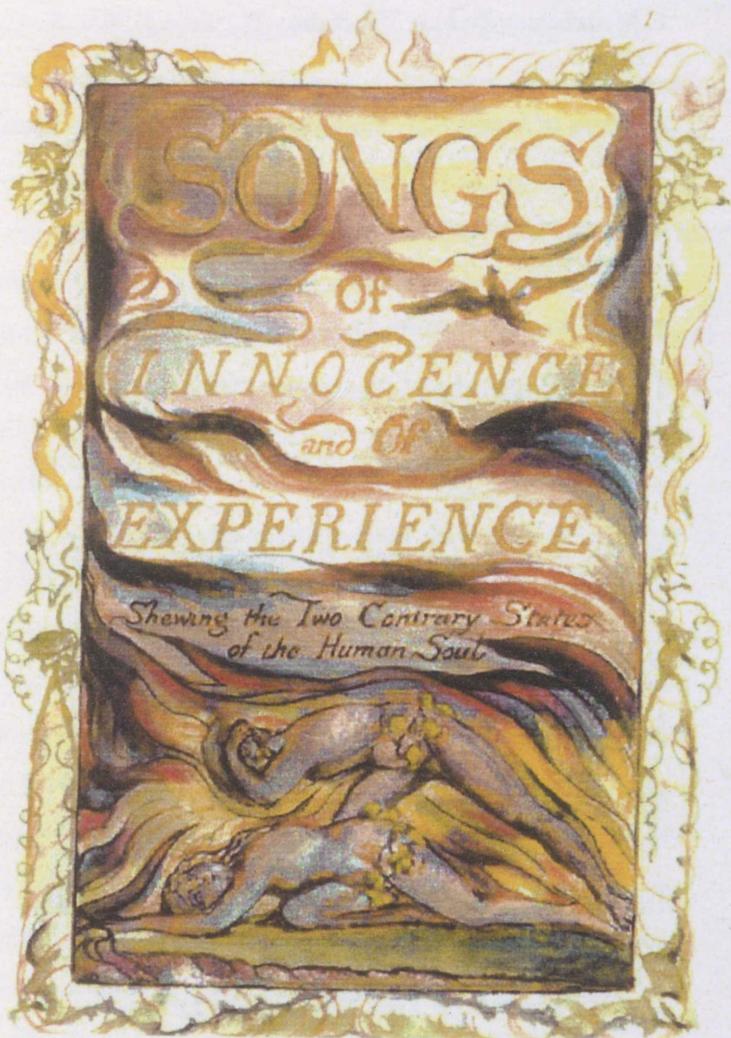


William Blake's  
Songs of Innocence and of Experience



Schaffer Library  
May 10 - May 31, 2001

## - Items Listed -

### Part A *Songs of Innocence*

1. Manchester Etching Workshop Portfolio (1983). See page 5
2. *Songs of Innocence* frontispiece and title page William Muir (1927). See page 3
3. *Songs of Innocence* title page Manchester Etching Workshop
4. "The Lamb" Trianon Press (1954). See pages 4 & 7
5. "The Lamb" Manchester Etching Workshop.
6. *Songs of Innocence* title page proof Michael Phillips (2000). See pages 1, 2 & 6
7. Copper plate of *Songs of Innocence* title page Michael Phillips (1998)

### Part B *Songs of Experience*

8. "The Tyger" Trianon Press (1955). See pages 4 & 7
9. *Songs of Experience* frontispiece and title page William Muir
10. *Songs of Experience* title page Manchester Etching Workshop
11. "My Pretty Rose Tree" Manchester Etching Workshop
12. "London" Manchester Etching Workshop

## Blake's Etching and Coloring Methods

For creating *Songs of Innocence*, Blake invented a new method of printing he called "Illuminated Printing," which allowed him to use all his skills as an engraver, book designer, poet, painter and watercolorist. With help from his wife, he was responsible for every stage of the production process.

