

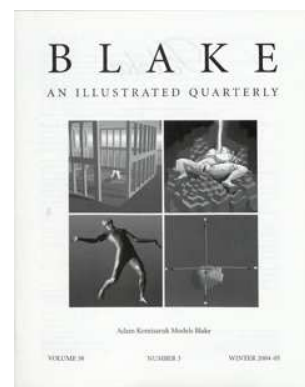
AN ILLUSTRATED QUARTERLY BLAKE

R E V I E W

Blake at Work Exhibition, Tate Britain, London

Antoine Capet

Blake/An Illustrated Quarterly, Volume 38, Issue 3, Winter 2004/2005, pp.
115-119



and literature but also in his worldwide influence. Kenzaburo Oe, a Japanese winner of the Nobel Prize in literature in 1994, is one famous example of such connections. He started reading Blake's poems when he was a student and, since then, has been making full use of the ideas and images of Blake's poems in his own novels. This indicates that the strong tradition of the reception of Blake in Japan continues into the present.

When Yanagi, Oe, and other Japanese readers encountered Blake in the 1910s to 1980s, there was no complete translation of Blake's work. The research environment has been different since Narumi Umetsu published, all by himself, the two-volume translation of Blake's writings (including his letters and annotations) into Japanese in 1989.⁴ These volumes give the Japanese easier access to Blake's work and thereby help them to pass on to future generations Blake's unique and continuing impact in Japan.

Yanagi's position, no matter how unique it may be, can be more easily understood in the international perspective. A kindred mind that immediately occurs to us would be William Morris (1834-96), who commenced the Arts and Crafts movement in England. Yanagi, 55 years Morris's junior, empathetically read Morris and published an essay entitled "William Morris' Works" for the 100th anniversary of Morris' birthday in the journal *Crafts*, which Yanagi himself launched in 1931 as one of the means to pursue the Folk Crafts movement in Japan. He had been impressed by Morris's Kelmscott Chaucer earlier on when he visited Morris's house in London in 1929. This direct encounter of Yanagi with Morris's work may explain his insistence on having paper of the highest quality for *Blake and Whitman*. He chose Echizen handmade paper and had watermarks of his own design imprinted on the paper.

Yanagi and the *Shirakaba* group also had kindred spirits among their Western contemporaries. Roger Fry (1866-1934) in England, for example, is comparable to Yanagi in that, among many other things, he showed a keen sensitivity to what he termed "post-impressionist" painters such as van Gogh, Cézanne and Picasso. One might suspect that some invisible power prompted Fry to mount the first exhibition of post-impressionist paintings in 1910, the year when Yanagi launched the journal *Shirakaba* which admired those very post-impressionist paintings as an ideal artistic model. The *Shirakaba* group (together with its female version, the *Seito* group, which the catalogue does not mention) is comparable to the Bloomsbury group in many ways. But it is not just in England that we can find an artistic group of the 1910s to 1930s whose activities are analogous to those of the *Shirakaba* group. In Canada, there was a group of painters called the Group of Seven, which was officially founded in 1920 and was led by A. Y. Jackson (after the sudden death of Tom Thomson in 1917). The members were endeavoring to establish Canada's national identity in art. (It is interesting to note that there was

the Canadian women painters' group called Beaver Hall Hill group, and that it was related to the male Group of Seven in a way similar to the *Seito* group's relation with the all-male *Shirakaba* group in Japan.) The activities of Yanagi and the *Shirakaba* group were not an isolated case, but can be thus located in the global network of the advancement of arts and crafts.

I wish to add a few words, in closing, about what will emerge from the conference on Blake in the Orient. The organizers hope to publish the conference papers in the form of a book. The program might therefore be replaced by a more comprehensive publication in the future, but even so the catalogue of the exhibition will long stand as one of the most solid and reliable accounts of Blake's legacy in Japan.

Blake at Work Exhibition. Tate Britain, London.

