

“PRINTING IN THE INFERNAL METHOD”: WILLIAM BLAKE’S METHOD OF “ILLUMINATED PRINTING”

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In 1788 William Blake invented what was technically a revolutionary method of printing both word and image together that he called “Illuminated Printing”. Blake’s invention made it possible to print both the text of his poems and the images that he created to illustrate them from the same copper plate, by etching both in relief (in contrast to conventional etching or engraving in *intaglio*). This allowed Blake to print his books in “Illuminated Printing” on his own copper-plate rolling-press. Significantly, this meant that he became solely responsible not only for the creation, but also for the reproduction of his works, and largely free from commercial constraint and entirely free from censorship.

In order to more fully appreciate the significance of Blake’s innovation, it will be helpful to set Blake’s invention in the context of conventional eighteenth-century illustrated book production, which required two fundamentally different kinds of printing press, a screw- or letter-press as well as a rolling-press, together with numbers of highly skilled specialist pressmen. The metaphorical significance of Blake’s method of “Illuminated Printing” will then be explored.

Taking charge of the printing process

Blake was trained as a copy-engraver (1772-79), serving seven years as an apprentice to James Basire (1730-1804) before qualifying to set up in business on his own. From his earliest years Blake also aspired to be both a poet and a painter. Using his technical training as a professional engraver, Blake found a way in which to reproduce his writings and designs and print them together: without the need to involve a publisher to organise and oversee production; a letterpress printer to print his text; or, a rolling-press workshop to print his engraved designs. As a result of his innovation, Blake became entirely responsible, not only for the creation of his works, but also for their reproduction and publication.

J. T. Smith's account

In 1787, when Blake was aged 30, married, and successfully established as a copy engraver, he and Catherine Blake were living in London, in Poland Street in the City of Westminster.¹ Living with them was Blake's beloved younger brother, Robert, whom William was teaching how to draw. In January, aged 24, Robert fell ill, apparently of tuberculosis. After a fortnight, during which Blake was continuously by his brother's bedside, Robert died.²

As recorded by J. T. Smith, Robert's school-friend and the author of one of the first and most reliable accounts of Blake, *Nollekens and his Times* (1828), Robert's spiritual presence became a catalyst for Blake discovering the means by which he could reproduce his own works:

Blake, after deeply perplexing himself as to the mode of accomplishing the publication of his illustrated songs, without their being subject to the expense of letter-press, his brother Robert stood before him in one of his visionary imaginations, and so decidedly directed him in the way in which he ought to proceed, that he immediately followed his advice, by writing his poetry, and drawing his marginal subjects of embellishments in outline upon the copper-plate with an impervious liquid, and then eating the plain parts away with *aquafortis* considerably below them, so that the outlines were left as a stereotype. The plates in this state were then painted in any tint that he wished, to enable him or Mrs. Blake to colour the marginal figures up by hand in imitation of drawings. (Smith vol. 2 461; repr. *Blake Records* 609)

This must have taken place within a year of Robert's death. The colophon of the last work that Blake produced using his method, *The Ghost of Abel*, reads, "1822 W Blakes Original Stereotype was 1788" (Blake 272). This referred to the production in 1788 of two small experimental tractates, *All Religions are One* and (in two series) *There is No Natural Religion*. However, by 1789 Blake was able to publish the first examples using his new method, the *Songs of Innocence* and *The Book of Thel* (Figure 1).

¹ See "Blake's Residences" in Bentley (*Blake Records* 742-4). Henceforth cited as *Blake Records*.

² The factual records in so far as they are known are given in *Blake Records* (43-44). Aileen Ward has shown that Robert Blake was not the student who was admitted to the Royal Academy to study in 1782: "April 2d Blake Robert [aged] 14 Yrs. Last 4th Augst. Eng[rave]r" (Ward 84-9). Robert Blake, christened "Richard Blake, son of James and Catherine", was born "June 19th [1762]", and always called Robert (*Blake Records* 10).

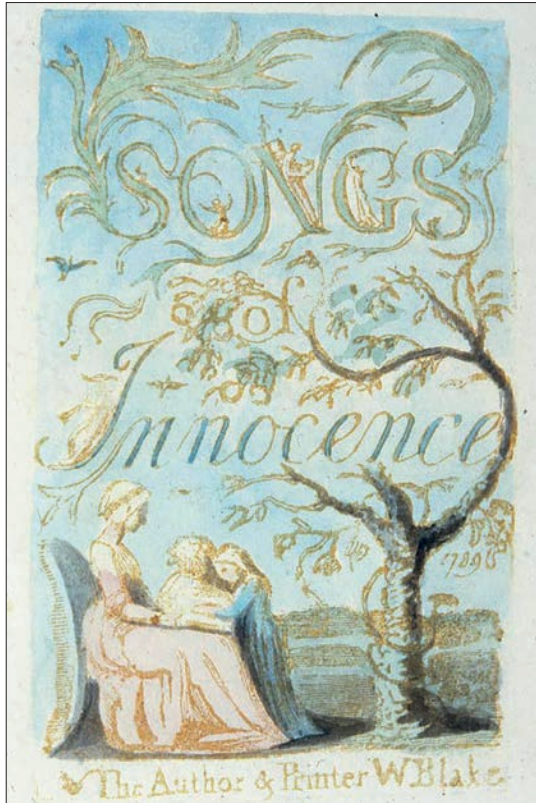


Figure 1: Title page of *Songs of Innocence* (1789).

