Signing Large Color Prints: The Significance of Blake's Signatures

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ABSTRACT Among William Blake's greatest achievements as both painter and printmaker are his large monoprints of 1795. Blake produced thirty-three monoprints of twelve designs, twenty-nine of which are extant. He signed at least twenty, using five different formats, but is thought to have sold only eleven, all to Thomas Butts. The present essay sequences the signatures and argues that Blake also sold nine monoprints to three collectors between 1806 and 1810, that he sold his first monoprints to Butts by mid-1796, that he printed designs in a heretofore unknown printing session in ca. 1795–96, and that, around 1807, he changed his idea about the monoprint, from large color print to a new kind of painting. The monoprints reveal that Blake's general practice was to sign artworks not upon execution or completion, but upon sale. **KEYWORDS:** dating impressions of Blake's works; history and significance of artists' signatures; methods of relief color printing; originality in printed artworks; mechanical painting and polygraphy

Many . . . of the almost numberless host of Blake's water-colour drawings, on high scriptural and poetic themes, OR *frescos*, as he called those (even on *paper*) more richly coloured, and with more impasto than the rest, continued to be produced; some for Mr. Butts, some to lie on hand; all now widely dispersed, nearly all undated, unhappily, though mostly *signed*. If men would but realize the possible value of a *date*!

Alexander Gilchrist, *Life of Blake*[1]

Perhaps, like so many who work on Blake, I am trying to find significance where no significance exists. I am sure that one can be led astray just as much by the physical realities, so called, as by the most arcane of theories.

Martin Butlin, "The Physicality of William Blake: The Large Color Prints of '1795'"[2]

1. Alexander Gilchrist, *Life of Blake, "Pictor Ignotus,"* 2 vols. (London, 1863), 1:245.
2. Martin Butlin, "The Physicality of William Blake: The Large Color Prints of '1795,'" *Huntington Library Quarterly* 52 (1989): 1–18 at 9.

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A FEW YEARS AGO, my neighbor bought a new car, his first in thirty years. Delivery took another three weeks because he ordered a special hue of red. Finally, there it was in his driveway. Two days later, he awoke to find the front bumper had been marked up and autographed, with a stone scratching through the paint. The signature? Sofia Viscomi.

A few things occurred to me immediately. My daughter Sofia, who was five and apparently practicing how to sign her name in diverse media, was not framed by her sister Maria, since she was only three. Next thought? "Not cheap!" But what also popped into mind, immediately and vividly, was the voice of an instructor that Sofia had had in an art class at the local museum, telling her and the other children repeatedly to sign their work, for that is what artists do. And that certainly is what we all believe today, in one form or another: that artists sign their works and that signatures, not dates, signify completion. Indeed, unsigned works seem, somehow, incomplete.[3]

As I looked at Sofia's signature, hearing the museum worker's voice instructing children to *sign* their work, I thought: how completely unlike Blake. He did *not* sign paintings or watercolor drawings or large color prints upon completion or execution; he signed them upon sale. His signature signified a transfer of ownership. As we shall see, an examination of Blake's signatures on the large color prints reveals that he sold the ones he signed and that signing upon sale was his general practice for noncommissioned works.

Large Color Prints

Without question, among William Blake's greatest achievements as both painter and printmaker are his large color prints. Twenty-nine impressions of twelve designs are extant.[4] The designs are in landscape format and, at approximately 40 × 60 cm, all large relative to the illuminated books that preceded them and most of the temperas and watercolors that followed. In 1795, when invented, they were the largest works Blake had executed. The first design appears to have been *God Judging Adam* (fig. 1), which was executed on a copperplate, its outline etched in low relief.[5] It is the only

3. In *If You Give a Mouse a Cookie*, by Laura Joffe Numeroff (New York, 1985), one of Sofia's favorite books, the mouse asks for "paper and crayons. He'll draw a picture. When the picture is finished, he'll want to sign his name" (n.p.).

4. I will use the term *design* to refer to the work as an abstraction, the terms *impression* and *print* interchangeably to refer to the printed object (the material manifestation of the work), and the term *matrix* to refer to the support or template on which the design's outline is executed and from which the prints are taken.

5. *God Judging Adam* was known as *Elijah and the Fiery Chariot* until 1965, when Martin Butlin discovered under the image a faint, possibly erased "God Speaking to Adam," which he recognized as the presumably untraced *God Judging Adam* recorded in Blake's 1806 receipts account with Butts; G. E. Bentley Jr., *Blake Records,* 2nd ed. [hereafter cited as BR2] (New Haven, Conn., 2004), 764. William Michael Rossetti, Frederick Tatham, Anthony Blunt, and others had good reason to interpret the design as Elisha and Elijah, because it re-creates a watercolor of that subject; Martin Butlin, *The Paintings and Drawings of William Blake*, 2 vols.

FIGURE 1. *Elijah/God Judging Adam* (Butlin 294), monoprint. Tate Britain. © Tate, London 2017.

design among the large color prints executed as a relief etching, the technique Blake used to make the plates for most of his illuminated books. It appears to have been an experiment at scaling up both Blake's plate-making technique and the method of printing colors that he had been using throughout 1794 to print illuminated books. It is sixteen times the size of *The Book of Urizen* plates and like them was printed in relief simultaneously with colors from the shallows.[6] The evidence for printing outline and

(New Haven, Conn., 1981), 1:258. Blake appears to have originally intended to represent the prophets in the monoprint re-creation, even emphasizing the fiery icons in the biblical account, 2 Kings 8–11; he changed his mind about the design's meaning—but not its iconography—in ca. 1805, when he titled Butts's impression, along with the seven other monoprints that he sold Butts. For the full argument as to why the subject was not God judging Adam in 1795 but became so when Blake returned to the image ten years later, see Joseph Viscomi, *Printed Paintings*, forthcoming. In the present essay, I refer to the monoprinted design as *Elijah/God Judging Adam* to indicate Blake's initial and altered meanings.

6. For a discussion of Blake's technique for color-printing illuminated books, see Robert N. Essick and Joseph Viscomi, "An Inquiry into William Blake's Method of Color Printing," *Blake/An Illustrated Quarterly* 35 (Winter 2002): 73–102; for a discussion of color

colors together in one pull is the halo along the outline (fig. 2), the result of the paper picking up colors from the shallows but not along the escarpments at the juncture between relief plateaus and etched shallows.[7] Moreover, printed outlines from such large relief plates are necessarily broader, which makes their embossment into the paper noticeable. This, combined with the halo effect, reveals the image to have been printed or stamped into the paper—reveals, in other words, traces of the machine, the rolling press, and thus identifies the image as a print. In the much smaller color-printed relief etchings, these effects of technique (embossment) and printing method (halo) are minimal, easily missed or disguised.

Blake's next two large color prints appear to have been *Elohim Creating Adam* and *Satan Exulting over Eve*, which are the same size as *Elijah/God Judging Adam* and appear to have been printed from unetched metal plates. *Christ Appearing to the Apostles* and *Pity* appear to have followed, both executed and printed from millboards that were given gesso grounds.[8] The subsequent seven designs were also printed from gessoed millboards. Painting the gessoed surfaces with opaque water-miscible paints and transferring them onto damp sheets of wove paper by passing paper and matrixes through a rolling press produced prints resembling oil sketches. At this stage, the reticulated colors, lacking "a firm and determined outline,"[9] were not unlike the "Blots & Blurs" that Blake condemned (E, 576). Indeed, Frederick Tatham described Blake as having "blotted on" the colors and remarked that the "look of accident about this mode" required Blake to finish the impression in water-colors and pen and ink, "to bring out and favour what was there rather blurred."[10]

Blake referred to the large color prints in his 1806 receipts account with Thomas Butts as "Prints" (BR2, 764) and in an 1818 letter to Dawson Turner as "Large Prints . . . Printed in Colours" (E, 771). However, he signed five of them "Fresco W Blake inv." Today, we refer to them as "large color prints" and "color printed drawings," but also as "monotypes"[11] and "monoprints." Technically, they are monoprints, because Blake had drawn an outline of his design on his matrix, probably in pen and

printing as it relates to the monoprints and their evolution, see Joseph Viscomi, "Blake's 'Annus Mirabilis': The Productions of 1795," *Blake/An Illustrated Quarterly* 41 (Fall 2007): 52–83; and *Printed Paintings* (forthcoming).

7. The same halo effect is present in impressions from overinked relief etchings, where ink (rather than paint) prints from the shallows, along with the relief outline—and where there can be no question that the two were printed together. See, for example, *The Book of Thel* proofs (copy a) in the *William Blake Archive*, ed. Morris Eaves, Robert N. Essick, and Joseph Viscomi, http://www.blakearchive.org/copy/thel.a-proof.

8. Viscomi, "Blake's 'Annus Mirabilis,'" 61–63.

9. *The Complete Poetry and Prose of William Blake* [hereafter cited as E], ed. David V. Erdman, with commentary by Harold Bloom, rev. ed. (New York, 1988), 649. The quotation is from Sir Joshua Reynolds's third *Discourse*, annotated approvingly by Blake as "A Noble Sentence."

10. *Rossetti Papers 1862 to 1870*, comp. William Michael Rossetti (London, 1903), 17.

11. Anthony Blunt, *The Art of William Blake* (New York, 1959), 58; Raymond Lister, *Infernal Methods: A Study of William Blake's Art Techniques* (London, 1975), 58.

