

William Blake: Burning Bright, Yale Center for British ArtJENNIFER DAVIS MICHAEL^a

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William Blake: Burning Bright. 26 August–30 November 2025, Yale Center for British Art, New Haven.

The recent exhibition at the newly refurbished Yale Center for British Art offered an excellent introduction to the depth and range of Blake's career as an artist. As the items on display were nearly all from the Paul Mellon Collection (the heart of the YCBA), the show was indirectly a tribute to Mellon as a devotee and collector of Blake's art. Plates from Blake's own illuminated books, such as *Songs of Innocence and of Experience*, *The Book of Urizen*, *America*, *Visions of the Daughters of Albion*, and *Jerusalem*, were presented alongside his illustrations of the books of others, in particular his luminous watercolors accompanying the poems of Thomas Gray. The selections also showcased Blake's skill in various media: pencil drawing, watercolor, conventional white- and black-line engraving, relief etching, and color printing, as well as tempera. Beyond what the exhibition showed us about Blake, it also exemplified a museum committed to its public mission of education and, as Blake would put it, "rouz[ing] the faculties to act" (letter to Dr. Trusler, E 702).

This was the first Blake show at the YCBA in nearly thirty years. A brief look at reviews from the 1997 exhibition, *The Human Form Divine* (curated by Patrick Noon), reveals how much has changed in the Blakean world. Deborah Solomon, writing in *The Wall Street Journal*, commented that Blake was less well known as an artist than as a poet because "there haven't been many exhibitions of his work." Not only has *The William Blake Archive* made his visual art available to anyone with an internet connection, I know of at least seven major exhibitions since 1997, including two at Tate Britain. Indeed, the 1997 exhibition at Yale set a high bar,¹ and I could not help comparing my memory of that one with the cur-

rent one. While Noon's exhibition was extravagantly inclusive—roughly three times larger—*Burning Bright* was more deliberately curated. I was fortunate to be able to speak to the curators, Elizabeth Wyckoff and Timothy Young, and they told me that considerations of accessibility and movement through the galleries meant that fewer works could be included. Nonetheless, this was a generous and thoughtful display that lent itself to teaching newcomers about Blake, with treats for the specialist as well.

Magnifying glasses were provided throughout the exhibition for close study of the works. Indeed, the exhibition as a whole invited viewers "[t]o see a World in a Grain of Sand." The curators made a deliberate choice not to begin with a big, splashy image, but rather to start small ("as Blake did," one of them told me), and gradually enter into the larger scale and intense color of his mature work. In front of a deep-blue wall was a small case (illus. 1) with a bound copy of *For Children: The Gates of Paradise* (1793), open to the design of a figure climbing a ladder to the moon, with the caption "I want! I want!" (illus. 2). (During a tour, a guide compared this experience to encountering Blake's works as tiny stars in the firmament.) Nearby hung the tempera painting *The Virgin and Child* (c. 1810–20) (illus. 3). While the work has darkened over time (like all of Blake's temperas), the new lighting in the remodeled gallery showed it off beautifully. We thus encountered Blake working in media as diverse as the handheld book "for children" and the sacred icon, and playing with contradictions in each case. *The Virgin and Child* follows closely in the tradition of the Theotokos Panagia, but with important differences: here the icon is set against a field of stars, with golden "thorns of light" (Billingsley 68) emanating from the halos. While the tiny children's book demonstrates the immensity of aspiration and desire, the icon emphasizes the fleshliness of the Incarnation: Mary's smile and

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¹ For instance, the display of all 100 plates of *Jerusalem* in the 1997 show fulfilled Northrop Frye's fantasy of hanging the poem in his office in such a manner (Frye 122).



1. *Burning Bright* installation image. Photo credit: Richard Caspole.

