
Adam and Eve Asleep: A Dissent

BY DAVID BINDMAN

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1 **I**N a Minute Particular in the last *Blake*, “Blake’s Unfinished Series of Illustrations to *Paradise Lost* for John Linnell: An Addition,” Martin Butlin published a new Blake Milton watercolor, *Adam and Eve Asleep*, and I would like to comment on it briefly. I should say that Martin Butlin was my PhD advisor, or *Doktorvater*, and remains a dear friend. He is, as everyone knows, a great Blake scholar who has sorted out Blake’s artistic oeuvre in a magnificent two-volume work, *The Paintings and Drawings of William Blake*. All this is to say that it pains me greatly to dissent from his conclusions about the watercolor, which I do not believe to be in Blake’s hand.

Why it might not be by Blake

- 2 It is close in drawing if not in coloring to the Boston watercolor of *Adam and Eve Asleep*, but so close in handling that it suggests that it was meticulously copied from an original work. The color is considerably brighter and fresher than the Boston version, which is much faded by light, but in my view the coloring is not compatible with Blake’s new free technique of the 1820s, which shows a remarkable sensitivity to light, both divine and natural.
- 3 Then there is the drawing of the archangel’s head, which is disturbingly elongated and lacking expression. This is not due to carelessness, to which Blake was occasionally prone; it is more than just loose drawing, for it loses the archangel’s sympathy for the earthly couple, which is so important to the meaning of the work, and it is not comparable to the drawing in the three 1820s *Paradise Lost* watercolors.
- 4 I am also disturbed by the complete lack of any trace of a provenance—it evidently turned up in a country sale. There is no prior history before its appearance in the sale or any connection to the Linnell family. This is in itself unusual;

thanks to the list by the Rossetti brothers in Gilchrist’s life, a high proportion of Blake’s drawings—even small scraps—are recorded by the middle of Victoria’s reign.

What might it be?

- 5 One hypothesis that would help to answer my objections is that John Linnell decided to add to the three watercolors that Blake made for the series and copied the Boston watercolor when it belonged to Thomas Butts, or alternatively worked up in watercolor an outline of the composition that Blake had made himself, though there are no traces of such an underdrawing. But there is not a jot of evidence that anything like that happened; in any case, it is unlikely that Linnell would have copied Blake’s original so meticulously, though one of his children might have.

Who did it?

- 6 At the moment we can only speculate that it is by an unknown Victorian, just possibly a member of the Linnell family, or by a later artist. There is also the possibility that it is a deliberate fake by a very clever forger who decided to produce something that might have existed, knew the story of the three Milton watercolors, and found some paper of the period. This might seem far fetched, but elaborately calculated fakes do exist, as in the case of the recent Galileo scam, when a forger replicated a whole seventeenth-century illustrated book and fooled the great expert in the field.