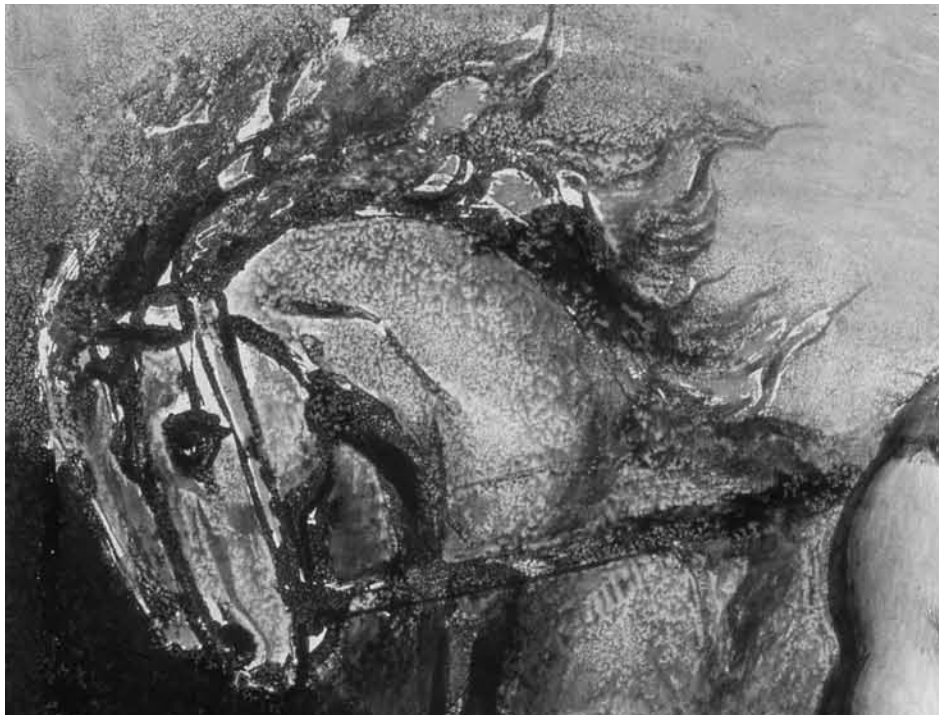


FIGURE 2. *Elijah/God Judging Adam* (Butlin 294), monoprint, detail of white lines in horses' heads. Tate Britain. © Tate, London 2017.

ink, and thus like prints, the design could be repeated. Unlike conventional prints, however, because so much improvisation was involved in painting a matrix and finishing its impressions, no two impressions of the same design can be exactly the same, hence the oxymoronic *mono*print, a print that is unique rather than exactly repeatable. Monotypes, on the other hand, are unique and purely improvisational images because they are printed from matrixes without fixed forms or lines.[12] Picture Degas's dancers, drawn on plates in diluted printers' ink. Proof that Blake's designs were monoprints—that the outlines were fixed on the matrix, making images reprintable—was discovered by Butlin and his Tate conservators in 1982, in the form of 1804 watermarks in *Newton* 306 and *Nebuchadnezzar* 301, evidence that the matrixes were reprinted between 1804 and 1805, when Blake sold the impressions to Butts.[13]

12. Beth Grabowski, *Printmaking: A Complete Guide to Materials and Processes* (London, 2009), 187; Michael Mazur, "Monotype: An Artist's View," in *The Painterly Print: Monotypes from the Seventeenth to the Twentieth Century* (New York, 1980), 55–62 at 62.

13. Martin Butlin, "A Newly Discovered Watermark and a Visionary's Way with His Dates," *Blake/An Illustrated Quarterly* 15 (Fall 1981): 101–3 at 101. I will refer to works in Butlin's

Rembrandt (1606–1669) had experimented in his late etchings with monoprints, by altering the plate tone per impression from the same plate. Hercules Segers (1589–1638) and Benedetto Castiglione (1609–1664) had also produced monotypes, the former in muted colors and the latter in white line on black ground. Blake is unlikely, however, to have known of Castiglione's or Segers's work. Printmaking and painting treatises of the period do not mention their methods. In any event, Blake was more radical and experimental then these earlier peintre-graveurs, in that he painted in a wider range of full-bodied colors on larger matrixes. No name for his processes or products existed, other than, perhaps, "Large Prints . . . in Colours." But, whatever we call them, they are in fact *printed paintings*. Robert Essick made a similar claim for Blake's illuminated prints, recognizing them as "printed manuscripts."[14] This perceptive oxymoron captures the essence of Blake's unique multiples, their appearing autographic, intimate, and, because they show no traces of their graphic production, as original productions rather than reproductions. I have discussed elsewhere in great detail why illuminated prints have these qualities, examining the tools and methods that Blake used to make his illuminated plates and books, in themselves and in light of new facsimile technologies and the aesthetic of the sketch much in vogue in England in the late eighteenth century.[15] The difference between Blake's relief etching and other methods that sought to reproduce the look and feel of drawings is that Blake's method enabled him to create printable designs with pens, brushes, and a liquid medium. In other methods, engravers used burins, needles, stipplers, roulettes, mezzotint rockers, and mattoirs—all metal tools of "sculpsit"—to manipulate lines and tones to create the *illusion* of pencil, pen, crayon, and brush. Blake had solved the technical problem of reproducing autographic marks and gestures in metal by performing as draughtsman and writer with the tools of the medium emulated.[16] Hence, his printed texts and images look like manuscripts because of how they were produced—which included being printed lightly to minimize embossments and thus traces of the rolling press.[17] To produce large painterly

Paintings and Drawings by their catalogue number (Butlin #), but for specific versions of designs I will cite title and number without parenthesis, e.g., *Newton* 307.

14. Robert N. Essick, *William Blake and the Language of Adam* (Oxford, 1989), 170.

15. See Viscomi, *Blake and the Idea of the Book*, chaps. 1–15, and Viscomi, "Illuminated Printing," in *Cambridge Companion to William Blake,* ed. Morris Eaves (Cambridge, 2003), 37–62.

16. For a discussion of illuminated printing's technical and aesthetic contexts, as well as intaglio methods analogous to and developed *before* Blake's, see Joseph Viscomi, "William Blake, Illuminated Books, and the Concept of Difference," in *Essays on Romanticism*, ed. Karl Kroeber and Gene Ruoff (New Brunswick, N.J., 1993), 63–87; and Viscomi, "Blake's Illuminated Word," in *Art, Word, and Image: 1000 Years of Visual/Textual Interaction*, ed. John Dixon Hunt, David Lomas, Michael Corris (London, 2009), 84–107.

17. Viscomi, *Blake and the Idea of the Book*, 3–46. Alexander Gourlay, in his essay in this volume, raises the possibility that Blake used a writing brush instead of a quill, because his "impervious liquid" may have been "glutinous" and thus did not flow like an ink. Linnell described the liquid as "glutinous," but then deleted the note, presumably realizing that the "stop-out" varnish could be diluted with turpentine to flow like a writing ink. My own experi-

prints, Blake worked in a similar manner, performing as a painter, applying opaque paints on flat surfaces with brushes and printing the painted design lightly to avoid platemarks.

Blake's monoprinting technique grew out of more than a year of printing the smaller relief etchings in colors. He would ink the plate and apply colors to the shallows and flat relief surfaces using brushes with cut-off tips (as revealed by tiny hairs in the paint layers); he would then print outline and colors together in one pull. Blake had adapted the standard *à la poupée* method used to print colors from intaglio plates, also referred to as "la manière anglaise," because English engravers used it exclusively and excelled at it. A more complex method was developed by Jacques Christophe Le Blon, who used separate mezzotint plates for yellow, red, and blue—and, later, black, when a fourth plate was used to increase opacity in the colors—registering one to the other on the same sheet of paper, with the overprinted colors creating secondary and tertiary colors. Neither the single-plate nor the multiple-plate color printing method, however, produced convincing facsimiles of oil paintings, because the graphic codes remained visible under the printed inks and the washes added to the impressions.

Between 1777 and 1795, the best, least expensive copies of oil paintings were Francis Eginton's and Matthew Boulton's "mechanical paintings" and Joseph Booth's "polygraphs." The former sounds like an oxymoron and the latter sounds like a police procedure, but both were real printing technologies that replicated the look, feel, and, in many cases, size of old master and modern oil paintings. Technically, both processes appear to have begun with designs executed as aquatints printed in colors on specially coated paper and counterproofed onto canvas—which returned the design to its original orientation or direction and original type of support.[18] The transferred design, used as an underdrawing, was finished in oil paints, usually with the original painting present; theoretically, the printed underdrawing in the presence of its model ensured consistency among copies. These kinds of copies were often much larger than conventional color prints because two or more transfer prints could be collaged to reconstruct a design before being transferred to canvas. Despite their being produced as commercial products on a scale that dwarfed Blake's print publishing efforts and

ments using asphaltum pitch and turpentine mixed with a little lampblack and linseed oil to make facsimiles of Blake's relief-etched plates, as documented in works mentioned in notes 6 and 15 of this essay, demonstrate that quills work well for both up and down strokes, and that this diluted "ink" was strong enough to be etched in nitric acid. However, had Blake also used a brush to write his small texts, then that would indeed be an astonishing achievement and revelation, not only because it was an ahistorical use of the tool, strains its capacity, and was technically unnecessary, but because it would demonstrate Blake having mastered a new and unusual set of skills.

18. The most extensive argument that the two processes were the same was made by John Coryton, in "A Lost Art," *Fortnightly Review* 20 (July 1873): 64–78. See also Barbara Fogarty, "The Mechanical Paintings of Matthew Boulton and Francis Eginton," in *Matthew Boulton: Enterprising Industrialist of the Enlightenment,* ed. Kenneth Quickenden, Sally Baggott, and Malcolm Dick (Farnham, U.K., 2013), 111–26. A thorough technical examination of both processes is given in the appendixes of my *Printed Paintings.*

their processes being more complicated than Blake's, they, too, combined printing and painting, hiding all traces of the former, in the creation of a print that passed as an oil painting. Unlike Blake's monoprints, however, they necessarily depended more on finishing and hid all traces of printed colors.

The transfer print technology was invented around 1777 by Eginton, who worked for Boulton at his Manufactory in Soho, Birmingham. The "main trade" in mechanical paintings appears to have been for export, but the business venture was winding down by early 1781, by which time the painting division was losing money and Boulton was focused on the steam engine business with James Watt.[19] In 1781, Eginton left the Manufactory, which continued to accept orders only for mechanical paintings in stock and granted Eginton permission to carry on a small trade producing new copies for at least another ten years.[20] Booth, a portrait painter in London, published *A Treatise Explanatory of the Nature and Properties of Pollaplasiasmos; or, The Original Invention of Multiplying Pictures in Oil Colours* in 1784. By 1787, he had changed the name and formed a "Polygraphic Society" comprised of investors who acquired paintings to copy and hired the craftsmen to copy them. Between 1787 and 1795, the Polygraphic Society held ten exhibitions and published eight catalogues (fig. 3), which described paintings and recorded them by title, artist, size, and price (fig. 4). The exhibitions, most held in "their Rooms, in Pall-Mall," down the block from Boydell's Shakespeare Gallery, sold polygraphs varnished and framed as *exact* copies of oil paintings. They were heavily advertised in various London daily newspapers, reviewed in the papers and magazines, and marketed to "Amateurs . . . who are inclined to decorate their apartments with elegant Pictures at a moderate expence."[21] Booth, rather than thinking reproductions diminished the value or "aura" of the original, compromising its historical authenticity (*pace* Walter Benjamin[22]), argued that original paintings were made more valuable through the dissemination of accurate copies.

