

## The Imaginative Artists

William Blake and David Scott.

There are given to us from time to time men of such deep artistic vision as to stand apart, even in the world of art. They are rare; they come at unexpected times and in unexpected places and in their own lives they are rarely appreciated. Such men were Fra Angelico and Botticelli in Italy, Albrecht Dürer in Germany and William Blake in England. These men are always unique. The power of their inspiration is too great for them to learn the usual tricks of the trade and so their visions find an outlet in every direction in which it can. Like a river in flood, it pours out where it can. So we find that in Italy Michelangelo <sup>was</sup> a poet and architect as well as a sculptor, and a painter. In England we are very rich in men of such overflowing genius. Rossetti, Morris was poet and painter, Morris poet and decorator and above them all William Blake, mystic, poet and artist.

The work of these men is distinguished by its vivid imaginative power and so we are accustomed to speak of "imaginative art" as though it were a kind of art apart, just as we speak of "decorative art" as though all art were not decorative. Yet what is there of real value in art if it is not imaginative. There is indeed no standard by which we may value any work of art, unless by the degree of imagination which it shows.

Critics in all times have acknowledged this in theory, but in practice too often the connoisseur has mastered the discipline and experts have found it easier to formulate rules, to discuss values and tones and tricks of execution rather than to plumb the depths or measure the heights of vision. It is easy to talk of the technique of art but often better to remain silent before the greater mystery of inspiration. Blake's anatomy is often curious, Blake's English is often clumsy, yet there is more in a single verse, or a single page of

Blake than in all the smooth out pourings of ~~each~~ Pope  
or Landseer. There is inspiration.

The XVIII century was a very practical age. Men  
were suspicious of inspiration, enthusiasm was bad form.  
The art of the day was academic, devoted to form rather  
than to content, bound round with conventions and rules.

It is difficult to account for the appearance of a  
genius so vivid as that of William Blake ~~in a~~ ~~and~~  
~~period when~~ at a time when the fashionable artists  
were Morland, Cosway, Flaxman, Fuselli, West  
and Copley. The only really great name is that  
of Reynolds, and he is so far apart from Blake that  
there could be little in common between them.

Blake was in no sense in revolt against the art  
of his day, he was too great for revolt. He simply  
stands apart. Yet his fellow artists knew and  
appreciated his power and if he had chosen to  
advertise himself, Blake might have been well known.  
But he did not choose. He simply did not care.

If the public do not buy his works, he says in one  
announcement, it is the public's loss. What  
indeed was a practical age to do with such a man.  
William Blake was born in 1757; he died in 1827 at the  
age of 70.

At an early age he showed signs of  
~~gen~~ some peculiar power, on one occasion, at the age of  
eight or ten years; he returned from a walk in Peckham  
Rye with an account of how he had seen a tree full  
of angels. Practical Blake, his angels, like other  
winged animals, naturally lived in trees. He drew  
naturally and even as a boy wrote poetry. At the  
age of 22 he brought out a little book "Poetical  
Sketches by W.B." which includes poems written ~~between~~  
as early as 12 or 14, poems which show that  
simplicity and feeling which appears again in the  
"Songs of Innocence". One of these early poems  
"A War song to Englishmen" is worth quoting. ~~It is~~  
~~quite a~~ It has some seven verses in all, of which  
the first two are:—

### War Song to Englishmen.

Prepare, prepare the iron helm of war  
 Bring forth the lots, cast in the spacious orb.  
 Th' angel of fate turns them with mighty hands  
 and casts them out upon the darkened earth.

Prepare, Prepare.

Prepare your hearts for Death's cold hand! prepare.

Your souls for flight, your bodies for the earth;

Prepare your arms for glorious victory

Prepare your eyes to meet a holy God

Prepare Prepare.

This poem, with its big images and its powerful rhythm is certainly very remarkable for a boy.

Blake's father, a respectable London hosier, apprenticed his son to an engraver, Basire. In these pre-photographic days engraving was a more important calling than it is today, ~~for~~ and Blake did commercial engraving and illustrating all his life, in the intervals of his creative art. Basire taught him carefully and to his training in this very exacting art Blake probably owes that definiteness of line on which he always insisted. His training as an engraver also probably influenced him in his selection of a printing process by which to reproduce much of his work.

