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Blake: Classicism, Gothicism, and Nationalism

by SEYMOUR HOWARD

What William Blake (1757-1827) made of Classic and Gothic art in his work is akin to the patriotic and personal interests of his contemporaries. The visionary was a man of his time, even in cultivating his idiosyncratic imagination.

Blake's first instruction (1768) centered upon the study of Classical models—casts of ancient sculptures and graphic works by classicizing Renaissance academicians. Along with a wide spectrum of other sources, they inspired his illustrations, writing, and conversation until the end of his life (e.g., fig. 1).

From mid-century, a pan-European fascination with the art and archaeology of the Classical world grew in intensity, until a virtual mania for ancient things and thoughts ruled popular taste. The resulting Neo-Classicism, perceived as a fresh, harmonious, and moral renaissance of ancient vision, was projected as clear, flat, linear schemata; its elemental idiom became the lingua franca of a new international style, which the first generations of moderns championed as the virtuous model for government, and for personal sensibility. Allegiance to the New Classics in effect identified young patriots and their nationalism.


D. Erdman (Blake: Prophet Against Empire, rev. ed., [Princeton, N.J., 1969]), exhaustively relates his work to its political context and discusses his nationalist leanings and special sort of patriotism as well as contemporary encouragement of eccentricity in artists, and implicitly Blake.

2. On Blake's Classical sources and his use of them, see D. Paley, "'Wonderful Originals'; Blake and Ancient Sculpture," in Blake in His Time, eds. R. N. Essick and D. Pearce (Bloomington, Ind., 1978), pp. 170ff.; and S. Howard, "Blake, the Antique, Nudity, and Nakedness; A Study in Idealism and Regression," Artibus et Historiae, VI (1982), 117-49. For the wide spectrum of other sources that Blake used, including Far Eastern, Near Eastern, ancient Mediterranean, Medieval, Renaissance, and then-contemporary images, see further, passim, the first comprehensive treatment of the artist from an orthodox art historical point of view, A. Bunt, The Art of William Blake (Morningside Heights, N.J., 1959), and, recently, D. Bindman, Blake as an Artist (London, 1978).

3. The Neo-Classic mystique of Blake's time was succinctly characterized and caricatured, while a still-living memory—though already a passe and somewhat Gothicized tradition—by Charles Baudelaire (Exposition Universelle, 1855, in Baudelaire, Art in Paris 1845-1862, tr. and ed. J. Mayne [London, 1965], pp. 129ff.): "I remember most distinctly the prodigious reverence which in the days of our childhood surrounded all those unintentionally fantastic figures, all those academic spectres—those elongated human.
Fig. 1. *Laocoon*, c. 1818, engraving. A late work revealing Blake's ambivalent allegiance to a Classical model that he had studied as an apprentice and had recently illustrated in a print for Flaxman's article “Sculpture” in Rees's *Cyclopaedia* (London), 1818, pl. 33.
With characteristic evangelical fervor, Blake expressed this shared conviction and sense of mission when explaining his means to a prospective patron, Reverend Dr. John Trusler:

I find more and more that my Style of Designing is a Species by itself, & in this which I send you have been compell’d by my Genius or Angel to follow where he led; if I were to act otherwise it would not fulfill the purpose for which alone I live, which is, in conjunction with such men as my friend Cumberland, to renew the lost Art of the Greeks.

Blake, letter of 16 August 1796

Blake’s friends George Cumberland (1754–c. 1848) and John Flaxman (1755–1826) had helped to introduce and publicize in England, and abroad, inventions in the new outline style, based largely upon Greek vase painting, and, less so, Classical reliefs (fig. 2). Their thin, transparent, and ethereal manner characterizes Blake’s design for Reverend Trusler, and his work by the 1790’s, generally (fig. 3). Like many young artists, Blake had known and copied the extremely influential illustrations of ancient vases in Sir William Hamilton’s collection, which helped to leave the new style (fig. 4). The thick Georgian and sometimes sculpturesque Classicism of Blake’s first inventions (e.g., fig. 5) had given way by the end of the century to a fashionable, “Hellenic” lightness.

