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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 audial 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.



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

Last year was an exceptionally busy one for Blake collectors. In spite of the number of items that came up for auction, the market held up well, with no perceptible decline in prices.

Copy C of *The Book of Urizen* is one of only two copies containing plate 4 with the complete text. Its auction at the Britwell Court Library sale, Sotheby's, 29 March, was thus an event of considerable importance. Details from the sale catalogue and a discussion of the book's fate can be found in the *Blake Newsletter*, 4 (Winter 1971), 69-70 and 4 (Spring 1971), [112]-113. Although there were fears that *Urizen* would be dismembered immediately and sold as individual plates, it is still intact and for sale by a London dealer. Another item (no. 34) in the Britwell Court sale, a copy of *Poetical Sketches*, received previous notice in the *Newsletter*; see Michael Phillips, "Blake's Corrections in *Poetical Sketches*": A Forthcoming Supplement and the Britwell Court Library Copy," *Blake Newsletter*, 4 (Spring 1971), 148-49. This copy is not recorded by Keynes in his census in *Blake Studies* (2nd ed., Oxford, 1971), pp. 41-45, unless copy H, which Keynes describes as "bound in green morocco, gilt, by F. Bedford, untrimmed" and locates "in 1936 in the Carl H. Pforzheimer Library, New York" somehow found its way to Britwell Court and during the voyage faded into the copy described in the sale catalogue ("olive straight-grained morocco gilt, t.e.g., uncut, by Francis Bedford"). The title-page is reproduced in the catalogue.

Copy A of *The Book of Thel* was sold at Parke-Bernet in New York, 19 October, lot 343, for \$21,000. This copy had been on deposit in the Harvard College Library since 1941, and it was something of a surprise to see it up for sale. The very lightly colored title-page is reproduced on the cover of the sale catalogue.

The auction that attracted the most attention during 1971 took place on 15 June at Christie's, where the *Blake-Varley Sketchbook* was sold leaf by leaf. A note by Michael Phillips on the sale and various reactions to it appeared in the Spring 1971 issue of the *Newsletter*, pp. [112]-113. Listed below are the major drawings, all reproduced in the catalogue along with thirteen lesser sketches, and the prices they fetched.

Lot 141, "The Ghost of the Flea." \$5,040 to a London dealer for resale. I believe that this sketch is still for sale at considerably more than the auction price.

Lot 142, "A Standing Archer." \$3,044 to Zeitlin & Ver Brugge of Los Angeles, California. The sketch was offered for sale and reproduced in their catalogue 228 for \$4,550.

Lot 144, "Head of the Dying King Harold,"

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 151, "Head and Shoulders of a Young Man," p. 108 of the *Sketchbook*. \$1,209.

Lot 155, "Head of Job." \$2,520.

Lot 156, "Prince Arthur." \$2,016.

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 amalgamate 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 of 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 72, "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 73, "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, Engraver* (Princeton, 1969), is another work in this series.

Lot 76, "The Sacrifice of Manoaah," 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.)