

“A History of Art & Science”: William Blake’s *Last Judgment*

REBECCA MARKS^a

WILLIAM Blake’s final painting of the Last Judgment has received little scholarly attention, largely because it has been lost since his death in 1827. From fragmented anecdotal accounts, we know that the piece was a tempera with gold leaf, six to seven feet tall and five feet wide (Butlin #648), and so overworked by Blake that it was described by George and Sydney Cumberland as “nearly as black as your Hat” (*BR*[2] 320). Frederick Tatham wrote that it was “very much spoiled and darkened by over-work; and is one of those alluded to in [Blake’s] Catalogue as being spoiled by the spirits of departed artists, or ‘blotting and blurring demons’” (Gilchrist 258). When J. T. Smith saw the painting, however, he had a very different response. Awestruck by “the lights of this extraordinary performance,” he marveled at Blake’s manipulation of color, especially the treatment of “silver,” “gold,” and “gilding.” He writes:

[If Blake had] fortunately lived till the next year’s exhibition at Somerset-house, the public would then have been astonished at his exquisite finishing of a Fresco picture of the Last Judgment, containing upwards of one thousand figures, many of them wonderfully conceived and grandly drawn. (473)

These conflicting responses cumulatively describe a painting of immense, overreaching ambition.

It is difficult to date a lost painting, but we might reasonably assume that Blake began work on the final *Last Judgment* around 1809, when he was drafting in his Notebook the tractate that would retrospectively become known as *A Vision of the Last Judgment*. There, he lays out a “most discriminate & particular” plan for an apocalyptic painting based in part on the Book of Revelation and in part on his own mythological and political ideas (E 562). By 1809, Blake had already produced at least nine designs on that

apocalyptic theme, each exploring different aspects of the potential narrative symbolism and structure (Butlin #639–48). The prolonged, visionary exactitude of that process may help explain why his final painting was never publicly exhibited or sold. It is plausible that he had become so absorbed in the minutiae of the large picture that its collective effect was one of prolixity, darkness, and chaos. At the time of Blake’s death, “Nobody could be found to give twenty-five guineas for it,” as his biographer Gilchrist records (401).

This article argues that one of the later drawings of the Last Judgment that Blake produced, the “Rosenwald” drawing in Washington, DC ([illus. 1](#)), represents the most complete surviving expression of his visionary project, and that it should be read as a *cartone*—that is, as a preparatory drawing for a large-scale historical fresco, in imagined emulation of Italian masters. Blake’s *Last Judgment*, in its combination of biblical narrative with mythological and political themes, both participates in and redefines the features of the historical genre as it manifested in eighteenth-century British painting.

Blake and History Painting

There is a precedent for reading Blake as a history painter, in relation to both his youthful aspirations to exhibit his work at the Royal Academy (Bindman, “Blake as a Painter” 87–90) and his later independent exhibition at 28 Broad Street in 1809 to 1810 (Myrone and Brown). In recent years, Martin Myrone has led the charge in spotlighting Blake’s status as a history painter. In the Tate exhibition of 2019, he included a reconstruction of Blake’s exhibition as part of a wider scholarly goal to move “away to some degree from the more technical discussions of printmaking and symbolism” and toward Blake’s “ambitions to be a public artist” (Calè). In the wider realm of eighteenth-cen-

a. Rebecca Marks (drrebeccamarks@gmail.com) is an independent art and literary historian. She completed her PhD on William Blake’s reception of Michelangelo at the University of Cambridge in 2025. She is currently writing a trade book on Gothic visual culture, due for publication with Penguin in 2027.



1. William Blake, *The Last Judgment*, c. 1809. Pen and wash over pencil, 45.3 x 34.6 cm. National Gallery of Art, Washington, DC, Rosenwald Collection, 1943.3.9017.

tury visual studies, William L. Pressly's 2014 study of James Barry's historical murals for the Society of Arts drew significant comparisons between Blake's and Barry's political theories about history painting (283-90). Pressly's argument was based on earlier research, conducted by John Barrell, into Blake's place within contemporary political theories of art (Barrell 253-57). But on Blake and history painting specifically, Morton D. Paley and David V. Erdman, in their respective studies *Energy and Imagination* and *Prophet against Empire*, originally situated Blake among the eighteenth-century milieu of Joshua Reynolds, Benjamin West, John Hamilton Mortimer, and Barry (Paley, *Energy* 173-78; Erdman 36-45, 66-68). In line with these scholars, I read Blake's visionary temperas as part of a tradition of historical painting in Britain. I believe that Blake is not marginal to this tradition, but in fact attempted to make serious contributions to it, not only by expanding the usual classical, mythological, or civic narrative scope into visionary subject matter, but also by freeing the genre from the realist limits of neoclassical grand style and returning to a more two-dimensional, symbolic, Gothic one.

Evidence for reading Blake's tempera of the Last Judgment as a history comes in *A Vision of the Last Judgment*, where he describes the project in the following terms:

My Picture is a History of Art & Science [& its
<the Foundation of Society> Which is Human-
ity itself. What are all the Gifts of the Spirit but
Mental Gifts whenever any Individual Rejects
Error & Embraces Truth a Last Judgment pass-
es upon that Individual. (E 562)

As an artist operating in London at the end of the eighteenth century, Blake would certainly have known that

"history" was not a neutral term. Within the context of the newly established Royal Academy, the word referred to a political, grand, and stately form of fine art intended to instruct, edify, and represent moral truth. History painting was vehemently advocated by Barry, who was one of Blake's artistic heroes (Dunne and Pressly 1-9; Lenihan 145-59; Pressly 283-90). Reynolds also promoted history painting as a didactic art form in his *Discourses*, which Blake annotated. For both Barry and Reynolds, it was a genre capable of cultivating civic virtue and shaping national identity (Barrell 227-57).

The concept of history painting (a word deriving from *istoria*, meaning eyewitness account) originated in Leon Battista Alberti's *De pictura* (1435). The formal features of the genre were defined as visual narrative; sufficient figures to convey this narrative; dramatic interaction; mythological or biblical themes; and didactic content. Alberti declared that histories had to be of "significant scale" and intended for "public display" (Lingo). Blake's extant drawings and paintings of the Last Judgment possess all these qualities, though their Gothic, two-dimensional style and symbolism represent a radical intervention in the historical genre as it had developed in eighteenth-century English-school painting. There is a clear stylistic difference, for instance, between Blake's approach in the Rosenwald drawing and those of contemporary apocalyptic histories, Barry's *Elysium* and West's *Death on the Pale Horse* (illus. 2 and 3).

