June 1977

Blake and the Language of Art: From Copy to Vision

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Recommended Citation
Colby Library Quarterly, Volume 13, no.2, June 1977, p.99-114

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IN MAY OF 1809 William Blake presented to the public an exhibition of his "Giant Forms." The house of his brother James at 28 Broad Street was used as a gallery, and Blake issued for the occasion his own Descriptive Catalogue as well as four advertising pamphlets. The sixteen pictures represented "The grand style of Art restored, in Fresco, or Water-colour Painting" and included The Canterbury Pilgrims and the two pictures of the "Spiritual Forms" of Nelson and Pitt, as well as The Ancient Britons, an important picture representing "the Strongest Man, the Beautifullest Man, and the Ugliest Man" which has been lost. Whatever Blake's hopes for personal recognition through his exhibition may have been, it was most certainly a political gesture. It could hardly be otherwise for a man who wrote that "The Arts & Sciences are the Destruction of Tyrannies or Bad Governments; The Foundation of Empire is Art & Science Remove them or Degrade them & the Empire is No More — Empire follows Art & not Vice Versa as Englishmen suppose." His advertisement for the Exhibition outlines his invention of portable Frescos which could be exhibited as wallpanels in public buildings; as Raphael and Michelangelo had "enriched and made great" Italy by fresco, so Blake would do for England: "... if Art is the glory of a Nation, if Genius and Inspiration are the great Origin and Bond of Society, the distinction my Works have obtained from those who best understand such things, calls for my Exhibition as the greatest of Duties to my Country" (E 518–19).

The decline of artistic taste in England, in Blake's view (reflected by the popularity of Reynolds and Gainsborough who "Blotted and Blurred") had direct bearing on England's state as an empire (or tyranny) at war with Napoleon. There were men who "would if they could, for ever depress Mental & prolong Corporeal War ... a class of men whose whole delight is in Destroying." In the Preface to Milton, whose words I have
just quoted, Blake called upon painters, sculptors and architects to rebel against the Neoclassicism ("Greek or Roman models") of the age. This was the spirit which was suppressing true imaginative expression and desolating Europe with wars, for Neoclassicism encouraged a dangerous form of abstraction, a dependance on public rules rather than private inspiration. ("One Law for the Lion & Ox is Oppression" he had written in *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell.*) Blake's fervent desire in *Milton* that all men would be prophets is reiterated in his call to Englishmen to be art critics: "O Englishmen! know that every man ought to be a judge of pictures; and every man is so who has not been connoisseurèd out of his senses."²

Blake's prefaces to *Milton* and *Jerusalem*, the Descriptive Catalogue and the Notebook entries known as his Public Address are all directed to the English public in which Blake had a touching faith: "I say the English Public are true Encouragers of real Art while they discourage & look with Contempt on False Art."³ It would be easy to dismiss some of this as the wishful thinking of a lonely artist who has faith in his own work, were it not for Blake's essentially practical knowledge that he spoke through his art a common language that all men could understand.⁴

Blake's perception of this language of the archetypes of gesture and stance used by painters and sculptors was transformed in his own work into highly sophisticated pictorial language which he had every reason to believe his public would recognize. For all around them were signs and symbols on shops and inns, on trade cards, on flags and heraldic badges, on embroidery patterns and textiles, and all manner of applied arts such as ceramics and furniture decorations. And while all this was available to the general public, men and women of education had even greater sources of symbolic material at their command.