It is only after his disillusion with failures of the French Revolution, the rise of Napoleonic imperialism, and a series of personal reverses that Blake—once a political radical who had supported Thomas Paine and the American Revolution—outspokenly turned from the Classical tradition, once linked with liberty, equality, fraternity, and patriotism, to embrace a more purely indigenous Gothic mode and the medieval religious mysticism and isolation of his mature years. By the end of his life, he had

5. For Blake’s designs after vase painting and his work for Trusler, see, e.g., Bindman, Blake as an Artist, p. 17, fig. 6 (my fig. 4), copied after P. F. H. d’Harncarville (C. Hugues), Collection of . . . Wm. Hamilton (Naples, 1766), II, pl. 57, a Dionysian scene from a late 5th-century red-figure vase painting, London, British Museum, and pp. 115f., fig. 96, Malevolence (my fig. 3), pendant to a lost composition Benevolence (both were commissioned by Trusler through Cumberland).
Fig. 2. John Flaxman, *Massacre of Britains by Hengist's Party at Stonehenge*, 1783, pen, ink, and wash, Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge. A subject of "Gothick"-nationalist historicism illustrated by the then-comparably exotic (and polarizing) mode of "Archaic" Greek vase painting (cf. also fig. 4).
Fig. 3. Malevolence, 1796, pen, ink, and watercolor, Philadelphia Museum of Art: Given by Mrs. William T. Tonner. Greco-Gothic schemata idiosyncratically fused in the style of Blake's developed manner; commissioned by Trusler through Cumberland.
Fig. 4. Apollo, Dionysos, and Attendants (after d’Harnarville, Collection of . . . William Hamilton [Naples], 1766, II, pl. 57), mid 1770’s, pen and ink. Reproduced by courtesy of the Trustees of the British Museum. Record of Blake’s attachment to the popular source book of “Etruscan” vase paintings and its still wobbly Rococo translations of “Archaic” outlines.
Fig. 5. *Queen Elanor Sucking Poison from the Wound of Edward I*, 1793, engraving. After an early design in Blake's *History of England* illustrations, begun c. 1780; derived from models by Gavin Hamilton, Angelica Kauffmann, and Benjamin West, as well as Milton.
equated ancient pagan work with the Antichrist, and all that was deadly to him (cf. fig. 6 and derogatory inscriptions in fig. 1).  

The Classics! it is the Classics, & not Goths nor Monks, that Desolate Europe with Wars.

Sacred Truth has pronounced that Greece & Rome, as Babylon & Egypt, so far from being parents of Arts & Sciences as they pretend, were destroyers of all Art. Homer, Virgil & Ovid confirm this opinion & make us reverence The Word of God, the only light of antiquity that remains unperverted by War. Virgil in the Eneid, Book VI, line 848, says “Let others study Art: Rome has somewhat better to do, namely War & Dominion.”

Rome & Greece swept Art into their maw & destroy’d it; a War-like State never can produce Art. It will Rob & Plunder & accumulate into one place, & Translate & Copy & Buy and Sell & Criticise, but not Make. Grecian is Mathematic Form: Gothic is Living Form, Mathematic Form is Eternal in the Reasoning Memory: Living Form is Eternal Existence.

“On Virgil,” c. 1820

Blake followed a well-worn, though then somewhat esoteric path. The use and appreciation of the Gothic style in English life, arts, and letters has long been recognized to be as much survival as revival: “Nor can any Nation upon earth shew so much of the ancient Gothique law as this island hath (N. Bacon, 1647).”

Blake’s association with Gothic art and its importance for English national heritage was already evident during his apprenticeship, when he prepared for his master, the engraver Basire, painstaking studies at Westminster Abbey for plates in the Society of Antiquaries’ Sepulchral Monuments in Great Britain (fig. 7). The experience reportedly had a profound effect upon him. With Flaxman, the young Blake also became an intimate of the medievalist literary circle of Reverend A. S. Mathew and his wife Harriet. They contributed to the publishing of his early poetry (1781) and encouraged his “Gothik” sensibility. Blake’s first independent illustrations, in an academic yet Gothicized vein, made for a visual History of England following Milton’s example, continued to demonstrate his interest (cf. fig. 5). A growing allegiance to Gothicism in sub-

6. For Blake’s changing opinions of Classical, Greek, and Roman works, see sources cited in n. 2; S. F. Damon, A Blake Dictionary (Providence, R.I., 1965), pp. 167f., 350; and A Concordance to the Writings of William Blake, ed. D. V. Erdman (Ithaca, N.Y., 1967), pp. 839ff., 1583f., and also p. 829 (“Gothic,” few references, several associated with the monk as a subject).