Through symbolic density, cyclical narrative, and antimimetic form, Blake's designs for the Last Judgment reimagine history painting not as a vehicle for institutional authority but instead as a mode of spiritual instruction (Barrell 69-162). In *A Vision of the Last Judgment*, Blake describes a picture that signifies an epic reckoning between the contrary states of the human soul: truth and er-



2. James Barry, *Elysium; or, The State of Final Retribution* from *The Progress of Human Knowledge and Culture*, c. 1777–83. Oil on canvas, 360.0 x 1308.0 cm. RSA, London, RSA024. Image © Royal Society for the Encouragement of Arts, Manufactures, and Commerce/Bridgeman Images.



3. Benjamin West, *Death on the Pale Horse*, 1817. Oil on canvas, 447.0 x 764.5 cm. Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts, Philadelphia, 1836.1. Image © Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts.

ror, imagination and reason, society and the individual. The damned, in his schema, are not simply the wicked, but those who “were too weak to Reject Error” (E 563). They have rejected vision in favor of law, science, or moral convention. The elect are not saints, but rather lovers, children, prophets, and artists: those who are attuned to imagination as a vessel for divine truth. “Men,” he writes, “are admitted into Heaven not because they have <curbed &> governd their Passions or have No Passions but because they have Cultivated their Understandings” (E 564).

Through his experiments with the Last Judgment as a visual and textual subject, Blake intentionally invokes a pre-modern artistic tradition—which links back to Michelangelo, to Dürer, and even to much earlier Gothic artists—and adapts this tradition to accord with his visionary philosophy. It is worth reminding ourselves that, though he is now remembered primarily as a poet and printmaker, he actively pursued the status of a history painter throughout his life (Essick). Having trained as an engraver between 1772 and 1779 and thereafter briefly studied at the Royal Academy, Blake repeatedly submitted historical compositions to the summer exhibitions between 1780 and 1808. These works tended toward historical, literary, and biblical subjects, such as *The Last Supper* (1799) and *The Miracle*

of the Loaves and Fishes (1800). In them, he combined the graphic lines and theatrical qualities of neoclassical painting with a historic monumentality, drawing from the visual vocabularies of Michelangelo and Raphael, Barry and Mortimer.

Unfortunately, he found little success within this institutional structure. In 1809, he wrote that “[t]he execution of my Designs, being all in Water-colours, (that is in Fresco) are regularly refused to be exhibited by the *Royal Academy*” (E 527). Thus frustrated by the refusal of his works for the summer exhibition, he curated his own solo exhibition at his family home at 28 Broad Street, Soho. This decision aligned with the views that he contemporaneously expressed in an unpublished tractate, possibly written as a lecture to the Chalcographic Society, entitled *Public Address*. It decried the lack of public patronage for English painters and criticized the dominance of sculpture and portraiture in official commissions:

The Painters of England are unemployd in Public Works. while the Sculptors have continual & superabundant employment Our Churches & Abbeys are treasures of [*Spiritual riches*] their producing for ages back While Painting is ex-

cluded Painting the Principal Art has no place [in our] <among our almost> only public works. (E 581)

Blake's exhibition was, then, in part a reaction to what he saw as a lack of support for public painting in England. Though it was ultimately an unsuccessful project that sold no pictures, in ideological terms it was nevertheless a radical intervention to the established structure of public art. Blake wished to restore the arts to the "grand" and "real" status that he perceived they had enjoyed in the Renaissance: he sought to strip them of the critics and "Ignorances" of the Georgian age and instead imbue them with spiritual truth (E 528). This is why his exhibition featured examples of what he called "portable Fresco" (a medium of his own making, with the goal of creating removable, modular mural panels to decorate public spaces), which, in form, were intended to emulate and modernize the techniques of the old Italian masters (Paley, *Energy* 271-77). In *A Descriptive Catalogue*, Blake envisions painting works "one hundred feet in height" and enshrining them on the walls of public, civic, or religious buildings (E 531). His *Last Judgment* might be seen to lie at the center of this broader campaign.

Though the newly minted Royal Academy, which had been founded in 1768, had initial aspirations to the European model of academic history painting, by the turn of the nineteenth century it had become apparent that the British school remained, at least in the eyes of William Hazlitt, "without any painter of serious historical subjects ... who has made even a faint approach to the excellence of the great Italian painters" (176-77). In this context, Blake's historical efforts can be aligned with those of Barry, which went against the public taste for portraiture and landscape in favor of the more spiritually elevated genre.

The works that I categorize as Blake's history paintings are his large-scale temperas, including *The Ancient Britons*, *The Spiritual Form of Nelson Guiding Leviathan* (1805-09), *The Spiritual Form of Pitt Guiding Behemoth* (c. 1805), and *An Allegory of the Spiritual Condition of Man* (1811-13). My application of the term "history" to these paintings involves a necessary expansion of the usual definition, particularly when we account for the fact that Blake's mythology frequently derives from his syncretic imagination, rather than solely from classical, biblical, or historical texts. There is also the question of how his style and medium diverge from historical tradition, which is denoted by an idealized yet naturalistic "grand style."

Blake's "histories" instead tend to combine neoclassical linear figures with two-dimensional perspective.

Compare, for instance, West's *The Death of Nelson* (1806) with Blake's contemporaneous painting *The Spiritual Form of Nelson*. West's *Nelson* fulfills all of the conventional requirements of eighteenth-century history. It is an oil on canvas, depicting a well-known story from cultural history, with a clear moral message. Blake's, on the other hand, is much more atypical of the genre. It is painted in a linear, iconographic style, in water-based tempera and gold leaf, with an abstract, morally ambiguous visual narrative.¹ Nonetheless, Blake's *Nelson* fits within the parameters of what he seems to think history painting is: allegorical, archetypal, mythological painting.

In these historical temperas, Blake intentionally eschews naturalistic style because he believes that the truth of the history lies in its visionary expression, not in clarity or realism of narrative. This is also why he rejects the use of oil paints. He writes: "Reasons and opinions concerning acts, are not history. Acts themselves alone are history.... [H]e who rejects a fact because it is improbable, must reject all History and retain doubts only" (E 544). His histories, rather than manifesting a sense of reason or strict morality, instead seek to visualize the power of the imagination. With this in mind, I think that Blake's beliefs about history painting and visionary expression may have found their pinnacle in his final *Last Judgment*, not only because he interprets the subject as an eternal struggle between imagination and reason, but also because it was his most ambitious and epic tempera painting project.