The study of the history of iconography is a relatively modern discipline, but it has already demonstrated the great continuity of visual symbol which existed well into the Seventeenth Century, surviving in Neoclassical transformations in Blake's time.⁵ A main repository of these symbols—which are in general representations of human and animal

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6. Ibid.
7. "It is the Classics & not Goths nor Monks that Desolate Europe with Wars" (*On Homer*, E 267).
8. Letter to the Editor of the Monthly Magazine (July 1806), E 705.
10. Bo Lindberg's excellent study, *William Blake's Illustrations to The Book of Job* (Abo Akademi, 1973) recognizes the language of art I deal with in this paper, and shares similar opinions on its importance for Blake.
Fig. 4. Blake, *Milton*, Plate 16; Library of Congress, Rosenwald Collection
forms as allegorical figures—are the Emblem Books and the manuals of Sixteenth Century mythographers. These were the sources for the Iconologia of Cesare Ripa, the monumental work which became a bible of symbols for European art. It first appeared in Rome in 1593, going through many editions and translations. It was published first in England in 1709, and would also have been known to Blake in editions of 1777–9. There was also a 1778 edition by George Richardson, the architect and friend of Nollekens, whose complete title is worth quoting as an indication of its contents:

Iconology, or, a Collection of Emblematical Figures, moral and instructive; exhibiting the images of the elements and celestial bodies, the seasons and months of the year, the principal rivers, the Four Ages, the Muses, the Senses, Arts, Sciences, Dispositions and Faculties of the mind, virtues and vices. Containing, in four books, upwards of four hundred and twenty remarkable subjects, engraved from Original designs, with particular explanation of the figures, their attributes and symbols illustrated by a variety of authorities from classical authors, selected and composed from the most approved emblematical representations of the ancient compositions of Cavaliere Cesare Ripa, Perugino.

Besides the Iconologia, one of the most influential of the mythographer's manuals was Vincenzo Cartari's Imagini Delli Dei Gi’Antichi (1556), published in England, without illustrations as The Fountain of Ancient Fiction, wherein is lively depicted the images of the gods of the ancients, (London 1599). An Apollo figure Blake used consistently likely came to him via Durer after Cartari (see figs. 3–5). There were also the books of the English Emblem writers, Francis Quarles, John Wynne, and George Wither. Blake's use of these English emblemists has been—and continues to be—explored by Hagstrum and others. Piloo Nanavutty, in an early study of Blake and the emblems, noted that it was those images which had "a wide currency in the general iconographic tradition" that Blake tended to use.

Blake's knowledge of these traditions would have begun early, at Henry Pars' drawing school, where he was sent at the age of ten. There drawing was taught by copying plaster casts of the Antique, and by making copies of prints and drawings. Copying was therefore for him and others the grammar of the language of art and lies behind such statements as:

To learn the Language of Art Copy for Ever is my Rule. (Annot. to Reynolds, E 626)

The difference between a bad Artist & a Good One Is the Bad Artist Seems to Copy a Great Deal: The Good one Really Does Copy a Great Deal. (Annot. to Reynolds, E 634)

Blake therefore could and did take most of western art (and also what Eastern art he knew of, such as Moore's Hindu Pantheon) for his province, and his use of images other artists had used was his way of af-

12. Seznec, p. 278.
And wander wild, through Things impossible!
What Wealth, in Faculties of endless growth,
In quenchless Paffions violent to crave,
In Liberty to chafe, in Power to reach,
And in Duration (how thy Riches rise?)
To perpetuate—— boundless Bliss?

Ask you, what Power refin'd in feeble Man
That Bliss to gain? Is Virtue, then, unknown?
Virtue, our present Peace, our future Prize.
Man's unprecarious, natural Estate,
Improvable at will, in Virtue, lies;
Its Tenure sure; its Income is Divine.

High-built Abundance, heap on heap! for what?
To breed new wants, and beggar us the more? Get
Then, make a richer Scramble for the Throng?

Soon as this feeble Pulse, which leaps so long
Almost by Miracle, is tir'd with play,
Like Rubbish, from discharging Engines thrown,
Our Magazines of hoarded Trifles fly;
Fly diverse; fly to Foreigners, to Foes;
Now
E.

