William Blake

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Martin Myrone and Amy Concannon

with an afterword by Alan Moore

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on the occasion of the exhibition
William Blake

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Front cover: William Blake, *The Ancient of Days,* c.1827 (no. 166)

Back cover: William Blake, *Christian in the Arbour*, 1824–7 (no. 162)

Inside cover / Endpapers: Richard Horwood, *Plan of the Cities of London and Westminster the Borough of Southwark, and parts adjoining Shewing every house*, 1792–1799

Frontispiece: William Blake, *Visions of the Daughters of Albion*, c.1795 (no. 49)

All artworks by William Blake unless otherwise specified.

Measurements of artworks are given in centimeters, height before width, before depth

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Martin Myrone and Amy Concannon

Director's Foreword

This is the fourth major exhibition of William Blake's work held at Tate at Millbank. Remarkably, he was the subject of the very first loan exhibition ever to be held at what was then the National Gallery of British Art, in 1913. It was remarkable because these were still relatively early days in the reassessment of Blake as a figure in cultural history, and remarkable, too, because the National Gallery of British Art had been established to showcase work by more modern British artists, and then primarily those working in the medium of oil painting rather than the watercolour and print media that Blake specialised in. A further show in 1947, organised by the British Council and touring to Paris, Antwerp and Zurich, served the purpose of post-war cultural diplomacy, and gave Blake a new currency among generations informed not only by the trauma of war but the imaginative freedoms associated with Surrealism and Neo-Romanticism. The major show in 1978, curated by Martin Butlin, was a landmark, taking account of the more rigorous scholarly work on Blake as a poet and visual artist undertaken in the previous three decades to set out a lucidly narrated overview of his work. The last major exhibition at Tate, in 2000 and one of the very first exhibitions at the gallery now reinvented as Tate Britain, offered a multi-faceted Blake: an artisan dedicated to his craft, a politicised artist deeply informed by his revolutionary sentiments and his experience of contemporary Britain, and a wildly imaginative interpreter of the Gothic.

There have been important exhibitions elsewhere in recent decades. Tate's collection was shown in Moscow in 2011–12; there have been further retrospectives in Paris and at the Ashmolean, Oxford in 2009 and 2014, respectively. But in the period of more than a century that has passed since that exhibition of 1913, Tate has established a very special relationship with this most idiosyncratic and distinctive of artists. The few works by Blake which had found their way into the National Gallery collection in the late nineteenth century were transferred to Tate at the beginning of the twentieth century, forming the kernel of what has become one of the outstanding collections of Blake in the world. Since the 1920s Blake has been on almost constant display at Millbank, accorded a separate gallery at various points including one with a specially designed mosaic floor by Boris Anrep which remains in place. There have been myriad different contexts in which Blake's work has been shown at Tate Britain, in temporary displays and exhibitions reflecting and adding to shifting perceptions of this most fascinating of British artists. At Tate Britain, the home of British art, we position Blake alongside Turner and Constable as the three great exponents of Romanticism in the visual arts in Britain. This exhibition builds on this century and more of scholarship, display, interpretation and re-imagining. Blake's work as a maker of visual images, as well as a poet, has come increasingly into focus among scholars, and the exhibition reflects this shift. It also presents Blake as profoundly rooted in the experience of his time, not only the politics, religious beliefs and historical events which we now understand shaped even his most visionary and outlandish productions, but his domestic experiences, as a boy growing up in Soho in a supportive family context, as the husband of Catherine, whose creative and practical influence over his work is only beginning to be fully appreciated, and as a sometimes difficult and contrary friend of fellow-artists, collectors and patrons.

The Blake we see here is as singular a figure as ever, fiercely independent and uniquely imaginative. The visionary who has inspired successive generations of artists, poets, musicians and performers, radicals and independently-minded people of all sorts, is shown in force here. But we are also invited to see Blake as a flesh-and-blood individual, full of contradictions and failings, dependent to a degree

upon friends and family, and whose hopes and ambitions were shaped by his times, as much as they escaped and went beyond those historical circumstances. The exhibition puts a particular emphasis on the way that Blake's art was encountered by his contemporaries, showing many of his extraordinary prophetic books as books, rather than as disbound series of sheets fixed to the wall as museum-pieces, and focusing on the traumatic failure of his one-man show of 1809 and the ambitions he harboured to see his works executed on a massive scale as public frescos. We hope that the strength of his individual vision and personality might be appreciated even more deeply in these contexts, and the present-day relevance of his commitments and beliefs felt all the more warmly.

