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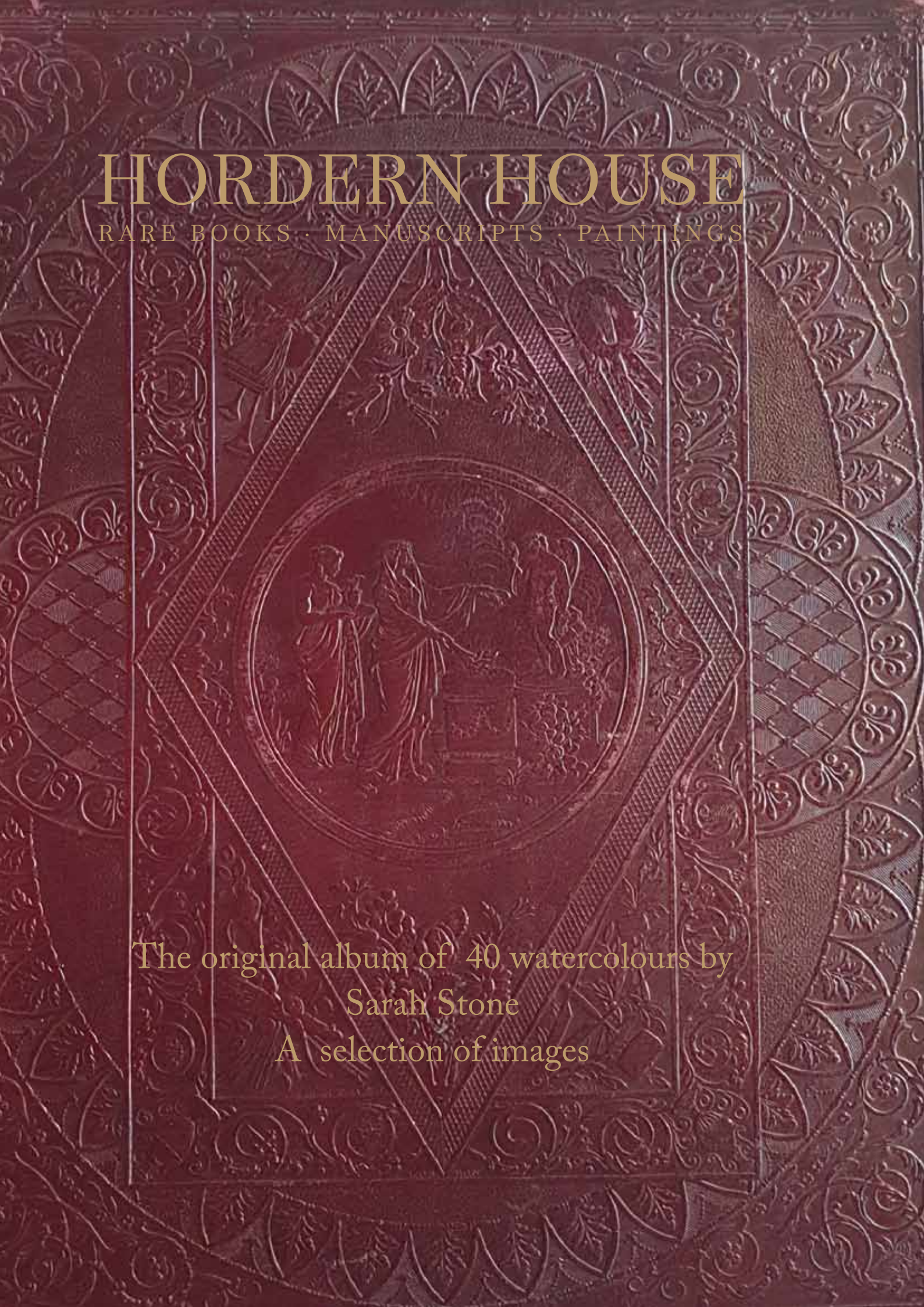


The original album of 40 watercolours by
Sarah Stone
A selection of images

ALBUM

STONE, Sarah [SMITH].

Album of fine watercolours by the artist of the Leverian Museum, in striking original condition.

England, the album assembled circa 1825-1830, but the watercolours significantly earlier, the natural history works (by both style and subject) dating from the 1790s.

Quarto album, 40 original watercolours tipped onto coloured pages, most signed "Sarah Smith" (see the handlist), ornately gilt-printed title-page with added hand-painted monogram in gilt reading "JLS & SS"; the binding of an embossed design of maroon roan, with central classical motif surrounded by an ornate floral pattern, signed by the manufacturer Remnant & Edwards with gilt-stamped "Scrap Book" lettered on the spine.

