

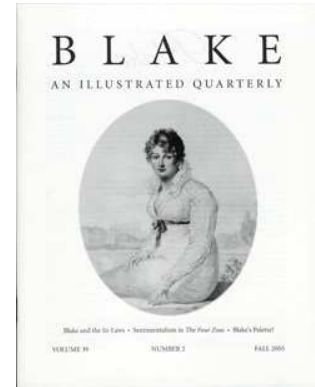
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## Blake's Only Surviving Palette?

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On 17 September 1927, the leading Blake scholar Geoffrey Keynes wrote to Eric Maclagan, then director of the Victoria and Albert Museum:

Dear Maclagan,

The American dealer, Gabriel Wells, recently bought the palette used by Blake during the brief period when he used oils. He put it in an exhibition at the Burlington F.A.C. where it attracted a good deal of attention (tho' relics of this kind do not excite me much!) It seems to have a good pedigree.

Wells has now gone back to the U.S.A., and wishing to give the object to some public institution, has left it to my discretion.

The Vict. & Albert seemed to me to be the best place, tho' Binyon suggests that the London Museum might also have a claim. Would you express an opinion? It can go to the Vict. & Albert if you wish.

Yours sincerely

Geoffrey Keynes<sup>1</sup>

Constable had presented Reynolds' palette to the Royal Academy in 1830,<sup>2</sup> and the display of materials and physical relics of artists was not unknown in the 1920s. A few months earlier, the V&A had displayed the spectacles and etching needle of Samuel Palmer (1805-81) in its retrospective Blake exhibition.<sup>3</sup> Keynes referred to the 1927 exhibition at the Burlington Fine Arts Club commemorating the centenary of Blake's death. Of modest scale but superlative quality, this was ac-

Nicola Costaras of the V&A made the palette available for examination. Catherine Higgitt and Raymond White of the National Gallery Scientific Department gave valuable help in interpreting the GC results.

A shorter version of this paper, entitled "William Blake's Only Surviving Palette?" and with the same authors, was published in the *V&A Conservation Journal* 49 (spring 2005): 20-21.

1. V&A Archive, RP/1927/7280.

2. Royal Academy 04/1344. Constable bought the palette at Sir Thomas Lawrence's sale. He had it from Sir George Beaumont, who had been given it by Reynolds.

3. A. H. Palmer, *Catalogue of an Exhibition of Drawings, Etchings & Woodcuts by Samuel Palmer and Other Disciples of William Blake* (London: V&A, 1926) 25-26. Both had been given to the V&A in 1923 (E. 3979, 3980-1923).

companied by a deluxe illustrated catalogue, and included a fragment of a copperplate for Blake's *America*, and a plaster cast of the artist's head<sup>4</sup> formerly owned by the son of George Richmond (1809-96), a leading member of the Ancients, followers of William Blake who included Palmer.

The palette, not in the catalogue, was evidently a late addition to the 1927 exhibition. Its owner was a Blake dealer of some repute. Keynes was told<sup>5</sup> that the palette had belonged to the dealer Francis Harvey, who handled numerous works by Blake during the 1860s, including some from the studio sale of Frederick Tatham (1805-78), another of the Ancients, who had inherited Blake's studio contents from the artist's widow.<sup>6</sup>

The palette (illus. 1-2) was received in a presentation case, today labeled "Palette used by William Blake in 1780. Given by Mr. Gabriel Wells." There is paint on both sides and it is inscribed around the thumbhole on the "reverse" "William Blake/28/Broad Street/1780." Blake submitted his entry to the Royal Academy in 1780 from that address,<sup>7</sup> and moved shortly afterwards. Basil Long, then Keeper of Paintings at the V&A, concluded that "the authenticity of the relic appears reasonably likely," and recommended its acceptance as a gift.<sup>8</sup>

We analyzed material from this palette towards the end of a research project on Blake's temperas, watercolors and color prints,<sup>9</sup> to compare them with Blake's painting materials. The analytical methods used, namely polarizing microscopy, energy-dispersive x-ray analysis, FTIR microscopy and gas chromatography, are described elsewhere.<sup>10</sup> There was no visual evidence to suggest that the palette had been reused after a long interval, or that the paint was inconsistent with an eighteenth-nineteenth-century date.

