

AN ILLUSTRATED QUARTERLY BLAKE

R E V I E W

David Alexander and Richard T. Godfrey, *Painters and Engraving: The Reproductive Print from Hogarth to Wilkie*

Robert N. Essick

Blake/An Illustrated Quarterly, Volume 14, Issue 4, Spring 1981, pp. 220-223

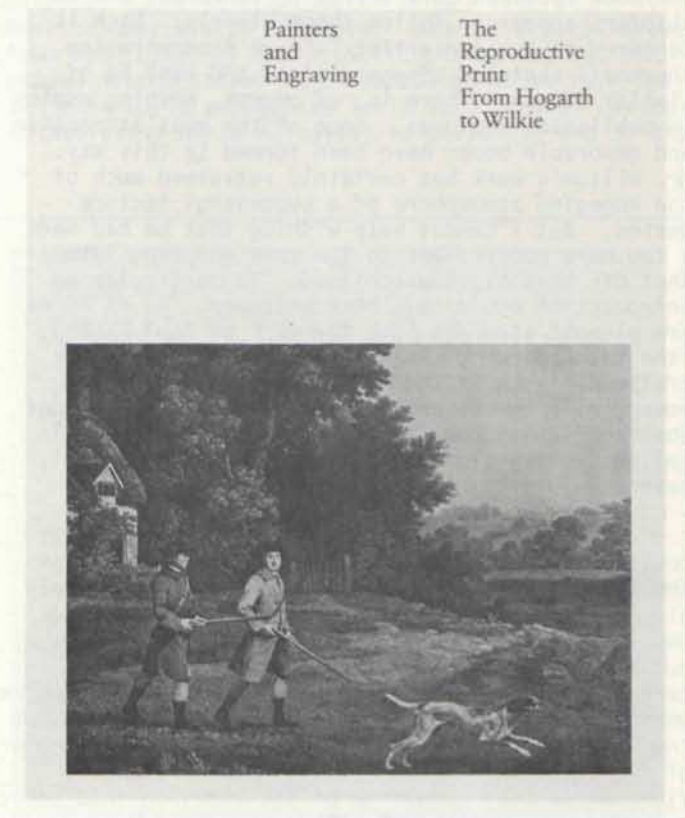


David Alexander and Richard T. Godfrey.
Painters and Engraving: The Reproductive Print from Hogarth to Wilkie. An exhibition at the Yale Center for British Art, New Haven, Connecticut, 26 March through 22 June 1980. Exhibition and catalogue (73 pp., 14 illus.).

Reviewed by Robert N. Essick.

In about 1810, Blake called upon "Englishmen" to "rouze yourselves from the fatal Slumber into which Booksellers & Trading Dealers have thrown you Under the artfully propagated pretence that a Translation or a Copy of any kind can be as honourable to a Nation as An Original."¹ This appeal has been so thoroughly answered by twentieth-century collectors, connoisseurs, and curators as to overthrow completely the aesthetic of the last two centuries which highly valued reproductive graphics. The triumph of original printmaking has transformed our sense of what to value in prints and, less happily, has tended to obscure the importance of copy engraving as the predominant form of the craft throughout Blake's lifetime. The recent exhibition, *Painters and Engraving*, at the Yale Center for British Art was a worthy and generally successful attempt to restore a more balanced historical view and investigate—but not necessarily advocate—the values of the reproductive print.

The 150 works in the exhibition, including a few paintings accompanied by their graphic translations, were displayed with appropriate restraint on the third floor of the handsome new Yale Center. All the prints were fine, early impressions and for the most part in excellent condition. Many of these works were originally intended for the collector's portfolio or display in intimate domestic settings, and thus I had to compensate for the public and institutional context of the exhibit by moving from print to print and studying each at close range. Rich burr, mossy tints, and clean strokes must be appreciated at a distance not to exceed twenty



inches. A scholarly exhibit of this type never draws the crowds swarming over the MOMA Picasso fiesta on the same weekend I visited the Center. Left frequently alone, except for an occasional guard who feared I was fogging up the glazing, I could study the prints with considerable convenience. Three visits of about two hours each made for a calm and decorous experience with a proper eighteenth-century balance of delight and instruction.

The exhibition had a narrow focus, for it dealt not with the full range of reproductive printmaking in England from c. 1720 to c. 1830 (as the sub-title implies), but rather with the specific field of prints copied after paintings executed as finished works in their own right. Further, almost all of the prints were based on eighteenth or early nineteenth-century British paintings, and book illustrations were generally excluded. This field was in turn divided into fourteen sections. Reciting them is a bit tedious, but an efficient way of giving a sense of the exhibit's contents and an outline of the history of eighteenth-century English copy engravings after paintings.