In 1782 he married Catherine Boucher - ~~His~~ She outlived him by a few years, and the story of their married life is one of continuous mutual devotion. Blake's affection never ceased, his wife devoted herself to him with a beautiful simplicity and all through the material struggles of a life of poverty their courage never gave way for an instant.

Blake was a mystic. Like all true mystics he was very definite and clear in his opinions. In all his paintings and drawings he was quite certain of what he wished to do, and it is important to keep this in mind when looking at them.

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He laid great stress upon a clear outline and a well defined drawing. In the day of Hogarth's line of beauty

<sup>everyone</sup> he writes, "Is a line of beauty, It is only fumble and bungle which cannot draw a line. This only is ugliness. That is not a line which doubts and hesitates in the midst of its course."

Imagination to him was not only the most important thing in art, it was the only real thing in life. He writes again, "Vision or imagination is a representation of what actually exists, really and unchangeably." and again, "The world of imagination is the world of eternity."

He looked at all the world with the eyes of imagination, counting the external form but as a window through which could be seen the vision within,

He writes to his friend Captain Butts:-

"What to others a trifle appears,  
Fills me full of smiles and tears  
For double the vision my eyes do see  
and a double vision is always with me  
With my inward eye tis an old man grey,  
with my outward a thistle across my way.

Slides Begin with the engraved work.

(1)

The Illustrations of the Book of Job. No 8

"And they sat down with him upon the ground seven days and seven nights, and none spake a word unto him for they saw that his grief was very great. produced in 1825,

Blakes engravings are not the finest of his work, The rather laborious process did not give him the freedom which he required and we miss the flowing line which is so beautiful in the books,

This is apparent if we compare this with one of the original sketches of the same series.

(2)

When the markings slurs sang together -  
a great composition

33 Deaths Door from the illustrations to Blair's Grave.

These illustrations were drawn by Blake but greatly to his disappointment, were engraved by Louis Sciavonetti. They were undoubtedly altered in the process and probably rendered more popular. This is the only series of Blakes works which was ever published in an edition of any size ,

34. The Strong and Wicked Man dying,

Blake is very fond of the back view.

5. The Last Judgement. Blake did several versions of this composition, varying the details but retaining the general form.

Great qualities of mass + line + a power to combine figures.

6 Paolo and Francesca in the whirl of lovers. From the Dante Illustrations.

Blake was at work on this series when he died. He left a great number of sketches but only a few of the plates were engraved, of which this is the finest, It is as me re engraving, I think, the finest Blake ever did, *Print coll*

Like many creative artists Blake was very independent of technique, Finding himself limited by the methods of engraving he invented for himself a process of etching on copper by which he produced his famous illustrated books. We do not know the exact details of the process, He apparently drew the design on the copper with stopping out varnish and then etched the plate sufficiently deeply to allow of its being printed from like a stereotype block or a wood cutblock

That is, he printed from the top of the block, not from an incised line as in etching. Whatever the exact method, it gave Blake the fullest control over the line and, as he said, "clearness and precision have been the chief objects in painting these pictures"

The copies were printed by hand and then coloured in watercolour. The process was a long one and very few copies of any one of the books were ever made.

When a particular book was asked for Blake, with his wifes help made a copy. Of the Europe, I believe, only a single

copy was ever finished. Blake was simply indifferent to commercial things. The story of how he invented the process is quite characteristic. It was he said revealed to him in a dream by his dead Brother, Robert. In the morning he sent M<sup>r</sup> Blake out with half a crown, of which ~~she~~ ~~spent~~ 1/10 on the materials for the new process. ~~It was the~~ ~~It was~~ till the money they had in the world and of it M<sup>r</sup> Blake spent 1/10 on the materials for the new process. Owing to the price of copper the plates were small. The Songs of Innocence measure about 5" x 3".

7. Songs of Innocence. p 2.

Piping down the valleys wild  
Piping songs of pleasant glee  
On a cloud I saw a child  
And he laughing said to me.