An intimate family album with beautiful original watercolours by Sarah Stone

A beautiful and varied album of watercolours by the natural history artist Sarah Stone, the great majority signed with her married name and therefore dating from after her 1789 marriage to John Langdale Smith, by far the least known and studied period of her work as an artist. The album is a dazzling testament to Stone's range and skill, and also the key that will help unlock more details of her professional work in later life, coincidentally the period when she did her most sustained work on Australian subjects. All of the watercolours showcase her remarkable skill as a fine watercolourist as well as her continued interest in exotic ethnography and natural history.

This is an enigmatic collection, but a revealing one too, showing Stone still working on items with a Leverian connection, but also broadening her perspective to include a series of scenes that have a very familial and domestic style, resulting in a more than normally personal selection, to the extent that it is difficult not to speculate that some of the holiday scenes on the coast of England and in the highlands of what looks like Scotland (or perhaps Switzerland), may in fact be autobiographical views.

This hypothesis is supported by the fact that this fine and personal collection was clearly a treasured family heirloom, both because of the nature of the pictures and notably that Stone has added the family monogram "JLS & SS" to the title-page. Given that the binding can be dated very accurately to the late 1820s, around the same time that her husband was afflicted by chronic illness (until his untimely death in 1827), we consider the album is very likely to have been designed as a memento or gift, one would like to think to their only child, Henry.

Stone was one of the finest watercolourists of her generation and made a signal contribution to the natural history of the Pacific and Australia, originally through her involvement with the most influential private museum of the late eighteenth century, the Leverian, and later as the artist responsible for preparing the illustrations for Surgeon John White's book on New South Wales, one of the great First Fleet accounts and considered the foundation work of Australian ornithology. This context reinforces what is doubtless the most significant aspect of the present album, the series of six wonderful depictions of parrots, including at least one Australian native (what seems certain to be a slightly moth-eaten Rosella, still recognisable despite the vagaries of taxidermy in this pioneering era).

Indeed, it is possible to argue that the fact that all of the works are signed Smith (not Stone), when combined with the rather moulted aspect of some of the birds depicted,

is the closest thing to a time-stamp that could be imagined on an undated watercolour: after 1789 because of the change in her name, but before the end of the 1790s because of the physical condition of the birds being depicted. That is, and precisely as one would expect, in terms of the condition and appearance of the parrots, the closest stylistic connection is with White's Journal (1790) and the Museum Leverianum (1792-1796), both of which feature many birds in rather stiff poses and with sometimes rather coarse or discoloured feathers.

Certainly, there is no gainsaying either the quality of the importance of the six exotic parrots in the album. Of the six, one has been firmly identified as an African Grey, Psittacus erithacus (see Jackson, p. 21), two are likely to be Indonesian species, and one is thought to be a (probably juvenile) Rainbow Lorikeet (as yet, the other two remain unknown, although one could feasibly be a juvenile Rosella). The Rainbow Lorikeet, one of the most striking birds of the eastern seaboard, was becoming well-known to bird-fanciers of the day, usually being referred to as the "Blue-Bellied Parrot" which makes the present depiction, quite unlike any of the engravings of the era, of great import.