Keynes, Writings of Blake, p. 786: “The Greek and Roman Classics is the Antichrist,” in “Annotations to Dr. Thornton’s... Lord’s Prayer,” 1827. The onset of Blake’s antagonism to the Classical tradition is first noted in a letter to William Hayley: “I have entirely reduced that spectrous Fiend to his station, whose annoyed has been the ruin of my labours for the last passed twenty years of my life. He is the enemy of conjugal love and is the Jupiter of the Greeks, an iron-hearted tyrant, the ruiner of ancient Greece” (ibid., pp. 851ff., 23 October 1804).

7. Ibid., p. 778.


Fig. 6. The Overthrow of Apollo and the Pagan Gods, c. 1808, pen, ink, and watercolor, H. E. Huntington Library and Art Gallery, San Marino. Manifesto of Blake's disenchantment with Apollo (Belvedere type), once a hero and then a demon in his personal Gothicized pantheon.
Fig. 7. Tomb of Aveline, Countess of Lancaster, in Westminster Abbey, c. 1775, sepia, Bodleian Library, Oxford (Gough Maps 225, fol. 134). Apprentice-journeyman study for a local and traditional picture-book chronicle.
sequent years emerges generally in his choice and interpretations of subjects, costume, and composition. His illuminated texts and preferences for anonymous-seeming paper and watercolor work in a craftsman tradition also recalls the practices of the medieval English limner (see, e.g., fig. 8).

Blake's transformations of early autobiographic and classicized subjects into ones with Gothic and nationalist meanings seem especially important and characteristic in this context. Take for example the mature reworking of his first print, after a supposed self-portrait of Michelangelo (fig. 9). The added inscription and recut classicizing image apparently identify a submissive yet ambitious alter ego in the now densely built, melancholic, and Ossianic figure labeled Joseph of Arimathea, Christ's messenger, who, according to legend, brought the new, Christian gospel and church to England—Blake's own envisioned role in his life as an artist. The inscription reads:

Joseph of Arimathea among the Rocks of Albion

One of the Gothic Artists who built the Cathedrals in what we call the Dark Ages, Wandering about in sheep skins & goat skins, of whom the world was not worthy; such were the Christians in all Ages.10

Earlier, in the inscription added to the mature engraved version of the exuberant and similarly proportioned heroic nude in his *Glad Day* compositions, Blake had associated his figure with an English “Antient,” a hero in his cosmology:

Albion rose from where he laboured at the Mill with Slaves: giving himself for the Nations he danc'd the dance of Eternal Death

This work has also been identified as a messianic self-portrait, coupled with a patriotic manifesto of joyous sacrifice and loving service (fig. 10). The composition, partly derived from illustrations of Classical Pompeian artifacts (fig. 11) and studies of the Vitruvian man, apparently depends as well upon Hermetic images of the Zodiacal figure that Blake knew from studying illustrated editions of the medieval alchemist Boehme, his fellows, and other esoteric followers, some of them English (fig. 12).11