It resembles oil paint, and because of the inscribed address it has always been assumed to date from c. 1780, the brief period during Blake's training when he used oil, a medium he strongly criticized and therefore avoided for the rest of his life. Analysis (table 1) confirmed that it includes linseed oil in many colors, poppy oil in some, and a mixture of these, or possibly walnut oil, in others. These oil types are typical of artists' oil paint, both hand ground in the late eighteenth and earlier nineteenth centuries, and supplied in tubes

4. L. Binyon and A. G. B. Russell, *Catalogue, Blake Centenary Exhibition* (London: Burlington Fine Arts Club, 1927) 53, 63 respectively.

5. V&A Archive, RP/1927/7280: F. A. C. Bathurst to Geoffrey Keynes, 28 September 1927.

6. A. Gilchrist, *Life of William Blake*, 2 vols. (London: Macmillan and Co., 1863) 1:367.

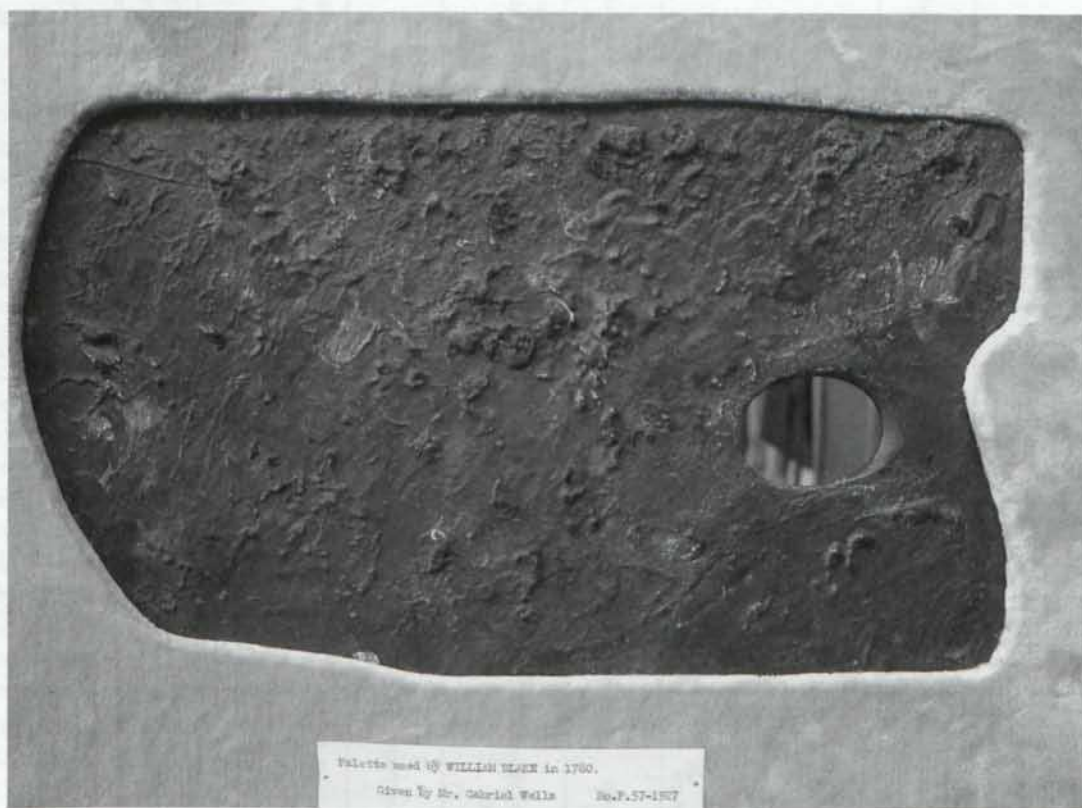
7. A. Graves, *The Royal Academy of Arts. A Complete Dictionary of Contributors and Their Work from Its Foundation in 1769 to 1904*, 8 vols. (London: Henry Graves and Co./George Bell and Sons, 1905-06) 1:298.