Linnell’s annotations

John Linnell, who met Blake in 1818 and became a close friend and supporter, later annotated a copy of Smith’s account. As Linnell was himself a skilled printmaker the details he supplies have authority:

The liquid mentioned by Mr Smith with which he says Blake used to Draw his subjects in outline on his copper plates was nothing more I believe [sic] than the usual stopping as it is called used by engravers made chiefly of pitch and diluted with Terps.

He then added an important detail:

The most extraordinary facility seems to have been attained by Blake in writing backwards & that with a brush dipped in a glutinous liquid [.] for the writing is in many instances highly ornamental & varied in character as may be seen in his *Songs of Innocence* and the larger work of one hundred plates called *Jerusalem*. (Blake Records 609)

Linnell confirms – what for many years has been misunderstood – that Blake was highly skilled in the use of mirror writing and was able to employ it in the creation of his illuminated books. Linnell also tells us that it was stop-out varnish that Blake used to write and draw on his plates. Such varnish is traditionally used during the etching process to cover parts of the plate so that other areas left exposed can be etched more deeply. Blake would have learned to mix and use stop-out varnish as an apprentice. The mixture would have to flow easily from his quill pen or fine brush and not run. It then had to harden sufficiently to resist being corroded or “bitten” by the mordant, almost certainly nitric acid, then commonly in use.

Both properties were crucial. When the stop-out varnish was fluid, it provided a medium

that was free and immediately responsive to the artist's hand. In solid form it made possible by etching the transformation of a freely drawn artefact, composed of poetry and design, into one capable of reproduction. By creating a formula possessing these contrary aspects, and putting it to use in just this manner, Blake unified the relationship between the poet and the painter with that of the printmaker.

Historical context

It will be helpful to set Blake's innovation in the context of how an illustrated book was produced from the end of the 15th to the early 19th century. In the 18th century, as earlier, an illustrated book made up of text and design was the product of a complex organisation and process (Gaskell 216).³ Firstly, a publisher, known then as a bookseller, would select and edit the manuscript in preparation for printing the text in a letter-press. If the book was to be illustrated, an artist would be commissioned to illustrate the text, and an engraver to copy the artist's designs by etching or engraving them in reverse on copper plates, so they could be printed on the same page in a copper-plate rolling press.



Figure 2: Denis Diderot and Jean Le Rond d'Alembert, *Encyclopédie, ou Dictionnaire raisonné des sciences, des arts et des métiers* (Paris, 28 vols., 1758-81). Vol. 7, Plate XIV (showing two letterpresses, left with type being inked, right being printed).

³ See also in Gaskell: "copperplate printing for book work was carried on in separate workshops, by firms independent of the printing house, and this was the rule for the whole of the hand-press period" (216); "the letterpress was printed first, and printed sheets with blank spaces would be delivered to the rolling press printer" (229).



Figure 3: Denis Diderot and Jean Le Rond d’Alembert, *Encyclopédie*. Vol. 7, plate XIV (showing two letterpresses, left with type being inked, right being printed).

When the text had been edited and was ready to be printed, and the designs had been etched or engraved, the manuscript was first sent to a letter-press printer’s workshop to be printed from raised lead type, with instructions to leave

blank spaces for the engraved plates to be printed later (**Figures 2 and 3**). Once the text had been printed, the sheets were then taken to a copper-plate printer’s workshop and the spaces that had been left blank printed with the illustrations etched or engraved on copper plates (**Figure 4**). Each operation entailed highly skilled specialists who were responsible for a distinct stage in the production process leading to publication of the book.



Figure 4: Denis Diderot and Jean Le Rond d’Alembert, *Encyclopédie*. Vol. 7, plate XIV (showing copper plate rolling press workshop, with copper plate being inked, wiped, and printed).

In other words, the production of an illustrated book entailed the use of two fundamentally different kinds of printing press: the letter-press was used to print the text from raised lead type, that is to say, from above the surface (**Figure 5**); while the etched or engraved copper plates, used to print the illustrations, were printed from below the surface, as the design had been incised into the face of the copper plate by the graver, or, if etched, by the mordant (**Figure 6**).

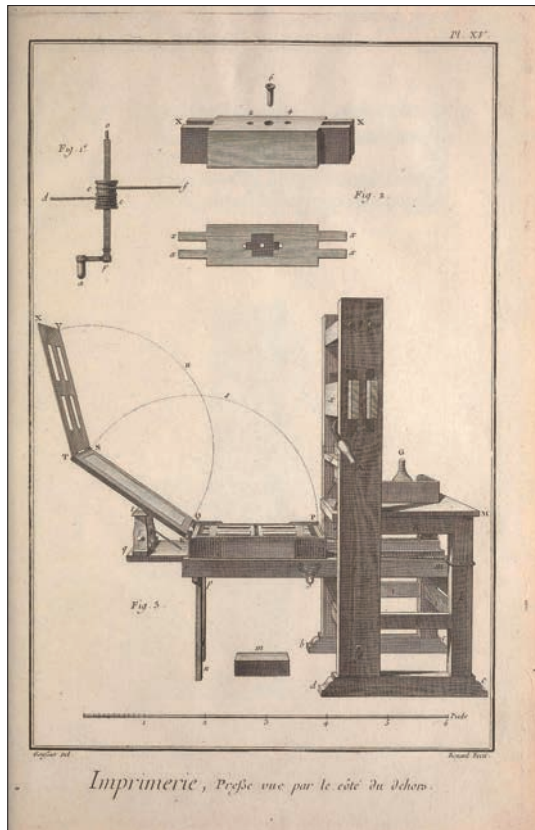


Figure 5: Denis Diderot and Jean Le Rond d'Alembert, *Encyclopédie*. Vol. 7, plate XV (a letter press in profile).

