"A DESCRIPTIVE CATALOGUE"
ADVERTISEMENT (1809)

COPY REPRODUCED HERE: Copy A (Glasgow University Library), the only copy known.
LEAF SIZE: 13.8 x 16.5 cm.
WATERMARK: None

HISTORY: (1) The advertisement was mounted on a sheet of paper watermarked 1820 which was hinged to a stub and bound by "J. LEIGHTON. BREWER STREET" by 1830 (when John Leighton died) with Descriptive Catalogue (1809) Copy O in half red morocco over patterned and stamped red cloth with "BLAKE'S CATALOGUE", "LONDON/1809" on the spine, the top edge gilt, probably for Blake's friend and chief patron Thomas Butts, for whom it was sold posthumously by Foster & Son, London, 29 June 1853, Lot 93 (described vaguely as "PROCEDURE OF CANTERBURY PILGRIMS; with explanations by the artist"), for £10.10.0 to (2) Stirling, i.e., Sir William Stirling-Maxwell (1818-1878) who added his bookplate and from whom it passed to his son (3) Sir John Maxwell Stirling-Maxwell (1866-1956), who bequeathed it at his death to (4) GLASGOW UNIVERSITY LIBRARY.

CONTEXT: Probably Blake sent copies of his advertisement for the Descriptive Catalogue in the spring of 1809 to friends like Thomas Butts, as he had the advertisement for the exhibition itself. The stress upon originality — "Original Conceptions on Art, by an Original Artist" — is Blake's response to the commonplace view, held notably by the Royal Academy, that engravers, as mere copyists, do not deserve the same respect as Original Artists. See the reproduction of Blake's Chaucer engraving page 123.
A DESCRIPTIVE CATALOGUE

OF

BLAKE's EXHIBITION,

At No. 28, Corner of

BROAD STREET,

GOLDEN-SQUARE.

THE grand Style of Art restored; in Fresco, or Water-colour
Painting, and England protected from the too just imputation of
being the Seat and Protectress of bad (that is blotting and blurring)
Art.

In this Exhibition will be seen real Art, as it was left us by
Raphael and Albert Durer, Michael Angelo, and Julio Romano; stripped
from the Ignorances of Rubens and Rembrandt, Titian and Correggio;

BY WILLIAM BLAKE.

The Descriptive Catalogue, Price 2½d. containing Mr. By's Opinions and Determinations on Art, very necessary to be known by Artists and Connoisseurs of all Ranks. Every Purchaser of a Catalogue will be entitled, at the time of purchase, to view the Exhibition.

These Original Conceptions on Art, by an Original Artist, are Sold only at the Corner of BROAD STREET.

Admittance to the Exhibition 1 Shilling; an Index to the Catalogue gratis.

Printed by Watts & Bridgewater, Southwark-street.
A DESCRIPTIVE CATALOGUE (1809)

COPY REPRODUCED HERE: Copy O (Glasgow University Library).

LEAF SIZE: c. 11.5 x 19.0 cm. uncut (Copies C, E, G); Copy O is 11.0 (irregular) x 18.3 cm.

WATERMARK: 1807 A P edgemark

ORIGIAL BINDING: Probably stabbed in unlabelled greyish-blue paper wrappers.

BINDING AND HISTORY OF COPY O are as in the "Descriptive Catalogue" advertisement with which it is bound.

CONTEXT: Blake probably had fifty to a hundred copies of his Descriptive Catalogue (1809) printed to sell for 2s 6d to those who attended the exhibition of his sixteen water-colours and temperas held in his brother's hosier shop at No. 28, Broad Street, Golden Square, Soho, which was also the Blake family home where the artist was born. A few extra copies were probably printed of gathering G, or at least of G6 containing the Index, for "A Descriptive Catalogue" advertisement offered "an Index to the Catalogue gratis" with the price of admission (1s) to the exhibition. No separate copy of the Index is known to have survived. Blake announced that "the Exhibition . . . [will] close . . . the 29th of September 1809" (p. [iii]), but it did not close then, and it may scarcely have been open at that unfashionable season. George Cumberland, Jr., apparently saw it in October 1809, Henry Crabb Robinson went to it on 23 April 1810, and he took Charles and Mary Lamb there on 11 June 1810.† On copies sold at the shop, Blake apparently regularly made two of the most obviously needed corrections to the Descriptive Catalogue, on the title-page to indicate where the pictures could be seen and purchased, and on p. 64. These two corrections are visible on about half (eight of seventeen) of the copies which have been traced, including Copy O reproduced here. The other copies, which were not corrected, he probably gave away to friends of later years — Frederick Tatham's (Copy P) was a gift "from the Author, June 12, 1824", and John Linnell bought his (Copy K) from Blake's widow in 1831, both copies lacking these corrections.
The only public notice of the Descriptive Catalogue was a savage attack in The Examiner for 17 September 1809, in which Robert Hunt called Blake “an unfortunate lunatic, whose personal offensiveness secures him from confinement” and whose “few wretched pictures...are very badly drawn.” Even Blake’s friends were taken aback by the Descriptive Catalogue. George Cumberland wrote that “Blake’s Cat. is truly original — part vanity part madness — part very good sense.” Blake had replied boldly to Robert Hunt’s criticisms of his Grave designs in print in the Descriptive Catalogue pp. 36-37, but the reception of his exhibition and his Descriptive Catalogue apparently destroyed his faith in the benevolence of the public and drove him to scurrilous doggerel in his Notebook:

The Examiner whose very name Hunt
Called Death [Blake] a Madman trembling for the affront[,].

