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BLAKE

R E V I E W

Robert N. Essick and Jenijoy La Belle, eds.,
Flaxman's Illustrations to Homer

Janet Warner

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been "to present a detailed iconographical and stylistic study of Barry's work that takes into account his forceful and idiosyncratic personality as well as the impact of contemporary social, political, and theoretical issues." On the whole, Pressly does an admirable job in fulfilling his aim; however, on occasion, the emphasis falls rather too heavily on an analysis of Barry's tempestuous personality. A more balanced perspective could have been achieved if Pressly had presented the reader from the beginning with a broader view of the art historical context rather than relegating it to the conclusion. This would have been of particular help in clarifying Barry's contributions to the stylistic developments associated with English romantic art. Likewise, the study would have profited by a more thorough discussion of such pertinent issues as how Barry's works were perceived by his contemporaries. Who was his audience and, more importantly, who bought his prints? Pressly tells us that Barry's prints were the chief means by which he supported himself and the one area in which he was able to reach an audience successfully. Were his prints given a different reading than his full scale oils, which were, for the most part, undervalued in his own day? This line of pursuit would have set Barry squarely in the context of his times. Pressly, nonetheless, provides the reader with an invaluable amount of new information about both Barry and English art in general in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries.

Pressly supplements the monograph with various helpful appendices including a *catalogue raisonné* of Barry's paintings, drawings and prints. Unlike earlier listings of Barry's works, Pressly's catalogue is conveniently arranged by subject rather than collection and arranged chronologically within each section. Copious illustrations further enhance the value of this handsomely produced book. Pressly's lucid manner of writing makes this excellent scholarly text a pleasure to read.



FLAXMANS ILLUSTRATIONS TO HOMER

Drawn by John Flaxman
Engraved by William Blake and Others



Essick and La Belle, eds. *Flaxman's Illustrations to Homer*. Dover, 1977.

Reviewed by Janet Warner

This edition of Flaxman's designs to Homer was published five years ago and has become a most useful reference book for anyone interested in sources of English neo-classical design. Robert Essick and Jenijoy LaBelle provide a scholarly and pertinent introduction, a useful annotated bibliography chronologically arranged, and just enough commentary on each design to identify it and suggest its relation to Blake's and other artists' treatments of similar subjects.

The reproductions of the outline designs are very clear, even perhaps a little more highly contrasted than the originals I have been able to compare them with. The editors note the favorable reception of the designs from their first appearance in 1793, and their undeniable influence on motif and style in nineteenth-century Europe. Irreverently, I was reminded of the twentieth-century comic strip (see Scylla, *Odyssey*, plate 20): should we blame Flaxman for this? The flattened plane and economy of line of the illustrations appeal to the taste of the modern viewer more than does the classical subject

matter. One can see the genesis of the relief decoration of so many 1930s buildings, and many of the lines of Art Deco furniture in these illustrations.

Additions to the Blake Apocrypha

Blake, a play written and directed by Grant Hehir. Music by Bruce Stewart. Performed at the Sheridan Theatre, Adelaide, Australia, 4-20 March 1982.

Reviewed by Michael J. Tolley

Adelaide, Australia, has a biennial Arts Festival in March and this Festival has developed a Fringe and among the Fringe activities in March 1982 was a play called *Blake*, written and directed by Grant Hehir, with music by Bruce Stewart. This play was performed at the Sheridan Theatre on eleven occasions from 4-20 March; I attended the final performance.

The play began promisingly enough with a harangue from a Russian, then one from an Anglican clergyman, who were both led, in celebrating Blake's 1957 bicentenary, to make the claim that he was the greatest genius who ever lived; they were then mocked by a sly bearded rogue calling himself John Joseph Hidson (the star of the show), who claimed to be the cynical alter ego Blake alone could see in his life, a life Hidson bedeviled. Thus we were prepared for amusing situation comedy of the type in which Blake, courting Polly or being patronized by Sir Joshua Reynolds, was goaded into shouting rudely at an invisible interlocutor. In his own person, Blake appeared as a morose, doubting coward, unluckily bearing a bald patch from his tender years and not even allowed a red flourishing wig.

This was a production that breathed the spirit of amateurism, which a full house enjoyed at \$4.50 a head. Eight performers handled all the characters deemed necessary in a rough representation of Blake's life, two of them

playing ten parts each, with the actresses all compelled to play male parts, one pleasant effect of which was, apparently, the adaptation of the character of Tom Paine to a womanish figure. To compensate, Mary Wollstonecraft appeared as a very mannish feminist who made a determined assault on Blake's virtue, Fuseli being inexplicably absent from Johnson's radical circle. The entertainment consisted essentially of a number of Blake's songs, set charmingly to music and, alas, all scranneily sung, interspersed with travestied episodes from Blake's life and illuminated by a double-screen slide projection, some of the slides being rare and excellent, some well-known ones appearing reversed, including the *Europe* frontispiece.

All of those Blakean purists who could not bear the heresies of Adrian Mitchell's *Tyger* would have stormed from the small Sheridan Theatre breathing threats of libel, but we are all so civilized in Adelaide (that is to say, we do not take art seriously here), and it was such a pleasant warm night, and the whole enterprise was so patently harmless in such of its intentions as could be inferred, that even I sat back and chuckled at each fresh absurdity and clapped with the others at the end of each act (there was an interval of fifteen minutes for refreshments: superb orange juice for 40 cents or, in this renowned wine state, plonk for 50).

The unsuspecting credulous members of the audience would have left believing some curious apocryphal facts. Among these are the idea that Blake was, indeed, mad, though this was partly the fault of Hidson who, however, provided Blake with the experience which led to the doctrine of contraries; that the girl he first courted was a tartish model called Polly from the life class at the Royal Academy where he studied with Rowlandson and argued with Reynolds about painting from imagination; that he went to Felpham as an expedient to avoid accepting the position of Royal Engraver (selected by the mad George III on the blind-dab-at-a-moving-list principle), where Mr. and Mrs. Hayley first introduced themselves to him and Catherine (Mrs. Hayley remaining visibly alive and well through the whole trial for sedition); that it was to rescue Catherine from a sexual assault of the drunken Schofield that Blake grappled with the trooper and ejected him from his garden; that Blake was saved from hanging or worse (transportation to Australia) from a hostile judge largely by the Royal-Engraver-selection story; that thereafter Coleridge befriended him, meeting him at the womanish Charles Lamb's house, in the intervals of insulting Wordsworth (Coleridge misremembered Blake's poetry but Blake capped him with a word-perfect recollection of "Kubla Khan"); that Blake died alone, chanting (partly under Parry's inspiration) the famous lyric "And did those feet," which he wrote on his deathbed.