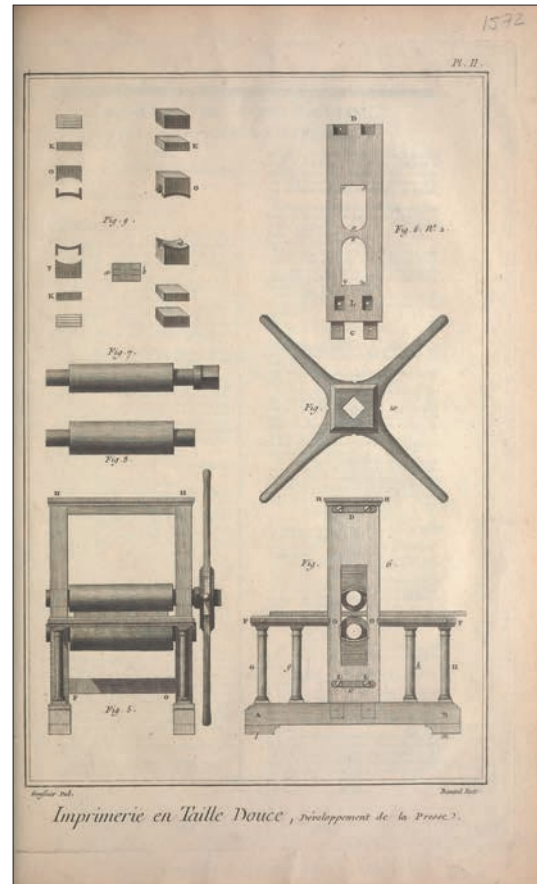


Figure 6: Denis Diderot and Jean Le Rond d'Alembert, *Encyclopédie*. Plate XV (a copper plate rolling press, rollers, star-wheel, viewed from head on and from the side).

The publication of Joseph Ritson’s *A Select Collection of English Songs* by the bookseller Joseph Johnson in 1783 is an example of conventional illustrated book production that Blake was involved in as copy engraver (**Figure 7**). The text has been set and printed in letterpress. The artist, Thomas Stothard, was commissioned by Johnson to draw the design in illustration and Blake was commissioned to engrave Stothard’s design (**Figure 8**). After the sheets were printed in the letterpress printer’s workshop, they were taken to the copper-plate printer. In the space left blank for the illustration, the engraved plate was then printed in a rolling press.

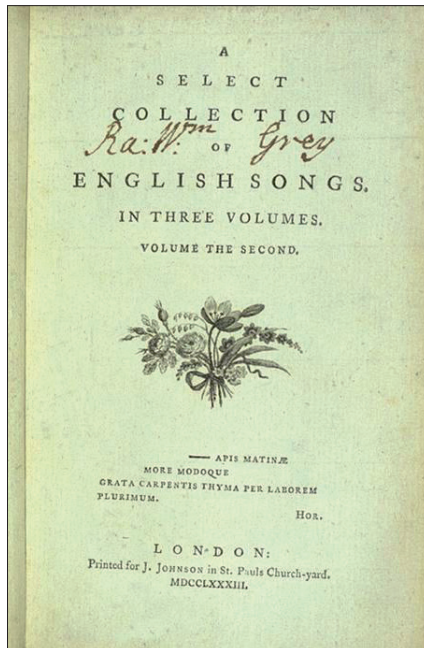


Figure 7: Title page, Joseph Ritson (ed.), *A Select Collection of English Songs*. 2 vols. (Joseph Johnson, 1783).



Figure 8: “Drinking Songs. Song I”. Engraving by William Blake after a design by Thomas Stothard. Joseph Ritson (ed.), *A Select Collection of English Songs*, II.i.

Blake's innovation

What exactly was Blake's innovation? Conventional etching involves covering a warmed copper plate with a fine layer of wax known as a "ground" (**Figure 9**). When the ground has hardened the design is then cut into it using an etching needle. The areas of the copper plate that have been exposed are then subjected to the corrosive effects of the mordant, "biting" the plate to create recesses. In preparation for printing, these recesses are charged with ink and the surface wiped clean. Blake's innovation turned conventional practice on its head. Very simply, Blake used stop-out varnish like ink, and the copper plate like a sheet of paper, writing his text and drawing his design together on to the same copper plate (**Figure 10**).

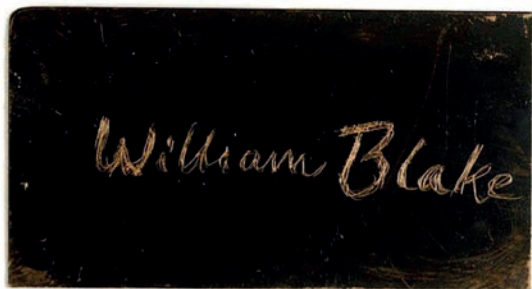


Figure 9: Copper plate prepared for intaglio etching.