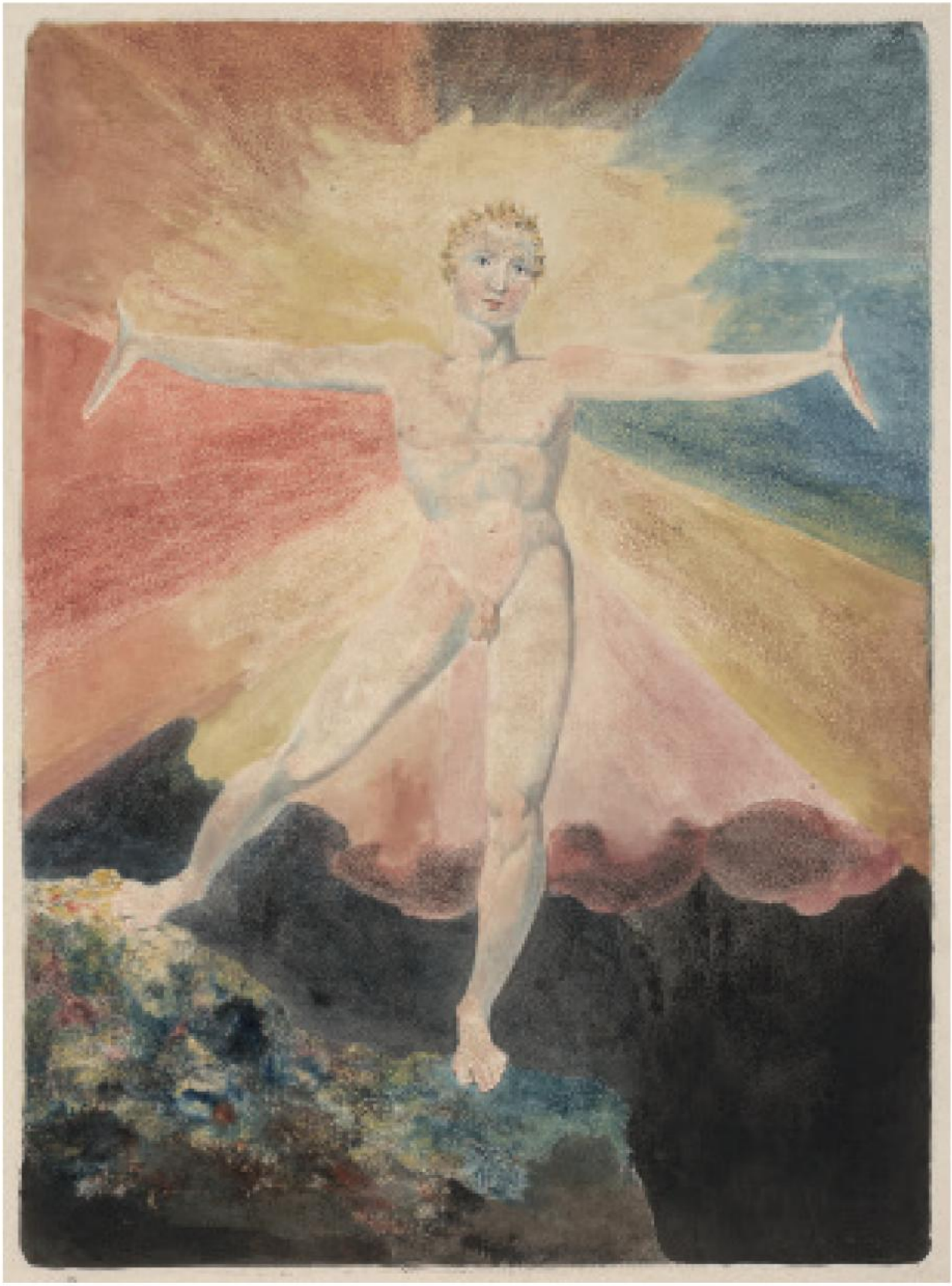
Showing Blake in all his diversity as a maker of images and books has required going far beyond Tate's collection, as deep and rich as it is. All of Blake's works, whether executed in watercolour, print or in tempera, are vulnerable to light exposure and can be shown only for limited periods under special lighting conditions, and we are enormously grateful to the many collections which have been able to agree such precious works for inclusion in this show. There are especially large groups of works from the Yale Center for British Art, New Haven, the Huntington Art Collection, California, from the Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge and from the National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne. We include a remarkable range of Blake's illuminated books, each copy an extraordinary rarity and unique in its arrangement and colouring, lent by the Bodleian Library, Oxford, Cincinnati Art Museum, and the Library of Congress. We are grateful to all the institutional lenders to the exhibition, and to the private individuals who have been kind enough to share their works with us, including Robert Essick and David Bindman who, along with a range of other individuals noted by the curators in their acknowledgements, have provided vital assistance in shaping this project.

The exhibition has been curated by Martin Myrone, Senior Curator, British Art to 1800, and Amy Concannon, Curator, British Art 1790–1850, who have also authored this catalogue. I wish to thank them for the commitment and fresh insight they have brought to each aspect of this project. Each of us is grateful to Alan Moore, the trailblazing graphic novelist, for contributing an afterword for this publication that is testimony, once again, to Blake's ongoing influence on modern and contemporary art and culture. Thank you also to Alice Chasey for her editorial management of this publication.

We would like to thank Tate Patrons and Tate Members for generously supporting the exhibition, for which we are very grateful.

This exhibition has also been made possible by the provision of insurance through the Government Indemnity Scheme. Tate Britain would like to thank HM Government for providing Government Indemnity and the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport and Arts Council England for arranging the indemnity.

Alex Farquharson
Director, Tate Britain



1. *Albion Rose*, c.1793
Colour engraving and etching with hand-colouring on paper, 36.8 × 26.3

THE MAKING OF A MODERN ARTIST

The figure of a young man, resplendent in his nakedness, arms outstretched and seeming to leap up from a craggy rock, a dazzlingly prismatic burst of colour behind him, has become an emblem of freedom of all sorts. It has served as a clarion call for revolutionary action, whether in relation to politics and social justice, the poetics of the counter-culture, or ideas of imaginative freedom, psychic well-being and body confidence. It has done so in books and on book covers, on album sleeves and posters, alongside essays and polemics, on tote bags and in museum exhibitions and gallery displays, in libraries and school-rooms, and at home or in the street, on Twitter and YouTube, in blog postings and websites. It has served to represent an idea of 'British values', of universal human values, of the value of resistance, of creativity, of freedom. Together with several other of the same artist's images, most obviously *Newton*, *The Ghost of a Flea* and *The Ancient of Days*, the image has been exhibited and discussed, published, recycled and repurposed, innumerable times and in a dazzling array of different – sometimes radically contrasting – contexts. The story of the man who made those images, William Blake, has been told repeatedly, and not only as a way of explicating his poetry and art for those of us most interested in such things, but also as a fable of inspiring self-transformation with much wider application. Blake, the son of a London hosier and haberdasher who was apprenticed to an engraver and destined to dedicate himself to that laborious trade, sought instead to create art and poetry of wild ambition and originality, scarcely understood or appreciated by his contemporaries. His famed self-sacrifice, imaginative independence and creative ambition have come to symbolise the very idea of authenticity, in art, life and politics.

