



Primary Blake installation, Tate Britain, 2013: engravings and color prints. Photograph courtesy of Tate Britain.

R E V I E W

Tate Britain's New Blake Room

Reviewed by Morton D. Paley

MORTON PALEY (mpaley@berkeley.edu) is co-editing *The Reception of William Blake in Europe*, to be published by Bloomsbury in 2016. He is continuing his research on the art of George Romney.

1 DURING my visits to what is now called Tate Britain over a period of many years, I have encountered the art of William Blake presented in a number of ways.¹ At

1. Some of the Tate's Blake installations over the years are illustrated in Joyce H. Townsend, Robin Hamlyn, and John Anderson, "The Presentation of Blake's Paintings," *William Blake: The Painter at Work*, ed. Joyce H. Townsend (London: Tate Publishing, 2003) 170-74, figs. 139-43.

first, in 1966, I found it on the main floor. I knew that it had previously been displayed in an octagonal room with mosaic floor designs (derived from *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*) by Boris Anrep, but that was before my time. Later, a selection of Blake's works was moved to a downstairs gallery that had been constructed for them. Not everyone was happy with this. "They moved Blake to the basement," Sir Geoffrey Keynes said. Still later, a striking venue was constructed downstairs: a darkened, air-conditioned room with illuminated display cases. I thought of it as the Aquarium, because the Blakes seemed like tropical fish on display there. That lasted for about ten years. Then Blake was upstairs again until, on 14 May 2013, a new exhibition room was opened. Its location is conceived as part of the overall rehang that Tate Britain has named the "Walk through British Art."

2 The new Blake room or rooms, as there are two, can be hard to find, but if you enter through the Turner gallery and go to room 17, you'll see a sign pointing to the staircase that leads to them. Once there, you are in a pleasantly lit space, which from May to October 2013 featured an exhibition on Blake and landscape created by Hayley Flynn, a doctoral candidate at the University of Nottingham. There were, as

one would expect, few pure landscapes exhibited here, two in all, one being the unfinished *Landscape near Felpham*, which was evidently drawn from a boat, as it views Hayley's Turret House and Felpham's old mill from the water. The other was the rather puzzling *A Garden Path, Eartham* (British Museum), which depicts a fairly regular arrangement of young trees. This drawing does not seem to be preparatory to something else, yet does not, remarkably for Blake, generate interest in itself. The major landscapes here were visionary backgrounds for human-centered subjects. Showing a group of Blake's works with this in mind makes us more aware of how he followed the practice of the Italian Renaissance painters he so admired.

- 3 Most of Blake's landscapes are the products of his own imagination, as those in *The Descent of Man into the Vale of Death* (British Museum) and *The Third Temptation* (Victoria and Albert Museum). The Dante illustration *The Ascent of the Mount of Purgatory* was hung beside Turner's *The Schöllenen Gorge from the Devil's Bridge*, which Flynn suggested as a source for it. Turner's painting dates from 1802, but another version, displaying a similar inverted corkscrew-like ascending path, was exhibited in 1815. Whether Blake was influenced by it, or even saw it, must remain a matter of

speculation. Other aspects of landscape were shown in the pastoral idealizations of Virgil and the *paysages moralisés* of Job.

- 4 A section termed Blake's Landscape Legacy began with Blake's young followers Samuel Palmer, George Richmond, and Edward Calvert, who were so affected by Blake's sense of visionary landscape. I was especially grateful for the seldom-seen Palmer drawing *The Harvest Moon*, supplemented by a jotting from an 1824 sketchbook: "Considering Dulwich as the gate into the world of vision one must try behind the hills to bring up a mystic glimmer like that which lights our dreams. And those same hills, (hard task) should give us promise that the country behind them is Paradise." Two etchings by Graham Sutherland and John Craxton's richly distorted revision of Palmer, *Dreamer in Landscape*, continued this tradition. On the whole, the exhibition theme was an interesting one, prompting the viewer to reflect on how necessary background often was to Blake, in contrast, say, to Flaxman, who illustrated the *Divine Comedy* without any.
- 5 The main presentation, devised by Martin Myrone, is not intended as a fixed entity; the Tate's online announcement



Primary Blake installation, Tate Britain, 2013: color prints, watercolors, and temperas. Photograph courtesy of Tate Britain.

