/17

**Subject:** Seaside Scene  
**Date:** Unknown  
**Medium:** Oil on Board  
**Size:** 7" x 10"

SME/1/2/18

**Subject:** Shore Scene at Bognor  
**Date:** c1874  
**Medium:** Watercolour laid on board  
**Size:** 7" x 13.5"

SME/1/2/19

**Subject:** Woman by a Lake  
**Date:** Unknown  
**Medium:** Oil on Canvas  
**Size:** 8" x 20"

SME/1/2/20

**Subject:** Woman with Tambourine  
**Date:** 1864-8  
**Medium:** Oil on canvas  
**Size:** 6" x 6"  
**Notes:** Also known as ‘Irene with Tambourine’
SME/1/3 – ETCHINGS AND ENGRAVINGS BY JAMES SMETHAM

SME/1/3/1
Subject: The days of Noah
Date: c1860
Medium: Etching and engraving
Size: 5.5” x 4”
Notes: From ‘Studies from a Sketch Book 5 1/2’

SME/1/3/2
Subject: The days of Noah
Date: c1860
Medium: Etching and engraving
Size: 5.5” x 4”
Notes: From ‘Studies from a Sketch Book 5 1/2’

SME/1/3/3
Subject: The Death of Earl Siward
Date: c1860
Medium: Etching
Size: 6” x 3”
Notes: From ‘Studies from a Sketch Book 9’

SME/1/3/4
Subject: The Death of Earl Siward
Date: c1860
Medium: Etching
Size: 6” x 3”
Notes: From ‘Studies from a Sketch Book 9’
SME/1/3/5
Subject: The Dell
Date: c1860
Medium: Etching
Size: 4.5” x 4”
Notes: From ‘Studies from a Sketch Book 11’

SME/1/3/6
Subject: The Dell
Date: c1860
Medium: Etching
Size: 4.5” x 4”
Notes: From ‘Studies from a Sketch Book 11’

SME/1/3/7
Subject: “Forsake not the law of thy Mother”
Date: 1860
Medium: Etching and engraving
Size: 4” x 3”
Notes: From ‘Studies from a Sketch Book 1’

SME/1/3/8
Subject: “Forsake not the law of thy Mother”
Date: 1860
Medium: Etching and engraving
Size: 4” x 3”
Notes: From ‘Studies from a Sketch Book 1’
SME/1/3/9
Subject: Hugh Miller watching for his father’s vessel
Date: c1860
Medium: Etching and engraving
Size: 3" x 6.5"

SME/1/3/10
Subject: The Last Sleep
Date: Unknown
Medium: Etching and engraving
Size: 2" x 4"
Notes: From ‘Studies from a Sketch Book 2’

SME/1/3/11
Subject: The Last Sleep
Date: Unknown
Medium: Etching and Engraving
Size: 2" x 4"
Notes: From ‘Studies from a Sketch Book 2’

SME/1/3/12
Subject: The Lord of the Sabbath
Date: Unknown
Medium: Etching
Size: 4.5" x 6.5"
Notes: From ‘Studies from a Sketch Book 7’
| SME/1/3/13 | Subject: The Lord of the Sabbath | Date: Unknown | Medium: Etching | Size: 4.5" x 6.5" | Notes: From ‘Studies from a Sketch Book 7’ |
| SME/1/3/14 | Subject: Midsummer | Date: c1860 | Medium: Etching | Size: 4.5" x 6.5" | Notes: From ‘Studies from a Sketch Book 4’ |
| SME/1/3/15 | Subject: The Moorland Edge | Date: c1860 | Medium: Etching | Size: 3.5" x 5" | Notes: From ‘Studies from a Sketch Book 10’ |
| SME/1/3/16 | Subject: The Moorland Edge | Date: c1860 | Medium: Etching | Size: 3.5" x 5" | Notes: From ‘Studies from a Sketch Book 10’ |
SME/1/3/17
Subject: Mr Robert Levett
Date: c1860
Medium: Etching and engraving
Size: 4" x 4"

SME/1/3/18
Subject: The Resurrection of the Daisy
Date: c1860
Medium: Etching
Size: 4" x 6"
Notes: From ‘Studies from a Sketch Book 8’

SME/1/3/19
Subject: The Resurrection of the Daisy
Date: c1860
Medium: Etching
Size: 4" x 6"
Notes: From ‘Studies from a Sketch Book 8’

