
William Blake: The Artist (Tate Britain,
11 September 2019–2 February 2020)
An Interview with Martin Myrone

BY LUISA CALÈ

LUISA CALÈ (l.cale@bbk.ac.uk), Birkbeck, University of London, works on practices of reading, viewing, and collecting in the Romantic period. Her publications include *Fuseli's Milton Gallery: "Turning Readers into Spectators"*; co-edited volumes on *Dante on View: The Reception of Dante in the Visual and Performing Arts and Illustrations, Optics and Objects in Nineteenth-Century Literary and Visual Cultures*; and special issues on "The Disorder of Things" (*Eighteenth-Century Studies*, 2011), "The Nineteenth-Century Digital Archive" (*19: Interdisciplinary Studies in the Long Nineteenth Century*, 2015), and "Literature and Sculpture at the *Fin de Siècle*" (*Word and Image*, 2018). Her current project, entitled *The Book Unbound*, explores practices of collecting and dismantling the book, with chapters on Walpole, Blake, and Dickens. She is also the exhibitions editor for *Blake*.

MARTIN MYRONE (martin.myrone@tate.org.uk) is lead curator, pre-1800 British art, at Tate Britain, London. He was curator of the exhibition *Gothic Nightmares: Fuseli, Blake, and the Romantic Imagination* (Tate Britain, 2006) and is author of *The Blake Book* (London: Tate Publishing, 2007). His article "William Blake as a Student of the Royal Academy: A Prosopographical Perspective" appeared in *Blake* 51.2 (fall 2017).

IN this interview Martin Myrone discusses the upcoming retrospective *William Blake: The Artist*, which opens at Tate Britain on 11 September.

[Editors' note: Luisa Calè wrote the notes below. The interview has been minimally edited for style.]

What is the driving idea behind the exhibition?

Blake is a major figure for Tate, and his name always figures in the list of possible projects under consideration as one of the relatively few historical British artists whose name is familiar to the large and diverse public we seek to address. The first modern Blake exhibition in a public gallery in the UK was at Tate, in 1913, and the subsequent shows in 1947, 1978, and 2000–01, together with the long-term (almost "permanent") smaller displays of works here for more than a century, mean there is a tremendous institutional heritage.¹ The last major Blake show at Tate was in 2000–01, headed up by the late Robin Hamlyn and by Michael Phillips; depending on your perspective this is either not long ago or an entire lifetime ago! But the time elapsed since then represents the sort of historical interval that will allow a new generation to see Blake in such depth for the first time, as well as a chance for people who saw the last show to see his work all over again and think about different aspects of his art.

How will you materialize Blake's works in the exhibition space? How do your choices relate to previous Blake exhibitions?

This needs to be something of a "Ronseal" exhibition—just like that range of DIY and garden products, it "does exactly what it says on the tin." It sets out to provide a comprehensive overview of the artist, with over 300 exhibits covering the full range of his output. There are limitations set variously by the gallery space, the reality of economic and institutional resources, and because there are works not available for loan for one reason or another—besides the aesthetic and curatorial decisions about making an exhibition legible and comfortable to experience. That said, there are curatorial emphases involved here. One is on Blake as a visual artist, a maker of paintings and prints as well as a poet; another is moving away to some degree from the more technical discussions of printmaking and symbolism that have come to the fore so eloquently in some recent shows, notably those involving Phillips at Tate and at the Ashmolean.² These have really put the processes of printmaking to the fore and achieved so much in raising aware-

1. For an analysis of Blake's twentieth-century exhibition history, see Martin Myrone, "Blake in Exhibition and on Display, 1904–2014," *Visual Culture in Britain* 19.3 (2018): 365–79; on the 1978 and 2000–01 exhibitions, see David Bindman, "William Blake—An Exhibition and a Book," *Burlington Magazine* 120.903 (June 1978): 418–19, 421; "William Blake: London and New York," *Burlington Magazine* 143.1176 (March 2001): 172–74.