This print, usually known as *Albion Rose* or *Glad Day*, has – along with the hundreds of other prints, paintings and drawings that Blake produced – also been subject to a century and a half of dedicated scholarship. Sometimes speculative, often highly technical, occasionally inscrutable, each word of his writings, each printed sheet, each drawing and painting, has been catalogued and described, analysed, interpreted and argued over. The print shown here is from the collection of The

Huntington in California, originally amassed by the American railroad magnate, Henry E. Huntington. It is a second impression of the colour-printed design, the first being in the British Museum in London.[1] It was preceded by a linear version of the same design dated as early as 1780 although probably engraved around 1793, and a pencil drawing of a figure with similarly outstretched arms which was probably an imaginative rendering but can be related in its technique and presentation to the studies Blake must have undertaken at the Royal Academy as a student there in c.1779–80.[2] On alternate sides of the same sheet, there the figure is shown from the front and from behind, his left foot and hand touching what we can read as the opening of a cave, the figure therefore arising, stretching out, on meeting the light outside.

These are all now single, seemingly independent sheets, held in pristine mounts in the rarefied conditions of the modern prints and drawings room or museum storage. But the impression of the print shown here was bound in at the end of Blake's prophetic book *The Song of Los*, when that volume was acquired by Huntington in 1915. *The Song of Los* is a poetic text printed by Blake himself in 1795, one of a succession of 'prophetic books' that he produced in the 1790s and that have become the foundation of his posthumous literary and artistic reputation. Featuring Blake's invented characters in an epic text organised under the headings of 'Africa' and 'Asia', it concerned the decline of morality in public life, the venality of the European slave trade, and the promise of global revolution as this had been awakened by the first, generally optimistic phase of the French Revolution (1789–93). Its themes can be related to historical events and values from Blake's time, but this was a visionary work rather than descriptive or literal. It included characters from the Bible and history (Adam, Noah, Socrates) and Blake's own invented figures with names that are made up but also resonate somehow with names that we already know (Brama, Los, Urizen).

2. *Academy Study (figure seen from behind)*, c.1779–80, Graphite on paper, 34.9 × 22.5

In their material form and modes of distribution, Blake's books were not like the industrially produced books we are used to. Composed of plates executed in his unique colour-printing technique, combining the text and images in a single design, each sheet in each copy might be printed differently, coloured differently, and the books themselves have existed in multiple arrangements which have fascinated (and frustrated) scholars and collectors. This impression of *Albion Rose* is on different paper from *The Song of Los*, but the most eminent Blake scholars have come to different views as to whether this was intentionally included by the artist as a final plate of that book, as it came to Henry Huntington, or if this was something contrived by a later owner of the sheets. Their opinions derive from a lifetime of looking at Blake, at the different

4. *Los and Orc*, c.1792–3
Ink and watercolour on paper, 21.7 × 29.5

freedom, a spiritual, intuitive interpretation of his images and words. There may be guides in such interpretation – Carl Jung or Karl Marx, Buddhism or the Bible, Jack Kerouac, Jah Wobble or Philip Pullman, a principled adherence to pacifism or sexual equality or queer protest or anarchism – but it is a deeply personal matter. In a positive light, this is 'Blake for all', everyone's opinions can matter, everyone can have a say, express a viewpoint and understand in their own way. In a negative light, this is the realm of 'emotivism', where the wholly individualised pursuit of pleasure is a mask for more deeply manipulative forces, an illusion of self-fulfillment fostered by and complicit with global consumer culture and big business.[7]

We can all place ourselves on a spectrum of interpretation, although we would all surely resist the negative characterisation of the extreme positions sketched out here. We will probably all occupy several, perhaps many different positions on the spectrum, at different times and in different settings. As the curators of the exhibition, and as the authors of this book, we need also to position ourselves. Our own views differ from one another's, and certainly from the views of some of our colleagues. As exhibition makers we must acknowledge and work with the full spectrum of experiences Blake's works might be expected to elicit. The exhibition aims to present a 'Blake for all'. It is precisely Blake's association with creative freedom, his perceived resonance with the array of socio-economic types identified by media teams and marketeers, that has had to be embraced to justify the time, money and energy expended on putting together a show of an eighteenth-century British artist when such historical figures risk being disregarded in the context of 'the current head-long rush towards the contemporary and the concomitant celebration of the products of a now fully globalized art market'.[8]

What we want to do is to introduce a note of reflection. The approach taken here is determinedly historicist and materialist. This means, simply, that we think that it really matters where and when these artworks were created, who got to see them and what they seem to have thought, who collected them. This means, among other things, shifting attention from the epic and dense poetry to the watercolours and paintings, the book illustrations and the more prosaic-looking of the relevant literary documents, such as the *Descriptive Catalogue* that accompanied Blake's disastrous one-man show in 1809, the magazine notice puffing the appearance of his epic illuminated book *Jerusalem: The Emanation of the Giant Albion* issued by Thomas Griffiths Wainewright without, it seems certain, great effect in actually securing sales for the artist. We are not seeking to expose Blake's patrons as simplistically self-interested or misled, or to say that his critics

5. *Frontispiece to Jerusalem: The Emanation of the Giant Albion*, c.1804–18, printed c.1832
Relief etching using black carbon ink on paper, 22.2 × 16.5

misunderstood him, or that the failure of the public to recognise his stature as an artist was the result of some sort of collective moral failure. We do not want, either, to presume that those patrons who did admire him were endowed with some kind of heroic profundity or depth of aesthetic understanding. Blake's failures, and his successes, are equally social facts. When his friend and supporter William Hayley noted of him, that he 'is very apt to fail in his art: – a species of failing peculiarly entitled to pity in Him, since it arises from nervous Irritation, & a too vehement desire to excell',[9] he is registering not (or not only) some outstanding challenge to the logic of cultural production as observed within post-structuralist literary theorising, but a perception of a practical position arising from and contributing to an individual experience of the world, expressed even in posture, poise, a way of speaking and acting. But it is not, either, that there is a simple unity between biography and art: there are contraries and inconsistencies as well, and such 'nervous Irritation' as Hayley detected might be taken as a sign of struggle and self-division.