1. Hogarth and His Predecessors (Le Blon, J. B. Jackson, Kirkall²)
2. The Mezzotint and Subject Painting 1735-1760 (Faber, Houston, McArdeil)
3. The Revival of Line 1740-1770 (Ravenet, Woollett)
4. The Irish Mezzotint Engravers in London 1750-1775

(Frye, Fisher, Watson, Dixon)

5. English Mezzotint Engravers 1760-1775 (Spilsbury, Green, Earlom, Pether)
6. Benjamin West and the Market for Prints after History Paintings (Green and Woollett again, Hall, Strange)
7. Reynolds and the Great Age of the Portrait Mezzotint 1775-1785 (Watson, J. R. Smith, Sherwin)
8. An Expanding Print Market: The New Techniques of Stipple and Aquatint (Ryland, Bartolozzi, Knight, Schiavonetti)
9. The Painter as Print Maker: The Prints of George Stubbs and James Barry.
10. The Painter and the Search for the Best Selling Print 1775-1800 (Bartolozzi, Woollett & Emes, Sharp)
11. The Widening Range of Mezzotint 1780-1810 (Earlom, J. R. Smith, Ward)
12. The Ambitions of the Print Publishers (Heath, Skelton, Sharp, Tomkins, Anker Smith; and the publishers Macklin, Boydell, and Bowyer)
13. The English Print Trade and the French Revolutionary Wars (Orme, Bromley, Heath)
14. Conclusion: The Early Nineteenth Century (Raimbach, Cousins, John Martin, Lucas' prints after Constable)

This list indicates the extent to which mezzotints, the chief means for rendering oil paintings into repeatable images, dominated the exhibit. All were highly competent and representative examples, but the long rows of mezzotint portraits and genre scenes showed how regularity and the extreme of high finish can grow into monotony. The more exciting mezzotints were those after paintings with Caravaggesque light effects, such as Philip Dawe's plate of 1768 after Henry Robert Morland's "The Ballad Singer" (both painting and print exhibited) and the great plates by Green, Earlom, and Pether after Wright of Derby's "A Philosopher Shewing an Experiment on the Air Pump," "The Blacksmith's Shop," and "The Farrier's Shop." For one as lodged in Blake and his circle as I, it was a slight disappointment not to find in the exhibit some of the striking mezzotints after Fuseli, such as J. R. Smith's "Belisane & Percival under the Enchantment of Urma" (1782) and "The Weird Sisters" (1785).

Although no works by or after Blake were in the show, it did offer an excellent chance for experiencing at first-hand the context of styles and techniques in which, and often against which, Blake pursued his own unique course as a printmaker. Blake's natural allies were Woollett and Strange, the great practitioners of traditional line engraving who opposed the newer schools of mezzotint, crayon manner, stipple, and aquatint. That he

attacked these two men, at least in his private *Notebook* jottings of c. 1810, and set his own career within an older tradition of original graphics, shows the extent of his dissatisfaction with the aesthetics and economics of the printmaking industry represented in this exhibit. In his earlier years, Blake seems to have been more willing to channel his talents into conventional copywork. His major source of employment throughout his career was book illustration, but some of his separate plates would have fitted comfortably into the Yale exhibit. Blake's two plates of 1782 after Watteau, "Morning Amusement" and "Evening Amusement," particularly the Keynes, Butlin, McGill, and Essick impressions printed in sanguine or terra cotta,³ are typical of the stipple plates presented in section 8 of the exhibit. Ryland's "Maria" after Angelica Kauffmann (no. 76 in the exhibition catalogue) and Bartolozzi's "Presentation of King John of France to Edward III" (no. 84) are very close to Blake's work. If the two extant productions ("Zephyrus and Flora" and "Calisto," both after Stothard) by the partnership of Blake and Parker are representative of their intentions, then in 1784 the two former apprentices of James Basire were attempting to produce and market prints that met the contemporary demand for delicately stippled "fancy" prints. A few years later, Blake even became involved in the highly popular business of producing stipple prints after George Morland's picturesque views of country life. "The Industrious Cottager" and "The Idle Landress," both originally published by J. R. Smith in 1788, are of the same genre as J. D. Soiron's two plates after Morland, "St. James's Park" and "A Tea Garden" of 1790, exhibited at the Yale Center (nos. 85 and 86). Soiron's plates, like three extant impressions of Blake's prints after Morland,⁴ were printed in colors *à la poupée*--that is, with each color of ink individually applied to the appropriate areas of the copperplate with a rag dabber or stump brush and printed in one operation.⁵ Blake's own color printing of the illuminated books appears to have been an extension of this technique to relief plates and a substitution of opaque glue or gum-based pigments for colored inks.

