

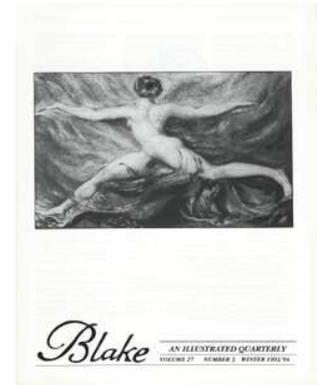
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R E V I E W

D. W. Dörrbecker, Konvention und Innovation:
Eigenes und Entliehenes in der Bildform bei
William Blake und in der britischen Kunst seiner
Zeit

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 REVIEWS

D. W. Dörrbecker, *Konvention und Innovation: Eigenes und Entliehenes in der Bildform bei William Blake und in der britischen Kunst seiner Zeit*. Berlin: Wasmuth, 1992. 423 pp. 53 b/w plates. DM 89.00.

Reviewed by
Angela Esterhammer

D. W. Dörrbecker's book is an interesting, detailed, methodical, and persuasive study of formal aspects of Blake's visual art in relation to the artistic practices of his contemporaries. The book is divided into two main sections, which constitute extended essays on "Plane" and "Line" as structural elements in the various media with which Blake experimented. The second half of the volume, for instance, begins with a survey of Blake's well-known pronouncements on outline, proceeds to the slightly less familiar argument that these are commonplaces of late-eighteenth-century artistic theory (if not actually rehashes of lectures given at the Royal Academy during Blake's lifetime), and then embarks on an original and purposeful analysis of the actual uses of line in Blake's draft sketches, watercolors, tempera paintings, color prints, reproductive engravings, and illuminated books.

This approach exposes and complicates the easy assumptions about outline that Blake's aesthetic theory invites us to make. Dörrbecker calls attention to Blake's pencil drawings, which he feels have been unduly



neglected, to demonstrate that his rapid, spare, often uncertain drafts and sketches show much less evidence of the "distinct, sharp, and wirey" bounding line than the sketches of an artist like Flaxman. Flaxman, he argues, would have a greater need for definitive sketches for purposes of advertising and reproducibility within his workshop, while Blake's sense of line is determined instead by his training as an engraver. Thus the effects of the engraver's techniques for portraying outline, motion, and light become evident in Blake's other media, even his watercolors. Dörrbecker's study of line culminates with the 1825-26 engravings to the Book of Job, with which he convincingly illustrates Blake's development of a style in which hatching reflects and complements the compositional outlines of the drawing in such a way that technique becomes a component and intensifier of meaning.

Meaning and method dovetail in Blake's Job engravings, and in the concluding chapters of this book, in a way that seems characteristic of Dörrbecker's critical approach. The avowed, and sustained, aim of the author is to undertake a formal study,

using the concepts and vocabulary of art criticism, which neither binds the significance of Blake's visual art to his verbal expression nor concentrates purely on iconographical aspects. However, Dörrbecker's formal perspective meets up with both iconography and poetry at appropriate points, and his bibliographical expertise contributes a rich context for this study in Blake criticism of various kinds.

Though I found the book most valuable as a detailed study of Blake's artistic practice over the course of his career and across his various media, Dörrbecker's study is equally strongly oriented toward the historical context in which Blake was working. The context of work by contemporaries such as Flaxman, Cumberland, Barry, Fuseli, and Stothard is wide and well informed. Dörrbecker cautiously but deliberately opposes the emphasis of Bindman and others on the common practices shared by Blake and his contemporaries, arguing that it is time for a renewed focus on the idiosyncrasies of Blake's artistic methods and conceptions. Dörrbecker's decision to use the style of Blake's time primarily as a foil for his individual characteristics leads to a reiteration of the important, if not earth-shaking, conclusion that Blake's artistic practice represents a personal adaptation of techniques he learned or imitated from his professional colleagues. The comparison of Blake to his contemporaries is necessarily restricted in some senses by the limitations on reliable knowledge of Blake's biography and his relationships with other artists. After appropriate cautionary remarks, Dörrbecker's analysis proceeds on the empirical evidence of resemblances and contrasts between Blake's work and theirs.

