

Chicago Life

MAGAZINE



CABINETS • HEART HEALTH • FALL FESTIVALS • INNOVATIVE EDUCATION **FALL 2017**

ADVERTISING SUPPLEMENT TO THE NEW YORK TIMES

Gates of Perception

Romantic poet and artist William Blake (1757-1827) was born in London, where he spent most of his life. He grew up in a working-class family, and as a young boy studied art at the Drawing Academy of Henry Pars. After, he continued with a five-year apprenticeship under commercial engraver James Basire, and at the age twenty-two joined the Royal Academy Schools as an engraver himself, while also privately studying Medieval and Renaissance Art. Throughout his life, Blake created introspective imagery that reflected his vision. His prolific and timeless work of powerful images and words responded to great works of literature, including Milton, Shakespeare, Dante, and the Bible, and to social concerns, political unrest, and civic resistance. Blake's work called upon everyone to keep their eyes and ears open.

BY SIGALIT ZETOUNI

Using his innovative relief-etching method, Blake produced illuminated books that included, *America, a Prophecy* (1793), *The Daughters of Albion* (1793), and *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* (1790). One of his most famous works is *The Songs of Innocence and of Experience*, a volume containing the formidable poems, "The Tyger," "London," and "The Sick Rose." Unlike many writers, Blake engaged in the entire production of his books. He composed the poems, drew the designs, transferred them onto the copper plates, exposed the plates to an acid bath, and, with his wife's assistance, printed the plates on his large rolling press. He mixed his colors and painted each sheet by hand. His wife bound the pages together in boards. Thus, Blake, who was always poor, saved the expenses of a printer and avoided government censorship.

The American Revolution, the French Revolution, and the Industrial Revolution inspired and influenced Blake and his work, as well. Andrew Lincoln, Professor of English at Queen Mary, University of London, has researched Blake's radical politics, and has described the political

environment in which Blake was creating as follows: "The revolution widened the range of voices contending for change, and led some radicals to adopt, as Blake did, 'prophetic' modes to envisage a turning point in history. But unlike many of these radicals, Blake saw recourse to law as a problem in itself. The social problems he saw around him seemed to require a complete liberation from existing political systems, and a transformation of the sense of human potential." (Lincoln Andrew, "William Blake's radical politics," 5/15/2014, British Library, www.bl.uk/romantics-and-victorians/articles/william-blake-radical-politics)

On September 23rd, the Block Museum of Art at Northwestern University will open an exhibition entitled, *William Blake and the Age of Aquarius*. It will consider the parallels between Blake's era and the mid 20th century U.S., including political repression, social transformation, and the struggle for civil rights, and also look at the protests against the conventions of his day and how they inspired many Americans disillusioned by social uniformity, materialism, racial and gender discrimination, and environmental degradation. These Americans sought in Blake a model of independence, imagination, and a resistance to authority. The exhibition will feature American artists for whom Blake was an important inspiration, and will include more than 130 paintings, prints, drawings, photographs, films, and posters, as well as original prints and illuminated books from his collections throughout the United States.

William Blake and the Age of Aquarius will exhibit artists who used Blake's lyrics as titles, experimented with printing techniques and innovative combinations of image and text, and cited Blake's worldview in letters, diaries and essays, including Diane Arbus, Bruce Conner, Jay DeFeo, Robert Frank, Allen Ginsberg, Stanley William Hayter, Jimi Hendrix, Agnes Martin, Ad Reinhardt, Maurice Sendak, *The Doors* and *The Fugs*. An early section of the exhibition will also focus on those artists who discovered



William Blake, "Ancient of Days," frontispiece for *Europe a prophecy*, 1794, relief etching. The Rosenbach, Philadelphia. Photographer: Jonathan Donovan

Blake's unique voice working specifically in the mid-1940s. These artists, along with the aforementioned, will include Sam Francis, Jackson Pollock, Charles Seliger, Robert Smithson, and Clyfford Still. Another exhibition theme will focus on Beat culture and the role of radical poet Allen Ginsberg in promoting Blake to fellow poets and writers. This section will examine Blake's influence on the artists and musicians who embraced psychedelia and on Timothy Leary's call to "Tune in, turn on, drop out."

William Blake and the Age of Aquarius is curated by Northwestern Professor of Art History, Stephen F. Eisenman, in consultation with Corinne Granof, Curator of Academic Programs, Block Museum of Art. Opening day program will begin at 2 pm, and will include a conversation with Stephen Eisenman and Blake scholar W.J.T. Mitchell, editor of "Critical Inquiry" and Gaylord Donnelley Distinguished Service Professor of English and Art History at the University of Chicago. The exhibition will run through March 11, 2018. □