Fig. 5. Blake, Design for Young's Night Thoughts, "Night the Sixth." p. 25; The British Museum
firming the unity of the human imagination. "What is laying up of material, but copying," he asked. Furthermore, the English artists of Blake's day were continually using the same motives. Blunt's comment that "there were certain motives and certain images which were, one might almost say, the common property of the whole group to which Blake, Fuseli, Flaxman, Romney and Stothard belonged . . . each member of the group produced his own particular interpretation of the motive" underlines the assumption by those artists of an artistic language, though Blunt himself spends some pages discussing the question of "borrowing" or plagiarizing before concluding the question of priority is a futile argument. Joseph Burke's important article, "The Eidetic and The Borrowed Image" (1964), which traces the phenomenon graphically, surprisingly concluded that Blake's borrowings could seldom have been deliberate, but were rather the unconscious product of his eidetic imagination. More recently, however, Robert Rosenblum demonstrated that certain classical items and motives appeared again and again in late 18th Century art, with visual similarities that can only mean one artist is in fact consciously commenting on the statement of another. Rosenblum's many examples of death-bed motives included Blake's 

Breach in a City the Morning after the Battle and the title page to Songs of Experience compared with designs of Romney and Flaxman. Further examples are found, for example, in illustrations to Milton by the same group, Barry, Fuseli, Lawrence and Blake (see fig. 6). Furthermore, designers of plate printed cottons and ceramic designers copied popular artist's engravings for their designs for textiles and pottery. I have observed an interesting similarity between an English textile pattern called "Tyger" and Blake's America, Plate 11 (figs. 7 and 8). With so much of this around him, no wonder Blake could speak of a language of Art, born of Copying.

Blake's recognition of an artistic language, or heritage of images, was a reflection of a Neo-Platonic idealism which underlies his ideas of art. For

17. This is not to say that these artists did not sometimes concern themselves with priorities. Fuseli is reputed to have said "Blake is damned good to steal from," and Blake wrote in his Public Address: "Flaxman cannot deny that one of the very first Monuments he did I gratuitously designd for him. . . . how much of his Homer & Dante he will allow to be mine I do now know as he went far enough off to Publish them even to Italy, but the Public will know & Posterity will know" E 561. See also the Notebook lines To Nancy F—"How can I help thy Husbands copying Me / Should that make difference twixt me & thee" E499.
19. Rosenblum, figs. 184-87. Rosenblum sees in the phenomenon a new attitude to the historical past termed Historicism reflected in the recreation of a documentary past on canvas. Bo Lindberg, in his recent study of the Job designs, has found that "attitudes or gestures embodying a special meaning in one work of art, tend to carry this same meaning in other works by the same artist or by another. That is: they have a conventional meaning. Artists can use pathos-formulae as writers use words; and, like the meaning of a word, the meaning of a pathos-formula can be modified or altered by the context. The study of these formulae is the lexicography of art. . . ." (p. 115). See also my "Blake's use of Gesture," in Blake's Visionary Forms Dramatic, ed. David V. Erdman and John E. Grant (Princeton U.P., 1970), pp. 174-195.
Fig. 6. Blake, *Satan Calling up his Legions*: Petworth Collection. The National Trust
he believed the images of art were not from Nature, but Imagination. When, as a mature artist, Blake wrote down the principles so implicit in all his work, his pronouncements clearly indicated his awareness of the difference between his own aesthetic orientation and the prevailing criticism:

No Man of Sense ever supposes that Copying from Nature is the Art of Painting. (*Public Address*, E 567)

There Exist in that Eternal World the Permanent Realities of Every Thing which we see reflected in this Vegetable Glass of Nature. (*VLJ*, E 545)

Men think they can Copy Nature or Correctly as I copy Imagination this they will find impossible. & all the Copies or Pretended Copiers of Nature from Rembrat to Reynolds Prove that Nature becomes [same] to its Victim nothing but Blots & Blurs. Why are Copiers of Nature Incorrect while Copiers of Imagination are Correct this is manifest to all. (*Public Address*, E 563)

These excerpts demonstrate that Blake was describing the copying of something quite distinct from the external world. The “vegetable glass of Nature” is only the mirror of the Eternal images; art is the “correct” copying of imagination; the home of “Permanent Reality.”

