

To see a world in a grain of sand¹ : A closer look at the ‘Melbourne Blakes’

Nature had not only painted there in all her hues
But there the sweetness of a thousand scents
Was blended in one fragrance strange and new
(Alighieri 1308–1321)

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ABSTRACT

The National Gallery of Victoria’s (NGV’s) exhibition *British watercolours 1760-1900: The Age of Splendour* provided the paper conservation studio with the opportunity to undertake non-destructive technical examination of the much treasured collection of William Blake watercolours from his *Divine Comedy* series. The NGV’s holdings originally formed part of a suite of 102 works commissioned in 1824 by the landscape painter John Linnell. The original commission was retained by the Linnell family until 1918 when it was sold at auction in London. At that time, the NGV was part of a consortium bid, together with the Tate, British Museum and a few other parties to secure the entire group (Eaves 2003). A careful process was devised for the division of the works and after a painstaking selection, Robert Ross, the London adviser to the Felton Bequests’ Committee recommended the purchase of 36 works which became known as the ‘Melbourne Blakes’.

In the lead-up to *British watercolours* each work was examined and photographed under ultraviolet (UV), infrared (IR), transmitted and raking light to help identify pigments, detect underdrawing, note compositional changes and confirm the origin and characteristics of the paper. Stereo microscopy was used to help classify media and determine how it had been prepared and applied. This time spent examining the watercolours provided an insight into Blake’s working methods and uncovered techniques not noted in previous studies. It also highlighted the presence of light sensitive pigments and the continued need to carefully monitor the display duration of these popular works.

Keywords William Blake, watercolour techniques, watermarks

INTRODUCTION

In 1824, Blake’s last great patron, the landscape painter, John Linnell commissioned him to produce a series of drawings based on Dante Alighieri’s *Divine Comedy* which would later be engraved (Gilchrist 1880)². Linnell provided Blake with a folio volume of a hundred pages specifically for the drawings and Blake ‘...set to work full of energy, sketching, while confined to bed by a sprained foot, the first outlines of the whole, or nearly the whole, of this new series.’ (ibid.). Blake worked on the drawings by orienting the folio either portrait or landscape depending on the needs of the composition³.

He was plagued by poor health whilst working on the watercolours and his letters to Linnell include recounts of attacks of shivering that would render him bedridden. Although he described his illness as ‘that Sickness to which there is no name’ it is now thought that his symptoms were due to biliary cirrhosis caused by sclerosing cholangitis, a condition possibly caused by Blake’s prolonged exposure to the fumes evolved when copper plates are etched in nitric acid (Robson & Viscomi 1996). Despite his fluctuating health, his letters convey a great enthusiasm for the *Divine Comedy* watercolours, describing them as ‘all I care about’ (Keyes 1968). In 1826, while recuperating from a period of ill health and making preparations to stay with Linnell at Hampstead he wrote ‘I intend to bring with me, besides our necessary change

of apparel, Only My Book of Drawings from Dante & one Plate shut up in the Book...’ (ibid.). His visit to Linnell’s home took place some months later and there he found a clump of trees on the skirts of the heath where he took his folio of drawings and worked on the series. Years after his death, close friends still referred to this area as the ‘Dante Wood’ (Gilchrist 1880).

Some months after returning to his London home in Fountain Court on the Strand, he continued to paint the series despite declining health that forced him to work bolstered up in bed (Gilchrist 1880). During technical examination of the suite, a microscopic down feather which may have come from his bedding was found attached to the watercolour media of one of the most highly finished of the works entitled *The Vestibule of Hell and the Souls Mustering to Cross the Acheron* (Longmore 2011). Blake was still working on the series when he died at his home on the 12 August 1827. As reported by Gilchrist and reflected in the ‘Melbourne Blakes’ the watercolours are at various stages of completion and therefore present his conceptions in all their stages from the bare outlines of the initial drawing to highly finished watercolour paintings. This variation in finish provides a tremendous insight into his technique.