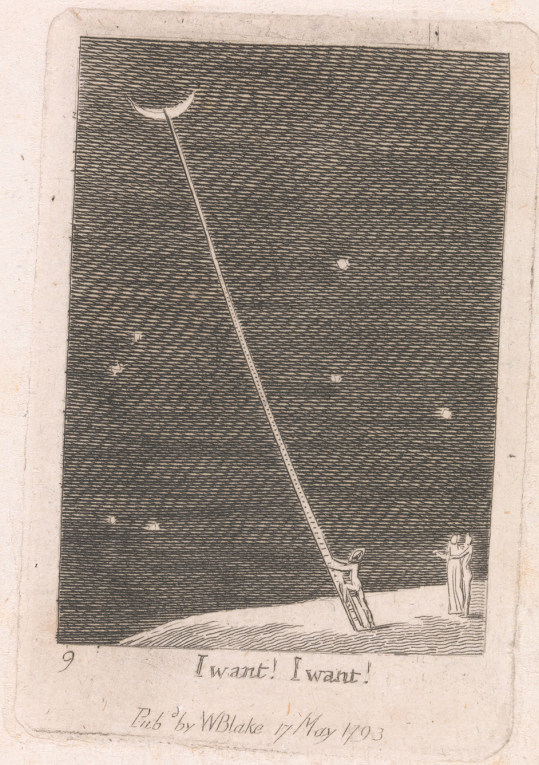
her tears, the infant Jesus's right hand reaching backward to bless her as he blesses the viewer with his left.

After these two windows into Blake, the main part of the exhibition told a story about his development and reputation as an artist. To me, it was somewhat confusing to have the illustrations for Blair's *Grave* (1808) alongside the early works of the 1780s, but the curators told me that the original heading for this section was to be "Establishing Blake's Reputation," which makes more sense. Reputation was always a fraught matter for Blake. *Poetical Sketches* was published not by Blake but by well-meaning friends, with copies distributed as gifts rather than sold commercially. *There Is No Natural Religion*, the first of Blake's own illuminated books acquired by Mellon (Noon 4), is thought to be his first attempt at illuminated printing and therefore a means to gain control over the artistic process from invention to execution to dissemination. In the context of the exhibition, it was a step on the way to *Songs* and the later illuminated books. The *Grave* illustrations are important for a different reason, and the sketch *An Angel with a Trumpet* allowed us to compare drawing to en-

graving (illus. 4 and 5). But in this case, Blake did not control the process: his publisher, Robert Cromek, engaged another artist, Luigi Schiavonetti, to execute the engravings, and Blake never forgave the slight. Ironically, as noted in the exhibition, these illustrations were a great commercial success and the most widely circulated of all Blake's works.

I appreciated the curators' choice to show entire pages in such a way that edges and stab marks were visible. Especially in the case of relief etching, the pages are three-dimensional objects, sculptural in detail. Seeing them in this way is an entirely different experience from viewing digital copies on *The Blake Archive* or a flat reproduction in a book. As the YCBA owns a disbound copy of *Songs of Innocence* and two copies of the combined *Songs*, one disbound and one bound, the curators were able to display the bound copy as Blake intended the work to be experienced, while also using the disbound copies to demonstrate the variations in printing and coloration. A reading room halfway through the exhibition provided additional focus on the book: high-quality facsimiles from the Trianon Press were available for visitors

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2. Blake, "I want! I want!," *For Children: The Gates of Paradise* copy E (1793). Leaf 13.7 × 11.4 cm. Yale Center for British Art, Paul Mellon Collection, B1978.43.1484V.

to handle and page through, while an inviting bench on the opposite wall offered a reading space for relevant children's books, such as *A Visit to William Blake's Inn* and *Where the Wild Things Are*. A table held a guide for the visually impaired, including Braille captions and tactile representations of the images. While it's easy to be caught up in the spiritual realm when considering Blake, these elements collaborated to ground the visitor in the physicality of the work.

In contrast to the 1997 show, this exhibition gave less prominence to the prophetic books, not showing any one in its entirety. Again, the emphasis was on the materiality of the works: one copy of *Urizen* (A) was bound, the other (C) disbound at some previous time, allowing us to experience the "bookness" of the work, so integral to its theme, but also to see multiple pages on the wall. For viewers already familiar with the manner in which *Urizen* deconstructs the idea of an authoritative text, the display reinforced that sense of indeterminacy in a different way from clicking through images in *The Blake Archive*. The selection of plates was thoughtful as well: the floating body of Urizen in a dark void (Bentley plate 12) contrasted with the image of him unfolding an illegible book (plate 5) that covers and even seems to take the place of his body. And the portrait of a child with a dog (plate 26) in evident distress—a scene disconnected from the poem's narrative—tied this work to the multiple versions of "The Little Boy Lost" displayed nearby.

