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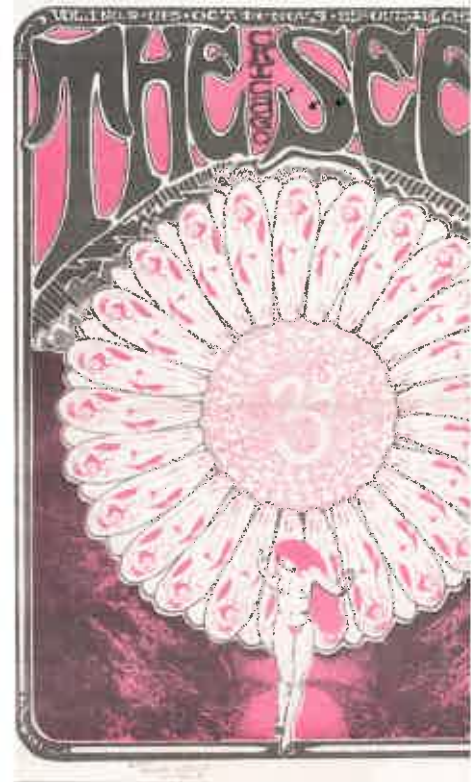
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WILLIAM BLAKE EXHIBIT AT THE BLOCK MUSEUM

by Suzanne Hanney

When rock musician Jim Morrison studied the British artist/poet William Blake (1757-1827) in a college English class, he asked his professor if Blake ever used psychedelic drugs to produce his dreamy images of man and nature.

His professor responded that Blake didn't need to; he had his own visions of angels in trees.

Even casual viewers who do not understand Blake the artist have a visceral view of his images in relation to spreading love, peace or personal spirituality, says Corinne Granof, curator of academic programs at the Block Museum of Art at Northwestern University, who consulted with curator and Northwestern Professor of Art History Stephen F. Eisenman to produce its current exhibit, "William Blake and the Age of Aquarius."

The exhibition is the first to consider Blake's impact on American artists from the end of World War II through 1970 in more than 150 paintings, photographs, films, posters and other media from the 1950s, '60s and '70s. There are also more than 50 rare Blake engravings from illuminated books loaned from major collections such as The Rosenbach in Philadelphia and the Yale Center for British Art.

"This exhibition, the first to explore William Blake's impact on 20th century popular culture, is populated by beats, hippies, poets, rockers and artistic voices of the counterculture," Eisenman said in prepared material. "Blake's protests against the conventions and repressions of his own society became a model for many young Americans, particularly those disillusioned by social conformity, consumerism, racial and gender discrimination, environmental degradation and the Vietnam War."

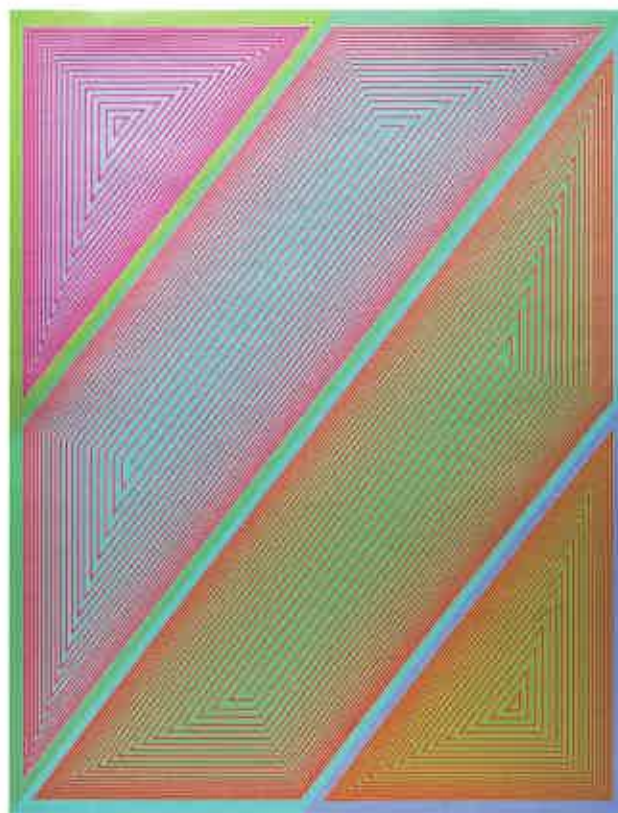
Blake was relatively unknown in his own era. He was eccentric and nonconventional, anti-monarchist, a painter of pastoral images in protest against the Industrial Revolution. A 1957 exhibit, "Masters of British Painting" in New York, San Francisco and St. Louis, accelerated the spread of Blake's work, Granof said.

