

William Blake (1757-1827)

Born in London, the son of a hosier, at the age of ten Blake was sent to a drawing school kept by Henry Pars in the Strand where he had the opportunity of drawing after the antique. Four years later he was apprenticed to James Basire, engraver to the Society of Antiquaries, where he remained for seven years learning the trade that was to earn him his living and enable him in between times to produce his own books. In 1778 at the end of his apprenticeship he proceeded to the school of the Royal Academy, where he continued his early study from the antique and learnt to draw from the living model.

Right: William Blake, *The Judgment of Paris*, a watercolour England, AD 1811



Blake became acquainted with some of the rising artists of his time, among them Stothard, Flaxman and Fuseli. He used to recite and sometimes sing his poems at the house of the Rev. A. S. Mathew and it was through the influence of Mathew and Flaxman that Blake's first volume of poetry was printed in 1783. Blake evolved a radical form of Christianity, which rejected the mechanistic laws of Bacon, Locke and Newton. He opposed the 'mind forged menacles' of repressive ideologies be they of church, state or even the discourses of Sir Joshua Reynolds, of whom he said 'This man was hired to depress art'.

His illuminated books form the heart of the collection. Blake used both hand-colouring and colour printing, his first experiment with the latter occurring in 1788 with three small tracts entitled *There is no natural Religion*. By the following year in *Songs of Innocence*, the unique style of his illuminated books had emerged with their decorative trellised margins imbued with Blake's personal imagery. *Songs of Experience* followed, then the *Book of Thel* which is the first of the longer narrative poems. In these books and the great prophetic works of the 1790s, Blake created a complex mythology charting a vast psychic battleground where the powers of inspiration and imagination, symbolised in some of the books as the character *Los*, challenge the cult of reason symbolised by the aged *Urizen*, who is pictured on the title page of the *Book of Urizen* with tables and book of law beneath the tree of Nature. The culmination of these difficult but deeply rewarding books is found in *Jerusalem, the emanation of the Giant Albion*, composed between 1804 and 1820. Blake was himself responsible for the writing, etching, printing, colouring and even the making of the pigments, and no two copies of the illuminated books are identical. The British Museum houses one of the finest collections, lacking copies of only a very few of them.

The British Museum has a comprehensive collection of Blake's engravings and relief etchings including his commercial work. Among his finest work are the illustrations to the *Book of Job* published in 1825. Blake had made a renewed study the engravings of Marcantonio and Dürer, achieving a masterly technique and subtlety seldom conveyed in his earlier manner of the 'dot and lozenge' technique learned from Basire. The *Book of Job* plates were his last experiment in the combination of text and image. The page is dominated by the central engravings whose imagery is complemented by the designs in the margins, interwoven with texts either from the *Book of Job* in the Old Testament or other biblical passages. The Department of Prints and Drawings owns the twenty-two copper plates for the *Book of Job* and the seventeen wood blocks used for Blake's illustrations to Thornton's *Pastorals of Virgil*, 1821.

The Museum's collection of drawings ranges from simple preparatory pencil sketches to highly finished watercolours including illustrations to Shakespeare and to Dante. Also in the collection are the five hundred and thirty-seven watercolour designs wofhich Blake executed about 1797 to illustrate Edward Young's long religious poem *Night Thoughts*. These make a fascinating study of Blake's

symbolism and his use of visual interpretation to subvert as well as to comment upon the meaning of the original text.

Works in Other Collections

London	Tate Britain
UK	Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge
Australia	National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne
USA	Huntington Library, San Marino
	National Gallery of Art and Library of Congress, Washington
	Pierpont Morgan Library, New York
	Yale Center for British Art, New Haven

Further Reading

Blake Newsletter 20, *A Handlist of Works by William Blake in the Department of Prints and Drawings of the British Museum*. Spring, 1972

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Viscomi, J. *Blake and the Idea of the Book*. Princeton University Press, 1993

The William Blake Digital Archive in America, based at the University of Virginia, can be accessed via: <http://blakearchive.org>