2. William Blake: Apprentice and Master, Ashmolean Museum, Oxford, 4 December 2014–1 March 2015; for a review of the exhibition and catalogue, see Susan Matthews, *Blake* 50.1 (summer 2016).

ness of the materiality of Blake's prints, so the new show is a chance to change direction a bit. Nor are we dealing with the legacy and impact of Blake in the exhibition itself. This has been covered in so many recent publications and events, as well as displays and exhibitions, and we'll be covering the Ancients and Neo-Romantics in a special display in the main gallery at the same time as the Blake exhibition. To some extent the resulting show here involves going back to the presentation of Blake seen in the great show at Tate of 1978, curated by Martin Butlin, showing Blake as an "Old Master" and as a visual artist.

What might strike a new note is our interest in the encounter with the objects. Given how readily available Blake is, or seems to be, now—through facsimile and reproduction, and most of all digitally, through the amazing work of the *Blake Archive*—we need to emphasize the importance of seeing the works "in the flesh." The show will also have a strong biographical angle. This isn't necessarily new in itself—and obviously fits into more than a half-century of historicist interpretation of Blake—but there are aspects of his career that will be brought to the fore. There are basic questions about how Blake spent his days—the time that he was able to dedicate to painting or writing poetry, to creating and printing his own works. There is the role played by his supporters—meaning his patrons, like Thomas Butts and William Hayley—and we're trying to consider the rather complex view of Blake's relationship with patrons set out by Sarah Haggarty's *Blake's Gifts* (2010). Then there is also the question of Catherine Blake, and her role as a creative partner. While visitors will, we hope, be absorbed by Blake's works and his vision, we will also want them to reflect a bit on the material and social conditions necessary for his extraordinary work. There will be moments, we hope, when the idea of Blake as the free-wheeling visionary, the limitlessly creative artist, will be undercut or put into a rather jarring context. Given the emphasis in contemporary culture being put on "creativity" and "self-expression," there is a bit of work to be done in adjusting popular assumptions about Blake, bringing him "down to earth" in some ways.

Blake exhibited his work above his brother's hosiery shop in 1809 and discussed it in his *Descriptive Catalogue*. How do you engage with Blake's curatorial choices?

The 1809 exhibition plays a really crucial role in the larger narratives we're setting out in the show—about Blake's focus on visual art, his ambitions to be a public artist.³ The subject of the one-man show has come back into focus with

3. An edition of Blake's *Descriptive Catalogue* was published in conjunction with the 2009 exhibition: *William Blake: Seen in My Visions*:

several works of scholarship that we are able to build on—Troy Patenaude's terrific archival work on the spaces of the exhibition⁴ and interpretative work by Susan Matthews and David Fallon, for instance. If we are intending the show to give people a chance to encounter Blake in a very immediate, material way, that has meant thinking about how Blake's works were encountered historically. We can suggest the importance of the context of the exhibitions at the Royal Academy and the watercolor show of 1812, Butts's house, and Hayley's Eartham,⁵ but it is the 1809 exhibition that provides a chance to tackle that topic in a direct and manageable way in the context of our exhibition spaces. At the same time, notwithstanding the various interpretations set forth in recent scholarship, we don't know what order the paintings were hung in, how deliberate was the sequencing, and the degree to which any visitor would have felt able to interpret one work in connection with the next.

How will you reconstruct the Georgian interior within the space of the gallery's exhibition rooms? How will this intervention differ from the 2009 reconstruction?

We brought all but one of the surviving works back together in 2009,⁶ but did not on that occasion set out to re-create the space. This time, in 2019–20, the focus will be on re-creating the space, creating an immersive environment where visitors will encounter Blake's works as they would have been seen. The re-creation of historic interiors is a major museological topic in its own right, of course, and we don't have the evidence for making a full "archaeological" reconstruction, with furniture and household items and such like. But we know enough of the proportions of the room, the nature of middle-class interiors of the time, to provide an immersive experience that will, we hope, be quite disarming. We're so used to seeing Blake's works in a digital or print environment, or in the clinical context of a modern gallery space, it will be something new to see them in a modest domestic interior.

