

AN ILLUSTRATED QUARTERLY  
**BLAKE**

R E V I E W

Robert N. Essick, *William Blake's Relief Inventions*

David Bindman

*Blake/An Illustrated Quarterly*, Volume 14, Issue 2, Fall 1980, pp. 106-107



WILLIAM BLAKE'S  
RELIEF INVENTIONS

By ROBERT N. ESSICK



LOS ANGELES:

WILLIAM & VICTORIA DAILEY  
1978

Robert N. Essick. **William Blake's Relief Inventions**. Los Angeles: William and Victoria Dailey, 1978. \$75.00.  
**Reviewed by David Bindman**

In the Prospectus of 1793 (K 207) Blake claimed to have "invented a method of Printing both Letterpress and Engraving in a style more ornamental, uniform, and grand, than any before discovered, while it produces work at less than one fourth of the expense." The use of the word "invented" is significant, for Blake is in effect proclaiming himself to be the possessor of a "secret" which could transform all the current methods of printing and book-publication. Furthermore he jealously guarded this secret, and though he occasionally hinted at publishing the method he never did do, and he was careful never to let anyone see him making relief-etchings, for it seems clear from their references to his methods that even such intimate friends as George Cumberland and John Linnell did not actually watch him at work on a plate. Nor, it appears, did he discuss the process with them in detail, although we know that for example he left the conventionally engraved *Job* plates lying around his workroom in an uncompleted state.

A fragment of a rejected copper plate for *America* and electrotypes from some of the *Songs of Innocence* are, apart from the works themselves, the sole surviving direct evidence of Blake's relief-etching methods and they formed the basis of an attempt by the remarkable trio of William Hayter, Joan Miro and Ruthven Todd to recreate them in 1947. Their method was purely experimental, that is to say it rested entirely on the making in the studio of a final product equivalent to Blake's own. In that sense their experiment was a complete success,

but as Essick points out, from the historian's point of view this is not quite enough, for achieving a seemingly identical result is not proof that you have followed precisely the same procedure. Essick's brief essay should not, however, be seen as a critique of the Hayter experiment, but rather as an attempt to reconcile the information which can emerge from studio experimentation with the evidence of technical manuals known to Blake; in other words to draw together the practical and documentary. As such the essay is masterly, for it clarifies with precision some of the means used, giving a completely convincing account of why the prints look the way they do. In particular we now have a definitive account of the significance of the shallow biting of the plates which accounts for the rough, almost messy surface of the prints, contributing to their sense of urgency and containing an implied criticism of the dry finish of the commercial engraving of the time. The discussion of the question of the consistency of the acid-resist is an admirable example of Essick's approach, for he reaches what seems to me an unassailable conclusion by the judicious interplay of experiment and documentation.

On the other hand I feel slightly less happy with the discussion of the problem of whether Blake transferred the text and design by counterproofing from a sheet of paper to the copperplate, or wrote backwards in acid-resist on the copper itself. Essick comes firmly down on the side of the latter, and he rightly cites the authority of Cumberland and Linnell (and indeed Sir Geoffrey Keynes) for this having been the case. Even so I am not con-

vinced except in the telling case of *There is no Natural Religion* and *All Religions are One*, which as Essick agrees do have an uncomfortable slant to the left, for I find it hard to believe that Blake would not have made an occasional error, either a backward-facing letter or a contrary slant, particularly given the difficulty of making a correction to a relief-etched plate. While one can argue that the process of transferring the acid-resist from the paper to the plate might be difficult, there is also the possibility mentioned by Essick that he could have counterproofed the design in some other medium on to the plate and then gone over it in acid-resist, a purely mechanical process. In the last resort I am reluctant to accept the notion that backward-writing of seamless consistency was the normal attribute of a skilled engraver. In fact one sees from proof impressions of prints that

engravers do frequently make mistakes which have to be corrected, and in any case they could well have used counterproofing for longer inscriptions. Unfortunately it is not likely, in view of Blake's secretiveness, that any further evidence will emerge to give a definitive answer to this problem.

A final word about the production of this pamphlet. It is produced in a limited edition on fine paper with samples of Essick's recreations of some of Blake's plates. Despite this it is not in the least precious in feeling but has the simple dignity and clarity of later Arts and Crafts book-making rather than the leather-bound opulence of some of the Trianon Press volumes. It is a very nice book indeed and preserves in a very brief compass an excellent balance between richness of content and elegance of form.

## Such Holy Song

Music as Idea, Form, and Image  
in the Poetry of William Blake

B. H. Fairchild, Jr.

Blake's holy trinity of art consisted of poetry, painting, and music. In this informed study, Dr. Fairchild examines the role of music in Blake's poetry, from the melodic "Songs" to the complex orchestration and thematic line of *The Four Zoas*. As a detailed examination of that facet of Blake's composite art that has received the least study, this book contributes a refreshing view into the visionary's often puzzling but always fascinating work. \$11.00

The Kent State University Press, Kent, Ohio 44242