8. V&A Archive, RP/1927/7280: memorandum from Basil Long to Eric Maclagan, 1 October 1927.

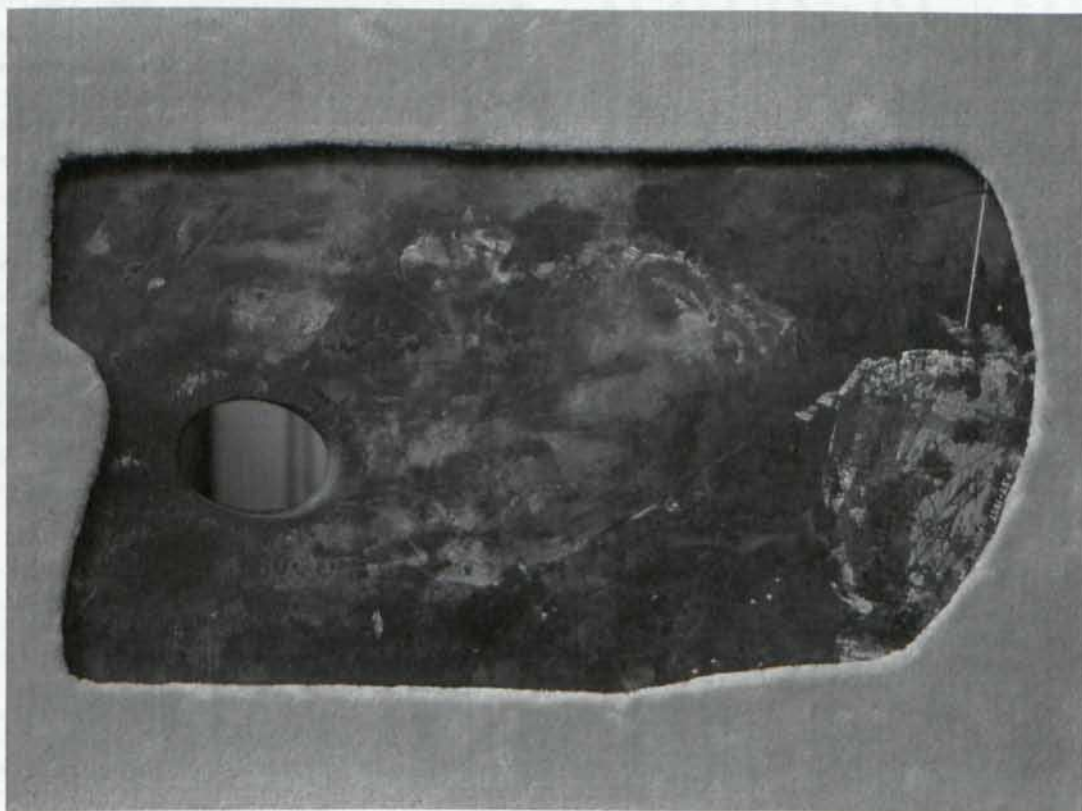
9. J. H. Townsend, ed., *William Blake The Painter at Work* (London: Tate Publishing, 2003).

10. J. H. Townsend, "Analytical Methods," Townsend, ed., *William Blake* 45-51.





Palette used by WILLIAM BLAKE in 1780.  
Given by Mr. Gabriel Wells No. P.57-1927



1-2. Front (top) and reverse (bottom) of the palette V&A P57-1927. Victoria and Albert Museum, © V&A Images. (Editors' note: Color versions of the images can be viewed on the journal's web site, <<http://www.blakequarterly.org>>).

Table 1: Analytical results for palette V&amp;A P57-1927.