Each copper plate was first meticulously "relief etched." After thoroughly cleaning the plate's surface, Blake used an acid resistant medium to draw directly on it, in reverse, his poem and image, as he wanted them to appear. The copper plate was then bathed in acid, and the parts that were not covered with acid resistant medium were eaten or etched away. The process of drawing and etching was then repeated, Blake taking care that the acid did not undercut the words and pictures left in relief. This was a time consuming process as the plates had to be watched so that no "bubbling" of the acid collapsed what was to be printed in *relievo*. The resulting bite or depth of the plate was little more than 1/10th of a millimeter. After the plate was finished, Blake printed proof copies to make sure there were no mistakes. He then printed his *Songs* in different colored inks such as green, brown, yellow ochre and raw sienna. When the prints dried he water-colored them with the help of his wife.

When Blake began printing *Songs of Experience* he experimented with a different process called "color printing."

After printing an ink impression of a plate, he would wipe the plate clean, apply opaque color pigments directly to it, and then take a second "color—printed" impression, this either by hand or by passing it lightly through a press. By color printing his second series of songs, the character of each series became distinctive: the translucent watercolor wash for *Innocence* and the opaque color printing for *Experience* joining to express Blake's conception of the collection as representing "Two Contrary States of the Human Soul."

In addition to being "Contrary States," the *Songs of Innocence* and *Songs of Experience* were printed on contrary sides of the same copper plates, Blake using the backs of the plates for *Innocence* to etch plates for *Experience*. He printed and colored copies of his *Songs of Innocence* and *Songs of Innocence and of Experience* over many years, so no two copies are exactly alike. Each, in fact, is unique. Too, in early copies many of the poems were printed on both sides of the paper, in later copies on one side only. Blake, it seems, never ceased from exploration, from the need to reinvent. He lived always by his own adage expressed in his long poem, *Jerusalem*: "I must Create a System, or be enslav'd by another Mans."

### William Muir Facsimiles

Alexander Gilchrist's *Life of William Blake* (1863 and 1880) encouraged the publication of facsimiles of Blake's illuminated books. One of the earliest, most ambitious, and most successful of these were produced at The Blake Press by William Muir, his wife, family and friends. Twelve titles -- two of them *Songs of Innocence* and *Songs of Experience*-- were printed and colored by hand in runs of 50 copies between 1884 and 1890. It was a dedicated act of great labor and love. As Muir writes in his Preface: "This one of the most beautiful books in the English Language owes its form to the poverty and obscurity of its author.... The simplicity and clear-heartedness that shine in the verses and the delicate fancy that graces their ornaments produce a unique result." For the Blake Centenary in 1927, Muir, with help from others, printed and colored 50 more copies of *Songs*, the facing reproductions from *Experience* and *Innocence* open for display being from that edition.

## Trianon Press Editions

The Trianon Press is responsible for the near perfect facsimiles of Blake's *Songs of Innocence* and *Songs of Innocence and of Experience* on display. The first title is an example of a lightly washed early copy, the second a richly colored late copy. For these exceptional replicas, the methods of collotype and *pochoir* were used. Collotype, which requires precise and highly skilled work, is the most accurate method of photomechanical reproduction yet invented. It is also a method that can produce at most two thousand quality impressions. *Pochoir* color proofs were obtained by superimposing all the stenciled colors required for each plate over the base collotype. These proofs were then compared with Blake's original coloring and corrections were made. It took about a month for a skilled craftsman to obtain a satisfactory color proof, and about seven to nine weeks for colorists to apply the stenciled watercolors to one specific plate for an edition run. *Songs of Innocence* (1954) was printed in an edition of 1600, *Songs of Innocence and of Experience* (1955) in an edition of 526.

### Manchester Etching Workshop Facsimiles

The Manchester Etching Workshop's limited edition of 1983 is the most recent attempt at reproducing the highest quality facsimile of a selection of Blake's *Songs*. For authenticity, the paper is hand woven and matches the tone of the Whatman paper that Blake used. It is also watermarked *Songs of Innocence* and *Songs of Experience*, and is embossed with Blake's own monogram. Unlike the Trianon facsimiles which used modern pigments and were colored by stencil, each color in this facsimile was mixed according to eighteenth century recipes and each print was colored by hand. Careful observation shows the additional use of pen and ink, which intensifies and enhances the soft washes as well as follows Blake's practice of clarifying details.