An entire room was devoted to the watercolor illustrations to the poems of Thomas Gray, with the pages mounted in clear cases in the center of the room, so as to be viewed from both sides. Pinholes showed where the pages had once been bound together. This installation allowed the visitor not only to study these luminous works up close, but also to consider Blake's art as a mode of reading and interpretation. The intertextuality here is physical: as a placard explained, "Blake took apart a copy of the 1790 edition of *Poems by Mr. Gray* and inserted each of the printed pages into a rectangular cutout in the center of a larger sheet of watercolor paper. This created a double-sided frame around the texts, on which Blake drew his fantastical designs." With the display cases themselves frameless, Blake's own visual framing of the text appeared to float in space. The various representations of both cat and goldfish in the "Ode on the Death of a Favourite Cat" (illus. 6 and 7) express Blake's idea that nothing is ever simply one thing. Similarly, these pages become a double voicing of Gray the poet and Blake the artist, revising the text in the sense of re-seeing it.

While *Jerusalem* did not receive the pride of place it enjoyed in 1997, when all 100 plates were displayed, the selections this time emphasized Blake's dialogue with a range of cultural influences, such as the Druidic monument of Stonehenge (plate 70) and the Hindu pantheon (plate 53) (illus. 8). Nearby was a pencil sketch of *Albion Compelling the Four Zoas to Their Proper Tasks*, as well as a sketch for Blake's engraving of the *Laocoön* for Rees's *Cyclopaedia* (illus. 9). These images of masculine power, juxtaposed to the softer image of a couple embracing inside a flower (*Jerusalem*, plate 28 proof, illus. 10), helped to ground Blake's esoteric myth in more traditional iconography of the human body, history, and religion. The room also included a posthumous monochrome copy of *Jerusalem* from Yale's Beinecke Library, allowing viewers to appreciate both the linear intricacies and the stunning illuminations.

The final room focused on Blake's illustrations to Job and Dante and on his large engraving of "Chaucers Canterbury Pilgrims." Given how few of Blake's copperplates have survived, it was impressive to see the plate of this work, on loan from the Yale University Art Gallery (illus. 11). Blake used both engraving and etching to create the intricate contours of this plate. Again, there is a sense both of his tremendous skill and of his disenfranchisement as an artist, as Blake clashed again with Cromek over the supposed theft of his Chaucer idea when Cromek commissioned a work on the same theme from Thomas Stothard.²

Bringing the exhibit almost full circle, the figure captioned "What is Man!" from *For the Sexes: The Gates of Paradise* reprised and revised Blake's earlier *For Children: The Gates of Paradise*. Rather than the aspirant figure reaching for the stars, the child here is wrapped in a cocoon, with a caterpillar looming above. This copy of the work, though dated 1826 by the YCBA, was printed by Catherine Blake c. 1828–29 (*Blake Archive*), thus highlighting Catherine's role in the ongoing production of Blake's work.³ The final image in the exhibition, the miniature *Horse* tempera, intended to illustrate a ballad by William Hayley, offered another image of a mother and child, in this case the mother protecting her child from a horse (Hargraves), though the horse does not appear threatening in Blake's version (illus. 12). Compared with the icon of *The Virgin and Child*, where the figures are right up against the plane of the image, *Horse* recedes behind a heavy frame, and I couldn't help feeling that this was a more domesticated Blake (though no doubt my reaction was influenced by my knowledge of his fraught relationship with Hayley).

² See Ward.

³ Copies F-I of *For the Sexes* are printed on paper with an 1826 watermark, which may be the source of the date for copy G in Yale's online catalogue. Viscomi has established definitively that the copy was printed posthumously, by Catherine.



3. Blake, *The Virgin and Child* (c. 1810–20). 28.6 × 23.5 cm. Yale Center for British Art, Paul Mellon Collection, B1977.14.91.