Sample	Description	Polarizing light microscopy (PLM)	EDX results	FTIR results	GC results					GC conclusions
					Az/Sub	Az/Seb	Az/P	P/S	O/S	
1	White ground from reverse		Zn S (Al Si) Zinc white, kaolin	Oil Possibly calcined kaolin	3.76	15.27	0.28	1.96	0.66	Linseed oil. Low Az/P ratio. Some oleate possibly from added non-drying oil and/or hindered drying on reverse
2	Black from reverse		Pb Al Si Ca P Zn Ca Mn Fe Ba K Lead white, kaolin, chalk or gypsum, zinc white, barytes, bone black, umber and/or Prussian blue?	Oil, zinc soap peak Lead white, possibly calcined kaolin, trace of chalk, barytes, trace bone black, Prussian blue	2.56	11.05	1.82	1.18	0.00	Linseed oil
3	Red from front		Pb Ca Ba Fe Si (Al P) Lead white, chalk, barytes, kaolin, Mars color, traces of bone black	Oil Kaolin, Mars colors or bone black; trace chalk, barytes, gypsum	2.35	11.88	1.93	0.75	0.06	Linseed oil. Low P/S ratio is unusual and may be due to small sample size
4	Green from front	Acicular yellow lead chromate, and a pale or faded green lake	Pb Ca Ba Cr Mn Fe Si lead white, chalk or gypsum?, barytes, umber, lead chromate	Oil Some barytes, possibly umber, Prussian blue a better match than chrome yellow, some gypsum	2.50	11.09	1.39	1.44	0.09	Linseed oil
5	Orange from front	Orange lead chromate, rounded and some acicular particles, lead white	Pb Cr Ca Lead white, chalk or gypsum?, lead chromate	Oil, small amount of wax Trace lead white, possible evidence of chrome orange, gypsum	1.95	10.50	0.77	1.04	0.02	Linseed oil. Low Az/P may be linked to zinc/lead soap formation. No evidence of wax
6	Bright red from front	Vermilion	S Hg Pb Si Ca Mg (Al) Vermilion, lead white, kaolin, talc, chalk or gypsum?	Oil, zinc soap peak No strong evidence of any pigment	3.25	10.69	1.09	2.88	0.28	Poppy or walnut, or possible mixture of poppy with linseed oil
7	Bright yellow from front	Acicular lead chromate	Pb Al Si Na Ca Ba Zn Cr Fe Lead white, kaolin, chalk or gypsum?, barytes, zinc white, lead chromate	Oil Chrome yellow, barytes, Pb white, possible calcined kaolin	3.51	12.98	0.47	2.49	0.20	Walnut or mixture of linseed and poppy oil. Low Az/P may be linked to zinc/lead soap formation
8	Blue from front	Traditional Prussian blue, white pigment(s)	S and Pb Al Si Ca Ba K Fe (Na) Lead white, gypsum, kaolin, barytes, Prussian blue	Oil Prussian blue, barytes, gypsum	2.77	13.43	6.23	1.26	0.00	Linseed oil, high azelaic acid content, possibly from contamination
9	Dull yellow from front	Deep pink lake on a very transparent base, chalk, some bone black and vermilion, and a small amount of traditional Prussian blue	Si Fe Al (K Na) Natural yellow ochre, kaolin?	Oil Natural yellow ochre and kaolin	2.83	10.91	0.86	3.94	0.00	Poppy oil. Low azelaic acid content may be linked to lack of lead in the sample
10	Dark red from front	Bone black, sienna, small amount of acicular lead chromate, possibly a deeper yellow than in s7	Al Si Pb and S Ca Fe (Ba K Na) Kaolin, lead white, chalk or gypsum?, iron oxide or Mars red, Al-based red? lake	Oil Possible synthetic oxide, possible Al-based red? lake	2.68	10.22	3.15	1.58	1.65	Linseed oil, some oleate possibly from added non-drying oil. High azelaic acid content possibly from contamination
11	White from front	Ultramarine, lead white	Pb Si (Al Ca Na) Lead white, chalk or gypsum, ultramarine	Small amount oil Lead white	3.92	13.86	1.98	3.83	0.83	Poppy oil, some oleate
12	Black and ground from front			Oil	2.88	12.88	2.24	2.28	0.18	Linseed or walnut, or may be mixture of linseed and poppy
13	Blue from front		Si Al Na S Mg Ca Ba (K Pb) Ultramarine, chalk or gypsum?, talc, barytes	Oil Ultramarine and barytes	2.92	12.12	0.79	1.89	0.04	Linseed oil. Low azelaic acid content may be linked to lack of lead in the sample