A Descriptive Catalogue of Pictures, ed. Martin Myrone (London: Tate Publishing, 2009).

4. Troy R. C. Patenaude, "'The glory of a Nation': Recovering William Blake's 1809 Exhibition," *British Art Journal* 4.1 (2003): 52–63.

5. Royal Academy exhibition catalogues can be accessed online at <<https://chronicle250.com>>; on the 1812 Associated Painters in Water-Colours show, see Robert N. Essick, "Blake's 1812 Exhibition," *Blake* 27.2 (fall 1993): 36–42; on Butts's house, see Joseph Viscomi, "A 'Green House' for Butts? New Information on Thomas Butts, His Residences, and Family," *Blake* 30.1 (summer 1996): 4–21.

6. William Blake's 1809 Exhibition, Room 8, Tate Britain, 20 April–4 October 2009, reviewed by Alexander Gourlay in *Blake* 43.3 (winter 2009–10): 96–100. For discussions of the 1809 exhibition, see essays by David Blayney Brown and Martin Myrone, Susan Matthews, Philippa Simpson, and Konstantinos Stefanis in *Tate Papers* 14 (2010).

The 1809 exhibition raises the question of scale in Blake's work, giving a tangible sense of the contradiction between domestic space and public works, miniatures and gigantic forms. How will you capture this tension in the exhibition?

There is a striking tension between Blake's sense of pictorial ambition and what he was actually able to achieve. This is a really important question for the exhibition as a whole, as well as for Blake studies more generally. There is, after all, a way of looking at the illuminated books that would consider them not as Blake's central, heroic achievement, but as a kind of compromise or retreat. A whole section of the exhibition will deal with this theme, looking at the period 1808–12. This is such a turbulent time in Blake's life, seeing the comparative critical and professional high point of *The Grave*, then the bitter disappointment of the 1809 show and his final retreat from public exhibitions, after 1812. There will be reminders of Blake's ambitions to paint on a large scale. We will want to register the absence of *The Ancient Britons* and relate the 1809 exhibition to his stated ambitions as a fresco painter. Morton Paley has drawn attention, usefully, to the idea of "Portable Fresco,"⁷ and there is quite a lot to be achieved simply in telling visitors to the show that what they see on the walls might properly be considered as only sketches or models for wall paintings that were never realized. Blake's use of the term "fresco" to describe his paintings, watercolors, and even colored prints needs to be emphasized. It suggests these media might be interchangeable to a degree, but there are specific physical qualities and formal ambitions at stake as well. When Blake talked about fresco, he was evoking large-scale paintings that were more like installations than commodities, public property rather than private. "Portable Fresco" is a paradoxical term, involving a degree of compromise. For a lot of people this will be new information.

Gothic Nightmares and John Martin: Apocalypse have reinterpreted painting within a wider visual field, re-creating historical and contemporary ways of seeing through experiments with moving images and visual technologies. Are you planning digital experiments for Blake 2019–20?

There are over 300 exhibits in the show, many arranged in series, and as we all know any single print or drawing could be subjected to lengthy, complex interpretation! And with Blake, there's a lot to read as well as look at, making this unlike most art shows. Accordingly, we are looking to present the works in a pretty straightforward way on the whole,

7. Morton D. Paley, "William Blake's 'Portable Fresco,'" *European Romantic Review* 24.3 (2013): 271–77.

giving as much space as we can so that visitors can dwell and interpret. We are not looking to crowd out the artwork with digital technology. But there will be a moment in the show, adjacent to the 1809 exhibition, where we will be projecting Blake's images on the scale he envisaged. Reproductions of Blake's images will be projected to a cinematic scale. We have tested this out, and it is striking that the images in question—*The Spiritual Form of Nelson* and of *Pitt*—work remarkably well in this large size. They really do "read" as fresco paintings. Obviously, we don't have a gallery space 100 feet high, but there will be the chance to get a feeling for these images on a massive scale and imagine what it would have looked like if, say, Blake had had his chance in St. Paul's or Westminster Abbey.

