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Blake and the Contemporary Art Market

As a rule, when we hear that a fine painting or an exceedingly rare book in mint condition has brought down a large price from the auction block we are not surprised. But few of us, I would imagine, are such careful observers of this rapidly changing marketplace that we realize the vast scope of the merchandise sold at auction or offered for sale by exclusive art dealers. As Blake enthusiasts, we often may watch the book dealers' catalogues for the going prices of major works such as the Gilchrist biography or the Yeats-Ellis edition. We may even occasionally stare in disbelief at the audacity of certain bookdealers as they gleefully overprice their offerings. But we seldom hear of Blake originals coming to the block, and most of us, I suspect, imagine all these priceless products of Blake's art to be housed in Institutions, private or public.

However, this fall as I was making inquiry among the major dealers, I stumbled upon three Blake originals, one recently sold, and the other two yet on the market. The two whose fate remains in question are the important Biblical watercolors, "Joseph and Potiphar's Wife," and "Felix and Drusilla." The firm of C. A. Stonehill, Inc. of New Haven, Connecticut offered these two at \$25,000 each. The offer was accompanied by descriptions taken from *The Blake Collection of W. Graham Robertson*, edited by Kerison Preston (London: Faber and Faber, 1952).

By comparing the amount these watercolors brought during the famous sale at Christie's on 22 June 1949 with their current price tag, perhaps we can arrive at some notion of the spiraling evaluation of Blake originals, an evaluation created by both current inflation and Blake's rising popularity among collectors. In 1949 "Joseph and Potiphar's Wife" brought £220.10.0, which, calculating by the wartime exchange rate of \$4.03 (the pound was devalued two months later, 19 September 1949, to \$2.80), is \$888.61. "Felix and Drusilla," on the other hand, sold for £275 or \$1,108.25. In the twenty years since W. Graham Robertson's collection was sold, "Joseph and Potiphar's Wife" has increased in value to approximately twenty-eight times its 1949 sale price, while "Felix and Drusilla" has increased by only twenty-two times. Obviously, the firm of C. A. Stonehill has arbitrarily equated the watercolors: in other words, a Blake original is a Blake original.¹

The third original work I turned up this fall is in quite a different class. The lavish *Catalogue Seventy* of Lew David Feldman's House of El Dieff listed as item 16 the following:²

[BLAKE, William.] *A Preliminary Study for "A Vision of The Last Judgment."* Pencil, pen and ink, and wash, 17 1/4 x 13 inches, matted, framed and glazed, 23 x 19 1/2 inches over-all. [London, c. 1807-1810.] \$10,000.00

Mr. Feldman has graciously placed me in touch with the new owners of the sketch, who have been kind enough to allow me to announce that the drawing is now in the collections of the Humanities Research Center at the University of Texas. The Center has allowed us to reproduce the sketch here [fig. 1], and Mr. Feldman has allowed us to reproduce the description of the drawing that appears in *Catalogue Seventy* [fig. 2]. It is, I believe, one of the most complete descriptions of the current state of the drawing.

While Blake originals do not daily come upon the market, I am sure that others



1 A preliminary study for "A Vision of the Last Judgment" (reproduced by infrared photography) From the collection of the Humanities Research Center, The University of Texas

have changed hands in recent years. I hope that as readers of the *Newsletter* learn of such sales, they will alert the community of Blake enthusiasts so that we may keep track of these important works.

NOTES

¹Since first writing this, copy C of *The Book of Urizen* sold at Sotheby's for £27,000--approximately \$64,800 or \$2592 per plate. [See *NEWS* in this issue of the *Newsletter*.] Either the watercolors up for sale by Stonehill are overpriced, or the purchaser of *Urizen* got a real buy.

²Item 17 in the Feldman catalogue is also a Blake item, though minor in comparison: *Illustrations of the Book of Job* (1825) with 21 engraved plates, proof impressions, unbound, 10 1/2 x 8 1/2 inches; together with Thornton's *Pastorals of Virgil* (with 17 woodcuts by Blake), 3rd. ed., 2 vols., octavo, contemporary sheep, rebacked, leather labels (worn), London, 1821: the lot \$3000.