Blake's allegiance to Gothic images and values at the expense of Classical and academic ones became obvious in his productions after the turn of the century, especially in (1) his illustrations and discussion of
Fig. 8. Title Page and The Lamb, from Songs of Innocence, 1789, copper relief etching. Canticle-like illuminations for early lyric poems of a sort apparently intoned by Blake, “our Gothic songster,” for the Mathew salon.
Fig. 9. *Joseph of Arimathea Among the Rocks of Albion*, c. 1809–20, engraving (recut plate of 1773 copied after a print of Michelangelo's so-called self-portrait in *The Martyrdom of St. Peter*, Pauline Chapel, Vatican). Blake's mature self-identification with the messianic first Gothic "artist" of England, as well as with the Renaissance master.
Fig. 10. *Albion Rose* (also called *Dance of Albion* and *Glad Day*; signed and dated WB inv. 1780), c. 1800-03, engraving. Mature and autobiographic reassessment of earlier figure studies that conveys ideals of energy, exultation, ecstasy, openness, and surrender.
Fig. 11. *Greco-Roman Satyr with a Thrysos*, intaglio print (in *De' bronzi di Ercoiano* [Naples, 1771], II, 149). A Classical prototype for fig. 10 (also reproduced by Blake's fellow-printmaker and publicist for Flaxman, Tomaso Pirol, in *Le antichità di Ercoiano*, Rome, 1794, V, pl. 18).
Fig. 12. Vitruvian Man, woodcut relief print (in H. C. Agrippa, *De occulta philosophia* [Cologne, 1533]). A characteristic illustration of the Classical figure of proportion, set in a matrix of esoteric symbols, preserved in late-Medieval tracts and images admired by Blake.
Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* (fig. 13), (2) his protracted and often antagonistic annotations to Reynolds's *Discourses*, and (3) his *Descriptive Catalogue*, written for an exhibition of his largely Anglophile paintings and drawings in 1809. While dismissing the originality of Classical art and using the very words and arguments of the Neo-Classic prophet Winckelmann, known to Blake through his friend Füssli's translation, he championed the art and all else associated with ancient Britain as the model of nature, health, truth, beauty, and virtue. Blake described his own works representing "Antient Britons" as the reincarnation of the very qualities that Winckelmann had previously identified as the prime characteristics of Classical art. For many transalpine artists and thinkers, the archaizing Neo-Classic mode prepared the way for and helped to legitimize more ethnically indigenous and regressive Neo-Gothic works, done with kindred linear, tonal, and chromatic means.

In his assessments of Homer and Virgil, Blake's last thoughts fully describe the now-commonplace idea of polarization between an organic Gothicism of the Germanic North, with its Romantic imagination, and a crystallizing Classicism of the Mediterranean South, with its academic rule of reason (cf. fig. 14). 12

The mature, Classical Goethe, whose pattern of conversion was pre-

12. For instructive and extensive discussions of these sometimes self-fulfilling definitions of national temperament and art, see the model studies of H. Wölflin, *Sense of Form in Art*, tr. A. Machsam and N. A. Shatar (New York, 1958), and, recently, R. Rosenblum, *Modern Paintings and the Northern Romantic Tradition* (New York, 1975).

A sampling of selections from the *Descriptive Catalogue* reveals the Gothic and nationalist bias and enthusiasm of Blake and his challenge to the authority of Classical antiquity and academic masters of oil painting; his own new classics were Gothicized renditions of Ancient Britons (Keynes, *Writings of Blake*, pp. 564f.):

"No man can believe that either Homer's Mythology, or Ovid's, were the production of Greece or of Lattum; neither will any one believe, that the Greek statues, as they are called, were the invention of Greek Artists; perhaps the Torso is the only original work remaining; all the rest are evidently copies, though fine ones, from greater works of the Asiatic Patriarchs. . . . the art of fresco painting being lost, oil became a fetter to genius, and a dungeon to art. But one convincing proof among many others, that these assertions are true is, that real gold and silver cannot be used with oil, as they are in all the old pictures and in Mr. B.'s fresco" ("The Spiritual Form of Pitt, guiding Behemoth . . . .", pp. 565, 566).

"The Venetian and Flemish [oil painters' and academicians'] practice is broken lines, broken masses, and broken colours. Mr. B's practice is unbroken lines, unbroken masses, and unbroken colours. Their art is to lose form; his art is to find form, and to keep it. His arts are opposite to theirs in all things" ("Sir Jeffery Chaucer and . . . Pilgrims on their journey to Canterbury," p. 573).

"The Britons (say historians) were naked civilized men, learned, studious, abstruse in thought and contemplation; naked, simple, plain in their acts and manners; wiser than after-ages. They were overwhelmed by brutal arms, all but a small remnant; Strength, Beauty, and Ugliness escaped the wreck, and remain for ever unsubdued, age after age.

