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R E V I E W

David Irwin, John Flaxman 1755-1826: Sculptor,  
Illustrator, Designer

Janice Lyle

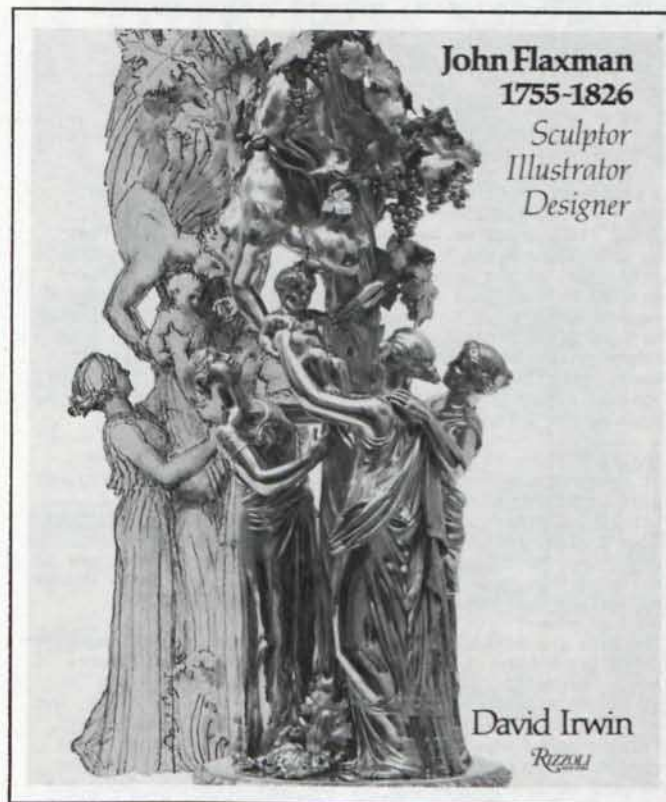
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# REVIEWS

David Irwin. **John Flaxman 1755-1826, Sculptor, Illustrator, Designer.** London: Studio Vista/Christie's, 1979. New York: Rizzoli International Publications, Inc., 1980. xviii + 249 pp., 282 illus. \$55.00.

Reviewed by Janice Lyle



John Flaxman  
1755-1826

Sculptor  
Illustrator  
Designer

David Irwin  
RIZZOLI

Until recently the only full-length monograph on John Flaxman available to scholars was the limited edition of W. G. Constable's biography published in 1927. However, 1979 saw Flaxman's full re-emergence as an artistic personality. The re-evaluation of his importance reached its peak with the major Flaxman exhibitions held in Hamburg, Copenhagen, and London accompanied by an extensive catalogue edited by David Bindman, the numerous reviews of these exhibitions, and the publication of David Irwin's monograph, *John Flaxman 1755-1826 Sculptor Illustrator Designer*. Thus, John Flaxman, whose art Irwin promoted as early as 1959 (see "Reviving Interest in Flaxman," *Connoisseur*, 144 [1959], 104-05), is now the subject of much modern attention.

In the Preface of his book, the first full-scale appraisal of Flaxman's life and work, Irwin states:

My aim has been a comprehensive examination of all aspects of Flaxman's career between the covers of one book. Different areas of his work are interdependent, thus making separate studies by their very nature incomplete. I have not traced his influence abroad, nor included his influence on Victorian artists. I have tried, however, to discuss as many of Flaxman's works as possible, short of producing a *catalogue raisonné*.

Irwin has been quite successful in the task he set for himself. He has assembled and collated information from widely diverse and often hard-to-find sources into a logical, cogent--if at times dry--exposition of Flaxman's development. Undoubtedly, the book's greatest contribution to scholarship is its presentation of factual information in an organized format.

Technically the book is excellent. It is well-designed and offers 282 illustrations, all black-and-white (a fact which is less distressing with Flaxman's work than with that of most artists, as the majority of his drawings are pen-and-ink while his sculpture is uncolored marble). The illustrations are located either on or near the page of the discussion, and there are notably few errors in corresponding plate numbers.