Reviewed by Antoine Capet

Editors' note: This review of the Tate's Blake "collection display" first appeared online at H-Museum, the H-Net Network for Museums and Museum Studies <<http://www.h-museum.net>>, on 13 August 2004. It is reprinted here by permission of the author and of H-Museum.

Subscribers interested in William Blake (1757-1827) may remember the major exhibition devoted to him at what was then the Tate Gallery, now Tate Britain, London, in 2000-01.¹ This year, Tate Britain has allocated a full room to a particular aspect of Blake's art, viz. Blake at Work, exploring his painting and printing methods through 37 representative works by him and some contemporaries,² notably George Richmond (1809-96)³ and some pieces of equipment, like his box of watercolors.

What makes the current exhibition so valuable is that it provides not so much a lesson in "art appreciation" from the usual aesthetic point of view as a magnificent introduction to "art appreciation" from the point of view of the media used

4. Narumi Umetsu, trans., *The Complete Works of William Blake*, 2 vols. (Nagoya: Nagoya University Press, 1989).

1. Comprehensive information on that exhibition is still available at <<http://www.tate.org.uk/britain/exhibitions/blake.htm>>.

2. Listed and illustrated, with captions, at <<http://www.tate.org.uk/servlet/CollectionDisplays?roomid=2780>>.

3. See caption of Richmond's *Abel the Shepherd* (1825, tempera on oak): "Richmond had asked Blake's advice about using tempera. Blake copied out for him a passage from a modern edition of a fourteenth-century treatise on art by Cennino Cennini" (reproduced on a panel to the left of *Abel the Shepherd*).

and the consequences for the durability of Blake's initial effects—a consideration too often neglected in comments on the “technique” adopted by artists.

The works shown fall into three broad categories: Blake's work on tempera, his work in pen and ink and watercolor on paper (chief among them his illustrations for *The Divine Comedy*) and his color prints (generally) finished in pen and ink. Blake's approach to tempera is excellently summed up in the caption to *Satan Calling Up His Legions*:

This picture was shown in 1809 in Blake's only one-man exhibition. It was described as “painted at intervals” and an “experiment on colours without any oil vehicle.” Blake was emphasising his rejection of oil paint as used by the Old Masters he called Venetian and Flemish “Demons.” Blake thought oil paint encouraged sloppy handling, and that lights and shades could not be rendered properly. No oil paintings by Blake have survived. Here, Blake used his own invented “Tempera,” patriotically emulating mediaeval artists whose work was “true” Art. The subject comes from Book I of John Milton's poem *Paradise Lost*.

His experiments at recapturing the old tempera technique are shown in, inter alia, *The Body of Christ Borne to the Tomb* (c. 1799–1800) or *The Spiritual Form of Nelson Guiding Leviathan* (c. 1805–09). The objective of the curators (Robin Hamlyn and Joyce H. Townsend) appears clearly through these two examples, since the captions very neatly explain how the contrast in the state of conservation of two pictures is due to the different supports used by Blake.

For *The Body of Christ Borne to the Tomb*, they write:

This tempera is very well preserved, mainly because it was painted on thin linen canvas, stuck onto thin cardboard. This is stiff enough to reduce the cracking that develops on flexible canvas. It also made it unnecessary to add the animal glue lining which has spoilt the opaque white effect of Blake's chalk preparatory layer in many temperas. As a result, Blake's delicate painted details can still be seen as he intended.

By contrast, the reasons for the poor conservation of *The Spiritual Form of Nelson Guiding Leviathan* are given in language equally accessible to the layman:

This work is cracked and damaged because Blake used a thin canvas and chalk-based ground. The ground layer has darkened due to the conservation treatment of “glue” lining; this is only suitable for oil paintings. Layers of glue in some of Blake's paints have also darkened. The orange tonality comes from remnants of a discoloured varnish. The contraction of the glue-rich layers and the movement of the thin canvas has created stress, causing cracking.

