

The Art and Craft of William Blake

by Sherilyn Troyer

During the Romantic period of British art and literature, when imagination and emotion were highly valued, William Blake was born in London in 1757. Blake's personality meshed well with the Romantic era. Throughout his life, he was known for his intensity and vivid imagination. From his youth, he often claimed to see things not visible in the physical world, such as angels in trees. This perception of beings in the spiritual realm can be thought of as "the artist's intense spiritual and sensory realization of the world" ("Blake, William [1757-1827]"). Blake often drew on these images when he made art ("William Blake").

The young William learned how to read and write from his mother, who taught him at home. Recognizing his artistic ability, his parents enrolled him in a school for young artists when he was ten years old. After studying there for four years, he began an apprenticeship with James Basire, an engraver with the Society of Antiquaries. Blake's father wanted him to learn the craft of engraving, since he felt it was more practical than just knowing how to draw and paint (Raine 13).

What Blake learned during his apprenticeship would greatly influence his later art. In her biography of Blake, Kathleen Raine gives the opinion that "any loss to painting was to be compensated for by the enrichment of the art of engraving" (13). During the course of his apprenticeship, Blake was assigned to visit and draw many old buildings in London, particularly

Westminster Abbey. From these experiences, Blake developed a "lifelong love" for antiquity and Gothic architecture (Raine 17). His art would always show a love of classical form.

When Blake was twenty-four, he married Catherine Boucher. At that time, Catherine was illiterate; however, Blake taught her the helpful skill of reading as well as artistic skills that she used to help him in his work (Greenblatt 76). Blake was not known for having an easygoing personality, and their marriage went through periods of turbulence. Nonetheless, they stayed together for life, and Catherine "was undoubtedly of great help in making ends meet on Blake's always limited income" (qtd. in "William Blake").

In 1788, when he was about thirty years old, Blake began experimenting with his own method of printmaking. The source of inspiration for this technique was a vision in which Blake claimed to have seen his recently deceased brother demonstrating the new method ("William Blake"). Rather than scratching a design into a plate, which was the more traditional method, he drew the design on the plate with an acid-resistant medium.

Songs of Innocence and of Experience, copy C, object 35 (Bentley 38, Erdman 38, Keynes 38) "NURSES Song"



"Lessing J. Rosenwald Collection, Library of Congress. Copyright© 2011 William Blake Archive. Used with permission. This project is supported in part by a William Blake Archive Reproduction Grant for Students."

He then treated the plate in acid, which bit away everything that was not part of the design. It was then ready to be inked and printed onto paper. After it was printed, he or his wife would add color to the print by using watercolor paints (Greenblatt 77). He called this method “illuminated printing.”

Blake was a master at marrying words and pictures. He often illustrated the works of others, but he had plenty of his own writing to illustrate as well. Because “the combination of word and image is a prominent feature of illuminated printing” (Viscomi), Blake used this method to publish all of his books except a short collection of poems printed in his younger years. This is especially noteworthy considering that the text and illustrations had to be drawn on the plate backwards so as to be readable when printed. Possibly his best-known works are the *Songs of Innocence and of Experience*, published together in 1794. They contain the well-known poems “The Lamb” and “The Tyger.”

In their essay “An Inquiry into Blake’s Method of Color Printing,” Robert Essick and Joseph Viscomi state that “no one but Blake was producing colored prints as illustrated text pages in books” at that time (sec. 2). In his publications, Blake seamlessly integrated his various roles as printmaker, poet, and painter (Essick and Viscomi sec. 7). He states in his *Prospectus* of 1793, “If a method of Printing which combines the Painter and the Poet is a phenomenon worthy of public attention, provided that it exceeds in elegance all former methods, the Author is sure of his reward” (qtd. in Viscomi). Certainly his self-published books were “worthy of public attention,” even if they were not best-sellers in his day. Blake was never rich, but “[his] appeal has been extraordinarily wide,” especially in modern times (“About Blake”).

Other ambitious works of Blake’s include illustrations for the writings of others. He made sets of illustrations for Chaucer’s *Canterbury Tales*, the *Book of Job*, and Dante’s *Divine Comedy*, on which he was still working when he died. His aptitude for line work fit well with religious art, which typically had a strong linear quality (Raine 20). Raine pronounces the *Illustrations of the Book of Job* to be “supreme masterpieces of the engraver’s art” (185). The illustrations were originally commissioned by a patron named Thomas Butts, for whom Blake produced watercolor illustrations. Later, John Linnell commissioned him to do engravings of the images, a project which his early training allowed him to carry out with expertise. The art critic John Ruskin said of the *Illustrations of the Book of Job*: “It is of the highest rank in certain characters of imagination and expression” (qtd. in Raine 192).

Blake was a fitting artist to have lived in the Romantic era, but his work was not fully appreciated in his day. Only in retrospect has the world realized the quality and genius of his work.

Illustrations of the Book of Job, object 12 (Bentley 421.11) "Job Rebuked by His Friends"



"Collection of Robert N. Essick. Copyright© 2011 William Blake Archive. Used with permission. This project is supported in part by a William Blake Archive Reproduction Grant for Students."

As we take time to notice, we will see the true value of the artistic uniqueness and quality of his craft.

Works Cited

"About Blake." 22 Mar. 2008. The Blake Society. 8 May 2011. <<http://www.blakesociety.org/about-blake/>>.

"Blake, William (1757-1827)." *Encyclopedia of World Biography*. Detroit: Gale, 1998. *Gale Biography In Context*. Web. 4 Apr. 2011. <<http://ic.galegroup.com/heinz.grace.edu/ic/bic1/ReferenceDetailsPage/ReferenceDetailsWindow?displayGroupName=Reference&disableHighlighting=true&prodId=BIC1&action=e&windowstate=normal&catId=&documentId=GALE%7CA148412377&mode=view>>.

Essick, Robert N. and Viscomi, Joseph. "An Inquiry into Blake's Method of Color Printing." Rochester.edu. 8 May 2011. <<http://www.rochester.edu/college/ENG/blake/inquiry/enhanced/index.html>>.

Greenblatt, Stephen. *The Norton Anthology of English Literature*. 8th ed. Vol. D. New York: W. W. Norton & Co. Inc., 2006. 76-79.

Viscomi, Joseph. "Illuminated Printing." The William Blake Archive. 8 May 2011. <http://www.blakearchive.org/exist/blake/archive/biography.xq?b=illum&targ_div=d1>.

"William Blake." *Authors and Artists for Young Adults*. Vol. 47. Gale, 2003. *Gale Biography In Context*. Web. 4 Apr. 2011. <<http://ic.galegroup.com/heinz.grace.edu/ic/bic1/ReferenceDetailsPage/ReferenceDetailsWindow?displayGroupName=Reference&disableHighlighting=true&prodId=BIC1&action=e&windowstate=normal&catId=&documentId=GALE%7CK1603000942&mode=view>>.