The Yale exhibit included two important painter-printmakers, Barry and Stubbs, whose work is legitimately a part of reproductive engraving, since their prints were copied after paintings, but who are also in the tradition of original graphics because the paintings they "copied" (and frequently altered) were their own. Blake shared much with these artists who also took singular approaches to the execution and publication of their designs "without the intermediary of engraver and publisher."⁶ In his early years Blake seems to have had the intention of preparing a series of designs on subjects from British history, and later on Biblical subjects, for eventual execution as copperplate line engravings. From this resulted only the "Edward and Elenor," "Job," and "Ezekiel" separate plates and perhaps "The History of England, a small book of Engravings" known only through their advertisement in the 1793 prospectus "To the Public."⁷ This pattern for an artist-printmaker was established by Barry, whose "King Lear and Cordelia" (nos. 102a and 102b in the exhibit) represents his energetic approach to the copper. Prints on historical and literary subjects were the

most respected, having the same position in graphics as the epic in the hierarchy of literary genres, and eighteenth-century decorum called for their execution in traditional line etching/engraving. Barry and Blake set their sights on this lofty field; neither achieved the popular and financial successes of the painters West and Reynolds or the copy engravers Woollett and Strange. Further, Barry tended to experiment with inking and printing techniques to such an extent that each impression is unique. This divergence from the uniform repeatability sought by the established printmaking industry was carried to an extreme in Blake's relief etchings and color printed drawings.

Given his explicit admiration for Barry,⁸ the parallels between Blake's career (or at least his early intentions for it) and his predecessor's are not surprising. The associations between Blake and Stubbs come less readily to mind, particularly given the differences in the subjects of their prints other than large felines. The Yale exhibit, however, makes their general relationship clearer. Godfrey tells us in the catalogue that "no prints are less spontaneously executed than those of Stubbs, whose delight it was to patiently rework and rethink for the graphic medium an image that he had already defined in paint, perhaps decades before" (p. 46). Blake's career after 1804 shows this same tendency, for he returned to his early plates to revitalize "Job," "Ezekiel," "The Accusers," "Joseph of Arimathea among the Rocks of Albion," and "Albion rose" with new cutting, burnishing, and inscriptions. And Blake seems to have fiddled with "Chaucers Canterbury Pilgrims" and *The Gates of Paradise* into his last few years.⁹ The great *Job* plates have a very high finish in their central panels, display some of the minute flick and stipple work to create rich and varied textures so typical of Stubbs' plates, and are reworkings of designs Blake executed almost twenty years earlier for Thomas Butts. Like Barry and Blake, Stubbs also "manifested to a remarkable degree that natural delight in purposeful technical experiment."¹⁰ When viewed from this special perspective offered by the Yale exhibit and catalogue, one might even begin to speak of the "School of Barry, Blake, and Stubbs." There are of course significant differences among them, but all three artists struggled against the modes of sensibility and production dominating late eighteenth-century printmaking. Their works embody that unity of conception and execution so much a part of Blake's aesthetic and of our modern taste in graphics. Certainly Blake's major attempt at producing a large engraving after one of his paintings, "Chaucers Canterbury Pilgrims," would have fitted nicely into the Stubbs and Barry section of the Yale exhibition. It is surprising that the organizers did not take advantage of available resources to do this: across the street at the Yale University Art Gallery they would have found Blake's original copperplate of the "Canterbury" and an impression of the rare third state.¹¹ The Center itself has a good impression of the second state and, for contrast and context, a fascinating etched proof (yet with inscriptions and an imprint, dated 1 August 1810, indicating it was published) of the Schiavonetti-Heath plate after Stothard's "Canterbury Pilgrims" painting.