Blake's Extant Last Judgment Designs

Recent scholarship on Blake's visual and textual engagements with the theme of the Last Judgment has primarily focused on the version currently on display at Petworth House, painted in 1808 for the countess of Egremont ([illus. 4](#)). This is the most finished and richly colored of Blake's extant designs, and it is accompanied by a detailed explanatory letter that he sent to Ozias Humphry, which provides a rare guide to the artist's visual schema (E 552-54). The emphasis on the Petworth *Last Judgment* in the academic literature has yielded valuable insights: on the picture's cyclical and sexual symbolism (Sklar; Rowland 224-29); on its iconographic dialogue with the Book of Revelation (Billingsley 150; Bindman, "Blake as a Painter" 103-04); and on Blake's relationship to the countess, his patron (Loukes 47-60). However, this emphasis has al-

1. On *The Spiritual Form of Nelson*, see Barlow; Ackroyd; Bindman, *Blake as an Artist* 155, 160-61; Erdman, *Prophet* 521-22; and Paley, "'Wonderful Originals'" 176.



4. William Blake, *The Vision of the Last Judgment*, 1808. Pencil, pen, and watercolor on paper, 50.3 x 40.0 cm. National Trust, Petworth House, Sussex, NT 486270. Image © National Trust Images/John Hammond.

so had the effect of narrowing scholarly focus. One avenue yet to be fully explored is the extent to which the Petworth painting fits within a broader visionary enterprise that culminated in Blake's final tempera. To explain why I will not focus on the Petworth version, but instead on the Rosenwald drawing as a locus for Blake's historical project, it is first necessary to trace in brief the chronology of the Last Judgment compositions.

Blake's Last Judgment designs began with an illustration for Robert Blair's *The Grave* in 1805 (illus. 5). In that watercolor, Blake worked within a recognizably traditional iconographic structure: Christ sits enthroned at the top of a symmetrical hierarchy, with the elect rising on his right

and the damned falling on his left, surrounded by clouds, trumpeting angels, and scriptural emblems, like the Book of Life. The composition, which has intense symmetry, flattened perspective, cyclical thrust, and crowds of muscular figures, bears visual affinities to the schematic reproductive prints after Michelangelo's *Last Judgment* that Blake would have encountered as an apprentice engraver and collector in the 1770s (Barnes 99-120). His next major exploration of the Last Judgment came in 1806, with *A Vision of the Last Judgment* (now in Pollok House, Glasgow), along with its companion piece *The Fall of Man* (1807; Victoria and Albert Museum). The Pollok House version develops a visual and narrative framework grounded in recognizable imagery from the Book of Revelation,



5. William Blake, *The Day of Judgment* (illustrations to Robert Blair's *The Grave*, no. 12), c. 1805. Pen and ink and watercolor, 27.0 x 22.2 cm. Art Institute of Chicago, 2019.139.

with trumpeting angels, the Books of Life and Death, and Christ enthroned.² It is almost twice the size of the Blair illustration and shows Blake experimenting with how best to depict apocalyptic subject matter, including changes to the angels' orientation and the addition of his own mythological figures, such as the "Church Universal," a woman crowned with stars and surrounded by infants. Thereafter came the 1808 *Last Judgment* for Petworth House, which, as noted, has been extensively studied. Following Petworth, Blake completed the Rosenwald drawing (Butlin #645), alongside a number of secondary sketches and a tracing of that design (Butlin #643, 644, 646). It was after these successive visual experiments that he began work on the large-scale tempera.

The Rosenwald drawing is the closest proxy for the lost painting; it fits the description that Blake wrote in his Notebook in 1809–10 more accurately than any other of his Last Judgment drawings. It is less symmetrically structured than the Petworth version, with a more ambitious distinction between the trajectories of the elect and the damned. This represents the idea of the Last Judgment as an eternal, cyclical vision rather than a one-off event, on which Blake notes: "The Last Judgment is not Fable or Allegory but Vision.... Vision or Imagination is a Representation of what Eternally Exists" (E 554). Moreover, the Rosenwald drawing contains allegorical personifications described in the Notebook that are not present in the Petworth version: for example, on Christ's left are the figures of "Sin" (dragged down by a demon holding a key), "Death" (nailed to the cross), and "Time" (dragged down by a crowned demon); on his right, "three Persons represent Poetry Painting & Music" (holding a lyre, a scroll, and a palette). Below we see the Harlot being burned by "wreathed Torches"; the "book of Accusations" beneath the feet of the Great Red Dragon; and the prison guards Gog and Magog wielding their "Hammer" and "Tongs." Beneath the Dragon's cave "a Skeleton begins to Animate." These are all described in Blake's *Vision* and are exclusively present in the Rosenwald drawing and its sketches, but in none of the earlier ones.

A tracing of this version (Butlin #646), dating from approximately 1809, may have been created as part of an unrealized intention to engrave the design. If it is by Blake, it offers material evidence that he considered reproducing the composition for a wider public. While no engraving is known, the existence of the tracing points to his sustained investment in the work's future after 1809, and supports reading the Rosenwald drawing not simply as a private vi-

sion but as a working design for a monumental and distributable image.

The Rosenwald drawing has received comparatively little attention in studies of Blake and the Last Judgment, for manifold reasons. The most comprehensive interpretation of the schema comes in S. Foster Damon's *A Blake Dictionary*, which offers a general summary of Blake's eschatological vision. Contextually, Damon frames the Rosenwald design as an aid to *A Descriptive Catalogue* and potentially to Blake's broader theology. Damon's account is largely taxonomic rather than interpretive and does not explore the work's formal or historical implications as a preparatory drawing for the larger tempera piece. Perhaps the Rosenwald drawing has been less attractive to contemporary scholars of Blake because, unlike the Petworth version, it is uncolored and unfinished. It is also slightly less conventional in its application of the narrative theme than the preceding versions. Whereas Blake's earlier *Last Judgments* tend to exhibit a left-right orientation, clearly staging the rise of the elect and fall of the damned, the Rosenwald instead abandons perspectival space entirely. It offers a stacked, layered, geometric architecture, and the boundaries between cosmic spaces are much more ambiguous. There are "the elect" and there are "the damned," but the lines between them are more indistinct. Individual figures are maximally elongated and abstracted. The ethereal quality of these characters in the Rosenwald version may signify a rejection of naturalistic representation in favor of an increasingly abstract one. The meaning of figures lies not in proportion or perspective but instead in what Blake calls the "Lineaments of the Countenances"—the abstract archetypal expressiveness of their bodies and faces (E 560). Every figure and gesture in Blake's work encodes a moral or imaginative truth (Warner 123–49; Marks).