The exhibition and this book join that long effort at de-mythologising Blake, established at the dawn of modern Blake studies in the late 1940s, and affirmed from different perspectives in major studies by David V. Erdman in 1954 and E.P. Thompson in 1963.[10] The latter's assertion that Blake can be aligned with a tradition of working-class protest and the emergence of class consciousness has been enormously influential. Erdman's exposure of the specificities of time and place which are threaded through Blake's visionary poetic work re-orientated Blake studies. These are approaches resumed with such penetrating detail (much assisted by the new digitalisation of historical records) by recent scholars including Michael Phillips, Angus Whitehead, Keri Davies and Mark Crosby among others. These writers have provided an unprecedented depth of detail about the physical arrangements of the spaces that Blake worked within, his immediate family and social and professional contacts, and the intellectual and spiritual traditions which formed his inheritance. There has also been important technical work, throwing new light on his materials and processes, by Joyce H. Townsend, Bronwyn Ormsby and Mei-Ying Sung. Other writers, Jon Mee, Susan Matthews and Sarah Haggarty included, have thought deeply about the social networks that Blake operated within and the social values that circulated through his work. These various historicist interpretations of Blake are now dominant, matched only by the interest shown in Blake's reception history in Britain, Europe and the wider world, with important work done by Colin Trodd and Jason Whittaker, and many others in the fields of literature, art, intellectual history and contemporary cultural studies. Eminent elder scholars, including David Bindman, Robert N. Essick,

Morton D. Paley and our distinguished forerunner at Tate, Martin Butlin, have also continued to contribute their experience and wise judgement to the field. Meanwhile, Blake's works and words have become instantly accessible in digital form, thanks to the extraordinary online presence of The William Blake Archive, including a growing corpus of digital versions of his works, Erdman's standard edition of his writings, essays and commentary, and archived copies of the specialist journal *Blake/ An Illustrated Quarterly*. The Archive, edited by Morris Eaves, Robert N. Essick and Joseph Viscomi, really has made a Blake 'for all'.

We owe great debts to this collective body of scholarship. Our task has been to translate some of the lessons of this vast, sophisticated, and not necessarily simply complementary, body of work into forms that can stimulate, provoke and perhaps unsettle in the context of an art exhibition. The exhibition is a space of encounter, and of negotiation, as we look, as we read and try to interpret and perhaps disagree with the captions and wall texts we read, the visual pairings and patterns we are presented with on the wall. The question of what friends Blake had, who his neighbours were, what he wore and how he looked, might seem distant from that encounter, even a distraction. But we recommend the historicist interpretation as a means of deepening and complicating our appreciation of Blake, and understanding the enduring relevance of the lessons provided by his life and experience. He was a man of his time, even in those aspects of his imaginative life and creative practice that seem most wholly out of his time. History is mobilised here to trouble what may seem like the most straightforward encounter with Blake's works as supposedly autonomous aesthetic objects. Blake's fate neatly exposed the dissonance between industrial enterprise and the 'love of the arts', as this was taking shape as a cultural theme in the 1830s. The perverse logic of modern art dictated, as was said of Blake, that 'Persons ... living in a garret and in an abject poverty, enjoyed the brightest visions, the brightest pleasures, the most pure and exalted piety'.[11]

Blake is a modern artist, and that modernity consists importantly not, or not only, in the formal 'modern-ness' of his art (the distorted bodies and startling juxtapositions that seem to anticipate Surrealism and Expressionism, or the elements of visionary self-exposure that seem to be replayed in some video and installation art), but in his departures from the dominant values of his own time. His opposition to emerging modern values, in politics, art and morals, has its own modern-ness, exemplifying how 'the Romantic view constitutes modernity's self-criticism'.[12] Key to this understanding is the bald statement that Blake *was an artist*. By this we mean to emphasise his visual output. In recent years, several scholars primarily interested in Blake as a writer have felt

greater credence to the latter possibility. As we review the literature on Blake, it is striking that it was J.C. Strange, a corn chandler (merchant) who was in the early 1850s amassing a Blake collection and thinking about writing the artist's life, who considered 'the transference of the patronage of the Arts to the mercantile & manufacturing men' as an 'injury to the Arts', while Dante Gabriel Rossetti, a bohemian artist and Pre-Raphaelite painter and a key figure in the reappraisal of Blake, defended the art collections of the businessmen and bankers who were the new patrons of art as 'disinterestedly made'. Strange noted that Rossetti's conversation '& ready manner reminded me more of the Exchange than of the studio'.[20] Given the degree to which the Pre-Raphaelites have been re-positioned as pioneer avant-gardists and democratically inclined radicals by popular publications and exhibitions of recent years, Rossetti's perceived complicity with ascendant bourgeois capitalism – manifested informally even in his language and self-presentation – is at the very least thought-provoking, considered in the context of his active role in re-evaluating Blake.[21]