Unlike the transfer prints that operated as underdrawings in polygraphs and mechanical paintings, Blake's template—the outline drawn on the millboard—was not dictatorial. Indeed, the absence of tones in the pen-and-ink outline required Blake to improvise when he painted in the forms, as did the absence of details and distinct forms in the printed impression, which necessitated his finishing the printed painting in colors, watercolors, and pen and ink. Although Blake's technique eliminated exact replication, it enabled him to produce two paintings at a time. By pulling

19. Fogarty, "Mechanical Paintings," 124.

20. According to Fogarty, off-site production lasted until 1791 (ibid., 124); Eric Robinson and Keith R. Thompson believe it lasted until 1801 ("Matthew Boulton's Mechanical Paintings," *Burlington Magazine* 112, no. 809 [1970]: 497–507 at 505, 506).

21. *Public Advertiser*, April 27, 1792.

22. Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," in *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt, trans. Harry Zohn (New York, 1969), transcribed at http://www.marxists.org/reference/subject/philosophy/works/ge/benjamin.htm.

two impressions sequentially (referred to as first and second pulls), and on three occasions pulling a third, with no or very minimal replenishing of colors on the matrix between pulls, Blake created multiple unique paintings. The second and third pulls had less paint from the matrix and thus were necessarily diminished in hue and often more highly finished in watercolors and pen and ink. After the matrix's initial printing of two (or more) pulls, the colors on the matrix would be flattened like stains; by repainting the matrix in fresh colors—which could be a month to years later—Blake could print another unique painting. Impressions printed by themselves, that is, without a subsequent pull, I refer to as *separate* pulls, which, of course, share the composition with other pulls, but not the particulars of colors, shapes, and textures.

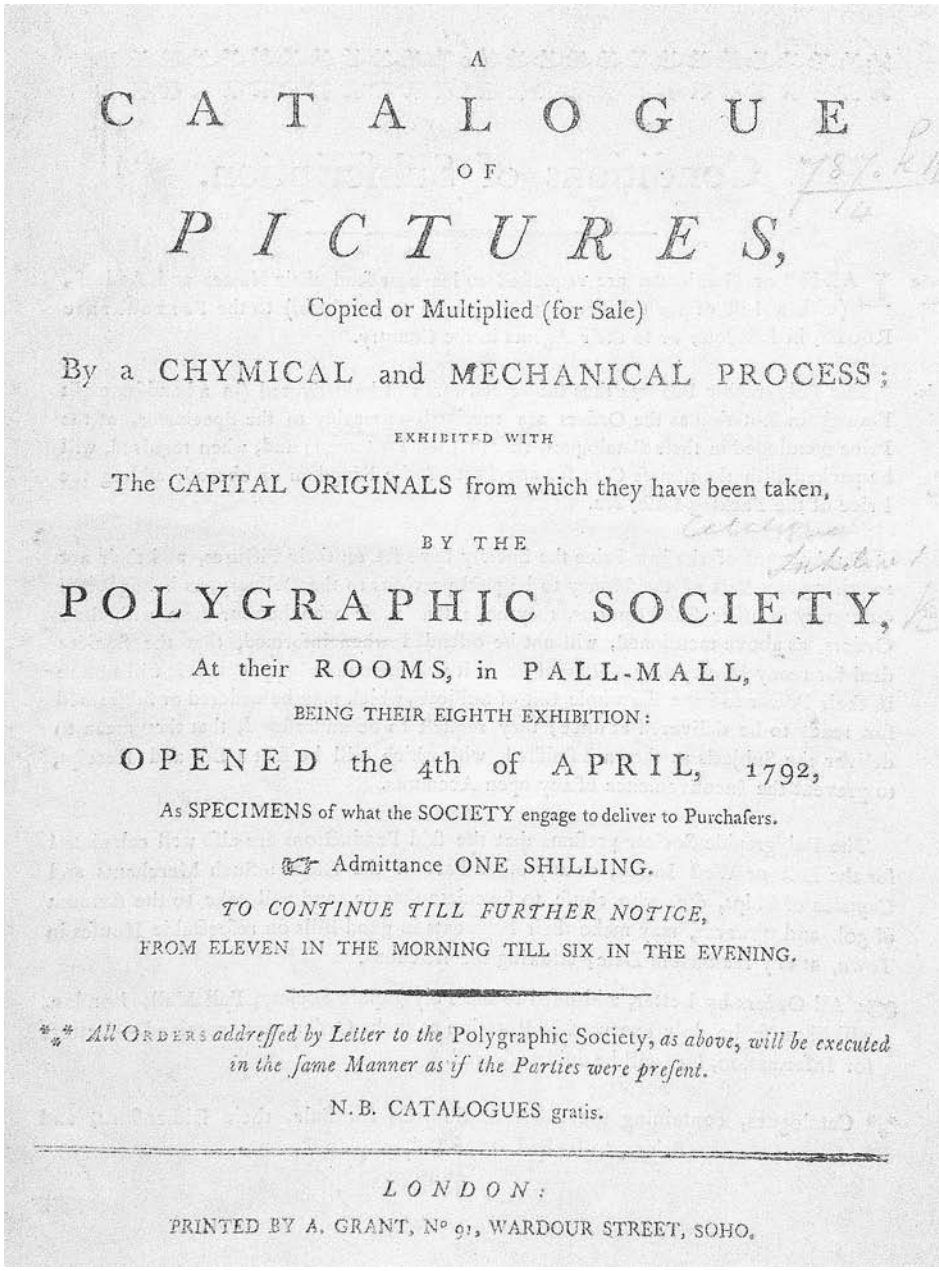
Printing was a stage in the production of high-end facsimiles of oil paintings as well as Blake's monoprints. In the former, printing was used reproductively; in the latter, creatively. This difference sets up their essential difference, which is ontological: the former are painted prints and the latter are printed paintings. Blake's monoprints were original paintings, produced without Blake's behaving mechanically at any point in the production process. Indeed, to contrast how Blake produced a printed painting with how printmakers, printers, and colorists produced sophisticated painted prints is to contrast an artist with technicians and reveal Blake's genius. This contrast raises the final question that I address in this essay: Did Blake perceive his monoprints as prints or paintings? I will argue that initially he perceived them as a category of print, but that around 1807 he came to see them as paintings. I will argue that the evidence for this change lies in the way he signed the last six monoprints, but before examining these signatures, we need first to answer four other related questions.

Four Questions to Ask

The Polygraphic Society's inventory, as reflected in their exhibition catalogue for April 1792, consisted of forty true-size polygraphs and five reduced reproductions. By 1795 or mid-1796, Blake had an inventory of thirty monoprints of twelve original designs. He was to add three more monoprints of two of the designs in ca. 1805. That the matrixes were reprintable raises the first of my essay's questions: Were these the only two printings of monoprints? Based on a detailed analysis of all sequential and separate pulls and extant signatures, I argue that there was another printing: shortly after Blake printed the twelve designs, he reprinted three of them to produce three more impressions, all separate pulls, ca. 1795–96.

Butts owned eleven of the twelve designs; missing from the series was *Naomi Entreating Ruth*, which, as Butlin notes, was probably excluded because Butts had a similarly composed watercolor drawing of the subject from 1803 (Butlin 456). Blake sold Butts eight of his eleven prints—all listed by name—in July and September of 1805 (BR2, 764). The other three designs, Butlin speculates, were acquired between 1805 and 1810, probably listed among unspecified items in the later invoices.[23] The

23. Butlin, *Paintings and Drawings,* 1:159.



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OF

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POLYGRAPHIC SOCIETY,

At their ROOMS, in PALL-MALL,

BEING THEIR EIGHTH EXHIBITION:

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☞ Admittance ONE SHILLING.

TO CONTINUE TILL FURTHER NOTICE,

FROM ELEVEN IN THE MORNING TILL SIX IN THE EVENING.

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N.B. CATALOGUES gratis.

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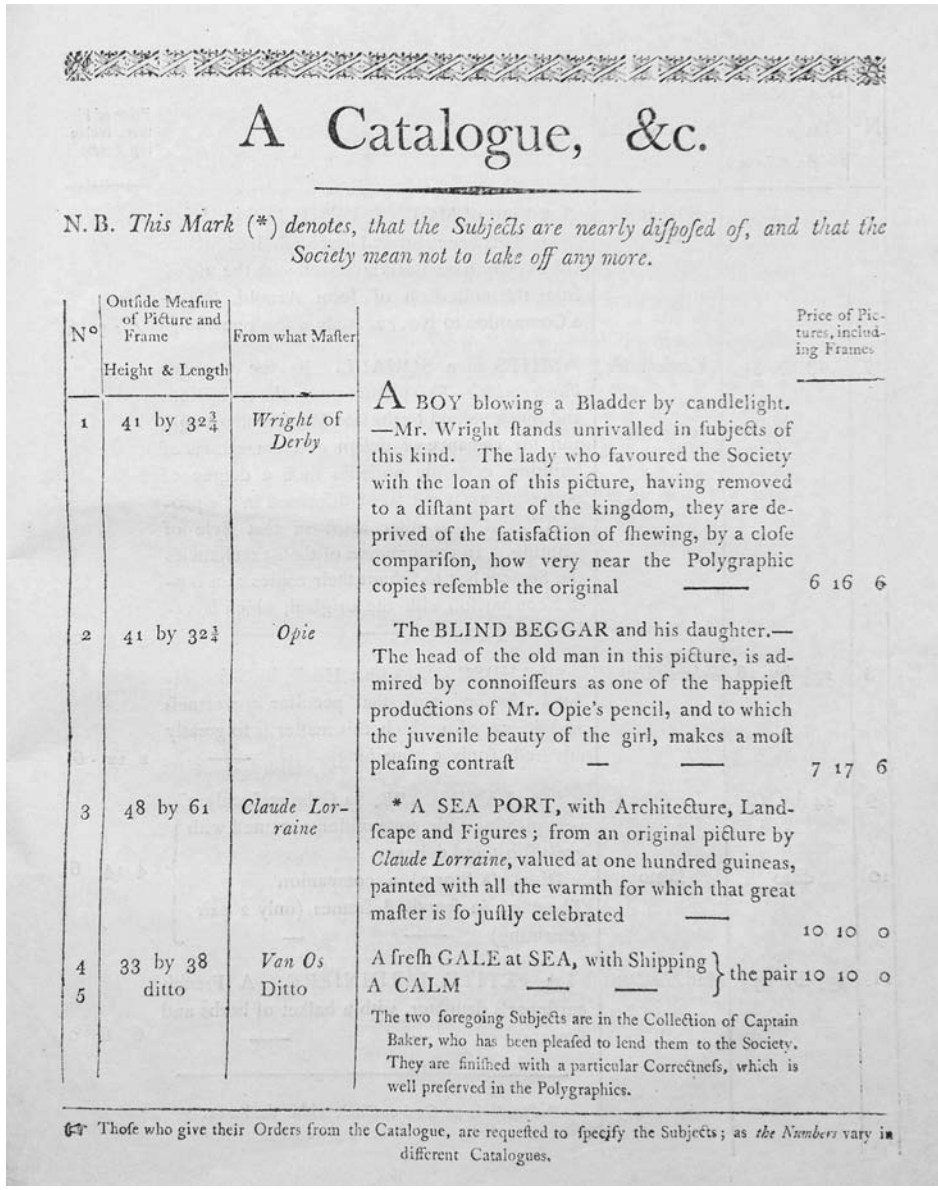
FIGURE 3. *A Catalogue of Pictures, . . . by the Polygraphic Society . . . April 1792* (London, 1792), title page. © British Library Board, 787.k.12(4).



