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R E V I E W

Raymond Lister, *Infernal Methods: A Study of William Blake's Art Technique*

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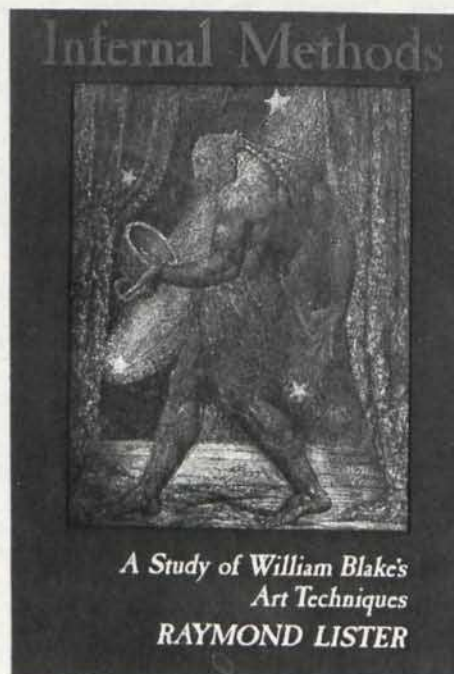


Raymond Lister. *Infernal Methods: A Study of William Blake's Art Techniques.*

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Pp. 102, illus. £8 (+ postage, U.S.).

Reviewed by Corlette Walker



An important development in Blake scholarship in recent years has been the attention paid to the influence of Blake's techniques as an engraver and as a painter on his art. Raymond Lister's *Infernal Methods: A Study of William Blake's Art Techniques* comes at the right moment to supply the necessary synthesis of these studies. Mr. Lister is a British art historian who has specialized in the Romantic period in Britain with particular emphasis on engraving and etching. In the introduction to this book he states that he is concentrating on Blake's craftsmanship and avoiding discussion of "subjects such as the symbolism of Blake's colors . . . the gestures and stances of his figures, of the relevance of his designs to his ideas of contraries, and so on, deeming it of greater importance in the present context to dwell on *how* rather than on *why*." Mr. Lister's motives in making this statement become more obvious as he describes many of Blake's techniques and admits that there is no general agreement on exactly how they were done. Some of the controversies are relatively minor, such as the problem of whether Blake varnished his watercolors or not, but some others, for example his creation of relief etching, are crucial to the *why* of his art. Indeed Mr. Lister does not avoid analyzing the effect of the techniques which Blake chose on his style--such as the influence of the firm wiry kind of engraving he learned from Basire on his conception of the "bounding line." By and large, however, with his admirable British clarity of expression, Lister does restrict himself to factual discussions of Blake's engraving and painting. And in truth it is exactly this kind of dispassionate analysis that is needed more than ever in the present climate of Blake scholarship. His discussion of Blake's engraving describes not only the techniques themselves but also their use from the seventeenth century onward. He compares Blake's techniques to those of his contemporaries, Flaxman and Fuseli, and

analyzes the effects of the new engraving techniques of the late eighteenth century.

Since engraving was Blake's profession, Lister, like most other writers on Blake's techniques, assumes that Blake was more than just conversant with the different techniques of wood engraving, aquatint and so on, even if he did not use them very often. Lister acknowledges that the same cannot be said for Blake's painting techniques, and he quotes Gilchrist's remarks that ". . . In an era of academies, associations and combined efforts we have in him a solitary self-taught and as an artist semi-taught dreamer. . . ." Lister does, however, quarrel with Gilchrist's use of the word "dreamer," again emphasizing that a craftsman even in another medium would be more of a realist in his use of different techniques than the word might imply. Blake's use of so-called "fresco painting," for example, cannot be equated with any known practice exactly and can only be labeled experimental. Yet in its way, as Lister points out, it is totally competent and realized.

He suggests much the same conclusion in his chapter on Blake's relief etching. My only quarrel with Lister, in this respect, is that he sides with Ruthven Todd, Stanley William Hayter and Joan Miro in their solution to the problem of how Blake's relief etching was really achieved. He states his agreement with them without referring to other and more current solutions. Even though his book was published in 1975, he does not mention the ideas put forth in many of the essays in Robert Essick's collection *The Visionary Hand* of 1973 nor in the essay in the 1973 *Blake Newsletter* by John Wright, nor does he suggest that it is an area of scholarly controversy.¹