This present commentary on Blake is also instinctively art-historical in its focus. This may again seem an obvious point, for surely if Blake is an artist, he has necessarily to be treated art-historically? But art historians have generally not been greatly occupied with Blake, at least compared to their colleagues in the field of literature. While Blake's works have been laboured over by literary historians and theorists through generations, and while his printmaking techniques have been scrutinised intensively over the last decades, it remains the case that there is still a lot to be done in the way of understanding Blake's work as visual art. Ellis K. Waterhouse rather famously declined to engage with the artist in his influential synoptic study, *Painting in Britain, 1530–1790*.[22] His heir in the same task, David H. Solkin, has shown little more enthusiasm but rather greater art-historical insight in his *Art in Britain 1660–1815*, where Blake is introduced into the story of British painting at two points to demonstrate the doomed fate of grand narrative art. In Solkin's account, the diminutive and cryptic nature of Blake's art exemplified the ultimate failure of artists to address a contemporary public with high-minded history painting. But such an interpretation may not sufficiently account for the material and thematic singularities of Blake's art – not least, in being a poet as well as a visual artist – and it may rest on too absolute a sense of his privations, failure and retreat into a private realm of imagination.[23]

Blake has proved to be a problem figure for such surveys of British art history – and in other more general accounts of the history of art. The monographic focus of this book and the accompanying exhibition risks re-asserting Blake's isolated position, presenting him as so singular he

sits outside the mainstream story of art altogether. While Blake's art has been an enduring inspiration, and artists across the generations have emulated certain aspects of his art, the technical idiosyncrasies of Blake's art and nature of his vision meant that there could not ever really be a 'school of Blake'. Blake was though a seminal figure in being poised so precariously and obstinately between obscurity and publicness, success and failure, legibility and absolute obscurity. Plenty of artists tried and failed to be history painters, but not many were able, like Blake, 'to carry on being productive for a certain period of time in the absence of a market', and none came to have such standing as a model for the creative type for his combination of literary and visual art. If his dedication to imaginative writing and art meant that Blake without doubt suffered materially and socially, especially after 1812 and before salvation in the form of support from the younger artists John Linnell and Samuel Palmer at the end of his life, neither did he disappear altogether.

He survived, paid the rent, only once fell back on institutional charity, while others disintegrated mentally, took their own lives, disappeared, or simply turned to another trade. And even at his lowest ebb, Blake was earning more than the many thousands of servants who occupied garrets and basements across London (including Blake's family home and his own home in Hercules Buildings for a while), the hundreds of thousands of labouring men and women across the country. Meanwhile, we would venture that Blake's reputation as the model of the self-sacrificing and authentic artist is not a mere historical fiction, conjured out of thin air by later commentators, but was a fact of his experience, emerging in the words of his supporters within his lifetime. What this exhibition sets out to suggest is that it is not an accident that Blake has become for so many people an exemplar of the creative type, the ideal artist in his authenticity, his struggles and suffering. It is not by chance that his art and words have connected so powerfully the political right, the political left, the establishment and the opposition, the marginalised and the mainstream, libertarians of all extreme forms, as well as the moderate and middle-class. Because the kind of freedom that Blake espoused, the kind of freedom that he experienced as a distinct kind of precarious and passionate worker, belongs distinctively to the modern Western world, providing ideals which are subscribed to across much of the political spectrum, and embodying wider values that we are all expected to cherish and defend. MM

William Blake is the exemplary 'inspired artist', an idea crystallised in this image of him. Although the attribution is disputed, this appears to be a self-portrait done in the very first years of the nineteenth century. The format and size suggest that it might have been prepared for engraving. Blake stares out at us with hypnotic intensity, his features and body organised with strict symmetry. There are no conventional signs that this *was* a self-portrait – no brush or pencil, no half-painted canvas or artist's model – but nor would Blake wish himself to be seen as a conventional artist. The artist is instead an isolated, heroic figure. Rather than being defined by what he does or how he acts, he invites us to search out the signs of creative intensity in his direct gaze. Such images had appeared in the history of art before, famously with Albrecht Dürer's Christ-like self-portrait (Alte Pinakothek, Munich). But Blake's image was one of several from around this date which signalled a seminal shift in the way artists imagined themselves. His visionary intensity was, however, exceptionally strongly expressed and even notoriously so.

6. *Portrait of William Blake*, c.1802–3
Graphite and wash on paper, 24.3 × 20.1

7. *Catherine Blake*, c.1805
Graphite on paper, 28.6 × 22.1

William Blake's casually conceived sketch of his wife Catherine was drawn on the back of a spare sheet from the poet William Hayley's *Ballads* (1802), which Blake had illustrated. The couple had married in 1782: although there were evidently periods of turmoil between them, the relationship ended only with Blake's death in 1827. It is notable that Blake's visual art and poetry only really started to develop in original ways after their marriage. Early biographers acknowledged that Catherine played a huge part in Blake's creative and commercial work, helping him with printing his designs, colouring his prints, and even finishing his drawings posthumously. She also looked after the household and finances. Blake himself acknowledged his debts to her, although it is her domestic labour which this drawing seems to suggest. It was said that he would always get the stove going, before she got up, a modicum of domestic service which hardly matches a lifetime of practical and emotional support. Arguably, Blake's extraordinary vision depended in some very real ways on the domestic stability of his life with Catherine.

regularly gone home. He would have returned there on a full-time basis for a period after the apprenticeship ended in the summer of 1779. Broad Street played a continuing part in his life. In 1784–5, with a modest bequest from his father, he had set himself up as a print publisher with his fellow Royal Academy student James Parker at no. 27, next door. The family stayed on at no. 28, his brother James, who had started a business apprenticeship while Blake was having his drawing lessons at Pars' school, taking over the shop.[8] William and Catherine stayed there when they returned to London in 1803, after a period staying in Sussex where Blake worked for the poet William Hayley, and his one-man exhibition was held in the rooms above the family shop in 1809. He published his *Canterbury Pilgrims* from the address in 1810. His brother remained at no. 28 with his wife and unmarried sister until 1812, and it is only after that date that the connection with Broad Street, and with the immediate family, seems finally to have been broken.