Likewise, for *The Bard, from Gray* (?1809, tempera heightened with gold on canvas support):

This tempera has greatly altered since it was painted. Blake used a very thin, white, preparatory layer of chalk and glue.

This was impregnated with more glue during a conservation “lining” treatment more appropriate to an oil painting. This reduced the effect of transparent colours over a white background, and displaced some details painted in shell gold. Blake's paint medium has also darkened greatly. The opaque red vermilion used for the line of blood, glazed over with madder lake, has survived better than blue areas.

Or *The Ghost of a Flea* (c. 1819–20, tempera heightened with gold on mahogany support):

Blake used gold leaf to dramatic effect in this work. A thin foil of “white” gold made from a gold-silver alloy lies under some of the curtains, the flesh of the flea, and the stars. The signature and tiny details in gold were painted on with a brush and “shell gold”: powdered gold foil made into paint. Blake's thick paint layers made from gums, glue and sugar have now darkened to brown, suppressing the strong blue of the meteor trail.

Our enjoyment of Blake's celebrated watercolors is also greatly enhanced by the technical details found in the captions. Tate Britain owns the originals used for *Illustrations to Dante's Divine Comedy* (1824–27), and the examples displayed receive extremely informative—and extremely welcome—technical comments, in the dual sense of the materials chosen, notably the pigments, and the modes of execution. So much so that it is worth naming here all the illustrations exhibited, as the reader will then be able to reconstruct Blake's technique even without seeing them.

Dante and Virgil Penetrating the Forest:

Blake added grey shadows in carbon black pigment on top of the colours he had used first. He strengthened some of the drawing with pen and ink over the colour. Both the blue pigment and the mixed green shades contain indigo. This lowers the contrast between them.

The Inscription over the Gate:

Dante describes the “dim” colours which contribute to his terror. Blake's dark shadows of pure black pigment next to areas of unpainted white paper contribute to this. He used Prussian blue for the blue areas, and indigo blue mixed with yellow for the green foliage, so that they contrast. The blue, green and vermilion red do not overlap.

Cerberus:

Blake drew this design with charcoal as well as pencil and, later, pen and ink. The distant flames of Hell are contrasts of deep red vermilion, a brownish-pink lake pigment that is probably brazilwood, and yellow gamboge. Brazilwood was one of the cheaper and less popular red/pink lake colours. Blake was always careful not to overlay colours or drawing media. This served him in good stead here because, as he

undoubtedly knew, charcoal tends to absorb a lot of colour from red lakes.

The Simoniac Pope:

The paper is watermarked "W ELGAR 1794," the year it was produced. It was then bound into book form. The parallel lines in the paper show it is "laid." This means it has more texture than Blake generally used, but the weight of the book would have flattened it. The two sides of the paper have different textures: Blake used both sides for his illustrations.

The Serpent Attacking Buoso Donati:

Here Blake's figures show subtle effects of light and shade, particularly in their flesh tones. He used small brushstrokes of red, blue and black for this, laying the colours side by side rather than mixing them. The robber Donati (right) is about to be punished by being turned into a serpent. Blake's technique and colour give form to his figure, but the blue also shows human life draining away into coldness.

The Pit of Disease: The Falsifiers:

Blake used a red lake, probably brazilwood, and a gritty vermilion red to show the flames of Hell. These pigments have very different working properties, and are not easy to use in thin washes in gum medium. He preferred to use vermilion whenever a blood red or a living flesh tone was required. Here he has used it for parts of the diseased bodies of the two falsifiers at the right, which are raw with scratching.

Dante and Virgil Approaching the Angel Who Guards the Entrance of Purgatory:

Here Blake has used Prussian blue, indigo blue, vermilion, a red lake (probably brazilwood), another red lake with a pinker tone, and yellow gamboge. He never used madder, the most stable of the red lakes, as it was too expensive. All his pigments, except for vermilion, are sensitive to light, so it is fortunate this watercolour has not been exposed to too much light. Indigo blue and the red lakes fade faster than gamboge. This is because the gum Blake added to make the gamboge look glossy has protected it.

