WILLIAM BLAKE
AND HIS CIRCLE

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HUNTERIAN ART GALLERY : UNIVERSITY of GLASGOW

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Frontispiece: Detail of no. 29, *Blake's engraving after his own "tempera painting"* The Canterbury Pilgrims, *now at Pollock House. In this scene the party are leaving the Gothic gateway of the Tabard Inn at the start of their pilgrimage. The characters are, from left to right, Chaucer, the Clerk of Oxenford, the Cook, the Miller, the Wife of Bath, the Merchant and the Parson.*

Glasgow University has an important collection of material related to William Blake, but it is little known outside a small group of specialists. One reason for this is that Blake's work defies simple categorisation and, as a result, is dispersed throughout several departments. The present exhibition, therefore, provides an opportunity to bring many of these works together and to display a number of items in Glasgow for the first time.

This is the sixth in a series of exhibitions in which students in the History of Art Department have been able to participate in the process of research and selection.

The students who contributed to this project were Karen Brown, Elissa Chase, Anneli Downing, Jeffrey Dunn, Karen Iwanowitsch, Rosemary McAuley, Toby Norris, Michael Paine, Emma Pollard, Sophie Pragnell, Julia Salmond and Diane Scott.

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THE
LODG
YNGE
HOUSE
FOR
PILGRIMS
WHO IOURNEY TO SAINT
THOMAS SHRINE
AT CANTER
BURY

"What is it that distinguishes honesty from knavery,
but the hard and wirey line of rectitude and certainty in the actions and intentions?
Leave out this line, and you leave out life itself."

William Blake, 1809

Like William Hogarth in a previous generation, Blake's peculiar position in British art owes much to the fact that he was trained as a reproductive engraver. A mechanical skill, much undervalued by the critics and connoisseurs of the period, it nevertheless provided both artists with the ability to pioneer new ways of working and novel means of realising or promoting their ideas. For Hogarth this meant the development of a new type of narrative art which he called Modern Moral Cycles and which were distributed to a large public through the sale of the artist's own engravings. For Blake, the most obvious manifestation of his trade was the remarkable series of hand-printed and coloured books such as *Europe* and *Visions of the Daughters of Albion*. It is difficult to imagine a conventionally trained painter turning to this sort of work and even less likely that an academic artist would have possessed the skill or confidence to attempt such a range of original printing techniques as Blake developed for these works. To this day the complexity of his methods remains to be fully explained.

But in Blake's case printmaking stood for more than simply the medium or process. His training as an engraver had a profound effect on the very nature of his art, defining his aesthetic and giving his work a distinctive appearance that marked him out from his contemporaries.

In 1772 at the age of fourteen Blake was apprenticed to James Basire to learn the skilled trade of reproductive engraving. This was an age of great technical innovation in the print industry which had seen the introduction of stipple engraving and crayon manner, to say nothing of aquatint and soft ground etching. Basire, however, continued to train his pupils in the traditional method of line engraving. This defined the visual imagination of his young apprentice and for the rest of his career Blake relied on the unyielding system of crisp linear description that had been drummed into him in Basire's studio. Time and again in Blake's writings we come across scathing comments about the corrupting influences of tone and colour in art and the corresponding superiority of line which preserved the 'true manner' of Michelangelo, Raphael and Dürer. "The great and golden rule of art, as well as of life, is this: That the more distinct, sharp, and wirey the bounding line, the more perfect the work of art; and the less keen and sharp,

the greater is the evidence of weak imitation, plagiarism and bungling." Right up to the end of his life Blake adhered to these principles, employing pure line engraving for his illustrations to *The Book of Job*, regarded by many as his greatest achievement.

This preoccupation with the quality of line was hardly restricted to printmakers. Indeed, it corresponded to some of the most elevated theories of the emerging school of history painters. James Barry, Henry Fuseli, George Romney and the sculptor John Flaxman all placed a high premium on the use of simple outline and looked to the vase paintings of ancient Greece for validation of this austere means of description. Blake knew all of these artists from his days as a student in the Royal Academy, and he shared many of their ambitions as well as their commitment to an art based on high ideals and moral principles.

