

# William Blake: Visionary Artist [B2]

Un precursore del Romanticismo e un fervente sostenitore della libertà spirituale e politica. La sua opera spazia dalle visioni idilliache dell'infanzia alle crude rappresentazioni del colonialismo.

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The brilliant 18th-century poet and engraver William Blake was ignored during his lifetime and even considered insane by many of his contemporaries. The creator of a unique artistic world, based on visions he saw throughout his life, marked a unique challenge to Britain's social, political and religious orders. Blake is now considered one of the greatest contributors to the country's art and literature. Born in London on 28 November 1757, the son of a hosier, Blake was mainly educated at home by his mother. He later claimed that as a child he saw God at his window and angels on trees in the local park. His parents were supportive of his childhood imagination. They sent him to drawing school at ten, and then apprenticed him to an engraver for seven years. However, then as now, there was not much money in art. From 1779 until he died in 1827, Blake would scrape a meagre living as a professional engraver, while filling his free hours creating poems and pictures that left his friends, William Wordsworth and Samuel Taylor Coleridge, and his few admirers, totally dumbstruck.

## FIRST WORKS

Blake's first major works appeared in 1789 (*Songs of Innocence*) and 1794 (*Songs of Experience*.) He developed his own famous style of illuminated printing for these collections of lyric poems (just fifty copies in all), which covered subjects as diverse as childhood, education, established religion, free will and free love. The collections contain some of the best-loved poems — all in lines of deceptive simplicity — in the English language, such as London and The Tyger ("Tyger Tyger, burning bright, In the forests of the night ...").

## A COMPLETE ORIGINAL

Blake was an Enlightenment thinker, critical of colonialism and slavery and what he considered to be the Church's oppression of ordinary people. However, his creativity and imagination became a harbinger for Romanticism. A complete original, his world was one in which all of life, the imagination, reason, and the physical and spiritual worlds were all connected: "To see a world in a grain of sand / And a heaven in a wild flower / Hold infinity in the palm of your hand / And eternity in an hour." He even created his own mythology. His visions, which were his constant companion, were as real to him as life itself. And his compassion was everywhere: "A robin redbreast in a cage / Puts all heaven in a rage."

## TWO EPIC BOOKS

The 1790s were a prolific time for the poet, most notably with *Marriage of Heaven and Hell* and *His Minor Prophecies*. As the new century dawned, he started work on his two great epic illuminated books, *Milton* and *Jerusalem*, which occupied twenty years of his life. *Milton* is about poetic inspiration (Blake claimed John Milton, the great poet author of 1674's epic poem *Paradise Lost*, appeared to him in a vision), while *Jerusalem* encourages readers to improve the society around them. The words in the much-loved hymn *Jerusalem*, which is regularly referred to as the 'unofficial English National Anthem', come from the preface to *Milton*.

## SINGING ON HIS DEATH

Blake died on 12 August 1827 in poverty and obscurity, with his wife Catherine by his side. He died happy, however, singing his own poetry and of his visions of Heaven, while drawing a portrait of his wife in tears by his bedside. Catherine had helped him with his art throughout their marriage of forty-five years. As the decades passed, Blake's genius would be slowly recognised. A true visionary, his combination of visual and verbal art was unique, and his vivid imagery has never been surpassed.

## JERUSALEM, BRITAIN'S FAVOURITE HYMN

The famous hymn Jerusalem had its origins in Blake's poem And did those feet in ancient time, which was part of the preface to his collection of writings, Milton: A Poem in Two Books. The poem was set to music by Sir Hubert Parry during World War One. The hymn, with its famous orchestration by Sir Edward Elgar, is now considered by many as an alternative to England's national anthem. Many of the lines have entered Britain's national consciousness: "And did those feet in ancient time Walk upon England's mountains green ... And was Jerusalem builded here, Among these dark Satanic mills? ... Bring me my Bow of burning gold ... Bring me my Chariot of fire!" The most famous performance of the hymn happens every year when it traditionally forms the culmination of the BBC's Last Night of the Proms. The BBC Proms is a highly popular eight-week summer season of orchestral classical music concerts held in London's Royal Albert Hall. Ironically, the poem is considered by some to actually represent Blake's satirical attitude to what he considered to be excessive nationalism in England at the time of the Napoleonic Wars (1803-1815), rather than praise Christian feeling and England's past.

## ARTISTIC STYLE

Blake's style of illustration was unique. He created a new etching technique, in which words and images appeared together in highly-coloured plates with calligraphic writing. His style was so unusual and unfamiliar that one critic called it "distorted, absurd" and the product of a "depraved fancy." After his one exhibition, in 1809, he was called a "madman" and a "fool." His now famous works include The Ghost of a Flea and Newton, with the young scientist crouched naked on a rock at the bottom of the sea!

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# Glossary

- **claimed** = affermare
- **Anthem** = inno
- **mills** = fabbriche
- **harbinger** = precursore
- **cage** = gabbia
- **Flea** = pulce
- **crouched** = accovacciarsi
- **Enlightenment** = Illuminismo
- **insane** = pazzo
- **free will** = libero arbitrio
- **deceptive** = ingannevole
- **robin redbreast** = pettirosso
- **dawned** = sorgere, nascere
- **encourages** = incoraggiare
- **Bow** = arco
- **engraver** = incisore
- **depraved fancy** = fantasia depravata
- **scrape a meagre living** = guadagnarsi a malapena da vivere
- **dumbstruck** = senza parole
- **lines** = versi
- **in a rage** = in collera
- **set to music** = mettere in musica
- **plates** = lastre, tavole
- **hosier** = produttore di articoli di calzetteria