



PAMELA COLMAN SMITH (1878-1951)



Pamela Colman Smith.
Photograph, c. 1912,
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The artist, author, editor, and designer Pamela Colman Smith was a friend of and collaborator with many key participants in the British aesthetic and decadent movements. She illustrated over two dozen books, periodical issues, and pamphlets, while her paintings were exhibited in Britain, Europe, and the United States. Nevertheless, she died in debt and without a notable reputation for her work. A jack-of-all-trades, she has, generally speaking, not been recognised as a master of any. The exception has been her illustrations for the Rider-Waite tarot deck, now the most popular deck in the world. As Smith's work on the deck is increasingly appreciated, it has also become known as the Smith-Waite, Waite-Smith, and Rider-Waite-Smith deck. The actual breadth and diversity of her talents, however, are perhaps most succinctly captured in her editorial vision, writing, and illustrations for the periodical *The Green Sheaf* (1903-04).

Corinne Pamela Colman Smith was born in London, England, in 1878 to expatriate Americans John Edward Smith and Corinne Colman. Part of an extended family of artists, authors, and actors, she was exposed by her parents to the visual and

performing arts. The family also introduced her to the mystical teachings of Emanuel Swedenborg, and likely to other elements of mysticism and the occult (Kaplan 5). In 1889, when Smith was 10, her father's job took the family on occasion to Kingston, Jamaica. There, Smith delighted in her exposure to the folklore of the West Indies, resulting in some of her most popular works. Notable among these are the collections *Annancy Stories* (1899) and *Chim-Chim* (1905), which she both wrote and illustrated.

In 1893, at age 16, Smith was accepted to the Pratt Institute of Art and Design in New York, where she came under the guidance of instructor Arthur Wesley Dow. He had developed both his aesthetic views and artistic skills in France during the peak of the Symbolist movement, gradually combining his early work with studies in Aztec, ancient Egyptian, and especially Japanese aesthetics and practices. This mix of interests resulted in his highly influential *Composition: A Series of Exercises in Art Structure for the Use of Students and Teachers* (1899), a handbook adopted by a number of major avant-garde Modernist artists. In this volume, Dow argues for a fusion of synesthesia, spiritualism, and Japanese technique. As early as Charles Baudelaire, Symbolist poets had combined synesthesia with mysticism, while, as Edward Ligan has demonstrated, Symbolist theatre regularly relied on the occult for its formulations. Thus, Smith's seemingly eclectic interests – art, theatre, mysticism, the occult, and synesthesia – were, in fact, a combination that was relatively popular within the Symbolist movement generally.

At key periods in Smith's career her work was more recognised in the United States than Britain. An article entitled "Notes" in *The Craftsman* describes Smith as a sort of guiding light for art in America on account of her "drifting out into dreamland and seeing visions and speaking as prophets in strange symbols" (769). When James McNeill Whistler gave Smith the compliment that she "does not know how to draw or paint, and she does not need to do either" (qtd. in Stickley 770), he captured the mysticist conviction that many people found so alluring in her particular form of Symbolism. Smith appreciated the description of herself, cited in Arthur Ransome's *Bohemia in London*, as "goddaughter of a witch and sister to a fairy" (Kaplan 68). As a visual artist, she nurtured the image of herself as a mystic invested in an occult form of

synesthesia. Meanwhile, in her persona as a story-teller and performer for adults and children alike, she similarly exuded an exotic, elfin quality, and often made use of costumes and toy figures and structures to enhance her audience's engagements with her narratives.

In 1897, a year after her mother died, Smith left Pratt without attaining a degree. She also had her first art show in 1897, at William Macbeth's New York gallery. In 1899, she moved back to London. Even though her father died soon after her return, the year proved to be one of her most productive, with Smith authoring five books, including *Annancy Stories*, and illustrating many of them herself. Reviews of her works were highly positive. "At the present moment the work of Pamela Colman Smith is known only to the few," notes a brief 1899 piece in *The Critic*, "but I predict that as soon as Mr. Russell has her hand colored prints on the market her name will be a household word" (15). The author goes on to declare that she "has the cleverness of Aubrey Beardsley without his coarseness." The next year, Gardner Teall declared Smith a "genius" whose works of "exquisite brilliancy" promised "greater things" in the future (135-36).

During the later 1890s, Smith often stayed with the actress Ellen Terry, who is said to have been the person who gave Smith the nickname Pixie. The artist was close to Terry's family, especially her daughter, Edith Craig. Smith was likely a lesbian. There is no record of her having romantic or sexual relations with men, but she had a number of intimate relations with women. In addition to Craig, she was also close to Craig's partner Christabel Marshall, who published in *The Green Sheaf* under the pseudonym Christopher St. John.

Smith also continued her involvement, begun in the early 1890s, in the Lyceum Theatre community of Terry and Craig. It included Henry Irving and Bram Stoker. Smith worked for the company as an illustrator as well as a costume and stage designer, often travelling with the troupe for their performances outside London. By the end of the decade, she also entered the Irish theatre scene and occult community of Florence Farr, Lady Augusta Gregory, and John (aka Jack) and William Butler Yeats. The latter commissioned her first mystical illustrations and introduced her to the Hermetic Order

of the Golden Dawn, which reinforced the spiritualist aesthetics she had already been developing.