A Catalogue, &c.

N. B. *This Mark* (*) *denotes, that the Subjects are nearly disposed of, and that the Society mean not to take off any more.*

N°	Outside Measure of Picture and Frame Height & Length	From what Master		Price of Pictures, including Frames
1	41 by 32¾	*Wright* of *Derby*	A BOY blowing a Bladder by candlelight.—Mr. Wright stands unrivalled in subjects of this kind. The lady who favoured the Society with the loan of this picture, having removed to a distant part of the kingdom, they are deprived of the satisfaction of shewing, by a close comparison, how very near the Polygraphic copies resemble the original ——	6 16 6
2	41 by 32¾	*Opie*	The BLIND BEGGAR and his daughter.—The head of the old man in this picture, is admired by connoisseurs as one of the happiest productions of Mr. Opie's pencil, and to which the juvenile beauty of the girl, makes a most pleasing contrast — ——	7 17 6
3	48 by 61	*Claude Lorraine*	* A SEA PORT, with Architecture, Landscape and Figures; from an original picture by *Claude Lorraine*, valued at one hundred guineas, painted with all the warmth for which that great master is so justly celebrated ——	10 10 0
4	33 by 38	*Van Os*	A fresh GALE at SEA, with Shipping } the pair	10 10 0
5	ditto	Ditto	A CALM —— —— }	

The two foregoing Subjects are in the Collection of Captain Baker, who has been pleased to lend them to the Society. They are finished with a particular Correctness, which is well preserved in the Polygraphics.

☞ Those who give their Orders from the Catalogue, are requested to specify the Subjects; as *the Numbers* vary in different Catalogues.

FIGURE 4. *A Catalogue of Pictures, . . . by the Polygraphic Society . . . April 1792* (London, 1792), 3. © British Library Board, 787.k.12(4).

absence of specific documentation of their sale forces my second question: When did Butts buy his first monoprints? I argue, based on the style of signature and the patterns of production and sales, that these latter three prints were actually acquired by mid-1796.

Butts appears to have been the only contemporary owner of Blake's monoprints.[24] Yet nine other monoprints were signed, which forces my third and fourth questions: Why were they signed, and how many monoprints did Blake sell during his lifetime? I will argue that Blake sold at least twenty monoprints: that, in addition to the eleven he sold to Butts, he sold the nine that he signed to as many as three collectors unknown to us. I will argue that the very fact that these nine monoprints were signed signifies that they were also sold, because signing artworks upon sale was Blake's general practice.

Number of Monoprints and Printings

Twenty-nine monoprints of twelve designs are extant. Butlin believes there were originally thirty-one impressions from two printings, 1795 and ca. 1804–5, with impressions of *Nebuchadnezzar* (Butlin 304) and *Elohim* (Butlin 290) presently untraced. In the monograph from which this essay is derived, I argue that there were once thirty-three impressions from three printings, 1795, ca. 1795–96, and ca. 1805, with impressions of *Satan* and *Newton* (from the 1795 printings) also missing, the possibility of which Butlin also acknowledges (Butlin 292, 307). I refer to these untraced impressions as *Satan* 292B and *Newton* 307B.

The *William Blake Archive* makes it possible to compare monoprints in great detail. I have examined twenty-five of the twenty-nine extant monoprints, some many times over, but only by examining very accurate high-resolution digital images of all twenty-nine extant impressions have I been able to identify the status of each print and resolve the problems of date and sequence. Viewing digital images simultaneously on three thirty-inch high-resolution monitors that are larger than any of the monoprints has enabled me to compare impressions at true size, as well as to enlarge, enhance, and crop them to yield revealing detail. Moreover, using image-editing software, I have been able to remove yellowish varnishes, or brighten colors to recover original conditions, or enhance images to reveal (or determine the absence of) obscured substructures and features. Most important, I have been able to enlarge any area multiple times without distortion and focus on how designs were printed rather than on how impressions were finished. As a result, I have identified which impressions of a design were printed together and in what order, which were printed separately, and which were refinished, or freshened up in preparation for sale. By comparing all impressions according to their key production features and styles of printing, I have been able to organize the impressions into three groups.

24. Ibid., 1:157.

Table 1 (overleaf) records thirty-three monoprints (including four that are untraced), twenty signatures, and three printing periods. As table 1 indicates, there were four "separate" pulls, three of which are similar in style of printing and finishing and can be grouped into a second printing:

TABLE 2. Group B: monoprints printed ca. 1795–96

Title	Butlin#	Location	Printing order	Signature
Elijah/God Judging Adam	296	Philadelphia	separate pull	
Hecate	316	Tate	separate pull	Blake
House of Death	322	Fitzwilliam	separate pull	

The three separate pulls of the second printing differ from impressions of the same designs printed in 1795. Their overall printing and coloring styles are similar to one another but differ from those printed ca. 1805. I have dated all three ca. 1795–96 based on the style and manner of the signature on just one of the impressions. Blake incised his surname into the paint surface of *Hecate*. He signed *Satan* 291 and *Pity* 310 in the same manner. Butlin dates these three signatures 1795 but, as noted, believes that the works were sold between 1806 and 1810 and included among unspecified works in Butts's invoices (BR2, 764–70).

The fourth separate pull can be grouped with two other impressions printed and finished in the same style (which differs from that of the first two printings) and grouped into a third printing. Blake reprinted *Nebuchadnezzar* twice and *Newton* once to yield three impressions. Given the 1804 watermark on two of these impressions (301, 306), this printing session was probably ca. 1805, in preparation of the sale to Butts in September 1805:

TABLE 3. Group C: monoprints printed ca. 1805

Title	Butlin#	Location	Printing order	Signature
Nebuchadnezzar	301	Tate	first pull	WB inv 1795
Nebuchadnezzar	303	MIA	second pull	WBlake 1795
Newton	306	Tate	separate pull	1795 WB inv

Butts Collection and Two Forms of Signature

I argue that the three prints signed "Blake" were sold in 1795 or in the first part of 1796 and not after 1805, and that they were the first monoprints acquired by Butts and sold by Blake. Moreover, they are among the first noncommissioned works that Blake signed and the first works on which he incised his name. Furthermore, he signed all three together and upon sale, not upon execution or completion, and doing so was to become his general practice for noncommissioned works. To understand why they were sold and signed in ca. 1795–96 requires our first examining the signatures of the prints sold in 1805.

TABLE 1. Known and conjectured Blake monoprints, by title and printing order, with signatures

Title	Butlin #	Location	Printing order	Printing date	Signature
Christ Appearing to the Apostles	326	National Gallery of Art	first pull	1795	Fresco W Blake inv
Christ Appearing to the Apostles	325	Yale University	second pull	1795	WB inv [1795]
Christ Appearing to the Apostles	327	Tate Britain	third pull	1795	
Elohim Creating Adam	290	untraced	? first pull	1795	
Elohim Creating Adam	289	Tate Britain	? second pull	1795	1795 WB inv
Elijah/God Judging Adam	294	Tate Britain	first pull	1795	WB inv 1795
Elijah/God Judging Adam	295	Metropolitan Museum of Art	second pull	1795	Fresco W Blake inv
**Elijah/God Judging Adam*	296	Philadelphia Museum of Art	separate pull	ca. 1795–96	
Good and Evil Angels	324	Private collection	first pull	1795	
Good and Evil Angels	323	Tate Britain	second pull	1795	WB inv 1795
Hecate	318	Huntington Library	first pull	1795	
Hecate	317	National Galleries of Scotland	second pull	1795	Fresco W Blake inv
**Hecate*	316	Tate Britain	separate pull	ca. 1795–96	Blake
House of Death [1794 watermark]	320	Tate Britain	first pull	1795	WB inv 1795
House of Death	321	British Museum	second pull	1795	WBlake 1795
**House of Death*	322	Fitzwilliam Museum	separate pull	ca. 1795–96	
Lamech	298	Robert N. Essick	first pull	1795	
Lamech	297	Tate Britain	second pull	1795	WB inv 1795

Naomi Entreating Ruth	299	Victoria and Albert Museum	first pull	1795	Fresco W Blake inv
Naomi Entreating Ruth	300	Fitzwilliam Museum	second pull	1795	
Nebuchadnezzar	302	Museum of Fine Art, Boston	? first pull	1795	
Nebuchadnezzar	304	untraced	? second pull	1795	?
***Nebuchadnezzar* [1804 watermark]	301	Tate Britain	first pull	ca. 1805	WB inv 1795
***Nebuchadnezzar*	303	Minneapolis Institute of Arts	second pull	ca. 1805	WBlake 1795
Newton	307B	untraced	? first pull	1795	
Newton	307	Philadelphia Museum of Art	? second pull	1795	Fresco W Blake inv
***Newton* [1804 watermark]	306	Tate Britain	separate pull	ca. 1805	1795 WB inv
Pity [1794 watermark]	310	Tate Britain	first pull	1795	Blake
Pity	311	Metropolitan Museum of Art	second pull	1795	WBlake / inv
Pity	312	Yale Center for British Art	third pull	1795	
Satan Exulting over Eve	292B	untraced	? first pull	1795	
Satan Exulting over Eve	292	Getty Museum	? second pull	1795	WBlake 1795
Satan Exulting over Eve	291	Tate Britain	third pull	1795	Blake

Note: The twenty-seven unmarked titles of twelve designs (two complete sets of designs and three designs with third pulls) were printed in 1795 and comprise Group A. The three titles marked with an * were printed as separate pulls in ca. 1795–96 and comprise Group B. The three titles marked with two ** were printed in ca. 1805 and comprise Group C.

According to Blake's receipt account with Butts for March 3, 1806 (BR2, 764–65), Butts acquired "4 Prints" for £4 4s. on July 5, 1805:

TABLE 4. Butts's monoprint acquisitions, July 5, 1805

Title on receipt	Butlin #	Printing order and date
God ~~Creating~~ Judging Adam	294	second pull, printed 1795
Good & Evil Angel	323	second pull, printed 1795
House of Death	320	first pull, printed 1795
Lamech	297	second pull, printed 1795

Two months later, on September 7, 1805, Butts acquired another "4 Prints" for the same amount:

Table 5. Butts's monoprint acquisitions, September 7, 1805

Title on receipt	Butlin #	Printing order and date
Nebuchadnezzar	301	first pull, printed ca. 1805
Newton	306	separate pull, printed ca. 1805
God [*Elohim*] *Creating Adam*	289	?second pull, printed 1795
Christ appearing	325	second pull, printed 1795

Blake signed all eight of the monoprints with his monogram and a date. The monogram, made of his initials "WB" with "inv" inside the loop of the *B* ("WBinv"), is probably Blake's best-known signature. He appears to have used it for the first time in the fourth engraving of *Night Thoughts*, dated June 27, 1796 (fig. 5).

