

AN ILLUSTRATED QUARTERLY

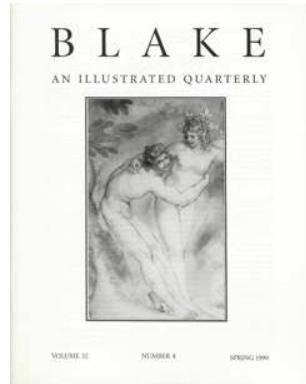
BLAKE

R E M E B R A N C E

Paul Mellon, 1908-1999

Patrick Noon

Blake/An Illustrated Quarterly, Volume 32, Issue 4, Spring 1999, pp. 151-152



Paul Mellon

1908-1999

Paul Mellon became interested in collecting William Blake at the comparatively early date of 1941. Of the major eighteenth-century British artists, George Stubbs alone preceded (and to the very end superseded) the poet in his affections. The largest exhibition of Blake's work ever organized in North America had just closed at the Philadelphia Museum of Art and had done much to generate enthusiasm among a new generation of collectors. His first purchase was an album of 22 watercolor illustrations for the Book of Job, most frequently referred to in the literature as "The New Zealand Set" and no longer accepted as autograph. It was an inauspicious start, but a more significant and, ultimately, precursory acquisition of the same year was copy B of Blake's first illuminated book, *There is No Natural Religion*, from the heirs of William A. White. From this celebrated source would eventually derive *Songs of Innocence* (copy G), *Visions of the Daughters of Albion* (copy I), and *America a Prophecy* (copy M).

After 1941, hardly a year passed without Paul Mellon's acquiring some Blake opus. The harvest is impressive: four tempera paintings, one monotype, several hundred prints and watercolors, and several dozen volumes with engraved illustrations; however, it is the 12 illuminated books that truly elevated him to preeminence among Blake admirers. Between 1947 and 1949, the acquisitions included Philip Hofer's *Book of Thel* (copy B); Benjamin D'Israeli's *Europe a Prophecy* (copy A); the *Songs of Innocence* and *Songs of Experience* (copy F) that George Cumberland, Blake's generous patron, had bound together in 1794; and a complete *Songs of Innocence and of Experience* (copy L) that has no known marvelous pedigree despite its quiet excellence. In the 1950s, the three previously cited titles from the White collection were added, as were a second *Book of Thel* (copy R) and one of the few copies of *The [First] Book of Urizen* (copy A) with a full complement of 28 plates. The final illuminated book to enter the collection, in 1972, was a second copy, quite differently colored, of *Urizen* (copy C), thus bringing together two of only eight known printings of that magnificent prophetic work.

When Paul Mellon began to amass a comprehensive collection of British art in the 1960's, he was plunging into a field that was much undervalued internationally. Conversely, 20 years earlier, he had been anticipated in his passion for Blake by a very acquisitive group of distinguished bibliophiles that included Henry E. Huntington, Lessing J. Rosenwald, and Mrs. Landon K. Thorne in America, and W. Graham Robertson and Sir Geoffrey Keynes in England. Exceptional objects were rare and the competition was aggressive. The Mellon collection could never achieve, at that date, the comprehensiveness of those other collections, but it ultimately ranks with them primarily because of two stellar acquisitions: the 116 watercolor illustrations for the poems of Thomas Gray, and the most coveted of Blake's composite art of poetry, painting, and printmaking, the unique colored copy of *Jerusalem* (copy E).

(continued inside on page 151)

(continued from back cover)

Paul Mellon purchased *Jerusalem* in 1953 from the collection formed by Sir William Stirling-Maxwell. From the same source and in the same year, he acquired, and immediately donated to the Victoria and Albert Museum, the tempera of *The Virgin and Child in Egypt* (1810). This was not his first Blake donation to a public institution. In 1949 he and Mrs. Thorne had made possible the purchase by the Morgan Library of twelve watercolor illustrations for Milton's *L'Allegro* and *Il Pensero*. The illustrations to Gray were purchased in 1966 by private treaty, thus preventing their likely dispersal by the trade.