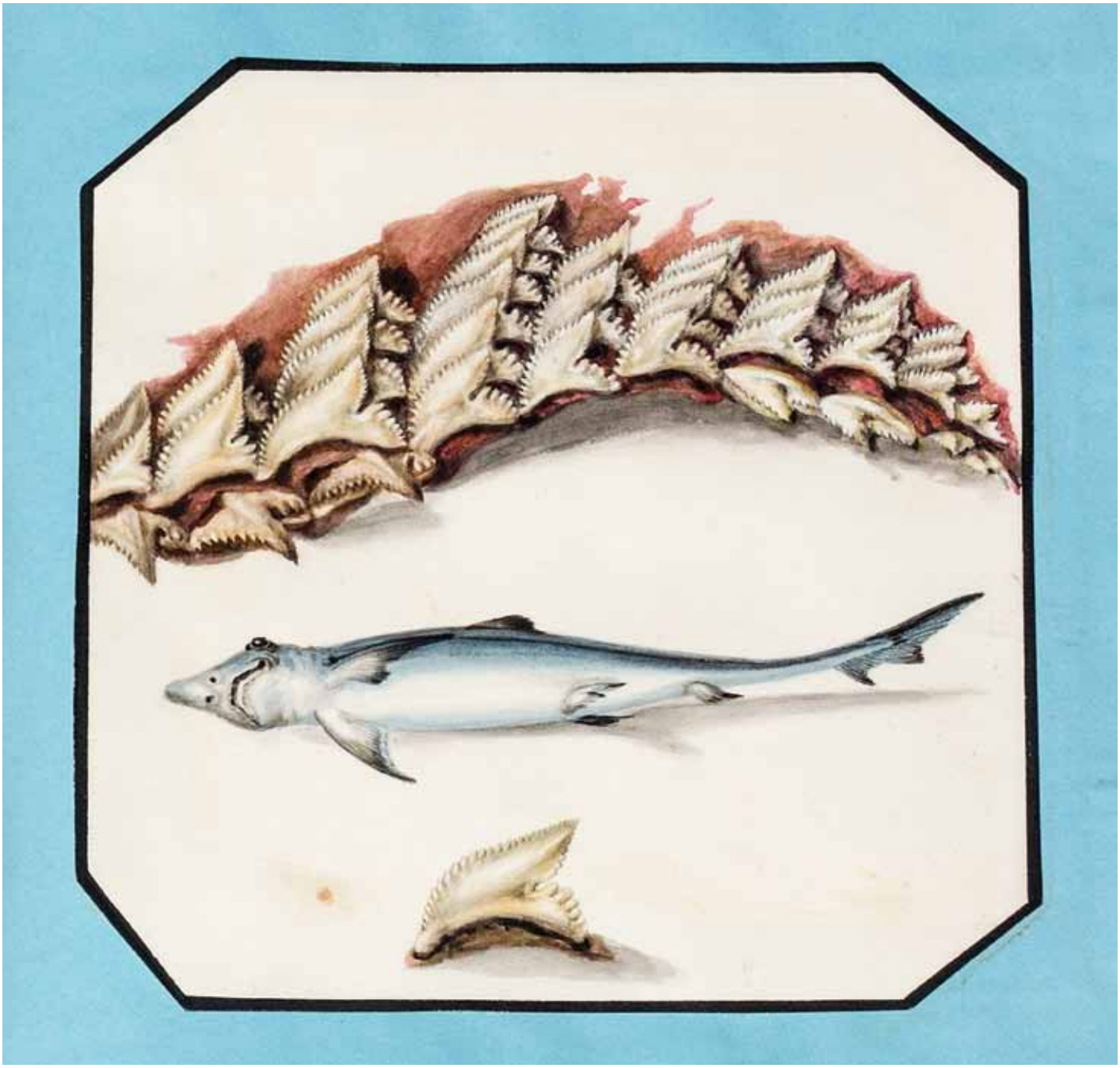
A fourth sheet in the album depicts three beautifully-rendered seabirds, two gulls and a tern, on a rocky outcrop overlooking a bay, all of which are exquisitely delineated. Although another marvellous example of Stone's work, there is nothing about any of the seabirds that would confirm their locality (although, of course, Cook's crew were not alone in collecting seabirds in remoter parts of the oceans, so a connection to the Leverian is certainly plausible).

Another familiar inclusion in the Leverian were sharks (and their teeth), which formed a substantial section of the collection, part of a much larger group that took in animals such as rays, fish and whales (see, for example, the 1790-published Companion to the Museum, esp. pp. 37-38). The present album includes a fine example of a shark very similar to one depicted in Stone's so-called Sketchbook I, and since reproduced in Kaeppler's *Holophusicon* (p. 72).

Of course, of all of the fields of natural history none were more avidly collected in the eighteenth century than shells, which were strongly represented in the Leverian and many other private collections, and the album also includes an uncommonly fine work depicting seven exotic specimens, dominated by a large Charonia, as well as a fine Cone with purple striations and another with an opalescent green.

The last of the definitively Leverian works is an exceptionally important depiction of the "Tahitian Chief Mourner", one of the most important religious figures from the island chain. The Mourner's headdress and clothing, made of tapa, shells and feathers, fascinated Cook and his artists, and Cook was personally presented with the only intact examples, all of which were keenly sought after by collectors in England, and which have now been recognised as some of the most important eighteenth-century artefacts of Tahiti and the Cook voyages alike. Stone's depiction here is, at first glance, not unlike another of her watercolours now in the Bishop Museum (see Kaeppler, *Artificial Curiosities*, p. 124), but it is quite clear on closer inspection that two distinct outfits are depicted in the two images, as can be seen in terms of the layout of the mother-of-pearl face pieces, and notably the very different feathered skirting.

