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An Afterword on William Blake: His Art and Times

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DISCUSSION

with intellectual spears & long winged arrows of thought

An Afterword on *William Blake: His Art and Times* By David Bindman

One of the frustrations and delights of putting on an exhibition is that objects can look different from one's memory of them when seen together on the walls. It is, of course, part of the *raison d'être* of such exhibitions that they enable direct comparisons to be made, but they also inevitably make the catalogue, which has to be written many months before the exhibition, out of date, for it cannot include the experience of the exhibition itself. The following notes are intended as corrections to the text and observations arising from the exhibition, and they center largely around the large color prints.

Martin Butlin's very recent discovery of an 1804 watermark on the Tate version of the *Newton* color print (cat. no. 56b) has already demolished the received picture of the chronology and development of the large color prints, some of which are dated 1795. The presence of seven of these prints in the exhibition from various sources offers a useful opportunity to start thinking about them again and I am glad to report some progress. It was clear from seeing the prints together that we have to abandon any sense of a rigid method in their creation; there was no one way of making them and we should see their creation as part of an organic process of trial and error over a number of years. This is brought home by the discovery of Mr. Patrick Noon, Curator of Prints and Drawings at the Yale Center for British Art, that there are definite indications of printing from a relief-etched copper plate on the Metropolitan Museum's impression of *God Judging Adam* (cat. no. 51). This has been confirmed by microscopic examination which revealed clear signs of indentation in the printed area and broken fibres around it consistent with pressure from a metal plate. The relief-etched areas, printed in gray, form a kind of broad underdrawing defining the main shapes of the figures, like the relief-etched areas in some of the plates from *The Book of Urizen* which were color printed. The discovery of relief-etched printing also provides an explanation of the mysterious letters observed on the surface of the New York impression, which appear to be the imprint of part of an embossed address of the kind often found

on the back of copper plates; Blake has evidently used the back of a copper plate to make the relief-etched underprinting and not bothered to burnish down the platemaker's imprint.

This strongly suggests that *God Judging Adam* was the first of the large color prints to be worked on and that at first Blake simply extended the method he had employed for color printing the illuminated books by using a very much larger copper plate. We may surmise that he would have found relief etching on this size of plate to be time consuming and difficult and therefore not worth the labor: certainly none of the other color prints shows any signs of such relief etching but only the direct application of color from an unetched surface. There is every likelihood that he began working on these problems in 1795 when he was probably finishing the last of the color-printed illuminated books; on the other hand the watermark on the Tate *Newton* proves that he was working with a color-printing method as late as 1804, when he was preparing a set of the prints for Thomas Butts. The little known Glen Foerd version of the *Newton* is also in the exhibition (cat. no. 56), and it is clear that the two versions are quite different in handling, and that there are arguments for seeing the Glen Foerd version as predating the Tate version by several years. The differences between the two figures of Newton—the angle of the head, the contour of the back, the relationship of the feet to each other and the angle of the hands—make it unlikely that they were printed from the same surface: it is probable that Blake made a fresh start with the Tate version, presumably to complete the set for Thomas Butts. The differences are compatible with a space of many years between the two versions, and perhaps with the change of style in Blake's art in the years around 1800.

These changes certainly involve a stronger linearity which can be seen in the Tate version in the more incisive contour, and the reduction of broken lines of varied thickness, but the most striking differences are in the modeling. The forms in the Glen Foerd version are built up with a simple plasticity, shadowing from the lower contour leaving the main area without interior modeling. The Tate version, on the other hand, has a high degree of definition within the larger forms so that it is possible to discern the segmentation of the muscles and sense the shape of bone and cartilage beneath. This is achieved in the figure of Newton by a stippling technique applied almost exclusively in watercolor, and it is possible to see here an analogy with the 1803 watercolor in the exhibition of *St. Paul preaching* (cat. no. 75). This technique may derive from Blake's experience as a miniature painter, as Raymond Lister has suggested. The background in the Glen Foerd version is defined by dark washes but in the Tate version it is filled with an intense blue color; in fact color pervades all the darker areas of the later print and the modeling of the figure also picks up the blue from the back-

ground. The curious aqueous anemone-like effect in the vegetation of the Tate version is not present in the Glen Foerd version where Newton is clearly in a cave through which light passes from the top left.

