NOTE

What is the price of Experience do men buy it for a Song: Blake at Auction 1971

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No attempt was made to compromise the bizarre qualities of the poem (for example, the Printing House in Hell scene). Blake's uniquely weird perception of such an (essentially) familiar place demands a corresponding imaginative effort from his reader. The method of the poem dictated the method of the play, which attacked the audience with a wide variety of sensational stimuli organized not according to patterns of plot but phases of pure effect. At every point the essential aim of the play was to induce new experiences of wonderment. For this reason the Chicago stage version resembled a ballet almost as much as it did a drama, just as its text was at least as much scenario as play. The blocking of the production was constantly turning into choreography.

The Chicago Marriage was presented in the Chancel of Rockefeller Chapel, a large Neo-Gothic church on the campus of the university. The audience was seated in the nave. The production itself was based upon a severe design of multi-media effects. This design, an incorporation of dance, song, mime, and various forms of ritual drama, was set in a context of aggressive visual and aural stimuli. In this way the style of the production attempted to translate Blake's firm grasp upon the marvellous into effective theatrical terms, and even to reproduce a stage analogue for the farrago of literary styles which Blake's great poem illustrates.

Cain's Company
brought $4,065.60. An article by David Bindman in the Guardian Weekly, 5 June 1971, p. 22, on the forthcoming sale featured this sketch, reproduced in outline. A brief notice on its purchase appeared in the spring 1971 issue of the Newsletter, p. [112].

Lot 145, "Milton's First Wife." $1,134.


Lot 156, "Head of Job." $2,520.


The entire Sketchbook, including its worn cover and several drawings by Varley, realized $34,432—a handsome sum, but nowhere near the $120,000 mentioned as an upper limit by Phillips in his note referred to above. Even the slightest sketches brought a large price. For example, Lot 166 (p. 84 of the Sketchbook bearing not much more than a doodle of some figures by a river) went for $2,016, perhaps because a note in the sale catalogue compares it with "Homer and the Ancient Poets" among the Dante designs. It continues to amaze non-Blakeans in the art world that so many are willing to pay so much for the merest of Blake's trifles which have in themselves practically no artistic merit. Enthusiasts realize the wisdom of such opinions, but keep buying anyway.

The sale of the preliminary drawing for "Joseph Ordering Simeon to be Bound" is described in the Spring 1971 Newsletter, p. [112], but its importance warrants a second notice here. This drawing, sold at Sotheby's on 24 June (Lot 108 for $6,720), is an early work (c. 1784-85) that can play an important role in our understanding of Blake's stylistic development. Curiously, the drawing shows the influence of Flaxman, while the finished design in the Fitzwilliam Museum just as clearly shows the influence of James Barry. When taken together, these works demonstrate how the young Blake would change styles, even in the midst of developing a single design, as he began to amalgame them all into his own unique visual idiom.

The last Blake auction of 1971 took place at Christie's on 9 November when nine paintings and drawings, as listed below, were sold from the collection of Lady Melchett. All but the last are reproduced in the sale catalogue.

Lot 71, "Saint Matthew and the Angel," tempera on canvas, c. 1799, sold for $12,336. Blake painted a series of four temperas for the Evangelists for Thomas Butts, of which this work is one of two surviving. "St. Mark" and "St. John" were in the Butts sale, 29 June 1853 (Lot 141), but have not been heard of since to my knowledge. "St. Luke" was in the Graham Robertson collection and now, according to Geoffrey Keynes, William Blake's Illustrations to the Bible, belongs to "C. Kearley, Esq."

Lot 78, "Tiriel Supporting Myratana," wash drawing illustrating Tiriel. The price is very likely a world's record for a drawing by Blake--$15,420. According to Geraldine Norman, writing in The Times [London] (10 November 1971), it sold for only $625 at auction in 1958. The fact that this monochrome drawing brought more than the previous lot caused Miss Norman to headline her article "Reversal in values of works by Blake." Both Tiriel designs in the sale fetched such high prices, not because of some rash vagary in the market, but rather because they illustrate one of Blake's own poems composed at a crucial point in his career when he was beginning to develop illuminated printing and prophetic narrative. In this case the collector responded to the scholar, paying more for a work in a "lesser" medium than for a tempera of lesser importance.

Lot 78, "Tiriel Leaving Har and Heva," wash drawing illustrating Tiriel, sold for $9,766. The sale catalogue entitles the work "The Blind Tiriel Departing from Har and Heva," but the introduction of Heva into the group is surely an error.

Lot 74, "Prone on the Lowly Grave--She Drops," watercolor intended to illustrate Blair's Grave but never engraved. This Stothard-like design sold for $5,140. Another rejected Grave preliminary appears on the cover of the Spring 1972 issue of Blake Studies.

Lot 75, "Saint Augustine Converting King Ethelbert of Kent," a watercolor which sold for $2,570. A note in the sale catalogue states that Mr. David Bindman has pointed out that this is one of an incomplete series of designs for a History of England, one of which, 'The Death of Earl Goodwin' [sic], Blake exhibited at the Royal Academy in 1780, no. 315. "The Landing of Julius Caesar," reproduced in Charles Ryskamp, William Blake, Sanguine (Princeton, 1969), is another work in this series.

Lot 76, "The Sacrifice of Manoah," a small and probably early watercolor, with the same design in pencil and grey wash on the verso, which sold for $1,157. The sale catalogue does not make clear whether it is the recto or verso in the reproduction.

Lot 77, "Adam and Eve," a slight sketch of three figures that also sold for $1,157.

Lot 78, "Lucifer and the Gods," an energetic wash drawing in Blake's Flaxmanesque style which brought $2,827.

Lot 79, "The Deluge," a pencil sketch, attributed to Blake in an inscription by Tatham, brought only $437.

Except for the last lot, all the works in the auction were of considerable interest. It may be many years before we see again in one year three sales of such importance as the Book of Urizen, Blake-Varley Sketchbook, and Lady Melchett auctions.

Our thanks to David Bindman for several items of information on Blake sales in 1971, all incorporated above. (Eds.)