Lister does not, in fact, digress very often from his straightforward accounting of the often extremely

complicated techniques of painting and printmaking of this period. Therein, in my opinion, is one of the great virtues of this book. I see its almost recipe-like simplicity as an antidote to the intense and subjective approach of the literary scholar to Blake's imagery. As the German art historian Detlef Dörrbecker suggests in the 1977 summer issue of *Blake* in his review of the David Bindman catalogue of the Blake exhibition in Hamburg in 1975, art historians have only very recently decided to deal to any great degree with the problem of form in Blake. In the past with the exception of Sir Anthony Blunt and a few others, literary scholars, as Dörrbecker notes, "... used Blake's illuminations and paintings because of their explanatory value as a kind of visual commentary or complementary code for understanding his poetic creation. . . ." Now he is confident that the idea that Blake's work as an engraver and painter is much more than a literal translation of his writing must finally be taken seriously, and that more attention should and will be paid the special visual qualities of Blake's art. As a result the new attention to form will have a salutary influence on our knowledge of the iconographical content of Blake's designs.² I am not quite so confident that the unique character of Blake's formes as separate in some respects from his ideas is as generally accepted as Dörrbecker would like. Certainly the recent interest in Blake's relief etchings as a problem which has many different kinds of implications is a symptom of this interest. Even here, however, in the mechanical descriptions of the process--where one would think that the literary scholar would be held to the physical facts of the process--there are still many areas of misunderstanding and ignorance. These in turn often result in tortured and arcane interpretations which are fully as obscure as the most complicated iconographical studies. Over and over reviewers and scholars stumble on the most elementary problems without realizing the implications of the use of this or that technique. Recently, in the 1977 spring issue of the *Blake Newsletter* Tom Dargan criticized J. Wittreich for calling crosshatching "a net of self-hood" and for implying that Blake had used it for subjective interpretive reasons and not as Mr. Dargan points out "because crosshatching is the engraver's usual method of giving body to the outlined figure." At the same time, neither writer notes, in this regard, Blake's preoccupation with nets *per se*. Robert Essick in his article "The Traditions of Reproductive Engraving" of 1972³ demonstrates quite plainly that the new net-like conventions of engraving resulted not only in images of webs and nets in Blake's poetry but, in his designs themselves, human forms covered with nets.⁴ More often Blake's experiments with techniques are treated as individual and unique expressions. Because there is very little understanding of the conventions and *schemata* which the artist used unselfconsciously, Blake's techniques are often freighted with a meaning which is controversial as well as all but incomprehensible except to the initiate. For example, John Wright's conclusion on the impulses which caused Blake to use relief engraving--as being "... the stages of process and cosmography of his sculptural plates, an analogue or emblem of the layered structure of the hierarchic allegorical systems of the cultural

world he sought to anatomize and to represent by transfiguration" is an extreme example. Could it not have been just as much, as Lister, Robert Essick and others have pointed out, a part of the general tendency to experiment with techniques of all kinds in the late eighteenth century in England rather than a deliberately conscious synthesis with poetic hierarchies?

Mr. Lister's reasoned clarity, rather than intuition and interpretation--no matter how brilliant--should be the basis for further discussion of Blake's technique and the influence of this technique on his visual imagery. It is more important at this stage to know what Blake did, how he did it, how his techniques fit into the general artistic situation, than to view his formal experiments solely in connection with his poetry. This may seem like heresy to some and yet the best art historical work of recent years, Bo Lindberg's *William Blake's Illustrations to the Book of Job*, includes a whole chapter on the techniques used and their effect on the imagery of this one work alone. After all, Blake, no matter how experimental and eccentric, must have assumed that his works would be viewed in a certain way. His craftsmanship by itself would have had control over many of the effects he attempted; they could not have been the result of sudden inspiration. Lister, for example, indicates that the difference in the time taken for hand coloring those plates colored by Blake and his wife Catharine together and those colored by Blake alone, which took more time and were done with more detail, resulted in appreciable visual differences.

Furthermore, rather than being the result of some poetic idea, the very notion of hand coloring--of "fresco" painting, of recreating tempera effects--is part and parcel of the experimental British taste of the time, a taste which was often deliberately anachronistic.⁵ One can compare Sir Joshua Reynolds (whom Blake despised) and his use of asphaltum to achieve "Rembrandtian" effects with Blake's techniques of painting and engraving in which he wished to recreate "Gothic" effects. In fact, as Thomas Hess remarked in his recent review of the newly opened Yale Center for British Art, "English painting is apt to be technically corrupt. The artists liked eclectic mixtures of texture and illumination."⁶ British artists tended also, unlike their peers on the continent (whose long indoctrination into the hierarchy of *genres* more or less restricted experimentation to the separate medium), to wander from one technique to another. The English desire to achieve the brightness and clarity of illumination or fresco, while part of the early nineteenth century longing for the "simplicity" and "purity" of the *Quattrocento*, took forms as different as Samuel Palmer's use of body-color and later the "wet white" ground of the Pre-Raphaelites.⁷ In this connection Blake, rather than being outside the stream of tradition as he is so often depicted in histories of painting, is at the very center of what was to become the overriding preoccupation of the nineteenth century artist--the concentration on process--on how the work of art was made and the relationship of this process to the content of the work.