FIGURE 5. *Night Thoughts,* engraving, plate 4, detail of monogram. Huntington Library, 132916.

It is not on any of the 537 watercolor designs Blake executed for *Night Thoughts*, which he appears to have begun around mid-1795, but it is on thirty-six *Night Thoughts* engravings, none dated before June 1796. For the next ten years Blake used his monogram on watercolor drawings and tempera paintings, with and without dates. In 1806 he began using his first initial and surname with "inv" or a date or both. *The Spiritual Form of Pitt* (Butlin 651), for example, is signed "WBlake 1806."[25]

25. Butlin reads the last digit as a 5, but notes that it is obscure; computer enhancement of the date shows that it is clearly a 6 (Butlin 651).

The monogram is a clever and aesthetically pleasing signature, perfectly appropriate for its initial purpose, which was to identify Blake as the inventor of the *Night Thoughts* designs and the engravings as original prints, executed by the artist rather than a reproductive engraver. "Inv" refers to *invenit*, the Latin term used in inscriptions of prints to identify the artist responsible for the image reproduced; "pinx" for *pinxit* and "del" for *delineavit* refer respectively to the person who painted the image and the person who designed it or made the drawing of it for the engraver. Other abbreviations of Latin terms used in print publishing were "sc" for *sculpsit*, referring to the engraver, and "fec" for *fecit,* also referring to the person who made the plate. In thirty-five plates, Blake used both "inv & sc" or versions of them (e.g., "in & s"), the conventional phrase designating that the same person invented and executed the graphic image. In two plates, however, he used only "inv." That is the essential identification: engraver as artist. That these invented images were also engraved by "WB" was understood.[26]

It needs to be pointed out that Blake's use of "inv" on his watercolor drawings and temperas was completely unconventional. Turner, for example, did not sign watercolors in this manner; he signed his name, often followed by "RA" to signify his status and membership in the Royal Academy. Occasionally one will see a "del" on a watercolor drawing, as in "Francis Towne del 1787," for example. Blake signed *The Whore of Babylon* (Butlin 523) as "Blake inv & del 1809," and *A Breach in a City* (Butlin 191) from 1784 as "W Blake inv & d."[27] In the latter work Blake also wrote the title above his signature, and both signatures may have been added years after the works were executed. But no other artist I know of routinely signed drawings or paintings with "inv." In these media, "inv" was redundant. Blake, trained as a copy engraver, appears to be thinking like one even when executing watercolor drawings and tempera paintings. Given his training and status, perhaps he felt he needed to assert his originality and himself as an original artist in all he did.

All eight of Butts's monoprints were signed with the monogram that Blake had been using for at least six years on his watercolor drawings and temperas. The format used in July, however, differs from that used in September. In the four prints sold on July 5, 1805, the monogram preceded the date ("WBinv 1795"; fig. 6).

26. The earliest Western prints were not signed at all, although by the later part of the fifteenth century many artists indicated their authorship of a print by incorporating a signature or monogram into the matrix design, what is called "signed in the plate," or "plate signature." While some prints were signed in pencil as early as the late eighteenth century, the practice of signing one's prints in pencil or ink did not become common until the late 1880s, when it was done for the benefit of collectors, who, when presented with a choice, preferred to buy signed impressions. The practice spread rapidly and today it is customary for original prints to be signed and numbered by the artist. An unsigned impression of the same print is generally not as commercially valuable.

27. For an argument that *A Breach* (Butlin 191), dated 1795–1800, is the 1784 version (Butlin 188), see Joseph Viscomi, "A Breach in a City, the Morning After the Battle: Lost or Found?" *Blake/An Illustrated Quarterly* 28 (Fall 1994): 44–59.

FIGURE 6. *Lamach* (Butlin 297), monoprint, detail. Tate Britain.

In the September set, the monogram followed the date ("1795 WBinv"; fig. 7).

FIGURE 7. *Newton* (Butlin 306), monoprint, detail. Tate Britain.

The exception in the latter set is *Christ Appearing* (Butlin 325), which has no date.[28] This last signature, however, appears to have had a date, now scraped off. If so, the monogram preceded the date, as in the July set. The signature on *Christ Appearing*, like those in the July set, was placed in the bottom left corner, whereas in the September set they were placed in the bottom right corner or, as with *Elohim*, right of center along the bottom. Was *Christ Appearing* signed with the four delivered in July but not delivered until September? Or was it just an anomaly in the September set, perhaps the first print signed? These questions may not be answerable; but it is interesting to note that *Newton* 306, *Nebuchadnezzar* 301, and *Elohim* 289 share a green-blue tonality missing in *Christ Appearing*. Blake produced new monoprints of *Newton* and *Nebuchadnezzar*, presumably for this sale, and appears to have refinished *Elohim* with them and refinished *Christ Appearing* with the July set.[29] Whenever *Christ*

28. The monogram on *House of Death* 320 appears to be without "inv" and to have been gone over again in pen and ink, which created open strokes in the verticals, the *B*'s loop, and the tails of the *7* and *5*. But the essential strokes before embellishment are the same as in *Good and Evil Angels* 323, which has open strokes in the *9*, and in *God Judging Adam* 294, which has open strokes in the *1*, *7*, and *9*, and on top of the *B*. There are no open strokes in the monograms or numbers in the signatures of the large color prints in the September set.

29. *Elohim* was almost entirely refinished. According to W. Graham Robinson, who once owned it, "Traces of colour-printing appear throughout the picture, but the whole has been so carefully worked over by hand in watercolour that little of the ground work remains" (Kerrison Preston, *The Blake Collection of W. Graham Robertson* [London, 1952], 30). The flatness of the image suggests that *Elohim* 289 was a second pull printed in 1795, and its green-blue tonality suggests that it was refinished along with *Newton* 306 and *Nebuchadnezzar* 301. But these green and blue washes are also similar to those used in 1795 in *The Book of Urizen* copy B

Appearing was signed, the signatures' similar but different formats support the idea that the two sets of monoprints were signed independently of one another, with the monoprints delivered in July signed together, and those in September—or three of the four—signed together.

The similarity of the three "Blake" signatures (fig. 8), in the rough manner in which they were made—scratched into the paint surface, probably with an etching needle—suggests that they, too, were signed at the same time.

FIGURE 8. *Left to right*: *Hecate* (Butlin 316), monoprint, detail; *Satan Exulting over Eve* (Butlin 291), monoprint, detail; *Pity* (Butlin 310), monoprint, detail. All Tate Britain.

They, too, fit the pattern—or what will become a pattern—of Blake signing works upon sale and not execution or completion. Works that were commissioned, such as the biblical watercolors for Butts and the illustrations to Milton's poems for Rev. Thomas and Butts, may have been signed upon completion because they were in Blake's mind already sold. But even this seems unlikely, because the sameness of the signatures' lettering style and placement among multiple leaves suggests that the leaves were signed at the same time, one after the other in the way we sign documents here, and here, and here. Works executed without a commission, however, like the monoprints, seem almost certainly not to have been signed until sold.

Today, signing and selling artworks are unrelated events, which is how Butlin treats them. He believes Blake signed the three large color prints "Blake" upon execution, in 1795, but sold them after 1805. The 1795 date for the signature makes sense on stylistic grounds, in that it is very similar to Blake's signature on the 1795 *Leonora* drawing (Butlin 338), and on chronological grounds, in that Blake changed his signature to the monogram midway through 1796 and thereafter used it consistently for ten years (and occasionally later). Butlin, however, arrives at his 1795 date not through comparison but rather through an ingenious deduction process. Butlin assumes that Blake incised his last name in wet paint, which, of course, would have to "have been done at the time of printing, while the pigments were still wet."[30] However, Butlin also states that Blake scratched his name through pigment to the white of the paper (Butlin 291), which is more likely, because the capillary action of wet paint would fill in the lines.

and in *Song of Los* copies B (plates 2 and 5) and D (plates 1 and 5), and in 1796 many of the *Urizen* plates in *Small Book of Designs*, copies A and B. *Elohim*'s basic tonality of blue-green was probably present when refinished and enhanced when prepared for Butts.

30. Butlin, "Physicality of William Blake," 8.

These seemingly trivial technicalities remind us that, while we can think of the monoprints as a series, they were not printed together or at the same time, like the plates in an illuminated book or the plates for the books of designs. Each monoprint was a labor-intensive and time-consuming autonomous event, from designing and painting to printing and finishing. The impressions signed "Blake" may have been produced weeks to months apart from one another. Indeed, *Satan* 291 and *Pity* 310 were from the first printing of 1795, and *Hecate* 316 is from a separate, apparently later printing. Hence, if the three prints were signed at the same time, as the signatures' shared styles of execution indicate, then their surfaces had to have been dry. Moreover, Blake clearly was not trying to match his signature on these three prints to any of the prints in the same series. This divergence suggests that the three monoprints were signed and purchased before the other eight and before the use of the monogram, that is, before mid-1796.

We arrive at the same conclusion, that Blake signed and sold the three monoprints together in ca. 1795–96, by recognizing two things: 1) the number of monoprints in the studio after the second printing; and 2) the impossible coincidence created by assuming that only these three specific monoprints were signed in 1795 but not sold until after 1805. After the second printing, Blake had thirty monoprints on hand. As noted, all eight of the monoprints sold to Butts in 1805 were also signed in 1805, and thus had remained unsigned until then. Blake signed nine other monoprints, but, as we will see, all of these signatures are in post-1805 formats; thus, they too were unsigned in 1805. If we assume that the three monoprints were signed "Blake" in 1795 and not sold until 1805, Blake would have had on hand three signed and twenty-seven unsigned monoprints between 1795 and 1805. Such an inventory is itself suspicious and raises questions: Why sign these three prints? Why sign *just* these three prints? The possibility that these three monoprints, the only ones signed among thirty, were sold more than ten years later to Butts and were coincidentally the only three monoprints Butts needed to complete the series taxes credulity. I conclude that *Hecate* 316, *Satan* 291, and *Pity* 310, the three monoprints signed "Blake," were acquired by Butts in 1795–96; they fit into Butts's collection, then, because the collection (also including eight monoprints signed with the monogram, and the watercolor design of *Naomi*, also signed with the monogram) was built around them. If the signature "Blake" preceded Blake's use of the monogram and *Hecate* 316 was from the second printing, it is reasonable to conclude that the second printing is datable to ca. 1795–96. And if Blake signed these impressions of *Hecate*, *Satan*, and *Pity* at the same time for the same patron, it is also reasonable to conclude he did so upon sale and not execution, and that the sale was before he began using the monogram, and thus no later than the middle of 1796.