Renaissance and Gothic Influences

The structure, to a greater or lesser extent, of all of Blake's Last Judgment drawings, with the swelling vertical hierarchy, symmetry, and Apollo-like Christ, suggests that Blake was echoing Michelangelo's *Last Judgment* in the Sistine Chapel. In 1784, Blake's friend John Hawkins proposed the idea of establishing an endowment fund to send him on a grand tour, but the trip never came to fruition (John Flaxman, quoted in *BR*[2] 31). Instead, Blake would have studied Michelangelo's design in the form of printed reproductions. Two kinds were available to him: either smaller, single-plate engravings, or larger, multiple-plate

2. Rev. 1.10–11 (KJV): "I was in the Spirit on the Lord's day, and heard behind me a great voice, as of a trumpet, / Saying, I am Alpha and Omega, the first and the last: and, What thou seest, write in a book...."

engravings, such as those by Niccolò della Casa (Barnes 99-120). He probably also amassed some analytical understanding of the work from art-critical texts, including William Aglionby's essays, Reynolds's *Discourses*, Henry Fuseli's *Lectures*, and Richard Duppa's life of Michelangelo. In 1804 (coincidentally, one year before he first attempted to paint a Last Judgment), Blake may have seen a painted copy of Michelangelo's *Last Judgment* at the Truchsessian Gallery in the New Road, opposite Portland Place (Paley, "Truchsessian"). Upon returning from the gallery, he wrote that the experience "enlightened [him] with the light [he] enjoyed in [his] youth" (E 756).

One way in which these decontextualized viewing experiences of Michelangelo's *Last Judgment* might have influenced Blake relates to the characteristic density of his designs. This is a feature that has frequently been commented on: for instance, Ozias Humphry, in a letter to the earl of Buchan dated 9 February 1808, describes the Petworth version as full of "sublimely multitudinous masses, & groups" (quoted in BR[2] 250). J. T. Smith, similarly, was struck by the tempera's "one thousand figures" (473). Much later, Kathleen Raine found in Blake's crowds a representation of "[a]ll mankind" metaphorized as "cells flowing and circulating within the one life," like a Tibetan mandala (56).

It is possible that this crowded characteristic of Blake's expressions of the Last Judgment derives in part from the types of reproductions of Michelangelo's design that would have been circulating in eighteenth-century London. If Blake had habitually referred to Giulio Bonasone's "Last Judgment" (illus. 6) as a source, he would have experienced an intensely reduced version of the fresco.³ This is because the details of the original, which is approximately 1340 x 1200 cm. in size, are necessarily scaled down by a factor of hundreds, and the result is very crowded.

But crowding and figural density are also features of history painting. In 1685, the early British art critic William Aglionby had defined the history as "an Assembling of many Figures in one Piece, to Represent any Action of Life, whether True or Fabulous, accompanied with all its Ornaments of Land-skip and Perspective" (n. pag.). Later, Jonathan Richardson noted that the history ought not to contain "[s]upernumerary" figures extraneous to narrative; however, "[w]here the Story requires that there be a Crowd of People, there may be some Figures without any Par-

ticular Character, which are not Supernumerary, because the Story requires a Crowd" (*Essay* 62-63). As a historical subject, the Last Judgment is an excellent example of this, since the source texts, the Book of Revelation and Gospel of Matthew, describe "a great multitude, which no man could number, of all nations, and kindreds, and people, and tongues" (Rev. 7.9) and "great multitudes ... gathered together" before God (Matt. 13.2).

For Blake, the visual crowding of the Last Judgment as a narrative event is a key aspect of its spiritual character. "I have seen in my Imagination," he writes in his *Vision*, "when distant they appear as One Man but as you approach they appear Multitudes of Nations.... <I have seen when at a distance Multitudes of Men in Harmony appear like a single Infant ...>" (E 556-57). The concept of the individual as a synecdoche for the whole of humanity manifests in his Last Judgment designs in intelligent ways. These compositions, when viewed from far away, merge into amorphous, unified, symmetrical shapes, like a skull, hourglass, or uterus. When observed from up close, they instead reveal their individual details. For instance, the heavenly, elect, and profane bear distinguishing features that denote their spiritual status. The profane, across all Blake's versions, consistently display in the fleshy and masculine physicality of their bodies the "Despair & Horror" of damnation. Rather than subliming into the ethereal realm of heaven as the elect do, the forms of the damned are heavy, pulled into the gravity of the abyss. They "fall thro the air & some are scourged by Spirits with flames of fire into the Abyss of Hell" (E 553). Blake's elect, by contrast, are elongated and androgynous. They stretch upward. Their attitudes are loving. They consist of embracing couples, children, and maternal figures, a fact that may signify the heavenly and redeeming power of love. "Each figure," writes Susanne Sklar, "has a distinctive face and body; each has a distinctive character" (131). "[T]he Spectator," Blake instructs, "will attend to the Hands & Feet to the Lineaments of the Countenances they are all descriptive of Character & not a line is drawn without intention & that most discriminate & particular" (E 560). However, he also believes that "all men are alike in outward form ... (and with the same infinite variety) all are alike in the Poetic Genius" (E 1), and he does not find these perspectives to be mutually exclusive.

Michelangelo's *Last Judgment*, which contains its hundreds of idealized bodies, each expressing individual character whilst also contributing to an overall narrative, em-

3. This is an educated guess. Blake appears to have been reading *Anecdotes of the Life of Julio Bonasoni*, by George Cumberland, around 1800. In a letter dated 1 Sept. 1800, he notes that he had lent the book to John Hawkins. See William Blake, Letter to George Cumberland, 1 September 1800, object 3, *The William Blake Archive*, blakearchive.org/copy/letters?descId=lt1sept1800.1.tr.03, accessed July 2024.