There are also clear differences in the way the color printing is applied; in the Glen Foerd *Newton* it has a thick and pasty quality, applied in broad dabs with occasional areas of aqueous reticulation as if the pressure was applied fairly gently from the printing surface. In the Tate Gallery version the color printing seems more controlled and concentrated in specific areas like the rocky background. The lack of the fluid kind of reticulation led me at first to wonder if it was color printed at all and built up instead with a dabber in the thicker areas, but this does not seem likely on further examination. The thickness and density of the Glen Foerd color printing aligns it with the Whitney *Good and Evil Angels* (cat. no. 53) and I would propose that these two and the Metropolitan *God Judging Adam* can be dated to about 1795. The *Pity* (cat. no. 52) and the *Hecate* (cat. no. 55) from the Tate, however, present more difficult problems. There can be no doubt from a comparison with the Tate *Newton* that they were at least finished off in 1804-05 for sale to Thomas Butts, but the quality of the color printing underneath, as far as it can be discerned under the final stippled coloring, seems to have the density of the presumed 1795 prints. It is still arguable, then, that these were, as was always thought, printed in 1795 and then finished finally in 1804-05 for Butts. If this is right then it would suggest that when Butts commissioned a set of the prints Blake had a mixed group of impressions of the color prints lying about the studio, most of which could be adapted into a harmonious set while others, including the *Newton* for reasons unknown, had to be made anew. This is probably as far as we can go at the moment but we will be able to fill out the account when the other Tate color prints are examined more closely.

Herewith a few notes on other things in the show:

Cat. no. 2. *Joseph of Arimathea* engraving (Trinity College, Hartford, Ct.). This appears to be a more interesting object than I first thought. Apart from touches of wash it has small areas of scraping out, and most unexpected, what appears to be the expressive use of plate tone on the surface to give a greater richness of texture. If this is deliberate then it suggests the use of yet another printing technique by Blake, and one that was hardly ever used in his time. The use of scraping out suggests a date in the 1820s; it is also used in the Mellon copy of *Jerusalem*, pl. 99.

44. *Europe a Prophecy*, copy A. I had hinted in the catalogue that there might be something wrong with the coloring of this copy, and I am now fully persuaded that most of the color washes, apart from the color printing, have been added by a later hand, perhaps in this century.

70. *The Virgin Hushing the Young John the Baptist*. Though a laboratory report states that this work is on paper it looks as if it is on canvas; certainly the weave is very strongly visible. Perhaps it is on very thin paper applied wet to the canvas?

79. *The Repose of the Holy Family in Egypt*. Though magical in quality and drawing this watercolor can be seen to be very badly faded.

The Scholars & A Grain of Sand By Warren Keith Wright

Other readers no doubt immediately recognized the lines quoted by Nelson Hilton in "The Shock of the New Blake" (*Blake* 58, [Fall 1981], 103), from p. 235 of Robert Hughes' *The Shock of the New* (New York: Knopf, 1981):

Seek those images
That constitute the Wild,
The lion and the Virgin,
The Harlot and the Child.

This is the third of four stanzas from Yeats' "Those Images," published in *Last Poems* and written, so Richard Ellmann tells us (*The Identity of Yeats*, New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1975, p. 294), "before Aug. 10, 1937" — some dozen decades after Blake's major works were composed. (Hughes's capitalization of Virgin, Wild, Harlot, and Child are especially beguiling.)

Scholars have long known how strongly Yeats identified with his precursor; but

Lord, what would William Butler say,
That Yeats should pass for Blake today?

[The Yeats lines were also identified by F. S. Corlew, *Ashtabula, Ohio*. Eds.]