"The British Antiquities are now in the Artist's hands; all his visionary contemplations, relating to his own country and its ancient glory, when it was, as it again shall be, the source of learning and inspiration."

"It has been said to the Artist, 'take the Apollo for the model of your beautiful Man, and the Hercules for your strong Man, and the Dancing Fawn for your Ugly Man.' Now he comes to his trial. He knows that what he does is not inferior to the grandest Antiques. Superior they cannot be, for human power cannot go beyond either what he does, or what they have done; it is the gift of God, it is inspiration and vision. He had resolved to emulate those precious remains of antiquity; he has done so and the result you behold."

"The flush of health in flesh exposed to the open air, nourished by the spirits of forests and floods in that ancient happy period, which history has recorded, cannot be like the sickly daubs of Titian or Rubens. . . . their men are like leather, and their women like chalk, for the disposition of their forms will not admit of grand colouring; in Mr. B's Britons the blood is seen to circulate in their limbs; he defies competition in colouring" ("The Ancient Britons," pp. 577, 579, 580f.).
Fig. 13. *Pilgrims of the Canterbury Tales*, c. 1810–11, engraving, second state (composition begun 1806; painted in tempera on canvas, 1808). A synoptic illustration of Chaucer's epic, which Blake enthusiastically described as presenting expanded Gothic equivalents of Classical types and meanings.
Fig. 14. Johann Friedrich Overbeck (1789–1869), *Italia and Germania*, 1811–29, oil on canvas, München, Neue Pinakothek. An “animistic” wedding of complementary Classic and Gothic styles, temperaments, and self-identifications by the conservative co-founder of the Nazarene brotherhood.
cisely opposite to that of Blake, followed Sulzer, and implicitly Winckelmann, and expressed a contrary view of stylistic genius in his well-known aphorism, "Classic is Health, Romantic disease."13

The Germanophile Henry Crabb-Robinson, who knew Blake as an old man and also published his Descriptive Catalogue in translation (1811), recognized the significance of his work for parallel developments in Germany.14 England in part led the way in creating the art and literature of the Gothic Revival. But in young Goethe's paean to the architect of Strassburg Cathedral (1772), in Wilhelm Wackenroder's Heart-Felt Outpourings of an Art-Loving Friar (1797), and in the enthusiastic writings of Tieck, Schlegel, and other literati of the German Sturm und Drang and its aftermath are found indigenous contemporary equations of Gothic art with a transalpine vision and sensibility. Like Blake, German patriots east of the Rhine championed the Gothic style, condemned since Vasari, as a means of self-identity and national unification, especially in response to the oppressive influence of Napoleon.15

Following the defeat of the Hapsburg Holy Roman Emperor at Vienna (1807), the Nazarenes formed their pious brotherhood of anonymous craftsmen, repudiating what they called the corrupt and defunct example of their teachers in an absolutist and classicistic academy. They preferred a more archaic, Gothicized art and lived in a guild-like fraternity, ostensibly like the predecessors of Dürer and Raphael (cf. fig. 14); their sanctimonious ways resembled those of the dissident contemporary student society the Primitifs (Classical archaists from Jacques Louis David's studio) and Blake's own monkish life of poverty, withdrawal, and devotion shared with his wife, a fellow-painter and collaborator.16

Shortly before his death, Blake joined the circle of the collector Carl Aders (c. 1822), a company that admired Germanic and primitivist art. There he met Crabb-Robinson and the adoring young "Antients," including Samuel Palmer, who aped Blake's late work (cf., e.g., fig. 15) and brilliantly characterized his charismatic charm as well as his obsession

13. For Johann Georg Sulzer's Allgemeine Theorie der schönen Künste, 2 vols. (Leipzig, 1771-74), see Robson-Scott, Gothic Revival in Germany, Chap. 1, "Eclipse of Gothic," esp. p. 15, citing his comments on the unwholesomeness of the Gothic styles, and pp. 5ff., the background of antagonism toward the Gothic style by Vasari, certain of his immediate predecessors, and most of his academic followers. J. J. Winckelmann's principal theories were argued under the subject "Nature" (part 1) in his essay Reflections Concerning the Imitation of the Grecian Artists in Painting and Sculpture, published initially in Dresden in 1755 and translated by Füssli in 1765 (Blake owned a copy of Füssli's translation while still in Basire's studio).


