

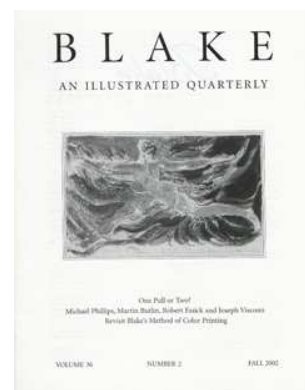
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D I S C U S S I O N

**Color-Printing Songs of Experience and Blake's  
Method of Registration: A Correction**

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## Color-Printing *Songs of Experience* and Blake's Method of Registration: A Correction

BY MICHAEL PHILLIPS

I wish to correct a mistake in *William Blake The Creation of the Songs From Manuscript to Illuminated Printing* (London: The British Library; Princeton: Princeton UP, 2000), specifically in Chapter V, "Colour-Printing *Songs of Experience*." This concerns the claim that Blake used a form of pinhole registration in color printing four impressions from Copy T<sup>1</sup> of *Songs of Experience* in the collection of the National Gallery of Canada.

In my effort to see every copy of the *Songs* in researching my book, I visited the National Gallery of Canada in August 1991. While inspecting the examples in the collection my attention was drawn to the four color-printed impressions of the title-page, "Introduction," "EARTH'S Answer" and "LONDON." With the help of the Senior Conservator of Prints and Drawings, Geoffrey Morrow, these were taken to the conservation laboratory and viewed under magnification, raking light and ultraviolet light. This clearly revealed that Blake had used a method involving two printing stages, the first to print in monochrome and the second in colors. In some instances, like that of the title-page, Blake had then applied color with a brush over areas of the color-printed pigments. It was clear that the monochrome ink had been largely absorbed into the fabric of the paper, while the viscous color pigments had been printed with less pressure and remained on the surface, often forming minute peaks and shallows when the print had been lifted from the copper plate.

From the evidence of our study in the laboratory, we were both curious as to how Blake could have printed these impressions in two stages. In May 1992, Geoffrey sent 35mm. color slides of each of the four color-printed impressions from Copy T<sup>1</sup>, including a number of details. In his covering letter he suggested that perhaps the "small black dot which can be clearly seen in the very corner of the plate is related to a method of registering the plate." I wrote asking how he thought this could have been done. He replied that Blake may have used a "swivel" technique, "where the single registration point in the top left corner allowed him to somehow swivel the paper sideways for the addition of colour to the plate and then back into registration for a second printing." Adding, "It is just a thought, I have never seen such a

technique used." From this speculation I deduced that Blake must have used a pin or etching needle to hold the monochrome impression and registration sheet in place while he swiveled the impression out of the way, either to add color to the plate or to remove it to do so. I tried this method in the printmaking studio. By marking off the opposite corner of the impression (from where it was held by the pin) on the registration sheet, the impression could be swiveled and returned into register. As represented in the 35mm. color slide details, the tiny dot visible in the upper left corner of each impression I interpreted to be the indentation or hole that had been left by the pin or needle using this method.

In September 2000, while correcting proof of my book, I wrote to ask Geoffrey to check my text where it referred to the color-printed impressions from Copy T<sup>1</sup> in the collection of the National Gallery of Canada, including the passages referring to pinhole registration (on pp. 98, 99 and 101 as published). He replied to say that "Everything looks good except for one sentence" that concerned my description of the blackened lead white pigment that was found on the title-page; a description that I duly amended and passed to the printer.

Geoffrey Morrow has now confirmed that I was mistaken in deducing from his description that the small black dots seen in the 35mm. color slides were in fact pinholes. I am now able to draw attention to this error in my book. Unfortunately, it was not possible to correct the label in the Tate Britain Blake exhibition describing the title-page of Copy T<sup>1</sup> of *Songs of Experience* as showing pinhole registration. There was no allowance in the exhibition budget for me to revisit the collections from which I had requested exhibits, where I would have had a chance to look again at the title-page. It was also not possible to see the exhibits in London in time to make changes. All of the exhibits arrived during the week before the opening, and immediately they arrived were unpacked and secured in their showcases under the supervision of their couriers.

Geoffrey Morrow's reply to my request to check my descriptions in proof gave me no reason to question the presence of pinhole registration on these four impressions. Nevertheless, as I made clear (p. 101): "The four impressions in the collection of the National Gallery of Canada, title-page, 'Introduction' 'EARTH'S Answer' and 'LONDON,' are the only examples that I have found that have been registered by using a pin. All of the remaining colour-printed impressions have no visible sign of registration."

It was the overwhelming evidence that Blake had found another, simpler method of registration that led to the experiments that I describe in my book. After printing the impression in monochrome, Blake could have nipped the margin of the registration sheet and impression between the rollers. This allowed the impression to be lifted at the opposite end to daub the plate with color pigment, or to remove the plate to do so (described on pp. 101-02). This method is illustrated in my chapter using the eighteenth-century roll-



ing press in the Science Museum, London (Fig. 34), the same rolling press that was on display in the Tate Britain Blake exhibition and illustrated in the exhibition catalogue (p. 101).