This idea, so basic to Blake’s concept of art, is essentially Neo-Platonic. Plato’s distrust of art had been amended by Neo-Platonists, who contended that the artist by-passed Nature and imitated directly the original “Ideas” of perfection.26 Though critics are divided about the extent and form of Platonic and Neo-Platonic influence in Blake’s poetry, its effect on his aesthetic is clear. As George Mills Harper noted, “even after 1804 when Blake consistently condemned Greek art and philosophy, he never repudiated Platonic metaphysics and aesthetics as he understood them through Plato’s interpreters and popularizers of his day. As late as 1820, for example, after having struck out harshly at the Greeks for many years, he declared in a note to ... Berkeley’s Neoplatonic potpourri the *Siris*, that the ‘Reality’ of everything ‘is its Imaginative Form,’ and neither Plato nor Pythagoras would have disagreed with that.”21 Harper did not discuss Blake’s visual images to any extent, and this remark has seldom been investigated by critics other than Kathleen Raine, whose extreme Neo-Platonic bias has irritated many scholars. However, Blake’s belief in imaginative form is behind his repeated use of certain symbolic figures, and traditional motifs shared with other artists, for in this aspect of his art Blake was very much a man of the Renaissance, working with personification, linking personification to myth, and devising symbolic visual images to represent concepts (like the *Ancient of Days* with his compass). No matter how originally or idiosyncratically he used these traditions, it is clear he was aware of the kinds of meanings that could be attached to symbolic images. They were the cornerstones of inspiration.

Fig. 7. “Tyger” from *Bromley Hall Pattern Book* (c. 1790); The Victoria and Albert Museum
Now the rather mysterious allegorical explanations of myth and symbol so prevalent in the Renaissance had become discredited in the early 18th Century, in favour of a more Aristotelian or empirical approach, which sought to "confine allegory to images readily understood."22 That is, the didactic or representational image of which the 18th Century was so fond was something of a protest against the obscurity of the emblems which Neo-Platonism purported to be more than mere representation. E.H. Gombrich refers to the Neo-Platonic conception of symbolism as a "form of revelation,"23 and indeed this is basically Blake's attitude, as we know from his words in *A Vision of the Last Judgment*: "If the Spectator could Enter into these Images in his Imagination approaching them on the Fiery Chariot of his Contemplative Thought if he could Enter into Noas Rainbow or into his bosom or could make a friend & Companion of one of these Images of wonder which always intreats him to leave mortal things as he must know then would he arise from his Grave then would he meet the Lord in the Air & then he would be happy" (E 550).

The key word here, of course, is Enter; the images are not merely representations, but possess a power of their own, close to a physical existence, an extension of the Christian word made flesh. E.H. Gombrich in *Symbolic Images* discusses a speech in praise of certain emblematic figures by a teacher of rhetoric, Christophoro Giarda (delivered in 1626, but reproduced in 1725 [in Latin] in Graevius' *Thesaurus Antiquitatum*), which may or may not have been known to Blake24 but is sufficiently relevant to the above passage in *A Vision of the Last Judgment* to justify quoting: "As nothing can be apprehended by the senses that is somewhat corporeal, nothing can be understood by our mind in its depressed condition that has not the appearance of a body. Who, then, can sufficiently estimate the magnitude of the debt we owe to those who expressed the Arts and Sciences themselves in images and thus achieved it that we can not only know them but look at them, as it were, with our eyes, that we can meet them and almost converse with them about a variety of matters?"25

The blurring of the distinction between symbol and reality which we recognize here is found in Blake's words also, and is typical of Renaissance art, where abstract ideas such as Chastity or Penitence may be painted as real and visible, or where the great Baroque ceiling paintings of heaven are intended to create an illusion so vivid that the painted heaven can evoke the ecstatic response of religious vision.