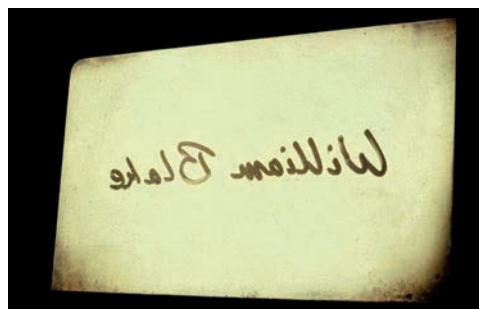


Figure 10: Copper plate prepared for relief etching.

This is not to suggest that Blake composed his poems and their accompanying designs on the plate. The creative process began with the development of the text in manuscript until he was satisfied with the copy that had been achieved (**Figure 11**). The design was conceived through sketches, adapted in different ways for different works (**Figure 12**). The copper plate was where text and design were finally brought together to create a unified whole (**Figure 13**). It formed a work of composite art of word and image, written and drawn in reverse in stop-out varnish in preparation for etching (**Figures 14 and 15**).

When the plate was ready to be etched, particular care was needed in order to protect the letters of the text, the fine detail of the design and the delicate, interlinear figures. This was accomplished by etching the plate in at least two stages to prevent "under-biting", when the varnish used to write the text and draw the design begins to lift away. To prevent this happening Blake would stop the process, gently wash and dry the plate, and then apply more varnish to these vulnerable details. In so doing he created "islands" of protective varnish around the letters before etching the plate again.

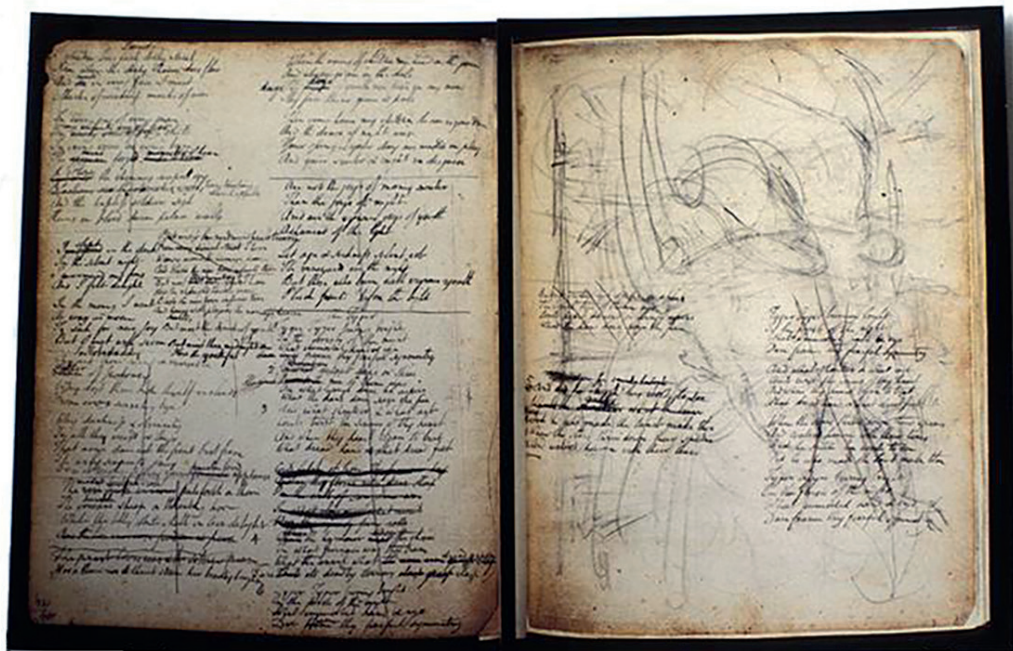


Figure 11: William Blake, *Manuscript Notebook N. 109* with MS drafts of “London” top left corner facing N. 108 with drafts of “The Tyger” carried over from bottom right N. 109, British Museum, Add. MS. 49,460.

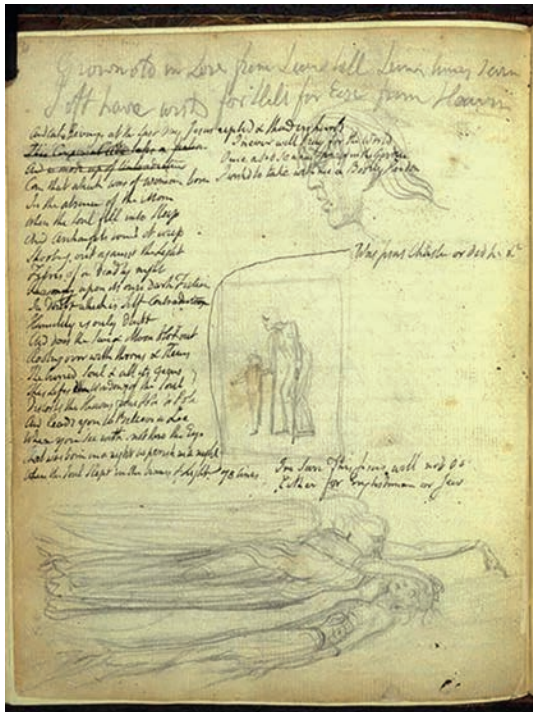


Figure 12: William Blake, *Manuscript Notebook N. 54*, with emblem drawing at centre copied to illustrate “London”.