15. On the Gothicising predilections of young Goethe, Wackenroder, Tieck, Schlegel, et al., and their association with the style of German origins and nationalism, see Robson-Scott, Gothic Revival in Germany, pp. 76ff., esp. 85, 109ff., 301 (post-Napoleonic nationalism), and, further, pp. 18ff., 42ff., for Jesuitic and French-endorsed survivals of the Gothic style elsewhere on the Continent.

Fig. 15. *Hell, the Circle of Lust*, with Dante, Virgil, Paolo, Francesca, and the heaven-bound whirlwind of once-infernal lovers and desires, 1826–27, engraving (derived from a watercolor series begun c. 1824). The mastered massive, contorted, and Gothicized idiom of Blake's last years.
Fig. 16. Johann Friedrich Füssli (Henry Fuseli; 1741–1825), *Thor Battling the Midgard Serpent*, 1790, oil, Royal Academy of Arts, London. Like Blake's *Nelson and Leviathan*, a Northern hero's struggle with a powerful insinuating evil force.
with all things Gothic. Blake had, of course, already known first-hand something of the tenor of German Sturm und Drang affections since the mid 1780's, from his good friend and mentor, the extravagantly Romantic Zurich émigré Johann Heinrich Füssli. They appreciated and influenced each other's work, and both explored and exploited the attractions of Classic as well as Gothic art (fig. 16). Füssli succinctly explained the appeal of the Gothic imagination for contemporaries and implied its usefulness for artists:

We are more impressed by Gothic than by Greek mythology, because the bands are not yet rent which tie us to its magic: he has a powerful hold of us, who holds us by our superstition or by a theory of honor.

Füssli, Aphorisms on Art, 1788–1818

Even before he met Füssli, Blake had used Medieval imagery in his earliest work and had studied the Medieval chronicles and mystics, especially Boehme, who was then also much admired on the Continent. With his countrymen Flaxman, Mortimer, Stothard, Romney, West, Barry, and even Reynolds, Blake had helped to establish a growing nationalist Gothic Revival that eventually resulted in the triumph of Pugin's designs for the Houses of Parliament in the Battle of Styles waged through the coming century. Such historicism and partisan use of styles encouraged the superficial application of didactic ornament; this pattern of search for roots eventually also encouraged the exposure of underlying structure and temperament for their own sake.

IN BRIEF, then, although Neo-Classicism, the revolutionary Republican style of his youth, used as an initial means of self-identification by early modern idealists on both sides of the Atlantic, remained an important element in his eclectic production, following wide-spread disappointment with the aftermath of the French Revolution, Blake, like other of his contemporaries, turned increasingly to Neo-Gothicism, a related archaism that was more compatible with personal and patriotic sentiments in England and elsewhere in Northern Europe.

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17. On Aders, see G. Grigson, Samuel Palmer, the Visionary Years (London, 1947), pp. 14ff., and William Blake 1757–1827, catalogue, Hamburger Kunsthalle (Hamburg, 1975), p. 244. For Palmer's observation, see Bentley, Blake Records, p. 321, n. 5, Palmer to Anne Gilchrist, 24 July 1862, "Every thing connected with Gothic art and churches, and their builders was a passion with him."

18. Reproduced in Sources and Documents; Neoclassicism and Romanticism, I, 93. Füssli follows the model of his close friend in Zurich, Caspar Lavater, a translation of whose Aphorisms on Man was annotated by Blake c. 1788 (Keynes, Writings of Blake, pp. 65ff.). For other Swiss influences on Blake, see Howard, Artibus et Historiae, VI (1982), 121ff., n. 13, and Jacob Merz, no. 11.

19. For the climactic place of the Pugin designs, see Clark, Gothic Revival, pp. 98ff., 113ff.