Blake's defense of his own technique is based on this tradition:

Fig. 8. Blake, *America*. Plate 11; Library of Congress. Rosenwald Collection
The connoisseurs and artists who have made objections to Mr. B's mode of representing spirits with real bodies, would do well to consider that the Venus, the Minerva, the Jupiter, the Apollo, which they admire in Greek statues, are all of them representations of spiritual existences of God's immortal, to the mortal perishing organ of sight; and yet they are embodied and organized in solid marble. Mr. B. requires the same latitude and all is well. The Prophets describe what they saw in Vision as real and existing men whom they saw with their imaginative and immortal organs; the Apostles the same; the clearer the organ the more distinct the object. A Spirit and a Vision are not, as the modern philosophy supposes, a cloudy vapour or a nothing: they are organized and minutely articulated beyond all that the mortal and perishing nature can produce. (A Descriptive Catalogue, E 532)

Here Blake emphasizes the special reality and clarity of imaginative images (as he does so often in other places also); their qualities as agents of revelation he underlined in *VLI* when he stated his work was an "Endeavour to Restore what the Ancients called the Golden Age" (E 545). For Blake then, images of art are both revelatory and clear, and thus that part of traditional lore which surrounded them in mystery he dismissed. He could therefore understand the contemporary desire for rationality in allegorical imagery, but he could see that the attempt had led society to generalize, much to its detriment. Commenting on the aesthetics of Reynolds, he rails: "To Generalize is to be an idiot To Particularize is the Alone Distinction of Merit" (E 630). Generalizing made the language of art into illustrated metaphor rather than revelation, and he must have recognized that much vitality had gone from the execution of many traditional emblems. Similarly verbal allegory was often debased; Blake eventually made a distinction between "Allegory of Fable" and true Vision: "Vision or Imagination is a Representation of what Eternally exists. Really & unchangeably. Fable or Allegory is Formd by the daughters of Memory. Imagination is Surrounded by the daughters of Inspiration..." (VLI, E 544).

Memory, which is part of our ability to generalize, has no part in helping us grasp the true meaning of images. Blake here implies the power of the symbol to be apprehended in a flash of understanding.26 The visual image is an immediate perception—it is not a memory. None of Blake's paintings are memories of what he has seen—they are the real thing, each time you look at them.27 Re-creations, not imitations; although there may be "Correct" copying, for that is visionary. Blake is careful to make the distinction between copying and imitation: "To recover Art has been the business of my life to the Florentine Original & if possible go beyond that Original. . . . To Imitate I abhor I obstinately adhere to the true Style of Art such as Michael Angelo Rafael Jul Rom Alb Durer left it (the art of Invention not of Imitation. Imagination is My World...") (Public Address, E 569). So we realize that to copy the "true style of art" is not to imitate, but rather to re-invent. For art is not progressive. Blake wrote, "If Art was Progressive We should have had Mich. Angelo's & Raphael's...

26. This was the basis of the emblem Tradition at its best. See Gombrich.
to Succeed & to Improve upon each other. But it is not so...” (E 645).

Our modern conceptions of “borrowings” in Blake’s art, therefore, implies more censure than it should, for he knew well what he was doing. One of his most striking designs—Plate 63 of Jerusalem (fig. 9)—has a most impressive iconographical lineage, and to trace it briefly here will demonstrate how Blake made use of the language of art, providing a new context for a traditional image.

*Jerusalem* 63 is dominated by the seductive reclining figure of a female nude in an attitude of ecstasy: her left arm raised over her head, which is thrown back. Her figure is wound about with a worm. The text of the preceding plate for the most part concerns Vala and her daughters, “the Seed of Woman” and Plate 63 continues to describe her vengeance in terms of Druid sacrifice and dance of death:

Such the appearance of Cheviot, in the Divisions of Reuben,
When the Cherubim hid their heads under their wings in deep slumbers,
When the Druids demanded Chastity from Woman and all was lost.
How can the Female be Chaste, O thou stupid Druid, Cried Los.

