

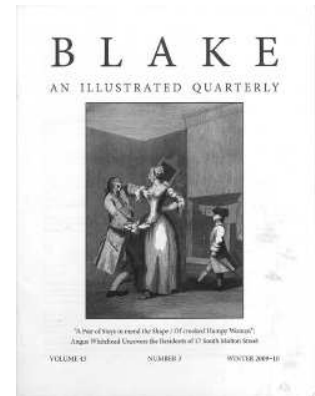
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Blake Copperplates in the Thomas Ross Archive

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BY G. E. BENTLEY, JR.

WILLIAM Blake engraved and etched hundreds of copperplates, but only forty-nine of them are known to have survived.¹ The information embedded in the metal of engravings can extend very considerably what we can deduce from prints made from them. However, most of the plates engraved by Blake and his contemporaries have long since been reduced to their constituent copper and converted to shoe buckles and cannon, sheathing for ships and wire. Consequently, the discovery of more is very exciting.

The print-making and -selling firm of Thomas Ross Limited in Binfield, Berkshire, has in its archive almost 10,000 copperplates dating from 1720 to the 1990s. These include designs by Flaxman, Hogarth, Linnell, and Stothard, but "the plates by William Blake ... are the most valuable in the Collection."²

The firm is descended from John Dixon, who printed proofs of Blake's *Illustrations of the Book of Job* on 3-4 March 1825,³ and from Dixon & Ross, who printed twenty-five sets of Blake's seven Dante engravings on 26 September 1838.⁴ Over the next 170 years it acquired the stock of printers and publishers, generally without plate inventories, including the major firms of McQueen (founded c. 1700, acquired in the 1960s) and Mauroo (founded 1900, acquired in 2000 with a stock of 2,600 plates). The business was acquired about thirty years ago by the Nutbrown family. They keep over half of their stock in print (listed at <<http://www.thomasross.co.uk>>), chiefly sailing, hunting, sporting, genre, and architectural scenes sold directly to galleries, framers, and interior designers rather than at retail. Though the Blake copperplates, twenty-six in all, are said to be the most valuable in the collection, only the Canterbury Pilgrims plate is kept in print, and Mr. Lindsay Nutbrown tells me that they sell only three or four of them a year. The others have not been printed in living memory.

As only the Canterbury Pilgrims plate is identified on the Ross web site, Nutbrown generously described the Blakes for me. They consist of the Canterbury Pilgrims plate, the twenty-two plates for Blake's *Illustrations of the Book of Job*,

1. See "Blake's Heavy Metal: The History, Weight, Uses, Cost, and Makers of His Copper Plates," *University of Toronto Quarterly* 76.2 (2007): 744; Blake also made seven temperas on copper. His woodblocks for Virgil survive in the British Museum Department of Prints and Drawings, but his only lithographic stone (of Enoch) does not survive.

2. "First Impressions: Blake and Turner are just two of the artists in the Thomas Ross Collection. RM Healey pays a visit," *Rare Book Review* (April-May 2007): 50-53. Healey does not identify the Blake plates in the archive.

3. *Blake Records*, 2nd ed. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004) 410, 783, 804.

4. *Blake Books* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1977) [hereafter *BB*] 545.

the portrait of Blake engraved after Thomas Phillips by Louis Schiavonetti as the frontispiece to Blair's *Grave* (1808), a double plate of Blake and Catherine drawn by Frederick J. Shields after outlines by Blake, and a portrait of Catherine. The dimensions of the plates (given as height x width in cm.) are very significant:

Illustrations of the Book of Job

	Ross	British Museum
title page	15.0 x 11.5	21.3 x 16.5
1	14.0 x 12.0	20.0 x 16.6
2	14.5 x 11.5	21.8 x 17.1
3	15.0 x 12.0	22.0 x 17.1
4	15.5 x 12.0	21.9 x 17.1
5	15.5 x 12.0	22.0 x 17.1
6	15.0 x 11.5	21.9 x 17.2
7	15.0 x 12.0	22.0 x 17.2
8	15.0 x 12.0	21.9 x 17.0
9	15.5 x 12.0	22.0 x 17.1
10	15.0 x 12.0	22.0 x 17.2
11	15.0 x 11.5	21.8 x 17.1
12	15.0 x 12.0	22.0 x 17.0
13	15.0 x 12.0	21.9 x 17.0
14	15.5 x 12.5	20.8 x 16.6
15	15.0 x 12.0	21.9 x 17.1
16	14.5 x 12.0	20.2 x 16.6
17	16.0 x 12.0	22.1 x 17.1
18	15.5 x 12.0	22.0 x 17.2
19	15.0 x 12.0	21.9 x 17.1
20	15.5 x 12.0	22.0 x 17.1
21	15.5 x 12.0	21.9 x 17.1

