

William Blake and the Age of Aquarius

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Reviewed by Sam Rowe

In 1948, a young Allen Ginsberg heard the disembodied voice of William Blake reciting poetry in his Harlem apartment. Blake, with his “deep earthen grave voice,” read several poems from *Songs of Innocence and Experience*, and “The Sick Rose” in particular induced, for Ginsberg, a sense of euphoric, apocalyptic transcendence:

like a prophecy . . . as if Blake had penetrated the very secret core of the entire universe and had come forth with some little magic formula statement in rhyme and rhythm that, if properly heard in the inner inner ear, would deliver you beyond the universe.

Ginsberg would come to understand this auditory hallucination or “apparitional voice” as formative in his poetic development. As he would have it, the specter of Blake, with Ginsberg as Ouija board, haunted the mid-twentieth-century avant-garde during its most euphoric phase.

An exhibition at Northwestern University’s Block Museum of Art amply substantiates Ginsberg’s intuition that Blake was a prophet of mid-twentieth-century counterculture. *William Blake and the Age of Aquarius*, curated by Stephen Eisenman and Corinne Granof, juxtaposes a judicious selection of Blake prints and watercolors with an array of artifacts from sixties painting, printmaking, writing, and music. Eisenman and Granof make a compelling case for the sixties as a Blakean decade. On one hand, as W. J. T. Mitchell points out in the exhibition catalog, this was roughly the era of Blake’s academic recuperation, the point at which he ceased to be a notable eccentric and began to be a major romantic poet. On the other, Blake cast a long shadow over the period’s counterculture, from Ginsberg to abstract expressionism to the Doors and Jimi Hendrix.

The Blake section of the exhibition is a blend of old favorites and lesser-known gems. A generous selection from *Songs of Innocence and Experience* is on display, as well as several plates from *The First Book of Urizen* and the iconic frontispiece (“The Ancient of Days”) to *Europe a Prophecy*. This last image in particular was central to the 1960s Blake revival. In a delightful personal reminiscence included in the exhibition catalog, the veteran scholar of Romanticism Frederick Burwick recalls that “there couldn’t have been more than one dorm room in ten that didn’t have a poster of a work by Blake, often *The Ancient of Days*.” (The first class Burwick taught at UCLA, it turns out, included a theater major named Jim Morrison, who wrote a paper on *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*.) The countercultural enthusiasm for this particular image, however, may be ironic. It depicts not an act of imaginative creation but a circumscription of imagination by reason: Urizen—Blake’s avatar of dispassionate, blind rationality—measures out the world with his compass, his eyes bent to earth.

The highlights of the exhibition may be among the less well-known Blake prints. A complete run of Blake’s late engravings illustrating the book of Job display both contrast and continuity between the prints from the 1790s, with Blake’s characteristically statuesque figures set in sharp, static lines and framed by imposing borders. Several of Blake’s intricate illustrations of Dante, including an erotically suggestive rendering of the Paolo and Francesca episode, are also on view. And Blake’s millenarian strain (drawn out helpfully in Mark Crosby’s contribution to the catalog) is present in the form of *The Number of the Beast is 666*, one of a set of stunning watercolors inspired by the book of Revelation.

One set of colored prints included in the exhibition remains all too relevant: Blake’s *Visions of the Daughters of Albion*. This proto-feminist work, often interpreted in light of Blake’s 1790s acquaintance with Mary Wollstonecraft, is a tormented meditation on the aftermath of sexual assault. The poem merits revisiting now, when the #MeToo movement has brought consent, victim-blaming, and the routine exploitation of women to the

foreground of political consciousness. Blake's protagonist, Oothoon, has been raped by Bromion and estranged from her partner Theotormon. Oothoon, sneeringly labeled a "harlot" by her attacker, delivers a remarkable address that attempts to reestablish her connection to Theotormon. Her peroration concludes with a line that would reappear in Ginsberg's ecstatic footnote to *Howl* as a mantra of pan-eroticism: "every thing that lives is holy!" How, Oothoon asks, can one recover eroticism in a body and a relationship damaged by sexual violence? How to affirm sexuality after it has been used as a weapon?

Blake's answers to these questions may not be exactly right—in many ways, he is closer to the sexual liberation ethic of the 1960s than the gender equity ethic of the 2010s. But his brief for sex-positivity and against toxic masculinity remains startlingly fresh. The haunting frontispiece to *Visions*—a particularly beautiful version of which appears in the Block Museum show—depicts Oothoon and Theotormon bound back to back in Bromion's cave. Sexual violence, in this image, is not simply an offense committed by men against women, but a set of mind-forged manacles that binds both feminine and masculine sexuality.

The bulk of William Blake and the Age of Aquarius is devoted to tracing the Blakean currents in 1960s art and culture. The curators make a good case for a Blakean influence in mid-century abstract expressionism. An intriguing 1940s engraving by Jackson Pollock shows the master experimenting with Blake's medium. Impressive canvases by Jay DeFeo and Robert Smithson are on view, along with a video by Bruce Connor documenting the removal of DeFeo's monumental Blake-inspired masterpiece, *The Rose*, from her East Village apartment. One highlight is a stunning Sam Francis canvas, with the painter's trademark deep blue set against aggressive red, and with a title that quotes from *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*: "Damn Braces," as in the infernal proverb "Damn braces: Bless relaxes."