Dörrbecker's systematic study aims at comprehensiveness, and from the available range of Blake's works he often chooses to make his point with reference to lesser-known and/or unfinished examples of Blake's art and

that of his contemporaries. These examples are represented reasonably well in the 53 black-and-white plates appended to the volume, though the analysis assumes that the reader will have at least the Butlin catalogue at hand for reference. The list of necessary supplements might also be extended to include David Bindman's publications on the iconographical aspects of Blake's art and Robert Essick's on the methods and materials; in his focus on formal elements, Dörrbecker assumes a knowledge of the work others have done on the art-historical context of the late eighteenth century and the practices of commercial engraving in that period.

Dörrbecker's overview and quasi-statistical handling of Blake's oeuvre lead to two types of observations that are intriguing for scholars with a non-specialist knowledge of visual art. First, it organizes, substantiates, accounts for, and sets in contemporary context aspects of Blake's art that we tend to intuit or take for granted. We all know that human figures are the primary subject matter of Blake's paintings, but Dörrbecker reevaluates this commonplace in terms of form rather than content, demonstrating that the number and orientation of human figures are the main compositional elements of Blake's drawings, and that the human figure typically marks what is by far the most commonly emphasized axis in Blake's compositions, the middle vertical. Drawing attention to the center of the painting, this structure asks us to interpret by reflecting or comparing the two vertical halves. Because bilateral symmetry, which sends the eye in both directions about a center, is more suited to an "epiphanic" than a narrative presentation, this formal characteristic of Blake's paintings constitutes one significant contrast to the work of his contemporaries, who (Dörrbecker maintains) use bilateral symmetry much less fre-

quently and narrative/historical presentation more often. Similarly, Dörrbecker informs us that compositions with one, three, five, or many figures, in which one figure occupies the central vertical, are a distinctive feature of Blake's style, while compositions with two, four or more figures arranged around an "empty" axis are seldom encountered. The analysis of figure and composition follows logically from a discussion of the most basic elements of Blake's art, beginning with standard paper formats and moving on to the main axes and symmetries available to an artist. Realizing the extent to which the vertical axis predominates throughout Blake's art may make us look differently at, for example, the two paintings in the Butts series of biblical subjects which are both titled "The Great Red Dragon and the Woman Clothed with the Sun," one of which shows the familiar, vertically-oriented central figure (Butlin #519), while the other uses a less common horizontal division of space (Butlin #520).

This latter point indicates the other revealing aspect of Dörrbecker's study: he is concerned not only with elucidating the norms and standards of Blake's art against the background of contemporary practice, but also with enumerating the exceptions to these norms. The exceptions are sometimes identified as Blake's experiments in imitation of other artists, as is the case with his few uses of the oval-format painting adopted by some of his older contemporaries, including John Hamilton Mortimer and Angelica Kauffmann. More attention is given, however, to Blake's use of unusual formats as a challenge to other artists. One of the most detailed studies in this book is of *Chaucer's Canterbury Pilgrims*, one of the very few occasions on which Blake used a long, horizontal frieze-format. Dörrbecker argues that Blake adapts his compositional

techniques to this format so as to revise the characterization and moral worldview of Chaucer, as well as of other Chaucer illustrators like Stothard, whose similarly-shaped *Pilgrimage to Canterbury* occupies the facing plate in this volume.

Some readers might find this book almost *too* systematic, in that it proceeds according to the logic of the general subject (i.e., formal elements and practices in visual art around 1800) as much as it follows the logic of Blake's work in particular. This seems appropriate enough, but at times the result is a peculiar emphasis on what Blake's work is *not* (e.g., his illuminated books are determined, in turn, to be *not* really comparable to medieval illuminated manuscripts, emblem books, or conventional late eighteenth-century book illustration).

Also, despite (or because of) the detailed attention to the full scope of Blake's work, to contemporary contexts, and to other criticism, readers will not find many extended close analyses of individual works in this book. Chapter headings and subheadings are logically organized and fairly precise, so that a reader wanting to look up a comparison of Blake's and Flaxman's practices of draughtsmanship, for instance, would know where to turn from the table of contents. The same is not necessarily true for readers interested in a particular work or period in Blake's career. There is, unfortunately, no index; the appendix giving bibliographical information about individual artworks discussed in the text might also have included page references so as to provide a way of looking up Dörrbecker's commentary on specific works by Blake and his circle. However, the main aim of this book is to make an argument about Blake's individualism with respect to formal composition, based on a wide range of evidence, and in these terms it is a sound success.