Victor N. Paananen. William Blake.
Boston: Twayne Publishers/G. K. Hall &
Co., 1977. Pp. 171. \$7.95.
Reviewed by Edward J. Rose

While it is probable that art historians and literary scholars will never view Blake's dual creative processes in exactly the same way, it seems logical that such studies as Lister's *Infernal Methods* should be read as the first step in understanding Blake's visual imagery. It is, as I mentioned before, especially useful because it does not try to be interpretive in a literary or philosophical way. As literary scholars such as Robert Essick and others have already realized, iconography, which is just as dense and impenetrable in its way as textual analysis, may not be as useful as an initial response to Blake's imagery as the study of technique and its relationship to form. To understand the medium, its norms and the experiments that Blake made with these norms might enable us to take the first step toward the "... more than meets the eye." It might even be the essential bridge between the two areas of Blake scholarship.

¹ Robert Essick "Blake and the Traditions of Reproductive Engraving" in *The Visionary Hand: Essays for the Study of William Blake's Art and Aesthetics*, edited by Robert Essick (Los Angeles: Hennessey & Ingalls, 1973); John Wright, "Blake's Relief Etching Method, *Blake Newsletter* 36 (Spring 1976), pp. 94-115.

² It is a curious fact but literary scholars appear to find iconography more attractive than the study of technique. One wonders why this is so. It may be that it generally resembles literary history. Unfortunately art historical methodology is as various as literary criticism, and while a literary scholar would never use structuralist and Marxist methodology in the same work, he often does not see that the same differences operate in art history. In other words, until now, no one has as yet mastered both disciplines well enough to use them both with ease.

³ Robert Essick's article was first published in *Blake Studies*,

A reviewer must pity the author of a Twayne volume--the restrictions of which apparently make the writing of an intelligent and meaningful book on Blake difficult. I must assume that Victor Paananen has done his best, having accepted willingly the limitations of the Twayne format. Unfortunately, however, the final result is a near disaster that is redeemed from absolute failure only by Paananen's understanding that he is not writing about a mythological poet but a prophet who tried to dramatize mental strife and not to create another rattletrap pantheon of bloated gods and goddesses. The Twayne *Blake*, however, cannot be taken seriously as a contribution to the study of Blake. It is, in fact, not even a good introduction and fares poorly when compared to Max Plowman's fifty-year old critique, which, by the way, is not listed in the selected bibliography; nor are Swinburne, Yeats, Symons, Wicksteed, or Percival. The usual Twayne restriction on the number of entries in selected bibliographies will not explain Paananen's astounding omissions, especially considering some of the items included. But "we" (Paananen's favorite personal pronoun, which makes him sound repeatedly like Charles Lindbergh in Paris), does not compliment the dead, since, "we" may suppose, they have no influence on the careers of the living.

⁵ (Fall 1972), 59-103, and Lister does list it in his bibliography. He does not, however, deal with its point of view.

⁴ Reproduced in *The Visionary Hand*, p. 512, Plate 161 (*Europe* plate 12 detail of lower right corner, copy L, Huntington Library). It depicts a figure caught in a net.

⁵ Duncan MacMillan in his review of David Erdman's *The Illuminated Blake* and Raymond Lister's *Infernal Methods* in the *Apollo*, August, 1976, points out that there was another engraver, Joseph Strutt, who was interested in illuminated manuscripts and "Gothic" effects at the same period that Blake was also interested in these things. He states:

The world of the London engraver was small, but even if no direct link can be established between Strutt and Blake, his example is important. By showing that Blake was not isolated in his enthusiasm for illuminated manuscripts does not make his use of them any less original but by making it seem less unprecedented it makes the logic of his choice of art forms apparent.

⁶ Thomas Hess, "English Artists, Warts and Halos," *New York Magazine*, 29 Aug. 1977, p. 35.

⁷ Martin Hardie in his *Water-colour Painting in Britain*, Vol. I., p. 15, notes that "Samuel Palmer in his last period underpainted with solid white producing great brilliance by the use of transparent water-colours over this white surface when quite dry." Linda Nochlin in *Realism and Tradition in Art 1848-1900* p. 106, excerpts a passage from William Holman Hunt where he describes this process:

... Select a prepared ground originally for its brightness and renovate it, if necessary, with fresh white when first it comes into the studio, white to be mixed with a very little amber or copal varnish. Let this last coat become of a thoroughly stone-like hardness. Upon this surface, complete with exactness the outline of the part in hand. On the morning for the painting, with fresh white (from which all superfluous oil has been extracted by means of absorbent paper and to which again a small drop of varnish has been added) spread a further coat very evenly with a palette knife over the part for the day's work. . . ."

In both cases the artists are using techniques usually associated with one medium in another--Palmer tempera techniques with water color, Hunt fresco procedure with oil paint.