Samuel Palmer asked Blake "how he would like to paint on glass, for the great west window [of Westminster Abbey], his 'Sons of God shouting for Joy,' from his designs in the *Job*. He said, after a pause, 'I could do it!' kindling at the thought."⁸ Will your digital interventions explore how his designs might be translated into the medium of stained glass, rendering its luminosity, and expanded to the monumental scale of Westminster Abbey?

We won't really know how these projected images will read until we install the exhibition. But it is already clear from our tests that the luminosity of the paintings, generally obscured in the actual paintings, will really come through with this staging. And the formality of many of these images, particularly in symmetry and in their repetition and pattern-making, reads differently on a large scale. It may be that the eccentricity of Blake's images is rather exaggerated by their diminution, their realization on such a small scale. They might begin to make sense more when projected at a large size.

How has the role of Blake exhibitions changed since the *Blake Archive* has been making digital facsimiles of Blake's works available online?

The archive has done such an amazing job in making Blake accessible, and we feel (with some relief!) that we're not obliged to try to explain or document every plate of every illuminated book within the exhibition or catalogue. That work has been done already, and so much better, in digital form. But that level of accessibility clears the way for going

8. Alexander Gilchrist, *Life of William Blake*, "Pictor Ignotus," 2 vols. (London: Macmillan, 1863) 1: 303, referring to *Illustrations of the Book of Job*, plate numbered 14; on a theatrical experiment transposing Blake's plate onto a Gothic window, see Detlef Dörrbecker, "Job in Frankfurt Schauspielhaus," *Blake* 11.4 (spring 1978): 298; see also Paley, "William Blake's 'Portable Fresco'" 273.

back to Blake's works as physical things, getting a sense of the actual size, the surface textures and colors, and, crucially, the different formats that Blake worked with. It is perhaps the case that digital reproduction enhances rather than devalues the original?

Many Blake books circulated in unbound form, stitched into wrappers so they could be hung or bound; they were disbound at various stages, including when they were reproduced in facsimile, for reasons of preservation, or to facilitate loans to exhibitions. The last Tate Blake retrospective in 2000–01 showed all 100 plates of *Jerusalem*, while a disbound copy of *Europe* was on display in the Blake exhibitions at the Petit Palais in Paris in 2009 and at the Ashmolean in Oxford in 2014–15.⁹ Can you com-

ment on the experience of the book on view and the aesthetics of the book as a series of prints hanging one beside the other on the wall or as a bound object in a glass case?

Lots of people remember the rather overwhelming experience of seeing all 100 plates of *Jerusalem* laid out around the final room of the 2000–01 Tate show. That really was a once-in-a-lifetime experience, and we are not looking to recreate it again in 2019. Looking back at installation shots of the previous Tate show, there was a huge amount going on, it was very busy, visually, and while it was enormously satisfying in many ways it was perhaps also the case that something got lost (along the lines of not seeing the forest for the trees). Among other things, the presentation of un-

9. *Europe* copy B (University of Glasgow, Special Collections Department, RX 132) was bound around 1821 with *America* copy G and *Jerusalem* copy B and disbound in 1966; see the *Blake Archive*. On William Blake: Le Génie visionnaire du romantisme anglais, guest cu-

rated by Michael Phillips with Daniel Marchesseau at the Petit Palais, Musée des Beaux-Arts de la Ville de Paris, 2 April–28 June 2009, see the reviews by Grant F. Scott in *Blake* 43.2 (fall 2009) and Meredith Davis in *CAA.Reviews* (26 August 2009).



All images of the 2000–01 Tate exhibition courtesy of Charles Marsden-Smedley.



bound copies of the illuminated books serves to suggest they are more like print series than books—you risk losing the “bookishness” of the books. Even since 2000 this is something we’ve become more alert to: we’re all thinking a bit more about the immediate context of encountering Blake’s books, of how they are material objects held in a hand or put on a desk before you, how the context of a library or print collection is quite unlike the modern gallery setting. A modern art exhibition can only start to suggest those sorts of environments and experiences, given all that is necessary in terms of security and ensuring the preservation of the objects, but we hope that there will be moments when the visitor gets a real sense of the *bookishness* of the books.