Earlier, in the mid-1940s, artists like Sam Francis, Stanley William Hayter, Agnes Martin, Jackson Pollock, Charles Seliger, Robert Smithson and Clyfford Still started rediscovering Blake poems such as "The Tyger" and "The Shepherd," which is covered in one phase of the exhibition. Still another section explores the Beat culture and radical poet Allen Ginsburg's promotion of Blake to fellow poets and writers, with audio of Ginsburg singing them and album covers with Blake designs.

The image that headlines the exhibition is "The Ancient of Days," a godlike figure with flowing hair who holds calipers as a way of measuring and ordering the universe, Granof said.

Blake's rebelliousness against authority was a model of resistance for 1960s hippies against the Vietnam War and commercialism, Granof said. The way 1960s activists used flowers as a pervasive, alternative symbol of youth and innocence – Abbie Hoffman's adage, "Don't trust anyone over 30" – was part of this philosophy.

Blake's thoughts about youth and innocence are a consistent thread in the exhibition. For example, Diane Arbus published a photo spread in Harper's Bazaar in 1963 headlined "Auguries of Innocence," which was the title of a Blake poem. Bob Dylan took his "Every Grain of Sand" from the same poem, in which Blake suggests, "To see the world in a grain of sand, And a heaven in a wildflower, Hold infinity in the palm of your hand..."



From Left:

John Stepan, Painting for cover of *The Tiger's Eye*, issues #5-8, c. 1948, oil on canvas. Yale University Art Gallery, courtesy of John J. Stepan

Cover of the *Chicago Seed*, vol. 1, no. 9, 1967. Charles Deering McCormick Library of Special Collections, Northwestern University Libraries

William Blake, "Ancient of Days," frontispiece for *Europe a prophecy*, 1794, relief etching. The Rosenbach, Philadelphia. Photographer: Jonathan Donovan

Richard Anuszkiewicz, "Inward Eye #2," from the portfolio *Inward Eye*, 1970, serigraph. Courtesy of Swope Art Museum @ Richard Anuszkiewicz/ Licensed by VAGA, New York/NY VAGA,

Similarly, Granof said, Morrison named his band The Doors because of a quote in Blake's book, "The Marriage of Heaven and Hell:" "If the doors of perception were cleansed, everything would appear to man as it is – infinite. For man has closed himself up, till he sees all things thro' narrow chinks of his cavern." Morrison chose the name after reading Aldous Huxley's book, "The Doors of Perception," about his 1950s experiments with mescaline.

Blake's art, poetry and ideas resonated with 20th century artists across various media so the exhibit coalesces artists across genres. Some used his lyrics as titles. Others experimented with printing techniques and Blake's innovative combinations of text and image – pictures curling around text in a way that hadn't been done before. Still others cited his worldview in letters, diaries or essays.

The exhibit is also the first major museum exhibition to present Blake's prints and illuminated poetry such as "Songs of Innocence and Experience" side by side with objects from 20th century art and popular culture. Featured artists include Arbus, Bruce Conner, Jay DeFeo, Robert Frank, Allen Ginsburg, Stanley William Hayer, Jimi Hendrix, Agnes Martin, Ad Reinhardt, Maurice Sendak, The Doors and The Fugs.

Eisenman brought the idea for the exhibit six years ago and it gained momentum when Lisa Corrin became the Museum's Ellen Philip Katz director, Granof said. Although the Beat poets had been studied extensively, the group of companion visual artists never had been.

Corrin said in prepared material that bringing together art, archives, popular and material culture "exemplifies the Block's mission as a teaching museum, and the University-wide emphasis on cross-disciplinary inquiry."

The exhibit focus changed very little since the 2016 election, although protests over Black Lives Matter and singing of the national anthem relate to the spirit of questioning and rebellion during the Age of Aquarius, Granof said. "It seems to have a lot more resonance than we anticipated."

Yet while "William Blake and the Age of Aquarius" is a serious exhibit, "There's a lot of fun elements too and a little nostalgia," she said.

Art came from Northwestern's special collections at Deering Library, augmented by loans from the Yale Center for British Art, the Smithsonian American Art Museum, the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York and others. There were rock posters from 1966 to 1969 in Northwestern's collection and a few purchases for this exhibit. In addition, the Block Museum and Princeton University co-published the exhibition catalog, "William Blake and the Age of Aquarius," edited by Eisenman, which features seven essays that tell how Blake's myths, visions and radicalism resonated with American artists who valued individualism, expanded consciousness, peace, and the power of love in a turbulent age.

"William Blake and the Age of Aquarius" will be at the Block Museum until March 11, 2018 and will not tour.

The Block Museum of Art is located at 40 Arts Circle Drive on the Northwestern University campus in Evanston. The museum is closed Mondays but open Tuesdays, Saturdays and Sundays, 10 a.m.-5 p.m.; Wednesdays, Thursdays and Fridays, 10 a.m.-8 p.m. It will be closed for the holidays December 22-Jan. 8, 2018.