Similarly, while the decoration on the front skirt of Stone's watercolour here is quite



similar to the various depictions included on plates from Cook's second voyage, after the voyage artist William Hodges, there are any number of differences, best seen in the style of the fan-headdress, the blockier shoulder-piece, as well as the worked skirting, here rendered in tremendous detail. In short, while the connections between the known sketches and known examples of the Mourner's dress have been much researched, not only is the present sketch new and otherwise unrecorded, it is certainly possible that it depicts the "lost" example of the dress, from the second voyage, recorded in the Leverian collection but not since sighted (on the lost example, see Kaeppler, *Artificial Curiosities*, p. 125). If true, this will be a signal rediscovery, but regardless, the freshness of the colour in the present album provides a real vision of the blue-green colouring of the feather tassels on the shoulders, and the pinkish tinge of the head-dress.

All-in-all, the album is a fascinating assemblage, with everything from a series of Stone's signature depictions of exotic birds and sea-life, to a crucially important image of the Tahitian Chief Mourner which will shed light on that enigmatic religious figure, through to bucolic barnyard scenes, a pair of religious icons, and a number of rural scenes that appear to show holiday-makers. It is the most substantial collection of Stone works sold in decades, the only known group firmly associated with the phase of her work after her marriage (the clear implication being that she continued to work but did not sign engravings from this second phase), and the only album with a known provenance to her family: an important and very beautiful collection.