Until recently, however, most scholars have thought Blake did not meet Butts until 1799. This belief is based on his first known reference to Butts, in a letter to George Cumberland dated August 26, 1799: "As to Myself about whom you are so kindly Interested, I live by Miracle. I am Painting small Pictures from the Bible. . . . My

Work pleases my employer & I have an order for Fifty small Pictures at One Guinea each" (E, 704). Yet, according to Gilchrist, who does not reference his source, Blake and Butts met around 1793.[31] Recent discoveries by Mary Lynn Johnson about Butts support the idea that he may have begun collecting Blake by 1796. Johnson discovered that Thomas Butts of number 9 Marlborough Street had policies with the Sun Fire Insurance Company in 1792 and 1796. The entry for September 24, 1792 covered his brick "dwelling House" up to £1,500 and the adjoining stables, coach house, and brewhouse up to £200. From July 21, 1796, his policy covered "Household Goods" up to £450 and "Printed Books, Plate, & Pictures" up to £50 "on each" and "Prints Drawings & Needle Work" up to £50. According to Johnson, Butts "seems to be insuring only the buildings in 1792 and only the contents of the house in 1796."[32] It is not known whether the policies had to be renewed annually, or, of course, how large the art collection was in 1792 or 1796 or whether it included Blakes. But we can infer that during this period Butts had begun collecting prints, drawings, paintings, and books and that by 1796 the collection was large enough to be considered worth insuring, even though his Blakes, art collection, and library were not mentioned in his fifteen-page will of 1845.[33] Nevertheless, that he was collecting artworks this early supports the hypothesis that he may have acquired some of his monoprints by 1796.[34]

Butts may have begun acquiring Blake works even earlier. Butts owned *Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, copy F, which he may have acquired directly from Blake around 1794, when Blake color printed it, making it the first Blake work in Butts's collection. This is the only copy in which Blake wrote "1790" (in pen and ink) on plate 3, above the first lines: "As a new heaven is begun, and it is now thirty-three years since its advent." *Marriage* was executed in 1790 and that line sends the reader in 1790 to 1757, the year Swedenborg, a central character and subject of the book, pronounced the advent of the New Jerusalem. It is also, of course, the year of Blake's birth, giving him a Christ-like thirty-three years. But *Marriage* is unsigned, the only illuminated book without a date or an identification of Blake as author or printer. And, even if it had been signed and dated, who would know that this "Blake" fellow was born in 1757? Who would get the reference or joke? Who would need or most value a prompt in an artifact printed in 1794 that its "now" was 1790? None of the other copies of

31. Gilchrist, *Life of Blake*, 1:114–15.

32. Mary Lynn Johnson, "Newfound Particulars of Blake's Patrons, Thomas and Elizabeth Butts, 1757–1806," *Blake/An Illustrated Quarterly* 47 (Spring 2014): para. 6; Johnson, e-mail message to the author, September 8, 2011.

33. Joseph Viscomi, "A 'Green House' for Butts? New Information about Thomas Butts, His Residences, and Family," *Blake/An Illustrated Quarterly* 30 (Summer 1996): 4–21 at 4.

34. Portions of the Butts's Blake collection were auctioned at Sotheby's on March 26–27, 1852, and June 26, 1852, and at Foster and Son on June 29, 1853, and March 8, 1854 (*Sale Catalogues of Blake's Works: 1791–2016,* ed. G. E. Bentley Jr., last modified May 2017, http://library.vicu.utoronto.ca/collections/special_collections/bentley_blake_collection/sale_catalogue/.) The first Sotheby sale was enormous, which presumably reflected the size and scope of Butts's collection of prints and drawings.

Marriage printed after 1790 have such a prompt, not copy E, color printed with copy F, or late copies G and I (ca. 1818, 1827), or refinished copy H (1821). I think Blake's "1790" in copy F was a personal touch provided specifically for Butts, who, like Blake, was born in 1757.

The hypothesis that Butts started collecting Blake in ca. 1799 is based on the letter from Blake to Cumberland referring to Butts's order for paintings, but concluding this from the letter is problematic for two reasons. First, it ignores that Blake's letter to Cumberland is only the sixth letter extant from Blake, who was forty-one and a half at the time; this reveals, sadly, that nearly all information about Blake's business dealings from the 1780s and 1790s—the period of the illuminated books and monoprints—is missing. Second, an order of fifty of anything handmade implies familiarity and trust born of experience. I believe that Gilchrist is correct, that Blake and Butts met in 1793 and that Butts became a reliable patron soon afterward.

In 1795, after printing all the designs systematically to produce first and second pulls and three designs to produce three pulls, Blake had twenty-seven impressions on hand: two complete series of twelve designs and extra impressions of *Pity* (312), *Satan* (291), and *Christ Appearing to the Apostles* (327). I believe at this point Blake showed the monoprints to Butts, perhaps hoping to sell him a complete set. Butts, however, apparently showed interest in only three designs: *Hecate*, *Satan*, and *Pity*. His commission required Blake to reprint *Hecate* so not to break up either of his complete sets. Blake did not have to reprint *Pity* and *Satan* because he had three impressions of them already on hand. In other words, the presence of *Hecate* 316 among Butts's earliest acquisitions and among the Group B impressions strongly suggests that Butts's commission motivated Blake's second printing of monoprints, ca. 1795–96, and that, at this time, Blake wanted to keep the series intact.

Blake used the printing of *Hecate* as an opportunity to print separate pulls (and third impressions) of *House of Death* and *Elijah/God Judging Adam* (the Group B impressions listed in table 2 above).[35] Perhaps Butts also expressed interest in one or the other of these designs. On the other hand, reprinting the Miltonic *House of Death* may have been prompted by Henry Fuseli's then-unfolding Milton Gallery (1791–99), increasing the chance of its selling independently of the series. Reprinting *Elijah/God Judging Adam*, the first monoprint executed and the only one printed from a relief-etched outline, enabled Blake to correct the mistakes made in the first two impressions, to hide the embossment and other signs of the press. Most of the colors in *Elijah/God Judging Adam* 296 were applied directly to the paper and not printed from the copperplate, eliminating the halo effect of the first impressions and giving the colors a brighter hue but an unreticulated, flatter texture than other monoprints.

35. By 1795, Blake had begun using commissions for individual titles of illuminated books as an opportunity to print multiple copies of the commissioned title and even other titles as a way to increase his stock of works (see Viscomi, "Illuminated Printing," and *Printed Paintings*, chap. 6).

Indeed, the smoothness and vividness of its reds and oranges have led some scholars to think a hand other than Blake's worked on this impression. But these are the reds and oranges that Blake had used in *The Song of Los*, color printed in 1795, and was using in coloring his *Night Thoughts* designs, which were concurrent with the second printing of the monoprints.[36]

In summary, Blake signed Butts's *Hecate*, *Satan*, and *Pity* at the same time, ca. 1795–96. They were already in Butts's collection when he took out his new insurance policy in 1796, and were perhaps the reason he took out such a policy. They were executed in a variation of the printing technique responsible for *Marriage* copy F and provided the precedent for the medium—opaque water-miscible paint—used to paint the "Fifty small Pictures" that Blake had begun for Butts within the next three years, if not also the grounds for Butts's confidence in Blake.

Visionary Dating: "1795" on Monoprints from ca. 1805

In 1805, Blake dated Butts's eight monoprints "1795," but only six of the prints were from that first 1795 printing. Butts's impressions of *Newton* and *Nebuchadnezzar* are on paper watermarked 1804 and are from the third printing, presumably in ca. 1805. Dating them "1795" puts into question the historical integrity of the series. Was "1795" on monoprints produced in ca. 1805 dating the conception of the designs or the series to which they belong?

At first glance, Blake appears to have been dating the designs' invention, which might seem disingenuous, given how forcefully he promoted execution as "the chariot of Genius" (E, 643). Butlin referred to this apparent discrepancy between execution and invention as Blake's "visionary" way with dates,[37] noting also that "Blake's attitude to dates was somewhat cavalier; it was the *idea* rather than the material execution that really mattered to him."[38] Yet, Blake did not behave this way with any of the versions of *The Parable of the Wise and Foolish Virgins* (Butlin 478, 479, 480, 481), or *Comus* (527 and 528), or *Paradise Lost* (529 and 536), or other works for which there are more than one version; he dated each version's execution, not the invention of the design. There is, however, another way of interpreting the discrepancy. Blake's

36. For David Bindman's, Andrew Wilton's, and Butlin's suspicions about the coloring in this version of *Elijah/God Judging Adam*, see Butlin 296. For similar colors in other of Blake's works at the time, see the *William Blake Archive* for *Night Thoughts* watercolors, designs 15, 52, 156, 328, 333, 345, 415, 426, and 433, and *Song of Los,* plate 8, in copies B, C, D, and F. See also the frontispiece to *Europe a Prophecy,* copy A, also executed in 1795 in colors that look un-Blakean until placed in the full spectrum of Blake's 1795 works, something not possible to do before the *Blake Archive*'s color digital images. Butlin also comments about the three strokes forming the eyelashes on the horses in *Elijah/God Judging Adam* as suspicious ("Physicality of William Blake," 16–17), but we see eyelashes on the horses in *Hecate* 317, *Pity* 310, and *Night Thoughts* (design 87), with those on the latter two horses formed by three similar strokes, and on Los howling, in *Small Book of Designs*, copy B, plate 18 (*Urizen,* plate 7).

37. Butlin, "Newly Discovered," 101.

38. Butlin, *Paintings and Drawings*, 24, emphasis added.

assigning a 1795 date to impressions executed in ca. 1805 suggests that he was thinking like a printmaker, dating the printable matrix. An engraving printed in 1805 from a plate dated 1795 will display the 1795 date. Likewise, Blake's "1795" on two monoprints printed in ca. 1805 suggests that he was dating the matrix. Blake appears, then, not to have privileged invention over execution when dating either prints or paintings, but to have dated the execution of what he presumably considered at the time the primary or defining object.