"Chaucers Canterbury Pilgrims"

Ross	Yale University Art Gallery
20.3 x 48.3	35.7 x 97.05

Phillips-Schiavonetti portrait of Blake from Blair, *The Grave* (1808)

Ross	National Gallery of Art (Washington, DC)
15.2 x 11.4	c. 25 x 29

Blake-Shields portrait of William and Catherine

Ross
11.4 x 15.2

Catherine Blake

Ross
10.8 x 9.5

The dimensions indicate that the plates of Job, the Canterbury Pilgrims, and the Phillips-Schiavonetti portrait are reduced-size facsimiles of the originals which happen to survive elsewhere. Blake's Job copperplates were commissioned (1823) and published (1826) by John Linnell, whose grandson Herbert Linnell gave them to the British Museum Department of Prints and Drawings in 1919 (BB #421). The Canterbury Pilgrims plate (1810) is now in the Yale University Art Gallery. Blake's twelve plates for Blair's *Grave* and the frontispiece portrait of him by Phillips were commissioned by Robert Hartley Cromek, engraved by Schiavonetti, and published in 1808, 1813, [1870], and 1926; the Blair designs were reprinted in Mora's *Meditaciones Poeticas* (1826) (BB #484). The copperplates were acquired by Lessing J. Rosenwald in 1938 and given to the National Gallery of Art (BB #435).

Probably some of the Ross plates were made for the second edition of Gilchrist's *Life of William Blake* (1880)—no longer "pictor ignotus" as in 1863. The dimensions are similar or identical to those in the 1880 edition:

Subject	Artist	Gilchrist (1880)	Ross
Catherine Blake	F. J. Shields	1: 361 10.6 x 9.9	10.8 x 9.5
Catherine and William Blake	F. J. Shields	1: 374 11.4 x 15.2	11.4 x 15.2
William Blake	Thomas Phillips	2, frontispiece 15.1 x 11.4	15.2 x 11.4

The Job prints are more problematical. When they were first printed in Gilchrist (1863, vol. 2), they show no indented platemark (in the Victoria University copy), and the only measurements feasible are of the framing lines, which do not include the imprint. When the prints appeared in 1880 (vol. 2), they are on India paper showing clear platemarks with four rounded corners (in the Victoria University copy). The dimensions of the framing lines are significantly larger in 1863 than in 1880:

	Gilchrist (1863)	Gilchrist (1880)
title page	14.0 x 10.9	13.0 x 10.3
1	12.2 x 10.0	12.0 x 9.9
2	14.0 x 11.0	13.0 x 10.0

In the list of illustrations, the 1863 Job prints are called photo-lithographs, and lithographs would leave no platemarks. The superior 1880 prints are said to be "Photo-Intaglios" produced by the Typographic Etching Company.⁵ They are made from different plates.

5. They are apparently the same plates used in *Illustrations of the Book of Job ... Reduced in Facsimile by Alfred Dawson* (1880).

The 1880 India paper Job platemarks are also significantly smaller than the Ross copperplates:

	Gilchrist (1880)	Ross
title page	14.5 x 10.9	15.0 x 11.5
1	13.9 x 11.3	14.0 x 12.0
2	14.6 x 11.1	14.5 x 11.5

I conclude that the three Ross portraits of the Blakes almost certainly were those made for the second edition of Gilchrist (1880) and that the Ross plates for Job may well have been made for the first edition of Gilchrist (1863).

It is curious that the Gilchrist copperplates should have been separated after 1880, for the other prints appearing in 1863 and 1880 do not appear to be in the Ross collection. The list of illustrations in the second edition gives the source of six plates as "Block lent by Messrs. Scribner & Co.":

Page	Title	Engraver
29	Glad Day	Anon.
68	Infant Joy	J. F. Jungling
128	Elijah in the Chariot of Fire	Anon.
134	Young Burying Narcissa	J. Hellawell
269	Death's Door	Anon.
270	Counsellor, King ...	Anon.

Presumably these six copperplates were returned to Scribner.

The sixteen electrotypes of Blake's *Songs of Innocence and of Experience* printed in volume 2 in 1863 and 1880 stayed with Macmillan's printer, Richard Clay & Co., until they were destroyed on Macmillan's orders about 1961.⁶ Presumably the other plates for Gilchrist were scattered as well.

The copperplate in the Ross Archive of Stothard's Canterbury Pilgrims design rivaling Blake's seems to be approximately the same dimensions as the original and may well be the plate actually engraved by Louis Schiavonetti, Niccolo Schiavonetti, James Heath, and Worthington and finally published in 1817. In its time this was a far better known plate than any of Blake's, and its discovery in the archive is of great interest.

6. BB 429-30.