How are you going to present the illuminated books?

We are going for a “mixed parliament” approach this time round. We certainly don’t feel that we need to show every plate of every book, given how readily accessible these are digitally and through facsimiles. We are showing the major illuminated books in bound form, and in most cases in bindings that are contemporary to Blake or at least very early—including copies from the Bodleian, Fitzwilliam, Library of Congress, and Yale Center for British Art. But we are also showing a full set of *America a Prophecy* and the colored copy of *Jerusalem* (25 plates) from a private collection, as well as a very strong group of individual plates from the books of designs. So we are laying out full series of plates in a couple of instances, but combining this with individually printed designs and with a pretty empathic sense of the books as books.

How do you see the difference between books of designs and illuminated books in Blake’s corpus?

Having works from both the books of designs and the illuminated books together in the show should help expose the relationship between them as complex and worth thinking about a bit more. It is important to register Blake’s willingness to separate at least some of his images from their textual context, although this was something he became more willing to do, arguably. The timing of these printings is important, and may itself suggest that the charged political context of the 1790s gave way to a more aestheticized interest in his works. But we have to leave this as an open question.

There’s still a bit of work to be done around the bibliographic history of the books of designs, isn’t there? I’m not sure that we’ve yet got a full appreciation or understanding of how prints and drawings were being viewed and handled in Blake’s times, let alone Blake’s own works in their specificity. And as well as the difference or lack of difference between the books of designs and the illuminated books,

there’s also the difference or lack of difference between these and the watercolors that were clearly being deployed as “extra-illustrations” in some instances (not just with the Young and Gray series, but with the Shakespeare designs for Thomas and, surely, the Butts biblical watercolors). The way that Blake’s works have been divided up historically between library contexts and art museums probably doesn’t help us with this issue, either.

Blake argued that illuminated printing is “a method of Printing which combines the Painter and the Poet.” How does your exhibition rearticulate Blake’s practice?

Morris Eaves warned against separating aspects of Blake’s output, the temptation to disaggregate his work and lose, therefore, a sense of the tension between words and images.¹⁰ It is clearly the case that much of the most searching Blake scholarship of the 1980s and 1990s explores precisely the intertwining or intermixing of text and image. But there are elements of something like disaggregation at work in more recent accounts of Blake. It is striking to read Nicholas Shrimpton introducing his new edition of Blake’s poems (Oxford University Press, 2019) and note that Blake was, after all, primarily a visual artist and that “involvement in literature was, by comparison, occasional and, in his own view, probably of secondary importance.” Shrimpton of course emphasizes that whatever Blake’s feelings and however he actually organized his day, his writings make him a towering presence in the history of literature, but there’s clearly scope to revisit the other side of the equation—Blake as a visual artist—beyond the illuminated books. This has a number of practical repercussions for the show, in terms of the presentation of materials and the relative weight of numbers of different media. But it also helps shape the narrative of the exhibition. We open the show not with his training as an engraver, nor with his flourishing as a poet-printmaker in the 1790s, but with the Royal Academy and the aspirations toward history painting that the institution fostered.

How does “Blake as a visual artist” differ from the artisanal printmaker presented by Michael Phillips in *William Blake: Apprentice and Master at the Ashmolean in 2014–15*? And from the Old Master offered by Martin Butlin in 1978? How do you tell this story through the curatorial arrangement of works in the Tate galleries?