The songs of innocence were afterwards issued with the songs of experience in one volume. Containing the "Lamb" and the "Tyger" they place Blake at once amongst the great poets.

8. Songs of Experience. London  
Medieval influence.

In the same year as the "Songs of Innocence" Blake produced the "Book of Thel" the first of the strange "books of prophecy" which include the "Visions of the Daughters of Albion," the "America," "Europe," "Asia," "Urizen" and others.

These books are, of course very obscure, one is ~~lost~~ ~~lost~~ ~~through~~ lost in a maze of strange names and cloudy figures. But all through them runs a passionate defense of liberty in thought, a protest against every system of thought, every method of education which to Blake's mind fettered the full exercise of the imagination. Along with this plea for intellectual liberty is a most tender sympathy for all weak and struggling

things. The names "Europe" "America" "Jerusalem" are not places but conditions of mind. Jerusalem for instance seems to be the mind freed from materialism and in spiritual communion with the Deity. So, from the Milton, the wellknown verse.

"I will not cease from mental fight,  
Nor shall my sword sleep in my hand  
Till we have built Jerusalem  
In Englands green and happy land."

The drawings are not illustrations to the poems but an accompanying series of ideas. It is vain to seek for actual words in the poems which may explain the drawings.

Blake knew the connection but he did not always make it clear to others.

Here is a page from the Europe

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"Europe" - Milieu blighting the Corn.

It has also been called a "female dream". Whatever the subject, the important thing is the vivid scene and action of the two splendid flying figures.

~~It is perhaps interesting to~~ A few words may be said of the conditions under which these works were produced.

For the greater part of his lives Blake & his wife lived in two rooms of which one was used as a reception room.

From it opened the smaller room in which the Blakes slept, lived and worked. In one corner was the bed, in another the fire, on one side the table for meals, at the window Blakes working table.

Blake never had any money, neither he nor his wife had any education yet those who knew the room always described it as delightful. It was neat & wellkept. One friend said "I never look upon him as an unfortunate man of genius. He knew every great man of his day and had enough."

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#### Portrait

Blake himself seems to have been very attractive. He was, in fact, a gentleman and no one who came in contact with him could doubt it for one moment. ~~It must have been a very great privilege to be ad-~~

He was an incessant worker + never seems to have flagged through his whole life. It must have been a very great privilege to be admitted to that little back room

The illustrations to the prophetic books form a very important part of his greatest work. They are all fairly small. 6" x 10" at most and are cheerily astounding in their command of line, + action.

16. America. Title page.  
 12. Preludium. 1793  
 13. Book of Thel. 1789. p 5.  
 14. Olhoon. 1793.

- The Jerusalem is perhaps the most powerful  
 15. Jerusalem - Sun + moon. 1804  
 16. " by Salams Watchmen.  
 17. " The Spectre of alburn  
 18. " group. 1804  
 19. " do do.  
 20. Tail piece.  
 21. Jerus Crucifixion

- Blake admired Michelangelo very much + his influence has been detected in many other works  
 22. Urizen The Chained Giant.

- Blakes watercolours were worked on a base of thin plaster. The colour is very full, almost liquid.  
 23. The witch of Endor -

24. The ancient of days striking the just circle of the Earth.



8	By Satans Watch fiends.	Jerusalem
9	Group	"
10	Crucifixion	"
11	Tailpiece	"

Blakes larger pictures were done in watercolour on a base of thin plaster. His colour is very full, often almost lurid

24 The Ancient of Days striking the first circle of the earth  
 This was originally designed for the Europe, it was one of Blakes favourite designs and actually the last picture he worked on .

Blake did not found a school. Imagination such as his is too rare ever to be the possession of any school and too independent to submit to any discipline. But Blake still exercises a deep influence on English art. *Rossetti* It can be seen in the work of the Preraphaelites and David Scott was openly a follower of Blake.

David Scott was born in Edinburgh in 1806. His father was an engraver, and evidently an admirer of Blake, for he was one of the original subscribers to Blair's Grave. Like Blake, Scott began life as an engraver but he soon turned to painting. He received the usual training, Visited Italy and studied in Rome. Although he never was a popular artist, his work was appreciated by his artistic brethren and he was one of the earliest members of the Royal Scottish Academy, founded in 1829.