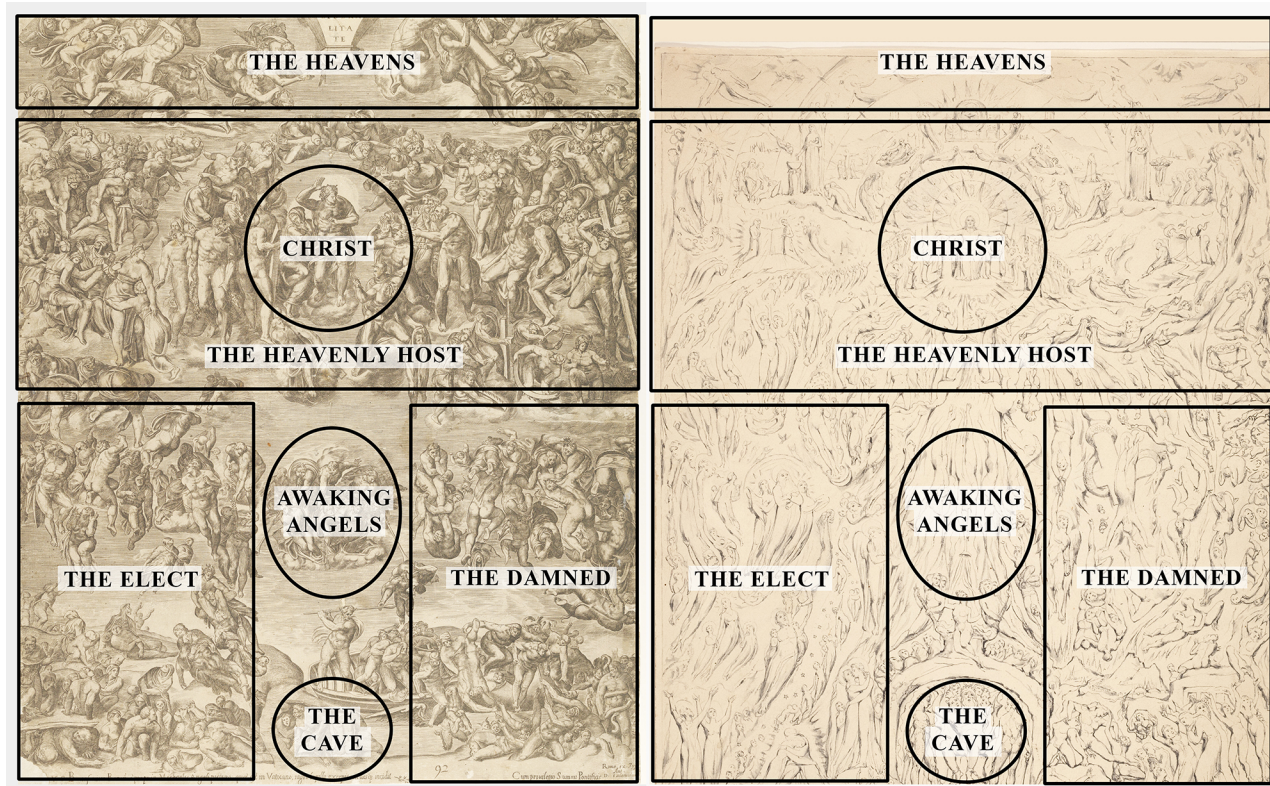


6. Giulio Bonasone after Michelangelo, “The Last Judgment from the Sistine Chapel,” 1546–50. Engraving, 58.0 x 44.2 cm. Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, 17.50.19-151.

bodies the qualities of *varietà* and *terribilità* that British-school history painters like Fuseli and Barry were looking to revive. The contorted, foreshortened, and anatomically emphatic figures in Michelangelo's fresco have been interpreted in a variety of ways. They are foremost a display of artistic virtuosity: an opportunity for the master to explore the possibilities of foreshortening in an antigravitational plane, expressing the comprehensive variety of "human passions" (Lingo 32). Theologically, Michelangelo's nude crowds are also "an allegory for the Truth of spiritual salvation," and confront the viewer with the ideal, spiritual body of man (Moroncini 346). It is a painting upon which "all is concentrated upon the grouping of the masses," though there has been no unanimous critical consensus on its structuring (Steinberg 130).

When we compare Blake's schema to the basic structure of Michelangelo's design (mediated, as it would have been for Blake, via the hands of Renaissance reproductive engravers), similarities between them become evident (illus. 7). The elect are grouped on Christ's right-hand side, the profane on his left. The heavens occupy the top, with angels decorating the upper corners. Beneath Christ appear

"Four Angels" who are "descend[ing] headlong with four trumpets to awake the Dead" (E 558). There is a logical hierarchy and narrative progression to this framework. It begins in the bottom left, rises with the elect, circles around Christ and his saints, and falls back down again, on the right, into the pits of hell. The visual story is told not through interactions between figures but instead via an overall sense of trajectory. In Blake's designs, Christopher Rowland and Susanne Sklar have interpreted the cyclical structure as symbolic of Blake's belief in the Last Judgment as an eternal event: an infinite rebirth. Rowland's interpretation is theological. He argues that the clockwise movement of the figures signifies the eternal nature of Judgment, which is "always happening, with eternity always ready and available, which is in line with the eschatology of the Gospel of John" (228-29). Sklar's reading is also preoccupied with the depiction of time, arguing that Blake's "figures ... fall and rise in a clockwork swirl" (131). This geometric blueprint is most abstracted in the Rosenwald version, whose architectural lines emanate outward and upward from Christ the savior. In the colored versions, Blake also consistently lightens the figures closer in proximity to Christ, reflecting the metaphor of Christ



7. Sections of Michelangelo's *Last Judgment* (left, Giulio Bonasone after Michelangelo, 1546–50) compared with sections of Blake's "Rosenwald" drawing (right, c. 1809).

as the sun. For him, this solar metaphor may be related to the way in which Christ is visualized in the Book of Revelation: “[H]is countenance was as the sun shineth in his strength” (Rev. 1.16). Blake subscribes to the idea that “[w]hen the Sun rises” it represents “an Innumerable company of the Heavenly host crying Holy Holy Holy is the Lord God Almighty” (E 565-66).

Critics have long identified the Sistine Chapel *Last Judgment* with the cyclical passage of the sun, “a slow movement from left to right—in a circle, or ellipse” (Wilde 166). Charles de Tolnay related Michelangelo’s design to the Copernican solar system; Valerie Shrimplin recently revived this argument in *Michelangelo, Copernicus, and the Sistine Ceiling* (2013). These Copernican interpretations might be connected to a comment made by the Baroque French art theorist Charles du Fresnoy in *De arte graphica*, in which he argues that the protagonist of a history painting must always be akin to the “principal light” of a visual narrative, shining “like the sun in the Copernican System” (see Reynolds 2: 330). The eternal rising-and-falling of Michelangelo’s design is clearly echoed, both in structure and in meaning, in Blake’s cyclical, solar composition.

In art-critical terms, Michelangelo’s *Last Judgment* (in fact, Michelangelo’s style in general) was understood by prolific commentators in the British-school scene, notably Reynolds and Fuseli, to visually embody the sublime (Duffy). Fuseli, for instance, argues that the Sistine Chapel signifies Michelangelo’s ambition “to unite magnificence of plan and endless variety of subordinate parts with the utmost simplicity and breadth” (84). “On the immense plain of the Last Judgment,” he writes, “Michael Angelo has wound up the destiny of man” (163). The same sublime themes are echoed by Blake in the plan that he wrote in his Notebook. For him, the Last Judgment also signifies the “destiny of man”: in his words, “<the Foundation of Society> Which is Humanity itself” (E 562).

