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## **William Blake**

Exhibition review – Tate Britain, 11 September 2019 – 2 February 2020

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William Blake's printed and painted work is so difficult to access, largely because of conservation constraints, that its creative range and visual potency are nowadays most often appreciated through the online William Blake Archive (whose academic excellence is widely acknowledged). The exhibition held at Tate Britain from September 11<sup>th</sup>, 2019 to February 2<sup>nd</sup>, 2020, is a timely reminder of the unique textural qualities of the original prints, drawings and paintings that for many have mostly been known through digital means. It is also a testimony to the scope, variety and evolutions of the artist's output.

It is truly a superlative exhibition. Most of the major Blake collections in the world have been brought together: the Huntington, the Yale Center for British Art, The British Museum, the National Gallery of Victoria (Melbourne), the Fitzwilliam Museum, The Whitworth Art Gallery (Manchester), Petworth House, to name but some of the most important contributors, have been very generous with their loans, making this the largest exhibition of Blake's work since its 2000 predecessor, also at the Tate. The rich catalogue which accompanies the show and complements it with detailed textual information gives an excellent idea of the resulting whole, and of the quality of the display.

With over 300 works by the artist, the visitor is able to appreciate the range of Blake's pictorial ambitions as well as his immense dedication to his work, the variety of pictorial formats and techniques he experimented with, but also the significance of the creative contexts within which he worked, from commercial reproductive engraving to independent visionary compositions.

The exhibition, organised in five "rooms", each subdivided into two or three sections, follows Blake's artistic life in chronological order, outlining at the same time the various phases of commercial, technical, stylistic and intellectual evolution that his career went through. It does a very convincing job of conveying this complex narrative, with an effective scenography, and a distinct interpretation. While a focus on Blake's printmaking work and immersion within the technical materiality of engraving and printing underpinned the 2000 Tate exhibition, the Paris 2009 exhibition, curated by Michael Phillips, as well as Phillips' remarkable reconstruction of Blake's printmaking studio at the Ashmolean Museum in 2014-15, the curators of this new show, Martin Myrone and Amy Concannon, have chosen to de-emphasise

this aspect of Blake's production. The engraving and printmaking work, reproductive or creative, is mostly contained within room 2 ("Making Prints, Making a Living"), a choice which especially prevents a full appreciation of Blake's illuminated poetry. A certain lack of interest in this unique work is suggested by the opening comments that may be read on the wall at the beginning of the display, which state that Blake described his printmaking technique "in poetic rather than practical terms so his exact methods remain mysterious". Fortunately for the inquisitive visitor, more detailed explanations of his original "relief etching" method are provided in one of the central display cases.

With little exhibition space devoted to this essential aspect of Blake's production, some choices had to be made, and they are overall commendable. A complete set of plates of *America: A Prophecy* (Copy M, Yale Center for British Art), displayed on three contiguous walls, allows the viewer to appreciate not only the originality and semantic intricacy of Blake's composite art, but also the quality of his calligraphy, the varied textural effects of relief-etching combined with white-line etching and hand colouring, and the care with which the latter was performed. Plates from the *Small Book of Designs* (British Museum) give a remarkable illustration of the rich effects achieved by Blake's original colour printing technique, while the viewer can appreciate his stunning combination of ink and watercolour in the Tate's frontispiece to *Visions of the Daughters of Albion*. But no explanations of Blake's technique are given here. And it is difficult to get an idea of the extent of Blake's illuminated production, except from the copies of *The Book of Urizen*, *Europe: A Prophecy*, *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* or *The Book of Thel* that are opened to significant pages in the central display cases, or the few samples from the famous *Songs of Innocence and Experience* that are displayed on some of the central plinths.

To make up for this relative lack of consideration for Blake the engraver and printmaker, the exhibition concludes with masterful examples of his creative work in graphic media: some bound copies of his intaglio masterpiece, his illustrations to *The Book of Job*, a remarkable example of his illuminated books, the first twenty-five plates of *Jerusalem*, copy B and, finally, the iconic "Ancient of Days", the frontispiece to *Europe*, that he completed shortly before his death.