The format is basically thematic, although the progression of Flaxman's interests allows the author to place the ten chapters in a generally chronological sequence: (I) Early Career; (II) Artist and Industry: Wedgwood; (III) To Italy; (IV) Sculptures in Italy; (V) Illustrations; (VI) Sculptor of Tombs: after 1794; (VII) Sculpture: Secular Commissions; (VIII) Portraits; (IX) Royal Plate and Other Metalwork; (X) Professor of Sculpture; Epilogue: Victorian Taste. Notes, bibliography, index of works and general index follow.

The outstanding feature of Irwin's study is his presentation within a single volume of the entire range of Flaxman's activities. Besides lecturing at the Royal Academy, Flaxman was a prolific sculptor of tombs and monuments, an influential illustrator of important literary works, and a recognized designer of pottery and silver. Irwin's greatest contribution to our understanding of Flaxman's work is his chapter on Flaxman's interest in Italian Trecento and Quattrocento art. The care with which Irwin cites only those frescoes that Flaxman could have seen in the 1790s is a credit to his thorough art-historical methodology. In addition, he incorporates an excellent selection of photographs to demonstrate the Italian sources for Flaxman's art. The author's discussion of the close relationship between John Flaxman and William Young Ottley offers valuable insights into a relationship which has received too little attention. In this context, Ottley's dedication of his volume, *A Series of plates engraved after the paintings and sculptures of the most eminent masters of the early Florentine school*, 1826, to John Flaxman deserves further study. Certainly Ottley's admiration for Flaxman is evident in his drawing style. Many Ottley drawings, made in preparation for the volume on Florentine art and also based on Flaxman's engraved designs to Dante, Homer, and Aeschylus, are stylistically so close to Flaxman that they have been incorrectly catalogued as Flaxman drawings.

Despite the importance of this instructive research on Flaxman, some minor criticisms are necessary. In many instances, the author seems to have unnecessarily limited his aims and viewpoint. All too often he confines himself to a mere recitation of events and description of works. Flaxman's interaction with other artists of the period is seldom discussed, and the artistic theories prevalent at the time are not explored in relationship to Flaxman. Indeed, Irwin fails to make critical judgments about Flaxman's place in the art world of 1800. One example is his discussion of Flaxman's *Triumphal Arch surmounted by Britannia* where no mention is made of French visionary architects like Boullée and Ledoux. These architects conceived projects of enormous proportions that undoubtedly furnished precedents for Flaxman's design.

Symptomatic of the limitations of Irwin's methodology is the comparison of Flaxman's *Achilles Shield* and Thomas Stothard's *Triumph of Bacchus and Ariadne: Sideboard Dish* which appear as consecutive illustrations in Chapter X. Irwin writes:

The Shield of Achilles was displayed prominently at the coronation banquet in July 1821. The royal collection already possessed a large sideboard dish illustrating the theme of the *Triumph of Bacchus and Ariadne*, which had been designed by Stothard, and also made for Rundell's, in 1814 (Plate 271). The composition of this dish and the shield are in some respects similar, and it is possible that Flaxman influenced his fellow artist. The similarities may however have been prescribed in the commissions [sic]. Both works have a central

motif of a chariot flanked by several figures, but whereas Flaxman's represent constellations, Stothard's are putti; Flaxman's chariot is pulled by horses, Stothard's by centaurs. (pp. 194-95)

John Flaxman's refinement of composition, his ability to design complex figural groups which remain clear and distinct, and his sensitive use of three-dimensional qualities contrast sharply with Stothard's overly-elaborate compositional elements and less well-proportioned figures. The author's exposition of these important differences would certainly clarify the positive aspects of Flaxman's style and his sensibility in design.

In Chapter IV Irwin notes that

Flaxman's volumes [of illustrations to Homer, Aeschylus and Dante] were therefore published either without any quotations at all or with only a minimal number of lines under each plate. This novel form of publication undoubtedly contributed to their contemporary visual impact and their far-reaching influence. (pp. 68-69)

This "novel form of publication" is significant and deserves elaboration. The history of book illustration offers some prototypes for this format, such as Stothard's *Pilgrim's Progress* series of 1788-91. A broader view of context and influence would have added to the scholarly insights in this volume.