What kind of street was Broad Street? Commentators on Blake have in the past drawn attention to the presence of artists and engravers, on Broad Street itself and in the immediate vicinity.[9] The leading engraver Francesco Bartolozzi had been down the street at no. 49 in around 1768–74, along with his young apprentice (and student at the Royal Academy) John Keyse Sherwin; the printmakers Francis Chesham and William Pether were there in 1778. Bartolozzi was one of a number of Italian artists and decorative painters in the area, including the decorative painter Michael Angelo Pergolosi on Broad Street itself for a time. There was James Wildsmith, a statuary (although probably retired), at no. 22 a few doors down from the Blakes, and further along again there was Henry Fremont, an embroiderer by trade but an auction of his property in 1783 showed also an assiduous academic draughtsman, and apparently a student at the Academy.[10] There was John Hakewill at no. 45, a trade painter but begetting a dynasty of architects and artists, and the Irish architect James Gandon (both sent sons to the Royal Academy); and in 1780–81 lodged for a time at no.1 Henry Fuseli, the Swiss-born translator and poet of considerable intellectual pretensions, newly returned from a period in Rome where he had decided for himself, and had persuaded a few others, too, that he was to become an artist of gigantic ambitions equalled only by Michelangelo – the archetype of wild genius.

More prevalent, however, were the producers of fashionable luxury goods, including cabinetmakers, upholsterers, furniture designers and suppliers. At Dufours Court, Broad Street, there was the fashionable cabinetmakers and designers Ince and Mayhew, and Sefferin Alken, a high-class carver and gilder (whose son attended the Royal Academy, and who became the founding figure in a dynasty of artists and printmakers); and in Broad Street, John Hartley, maker of looking glasses, and at no. 5 William Bainbridge, described with the deceptively unalluring term 'glass grinder' in insurance records, who maintained a stock of 'tasteful frames ... brilliant mirrors' and 'some valuable prints, drawings, and paintings'.[11] There were, most notably, the makers of harpsichords and pianos, still a novelty and items of great expense. The trade had developed in London only in the 1760s, with the arrival of a number of German makers.[12] In Broad Street there were several, taking up multiple or extended properties: Frederick Beck at no. 4 and no. 10, Abraham Kirkman at nos. 18 and 19, Christopher Ganer at nos. 47 and 48, as well as Francis Werner, a fashionable musician and music publisher immediately across the road from the Blakes at no. 30 for a time.

There were, certainly, more mundane trades: several tailors, an ironmonger, a plumber, a carpenter, as well as, predictably, the bakers, hairdressers and public houses, all the shops and establishments that appeared on almost any substantial street in central London at the time. But there were also (although more towards the wider, eastern end of the street, and in declining numbers during the Blake family's time here), colonels, clergymen, and navy pursers, surgeons and physicians, well-off widows and retired gentlemen, representatives of the affluent middle class and gentry.[13]

The Blakes were at the cheaper end of the street, where households were more intensively involved in retail and production.[14] But there was no neat division, and the street as a whole was orientated towards the upper ends of the social world. James Blake would have dealt directly with elite clients in the grander streets and squares all around. It was, for instance, he who provided in 1772 a substantial lot of £8 of ribbons to 'Mr. Banks new Burlington Street' – the famous explorer and scientist Joseph Banks, preparing for another possible circumnavigation with Captain Cook.[15]

It is not that there aren't signs of financial failure, immorality and criminality. But there weren't many, at least before 1800. Henry Fremont, the embroiderer and draughtsman at no. 9, was bankrupted in 1782 – hence the sale of his stock and drawings.[16] Thomas English, a thirty-eight-year-old looking-glass manufacturer, was in 1801 declared 'a lunatic and doth not enjoy lucid intervals', so his property was seized.[17] The nineteen-year-old Elizabeth Bishop, who had been servant to Mrs Griffiths at no. 47 for £4 yearly and lodgings, was out of work and declared a pauper in 1776.[18] A house at the junction of Broad Street and Poland Street was openly announced as a brothel in 'Harris's List', the notorious guide to sex workers published through the late eighteenth century.[19] Mansur Hatton, a button-seller immediately over the road from the Blakes in Broad Street, was identified as the father of an illegitimate child born to a Bett Hall in 1776.[20] More dramatically, on 18 January 1778, a young hairdresser from nearby Panton Street, Peter Ceppi, known as Skipio, shot and injured his former lover Henrietta Knightly in a lodging house run at no. 41.[21] They had lived together in lodgings run by a Julia Cross, a German woman, but she was now living in Broad Street with a new partner, a Jewish man called Leverman who worked as an artificial flower maker. Having been put on trial and found guilty, on Friday 22 May 1778, he and six others were paraded along the traditional route from the prison at Newgate in the City of London to Tyburn, at the far western end of Oxford Street, and executed.

Whether Blake was with Basire in Great Queen Street, or was at home in Broad Street, the procession would have been only a couple of blocks away, and such was the noisome, high-profile character of these events that he could hardly have been unaware of them.