Figure 1. William BLAKE *Saint Peter Appears to Beatrice and Dante* (1824-1827) illustration to *The Divine Comedy* by Dante Alighieri (Paradiso XXIV, 19-33) pen and ink and watercolour over pencil and black chalk 37.1x 52.7 cm (sheet). *Butlin 1981, 812.94; Butlin & Gott, 36* National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne. Felton Bequest, 1920 (1021-3). Transmitted light photograph showing W Elgar watermark



Figure 2. William BLAKE *The Queen of Heaven in Glory* (1824-1827) illustration to *The Divine Comedy* by Dante Alighieri (Paradiso XXX, 97-126; XXXI, 1-21, 55-73 and 112-42 and XXI, 1-9) pen and ink and watercolour over pencil and black chalk, 37.1x 52.8 cm (sheet) *Butlin 1981, 812.99; Butlin & Gott, 38*, National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne. Felton Bequest, 1920 (1023-3). Transmitted light photograph showing W Elgar countermark

ACQUISITION

The key to the Blake watercolours entering the NGV's collection was the appointment of Oscar Wilde's close friend, Robert Ross as the London adviser to the Felton Bequests' Committee in March 1917 (Zdanowicz 1989). Ross was deeply interested in Blake's work and shortly after his appointment he contacted the Felton Trustees to advise them of the forthcoming sale at Christies in London of the Linnell Collection which included Blake's illustrations to Dante's *Divine Comedy* (ibid.). At this time the watercolours were no longer bound together in a single folio book, having been separated for exhibition at the Royal Academy of Arts in winter 1893 (Unknown 1893). As no British institution could afford to buy the entire collection, a consortium was established to ensure the collection stayed within The Empire. In this proposed arrangement, Melbourne was well-placed because of the scale of the Felton Bequest, the professionalism and knowledge of Ross and the willingness of the NGV Trustees to place their trust in him (Zdanowicz 1989).

Although the series was purchased in March 1918, the watercolours did not reach Melbourne until 1920; primarily because Ross had concerns about the dangers of the works being damaged or lost on their journey to Melbourne due to the continued risk of enemy activity on the seas. He wrote to E. Armstrong Esq. on 17 September 1918 of his belief 'the only trustworthy packers in London is the French firm of Chenue, who act for the British, Victoria & Albert Museum. All their French hands are at the War...The art of scientific packing is unknown to the English' (NGV Felton Papers).

DISPLAY HISTORY

Upon arrival at the NGV, the series was framed and displayed in the Buvelot Gallery in August 1920. At the time, the works received fairly hostile reviews in the local papers. On the 11 August 1920, the *Argus* critic wrote: '...many of his pictures, considered artistically, are grotesque in the extreme, and in some cases repulsive in treatment...no justification can surely be shown for the purchase of so many artistically inferior pictures, which will no doubt before long find their way to the cellars.' It was not until the 1940s that the watercolours received more favourable reviews including: 'Few Felton Bequest acquisitions have reflected more credit on the purchasing committee than the William Blake drawings...praise of them could hardly be too lavish' (Harcourt 1940).

METHODOLOGY OF EXAMINATION

Works from the series were most recently displayed in the NGV's exhibition *British watercolours 1760-1900: The Age of Splendour*. As part of the preparations for this exhibition, curatorial staff requested the entire series be unframed for updated photography. The watercolours had not been out of their frames since preparation for the exhibition *William Blake in the Collection of the National Gallery of Victoria* in 1989, so this provided an opportunity to examine the whole collection and arrange for additional photography such as IR, UV, raking and transmitted light to be undertaken.

Working within a tight timeframe, all works were examined under a stereo microscope and a selection of photomicrographs were taken that represented the various

materials and techniques present in each work. Over the following months research was carried out into the art practice of William Blake and the various photographic images were examined and compared with findings from past studies.