One particularly fun item of mid-century abstraction included in the show is a set of Charles Seliger's illustrations to *An Island in the Moon*. An oddity in the Blake canon, this unprinted early work is a send-up on philosophical erudition and over-specialization, working in the mode—more reminiscent of the early eighteenth century than of Blake's own nascent romantic moment—of allegorical satire. Seliger, who found *An Island in the Moon* in a Jersey City library copy of Blake's poetry at the age of 19, illustrated the personages of Blake's absurd lunar salon with white ink on a layer of black ink. His spindly, apparitional figures are both silly and menacing. In comparison with, for example, Blake's celebrated watercolor of Sir Isaac Newton, Seliger's drawings draw out the evolution of Blake's complex, ambivalent reaction against the Enlightenment and natural philosophy.

Later practitioners of Blake's profession, printmaking, make a strong showing. In the 1940s, the printmaker Stanley William Hayter and the Blake editor Ruthven Todd collaborated on an attempt to revive Blake's method of printing and text illustration. Using Blake's distinctive technique of acid-wash relief, Hayter engraved poems by Todd, framed by abstract embellishments. The results are not particularly distinguished, either as prints or poems, but do demonstrate Blake's ongoing relevance to the mid-century avant-garde.

Blake continued to inspire fellow printers into the Age of Aquarius proper. Hayter and Todd's prints are shown alongside several 1966 screen prints by Ad Reinhardt. Composed of stable geometrical blocks of subtly contrasting matte colors, Reinhardt's prints demonstrate Blake's artform at its finest, even if their link to Blake himself is a bit tenuous. (Reinhardt's friend Thomas Merton, as the curators point out, was a Catholic mystic and a devoted Blakean.) A series of ten screen prints by Richard Anuszkiewicz, each titled with a Blake quotation, are aggressively hallucinatory. With their sharp geometrical figures and hyper-saturated colors, the prints are more Blakean in inspiration than in appearance. In a nice touch, however, Anuszkiewicz's experiments in color perception are across the gallery from a set of Victor Moscoso's psychedelic posters for Bay Area concerts. (Anuszkiewicz and Moscoso, in fact, both studied with Joseph Albers.)

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The scope of the Block Museum exhibition extends from visual arts to writing and from the avant-garde to the broader milieu of 60s counterculture. Ginsberg is a central figure here, and his 1969 recordings of *Songs of Innocence and Experience*, with modal, folksy musical accompaniment, serve as testimony to ongoing engagement with the master long after his Blake vision (or audition). The curators make a case for reading Kenneth Patchen's illustrated poetry books as Blakean in descent. And Maurice Sendak, a lifelong lover of Blake, gets his due, from a 1967 re-illustrated edition of *Songs* to the late *My Brother's Book*, which contains striking visual resonances with Blake's Milton.

Another unexpected treat is *In Harpy Land*, a sequence of collages by Helen Adam (whose work was recently featured in this magazine). *In Harpy Land* illustrates terse, Blakean proverbs with images of avian-themed feminine decadence. In what may be a response to the mad printer of Lambeth, these images seem to discover a kind of primordial innocence in feminine auto-eroticism, finding freedom just where the iron laws of Urizen would find sin and degeneracy. The curators, finally, make the case that this Blakean influence seeped into the broader counterculture, exploring Blakean visual resonances in ephemera like Moscoso's screen print posters and underground publications like *The Chicago Seed*. They make much of the appearance of an echo of Blake's Milton in Jimi Hendrix's "Voodoo Chile": "Well my arrows are made of desire . . ."

Ginsberg, it seems, was right to think that his supernatural auditory encounter with Blake heralded a new dawn of cultural possibility. Ginsberg's relationship to both Blake and this new countercultural Jerusalem, however, evolved over the years. Thirty years after his Blake vision, in a 1978 lecture at Naropa University, he would look back at both Blake's historical moment and that of his own creative peak:

Blake was struggling with some of the same emotions we struggle with, which I assume are more or less common, for his revolutionary times—post French Revolution—and the destruction of idealism, radical disillusionment. There are similar revolutionary conditions now as in Blake's time, similar social and emotional problems. Blake's books are useful now as explorations of the same problems we have, somewhat related to the revolutionary fervor of the Sixties in America and the subsequent so-called "disillusionment."

If the young Ginsberg found a universe of revolutionary imaginative potential in Blake's works, the older Ginsberg found a set of reflections on what it means to outlive a revolution. As Blake might put it, the key to both the 1790s and the 1960s is to understand the relationship between *Innocence* and *Experience*.

In addition to William Blake, then, the 1790s have something else in common with the 1960s: in historical perspective, it's hard not to regard both decades as a terrible waste of potential. The democratic and egalitarian fervor of the 1789 gave way to the Terror and then to Bonaparte, and Tom Paine is now safely misread and absorbed into narratives of American exceptionalism. Something similar can be said of the 60s: their liberation of sexuality and perception has been transmuted into professional-class virtue ethics, their resurgent Marxism cloistered in academic bowers or curdled into hard-left nostalgia. As Haight-Ashbury tripped out and barricades went up in the Paris streets, Bill Clinton, final betrayer of the twentieth-century social democratic tradition, was smoking weed without inhaling. The pairing of Blake and the hippies suggests a crucial question: what survives from these two tumultuous decades after their *Innocence* has past into bitter *Experience*?