Blake signed his large painterly prints like an artist, on and not, as is the convention in signing prints, below the image. Information about the printed image—its title, inventor, delineator, date, publisher, engraver—was conventionally included in an inscription under the image. This information, designed as part of the printable, repeatable matrix, displayed consistently in all impressions, regardless of when the plates were actually printed. Unique objects, like watercolor drawings and paintings, were autographed. The signature's placement was variable, conventionally lower left or right corner, but on the image itself and usually determined by appropriateness (e.g., black ink or paint on a lighter background area). An autograph on a work of art, in addition to being a form of advertisement for the artist, signifies originality and origin, that the object is handmade and unique, originating from the mind and hand of the person signing it. I believe that Blake usually provided that signification on his paintings, watercolors, and monoprints when ownership changed—when the artwork left his possession.

Three New Collectors of Monoprints

By September 8, 1805, Thomas Butts had eleven large color prints in his collection. He is generally assumed to have been the only person to have purchased monoprints directly from Blake. If so, then Blake still had on hand, in fall of 1805, the following twenty-two impressions, as shown in table 6. Did Blake sell any of these monoprints over the next twenty-two years? Did anyone besides Butts buy monoprints during Blake's lifetime?

According to Butlin, the monoprints that "can be traced back to an early collection passed from Mrs. Blake to Frederick Tatham."[39] Among these are *Elijah*/*God Judging Adam* 296, *Good and Evil Angels* 324, *House of Death* 322, *Nebuchadnezzar* 302, and *Pity* 312. None of the nine prints that were signed—indicated in bold in table 6—is in that category. Butlin records them with a question mark, as "Coll: ? Mrs. Blake; ? Tatham," or with the first known owner preceded by an ellipse, such as "Coll: . . . [known owner]," allowing for the possibility that Blake himself had sold them to collectors unknown to us. Blake's signing them using three differently formatted signatures indicates that he did.

39. Martin Butlin, "Cataloguing William Blake," in *Blake in His Time*, ed. Robert N. Essick and Donald Pierce (Bloomington, Ind., 1978) 70–90 at 85.

Blake signed three monoprints with "WBlake 1795" (fig. 9), one with "WBlake / inv" (fig. 10), and five with "Fresco W Blake inv" (fig. 11).

FIGURE 9. *Left to right*: *Satan Exulting* (Butlin 292), monoprint, detail. J. Paul Getty Museum.
Nebuchadnezzar (Butlin 303), monoprint, detail. Minneapolis Institute of Art.
House of Death (Butlin 321), monoprint, detail. British Museum.

FIGURE 10. *Pity* (Butlin 311), monoprint, detail. Metropolitan Museum of Art.

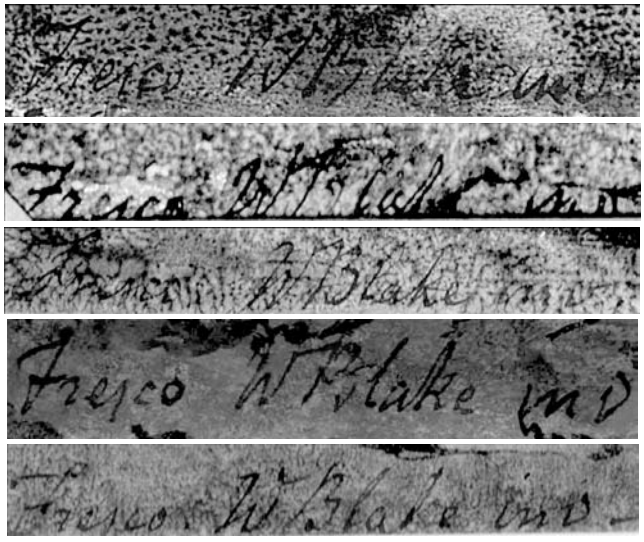


FIGURE 11. *Top to bottom: Hecate* (Butlin 317), monoprint, detail. National Galleries of Scotland.
Naomi Entreating Ruth (Butlin 299), monoprint, detail. Victoria & Albert Museum.
Christ Appearing to the Apostles (Butlin 326), monoprint, detail. National Gallery of Art.
Newton (Butlin 307), monoprint, detail. Philadelphia Museum of Art.
Elijah/God Judging Adam (Butlin 295), monoprint, detail. Metropolitan Museum of Art.

TABLE 6. Monoprints in Blake's inventory from fall 1805

Title	Butlin #	Location	Printing order	Printing date	Signature
Christ Appearing to the Apostles	**326**	**National Gallery of Art**	**first pull**	**1795**	**Fresco W Blake inv**
Christ Appearing to the Apostles	327	Tate Britain	third pull	1795	
Elohim Creating Adam	290	untraced	? first pull	1795	
Elijah/God Judging Adam	**295**	**Metropolitan Museum of Art**	**second pull**	**1795**	**Fresco W Blake inv**
Elijah/God Judging Adam	296	Philadelphia Museum of Art	separate pull	ca. 1795–96	
Good and Evil Angels	324	Private collection	first pull	1795	
Hecate	318	Huntington Library	first pull	1795	
Hecate	**317**	**National Galleries of Scotland**	**second pull**	**1795**	**Fresco W Blake inv**
House of Death	**321**	**British Museum**	**second pull**	**1795**	**WBlake 1795**
House of Death	322	Fitzwilliam Museum	separate pull	ca. 1795–96	
Lamech	298	Robert N. Essick	first pull	1795	
Naomi Entreating Ruth	**299**	**Victoria and Albert Museum**	**first pull**	**1795**	**Fresco W Blake inv**
Naomi Entreating Ruth	300	Fitzwilliam Museum	second pull	1795	
Nebuchadnezzar	302	Museum of Fine Arts, Boston	? first pull	1795	
Nebuchadnezzar	**304**	**untraced**	**? second pull**	**1795**	**?**
Nebuchadnezzar	**303**	**Minneapolis Institute of Arts**	**second pull**	**ca. 1805**	**WBlake 1795**
Newton	307B	untraced	? first pull	1795	
Newton	**307**	**Philadelphia Museum of Art**	**? second pull**	**1795**	**Fresco W Blake inv**
Pity	**311**	**Metropolitan Museum of Art**	**second pull**	**1795**	**WBlake / inv**
Pity	312	Yale Center for British Art	third pull	1795	
Satan Exulting over Eve	292B	untraced	? first pull	1795	
Satan Exulting over Eve	**292**	**Getty Museum**	**? second pull**	**1795**	**WBlake 1795**

This last, longer format appears at first to have been a "variation" of the shorter "WBlake / inv."[40] These two signatures, however, were differently formed and appear to represent different moments of signing. "Fresco W Blake inv" is on *Hecate* 317, *Naomi* 299, *Christ Appearing* 326, *Newton* 307, and *Elijah/God Judging Adam* 295. These signatures are on one line at the bottom left corner and are lettered alike, with a space between the *W* and *B* and, most revealing, with a *W* that is unlike any that Blake used in signing his paintings, prints, watercolors, or other monoprints. It is his actual autograph, the *W* he used in his everyday handwriting and signatures in letters (fig. 12).

FIGURE 12. Blake's *W* in signature on letter to George Cumberland, December 19, 1808, detail. British Museum.

In *Four Zoas*, we see it in his common hand on page 19 but not in his fair-copy hand on page 13 (fig. 13).

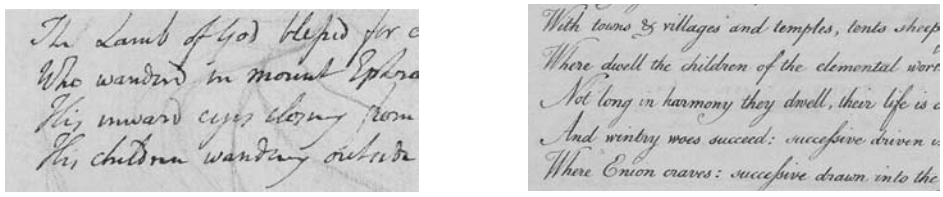


FIGURE 13. Blake's *W* in common hand (left) and fair-copy hand (right). *Four Zoas*, manuscript, pages 19 and 13, detail. British Library.

The defining characteristic of this everyday *W* is its shorter middle arm. The capital *W* that Blake used in signing works of art has three arms of the same height, stylized as in his fair-copy hand (figs. 9, 10, 14, 15).

FIGURE 14. "The Goblin," *Allegro and Il Penseroso* (Butlin 543.5), watercolor, detail. Morgan Library and Museum.

40. Butlin, "Physicality of William Blake," 9.

The sameness in placement and lettering of "Fresco W Blake inv" and the fact that these five signatures are the only ones Blake wrote on works of art in his everyday hand strongly suggest that they were written with the same instrument at the same time—and presumably for the same collector.

The signature "WBlake 1795" is on *Satan* 292, *Nebuchadnezzar* 303, and *House of Death* 321; these three signatures are alike in form, and on 292 and 303 they were placed at the bottom right corner; on 321, it was placed in the left corner, presumably because the right corner was not suitable for a signature. Here, too, the sameness of the signatures suggests the same instrument and moment of signing. The signature "WBlake / inv" (see fig. 10), broken in two lines, is only on *Pity* 311, in the bottom right corner.

Why did Blake sign these monoprints? Was he, as Butlin speculates, *preparing* them for sale?[41] The potential for a sale occurred in 1818, to Dawson Turner, who wrote Blake expressing interest in his works (E, 771). Signing in preparation—or hopes of—a sale sounds reasonable until one asks: Why would Blake sign nine different impressions of a series of twelve designs out of twenty-two available impressions in three distinct styles dateable to between 1807 and 1810, for *one* potential collector in 1818? Or, if signed in preparation of more than one sale, why sign yet more impressions when a previously unrealized sale had already provided signed impressions? It is reasonable, however, to assume that the different signatures suggest different signing events at different times and probably—but not necessarily—different buyers.

Butlin is right to associate these signatures with sales, only the sales were almost certainly completed. The monoprints were always ready for sale, needing no preparation, since signing was neither labor-intensive nor time-consuming and could have waited until the sale was made or the work exchanged. Signing monoprints in various formats in the expectation that the ones signed would be the ones chosen by a collector would be nonsensical. The three sales to Butts of monoprints (ca. 1795–96, July 1805, and September 1805) provide precedents for Blake's signing monoprints from this series upon sale. Indeed, Blake would have no reason to add signatures to unsigned works in storage until some event prompted their addition. The only event that could initiate such an addition is their sale. We can read the signatures as signifying sales, even if we do not know the buyers.