SME/1/3/20
Subject: Street Scene
Date: c1860
Medium: Etching
Size: 5" x 4"

SME/1/3/21
Subject: The Water Lily
Date: c1860
Medium: Etching
Size: 4" x 4.5"
Notes: From ‘Studies from a Sketch Book 4’
SME/1/3/22

Subject: The Water Lily
Date: c1860
Medium: Etching
Size: 4" x 4.5"
Notes: From ‘Studies from a Sketch Book 4’
SME/1/4 – ARTWORKS BY OTHERS

SME/1/4/1
**Artist:** Attrib. George Smetham  
**Subject:** Knights and Maiden on Horses  
**Date:** Unknown  
**Medium:** Watercolour  
**Size:** 5.5” x 13”

SME/1/4/2-4
**Artist:** William Davies  
**Subject:** “Smetham of the virtuous father, of virtuous son”  
**Date:** Unknown  
**Medium:** Etchings  
**Size:** 4” x 2.5”; 6” x 4”; 4.5” x 2.5”

SME/1/4/5
**Artist:** Sir John Everett Millais  
**Subject:** The Little Mother  
**Date:** Unknown  
**Medium:** Reproduction of an etching  
**Size:** 4” x 6”

SME/1/4/6
**Artist:** Unknown  
**Subject:** Galileo in Prison  
**Date:** Unknown  
**Medium:** Reproduction of a pencil sketch  
**Size:** 7.5” x 6”  
**Notes:** Inscribed to James Smetham
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>SME/1/4/7</strong></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Artist:</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Subject:</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Date:</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Medium:</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Size:</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Notes:</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
SME/1/5 – Sketchbooks and Notebooks of James Smetham

SME/1/5/1

Title: ‘Bible Studies by James Smetham’
Date(s): 1847-1900
Description: Inscription by Sarah Smetham addressed to ‘my dear Helen’, Oct 1900. ‘These Bible Studies were made between the years 1847 and 1877. They were originally drawn in common school exercise books: and were in this form shown to Mr Ruskin, who in his letter of acknowledgement dated [15 Nov 1854] says” I am quite amazed, almost awed, by the amount of talent, and industry, and thoughtfulness shown in these books of yours”. So they continued, gradually being enriched, till 1866 when Mrs M. C. Taylor came to visit us, and kindly Undertook the mounting of them in a thick volume James had recently purchased for a diary, and which he named his “Year Book”. This book I divided into three, and had them bound in their present form in 1896. The illustrative Scripture quotations were written by me.’ Also includes James Smetham’s ‘Journal’ of sketches and ‘squarings’ recorded daily from 7 Oct 1867-3 Oct 1868.

SME/1/5/2

Title: Bible Studies sketchbook
Date(s): [c. 1860s]
SME/1/5/3

Title: Studio notebook

Date(s): 1871-1873

Description: Includes details of Smetham’s artworks, materials, sources, and notes on his practice with occasional sketches. Also, autobiographical reflections.

p. 2, ‘the benefit began to me first in the book of engravings from the National Gallery obtained when I was 16 years old & which I have studied ever since’.

SME/1/5/4

Title: ‘Daily Journal’ sketchbook

Date(s): 1874-1877

Description: Includes sketches, ‘squarings’, notes, and other insertions (periodical clippings, etc.) recorded daily, Feb 1874 – 21 Sept 1877. ‘The last “square” cut out and gummed in end of MS poems’. See, SME/2/4/1. Rear of volume also includes poetry, and lists of Smetham’s artworks.
SME/1/6 – CORRESPONDENCE OF JAMES SMETHAM

SME/1/6/1
Title: Letter from Dante Gabriel Rossetti, to, James Smetham
Date(s): 10 Dec 1865
Description: Discusses the religious content of Smetham's works.
   ‘After thoroughly reading your friendly and earnest
   ‘ventilations’ …, I ought nevertheless to tell you that,
   where I said I should be happy to receive such, I did
   not anticipate that they would consist chiefly of religious
   enquiry and discussion. I had better tell you frankly at
   once that I have no such faith as you have’.