It is from Michelangelo’s *Last Judgment*, Christopher Heppner and Tristanne Connolly argue, that Blake derives his aerial figures, his flying figures, and any that seem to be “freed from gravitational bonds” (Heppner 35). Aerial figures certainly do populate the margins of Blake’s illuminated books, and the prints and illustrations frequently feature figures in pain and those endowed with the ability to fly. Much of what facilitates the narrative drama of Blake’s Last Judgment designs lies in the operations of their antigravitational world, wherein figures tumble, twist, and writhe in a dynamic theatre. Furthermore, Blake’s figures, like Michelangelo’s, are clearly aware of what is happening to them. The profane scream, ripping their hair and covering their mouths; the elect look upward

in wonderment, hands clasped together in prayer. Blake emphasizes these gestures by compressing and stretching parts of their faces and bodies. While the exact source is difficult to determine, it’s certainly true that Michelangelo’s *Last Judgment* was associated, in eighteenth-century art criticism, with a specific kind of nongravitational, dramatic, affective gesture. Richardson, for instance, pithily describes Michelangelo’s fresco as “a good Character for a Drawing-Book,” though “a very Improper one for such a Subject as the Last Judgment” (*Account* 271).

Beyond Michelangelo’s influence on Blake’s designs, however, there is also a Gothic quality in Blake’s drawings that evoke the ornamentation and foliation of tracery. A key facet of his radical reinterpretation of history painting is its relatedness to antique modes of artistic expression. He rejects the theatrical naturalism of painters like West, Barry, and Mortimer in favor of the visual strategies of Gothic art. In this sense, Blake participates in a kind of “antique modernity”: a recovering of archaic forms in order to critique modern conventions. The two-dimensionality and foliate fluidity of his Last Judgment designs recall the style of medieval apocalyptic Doom paintings and Gothic tracery and architecture. Blake, in his revisionism, prefigures the Pre-Raphaelite philosophy that would similarly turn to the past to revitalize the moral and visionary potential of the arts.

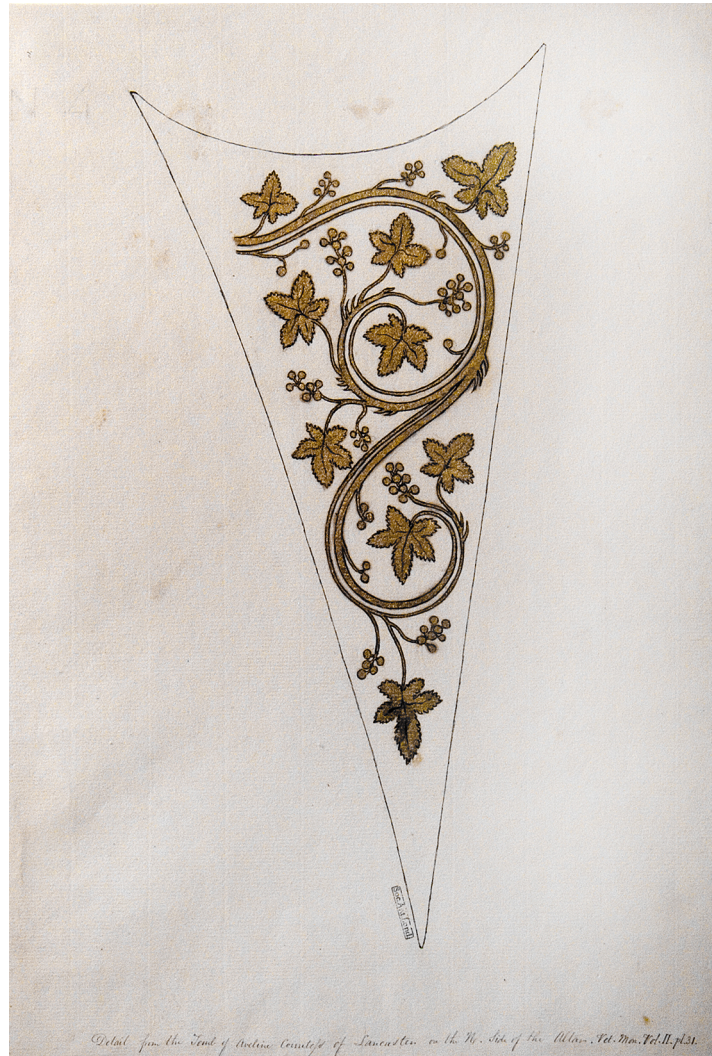
Although we now see Michelangelo as part of the Renaissance tradition that the Pre-Raphaelites later rejected, Blake instead aligns him with the “Gothic” artists. For Blake, “Michael Angelo” and “Rafael” are equivalent in artistry and imagination to “the finest specimens of Ancient Sculpture and Painting, and Architecture, Gothic, Grecian, Hindoo and Egyptian” (E 544). The inscription that Blake added to the second state of “Joseph of Arimathea among the Rocks of Albion” (his earliest engraving, a copy of a figure from Michelangelo’s *Crucifixion of St. Peter*) further connects the Michelangelesque style with Gothic art. It reads: “This is One of the Gothic Artists who Built the Cathedrals in what we call the Dark Ages Wandering about in sheep skins & goat skins of whom the World was not worthy such were the Christians in all Ages” (E 671). This association between Michelangelo and the Gothic in Blake arises from the clear, linear, visionary quality of the reproductive prints that Blake would have studied, as well as Michelangelo’s historic reputation as a supreme draftsman.

By Blake’s logic, the Gothicism and the Michelangelism of his Last Judgment designs are not mutually exclusive; in fact, they are one and the same. “Ages are All Equal,” he writes, “[b]ut Genius is Always Above The Age” (E 649). The designs suggest an earlier lineage based in both

medieval and Renaissance conceptions of sacred art. By returning to past traditions, he looks to emancipate eighteenth-century academic history painting from its institutional limitations of subject matter, perspective, and contemporary politics, and return it to a symbolic, visionary heritage.

Blake's figures in the Last Judgment compositions, and particularly in the Rosenwald drawing, are two-dimensional, vegetal, and fluid. Their bodies are flattened and

elongated. They invite comparisons with the Gothic architecture of Westminster Abbey, which Blake studied while he was an apprentice to James Basire (*illus. 8*). It is also possible that he saw some remnants of medieval wall paintings in English parish churches on his trips around Kent and Sussex with Thomas Stothard in the 1780s (though it is worth noting that many of these wall paintings were whitewashed during the Reformation and were not rediscovered or restored until the late nineteenth century).⁴ It is more likely, however, that the Gothic quality of



8. William Blake, *Countess Aveline, Detail from Her Tomb*, c. 1775. Pen and ink with shell gold, 38.1 x 26.6 cm. Image © Society of Antiquaries of London.