While possibly frustrating, the curators' decision is justified by the rest of the exhibition, which more than succeeds in its objective of demonstrating Blake's worth as an original painter, however unconventional he may have been. His rejection of Royal Academy teaching, notably in his violent criticism of Reynolds's *Discourses on art*, and his consequent dislike of academic practices like oil painting, has meant that he has often been viewed as a mostly self-trained, independent visual artist whose place in the canon is uncertain. The Tate exhibition corrects this perception by demonstrating the full extent of his artistic ambitions and mastery, and highlighting his desire to be viewed as a serious artist by his contemporaries. This decision is underscored by three major articulations. Room 1 ("Blake Be An Artist"), which stresses from the start the influence of his training days at the Royal Academy, even though he had been an apprentice engraver for many years before enrolling, makes evident the formative importance of this period in his career, through a rich display of early drawings and watercolours which reveal both neoclassical influences and Blake's interaction with academicians like Henry Fuseli and James Barry. Room 3 ("Patronage and Independence") highlights Blake's ability to negotiate his creative

freedom in his interactions with his patrons. Room 4 (“Independence and Despair”) includes a recreation of Blake’s solo 1809 exhibition, which the artist held in his brother’s house in Broad Street, in order to assert his very personal conception of artistic excellence and allow his visionary powers to be acknowledged by his contemporaries.

The rest of the exhibition takes us through an astonishing range of visionary conceptions and pictorial techniques. From his small watercolour drawings illustrating Milton’s *Paradise Lost* (The Thomas set, 1807, Huntington Library and Art Gallery) or “On the Morning of Christ’s Nativity” (1809, Whitworth Art Gallery, Manchester) to ambitious and intricate tempera paintings like *Satan calling up his legions* (Petworth House) or *An Allegory of the Spiritual Condition of Man* (c. 1811, Fitzwilliam Museum), the breadth of Blake’s conceptions and technical ability as a draughtsman and painter is made evident. The textural quality of tempera, used by Blake as a means to rival the effects of oil while conveying in more immediate ways his original visions, may be appreciated in a number of compositions, even though the colours have often darkened. The various uses to which he managed to put watercolour are particularly striking: from the delicate and peaceful representations of Adam and Eve in Paradise to the much darker visions of the Book of Revelation (in particular a horrific “The number of the beast is 666”) and illustrations to Dante’s *Inferno*, he displays the full emotional potential of a medium that he considered much superior to oil, contrary to academic precepts.

Highlights of the exhibition include complex watercolour paintings like the Arlington Court *Sea of Time and Space* (1821), as well as the paintings bought by Elizabeth Ilive, countess of Egremont and wife of Turner’s famous patron. Among them is the astonishing *A Vision of the Last Judgment*, rivalling on a much smaller scale and in watercolour Michelangelo’s more monumental treatment of the same subject.

To anyone interested in Blake’s printing techniques, the twelve large colour prints of 1795-1805, assembled in one small area halfway through the exhibition (in the middle of Room 3) are possibly the high point of the exhibition. The remarkable reticulations of printed colour contrasting with the matt effects of watercolour, combined with Blake’s powerful and unique designs, certainly make these one of his most outstanding achievements. Yet even when one believes a climactic moment has been reached, much remains to be admired, what with the Petworth collection and the poets’ heads commissioned by William Hayley in the last section of Room 3, Blake’s engraving of his own *Chaucer’s Canterbury Pilgrims* in Room 4, and most of Room 5 (“A New Kind of Man”), which shows the mature artist at the top of his creative abilities and comprises a good number of *Divine Comedy* illustrations, 25 plates from the rarely seen Copy B of *Jerusalem*, and all 28 illustrations to Bunyan’s *Pilgrim’s Progress*, which are exhibited together for the first time in decades.

If Blake’s 1809 exhibition was a stinging failure, drew bitter criticism from contemporaries who accused him of lunacy and vanity, and plunged him into a prolonged period of despondency, the ambitions which it displayed are certainly vindicated by this show, which celebrates an artist of unparalleled creative abilities. The visitor leaves with a comprehensive conception of William Blake the Romantic artist, struggling against the vicissitudes of the art market but at the same time making a unique place for himself by refusing to compromise his original visions.