Smith joined the Order in 1901, and remained involved for about four years. She became friends with a number of influential members in the Order, even if she was not particularly earnest about training in secret knowledge (Gilbert 197). In fact, Smith never defined herself predominantly as an occultist, one who is educated and trained in the secrets of esoteric knowledge and spiritual practices. Rather, she presented herself as a mystic, one who is innately attuned to otherworldly divine forces. In 1903, Smith left the Yeats-led Isis-Urania Lodge, which emphasized training in natural magic, and joined Arthur Edward Waite's more mystical Independent and Rectified Rite of the Golden Dawn. The latter group felt mystical experiences occurred when one opened oneself up to pre-existing otherworldly forces, allowing an esoteric symbology to mediate on one's behalf. In keeping with such a belief system, Smith described her mystical writing and visual art as largely the product of influences beyond herself (Anon, "Pictures," 649).

In 1901, Smith began inviting artists, authors, and other creative types to weekly open houses at her London flat. These gatherings were characterized by lively, vibrant discussions and her frequent costumed performance as a story-teller of Jamaican tales. Visitors included J.M. Barrie, Lady Augusta Gregory, W.T. Horton, Arthur Ransome, Jack and W.B. Yeats, and children's novelist (and poet laureate from 1930 to 1967) John Masefield.

Smith's first venture into editing was *A Broad Sheet*, an illustrated monthly she co-edited with Jack Yeats from January 1902 to December 1903. An anonymous and untitled piece in *The Art Record* voices uncertainty over what to make of the curious publication, combining writing by W.B. Yeats and George Moore, on one hand, and images seemingly intended for the nursery, on the other. The author of the article concludes that it is "a very peculiar sheet with a mystical intention we cannot quite discover. Perhaps the Celtic renaissance has a hand in the business." *A Broad Sheet* consisted of a one-sided leaf of paper, 15 by 20 inches in size, for which the editors

provided both visual and verbal text, as well as hand colouring. Smith, Yeats, and Elkin Mathews offered the publication for sale at an annual subscription fee of 12 shillings (in the United Kingdom) or 3 dollars (in the United States). Smith contributed for the first year, before moving on to editing her own periodical, *The Green Sheaf*. Jack Yeats folded *A Broad Sheet* after one more year.

The Green Sheaf ran for 13 monthly issues from January 1903, with the final, undated issue presumably being issued in January 1904. Initially, Smith and W.B. Yeats had explored ideas for the project together, but it is apparent that, from early on, Smith made all the major decisions, including about contributors and lay-out, as well as the periodical's termination. Yeats had encouraged an idealistic mysticism for the venture, "quite unlike gloomy magazines like the *Yellow Book* and the *Savoy*" (389). But Smith's own visual and verbal contributions suggest her preference for including a more moody, even melancholy tone. Many contributors to *A Broad Sheet* also appear in *The Green Sheaf*, including W.B. Yeats, Alix Egerton, Masefield, and Smith herself. The latter publication includes advertisements for other of Smith's ventures, such as hand-coloured prints, room decoration, and story-telling engagements, as well as for ventures of friends such as Edith Craig. In the final issue, Smith also noted the formation of her London print shop, also called *The Green Sheaf*. This short-lived venture published smaller editions, such as *Four Plays* (1905) by Laurence Alma Tadema, and *Shadow Rabbit* (1906) by Dolly Radford and Gertrude M. Bradley, as well as Smith's own 1905 book *Chim-Chim* (which she wrote, illustrated, and hand-coloured).

The positive response to Smith in the United States, where she was seen as an American artist, is apparent from Alfred Stieglitz choosing her work for his New York Little Galleries of the Photo Secession's first exhibition of art that was not avant-garde photography. Gustav Stickley, writing as the editor of *The Craftsman*, summarized the event enthusiastically:

The exhibit, which was to have lasted a week, was extended ten days and thronged with visitors, and I understand that fully one-half the main collection

was sold, while nearly all of the most significant magazines purchased the right for reproduction of one or several drawings. (790)

The show proved to be Stieglitz's greatest gallery success to date and, not surprisingly, he followed it with two more Smith shows during the next two years. Even this was not enough, however, to secure her a steady income. In 1909, Waite commissioned Smith to illustrate an entire tarot deck based on his instructions, and it was published by William Rider and Son that year. In a letter to Stieglitz asking for any possible sales money, Smith notes that she was not paid nearly what Waite's commission demanded of her time and effort. Another of her ventures that year was no more lucrative, but it reflects Smith's frustration, articulated in some of her letters, with the fact that female artists were under-appreciated. When in 1909 Clemence and Laurence Housman and Alfred Pearse founded the Suffrage Atelier of female artists to produce political posters, postcards, and other works promoting women's right to the vote, Smith and her friend Alma Tadema joined up, even though other commitments of their time would have paid more.

It would seem that Smith had resigned herself to the likelihood that her many connections and the consistently positive reviews of her art on both sides of the Atlantic would not result in a financially comfortable existence. In 1911, she moved to New York, but returned to England roughly three years later. During this time, she also converted to Roman Catholicism. She was involved in the war effort as an illustrator, while also contributing some illustrations to magazines (O'Connor 87). In the early 1920s, an inheritance allowed Smith to purchase a home on the Lizard at the remote western tip of Cornwall. Smith eventually shared her Cornwall home with Nora Lake, of whom little is known. When Smith died in 1951, she left Lake her estate (which amounted to nothing after debts were addressed).

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