Beatrice Addressing Dante from the Car:

Blake followed Dante's text carefully when choosing his colours. The three women dancing before Beatrice are described, from left to right, as wearing "emerald," "ruddy" and "snow new-fallen" garments, to symbolise the virtues of Hope, Charity and Faith. Blake used green verditer (probably), vermilion and chalk. This is one of the best preserved of the Dante illustrations. It includes a wider range of pigments than any of the others.

Apart from Blake's *Illustrations to Dante's Divine Comedy*, the room also has many remarkable watercolors, with equally revealing "technical" captions.

The River of Life (c. 1805, pen and ink and watercolor on paper support):

This work ... is ... a rare example of how Blake presented his watercolours: he drew the washline border between ruled ink lines.

The yellow tone of the paper is the result of over-exposure to light. This caused some of the original blue paint (indigo perhaps) to fade; the fuzzy band of Prussian blue on the lower edge, and spots of the same colour in the river, were added later by someone trying to "correct" this fading.

Satan in his Original Glory: "Thou wast Perfect till Iniquity was Found in Thee" (c. 1805, pen and ink and watercolor on paper support):

This watercolour ... is ... an extreme example of the damaging effects of over-exposure to light. The sky was originally an intense blue, now only visible at the lower right edge. The only colours which have survived unaltered are the vermilion red Blake used for the flesh, and red ochre in Satan's wings. The paper has yellowed considerably. There is no evidence left of any yellow gamboge or pinkish red lakes.

The Entombment (c. 1805, pen and ink and watercolor on paper support):

The watercolour is "drum-mounted," that is, glued along its edges to a "window" cut in the board. The smudges of gold and black paint on the mount suggest the drawing was later framed with verre églomisé: glass painted with black and gold lines on its inner face. This method, invented by the eighteenth-century French framer J-B Glomy, became popular in the mid-nineteenth century.

The Penance of Jane Shore in St. Paul's Church (c. 1793, pen and ink and watercolor finished with size on paper support):

The "golden glow" of this watercolour comes from a very thick, now-yellowed glue layer that was almost certainly applied as a varnish by Blake. He varnished his temperas in a similar way. Once it had yellowed someone else added a picture varnish on top. This also went yellow but has since been removed. The subtle colouring of Blake's painting is suppressed by the glue varnish.

Los and Orc (c. 1792-93, pen and ink and watercolor on paper support):

The sombre mood is conveyed by the dark colour which Blake chose to dominate the scene. He used a pure brown ochre for the entire background. Orc's shadow is a grey wash. The light falling on the figures' flesh is shown with paint mixed from chalk and vermilion. The yellow used in the foreground—glossy, transparent gamboge—has not faded.

Finally, the room has a fine selection of Blake's prints, carefully chosen, one presumes, for what they can teach us about his technical approach. Among them:

Newton (1795/c. 1805, color print finished in ink and watercolor on paper support):

The watermark in the paper has the date 1804. Blake must have printed this work in 1804-5. The complexity and quality of the colour-printed areas of the rock, and the high degree of hand-finishing applied to Newton's flesh and hair, show the great technical proficiency he had acquired through his colour-printing experiments from the mid 1790s.

Lamech and His Two Wives (1795, color print finished in ink and watercolor on paper support):