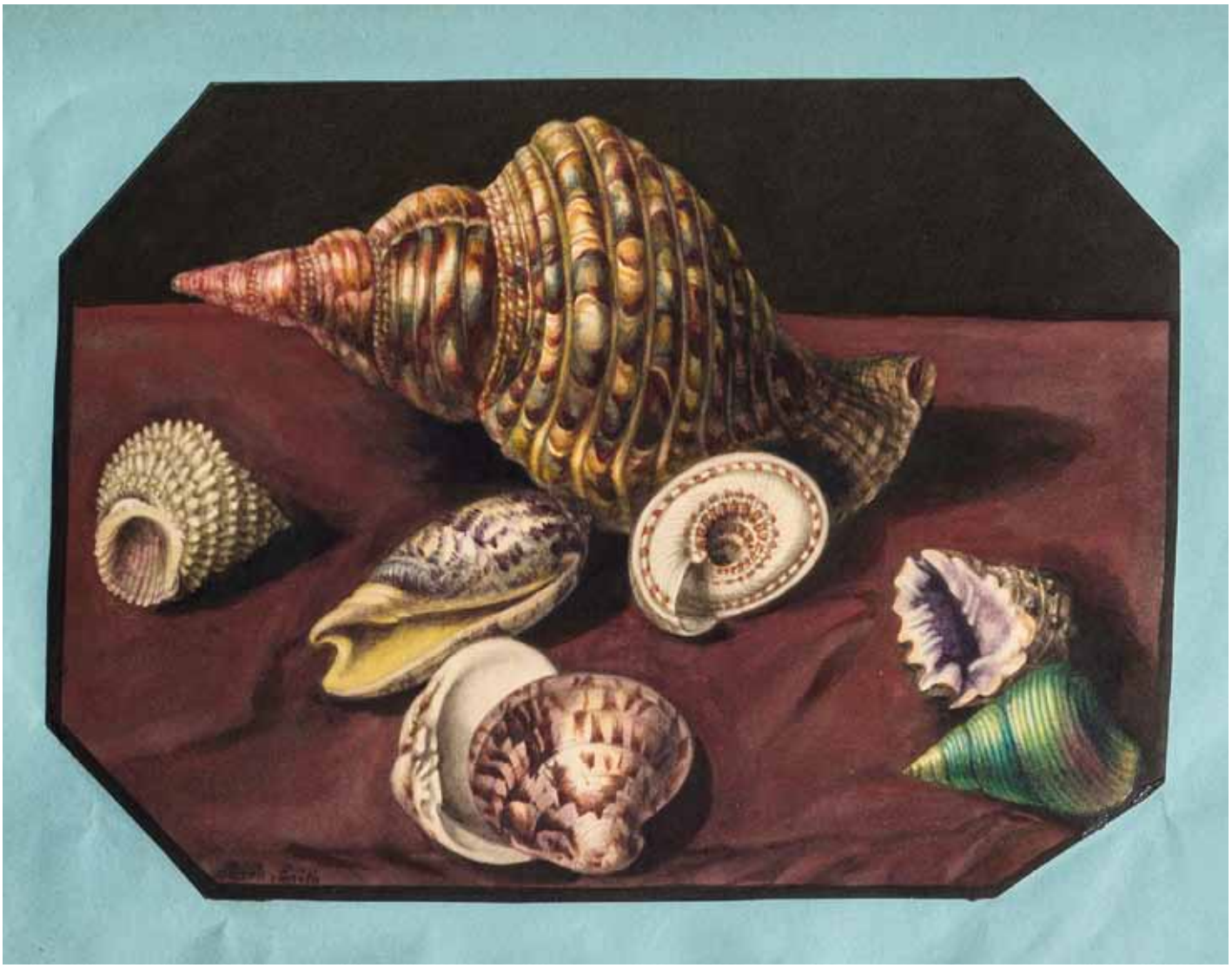
Sarah Stone

Sarah Stone (c. 1760-1844) was born in London, the daughter of a fan painter who learnt the trade with her father (clearly the technique of fan painting was an almost ideal apprenticeship for fine natural history drawing, as is evidenced by the fact that her near contemporary Nicolas-Martin Petit (1777-1804) had a similar family background).

Stone was only in her mid-teens when her preternatural ability was recognised by Sir Ashton Lever, the owner of the greatest collection of natural history and objects of curiosity assembled in the late eighteenth century. Lever employed her as the central artist responsible for depicting his collection, and she is known to have been working for him by 1777 at the latest. Stone "spent hours in Sir Ashton Lever's museum, faithfully drawing and painting mounted birds, insects, mammals, fishes, lizards, fossils, minerals, shells and coral from all over the world, as well as ethnographical artefacts brought back from exploratory voyages, including those of Captain Cook" (Jackson, Sarah Stone, p. 9). The drawings that she produced of the Hawaiian and Pacific Northwest coast specimens are in many cases all that survive of the wonderful materials gathered at various points of first European contact.

Her output was so well-regarded that when the lottery of the Leverian was first bruited the British government specifically exempted her drawings from the sale, with Lever being "empowered to sell and dispose of the said Museum, and the several pieces composing the same (the Drawings of Miss Sarah Stone only excepted)."

The natural focus on Stone's connection to Cook's voyages and the enormous number of Pacific artefacts and specimens she depicted, has tended to obscure her importance for the early natural history of Australia, which was profound, chiefly because of her central role in the publication of First Fleet surgeon John White's *Journal of a Voyage to New South Wales* of 1790. The Journal was based on White's private account of his first months



in Australia which he forwarded to his friend in England, Thomas Wilson, to be published. White also sent home a large number of natural history specimens, chiefly birds, that were then drawn by artists in London: Stone's ability was such that she is credited on half of the 65 engravings that were published in White's book, and is in fact usually credited with having produced 49 of them.

Stone's work on White's book was also the last major project she officially undertook. In 1789 she had married a young naval officer called John Langland Smith and her output slowed dramatically, with the last known work in her name dated 1806, perhaps not coincidentally the same year that Lever's collection was finally dispersed at auction. Little is recorded about her later life, although her husband continued in the Navy until 1806, making several runs to the West Indies, and he clearly continued to encourage her work, as is attested by a surviving sketch of hers which shows a bird he bought back on one of his trans-Atlantic voyages. John was admitted to Greenwich Hospital in 1823 and died 30 October 1827, "after a tedious illness."

They had one son, Henry Stone Smith (1795-1881), with whose family Stone lived for many years, dying at his house in Westminster on 11 January 1844 at the age of 82. Curiously, despite having a relatively large family himself, Henry had only one recorded grandchild, Florence Sophia Nightingale (b. 1860).

The details of Stone's later life are so thin that it may prove to be the case that the present album adds significantly to her biography.

The main repositories of Stone works are some of the most established international collections, notably the Natural History Museum, London; the State Library of New South Wales; the Australian Museum; and the Bishop Museum, Hawaii. Although individual works by Stone are still not infrequently offered for sale, whole albums are only exceedingly rarely offered for sale (the album in the Bishop Museum, for example, was originally sold in 1932 before being donated by its buyer, Capt. A.W.F. Fuller, while an album of 31 of Stone's watercolours in the SLNSW was purchased in 2000).