4. Anne Marshall, "Medieval Wall Painting: A Short Introduction," *Medieval Wall Painting in the English Parish Church*, reeddesign.co.uk/paintedchurch/introduction.htm, accessed July 2024.



9. After Michael Wolgemut, "The Last Judgment" from the *Nuremberg Chronicle*, c. 1493. Woodcut, 36.3 x 22.7 cm. Palmer Museum of Art, 2014.69. Image © Palmer Museum of Art, Pennsylvania.

his Last Judgment designs derives from a print source, such as the early woodcuts in the *Nuremberg Chronicle* (illus. 9). Blake's emphasis on line work and intricate detailing, and his use of mystical symbols like stars, clouds, flames, wings, and trumpets, are certainly reminiscent of the aesthetics of medieval engraving.

The supersession of mimetic form by allegorical symbolism is yet another feature that gives us cause to consider Blake's *Last Judgment* as a radical intervention to history painting. The eighteenth-century neoclassical historical

style placed an emphasis on mimesis, though it did allow some degree of artistic license (Phillips 69):

Even the Historian takes great liberties with facts in order to interest his readers, and make his narration more delightful; much greater right has the Painter to do this, who, though his work is called History-Painting, gives in reality a poetical representation of events. (Reynolds 2: 221)

However, Blake stretches this “poetical” potential of the history to its utmost limit. He does not so much take “great liberties” with mimetic representation as create an entirely symbolic, stylized, visual narrative. There is no modeling, depth, or theatrical drama. Instead, there is a diagrammatic map of the human soul.

In this light, the Rosenwald drawing stands as a culmination of Blake’s ambition to restore the *istoria* to its original spiritual function. This function was, at least in Barry’s and Blake’s view, a form of universal, visual communication “much superior to language” (Barry 63). Blake entreats the viewer to “[e]nter into these Images in his Imagination” not simply to observe the Last Judgment as a cinematic tableau, but instead to internalize the truth at the heart of that image: the eternal, ongoing conflict between imagination and reason (E 560).

When considering the mystery of Blake’s lost painting from 1827, we are faced with a number of questions. If his *Last Judgment* had been shown at the Royal Academy’s exhibition of 1828, would it have provoked the kind of profound response that J. T. Smith anticipated? During Blake’s lifetime, few of his works received any kind of critical acclaim. Many of the paintings he had previously submitted to the academy had been disregarded as “unscientific and irregular Eccentricity, a Madman’s Scrawls” (E 528). Robert Hunt, in reviewing Blake’s exhibition, famously called him an “unfortunate lunatic” (BR[2] 283). There is no reason to think that a *Last Judgment* would have been received any differently. Moreover, we know that there was relatively low demand for complex historical paintings among British consumers of art in the eighteenth century (Solkin, “Crowds and Connoisseurs” 157; Vaughan). Unfortunately for Blake (as well as for Barry, Mortimer, and other history painters), English history painting was always “destined for a role on the sidelines,” eternally overshadowed by prevailing tastes for landscape, genre painting, and, above all, portraits of dogs and horses (Barringer 132).

This article has argued that taking Blake’s *Last Judgment* seriously as a history painting forces us to think about the historical genre in Britain as a contested, experimental, and spiritually potent space. Blake’s understanding of history painting is fundamentally related to two things: first, to the unmediated expression of original ideas (what he calls “vision”); and secondly, to the potential for art to impact the viewer. This kind of history painting is embodied for Blake by the large-scale frescoes of Michelangelo, Raphael, and his contemporaries Barry and Mortimer. In their work, he believes that the “Genius and Inspiration” of the painter are displayed for all to see. He argues that “Italy is enriched and made great” by historical paintings,

and in part it is this belief that motivated his exhibition, because he wished to “exhibit to the Public, in an Exhibition of my own, my Designs, Painted in Watercolours” to show his affinity with Renaissance masters (E 528).

Erdman has suggested that, although Blake’s solo exhibition did not include the *Last Judgment* described in his Notebook in 1809–10, Blake may have intended to display the painting in a never-realized second exhibition (E 881). The painter and antiquarian Seymour Stocker Kirkup, who had befriended Blake in 1809, later recalled witnessing Blake’s work on the *Last Judgment*:

[H]e was painting the master-piece at the time, the great fresco on canvass (an invention of his own) which made such an impression on my mind that I could draw it now, after a lapse of 55 years or more.... (Quoted in BR[2] 288)

It is possible that, after the failure of the exhibition, Blake had been planning to submit the *Last Judgment* as an example of his “portable Fresco” (E 527) to the Royal Academy. On the other hand, it might have been a personal project, intended purely as an expression to his patrons and coterie of his resolve to “make England What Italy is an Envid Storehouse of Intellectual Riches” (E 581). Conceivably, it may also have been a different sort of exercise altogether: ritual, spiritual, or meditative. Seen from this vantage point, the Rosenwald drawing might be understood not only as a proxy for Blake’s most ambitious work of history painting, but also as a vital precursor to the symbolic abstraction of twentieth-century spiritual art.

Bibliography

Ackroyd, Peter. “Genius Spurned: Blake’s Doomed Exhibition Is Back.” *The Times* [London], 4 Apr. 2009, pp. 6–7.

Aglionby, William. *Painting Illustrated in Three Dialogues [sic]: Containing Some Choice Observations upon the Art*. London, 1685.

Alberti, Leon Battista. *Della pittura*. Edited by L. Mallè, Sansoni, 1950. Originally written in Latin as *De pictura*, 1435; translated by the author into Italian in 1436.

Barlow, Peter. “The Aryan Blake: Hinduism, Art, and Revelation in William Blake’s Pitt and Nelson Paintings.” *Visual Culture in Britain*, vol. 12, no. 3, 2011, pp. 277–92.

Barnes, Bernadine. *Michelangelo in Print: Reproductions as Response in the Sixteenth Century*. Routledge, 2016.