At this time the anecdote and the historical picture reigned supreme. Costume subjects, Scenes from Shakespeare, Julius Caesar landing in Britain, The Elopement, such were the subjects on which the normal painter expended his talents. Execution was skilful and smooth high finish was regarded as essential as also was deep archaeological knowledge of the details of dress, armour and the like. David Scott was a seer of visions but he did not, like Blake, live entirely in his vision nor had he Blake's supreme moral courage, so that he did not break away entirely from the mode of expression of his day. He painted the usual pictures, but he painted them in a very unusual way. In his drawings and etchings

he was more untrammelled, but, in all his work, his imaginative power makes him stand apart from all other Scottish painters.

In 1831, at the age of 25, he produced a series of six delicate line etchings entitled the "Monograms of Man."

25 ~~18.~~ (I) of Life. Scotts favourite idea of the Creative hand.

26 ~~19~~ (III) Of Knowledge.

27 ~~20~~ (IV) Of Intellect. The spirit of man seeking the source of All.

28 ~~21~~ (V) Of Power. Chained to the earth.

Shortly after the "Monograms" Scott did a series of illustrations to the "Ancient Mariner"

29 ~~22.~~ The Spirit of the south departs and the angelic spirits conduct the ship

30 ~~23~~ In 1841 he did a set of pencil drawings illustrating the "Pilgrims Progress." These were ~~never~~ afterwards etched by his brother and published

"Christian entering the Valley of the Shadow of Death" sometimes known as the "Shadow of the Crown"

31 ~~24.~~ The Angels that cry continually Holy, Holy, Holy.

In 1848 he drew a set of illustrations for Professor J.P. Nichol's Architecture of the Heavens. a number of them were used, in an extremely rare edition of the book, and surely no treatise on Astronomy was ever so illustrated.

32 ~~25~~ The All Sustaining Hand.

33 ~~26~~ The Comet.

executed  
Scott was very fond of large, rapidly watercolours, often done entirely in shades of grey and red. "~~Man and his conscience~~"

34 ~~27~~ "Man and his conscience" is a good example of these.

35 Turning now to his oil pictures. "The Vintager" was painted whilst he was a student in Rome. It is in flat tones of dull green, purple and blue, with a touch of grey. It was probably influenced by the fresco painting of Italy. but is a remarkable work for a student. It is now in the National Gallery of Scotland.

36 ~~28~~. In 1841 he exhibited "The Duke of Gloucester ente entering the Watergate of Calais" now known as the "Traitors Gate" It is one of the few really terrible pictures I know.

24. In 1837 he painted the picture which is my own favourite and which is generally acknowledged to be one of his most beautiful works. "Puck fleeing before the Dawn". This is also in the National Gallery of Scotland. Colour.

David Scott died in 1849, at the age of 43. He had never been a strong man and his later years were darkened by ill success and by lack of sympathy. He was not altogether unappreciated, but he never obtained the recognition which he felt to be his due. It preyed upon him that he was failing in his work. But Edinburgh in the beginning of the XIX century was a rapidly growing industrial city. It was full of clever busy men all making money and with little time to give to thought or to art. They did not understand Scott and Scott was not strong enough to stand alone against them. So they killed him. His genius began to force recognition shortly before his death. His picture "The Spirit of the Storm" was purchased by public subscription and presented to the Trinity House in Leith, where it still hangs. When the news was brought to Scott he only murmured "Too Late Too Late"

I have told you the story of two geniuses, both of whom were thoroughly neglected by their generation. I would close with a plea for Imagination in Art and for the encouragement of every artist, no matter what his medium, who has imaginative power. We need more imagination in Canada, but, unless we encourage it, we will not get it. And to conclude I will give you a last quotation from Blake.

I assert that I do not behold the outward creation and that to me it is hindrance and not action. What, it will be questioned, when the sun rises do you not see a round disc of fire somewhat like a guinea? Oh! no! no! I see an innumerable company of the heavenly host crying Holy! Holy! Holy! is the Lord God Almighty. I question not my corporeal eye any more than I would question a window concerning a sight. I ~~do~~ look through it not with it.