says, “This room provides a showcase for a changing selection of Blake works from Tate’s collection.” Some of the forty plus pictures on display could hardly have been omitted—*The Spiritual Form of Nelson*, for example, and *Newton*—and I will resist the reviewer’s fatal temptation to say what better choices he or she could have made. As Tate Britain counts 392 Blake items in its possession, this would not be hard to do, but in fact the selection is a very representative one, including the early and the late, the commercial and the visionary, and examples of different media. In one respect it may strive too hard to be representative: as the Tate does not own any original illuminated books, three plates from posthumous pulls are on display. As an idea of Blake’s extraordinary combinations of text and image should surely be given, why not borrow a couple of prime examples from the British Museum’s enormous collection? There would be little point in my naming the pictures displayed, as images of all of them are available at <http://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks?ap=1&wp=1&wv=grid&rid=8578>.

- 6 The particular blue shades chosen for the carpet and walls not only have a soothing effect but also appear to bring out some details in the pictures that I could not remember having noticed before—some of the figures under the right arm of *The Spiritual Form of Pitt*, for example. I also sensed a finer perception of the textured reticulations of *Newton*. There is something about the room itself that encourages peaceful contemplation; I heard little conversation there, and that was muted. It will be interesting to see what the next group of works chosen for exhibition will be like.

Note:

Here is a timeline of William Blake at the Tate, taken from <http://www.tate.org.uk/whats-on/tate-britain/display/william-blake-display/william-blake-william-blake-tate-timeline>. Accessed 30 June 2013, slightly modified, and with some additions by Alexander Gourlay.

1897

What is now Tate Britain is founded as the National Gallery of British Art.

1911

Blake’s works are on display in gallery 1 along with other early nineteenth-century artists.

1913 October–December

A major loan exhibition of Blake is held, the first at a public gallery. A reduced version tours to Manchester, Nottingham, and Edinburgh.

1914

Blake’s works are shown in a separate gallery together with work by the sculptor and painter Alfred Stevens (1817–75).

(*The Spiritual Form of Nelson Guiding Leviathan* is purchased.)

1920

Blake and Earlier Watercolours is on display in [octagonal] gallery 2. This includes a loan of works from artist and collector W. Graham Robertson. Robertson acquired many of the works in his collection from the family of Thomas Butts, Blake’s friend and patron.

1923

A mosaic floor by Boris Anrep based on Blake’s Proverbs of Hell from *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* is added to gallery 2. This can still be seen today. Gallery 2 becomes dedicated to showing works by Blake. Blake’s works remain on display here until 1967.

1932

The National Gallery of British Art is renamed the Tate Gallery.

1939

Nine of Blake’s large color prints are presented to the Tate by Robertson.

1947 August–September

William Blake (1757–1827) is held at the Tate. Out of 66 works in the exhibition, 25 are Tate owned and 45 are from the collection of Robertson. The show also appears in Paris, Antwerp, and Zurich.

1949

A tenth large color print and watercolors and temperas including *The Ghost of a Flea* are bequeathed by Robertson’s estate.

1957

Martin Butlin’s *William Blake (1757–1827): A Catalogue of the Works of William Blake in the Tate Gallery* is published. Revised editions are published in 1971, 1978, and 1990.

1967

Gallery 2, with Anrep’s Blake mosaic floor, is used for displaying Hogarth and his contemporaries. In the following years works by Blake are displayed in other rooms in the main gallery.

1978 March–May

William Blake, a comprehensive loan exhibition, is held.

1979

Blake and His Followers display is shown in gallery 7 until 1990.

1998

A Blake display returns to gallery 2 until 2000.

2000

The Tate Gallery is re-renamed Tate Britain.

2000 November–February 2001

A major exhibition, William Blake, is held at Tate Britain, and tours to the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.

2003–04

William Blake: The Painter at Work, a display and accompanying book, present technical research into Blake's painting techniques.

2009

A display devoted to Blake's solo exhibition two hundred years earlier in May 1809 reunites nine of the surviving works.

2009

Eight color relief etchings with handwritten inscriptions are purchased by the Tate.

2011–12

The Blake collection is on tour to Moscow and Madrid.

2013

A designated Blake room opens once again at Tate Britain.