PAPER SUPPORTS

Transmitted light photography enabled the chain and laid lines, watermarks and countermarks to be observed. The paper is antique laid with half the sheets examined bearing a fleur-de-lys watermark and half bearing the W Elgar 1796 countermark (both belonging to the W Elgar paper mill)⁴. The paper which was originally *Imperial* size (56 x 75 cm) was folded in half and gathered into sections for sewing, resulting in a group of pages containing the watermark, followed by a group containing the countermark. Images of the watermarks and countermarks were sent to Peter Bower and he was able to determine two variants are present, as one would expect from a pair of moulds (Bower 2012) (Figures 1 and 2). The raking light photographs indicate approximately two thirds of the works are painted on the wire side and one third on the felt side. Unfortunately in some cases, the paper surface is severely flattened (possibly from past treatment) and it is not possible to be absolutely certain which side the work has been executed on.

A number of the supports contain distinctive creasing and tiny losses relating to the original locations of the sewing stations and the pulling of the sewing thread. Five works have binding evidence along the left edge, indicating the work is from the right page of the folio book. *Dante Adoring Christ* is the only work examined with binding evidence along the right edge, indicating it was a left hand page.

UNDERDRAWING

Blake's initial drawings were undertaken using a combination of graphite-type pencil and black friable media variously characterised as black chalk and charcoal in previous studies. When sketching out most of the examined works, Blake's first compositional marks were made using shimmering graphite lines, making small enhancements with the friable media. Examination of the IR photographs indicates few digressions from these initial marks and those that were found were minor in nature. Blake attached great importance to these first lines having said 'First thoughts are best in art, second thoughts in other matters' (Gilchrist 1880) (Figure 3).

WATERCOLOUR

Although the series was left at varying stages of completion, Blake had proceeded to the application of tonal washes and watercolour with all of the Melbourne works. Rudimentary examination of the pigments was undertaken using stereo microscopy. Using this non-destructive technique coupled with knowledge of the pigments readily available at the time Blake was working and previous research into his palette, it was possible to gain an understanding of the pigments present.



Figure 3. William BLAKE *Antaeus setting down Dante* (1824-1827) illustration to *The Divine Comedy* by Dante Alighieri (*Inferno*XXXI, 112-43), pen and ink and watercolour over pencil and black chalk, 52.6 x 37.4 cm (sheet), *Butlin 1981, 812.63; Butlin & Gott, 27, National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne. Felton Bequest, 1920 (1012-3). Modelling to delineate musculature using initial tonal drawing followed by application of colour*

According to past studies, Blake's palette included carbon black (used in both ink and watercolour form), Prussian blue and indigo, vermilion and red lake, gamboge and chrome yellow and brown, yellow and red ochres (Gilchrist 1880, Maheux 1984 and Townsend 2003). He extended this basic palette by mixing indigo or Prussian blue with gamboge to make green, gamboge with vermilion to make orange and indigo or Prussian blue with red lake to make purple.

When viewed under magnification sizeable chunks of pigment were noted in the red and blue media of several works. The appearance of solid masses and clumping of pigment is possibly the result of incomplete grinding which failed to evenly distribute the pigment particles within the binder. Blake is known to have ground his own colours from powdered pigment on a statuary marble slab (Lister 1975). According to Lister, Blake mixed pigment with diluted carpenter's glue to form water soluble paints. Although commercially prepared watercolour cakes would have been available to Blake, he may have found these early prototypes too hard or he may just have preferred not to change his methods of working and continued to grind his own paints (*ibid.*). Technical examination undertaken at Tate revealed Blake used a range of gums including Tragacanth and Arabic which could have been mixed with glue or used alone as a binder for his watercolours (Townsend 2003).

UV photography of the works was undertaken by the NGV's Photographic Services Department using a Hasselblad digital camera fitted with a 2B filter and Broncolor UV fitting over the flash. The works were subjected to a 25 second exposure of 300-315nm UV. In addition, the Department photographed

two colour charts of English watercolours dating from the 19th century that included most of the pigments known to have been used by Blake. Examination of the UV photographs indicated the presence of red lake (possibly cochineal carmine or Kermes carmine) that fluoresced a bright pink in 25 works (Schweppe & Winter 1997). The most extensive use of red lake was found in *Dante Running from the Three Beasts*, due to the prominent role Dante plays in the composition; his robe always being depicted as red in Blake's series. When viewed under UV light, gamboge (which appeared olive green) was noted in 30 of the works⁵.