11. *62–74 Broadwick Street by Marshall Street, Westminster, London* 1962

The Ceppi case is worth pausing over briefly. It is a reminder that many Londoners – although not the Blake family – were living in short-term, subdivided accommodation, rooms above other people's shops, back-rooms, basements and attics, lacking job security and with uncertain long-term prospects.[22] They might change partners, routinely co-habit, and have entangled love lives. They were often scraping a living in workshops and marketplaces, labouring or cleaning. And there are reminders that London was, determinedly, a cosmopolitan city. When Ceppi had an earlier run-in with the law, he was bailed by Joseph Serafini of Great Suffolk Street, 'picture dealer', surely an Italian: 'being a foreigner', Ceppi himself needed an interpreter in court. The ferocity of the 'Gordon Riots', the sudden burst of anti-Catholic violence which broke out in London in the summer of 1780, was perhaps especially shocking given that French and Italians, Germans and Swiss, Jews, Catholics and French Protestants were so visible in daily life in the metropolis. London was already a multicultural society, in a way we would recognise. Among the lodgers who passed through

12. Robert Blake, *The Preaching of Warning*, c.1785
Graphite on paper, 34.3 × 46.7

was at one time at no. 22 'a Single Young Man of Colour, 28 years of age', looking for work 'as Servant, in a small Family, or with a Single Gentleman'.[23] The artist Agostino Brunias, who was at no. 20 in 1778, had been based in the Caribbean and may have raised a family with a woman of colour (although whether his family accompanied him back to London is uncertain).[24] More certainly, William Sancho, a Black Londoner and the son of the acclaimed musician and author Ignatius Sancho, was running the office of the Vaccination Pox charity at no. 44 from 1799.

Scholars have cast around for evidence of Blake's encounter with low life and social suffering, the brutality of the criminal justice system, Industrial Revolution or echoes of the French Revolution, his experience of cosmopolitanism, of Britain's wars and global empire. In truth, all these were in evidence on his doorstep, or the doorstep of the family home at any rate. It is clear that the street changed within Blake's lifetime, and even within the time that the Blake family were based there. There was industrialisation, with the brewer W.T. Stretton installing a 'sun and planet' steam engine at no. 49–50 in 1800 and in the next two decades taking over the entire block of houses, surely to the detriment of the street as a whole.[25] If we have learned that Blake's famous words about 'dark Satanic Mills' should not be taken too literally, it is also the case that mechanisation was appearing across the road from the family home, as well as on the banks of the Thames, where Blake certainly knew the famous Albion Mills. Meanwhile, in 1794, an anonymous informer reported that for 'above two months post papers from [the infamous radicals] Hardy and Thelwall have been deposited in the house of Mr Hartley a Grinder in Broad Street Carnaby Market', this being John Hartley, the manufacturer of looking glasses at no. 38 and a documented member of the London Corresponding Society, the most prominent of the radical reform groups fired up by the French Revolution.[26] But there is every sign that, until Waterloo at least, this was a very satisfactory place to live, certainly for a family like the Blakes.

Georgian London has been rather besmirched by the retrospective view taken of it by writers from the Victorian era onwards. Thus when the publisher Adam Black recalled visiting Thomas Sheraton, the cabinetmaker, designer and Methodist preacher who had retired to Broad Street in 1799, he evoked a scene of dreadful disintegration, dirt and poverty: 'He lived in an obscure street, his house half shop, half dwelling-house, and looked himself like a worn-out Methodist minister, with threadbare black coat.'[27] Sheraton was doubtless impoverished in later life, but Black's distaste for the mixture of working space and domestic life comes from a later, nineteenth-century perspective (the memoir was composed in the 1860s), when industrialisation, transportation and lifestyle changes meant that spaces for living and working were separated more sharply. The independent gentlemen and widows, attorneys and surgeons who might live in a central London street like Broad Street in the 1760s or 1770s alongside traders and makers of goods of many kinds, all inevitably within a few doors of a tavern which would also serve as a meeting place and coroner's office, were by the early nineteenth century more likely to have moved to new pastures. Meanwhile, Broad Street's name had been blackened by association with the terrible cholera outbreak in 1854, traced to the water fountain outside no. 40, beside the public house which now bears the name of the man who exposed the scandal, John Snow.

What is especially salutary to bear in mind is how, in Blake's time, the art world was not as 'distant' from the everyday life as it may now sometimes seem to be. Broad Street presents, in microcosm, something of the cultural energy of later Georgian London, the proximity and mixing of tradesmen and professionals, gentry and artists, all getting by or getting on in various ways, through making and selling, trading and investing, rents and speculations. The visual arts formed one, essentially normalised facet of this world. There were prints and pictures in the shops, the music publisher and the stationer over the road, and even the unfortunate Peter Ceppi had as a friend a West End picture dealer.

The cabinetmakers Ince and Mayhew, just round the corner from the Blakes, both had picture collections.[28] In this one street there were at least six households with members who went off to the Royal Academy schools in the late eighteenth century. These were not especially affluent households, and they included Frederick, the son of John Sebastien Meyer, a tailor at no. 49, who studied architecture at the Academy and with Sir John Soane.

