

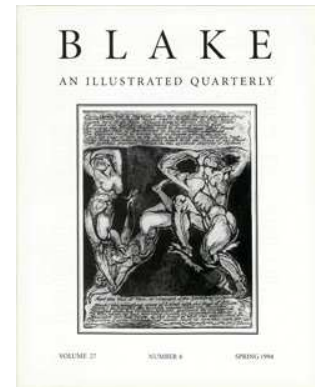
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R E V I E W

Wendy Wassing Roworth, ed., Angelica
Kauffman: A Continental Artist in Georgian
England

G. E. Bentley, Jr.

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Angelica Kauffman: A Continental Artist in Georgian England. Ed. Wendy Wassying Roworth. London: Reaktion Books, 1992, in association with the Royal Brighton Pavilion Art Gallery & Museums, Brighton. Distributed in the U.S. and Canada by the University of Washington Press. 216 pp., 149 illus. £9.95.

Reviewed by G. E. BENTLEY, JR.

Though William Blake is not referred to in *Angelica Kauffman*,¹ the book is surprisingly illuminating of Blake's context and ambitions. For one thing, Angelica Kauffman lived in Golden Square, round the corner from where Blake was born and brought up in Broad Street; he probably knew of her as a neighbor, not to mention as the finest female painter in England and a founder-member of the Royal Academy in 1768; indeed, he may have bought some of her etchings after her own designs, sold at her house in Golden Square (151).

For another, at the time that Blake's father introduced him to the wonderfully fashionable engraver William Wynne Ryland as a possible apprentice, "Ryland was the engraver most responsible for spreading Kauffman's fame" (143) and one of the most prolific engravers and publishers of history paintings. He was extraordinarily successful, and in 1783 he said that he had

shares worth £7,000, a royal pension of £200 annually, and that "My stock in trade is worth £10,000 and the net produce of my business falls little short of £2,000 a year." (173)

In the light of Ryland's conspicuous success, Blake's adolescent dislike of him must have seemed merely willful: "I do not like the man's face; he looks as if he will live to be hanged" (*Blake Records* [1969], 511). But in 1782, when Ryland found that he had overextended his credit, he forged two India bills and was indeed hanged the following year. Blake is likely to have been particularly aware of Angelica Kauffman because of the proposal that he should be apprenticed to her chief engraver.

For yet another, Angelica Kauffman was one of the very small number of painters in Blake's England who was able to live handsomely from the sale of her history paintings,

¹ The book was published "To coincide with the exhibition at Brighton Museum and Art Gallery" 14 November 1992-3 January 1993, according to a flyer for the exhibition; the pictures were also exhibited in York 23 January-7 March 1993.

the branch of the art which Blake and most of his contemporaries believed to be the highest accomplishment of the painter, corresponding in literature to epic poetry. "What distinguishes Kauffman from most artists active in England during the eighteenth century, and from virtually all women artists before the twentieth, was her ambition to achieve standing as a history painter" (21). Oddly, the only painters successful then in this line of high art in Britain were from outside England: the Americans Benjamin West (who became President of the Royal Academy) and Copley, the Swiss Angelica Kauffman and Blake's friend Henry Fuseli, and the Irishman James Barry—though Barry was reduced to living on apples when painting his great frescoes for the Society of Arts, as Blake remarked bitterly. It was chiefly as a result of the work of Benjamin West and Angelica Kauffman, and their engravers, that history painting was made, at least for a short time, fashionable. The *Public Advertiser* for 2 May 1775 remarked:

It has long been a matter of *complaint* in this Country, that there is very little Encouragement for Historical Painting; and that most Men extend their Ideas of Painting no farther than to get their own Portrait executed, and perhaps that of their Wife or favourite Child. . . . However well founded the above-mentioned Complaint might [*have*] be[*en*] some Years ago, yet it is certainly not so at the present. . . . (24)

As an aspiring history painter, Blake would certainly have been aware of Angelica Kauffman's paintings, and even more important the engravings after her paintings. For she not only painted pictures from history and literature, such as *Zeuxis Selecting Models for his Painting of Helen of Troy* (1778, pl. 37 here) and *Ariadne Abandoned by Theseus* (1794, pl. 61 here), but she and Benjamin West were the first members of the Royal Academy to exhibit paintings from British history (1771), though "the society of Artists had offered premiums since 1760 for paintings of British History" (62). British history was a subject very close to Blake's heart in his early years; not only did he make many drawings and paintings of British historical subjects in Westminster Abbey when he was working for Basire as an apprentice (1772-79), but he embarked upon a small book of designs illustrating British history. Angelica Kauffman painted *The Tender Eleanora Sucking the Venom out of the Wound which Edward I, her Royal Consort, Received from a Poisoned Dagger from an Assassin in Palestine* (1776, pl. 43 here),² which was engraved by W. W. Ryland (1780, pl. 140 here), and one of Blake's most ambitious early engravings called "Edward & Elinor" (18 August 1793) is of exactly the

² The subject derives from Paul de Rapin-Thoyras, *History of England* (1726-31) (*Angelica Kauffman* 62).

same subject; the only known copy was cut in two and used as pages 87-90 of *Vala* or *The Four Zoas*. The coincidence of subject matter is at least curious.

Angelica Kauffman consists chiefly of:

- 1 Wendy Wassyng Roworth, "Kauffman and the Art of Painting in England" (11-95, 193-97);
- 2 Angela Rosenthal, "Kauffman and Portraiture" (96-111, 198-99);
- 3 Malise Forbes Adam and Mary Mauchline, "Kauffman's Decorative Work" (111-40, 199-201);
- 4 David Alexander, "Kauffman and the Print Market in Eighteenth-Century England" (141-78, 201-03);
- 5 David Alexander, "Chronological Checklist of [311] Singly-Issued English Prints after Angelica Kauffman" (179-89);³
- 6 149 illustrations, 40 of them in color, of Angelica Kauffman's remarkably fine paintings and the engravings after them.

The most novel and important aspects of the book are probably the demonstrations that, first, "almost all the decorative compositions [*on furniture, china, etc., commonly*] attributed to her are reproductions, and were executed after her designs by copyists" (Adam and Mauchline 113), and second,

There were more singly issued stipples engraved in England after the work of Angelica Kauffman than after any other painter. Between 1774 and 1781—the second half of her stay in England—some 75 stipple engravings were published after her paintings and drawings, and nearly double that number appeared between her departure in 1781, and 1800. . . . it is likely that a higher proportion of her pictures were not only painted to be engraved but were also bought by printsellers than any other painter of standing in eighteenth-century England. (Alexander 141, 178)

Angela Kauffman demonstrated that an artist could make a living by creating history paintings. Any young artist with the same ambition is likely to have been vividly aware of her accomplishment.

The most enduringly valuable sections of *Angelica Kauffman* are likely to prove to be the checklist of separate prints after her designs and the masterful essay on "The Print Market in Eighteenth-Century England" by David Alexander.

³ N.b.: "an expanded and indexed copy of this list has been deposited in the British Museum Print Room" (179).