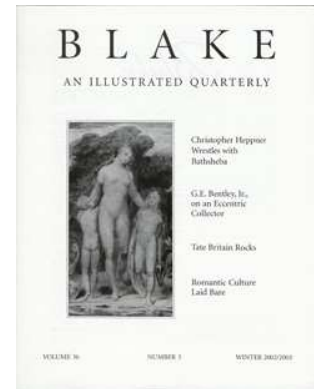


AN ILLUSTRATED QUARTERLY  
**BLAKE**

N E W S

## Blake exhibition at the Huntington Library

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solved residues of meaning is an obstacle to the enjoyment of art. However great the visual satisfaction produced by a painting, it cannot reach a perfect state so long as the spectator is plagued by a suspicion that there is more in the painting than meets the eye.<sup>45</sup> That statement was made in a book featuring a new reading of Botticelli's *Primavera* that stressed "the intellectual character of Botticelli," though it also aimed to maintain our sense of the painter's "lyrisme exact."<sup>46</sup> However, even all Wind's skilfully applied learning has not put an end to the multiplication of interpretations of Botticelli's work, which suggests that painting is inherently an art that resists definitive iconographic interpretation. Wind's language calls to mind Blake's comment about the "wonderful originals called . . . the Cherubim" which he saw "in vision," which contained "mythological and recondite meaning, where more is meant than meets the eye" (*A Descriptive Catalogue*, E 531); we can do our best to reach out for that "more," but Blake is even more resistant than Botticelli to the imposition of firm iconographic conclusions.

If we turn to plastic values, we experience an analogously mixed state of arousal / frustration, though there is here no parallel with Botticelli's fascinating surfaces. The figures of the family group are attractive and graceful, but lacking in the kind of anatomical and expressive accuracy that might give them a more deeply satisfying articulateness. The scene contains a good deal of vegetation, split into two very differently handled realms; in one we have a background of blurred and melded trees, that appear to have been added simply to provide a contrastive but non-interfering mat against which the bodies of the family group appear to advantage, and in the other we have the rather repetitive and underindividualized though strongly registered flowers, that appear to have been added to indicate specific meanings; the two realms do not cohere into a closely observed and naturally varied garden landscape, though the generalized indications of a quasi-paradise garden do support the innocent implications of the frank nudity. The sky too is made up of streaks of color that indicate evening, but do not fuse into a persuasive sky; the desire to be faithful to a specific textual reference has won a tug-of-war over the production of a convincing background to the action.

In short, the design does not fully satisfy either the intellectual or aesthetic interests that it arouses, though it offers enough to engage our interest. In defending a painting less problematical than *Bathsheba*, Blake told Trusler that "What is Grand is necessarily obscure to Weak men. That which can be made Explicit to the Idiot is not worth my care" (E 702). One can retreat before the imputed slur, and bravely claim that a painting is after all perfectly perspicuous to an adequately prepared viewer, or one can see the statement as a form of bullying, justified in the face of all that Trusler

45. Wind, *Pagan Mysteries* 15.

46. Wind, *Pagan Mysteries* 126.

as author of a book subtitled *The Way to be Rich and Respectable* meant to Blake,<sup>47</sup> but not a statement we should accept as a control over our own responses. We can enjoy the painting for what it has to offer, without feeling ashamed to admit that Blake in this and other designs has partially subordinated plastic and pictorial values to the quest for significance, without giving means to fully satisfy the latter. There is a gentle irony in the fusion within one person of the poet who wrote "The School Boy" (E 31) and, while receiving no formal education in letters, wrote some of the greatest poetry in the language, with the artist who underwent a full seven year apprenticeship as professional engraver, followed by two years' study at the Royal Academy, and yet often had trouble producing fully satisfying independent designs. The illuminated poetry remains the area within which Blake most successfully integrated the two identities, the textual base providing a continuous support for and interaction with the powerful images that surround and comment upon it.

47. Bentley, *Blake Records* 60.

## N E W S L E T T E R

The Huntington Library, Art Collections, and Botanical Gardens in San Marino, California, will present a major William Blake exhibition, 19 January 2003 to 25 May 2003. The show, entitled "Vision and Verse: William Blake at The Huntington," will be curated by Robert N. Essick. The Huntington has mounted a number of small Blake exhibitions over the years, but space limitations meant that only a few dozen works could be displayed at any one time. The recent development of the former carriage house on the Huntington grounds into the MaryLou and George Boone Gallery will permit a generous selection of the Blake collection to be shown. All the watercolors, including the three series illustrating John Milton's poetry, will be included, along with many plates from Blake's illuminated books, the Job and Dante engravings, drawings, manuscripts, separate plates, and commercial book illustrations. The exhibit will honor the institution's founder, Henry E. Huntington, for his prescience in collecting outstanding works by Blake at a time when the artist/poet was still little known. There will be no catalogue, but an illustrated brochure will be available free of charge to all those who visit the exhibition. Further information about the Huntington and its exhibition program is available online at [www.huntington.org](http://www.huntington.org).

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