Prior to that date, in March 1949, Geoffrey Keynes and others had founded the William Blake Trust to promote the continued study of the poet through the publication of accurate color reproductions of his greatest works. The unique copy E of *Jerusalem*, which had not yet entered the Mellon collection, was the first major project undertaken for the Trust by Arnold Fawcett and his Trianon Press in Paris. In 1962, Paul Mellon was elected an Associate American Trustee, and from 1966 to 1970 he supported financially, and with matchless patience, the exacting production of the jewel of the Trust's collotype and stencil replications, *William Blake's Water-Colour Designs for the Poems of Thomas Gray* (1971). This was merely one of many instances of his financial and intellectual support for the publications and exhibitions of the Blake Trust. It is quite likely, in fact, that without his subventions the Trust would not have been able to effect its most important projects. Martin Butlin's magnificent catalogue raisonné, to cite but one example, owes its second, invaluable volume of illustrations to Paul Mellon's generosity.

As a novice curator only recently arrived at the British Art Center after its opening in 1977, I was immediately dispatched to Upperville to reconnoiter what remained of the British paintings and drawings not yet transferred to Yale. The Brick House was still resplendent with its dazzling collection of Ben Marshall and Stubbs set on pastel walls. The Degas waxes and *Fallen Jockey* seemed an exquisite anomaly in this seat of Georgian decorum. The Degas *Self-Portrait*, literally affixed to a nearby powder room door, playfully exposed the unique wit of a man who was fastidious about the installation of his collection. The majestic library, however, had had its shelves seriously denuded of its many treasures—the color-plate books that comprised the Abbey collection, for instance. I first met Paul Mellon in this library. It was the briefest of encounters. He had come to assess and to welcome, but he made the point of introducing me to a very special group of books and folios that occupied an inconspicuous nine square feet of this cavernous cabinetry. On the nearby tables rare sixteenth-century globes, flawless porcelain, and the trophies

and bronzes of Mill Reef proved little distraction as he pulled a volume from the shelf and left me to my private meditations. It was *Jerusalem*, plates 1-20.

Although much of the Blake material had gone to Yale in 1977, Paul Mellon retained the cream of the collection, for obvious personal reasons, until its permanent transfer to the British Art Center in 1992. At his death, he owned only a single work by Blake. Identical in size to the small engraved illustration for Hayley's *Ballads* (1805) that it reproduces, *The Horse*, a precious tempera on copper, is indisputably the gem of the entire collection. If it is one of the "little high finished Pictures the size the Engravings are to be" mentioned by Blake in a letter to Hayley of March 1805, it is the only surviving example. Intimate in scale, exquisite in execution, perfection in its state of preservation, and thematically so sympathetic to the varied tastes of a literary scholar, connoisseur, and sportsman, it is not surprising that this philanthropist, who gladly relinquished to the public domain countless works of art in his lifetime, was reluctant to do so in this one instance.

In 1997, I organized an exhibition of the entire Mellon Blake collection. Many of the works had been seen publicly over the years in the most important Blake exhibitions, especially those organized by Martin Butlin for the Tate in 1978 and David Bindman for Yale in 1984, but never had they all been shown together. While still in his possession, Paul Mellon had had the illuminated books and the Gray disbound with the thought of their public exhibition and ease of study in mind. Consequently, it was possible to exhibit for the first time all one hundred plates of *Jerusalem* and to juxtapose the multiple sets of *Songs*, *Thel*, and *Urizen*. A staggering display of over 350 sheets, the exhibition paid admirable tribute to Paul Mellon on his ninetieth birthday and to his lifelong commitment to Blake. He spent hours in the show, on several visits, carefully examining the many works with which he had communed privately over the years. His enthusiasm for Blake was unflagging, and at the end of one of our campaigns he asked, in a capriciously plaintive voice, whatever possessed him to part with such treasures.

Paul Mellon was a magnificent collector, not only of Blake but of artists of many nationalities and epochs. He was blessed with a cultivated and incisive taste for objects of both transcendent and private import; hence the intoxicating appeal of a poet who made an art of the book. He entered the game rather late yet he garnered many of the finest trophies, and until one has enjoyed these treasures in the serene atmosphere of Louis Kahn's building at Yale, it is impossible to grasp the special order of Paul Mellon's genius and philanthropy, and the magnitude of our loss.

Patrick Noon
Minneapolis, March 1999