With descriptive exhibition panel, [20th cent.].
**SME/1/7/1**

**Title:** ‘Letters and Reminiscences’

**Date(s):** [c. 1840s]-[20th cent.]

**Description:** In two volumes. Biographical reminiscences of the lives of James and Sarah Smetham. Dated 1899 on p. 1. Includes Smetham family tree continued into the mid-20th cent. Other insertions in volume one include:

- p. 63, letter from James Smetham, to, his parents, [1844].
- p. 93, notes and sketches by James Smetham about attending lectures at Marlborough House, Oct 1853.
- p. 132, notes and sketch, ‘Mr. R. has gone and we are now masters of our own house, [c. 1850s].
- p. 152, letter from John Ruskin, to, James Smetham, 8 Feb 1857.
- p. 256, notes and sketch, acknowledging ‘a cheque which I dispatched to that great, big bugbear McQueen’ [c. 1860s].

Volume two includes:

- pp. 303-324. List of James Smetham’s paintings, 1899. Includes details of the year created, dimensions, and ownership.
SME/1/7/2

Title: ‘Family Letters and Memoranda, with some additional letters of J. S.’ notebook, volume 2

Date(s): 1867-1897

Description: Biographical reminiscences of the lives of James and Sarah Smetham. Includes copy letters from Dante Gabriel Rossetti, John Ruskin, and others. At rear, list of Smetham’s paintings with details of year created, dimensions, and ownership, 1844-1877. Other insertions include:

Inside front cover, sketch of the Old Rectory, Stoke Newington.

pp. 9-10, letter from John Smetham, to, Edwin Smetham, [1867].

pp. 9-10, letter from John Smetham, to, Sarah Smetham, August 1867. Discusses steeplejacks, with sketches.

SME/1/7/3

Title: ‘Life and Teaching of Jesus, being, A Mosaic of the four Gospels’ notebooks

Date(s): [19th cent.]

Description: Two volumes. Transcribed by Sarah Smetham. Dated ‘J. S.’, 6 November 1854 on vol. 1, p. 2. Indexes at rear of each volume.
SME/1/8 – VOLUMES COMPILED BY WILLIAM DAVIES

SME/1/8/1

Title: Poems by James Smetham

Date(s): 1869-1877

**SME/2/1/1**

**Title:** Extract from the ‘Letters of James Smetham’

**Date(s):** [20th cent.]

**SME/2/1/2**

**Title:** Periodical cuttings about James Smetham

**Date(s):** [20th cent.]

**Description:** Six items.

**SME/2/1/3**

**Title:** Notes, ‘A Plan for the Illustrations of the Bible’

**Date(s):** [20th cent.]

**Description:** With photocopy.

**SME/2/1/4**

**Title:** Envelopes relating to the Smetham family, and others

**Date(s):** [20th cent.]

**SME/2/1/5**

**Title:** Loose board with label of Oswald Doughty

**Date(s):** [20th cent.]

**SME/2/1/6**

**Title:** Backing paper from ‘Woman with a tambourine’

**Date(s):** [20th cent.]

**Description:** Artwork is at SME/1/2/20
SME/2/1/7
Title: Labels
Date(s): [20th cent.]
Description: Created when manuscripts from the collection were displayed at the Yale Center for British Art. Subsequently removed during in preparation for conservation work in 2020.

SME/2/1/8
Title: Exhibition display labels
Date(s): [20th cent.]

SME/2/1/9
Title: Copy article, ‘Rural Essex in the 19th Century, The Talented Artist Who Spent A Holiday Near Ongar’ by Jean R. Woolley
Date(s): [20th cent.]

SME/2/1/10
Title: Collection deposit record
Date(s): 1996

SME/2/1/11
Title: Copy extracts from the Commonwealth War Graves Commission about James Eric Smetham
Date(s): [21st cent.]
SME/2/1/12

Title: Copy article, 'Miller, Hugh' in the *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*

Date(s): 2009
**SME/3/1 – SMETHAM 2021 BICENTENARY PROJECT**

**SME/3/1/1**

**Title:** Research file  
**Date(s):** [21st. cent.]  
**Description:** File of documents printed in preparation for the Smetham 2021 Bicentenary Project.

**SME/3/1/2**

**Title:** Conservation file  
**Date(s):** [21st. cent.]  
**Description:** File of documents relating to conservation work on the collection in support of the Smetham 2021 Bicentenary Project.

**SME/3/1/3**

**Title:** Project file  
**Date(s):** [21st. cent.]  
**Description:** File of planning and promotional documents relating to the Smetham 2021 Bicentenary Project.