later in the nineteenth century. In this palette the poppy oil, known to yellow less than linseed oil, was not strongly associated with the white and blue paint that would have benefited most from it. The variations in azelate/palmitate as well as oleate/stearate ratios seen in the gas chromatography results probably stem from differential drying of the paint, which was much thicker than would be found on a painting. The results may also have been affected by pigment-medium interactions such as the formation of zinc soaps, occasionally identified by FTIR, as well as the possible addition of non-drying oils.

At least one shade of yellow and one of orange lead chromate were identified with optical microscopy, and supported by EDX and FTIR results. These could not have been used by Blake or anyone else c. 1780. Yellow lead chromate (chrome yellow) was patented in 1814, and a pale yellow shade has been found in a Turner oil exhibited early that year, while the darker yellow and orange shades were probably available only later, in the 1820s.<sup>11</sup> These remain the earliest occurrences of lead chromate in the British collection at Tate, and in the literature on British art. Zinc white was produced in a useful form for oil medium in 1834, the earlier variety being too transparent for the purpose.<sup>12</sup> The traditional form of Prussian blue, found here, was used by J. M. W. Turner c. 1800-1840s.<sup>13</sup> Constable (1776-1837), in contrast, was using the modern, fine-grained form by the end of his life,<sup>14</sup> as indeed was Turner (1775-1851).<sup>15</sup> The Pre-Raphaelites used the modern form in the early 1850s.<sup>16</sup> The other pigments found on the palette were available throughout Blake's lifetime and well beyond. These observations suggest a date of use of c. 1834-45 for the palette.

The connection with Harvey implies that the palette was in existence by the 1860s, a period when Blake had a small following, and his work fetched correspondingly low prices. Nevertheless, the possibility cannot be excluded that it is a deliberate fraud, of mid-nineteenth-century date. If it has a genuine connection to Blake, it could have been used by one of the Ancients, who had acquired it from Blake's widow, herself an artist. Our limited analyses of the paint used by Richmond and Palmer have shown that, like Blake himself, they used a mixture of animal glue and plant gums in their paintings during his last years, in the 1820s.<sup>17</sup> Few of their later works have

been analyzed, but a Richmond self-portrait of 1853 is catalogued as in oil,<sup>18</sup> so their use of this medium is possible. The only certain conclusion is that the paint on the palette could not have been used by William Blake.

18. National Portrait Gallery, oil on canvas on board, 35.2 x 27.3 cm.; NPG 2509.

11. J. H. Townsend, "The Materials of J M W Turner: Pigments," *Studies in Conservation* 38 (1993): 231-54.

12. R. D. Harley, *Artists' Pigments c. 1600-1835. A Study of English Documentary Sources*, 2nd ed. (London: Heinemann-Butterworth, 1982) 179.

13. Townsend, "Materials" 246.

14. S. Cove, "Constable's Oil Painting Materials and Techniques," *Constable*, ed. Leslie Parris and Ian Fleming-Williams (London: Tate Gallery, 1991) 493-518.

15. Townsend, "Materials" 246.

16. J. H. Townsend, J. Ridge, and S. Hackney, eds., *Pre-Raphaelite Painting Techniques 1848-1856* (London: Tate Publishing, 2004) Appendix 1.

17. Townsend, ed., *William Blake* Appendix 6 (188).