For about ten years Blake was driven deeper and deeper into obscurity. Between 1809 and 1818 he received commissions for only four books and three separate engravings, so far as we know; his chief patron Thomas Butts seems to have asked for no more of his drawings; and Blake seems to have rebuffed new patrons and old friends alike. In July 1816 Nancy Flaxman wrote to her husband about “what pass’d between” Blake and an acquaintance who wanted to buy some of Blake’s works:

I understand B— was very violent Indeed beyond all credence only that he has served you his best friend the same trick [some] time back as you must well remember. . . . other people are not oblig’d to put up with B s odd humours.[5]

It is a sad period of Blake’s life, when the fire of genius seems to be flickering out and he is withdrawn deep within himself.

But at the end of this period Blake was discovered by a group of young artists, among whom the best known today are John Linnell and Samuel Palmer and George Richmond, who became his friends and disciples, and the last ten years of Blake’s life (1818-27) were among the most gloriously productive of his life. During these years he completed his Jerusalem (1804-20), his Virgil woodcuts (1821), his Pilgrim’s Progress designs (?1824), his Job designs and engravings (1826) and his Dante designs and engravings (1824-27). Posterity has concluded that it was not Blake who misunderstood reality but Blake’s contemporaries who misapprehended Blake.
For the full stop after "dispute" substitute a question-mark.

For the colone after "Voltaire", substitute a comma.

For "opinions" read "opinion" — Copy K is thus corrected by hand.

Suppress the black quad between "among" and "the".

For "sat" read "set".

For the full stop after "naked" substitute a query.

For "of want" read "want of", as Blake corrected copies B-D, F-H, J, l, and O (this one).

For the full stop, substitute a query and insert the missing "I" in "line".

For page "30" read "39".

Blake seems to be quoting, with minor normalizations, from The Works of Our Ancient and Learned English Poet, Geoffrey Chaucer [ed. T. Speght] (1602), which has a list of "old and obscure words in Chaucer explained", evidently by Francis Thynne, to which Blake refers directly on p. 9 (the "Tabarde . . . Inn . . . was the lodging of the Abbott of Hyde by Winchester"). Blake quotes from The Author's Prologue, II. 146-147 (p. 7), I. 622 (p. 8), l. 108 (p. 11), l. 163-164 (p. 12), l. 208 (p. 13), ll. 237-238 (p. 14), ll. 663-665 (p. 18), I. 345 (p. 21), ll. 536-538 (p. 21 bottom), l. 24 (p. 23 top), l. 362 (p. 23 bottom), l. 83 (p. 24), l. 83-87 (p. 28 top), ll. 94-96 (p. 28 bottom), ll. 99-100 (p. 29), l. 622 (p. 30), The Nun's Priest's Tale, II. 3952-3959 (p. 15 top), The Monk's Tale, ll. 3132-3136 (p. 15 bottom), and The Wife of Bath's Tale, ll. 469-480 (pp. 30-31).

A selection from the Canterbury Pilgrims with two plates by Blake, called The Prologue and Characters from Chaucer's Pilgrims (1812), was published apparently to advertise Blake's print, and the first clause in the second paragraph here was quoted in it. The last sentence in that paragraph was paraphrased by William Hazlitt in his Lectures on the English Poets (1818, p. 50), pp. 25, para. 2: The "ignorant hirelings" against whom Blake was defending himself had attacked his Blair designs in The Examiner (R[ober]t H[unt]) for 7 August 1808, The Anticipatin Review for November 1808, and The
The "competitors" here are Thomas Stothard, Louis Schiavonetti, and Robert Hartley Cromek. Cromek first commissioned Blake to make drawings and engravings for Blair's *Grave* and then gave the engravings to Schiavonetti, and he then commissioned Stothard to paint the Canterbury Pilgrims, based according to Blake on Chaucer's *Chaucer* drawing, and Schiavonetti to engrave it.

p. 28, top para.: What Blake refers to as "my rival's prospectus" is the PROSPECTUS for Stothard's picture of THE PROCESSION OF CHAUCER'S PILGRIMS TO CANTERBURY which was printed with the edition of Blair's *Grave* (1808) with designs by Blake etched by Louis Schiavonetti. Blake refers to it on p. 10, para. 3, p. 23 top para., pp. 29, 30 ("it appears" says), pp. 32, 33. Blake seems to assume that his readers will be familiar with the Stothard Prospectus.

pp. 33, 34: The couplets appear in slightly modified form in Blake's *Notebook* pp. 36, 34 (pp. 947, 945).

p. 42, top para.: "the form of the fourth is like the Son of God" is Daniel 3:25.

See the reproduction of Blake's Chaucer engraving page 123.

**NOTES:**

6. The corrigenda list omits minor eccentricities of punctuation and capitalization (which may reflect Blake's text), defects of type (such as the broken first "i" in "sublimity" in p. 18, the "f" of the last "of" on p. 31 top paragraph in the wrong font), and the fact that pp. 44 and 47 have more lines than pp. 45-46. The work was not "on the whole carefully printed", as Sir Geoffrey Keynes asserts (*The Complete Writings of William Blake* [1957], p. 913).
A DESCRIPTIVE CATALOGUE
OF
PICTURES,
Poetical and Historical Inventions,
PAINTED BY
WILLIAM BLAKE,
IN
WATER COLOURS,
BEING THE ANCIENT METHOD OF
FRESCO PAINTING RESTORED:
AND
DRAWINGS,
FOR PUBLIC INSPECTION,
AND FOR
Sale by Private Contract,
at No 28 Corner of Broad Street, Golden Square

LONDON:
Printed by D. N. Shury, 7, Berwick-Street, Soho,
for J. Blake, 28, Broad-Street, Golden-Square.

1809.