A more flexible method of registration was also described. Using this method the monochrome impression and registration sheet passed between the rollers, but before the impression was lifted from the plate a weight was placed at one end. This allowed the opposite end of the impression to be lifted and the copper plate to be daubed with color, or for the plate to be removed, cleaned and applied with color before being placed back into register. As I describe, using this second method also made it possible to remove the print and replace it with a second monochrome impression, which could then be color printed using the color pigments remaining on the plate (pp. 107-08).

Relying upon photographic reproduction led to the error published in my book. Such a mistake illustrates how there is no substitute, however sophisticated, for seeing Blake's illuminated books and prints firsthand, ideally in laboratory conditions where special lighting and magnification are available. Only by studying Blake's illuminated books and prints in this way are we able to discover the materials that he used and how they were printed. This in turn will bring us closer to an understanding of the time and effort that were involved in their making, and place us in a position to address questions of intention and audience that follow directly from such an understanding.

I have recently confirmed my description of events with Geoffrey Morrow. He adds: "The main point, that Blake did use a double printing technique on occasion, is one about which we are in full agreement. Only by examining prints like the title-page under the conditions you describe can the technical reality be experienced with full understanding."

## "Is This a Private War or Can Anyone Join In?": A Plea for a Broader Look at Blake's Color-Printing Techniques

BY MARTIN BUTLIN

This article arose as a response to "An Inquiry into William Blake's Method of Color Printing" by Robert N. Essick and Joseph Viscomi that first appeared on the latter's web site on 15 October 2001. A revised version appeared in *Blake/An Illustrated Quarterly* 35 (winter 2002): 74-103. This piece, in its concentration on technical detail and its assertion that Blake's color-printing in his illuminated books was only feasible through an exclusively single-pull technique, seems to me to miss out more general considerations of

Blake's overall development in the 1790s and to leave several important questions unanswered.<sup>1</sup>

First, as they say in the Michelin guides, *un peu d'histoire*. The opening paragraphs ("Introduction" in the web site version) assert that the "first, prominent appearance" of the two-pull technique was in the catalogue of the Tate Britain Blake exhibition of 2000-01, followed by Michael Phillips' *William Blake: The Creation of the Songs from Manuscript to Illuminated Printing*, published by the British Library in 2000. It was only in 2000 that "printing techniques rose to the forefront of attention among the small band of scholars interested in how Blake made his books ..." (74). This assertion is almost immediately contradicted by footnote 2 (significantly revised in the printed version, 74), which shows that the question of Blake's color-printing techniques has been discussed from at least as early as Graham Robertson's account in the 1907 edition of Alexander Gilchrist's *The Life of William Blake* (404-06). This supports the double-pull theory, but the authors discount this by distinguishing Blake's technique in the large color prints of "1795," discussed by Robertson, from the color-printing technique in the books, despite the fact that the former grew directly out of the latter. In fact, the double-pull theory was generally accepted, if only as an assumption rather than on the basis of any deep research, until relatively recently. The footnote also refers to the fact that the one-pull method was described by Essick in *William Blake Printmaker*, but fails to point out that the description is somewhat qualified: "Blake's technique unites the design or 'key' plate and additional color plates into one relief plate, and requires one, or at most two, printing operations" (125). It was in fact Viscomi, in his epoch-making *Blake and the Idea of the Book* (119-28, 287-88, etc.), who first wholeheartedly promulgated the idea of the one-pull technique at the expense of any other method; this is again relegated to the footnote. The authors fail to point out that, in this respect, Viscomi's theory was challenged in an otherwise highly positive review of the book in *The Burlington Magazine* 137 (Feb. 1995): 123. Alas, *The Burlington Magazine*, the leading art-historical journal in Great Britain, clearly does not make a prominent appearance in American literary circles, despite the fact that the review was listed in G.E. Bentley, Jr.'s listings for that year.<sup>2</sup>

1. Publications referred to in abbreviated form in this essay are: Robert N. Essick. *William Blake Printmaker*. Princeton: Princeton UP, 1980.

David V. Erdman, ed. *The Complete Poetry and Prose of William Blake*. Garden City, NY: Anchor Books, 1982.

Joseph Viscomi. *Blake and the Idea of the Book*. Princeton: Princeton UP, 1993.

D.W. Dörrebecker. *William Blake, The Continental Prophecies*. London: William Blake Trust/Tate Gallery, 1995.

Phillips 2000; see below.

2. "William Blake and His Circle: A Checklist of Publications and Discoveries in 1995," *Blake/An Illustrated Quarterly* 29 (spring 1996): 163.