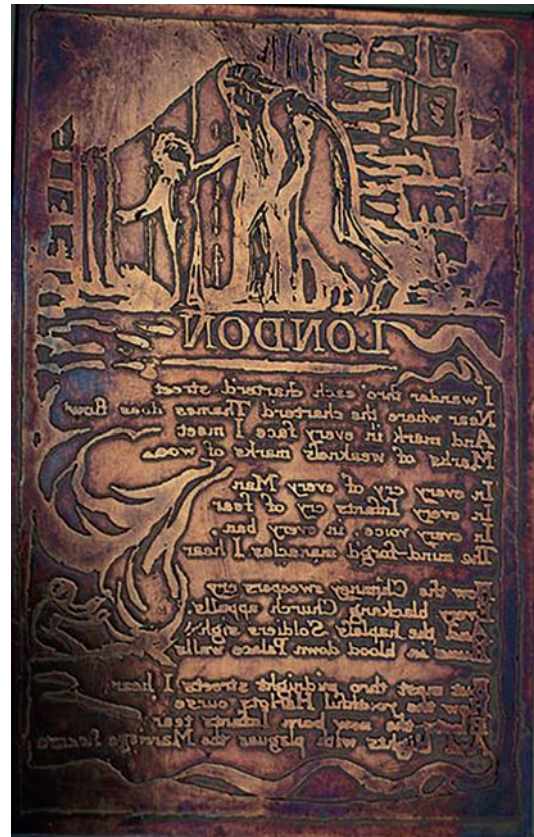


Figure 13: Relief-etched copper plate of “London”, by Michael Phillips.

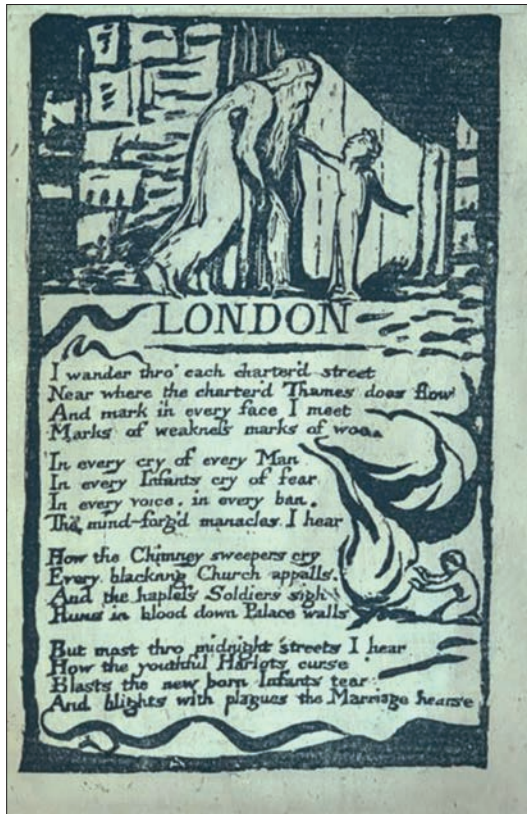


Figure 14: Monochrome impression of “London”, by Michael Phillips.



Figure 15: Colour-printed impression of “London”, *Songs of Experience* (1793).

America fragment

We know how Blake proceeded from a single fragment that has survived from one of his relief-etched copper plates. This cancelled plate from *America a Prophecy* is now in the Lessing J. Rosenwald Collection of the National Gallery of Art, Washington, D. C. (**Figure 16**). The fragment not only reveals that more than one stage of etching was involved, and how stop-out varnish was applied between stages to protect vulnerable areas, but also, significantly, that the total depth of bite was extremely shallow, no more than 0.12 mm. The evidence provided by this single fragment will be all-important to understand what was involved in inking the relief surfaces of plates etched to such shallow depths.



Figure 16: Fragment of cancelled plate from *America a Prophecy*, 1793.
Lessing J. Rosenwald Collection, National Gallery of Art, Washington, D. C.

With etching completed, the plate was cleaned in readiness to be inked. Blake mixed his coloured inks using dry pigments that he ground himself. These were then very probably mixed with a greatly reduced and thickened linseed oil until the ink was tacky and stiff. Blake used very few pigments to create a palette of extraordinary range: bone black, vermilion, Prussian blue, gamboge, madder lake and yellow ochre. Calcium carbonate (chalk) or lead sulphate (lead white), or both, would be added to make the ink dryer and more paste-like, and to prevent spattering during the inking process. As ink rollers were not invented until near the end of Blake’s life, he inked the relief surfaces of his plates using a leather dauber, similar to, but almost certainly very much smaller than, a letterpress printer’s ink ball (see Bloy 54-55) (**Figure 17**).⁴



Figure 17: Selection (left) of two ink dabbers used to ink intaglio etched or engraved copper plates, (centre) ink ball, and (right) two ink daubers or balls prepared to ink replica relief-etched copper plates.

⁴ My own experience is that control is achieved by using a leather-covered dauber or ink ball with a nearly flat face approximately 50 mm. in diameter. The evidence of wiped smudges created where the dauber has touched the shallows, seen on impressions of *America* printed and left in monochrome, suggests that Blake used a small dauber or ink ball, and, as Jackson describes, had to take more time to wipe away the smudges created by it than the time needed to ink the plate. For Jackson, see below.