[BLAKE, William.] *A Preliminary Study for "A Vision of The Last Judgment."* Pencil, pen and ink, and wash, 17 1/4 x 13 inches, matted, framed and glazed, 23 x 19 1/2 inches over-all. [London, c. 1807-1810.]

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"The Nature of my Work is Visionary or Imaginative; it is an Endeavour to Restore what the Ancients call'd the Golden Age." So wrote William Blake in his lengthy *Rossetti Manuscript* account of the lost tempera painting of *The Last Judgment*. The tragic loss of this elaborate symbolic painting is mitigated somewhat by the survival of a very small group of rare pencil and watercolor studies, of which the present may well be the earliest in conception and execution. It thus occupies a place of primary importance in the work of the man who has been called "one of the half-dozen greatest men of genius of the modern world." (Kathleen Raine).

The lost fresco is believed to have measured seven feet by five and was conceived in the heroic mold and patterned upon the great work of Michelangelo. "The general design and some of the groups of Resurrected figures . . . in Blake's illustrations of the *Last Judgment* are based on Michelangelo's *Last Judgment* in the Sistine Chapel, a work known to Blake through engravings and greatly admired by him." (Martin Butlin, *A Catalogue of the Works of William Blake in the Tate Gallery*, London 1957). To this general design Blake however added the impress of his own extraordinary mystic vision and the work became a vast epitome of his arcane philosophy which he worked on to the very end of his life. The extensive notes and explications of this monumental theme culled from the *Rossetti Manuscript* testify to its major importance. Geoffrey Keynes, *Blake's Pencil Drawings: Second Series*, (London) 1956, records the existence of two watercolor and three pencil studies and reproduces the drawing now in the Rosenwald Collection of the National Gallery of Art. Another reproduction of our drawing, in addition to that on the opposite page, may be found in E. J. Ellis' *The Real Blake*, London 1907. We have been unable to locate either the original or a reproduction of the third pencil study for comparison and our conclusions must therefore be tentative pending the publication of a complete iconography of Blake's work.

The Rosenwald drawing, in pencil and wash, has been worked over in india ink and represents a fuller version of

Blake's conception. A very close comparison of our exemplar with the Keynes' reproduction leaves no doubt that the two were created one from the other. In all but the very smallest of details their conformity is exact. (The measurements given by Keynes are slightly greater than those of our example but this may be accounted for by the fact that ours was measured in the frame, it being considered unwise to disturb the records of provenance on the backing). The spatial relation of the hundreds of individual figures in these drawings could hardly have been repeated in such exactitude from memory, even by their originator. The uncompleted portions of our drawing are filled with very lightly pencilled suggestions for the figures later completed in the Rosenwald. There would seem to be little doubt that the present offering is the earlier of the two. The determination of whether it is the earliest of all extant Blake studies for this great work must be based on a complete scholarly investigation.

The collecting and exhibition provenance of this drawing is notably distinguished. It appeared in the famous Burlington Fine Arts Club exhibition of 1876 as No. 227 *The Commencement of a Picture of the Last Judgment*, lent by A. Aspland. Other early owners include F. Tatham and Dr. Edward Rigall. It was acquired in 1903 by the late Sir Sydney Cockerell and bears a note in his hand to that effect on the backing together with some other references. E. J. Ellis (cited above) records its exhibition in 1904 at the Carfax Gallery and it has in recent years been shown at the Fogg Art Museum and the Philadelphia Museum of Art (on loan from the T. Edward Hanley collection). Labels for the latter two are pasted to the backing. Further references and citations may be found in Gilchrist's List 2, Section A, No. 24 and Rossetti, 1863, List 2, No. 22 and 1880, List 2, No. 24.

"The Last Judgment is one of these Stupendous Visions. I have represented it as I saw it" wrote Blake. This drawing is a seminal part of the vision of "a figure whose stature overtops all but the greatest men of genius that England—or for that matter, the Western world—has known."