

## John Sell Cotman (1782-1842)

Cotman was born in Norwich, the son of a shopkeeper who turned from hairdressing to haberdashery. He came to London to further his artistic education in 1798, and soon became a leading member of the circle of watercolour artists gathered around Thomas Girtin (1775-1802), despite having little formal training. From 1803-5 he made annual visits to Yorkshire as drawing tutor to the Cholmeley family; the sketches and studies made there provided the basis for many of his best-known watercolours. On the formation of the Society of Watercolour Painters in 1804, some personal animosity prevented Cotman from joining, and he returned soon afterward to Norwich, where he became a popular teacher; he lent out monochrome and coloured drawings for students to copy from a 'Circulating Library' which came to number over 1,000 works.



Above: John Sell Cotman, *Greta Bridge*, 1806-7



Cotman issued the first of his sets of etchings in 1811. The next decade, when he lived in Yarmouth on the Norfolk coast, was devoted almost exclusively to printmaking, inspired in part by the antiquarian interests of his patron and employer, the banker Dawson Turner. In 1817 Cotman made the first of three tours of Normandy, which resulted in two folio volumes of etchings, published in 1822. Following his return to Norwich in 1823, Cotman took up painting again with renewed energy, in watercolour and in oil; he exhibited more frequently in the city and also in London. In 1834, he was appointed Drawing Master at King's College School in London, and lived in Hunter Street, Bloomsbury. He made a final, extended visit to Norfolk in the autumn of 1841, not long before his death in London in July 1842.

Left: John Sell Cotman, *The Drop Gate, Duncombe Park*, around 1806

For most of the twentieth century, Cotman was the most widely admired English watercolourist, surpassing even Turner in popularity. This revival owed much to the Norwich collector and curator James Reeve (1833-1920), who acquired many works by Cotman and his Norfolk contemporaries. His contributions to exhibitions in Norwich and in London in 1888-89 re-established Cotman's reputation and attracted the interest of Laurence Binyon, Assistant Keeper in the Department of Prints and Drawings, who published studies of Cotman in 1897 and 1903. Reeve sold his collection to the British Museum in 1902, making it the foremost public holding of the artist's work.

The British Museum now contains works from every phase of Cotman's career. These range from his earliest known drawing (*House at St Stephen's Road, Norwich*) to an extensive group of the chalk landscapes Cotman drew in 1841 as studies for paintings that he never lived to complete. Alongside *Greta Bridge*, the work Binyon hailed as the greatest work in watercolour by any English artist, are over two hundred drawings in chalk and pencil, revealing an artist far more varied, and also more spontaneous than would be suspected from his watercolours alone. The Museum also holds a comprehensive collection of Cotman's prints, most from the collection of Dawson Turner. Acquired with the Reeve Collection were seven volumes of archives, comprising letters, press cuttings and extensive documentation on Cotman and other Norwich artists, together with catalogues of many of the artist's sales.

## Other Collections

<b>London</b>	Tate Britain Victoria & Albert Museum
<b>UK</b>	Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge City Art Gallery, Leeds Castle Museum, Norwich
<b>USA</b>	Yale Center for British Art, New Haven

## Further Reading

Arts Council of Great Britain *John Sell Cotman 1782-1842*. Touring exhibition, 1982

Binyon, Laurence *The Art of John Sell Cotman*. The Portfolio, April 1897

Binyon Laurence *Life and work of John Sell Cotman. Masters of English Landscape Painting*. The Studio, Special Number, 1903

Holcomb, Adele *John Sell Cotman*. British Museum Publications, 1978

Kitson, S.D. *The Life of John Sell Cotman*. Faber & Faber, 1937

Moore, Andrew *John Sell Cotman 1872-1842*. Norfolk Museum Service, 1982

Norwich Arts Circle *Ninth Exhibition. Drawings by the late John Sell Cotman*. July 1888

Popham, A.E. *'The Etchings of John Sell Cotman'*. The Print Collectors' Quarterly, Oct 1922

Rajnai, Miklos assisted by Allthorpe-Guyton, M. *John Sell Cotman 1872-1842. Drawings of Normandy in Norwich Castle Museum*. Norfolk Museum Service, 1975

Rajnai, Miklos *The Norwich Society of Artists 1805-1833*. Norfolk Museum Service, 1976

Rajnai, Miklos and Allthorpe-Guyton, M. *John Sell Cotman 1872-1842. Early drawings (1798-1812) in Norwich Castle Museum*. Norfolk Museum Service, 1979