In lieu of the traditional audio guide, the exhibition offered a more extensive and more durable audio component via the Arts+Culture app from Bloomberg Connects. Through this free app, visitors could access readings of poems and brief descriptions and explications of visual works by Yale faculty and students. (This material remains on the app after the exhibition's close.)

The book *Blake* by Elizabeth Wyckoff, released alongside the exhibition, does not bill itself as a catalogue, though it includes many images from the exhibition, as well as others from the collection. It is part of the YCBA Collection Series, along with volumes on Constable and Turner. In a recent interview, director Martina Droth described the book series as motivated by the same spirit as the Turner and Blake exhibitions, to "introduce, or in some instance, reintroduce audiences to the museum's incredible holdings" (Cummings). *Blake* is a beautiful volume, containing a comprehensive introduction to Blake's life and work by Wyckoff and culminating in an essay by Sarah T. Weston, "The Infernal Prism: Blake's Colors Unbound."

When I first began studying Blake in the late 1980s, my teachers tended to downplay his use of color. For one thing, before *The Blake Archive*, it was difficult to obtain good reproductions, and the variations among copies undermined any definitive claims about the meaning of this or that color. Despite Jean Hagstrum's assertion that "one simply cannot write off color as an irrelevant afterthought" (15), many critics followed Blake's own preference for linearity over the "Blots

& Blurs of Rubens & Titian" (Mitchell 445, quoting Blake, E 576). Moreover, I suspect that the role of Catherine Blake in hand coloring the plates played a part in the dismissal of color as a serious topic. Thankfully, color is now receiving the attention it deserves in the Blake world. Building on the ground broken by Joyce Townsend et al. in *William Blake: The Painter at Work*, Weston's article introduces readers to the dynamic interplay between text and design in Blake, showing how meaning can be destabilized both within a single plate and across various copies. She contextualizes his "visual experiments" (111) with the work of Newton and Goethe (among others), who both theorized and manufactured color in earlier decades. Using the YCBA holdings to exemplify Blake's work in watercolor and color printing, as well as the addition of gold in his later work, Weston ends by acknowledging the unfixeness of these images. Not only do they decay and fade with time, "they were built to be chimerical and fleeting" (121).

An exhibition too is a fleeting moment, but *Burning Bright* lingers in the mind long afterwards. By embracing rather than eliding the physical contingencies surrounding a work of art in time, this exhibition anchored Blake in the real world that his art so often reaches beyond. I trust that for the variety of audiences I saw passing through the galleries, from undergraduates to casual visitors to advanced scholars, the flame will continue to burn.



4. Blake, *An Angel with a Trumpet* (c. 1805?). 19.7 × 10.5 cm. Yale Center for British Art, Paul Mellon Collection, B1975.4.44.

THE
GRAVE,
A Poem.