Blake preferred to apply aqueous media with a camel hair brush and in most of the works examined, various washes have been applied on top of each other (Maheux 1984). In several cases the works are essentially tonal drawings, for example *Ephialtes and Two other Titans* and *Lucifer* are comprised predominately of black wash with minimal red lake washes applied once the black layer had dried. To paint figures in most of the works, Blake started with a tonal drawing to delineate musculature and help model form and then added varying degrees of colour (Figure 4). In many instances two layers of colour were applied, one on top of the other, to form secondary colours. This layered colour mixing technique was noted with greater prevalence than secondary colours that have been mixed on a palette. In most of the works examined, Blake allowed the separate layers of watercolour to dry prior to adding subsequent colours so they would remain clearly distinct. In some works he applied subsequent layers of colour using a dry brush to avoid bleeding.



Figure 4. William BLAKE *The Queen of Heaven in Glory* (1824-1827) illustration to *The Divine Comedy* by Dante Alighieri (Paradiso XXX, 97-126; XXXI, 1-21, 55-73 and 112-42 and XXI, 1-9) pen and ink and watercolour over pencil and black chalk 37.1x 52.8 cm (sheet) *Butlin 1981, 812.99; Butlin & Gott, 38, National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne. Felton Bequest, 1920 (1023-3). This unfinished work shows Blake's sketching technique and includes extensive notes relating to his ideas for the composition*

Blake frequently laid different colours next to each other resulting in a dynamic, vibrant effect. This technique is seen in *Dante Running from the Three Beasts* where gamboge, red lake, vermilion and Prussian blue have been placed in close proximity to depict the radiant sunrise over an expanse of water.

BRUSHWORK

While examining the works under the stereo microscope it was occasionally possible to gain a sense of the vigour with which the camel hair brush had been used. Pilling of the surface fibres and localised abrasion where Blake had worked vigorously with a loaded brush could be seen. His brushwork ranges from broad sweeps of colour to tiny strokes delicately applied with a fine brush. There are a small number of examples within the most highly finished works that include stippling, an aesthetic Blake would have been familiar with through his previous use of stipple engraving. Stippling with brush and aqueous media would have been perfected by him from 1800 whilst working as a miniature painter and the technique was increasingly used by contemporary watercolourists such as J.M.W. Turner in the first decades of the nineteenth century (Lister 1975). Stippling was observed in several of the works including *Dante Adoring Christ*, where the face of Christ has been delicately rendered in great detail using tiny brushstrokes (Figure 5).

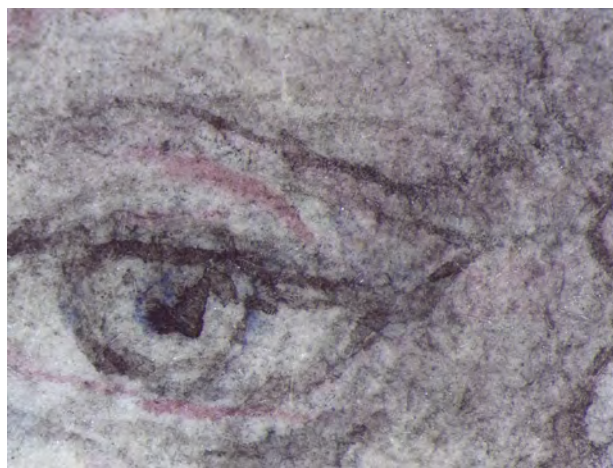


Figure 5. William BLAKE *Dante Adoring Christ* (1824-1827) illustration to *The Divine Comedy* by Dante Alighieri (Paradiso XIV, 97-111) pen and ink, watercolour and gum over black chalk 52.7 x 37.2 cm (sheet) *Butlin 1981, 812.90; Butlin & Gott, 35, National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne. Felton Bequest, 1920 (1020-3). Photomicrograph showing Blake's stippling technique*