## Etching Tools and Processes

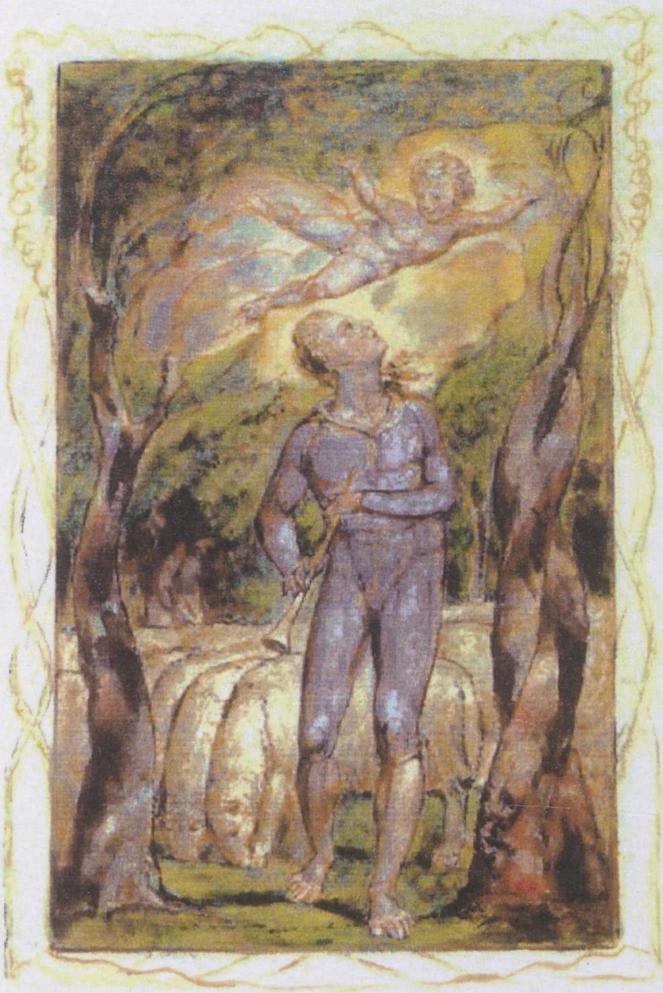
The copper plate and print made by Michael Phillips are replicas of the title page of *Songs of Innocence*. After effectively reproducing Blake's relief etched plate, Phillips printed an impression from it in gray ink-- a proof similar to the Manchester print in black of "The Lamb." The slender etching needle and wooden handled graver beside the plate are modern tools similar to ones Blake would have used to make his living as a commercial engraver. He probably also used them for fine work in his relief etched illuminated plates, the particularly thin, white lines in the lower portion of this print being examples. Only one small piece of a relief etched plate by Blake has survived, and this from a proof plate for *America a Prophecy* that ended up not being used for the final version of that poem.

### “The Lamb” and “The Tyger” as Contrary States

Blake’s “The Lamb” from *Songs of Innocence* and “The Tyger” from *Songs of Experience* exemplify the differences between what Blake calls the “Two Contrary States of the Human Soul.” In *Songs of Innocence*, innocence prevails and is simplistic, one-dimensional. The lamb is young, soft, meek, mild, and in its naivete is untroubled by the multidimensional world of experience. By comparison, “The Tyger” is complex and deals with intense emotions such as fear, dread, terror and awe. Experience has forced the speaker of “The Tyger” to face the more passionate and violent side of life while innocence protects the young speaker of “The Lamb” from such knowledge.

## Coloring

After mixing his “few and simple” watercolors, Blake, probably with the help of his wife, applied them to his print in a thin wash using a fine, soft, camel hair brush. As if to convey a sense of *Innocence*, the earliest copies of that volume were delicately colored in flat, pastel tones with both printed line and wash visible and in seeming balance with each other. In most cases, later copies of the combined *Songs* were colored more brightly, deeply, elaborately, dramatically, as if Blake were more interested in producing a highly finished collection of individual carefully colored prints than a book of illustrated interrelated lyrics whose words and pictures played off each other to puzzle, challenge and provoke its reader—viewer to thought. The variety of uncolored and colored examples from *Songs of Innocence and of Experience* on view forces the viewer to consider the many ways that coloring might, can, and does affect interpretation.



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