

# William Blake Apprentice and Master

4 December 2014 - 1 March 2015



This exhibition focuses on the extraordinary life and work of William Blake (1757 – 1827), printmaker, painter and revolutionary poet. It is arranged across three rooms that focus on different periods of his life:

- the first room explores Blake's education and apprenticeship
- the second room examines the revolutionary printing technique he developed and the innovative work he produced using it
- the final room focuses on Blake's later works and traces his influence on young artist-printmakers

The exhibition could be used to explore subjects and themes including: poetry, art and design, religion and social conscience and creativity and imaginary worlds.

This is a charging exhibition but FREE for booked school groups and for under 12s.

To book a group visit please contact the Education Department:

[education.service@ashmus.ox.ac.uk](mailto:education.service@ashmus.ox.ac.uk)  
t: 01865 278015

## Exploring the exhibition

### Room 1

**'Thank God I was never sent to school / To be Flogd into the Style of a Fool.'**

Blake learned to read and write at home, until he chose to be enrolled at drawing school, aged ten. He lived at a time when the decorative and artistic trades were flourishing in London, which gave him access to resources and schooling that he might otherwise have been denied. At the age of 14 he was apprenticed to engraver, James Basire and subsequently won a place as a probationary student at the Royal Academy.

**Discussion points:**

- > What sorts of books and art influenced Blake as a child and young person?
- > What different kinds of writing, engraving and drawing did he experiment with?



### Room 2

**"I would have all the writing Engraved instead of Printed"**

In 1788 Blake came up with a new method of printing that enabled him to become poet, artist and publisher of his own work. Traditionally an illustrated book was created by printing the writing and pictures separately. Blake's revolutionary method involved dipping a fine pencil brush into a varnish and then writing backwards onto the copper plate. Drawings and decorations could then be added around the text. Once dry the plate was washed with a solution of nitric acid that corroded the copper left exposed, leaving the writing and drawing in relief. These could then be painted to produce the kind of colour prints on display here.

**Discussion points:**

- > Have you ever tried writing backwards?
- > Would you have the discipline, patience and skill it would have taken to produce these colour prints?
- > Which print is your favourite and why?

### Room 3

**William Blake. Blake the Misfit, Blake the Outsider. Just like me. He was a painter and a poet and some people said he was mad – just like they say about me. Maybe he was out too much in the moon. Sometimes he wore no clothes. Sometimes he saw angels in the garden. He saw spirits all around him. I think he was sane. (Almond, My Name is Mina)**

Although Blake was considered mad by many of his contemporaries for his idiosyncratic views, he is highly regarded by later critics. In his later years he enjoyed the friendship of a number of younger artists, collectively known as the Ancients, on whom his influence can be traced. The last gallery in the exhibition allows for Blake's later work to be seen alongside pieces by Samuel Palmer, George Richmond and Edward Calvert who were regular visitors at Blake's home.

**Discussion points:**

- > Compare Blake's work with the Ancients. How are they similar? How are they different?
- > Can you think of any writers, artists, singers or thinkers who are influenced by Blake today?



## Exploring Art & Design themes

### Printmaking and watercolour

The exhibition highlights Blake's engravings. Engraving involved cutting into a copper plate with a sharp tool. Ink was then rubbed onto the plate and settled into the incised areas. After wiping off surface ink the plate was forced under pressure through a printing press. The incised cuts printed as positive marks.

Blake reversed this printing method by using varnish and nitric acid to produce a copper plate on which the writing and drawing stood out in relief rather than being carved into the metal. However, because writing will print back to front., Blake had to use mirror writing on the plate to ensure words printed the correct way round. After the ink dried, Blake was then able to paint the print with transparent watercolour.

Try engraving using a small piece of Perspex and a compass needle. You can cut fine lines with the compass needle into the Perspex like drawing. You will need printing ink to coat the Perspex plate. After you have wiped the excess ink off, lay lightly dampened paper over the plate, then rub firmly on the back of the paper with a spoon. Peel off the paper and hang to dry. When dry you can highlight the print with watercolour paint.

### Text and image

William Blake's prints and paintings are full of narrative references drawn from a range of sources, including myths, the Bible, great literature, and historical events. His prints particularly include poetry and text together, a device taken from medieval illustrated bibles where the text forms a pattern around the image. Blake sometimes used his own poetry; on other occasions he illustrated the text. The way in which Blake blends the text with the images in his prints gives it a strongly rhythmic quality, winding its way around figures and across landscape.

Many other artists since William Blake have similarly used text and image together. See David Hockney, Peter Phillips and the German artist Anselm Kiefer. Their text is borrowed poetry or their own thoughts, often handwritten across the painting or print.

With reference to these artists you could take a piece of text and marry it to your portrait or landscape to enhance the meaning.



### Religion experience and social conscience

Blake drew upon his own spiritual experiences, he also campaigned for social and political causes. Much of his work contains reference to biblical stories such as King Nebuchadnezzar from the book of Daniel or The Ancient of Days, a name of God. He also made constant references to the contrast between heavenly bliss or the sufferings of Judgement.

Many modern artists have also used Christian themes in their work: Henri Matisse, Marc Chagall, Georges Rouault and the British artist Stanley Spencer among others.

Drawing on your own religious or spiritual experience, develop an imaginary work which gives a sense of the mystical. Alternatively take a religious or social reformer you admire and develop work based on their life and work.

## Further information

[www.ashmolean.org/exhibitions/williamblake/about/](http://www.ashmolean.org/exhibitions/williamblake/about/)

The video clip BBC Arts: Inside the Studio of William Blake offers an interesting introduction to the exhibition and an explanation of his innovative printing methods.

[www.bl.uk/people/william-blake](http://www.bl.uk/people/william-blake)

The British Library has an incredible online collection of Blake's illuminated books to browse alongside information and lesson plans.

Philip Pullman and David Almond both draw heavily on Blake in their work. The spoken word artist Kate Tempest also sees herself as being indebted to Blake.

[www.theguardian.com/books/2014/nov/28/philip-pullman-william-blake-and-me](http://www.theguardian.com/books/2014/nov/28/philip-pullman-william-blake-and-me)

Philip Pullman's article for The Guardian describes the history of his engagement with this revolutionary thinker and the effect that Blake still has on him today.



### Picture credits

William Blake (1757–1827)  
'Los howl'd' from The First Book of Urizen  
1796  
Colour-printed relief etching with hand colouring  
11.9 x 10.5 cm  
© British Museum

William Blake (1757–1827)  
Nebuchadnezzar  
c. 1795–1805  
Colour print, ink, and watercolour on paper  
54.3 x 72.5 cm  
© Tate, London

William Blake (1757–1827)  
Dante and Statius sleep while Virgil watches from Purgatorio VXXVII  
1824–27  
Watercolour, pen, and ink over graphite  
52 x 36.8 cm  
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