SPONGING

Several works in the collection contain areas of sponging, a technique not noted in previous studies of the series. Sponging is used to soften effects, blend various pigments or to create highlights by removing pigment to reveal the glow of the underlying paper support. In cases where a compositional change is desired, it can be used to intentionally erase elements the artist is unhappy with. Having been given a copy of Cennino Cennini's *Tratto della Pittura* by John Linnell, Blake was familiar with the teachings of Cennini who suggested wetting out an unsatisfactory area of the composition with a large brush steeped in water and then rubbing over it to remove surface fibres so the area could be reworked (Lister 1975). During Blake's time it was common for a small piece of bread rolled into a ball or a sponge to be used to rub and draw the pigment away from the paper's surface. Within the collection there are examples where the technique has been used to create highlights such as areas of the lightning bolts in *Capaneus the Blasphemer* while in other works such as

The *Six-Footed Serpent Attacking Agnello dei Brunelleschi* pigment removal is more likely to be intended erasure that Blake planned to later repaint but died before he could revisit the work (Figure 6).



Figure 6. William BLAKE *Capaneus the Blasphemer*, (1824-1827) illustration to *The Divine Comedy* by Dante Alighieri (InfernoXIV, 46-72), pen and ink and watercolour over pencil and black chalk, 37.4 x 52.7 cm (sheet), *Butlin 1981, 812.27; Butlin & Gott, 12*, National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne. Felton Bequest, 1920 (997-3). *The highlights in the lightning bolts are achieved by sponging.*

SCRATCHING OUT

Another technique not noted in previous studies but observed in one of the most highly finished of the works examined is scratching out. In rendering the raindrop-like forms descending from the clouds above the head of *Antaeus in Antaeus setting down Dante*, Blake has used a penknife or similar tool to remove the pigment sitting on the paper surface and some of the underlying fibres to create pristine white lines that act as highlights.

QUILL AND INK

In most of the works, it appears that once the watercolour washes were laid down and had been manipulated to Blake's satisfaction, the composition was outlined using black ink lines applied with a quill (presumably in preparation for later engraving). According to research undertaken at Tate, he used ready-made 'India ink' (a carbon black ink) for this purpose (Townsend 2003). The ink was made by combining soot with a water-based medium such as gum or glue. In the nineteenth century, shellac dissolved in borax was added to render the ink insoluble in water and this property would have allowed Blake to use the ink over or under passages of watercolour without the risk of the ink running (*ibid.*). Red/brown coloured ink was used in addition to black ink in the work *Minos*, but this was the only example of a different type of ink found during this study.

CONCLUSION

Information gained from the brief time spent examining the 'Melbourne Blakes' has resulted in a greater awareness of the light sensitivity of the works due to the presence of particular pigments such as gamboge and red lake. This knowledge will help inform decisions about their future display to ensure they

remain as rich and vibrant as they are at this time. Display durations for each work will continue to be carefully monitored and light levels during display periods will be maintained in accordance with the NGV's lighting policy for ultra-sensitive works. In addition, blackout roller blinds will continue to be drawn over the works whilst in storage so they are not exposed to incidental light when the store is in use.

ENDNOTES

1. The first line of William Blake's 'Auguries of Innocence', published in 1863 in the companion volume to the first edition of Alexander Gilchrist's biography of Blake.
2. *The Divine Comedy* is divided into three parts: Hell, Purgatory and Heaven. The 'Melbourne Blakes' include 26 scenes from Hell, 6 from Purgatory and 4 from Paradise.
3. Of the works examined, 21 are landscape orientation and 14 are portrait.
4. William Elgar operated Chafford Mill on the Medway, outside the village of Fordcombe, near Tonbridge between c. 1785 and 1802. The mill specialised in production of fine writing paper that was suited to drawing and watercolour work and was used by both Blake and Turner (Bower: 2003).
5. The gamboge on the two colour charts also appeared olive green under UV light.

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