Provenance

The presence of the monogram on the ornately-printed title-page, the letters "JLS & SS" added in gilt (for John Langdale Smith and Sarah Smith), confirms that the album originally belonged to Stone and her husband. In this light, the embossed binding itself is of some interest, being a known design manufactured by Remnant & Edwards in the late 1820s, further confirming that this collection would date from the lifetime of the Smith family. By the mid-twentieth century the album was in the possession of Elizabeth Bateman, who started work at Hall's Bookshop in Royal Tunbridge Wells, Kent, in 1955, and ran the store from 1967 until her death in 1983. The album remained with her descendants until recently sold in the UK. Hall's first opened in 1898, so there is a chance that the album was first acquired by the company much earlier: one curious fact is that Henry Stone Smith is listed as having died in Kent (although admittedly at Thanet, on the diametrically opposite side of the county).

Bibliography

Christine E. Jackson, Sarah Stone: Natural Curiosities from the New World (London, 1998); Adrienne Kaeppler, Holophusicon: The Leverian Museum (Germany, 2011); [King & Lochee], Catalogue of the Leverian Museum (London, 1806); [Leverian]. A Companion to the Museum, (late Sir Ashton Lever's) (London, 1790).

$145,000

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Images in the album

1. Heads of five cherubim against a stormy sky. Signed.
2. Rural scene of a delipidated house near a river. Signed.
3. Woman in ornate purple evening wear with jewellery (perhaps copied from an Old Master). Signed.
4. Scene in a rural village. Signed.
5. Young woman standing in the doorway of a house, in a red skirt and white chemise. Signed.
6. Still life of eight exotic shells. Signed.
7. Young man in a dark coat, right shoulder bared. Signed.
8. Pair of brightly coloured parrots posed on branches. Signed.
9. Religious image of Jesus with chalice and bread. Signed.
10. Religious image of Mary and infant Jesus; apparently a pair with the previous.
11. Castellated house on a river, white swans, apparently a rural English scene. Signed in pencil.
12. Still life of a vase of flowers, including roses, carnations; dark background. Signed.
13. Still life with vase of flowers, including carnations, violets; light background. Signed.
14. Garden of Eden scene, naked woman with long blonde hair in a bower of flowers. Signed.
15. Detailed portrait of a terrier dog looking directly at the viewer. Signed.
16. Chickens, chicks and a rooster, with ornate green fence. Signed.
17. Couple in period clothes next to a river and arched stone bridge. Signed.
18. Woman in a golden gown with blue shawl, jewellery including pearl-drop earrings, similar in style to no. 3. Signed.
19. Sharks' egg, shark (viewed from below), and shark's tooth.
20. Scene next to a glacial tarn, shepherd and small flock. Switzerland? Scotland? Signed.
21. View on a highland pass, mountainous background, small boat on a lake. Switzerland? Scotland? Signed.
22. Two studies of flowers. Signed.
23. Study of a flower with variegated leaves. Signed.
24. Scene of a chicken and five chicks outside their hutch. Signed.
25. Pair of parrots on a branch. Signed.
26. Close view of a deep-purple coloured dahlia. Signed.
27. Matched view of a red dahlia varietal. Signed.
28. Exquisite and detailed pair of green parrots. Signed indistinctly on the trunk.
29. Three seabirds on a rockface. Signed.
30. Fine depiction of the Tahitian Chief Mourner, highlighting the mother-of-pearl ornamentation and tapa cloth. Signed.
31. Rural scene with the ruins of an overgrown castle. Signed.
32. Remarkable scene of a woman and two men investigating some seaside rock formations. Signed.
33. Detailed portrait of another dog, quite ursine in features, very like no. 15. Signed.
34. Woman in Empire-style loose-fitting gown with blue sash, holding up a bird (canary?) in a gilt cage. Signed.
35. Portrait of an islander (?) with spear and bow, near tree with large fruit (coconut? breadfruit?).
36. Profile portrait of a woman in eastern dress, ornate gilt and red headscarf. Signed.
37. Intriguing scene depicting stairs and a causeway to a small and remote waterfall, several day-trippers visible. Signed.
38. Coastal scene showing fishermen, their skiffs and a small stone house; in the background a large house on the cliffs. Signed.
39. [loosely inserted]. Study for what appears to be a sort of cut fruit or coral – a little indistinct. A fossil? Signed "Sarah Smith."
40. Three-quarter profile of a young woman in a white dress with a necklace of red stones. Signed in pencil.

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