I think the illustration on Plate 63 is a comment on these lines, the reclining nude and worm reminding us of the sexuality of all nature, the impossibility (and even undesirability) of chastity in the natural world. The combination of the sun and moon in one emblem further underlines the meaning of nature here.28 (Blake often uses familiar though not identical reclining females to represent the Female principle. He also uses upright Venus figures and other reclining forms, but I am only concerned with this one image at present.)

Blake’s reclining nude here is an image which resonates with associations throughout art history. It began as a Dionysiac nude (in Kenneth Clark’s term), a sculptured Nereid often appearing on ancient sarcophagi. Sometimes the figure is identified as Ariadne discovered by Bacchus, connoting both sleep and ecstasy. There is an antique sculpture now called the Ariadne of the Vatican (2nd Cent. B.C.) discovered in the 16th century (fig. 10) and a woodcut of this subject in the *Hypnerotomachia Poli­fili* with the same figure. Blake probably knew the woodcut, he may have known a drawing by Raphael of the Ariadne (mentioned by Clark, p. 404) but he certainly knew the figure on the Portland Vase (which Sir William Hamilton had brought to England originally), and he engraved it for Darwin’s *Botanic Garden* (1791) (fig. 11). The figure was described by Darwin as an Eleusinian symbol of mortal life,29 the sleep of death. (She holds in her hand an inverted torch, symbol of death.) She thus has much the same meaning as she has for Blake, wrapped around by the worm.

Furthermore, the connection of an Ariadne image with Blake’s repre-


Fig. 10. Ariadne; Musei Vaticani

Fig. 14. Figure of Cleopatra; Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge
Fig. 11. The Portland Vase in Erasmus Darwin’s *Botanic Garden*; T. Fisher Rare Book Library, University of Toronto
sentation of the Female Principle is apt, for in Blake's time the Ariadne was identified as Cleopatra, and Cleopatra is not only an epitome of Female Will, she is associated with the Snake.

Blake's immediate source for his nude, however, must have been Titian's *Bacchanal* (also called *The Andrians*)—in Clark's opinion one of the most splendid nudes of the High Renaissance (fig. 12). Or, if Blake did not know the Titian, he knew a copy—the Rubens *Bacchanael* (fig. 13). Both these pictures allude to Ariadne and Dionysus, and the gesture of ecstasy—the arm over the head—fits also the Dionysiac vision Blake often presents in conjunction with his representations of the Female Will (see especially J 66). Blake seems to have understood the story of Ariadne's marriage to Bacchus on Naxos as a symbolic sleep of Nature, dominated by the worm of mortality. (Perhaps he also saw the Theseus part of her story as hopeful, and had Ariadne in the back of his mind when he offered us "the end of a golden string" [U 77].)

Saxl has found the classical models for nearly all the figures in these paintings. He writes: "It is a remarkable fact that it is the greatest masters who turn to the great creations of the past and try to make them their own starting point. The works they produce are not copies—even if copies are intended, as in the case of Rubens, . . . ."

And to illustrate how one image finds its way into many media, there is an 18th Century English ceramic figure of Cleopatra, the asp around her arm as she falls into the sleep of death (fig. 14). So we can be sure that Blake knew the associations his audience would bring to his illustration for J 63. In his own idiom, he was speaking the language of art. Its importance to him he summed up in his *Descriptive Catalogue*: "Milton, Shakespeare, Michael Angelo, Rafael, the finest specimens of Ancient Sculpture and Painting and Architecture Gothic, Grecian, Hindoo and Egyptian, are the extent of the human mind. The human mind cannot go beyond the gift of God, the Holy Ghost. To suppose that Art can be beyond the finest specimens of Art that are now in the world, is not knowing what Art is; it is being blind to the Gifts of the Spirit" (E 535).

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31. Blake engraved a design for Cumberland's *Thoughts on Outline* which uses a very similar reclining figure—but this time a boy—for the sleeping Cupid, discovered by Psyche.