Blake scholars will be disappointed by the paucity of references to the object of their interest. For example, Flaxman's drawings for the *Book of Enoch* (one of which appears as figure 140) display many correspondences with Blake's drawings of the same subject, while the similarities between Flaxman's drawing for William Collins' sculptural monument (figure 77) and Blake's illustrations for *America* will be obvious to Blake scholars; Irwin's reticence on these points is regrettable. The discussion of Flaxman's designs for Homer, Aeschylus, and Dante rightly stresses the importance of symmetry in these works. Flaxman's illustrations, produced in Italy during the early 1790s, rely on a simplification or distillation of each form, a positioning of those forms in a perpendicular or parallel relationship to each other, and a division of the abstract spaceless ground into geometric segments. It is likely that upon Flaxman's return from Italy in 1794, these engravings had an important stylistic impact on Blake. That the period 1794-1795 was traumatic for Blake has often been noted in reference to his poetry and his political beliefs. The French Revolution, the execution of Louis XVI, the Reign of Terror, and the repressive measures instituted by the English government all contributed to the disillusionment of Blake and other radicals of the period. This disillusionment caused Blake to alter not only his political and philosophical attitudes, but his poetic and artistic methods as well. Flaxman's designs are more abstract and refined than Blake's, but Blake was capable of translating the compositional elements of Flaxman's engravings into the powerful images of the 1795 series of color-printed drawings. As Blake is now the most popular

and well-known artist of this period, it is unfortunate that such specific correlations in style, technique, and theory between the two close friends are not included in Irwin's study.

The only really distressing aspect of the book is Irwin's attitude toward references. Footnotes in the volume most often cite contemporary sources or the manuscripts and drawings themselves. This approach ignores the more recent critical commentary on individual Flaxman works. Thus, when Irwin refers to Goya's use of Flaxman's Dante designs, he does not cite Sarah Symmons' excellent article, "John Flaxman and Francisco Goya: Infernos Transcribed" (*Burlington Magazine*, 113 [Sept. 1971], 508-12), nor does he specifically credit Robert Wark with the cogent analysis of Flaxman's drawing style in *Drawings by John Flaxman in the Huntington Collection*, 1970. In his discussion of deathbed scenes he does not refer to Robert Rosenblum's seminal work on the topic in *Transformations in Late Eighteenth Century Art*, 1967, a book whose footnotes have provided the stimulus for numerous dissertations. Irwin's exploration of Flaxman's publication of Hesiod does not direct the reader to G. E. Bentley, Jr., "Blake's Hesiod" (*Library*, 20 [1965], 315-320); and although he does cite Bentley's *Blake Books*, the awkward format of the footnotes requires one to go from Chapter V,

footnote 30, back to Chapter I, footnote 7, to discover to which work by Bentley Irwin is referring.

The problems in citation may appear trivial, but a volume with pretensions to offering a thorough discussion, short of a *catalogue raisonné*, of the works of a single Neoclassic artist is definitely more than a coffee-table book. As such, one expects a thoroughness in the footnotes that will provide valuable research assistance. (It is possible that the reservations noted in this review may be partly the result of the delay between completion of Irwin's manuscript and publication.) Undoubtedly, Irwin's book will be the primary Flaxman reference for many years to come. The catalogue edited by David Bindman (*John Flaxman, R. A.*, London: Thames and Hudson Ltd., 1979) will better serve scholars interested in the broader questions slighted by Irwin, such as Flaxman's place within the context of his contemporary art scene and the exploration of his international influence. Irwin's book, however, has the virtue of providing a comprehensive life of Flaxman with the traditional biographical elements and a straightforward exposition of his major works. Taken together, these two recent volumes should promote a more informed appreciation of John Flaxman's *oeuvre* and furnish the basis for further, more detailed studies of his career and influence.