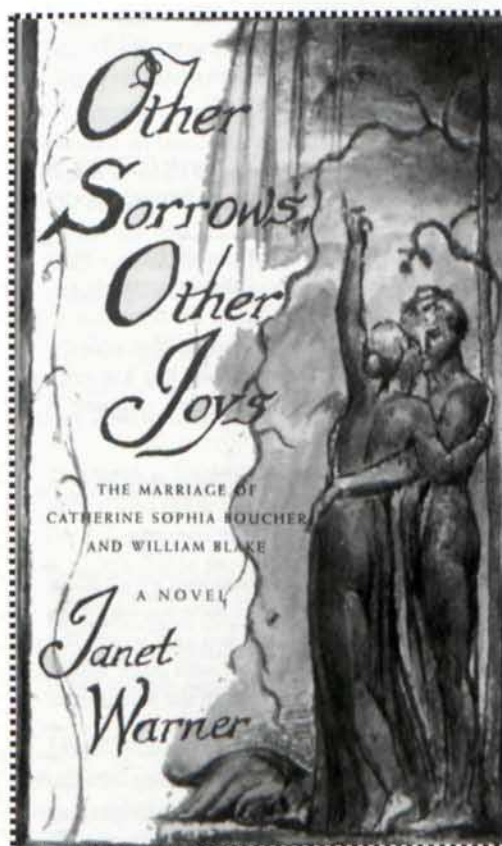
Blake's image was printed onto smooth white paper. The light pencil crosses are framing marks of unknown date; they could be Blake's. The inscription near the lower edge appears to be in Blake's hand, perhaps written at the time of production. The writing at lower right, intended to be hidden by any frame, has been added by several curators. Blake's hand-finishing extended beyond the colour printing at each corner, and has been extended by others, for neat framing within a window mount.

God Judging Adam (1795, color-printed relief etching with ink and watercolor on paper support):

This is a hand-finished relief etching, printed on paper from a copper plate. The broken texture visible along the light grey outline of God's right arm was produced as the printing plate was lifted off the paper.

Naomi Entreating Ruth and Orpah to Return to the Land of Moab (c.1795, color print finished in pen and ink, shell gold and chinese white support):

Blake wrote the word "Fresco" in the lower left, in Indian-type ink, and added his signature and the date. Blake expended much time and care in hand-finishing this print (see illustrations on the panel to the right). In addition to the normal range of pigments found in his prints, Blake used ultramarine to finish the white garments of Ruth and Orpah, and painted Ruth's halo with shell gold, powdered gold leaf made into paint. Both were expensive materials.



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All art historians, not only Blake scholars, will want to pay a visit to Room 8 (where Blake at Work is on view) as soon as possible, since it is not clear whether this is intended to be a new permanent display. People interested in book illustration and the technique of early color prints will probably learn a lot, since nothing can replace the immediate, synoptic confrontation between the most informative captions and the works themselves (though the necessarily dim light sometimes makes the operation painful for those whose eyesight is declining). The general educated public will find an exemplary (and uncommonly comprehensive) introduction into the technical choices and experiments, with their long-term hazards from the point of view of durability and conservation, which the greatest artists had to make, within the limits of the materials then available to them.

It would therefore be a pity, for those who have occasion to be in London this summer [2004], to miss Blake at Work in case it is removed without prior notice to make room for some other exhibition.

N E W S L E T T E R

Go to <<http://www.blakequarterly.org>> for:

- An online version of "Introducing The Blake Model"
- G. E. Bentley, Jr., "Blake and the Xenoglots"
- A report by Susanne Sklar on a recent reading of *Jerusalem*

Nobodaddy Wakes from His Slumber (After Blake 12)

BY DAVID SHADDOCK

*Why darkness & obscurity
In all thy words and laws*

To Nobodaddy

He slept on his bed of shredded printouts more than fifteen years
After the Great Bear was slain. His triumph brief, he found himself
Shunted aside as liberals gloated and fornicated in the Holy Temple,
Where he alone had presided, where the sacred codes and secret pulses
From his vast network were downloaded, life-sustaining they were to him,
And without them he took to his bed and dreamed incessantly of Return,
While Dodd and his ilk grew emboldened and wove chains of regulation
Round his comatose-seeming torso. Beneath this deceptive slumber
Abstract Reason wove fantastic gambits in his brain, and when the Towers'
Crashing (foretold it was in a dream) woke him he had ready
New Orders, alive with power he drew from the Vault,
Constant Strife there would be, and crushing Control of the Imagination,
And Ashcroft his henchman rose like a statue on the hydraulic dais to proclaim them.