So although Blake was born into a family occupied with commerce, the art world was not so distant, perhaps least of all physically. Blake's walk from the family home to the Academy (just over 1.1 miles, which might have taken some 25 minutes) would lead him past the entrance to Dufours Court, and over the road to the public house on the corner (now the John Snow), turning south down into Cambridge Street, and the longer, narrower route that ran all the way down to Piccadilly, crossing Brewer Street and continuing into Great Windmill Street. Here, all the way down, there were smaller houses than his own, the makers and doers of the textile trades with tailors and hosiers, staymakers and linen drapers, and the Public Office where official business was locally done, and the inevitable pubs and grocers. But to the left at the south end there was the grand, purpose-built house and 'museum' (only the haggard-looking façade remains) of the acclaimed surgeon William Hunter, Professor of Anatomy at the Royal Academy.[29] At Piccadilly Blake would turn left, down Coventry Street, and then down and across Whitcomb Street with its stables and builders' yards, into the open space of Leicester Square, where portrait painters had their painting rooms, and where most famously Sir Joshua Reynolds, first President of the Royal Academy, lived. From the south-east corner of Leicester Square, down the short line of shops and tradesmen's accommodations on Green Street (Blake was to lodge in a house at the west end of this street with his wife after their marriage in 1782), he would come, on the right, to the intimidating façade of St Martin's Workhouse (where Mansur Hatton's illegitimate son was born) – surely a more immediate point of reference for Blake than the ostensibly more physically proximate St James's Hospital, whose largely hidden presence north of Broad Street has been identified as a source of inspiration for his poems on London poverty. Crossing St Martin's Lane, where the previous generation of artists and craftsmen had congregated around William Hogarth and Francis Hayman, he would head further east, towards Covent Garden, crossing Bedford Street into Maiden Lane, immediately to the left a barber's shop belonging to William Turner, serving the artists of the Academy, with a young son whose precocious drawings were posted up in the window. Blake could cut down into the Strand, following one of the several narrow alleys available to him on his route, or if he wanted to keep his shoes clean he would carry on down Maiden Lane, turning right on Southampton Row at the end, and, with the famous vegetable market in Covent Garden to his back, head down the slope past the gate that kept unwanted traffic out, and then onto the Strand, a grand but congested commercial thoroughfare that provided one of the major axes of the metropolis. There, beside the china shops and publishers, printshops and lacemen, and the multitude of drinking holes, looking east towards Sir Christopher Wren's St Clement Danes church, Blake would have had his first sighting of the Royal Academy, its palatial frontage surmounted by gleaming sculptures by John Bacon, RA, which would have risen above the road traffic and bustling pedestrian flow of the Strand itself.

When late in life Blake told the journalist Henry Crabb Robinson of his choice of the life of the artist, he represented it in visionary terms: 'The spirit said to him "Blake be an artist & nothing else."'[30] The line was taken up by the artist's biographers, with added emphasis: 'Blake Be an Artist!'[31] But we don't need recourse to the language of imagination to register that there was a kind of alchemy, a social magic, at work in the transformation he underwent on entering the Royal Academy and being able to claim the aspiration to be an artist, inspired to compete – as the lecturers of the Academy compelled their

13. *The Spirit of a Just Man newly Departed Appearing to his Mourning Family*, c.1780–5
Ink and wash on paper, 33 × 48.3

up on the radical history painting of the 1760s (several examples of which had been engraved). Blake's style achieved a pitch of refinement and ambition with the three large watercolours of the biblical story of Joseph that he showed at the Academy in 1785. By that date the optimism for high art had started to evaporate. The war with revolutionary America and its allies (1775–83) had ended badly; London was overrun with demobbed military men. Unemployment and urban discontent were on the rise.

With a modest inheritance from his father Blake had ventured to become an independent publisher with James Parker, based at 27 Broad Street. Meanwhile, Flaxman had introduced him to the Reverend Anthony Stephen Mathew and his wife Harriet, and together they had financed the publication of a slim volume of Blake's writings, the *Poetical Sketches*. But if these reflected the political and cultural themes of the preceding decade, Blake was moving in new directions as well. Among his watercolours there are subjects which are less obviously related to historical or literary themes, and which defy ready interpretation. And it was at social gatherings organised by the Mathews that Blake reputedly would sing his poetry, assuming an inspired, bardic identity which was an important element in a developing ideal of the creative poet. Though the *Poetical Sketches* achieved no great celebrity, they did serve as a kind of calling card. Flaxman sent a copy to the poet William Hayley in 1784, noting of their author that their mutual friend, the successful painter George Romney, 'thinks his historical drawings rank with those of M[ichel] Angelo'.[40] There was even talk of putting together the funds to send Blake to Italy, where he could be expected to transform himself into an artist of grand ambition ready to compete with that fierce Renaissance master (as had happened with Fuseli and several others over the last decade). That Blake was emerging simultaneously as original visual artist and writer is significant in itself, pointing to a newly amorphous sense of 'the artist' as it was emerging in some cultured metropolitan circles, not as involving the technical mastery of specific skills within specific media but, rather, a generally creative spirit.[41]

Blake's partnership with Parker did not last beyond 1785, even after it had been sustained artificially with financial input from the Mathews. It seems likely that Blake himself was venturing to produce some kind of original, illustrated poem only shortly afterwards. For from this date we have a manuscript poem, *Tiriel*, and a record of a set of twelve wash drawings to accompany it, nine of which are known to survive. Blake's poem involves a blind king, Tiriel, his queen, Myratana, their children, and the ancient figures of his parents, Har and Heva. In a bleak and blasted fantasy landscape, Tiriel undergoes a series of travails and confusing encounters, family curses, estrangement and rebellions evocative of Greek tragedy, Shakespeare's *King Lear*, and the fabulised Gaelic epics of 'Ossian' published sensationally by James Macpherson in the 1760s. The uniform technique and format of Blake's designs, and the fact that the poem exists separately in manuscript, suggests that he planned to have the poem set in conventional type, and to print the illustrations separately; the designs would have fitted into a landscape-format folio page quite neatly, although generally also at a 90 degree angle to the text. Like the prints issued from Boydell's Shakespeare Gallery, we might assume that they might have been issued as single plates. Although we know that Blake had his own printing press – he held onto this after the Parker-Blake partnership was dissolved – and so would have been able to print the plates separately, he did not have the facilities to print the text of the poem in the conventional manner. Even if the artists and tradesmen variously involved in the printing of texts and of images tended to be located in the same London districts, the skills, equipment and techniques involved were completely separate, and incorporating engraved images in a printed book was a costly and difficult business.[42] Blake's *Tiriel* might be a testament to his growing dual ambitions as an artist and a poet, but what remains in the form of unpublished text and un-engraved drawings shows that he had not yet the means to realise those ambitions. MM

14. *Joseph's Brethren Bowing Down before him. The Story of Joseph*, c.1784–5
Ink, watercolour and graphite on paper, 40.3 × 56.2