A scholarly exhibition deserves a good catalogue to perpetuate its memory and extend its impact beyond the lucky few who attended the show. Although the physical appearance of the catalogue authored by Alexander and Godfrey is not very promising, with few illustrations and typewriter typography, their double-column text is packed with valuable information, some of it taken from previously unpublished letters and engravers' receipts. Although not the focus of any one section of the catalogue, the class struggle between engravers and painters--the latter always asserting their superiority to the former yet desperately needing their talents--is clearly documented. The conventional entries on individual works are preceded by an introduction by Alexander, brief descriptions of printmaking techniques by Godfrey, and a most informative overview by Alexander of how eighteenth-century prints were published. The second of these sections offers interesting material on the use of drypoint (hard to detect in eighteenth-century plates because the burr was always removed before printing) and on the sale of unfinished proofs, but also raises a few doubts. Godfrey calls woodcut a "planographic process" (p. 8). Surely it is relief; the first planographic technique was lithography, and even that was a relief technique in its early history in England. Godfrey also states that the etching ground was wax, the usual method of biting the plate was to build a dike of wax around its edges and pour acid into the shallow vessel formed thereby, and the most common mordant was dilute nitric acid or the "Dutch Bath" of hydrochloric acid mixed with chlorate of potash (p. 7). All three observations are subject to question. The eighteenth-century etching manuals in French and English recommend the "soft varnish" which indeed contained "virgin wax" (i.e., purified beeswax) but also asphaltum and other substances.¹² Pure wax would be too soft and would probably drip off the plate if one tried to smoke it with a candle. Blake used the dike method for biting his relief plates; but the handbooks give equal if not more attention to a slanted palette, with a trough at the bottom, on which the plate was placed and acid poured over it, and to the "Cochin Rocker"--an acid-filled tray in which the plate was gently rocked back and forth to keep the acid moving and thereby prevent bubbles that cause underbiting and lifting of the ground. To support his reference to the dike method, Godfrey refers to item 9 in the exhibit, a print from *The Universal Magazine* of October, 1748, showing (among other printmaking activities) a copperplate resting in an acid bath tended by a young boy with a feather to whisk away bubbles. This scene is even more disconcerting to me than it should have been to Godfrey, for I have never found an eighteenth-century description of etching that recommends this procedure, now standard in an age without cheap apprentice labor to pour acid or rock trays. Perhaps it is only a Cochin Rocker temporarily at rest and the boy a lazy apprentice. Finally, the standard mordant was probably Abraham Bosse's so-called *aqua-fortis*, a mixture of vinegar, sal-amoniac, sea salt, and verdigris. Only Dossie (II, 146-50) objects noisily to this mordant and writes that true *aqua-fortis* is nitric acid. None of the manuals I have seen says anything of the Dutch Bath, although Bosse's formula has a similar combination of acids and salts and in my experience bites copper in a

similarly gentle, non-bubbling manner. But these technical matters seem to be subject to endless dispute, and I suspect that neither Godfrey nor I have heard the end of it.

The catalogue, like the exhibition itself, is worthy of its institutional sponsor. I hope that the Yale Center and its guardian angel, Mr. Paul Mellon, will continue to serve scholars in specialized fields, such as English copy engraving, where few other museums or libraries can afford to labor. These efforts will surely add to Yale's reputation as a center for the study of British art and culture.

¹ "Public Address" in David V. Erdman, ed., *The Poetry and Prose of William Blake* (Garden City, New York: Doubleday, 1965), p. 565.

² For each section I list only the more important printmakers presented, not all those exhibited.

³ Sir Geoffrey Keynes' impression of "Morning Amusement" is reproduced in sanguine in his *Engravings by William Blake: The Separate Plates* (Dublin: Emery Walker, 1956), pl. 39.

⁴ An impression of "The Idle Laundress" color-printed in blue, brick red, brown, black, and olive green is in the Keynes collection. A pair of these companion prints color-printed in blue, green, brick red, and black was sold from the A. E. Newton

collection at Parke-Bernet, 17 April 1941, lot 154 (\$150), and is now in the collection of Lucile Johnson Rosenbloom, Pittsburgh.

⁵ An exhibit at the Yale Center from 20 April through 25 June, 1978 dealt specifically with color printing. See the informative catalogue by Joan M. Friedman, *Color Printing in England 1486-1870* (New Haven: Yale Center for British Art, 1978).

⁶ Richard T. Godfrey in the catalogue to the exhibition, p. 46.

⁷ See Erdman, ed., *Poetry and Prose of William Blake*, p. 671.

⁸ See the annotations to Reynolds (Erdman, pp. 626, 631, 640), the "Public Address" (Erdman, pp. 565, 570), and the reference to "Barry, a Poem" on p. 61 of Blake's *Notebook*.

⁹ I have discussed all these revisions in some detail and argued for their late date in *William Blake, Printmaker* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980).

¹⁰ Godfrey in the exhibition catalogue, p. 47.

¹¹ The only other impressions of the third state (as described in Keynes, *Engravings by Blake: The Separate Plates*, pp. 46-47) I have been able to locate are in the Huntington Library and the collection of Douglas Cleverdon, London.

¹² See William Faithorne, *The Art of Graveing and Etching* (London, 1662), section 19; and *Sculptura Historico-Technica*, Fourth Edition (London, 1770), pp. 82-83, for standard formulae. [Robert Dossie], *The Handmaid to the Arts*, Second Edition (London, 1764), II, 83-89, offers eight different recipes, none of which is pure wax.