Illustrated by twelve Etchings

Executed

BY

LOUIS SCHIAVONETTI,

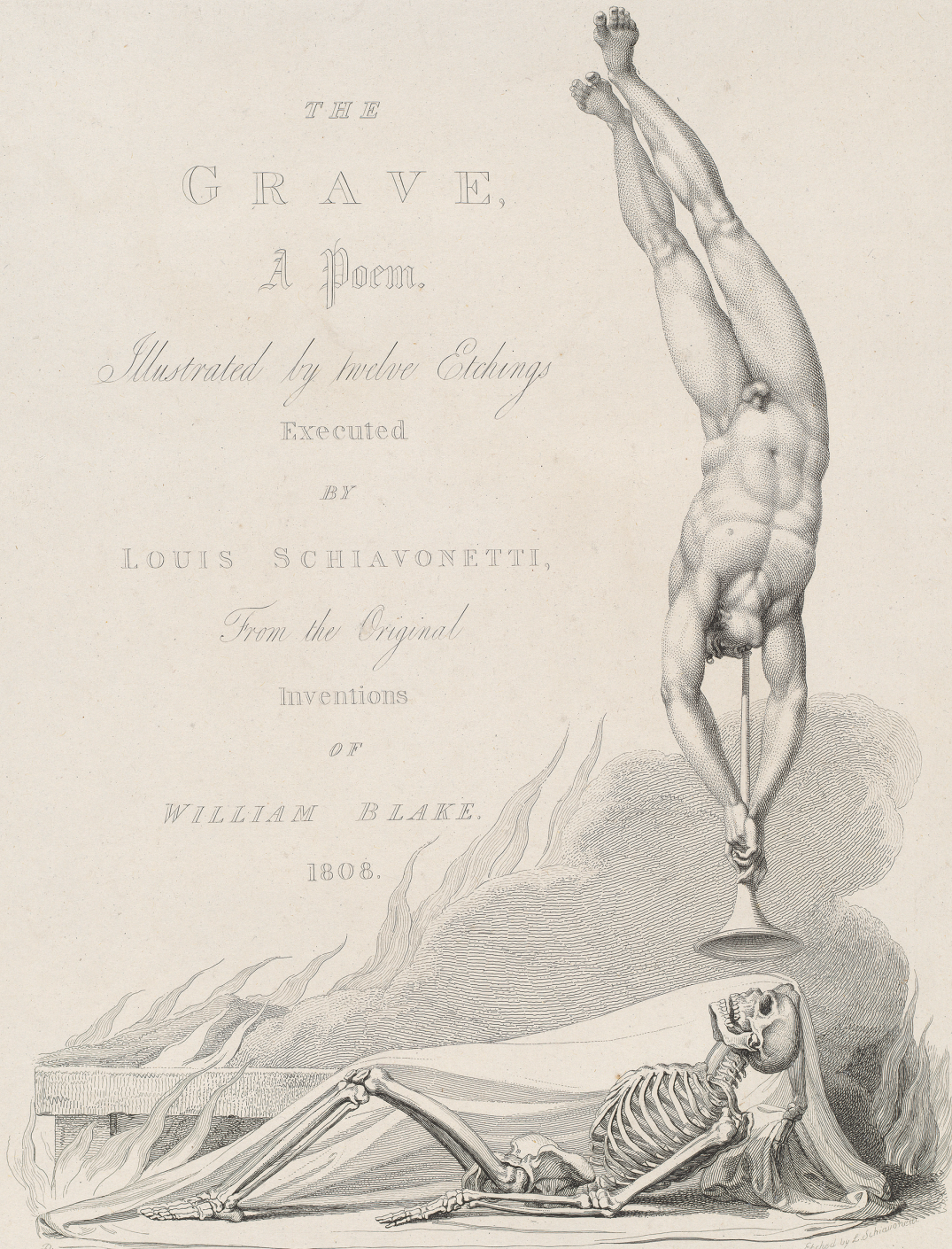
From the Original

Inventions

OF

WILLIAM BLAKE.

1808.



Drawn by W. Blake

London, Published by R. H. Green, N° 64, Newman Street.