Jackson & Chatto's *A Treatise on Wood Engraving*

Inking only the extremely shallow relief surfaces of the copper plate with a leather dauber or ball required not only skill, but also patience and time. In *A Treatise on Wood Engraving* (1839), John Jackson and W. A. Chatto describe what was involved, in what is the only first-hand account of how Blake prepared his relief-etched copper plates for printing:

As it is difficult, according to Blake's process, to corrode the large white parts to a depth sufficient to prevent their being touched by the dauber or ball in the process of inking, and thus preventing a soiled appearance in the impression, he was accustomed to wipe the ink out where it had touched in the hollows. As this occupied more time than the mere inking of the plate, his progress in printing was necessarily slow. (Jackson and Chatto 716-17)

Because the etched areas of the plate that surround the letters and design are so shallow, as Jackson and Chatto describe, it was almost impossible to avoid touching the shallows during the process of inking with the dauber (**Figures 18, 19 and 20**). When original monochrome impressions of the illuminated books are examined, one can see evidence of where Blake has then painstakingly wiped away dribblets and smudges of ink following inking with the dauber or ink ball (see Phillips 2004).



Figure 18: Replica relief-etched copper plate of Plate 12, *America a Prophecy* (1793), by Michael Phillips.



Figure 19: Inking replica of Plate 12,
America a Prophecy, by Michael Phillips.



Figure 20: Wiping ink smudges and dribblets after inking replica of Plate 12,
America a Prophecy, by Michael Phillips.

In the collection of the Pierpont Morgan Library in New York, there is a monochrome impression of “The Tyger” that shows clearly what could take place during the inking process that Jackson and Chatto describe (Figure 21). As we look more closely, the dribblets and smudges of ink can be seen more and more clearly (Figures 22 and 23). In this case Blake evidently felt that the impression was passable (perhaps because it could be heavily hand-coloured later), though apparently it was never included in a copy of the *Songs of Experience* (Figure 24). When studied closely, monochrome impressions almost invariably show signs of Blake painstakingly wiping these dribblets and smudges away.



Figure 21: Monochrome impression of “The Tyger” (1793). Pierpont Morgan Library, New York.

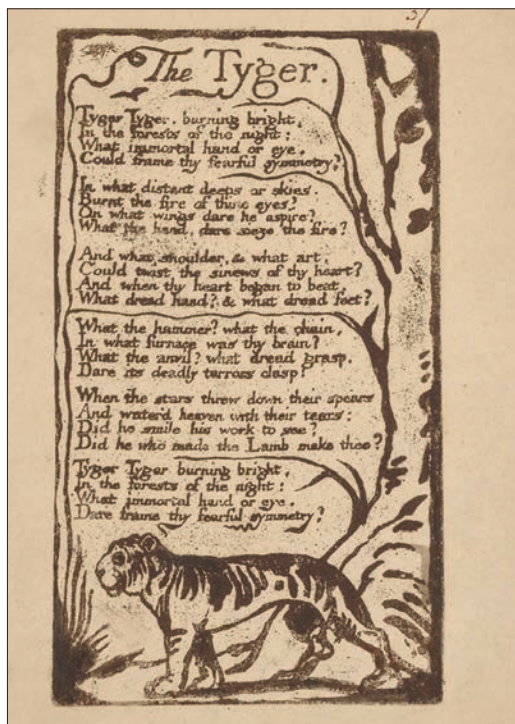


Figure 22: Detail of “The Tyger”.

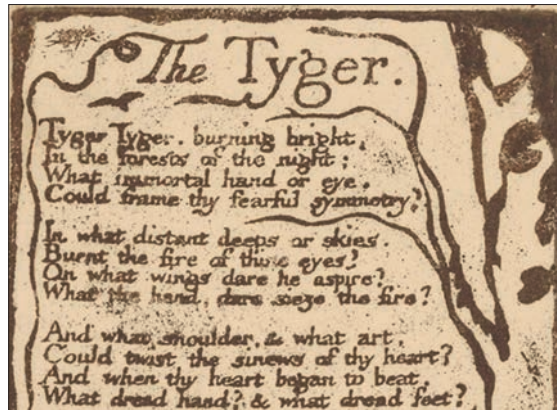


Figure 23: Detail of “The Tyger”.



Figure 24: Detail of “The Tyger”, colour printed, *Songs of Experience* (1793).

Neglect of Jackson's account has led scholars to presume that Blake's inking and plate-wiping process was carried out quickly and with ease. In fact, it can take up to 30 minutes or more to prepare one of the plates of the *Songs*, and more than an hour to ink and wipe one of the larger plates from *America a Prophecy* or *Europe a Prophecy*. This has far-reaching consequences for the numbers of copies produced.

When the difficulty Blake had in inking and wiping his relief-etched plates is acknowledged, combined with the further time required to finish each impression, either by colour printing or in watercolour and pen and ink, it is not surprising that production of the illuminated books was limited. Between 1789 and Blake's death in 1827, for example, only 35 copies of the *Songs of Innocence* are known to have been produced, a work of which there are more known copies than any other.⁵

Blake's innovation was to etch in relief both his text and his design together on the same plate. This made it possible to print both from the same inked surface, in the same press, at the same time – a development that liberated him from the constraints and expense of conventional illustrated book production, as well as the imposition of censorship. From inception to publication, the work never left his hands. Apart from the need to purchase the copper used in making his plates, the paper used to print, and the oil and pigments used to mix his inks and watercolours, Blake controlled and was responsible for every step in the creative and reproductive process.