The overriding concern of this group was to establish a native school of art and, following Hogarth's lead, they looked to the achievements of English literature. Shakespeare and Milton became the principal quarry for history painters, but it was not long before scenes from Ossian, Dante and, finally, Chaucer appeared in exhibitions. Despite the popular interest and occasional excitement which such paintings generated, there was still very little support for history painting on the part of collectors. Fuseli, lamenting this state of affairs, wrote "There is little hope of the Poetical painting finding encouragement in England. The people are not prepared for it. Portrait with them is everything." In fact, the situation was not as bad as he would suggest and a solution would emerge from the print trade itself.

Painters of literary and historical subjects were able to thrive due to the success of two related enterprises: the highly publicised exhibitions based around one author, such as Boydell's *Shakespeare Gallery* of 1789, and, alongside this, the sale of engravings after paintings commissioned by publishers and printsellers. These prints were the medium through which most people saw the work of leading artists and they provided a very good source of income. Blake worked on

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both sides of this trade, producing prints after other artists' work as well as the engravings after his own paintings. It was a strange alliance between the most elevated form of art, history painting, and the most inferior, reproductive engraving, but it opened up an immense market for British prints and ensured the success of artists and engravers alike.

If Blake's career has a degree of single-mindedness which links some of his earliest to his very last designs, one group of works strikes an unusual note. These are the illustrations to Virgil's *Eclogues*, which were commissioned to accompany a school text. Not only was this pastoral theme unusual in Blake's output, the medium of wood-engraving was unfamiliar to him. The resulting prints, however, reveal a genuine sympathy for the verse which is enhanced by the rather coarse execution of the blocks. Rev. Thornton, the editor, was less than pleased with the result and went so far as to place a disclaimer in the text stating that "they display less of art than of genius, and are much admired by some eminent painters." This cool remark should perhaps be contrasted with the comments of Samuel Palmer, who came to regard the illustrations to Virgil as something of a talisman: "there is in all such a mystic and dreamy glimmer as penetrates and kindles the innermost soul, and gives complete and unreserved delight, unlike the gaudy daylight of this world. They are like all that wonderful artist's works the drawing aside of the fleshy curtain...."

Through the work of Palmer, Calvert and the other members of the group known as 'The Ancients', Blake's vision of pastoral

serenity was given new significance for a later generation of English landscape artists.

The Blake Collections in Glasgow

Glasgow has held an important position in Blake studies starting in 1853 when William Stirling (later Sir William Stirling Maxwell) acquired five paintings from the estate of Thomas Butts. The most important of these was *Sir Jeffrey Chaucer and the Nine and Twenty Pilgrims on their journey to Canterbury*, the centrepiece of Blake's solo exhibition in 1809. In all, six paintings by Blake were presented to the city of Glasgow in 1967 as part of the Pollok Gift and are currently displayed at Pollok House and in the new St Mungo's Museum of Religious Art and Life. Considering the overall pattern of Stirling Maxwell's taste as a collector, it seems likely that Blake's work appealed to him because of its affinity with emblems. Stirling Maxwell assembled the largest collection of emblem books in the world (now deposited with Glasgow University Library) including several items of Blake's printed material such as the bound proof copy of *The Book of Job*. In this context it is possible to see Blake's work as part of a long-standing European tradition in which literary and moral themes are explored in the interrelationship of text and image.

Stirling Maxwell was not alone, however, in his interest in Blake. In the late 19th and early 20th century, the Glasgow industrialist and bibliophile Bernard Buchanan MacGeorge assembled a considerable collection of Blake's books and drawings. When this library was sold in 1924 the catalogue listed some of the finest copies of the 'Prophetic Books', all of which are now scattered. The rare broadsheet ballad *Little Tom the Sailor* was the only item to be acquired for the University. Some consolation for the dispersal of this group may be found in the two works, *Europe* and *Visions of the Daughters of Albion*, which were donated to Glasgow University Library in 1975 and now form the centrepiece of the present exhibition.

As regards Blake's contemporaries, the University has been fortunate in acquiring a number of important prints and drawings, some dating back to the original formation of the collection. William Hunter, the pioneer of obstetrics and principal benefactor of the University's substantial art collection, was the Professor of Anatomy at the Royal Academy. From this position he was able to assemble a large personal collection including a number of prints such as the group of etchings and aquatints by James Barry which were probably acquired directly from the artist himself. Since then the university has benefited from a number of gifts and bequests which have greatly enriched the print collection. One principal benefactor was James McCallum whose collection of over 3,000 prints included such unusual items as *The Witch digging up a Corpse*, a unique impression of a soft-ground etching by Henry Fuseli.

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