- Barrell, John. *The Political Theory of Painting from Reynolds to Hazlitt: "The Body of the Public."* Yale UP, 1986.
- Barringer, Tim. "Landscape and the Problem of History." Phillips and Bear, pp. 131-52.
- Barry, James. *A Letter to the Dilettanti Society*. J. Walker, 1798.
- Bentley, G. E., Jr. *Blake Records*. 2nd ed., Yale UP, 2004. [Abbreviated as BR(2)]
- Billingsley, Naomi. *The Visionary Art of William Blake*. I. B. Tauris, 2018.
- Bindman, David. *Blake as an Artist*. Phaidon, 1977.
- . "Blake as a Painter." *The Cambridge Companion to William Blake*, edited by Morris Eaves, Cambridge UP, 2003, pp. 85-109.
- Blake, William. *The Complete Poetry and Prose of William Blake*. Edited by David V. Erdman, newly rev. ed., Anchor Books, 1988. [Abbreviated as E]
- Burke, Edmund. *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful*. L. Dodsley, 1757.
- Butlin, Martin. *The Paintings and Drawings of William Blake*. Yale UP, 1981. 2 vols.
- Calè, Luisa. "William Blake: The Artist (Tate Britain, 11 September 2019–2 February 2020): An Interview with Martin Myrone." *Blake*, vol. 53, no. 1, summer 2019, <https://doi.org/10.47761/biq.242>.
- Connolly, Tristanne J. "Graphic Bodies." *William Blake and the Body*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2002, pp. 25-72.
- Damon, S. Foster. *A Blake Dictionary: The Ideas and Symbols of William Blake*. 1965. Rev. ed., UP New England, 1988.
- De Tolnay, Charles. "Le Jugement dernier de Michel Ange. Essai d'interprétation." *Art Quarterly*, vol. 3, 1940, pp. 125-46.
- Duffy, Michael H. "Michelangelo and the Sublime in Romantic Art Criticism." *Journal of the History of Ideas*, vol. 56, no. 2, 1995, pp. 217-38.
- Du Fresnoy, Charles Alphonse. *De arte graphica—The Art of Painting*. Translated by John Dryden, London, 1695.
- Dunne, Tom, and William L. Pressly, editors. *James Barry, 1741–1806: History Painter*. Ashgate, 2010.
- Duppa, Richard. *The Life and Literary Works of Michel Angelo Buonarroti*. John Murray, 1806.
- Erdman, David V. *Prophet against Empire*. Princeton UP, 1954.
- Essick, Robert N. "Blake, William (1757–1827)." *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, Oxford UP, 2004.
- Freedberg, S. J. "Michelangelo." *Michelangelo: Selected Scholarship in English*, edited by William E. Wallace, vol. 1, Garland Publishing, 1995, pp. 7-47.
- Fuseli, Henry. *The Life and Writings of Henry Fuseli*. Edited by John Knowles, vol. 2, Henry Colburn and Richard Bentley, 1831.
- Gilchrist, Alexander. *The Life of William Blake*. 1863. John Lane, 1907.
- Hazlitt, William. "Essay XII. On the Fine Arts." *Literary Remains of the Late William Hazlitt*. Vol. 2, Saunders and Otley, 1836, pp. 113-91.
- Heppner, Christopher. *Reading Blake's Designs*. Cambridge UP, 1995.
- Lenihan, Liam. *The Writings of James Barry and the Genre of History Painting, 1775–1809*. Ashgate, 2014.
- Lingo, Stuart. "Figuring History at the End of the Renaissance." Phillips and Bear, pp. 29-49.
- Loukes, Andrew, editor. *William Blake in Sussex: Visions of Albion*. Paul Holberton, 2018.
- Marks, Rebecca. "Organs of Embodied Sentiment: William Blake's Sistine Studies, c. 1770–1790." *The Cambridge Quarterly*, vol. 52, no. 3, 2023, pp. 270-89.
- Moroncini, Ambra. *Michelangelo's Poetry and Iconography in the Heart of the Reformation*. Routledge, 2017.
- Myrone, Martin, and David Blayney Brown. "William Blake's 1809 Exhibition." *Tate Papers*, no. 14, 2010, www.tate.org.uk/research/tate-papers/14/william-blake-1809-exhibition.
- Paley, Morton D. *Energy and the Imagination: A Study of the Development of Blake's Thought*. Clarendon Press, 1970.

———. “The Truchsessian Gallery Revisited.” *Studies in Romanticism*, vol. 16, no. 2, 1977, pp. 165-77.

———. “‘Wonderful Originals’—Blake and Ancient Sculpture.” *Blake in His Time*, edited by Robert N. Essick and Donald Pearce, Indiana UP, 1978, pp. 170-99.

Phillips, Mark Salber. “History Painting Redistanced.” Phillips and Bear, pp. 67-86.

Phillips, Mark Salber, and Jordan Bear, editors. *What Was History Painting and What Is It Now?* McGill-Queen’s UP, 2019.

Pressly, William L. *James Barry’s Murals at the Royal Society of Arts: Envisioning a New Public Art*. Cork UP, 2014.

Raine, Kathleen. *Blake and the New Age*. George Allen and Unwin, 1979.

Reynolds, Joshua. *The Works of Sir Joshua Reynolds*. Edited by Edward Malone, London, 1797. Cambridge UP, 2014. 2 vols.

Richardson, Jonathan. *An Account of Some of the Statues, Bas-Reliefs, Drawings, and Pictures in Italy*. J. Knapton, 1722.

———. *Essay on the Theory of Painting*. 1715. 2nd ed., London, 1725.

Roman, Cynthia Ellen. “James Gillray’s ‘The Death of the Great Wolf’ and the Satiric Alternative to History Painting.” Phillips and Bear, pp. 90-110.

Rowland, Christopher. *Blake and the Bible*. Yale UP, 2010.

Shrimplin, Valerie. *Michelangelo, Copernicus, and the Sistine Ceiling*. Lambert Academic Publishing, 2013.

Sklar, Susanne. “Erotic Spirituality in Blake’s *Last Judgment*.” *Sexy Blake*, edited by Helen P. Bruder and Tristanne Connolly, Palgrave Macmillan, 2013, pp. 125-40.

Smith, John Thomas. *Nollekens and His Times*. Vol. 2, Henry Colburn, 1828.

Solkin, David H., editor. *Art on the Line: The Royal Academy Exhibitions at Somerset House, 1780–1836*. Yale UP, 2001.

———. “Crowds and Connoisseurs: Looking at Genre Painting at Somerset House.” Solkin, *Art on the Line*, pp. 157-71.

Steinberg, Leo. “The *Last Judgment* as Merciful Heresy.” *Michelangelo’s Painting: Selected Essays*, edited by Sheila Schwartz, U of Chicago P, 2019, pp. 130-60.

Vaughan, William. “Taste and the Multitude: The Somerset House Exhibitions in Continental Eyes.” Solkin, *Art on the Line*, pp. 243-52.

Warner, Janet A. *Blake and the Language of Art*. McGill-Queen’s UP, 1984.

Wilde, Johannes. “The Last Thirty Years.” *Michelangelo: Six Lectures*, by Wilde, Clarendon Press, 1978, pp. 147-90.