In his prospectus issued "To the Public" in October 1793, Blake listed among the works for sale *America a Prophecy*, *Visions of the Daughters of Albion*, *The Book of Thel*, *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, *Songs of Innocence*, and *Songs of Experience* (Blake 692-93) (**Figure 25**).⁶ After each title he added the description "in Illuminated Printing", highlighting its importance, not only as a new method of printing, but also signifying to readers and collectors a particular value of the work. In the eighteenth

⁵ 35 copies are recorded of the *Songs of Innocence*, Blake's most frequently printed work between its first publication in 1789 and his death 38 years later in 1827. This figure compares to 29 copies of the combined *Songs of Innocence and of Experience*, 19 of *The Book of Thel* and *Visions of the Daughters of Albion*, 15 of *America a Prophecy* (1793), 9 of *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* (1793), *Europe a Prophecy* (1794) and *The First Book of Urizen*, 6 of *Jerusalem* (1804), 5 of *The Song of Los* (1795) and 4 of *Milton* (1804). A current census of known copies of each work is available online at the William Blake Archive: <http://www.blakearchive.org/>

⁶ Blake's prospectus, "To the Public, October 10th, 1793", was first transcribed in Alexander Gilchrist (*Life of William Blake* II.263). It was described as follows: "The following is a copy of a characteristic Prospectus issued by Blake, in 1793. The original is in engraved writing printed in blue on a single leaf about 11 x 7 1/2 inches. Of course it has become excessively rare, the specimen here described having been obtained only at the last moment, through perseveringly kind efforts on the part of Mr. Frost". The copy located by "Mr. Frost" disappeared, and no copy is known today. It was reprinted in Blake's *Complete Poetry and Prose* (692-3).

century, the words “to illuminate”, or “Illuminated” invited natural comparison with medieval illuminated manuscripts.⁷ Blake had spent up to five years working in Westminster Abbey, where the library would have offered exceptional opportunities for seeing examples. Other opportunities would have been provided by the auction rooms that Blake attended as a boy and young man.⁸ These wonderful examples from the past of word and image combined to create a single artefact clearly inspired Blake. His desire to emulate them fostered the innovation that made it possible, described so appositely in his prospectus as “Illuminated Printing”.

Metaphorical significance

Blake’s method of printing held a significance for him of yet another kind. On plate 14 of *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, he describes his process in these terms (**Figure 26**):

But first the notion that man has a body distinct from his soul, is to be expunged; this I shall do by printing in the infernal method, by corrosives, which in Hell are salutary and medicinal, melting apparent surfaces away, and displaying the infinite which was hid.

If the doors of perception were cleansed every thing would appear to man as it is, infinite. (Blake 656)⁹

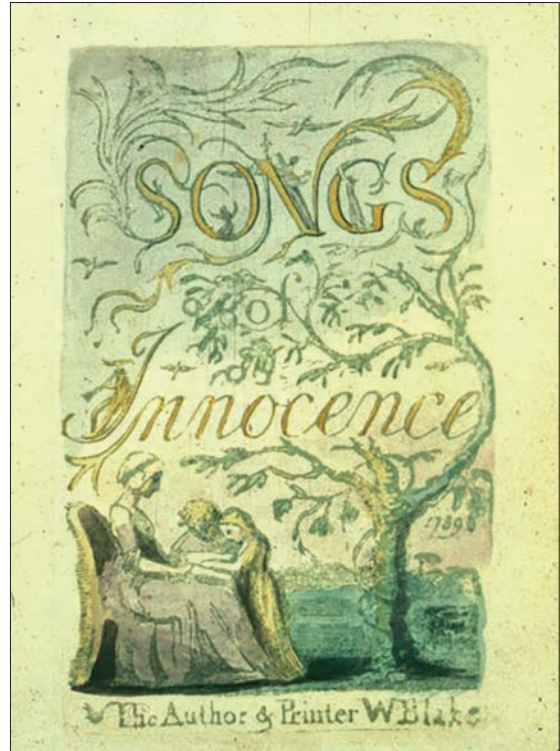


Figure 25: Title page, *Songs of Innocence* (1789).
Relief etching, hand coloured.

⁷ OED, “Illuminated, 5”: “Of letters, writing, manuscripts, etc.: Adorned with brilliant colours, metallic pigments, etc. (see Illuminate v. 8)”.

⁸ See Malkin (xx–xxi). Reprinted in *Blake Records* (562–63). See also the opening chapter of A. L. N. Munby’s *Connoisseurs and Medieval Miniatures 1750–1850*, which describes the transformation in Blake’s lifetime of regard for medieval illuminated manuscripts, from objects of purely antiquarian interest to valuable artefacts.

⁹ *Complete Poetry and Prose*, p. 39.

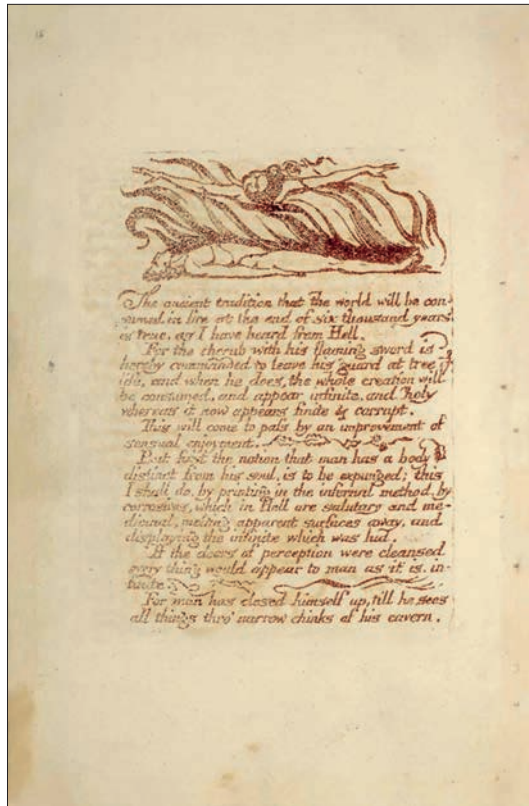


Figure 26: Plate 14, *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* (1793).