As someone who had a supporting role on the 2000–01 Blake show, it is fascinating to recollect the process of

10. Morris Eaves, “Introduction: To Paradise the Hard Way,” *The Cambridge Companion to William Blake*, ed. Eaves (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003) 1–16.

putting that together and look at the old installation shots of the show. It was a massively ambitious, complex project, with over 500 individual exhibits. There were a number of different perspectives in play: as David Bindman noted in his review, “It is hard to work out who had overall responsibility for the exhibition or the catalogue” (*Burlington Magazine*, March 2001). The results were rich and memorable, and the show did an amazing job of creating a more complex view of Blake. But the results were also perhaps rather overwhelming. We don’t have the same material means at our disposal to do what we did then, and loans are harder to secure now than they were then—partly because Blake’s works have been exposed that much more often. Museums have strict rules about the extent to which a work on paper can be exposed, and the light levels it can be shown under. Different collections work in slightly different ways, but if an individual work is shown in this exhibition, it may not be shown again for a period. On the other hand, it is the case that there are works that can’t be shown in our exhibition because they have been exposed too much recently. This is a big, practical factor in putting together any show featuring lots of works on paper, but the same issues apply to Blake’s temperas, as they too are vulnerable to light. In some regards we are going back to the Blake seen in the 1978 show, emphasizing him as a painter and maker of images. We will, hopefully, offer a manageable, streamlined presentation of Blake that

will make his work more visually immediate and accessible, without in any way oversimplifying. We are not, surely, in a position to historicize our own shifting views very fully. But we have to wonder whether the emphasis on complexity and ambiguity within the *meanings* of Blake’s works, which characterized the “Blake industry” and the 2000–01 show, is yielding to a more straightforward reading of his work and a greater emphasis on the contradictions and ambiguities of his working life, understood in the context of the London art world of his time. It feels timely to be thinking about Blake’s creative labor, his education and access to the art world, his dependence on Catherine and on his family, rather than about the psychoanalytic resonances of his symbolism, or the precise significance of an individual comma (or is it a full stop?). Meanwhile, the optimistic interpretation of Blake as a proto-feminist, oppositional radical has given way to a more nuanced sense of his social identity, emotional investments, and political commitments. There’s been a kind of wish-fulfillment at work in how Blake has been interpreted. There’s scope for reflecting on that as well. It’s not about losing sight of Blake as a heroic, oppositional figure—he so clearly was and has been—but it is about getting a more realistic grasp on who he was, his place in history and art history, and why his art and life remain so enduringly relevant.

Richard Martin, the curator of public programs at Tate Modern and Tate Britain, has kindly provided a list of related events. He emphasizes that more contributors will be added as plans develop; please keep an eye on <<https://www.tate.org.uk/whats-on/tate-britain/exhibition/william-blake-artist>> for the latest details.

William Blake: A Live Literature Celebration

Friday, 20 September 2019, 18.30-20.00; Private view 20.00-21.00

Clore Auditorium, Tate Britain

A unique immersive performance bringing together music, dance, spoken word, and visual imagery. Devised and directed by Valerie Doulton and performed by the Live Literature Company. Followed by an optional private view of the exhibition.

The Poetry of London

Thursday, 24 October 2019, 18.30-20.00

Clore Auditorium, Tate Britain

A panel discussion exploring how London has inspired poets, and how poets have reimagined London—from Blake to the present day. Contributors include poet Chris McCabe and artist Sophie Herxheimer, co-authors of *The Practical Visionary*.

Audio Description Tour: William Blake

Monday, 18 November 2019, 10.30-12.00

In the exhibition, Tate Britain

Keynote: William Blake and the Idea of the Artist

Thursday, 28 November 2019, 18.30–20.00

Clore Auditorium, Tate Britain

Conference: William Blake and the Idea of the Artist

Friday, 29 November 2019, 10.00–18.00

Paul Mellon Centre for Studies in British Art

A daylong exploration of the economy of artistic labor and the politics of creativity.

William Blake: Tour

Friday, 24 January 2020, 18.30-20.30

In the exhibition, Tate Britain

An exhibition tour led by Rev. Dr. Ayla Lepine.

Blake Now

Friday, 31 January 2020, 18.30-20.00; Private view 20.00-21.00

Clore Auditorium, Tate Britain

A panel discussion exploring contemporary perspectives on Blake and his legacy. Followed by an optional private view of the exhibition.