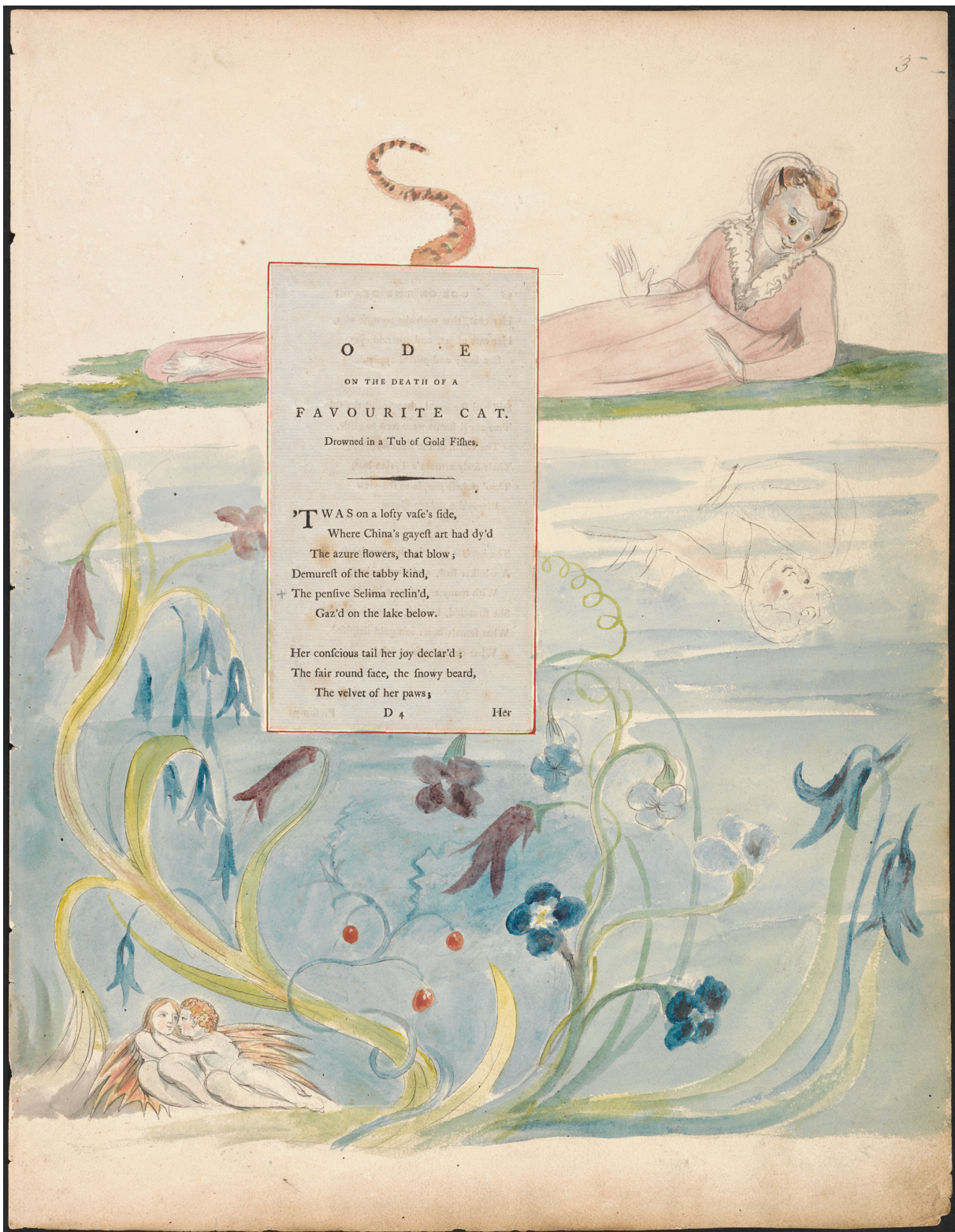
Etched by L. Schiavonetti

Proof Copy R. H. C. Price 5.5.0.

5. Robert Blair, *The Grave*, title page (1808). Plate 36.2 × 27.6 cm. Yale Center for British Art, Paul Mellon Collection, B1978.43.1472.



6. *Burning Bright* installation image. Photo credit: Robert Hixon.



O D E
ON THE DEATH OF A
FAVOURITE CAT.

Drowned in a Tub of Gold Fishes.

T WAS on a lofty vase's side,
Where China's gayest art had dy'd
The azure flowers, that blow;
Demurest of the tabby kind,
The penfive Selima reclin'd,
Gaz'd on the lake below.

Her conscious tail her joy declar'd;
The fair round face, the snowy beard,
The velvet of her paws;

D 4

Her

7. Blake, "Ode on the Death of a Favourite Cat," p. 3, *Illustrations to Gray's Poems* (c. 1797–98). Leaf 41.9 × 32.4 cm. Yale Center for British Art, Paul Mellon Collection, B1992.8.11(5).



8. *Burning Bright* installation image. Photo credit: Robert Hixon.



9. *Burning Bright* installation image. Photo credit: Robert Hixon.



10. Blake, *Jerusalem* plate 28, proof impression. Leaf 11.1 × 15.9 cm. Yale Center for British Art, Paul Mellon Collection, B1992.8.1(105).



11. *Burning Bright* installation image. Photo credit: Robert Hixon.



12. *Burning Bright* installation image. Photo credit: Robert Hixon.

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