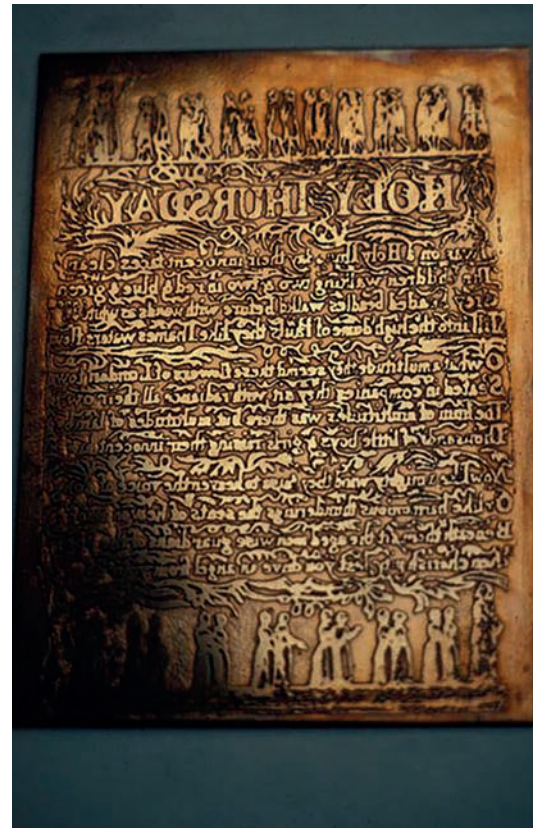


Figure 27: Replica relief-etched copper plate, "Holy Thursday", *Songs of Innocence* (1789), by Michael Phillips.

Blake’s method was symbolic of his philosophy of mind and unwavering belief in the existence of innate ideas. This belief was fundamentally opposed to empiricism, the philosophy that dominated the eighteenth century, in particular as established by John Locke in his *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*:

Let us then suppose the Mind to be, as we say, white Paper, void of all Characters, without Ideas; How comes it to be furnished? [...] to this I answer, in one word, From Experience. In that, all our Knowledge is founded; and from that it ultimately derives it self. (Locke II.i.2)

In his annotations to Sir Joshua Reynolds’s *Discourses*, Blake noted that he had read Locke’s *Essay* “when very Young”. His opposition to empiricism and to all who believed in its principles was unequivocal:

Reynolds Thinks that Man learns all that he Knows I say on the Contrary That Man Brings All that he has or Can have Into the World with him. Man is Born Like a Garden ready Planted & Sown. (Blake 656)

For a man with Blake’s training, the analogy between Locke’s metaphor for the human mind as a *tabula rasa*, a blank slate, and a copper plate prepared for conventional intaglio etching or engraving would have been apparent (**Figure 27**). Its opposite, etching in relief by biting away the surfaces of the copper to reveal poetry and design from within, would similarly have been appreciated as a corresponding metaphor for the existence of innate ideas – for the divine within man, awakened and raised to life, as the head-piece to plate 14 of *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* depicts. Awakening the divine within man, regaining the “paradise within” promised at the conclusion of Milton’s *Paradise Lost*, is the abiding principle of Blake’s poetry and art.

WORKS CITED

An expanded version of this paper will be found in my Ashmolean Museum exhibition catalogue, *William Blake Apprentice & Master*, chapters IX and X (89-105). See also Michael Phillips, *William Blake The Creation of the Songs From Manuscript to Illuminated Printing*. For a demonstration of Blake's method of preparing and printing the relief-etched plates of his illuminated books, see the British Library video on my website: <http://www.williamblakeprints.co.uk>

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Résumé : *En 1788, William Blake invente une méthode d'impression révolutionnaire qui lui permet d'imprimer en même temps ses poèmes et les images qu'il avait créées pour les illustrer, à partir de la même plaque de cuivre, gravée en relief - au contraire de la méthode habituelle, de taille en creux – sur sa propre presse. Il devient alors le seul responsable non seulement de la création mais aussi de la reproduction de ses œuvres, se libérant de la censure et des contraintes du commerce. Cet article explicite l'invention de Blake, la resituant dans le contexte de l'édition au XVIII^{ème} siècle, qui exigeait deux types de presses à imprimer, et des ouvriers spécialisés. La signification métaphorique de la méthode de Blake est également explorée.*

Abstract: In 1788 William Blake invented a technically revolutionary method of printing both word and image together that he called ‘Illuminated Printing.’ Blake’s invention made it possible to print both the text of his poems and the images that he created to illustrate them from the same copper plate, etched in relief (in contrast to conventional etching or engraving in intaglio), unassisted, using his own rolling-press. Significantly, this meant that he became solely responsible not only for the creation, but also for the reproduction of his works, largely free from commercial constraint and entirely free from censorship. The paper explains and illustrates Blake’s invention in the context of conventional eighteenth-century illustrated book production, which required two fundamentally different kinds of printing press, a screw- or letter-press as well as a rolling-press, and numbers of highly skilled specialist pressmen. The metaphorical significance of Blake’s method of ‘Illuminated Printing’ is also explored.