Sequencing the Signatures

Blake began using his initial and surname with a date and/or "inv" in 1806. To assume that "WBlake 1795" would follow the "WBinv 1795" monogram used in 1805 on Butts's monoprints seems reasonable. "WBlake 1795" suggests that he was still dating the matrix and presumably thinking about the monoprint as a kind of print. That appears to change with "WBlake / inv," which almost certainly precedes "Fresco W Blake inv," in that Blake is unlikely to have dropped "Fresco" once he began to identify these

41. Ibid., 8.

works as such. Indeed, it seems very unlikely that the date of 1795 on the monoprints would appear on eight monoprints in 1805, disappear the next time Blake signed a few color prints, then reappear for three, then disappear for one. In other words, the post-1805 sequence that makes the most sense is:

Table 7. Proposed sequence for signatures on monoprints sold after 1805

Title	Butlin#	Signature	Collector
House of Death	321	WBlake 1795	
Nebuchadnezzar	303	WBlake 1795	X
Satan Exulting over Eve	292	WBlake 1795	
Pity	311	WBlake / inv	Y
Christ Appearing to the Apostles	326	Fresco W Blake inv	
Elijah/God Judging Adam	295	Fresco W Blake inv	
Hecate	317	Fresco W Blake inv	Z
Naomi Entreating Ruth	299	Fresco W Blake inv	
Newton	307	Fresco W Blake inv	

This sequence, I will argue, is also the one best supported by textual and circumstantial evidence.

The nine signed monoprints fall into three groups by nature of the style of their signatures. I will refer to these groups and their possible collectors as X (three prints signed "WBlake 1795"), Y (one print signed "WBlake / inv"), and Z (five prints signed "Fresco W Blake inv"). This is the order in which the monoprints appear to have left Blake's studio. Were the three groups sold to the same collector? Butts, after all, owned monoprints from the same series that were signed in two different formats and variants thereof. Or were the three groups of monoprints sold to three (or more) different collectors?

We may not be able to answer these questions conclusively, because answering from the buyer's perspective yields a different answer than answering from the seller's perspective. At first, the idea of one buyer appears supported by the absence of duplicates among the signed impressions. Imagining the transactions with three buyers helps to reveal this. The buyer choosing the three impressions that Blake signed "WBlake 1795" chose first, decreasing the pool of twenty-two impressions to nineteen of twelve designs. The person choosing the impression Blake signed "WBlake inv" reduced stock to eighteen impressions of twelve designs. The person choosing the five impressions that Blake signed "Fresco W Blake inv" chose last, which means he had eighteen impressions of twelve designs to pick from, and yet he or she picked five designs that supplement the four impressions signed "WBlake 1795" and "WBlake inv."

The odds that this last buyer, choosing at random, would pick only supplementary works, that is, no duplicates, are a mere 7 percent. Conversely, there is a 93 percent probability that just one buyer (Z), with knowledge of the first two purchases (X, Y), acquired all three groups.

However, change the perspective from buyer to seller and the pattern points to three buyers. Blake appears to be selling only duplicates from his inventory, deliberately leaving a complete set of twelve impressions of twelve designs intact. From the seller's perspective, we encounter a very unlikely coincidence: the nine impressions sold are the *only* impressions that Blake could have sold if he intended to retain one complete series without having to reprint any design.

Table 8. Blake's monoprint inventory from fall 1805, showing signatures on duplicates

Title	Butlin#	Signature
Elohim Creating Adam	290 (untraced)	
Lamech	298	
Good and Evil Angels	324	
Nebuchadnezzar	302	
Nebuchadnezzar	**303**	**WBlake 1795**
House of Death	322	
House of Death	**321**	**WBlake 1795**
Satan Exulting over Eve	292B (untraced)	
Satan Exulting over Eve	**292**	**WBlake 1795**
Pity	312	
Pity	**311**	**WBlake / inv**
Christ Appearing	327	
Christ Appearing	**326**	**Fresco W Blake inv**
Elijah/God Judging Adam	296	
Elijah/God Judging Adam	**295**	**Fresco W Blake inv**
Hecate	318	
Hecate	**317**	**Fresco W Blake inv**
Naomi Entreating Ruth	300	
Naomi Entreating Ruth	**299**	**Fresco W Blake inv**
Newton	307B (untraced)	
Newton	**307**	**Fresco W Blake inv**

The unsigned impressions (unbolded in table 8) were unsold at Blake's death and comprise one complete set of the series.[42]

Blake appears to have been choosing what to sell—or what not to sell. And he appears to have sold to three buyers, because, however he defined monoprints at this time, as prints or paintings, the inclusion of the word "Fresco" in the Z group of prints differentiates them ontologically from the X and Y groups, a very odd thing for Blake to do if these "frescos" were entering the same collection as groups X and/or Y—odd, but of course not impossible. The three different texts and formats of signature more likely signify three different signing events and probably three different buyers—with buyer Z perhaps paying more for "fresco" paintings than buyer X did for large color prints. The absence of duplicates appears to reflect Blake's intention to sell impressions separately as autonomous designs while also deliberately keeping one complete series intact. Doing so required not selling the sole impressions of *Lamech*, *Good and Evil Angels*, and *Elohim*, designs printed twice in 1795 but not reprinted. Had Blake sold them separately, he would have broken his one complete set.

Blake's limiting sales to duplicates suggests that the matrices were possibly unprintable, in which case he could not replace a unique impression to keep the series intact. If the matrices were still printable, then selling only duplicates could mean Blake wanted to retain the series as such but did not want to re-engage in monoprinting. Blake knew that he could refinish even the poorest pull from the first printing into something remarkable if he had a buyer. He may have entertained one or both ideas—refinishing what was in stock and selling the series together—in 1818, when he informed Dawson Turner about his "12 Large prints." He priced them separately at £5 5s., five times their price in 1805, when they were priced the same as his watercolors. The higher price—which is high for most color prints, but not for polygraphs—may have been linked to the price of his paintings at that time, though what that might have been is not known. He told Turner that he would "take care that they shall be done at least as well as any I have yet Produced" (E, 771). Whether Blake was referring to refinishing what he had in stock or actually reprinting matrixes is unclear.

Dating the Signatures on Nine Monoprints

My hypothesis that Blake sold the nine color prints that he signed raises many questions, to be sure, but the main questions are simple enough: When and to whom? Having sequenced the signatures will help to establish dating parameters, which in turn may provide the grounds that will eventually help Blake scholars to answer the "to whom" question.

42. I have included untraced *Nebuchadnezzar* 304 among the monoprints on hand as of fall 1805 (table 6). Because evidence provided in my larger study on the monoprints suggests it was also signed and sold by Blake, I have not included it among the monoprints left in Blake's studio at the time of his death, those recorded in table 8 as unsigned.

House of Death 321, *Nebuchadnezzar* 303, and *Satan* 292—very distinct and dissimilar compositions—were similarly signed "WBlake 1795." Precedent tells us that such similarity for prints from the same series suggests that the prints were probably signed at the same time. Blake used this form of signature—initial and surname without "inv"—before and after the monogram, that is, in 1795 and between ca. 1806–1812. In 1795 he signed *The Song of Los* and *The Book of Ahania* using a version of "WBlake 1795." But we can rule out the earlier date because *Nebuchadnezzar* 303 was from the ca. 1805 printing. It and the other two monoprints similarly signed were probably signed between 1805 and, as we will see, 1807. Even though "inv" is not part of this signature, the date is, and it is the date that reveals his continuing to perceive the matrix/monoprint as a kind of color print. His doing so suggests that these three large color prints were the first ones he signed after signing others "1795 WBinv," in September of 1805. The other two formats of signature reinforce this sequence, because they indicate that Blake had reconceived the monoprints as paintings, had come to emphasize the painting part of his hybrid painterly print.

We see this reconception in "WBlake / inv," the signature on *Pity* 311 (see fig. 10). Blake used this format—WBlake inv—less often than the monogram. He used it following a date, as in "1806 WBlake inv" (Butlin 613) and "1807 WBlake inv" (Butlin 641). Blake used a form of the "WBlake inv" for another ten or more years, including in the illustrations to Milton's *Paradise Regained* (Butlin 544) and *L'Allegro* and *Il Penseroso* (Butlin 543, fig. 14) There are works from 1820, 1822, and 1825 signed this way, but the letters in these later works were often incised through the paint layer and usually used Roman letterforms (Butlin 770, 537.1, 549.1, 480). Blake signed the three illustrations of Linnell's copy of *Paradise Lost* in 1821 "WBlake inv" (Butlin 537.1) in a style that resembles the hand on *Pity* as well as the 1806 and 1807 works (Butlin 613, 641). Nevertheless, the style of lettering in the signature on *Pity* 311 appears closer to 1807 than 1821, or to the lettering on the ca. 1816–20 Milton illustrations, where the *a*, *k*, and *e* are differently formed and not connected. Hence, the "WBlake / inv" on *Pity* 311 appears to be a variant of the signature that Blake was using in 1806 and 1807 with the date excluded, rather than a variant of his signature in, for example, "WBlake 1808," "WBlake 1809," "WBlake 1812" (536.4; 538.2,5; 676), with the date replaced with "inv."

A clue that supports dating *Pity*'s signature to ca. 1807–8 comes from *Enoch*, Blake's one and only lithographic print (fig. 15).

FIGURE 15. *Enoch*, lithograph, detail. Robert N. Essick Collection.

This pen-and-ink lithograph, executed by Blake in ca. 1807, was signed the same as *Pity* 311, "WBlake inv," in cursive (albeit backward on the stone) and with name and "inv" on the same line. But the text and lettering style are not the only clues. Others come from the nature and appearance of the print itself. To make the lithograph, Blake drew directly on the stone in an ink presumably provided by G. J. Vollweiler, the proprietor of *Specimens in Polyautography*, as lithography was originally known. According to Hullmandel, in the preface of the *Art of Drawing on Stone* (1833), "a lithographic impression is not even a facsimile of the work . . . but the original drawing itself, and this is a feature peculiar to lithography."[43] The relation between original and copy was especially complicated because, before the invention of transfer papers for lithography, the drawing was necessarily executed directly on the stone, which was then erased after the edition was printed to free the stone for reuse. In this light, Blake's *Enoch* is the drawing. In the absence of an extant matrix, any print of *Enoch* would strike the viewer as an original drawing. Indeed, even knowing that it is a lithographic print, one still experiences it as a drawing and not as a copy or translation of a drawing. As with Blake's illuminated prints, it reveals no graphic codes and has no model to compare it to.

Although Blake used "inv," the designation appropriate for an original print, he signed *Enoch* like a highly finished pen drawing, on the surface of the image, and not like a print, that is, not within an inscription or colophon below the image or design, as was the convention for prints. Though technically a "plate signature" (see note 26), this cursive script presents itself as an autograph. With an autograph signature and no inscription or date for the matrix, the planographic print presents itself as a drawing, showing no signs of translation or the machine to suggest otherwise. Blake would have recognized, in its process and effect, lithography's resemblance to relief etching. More to the point, this shock of recognition, of the *Enoch* print as original drawing, may have led Blake to recognize monoprints as original paintings and to sign *Pity* 311 the way he signed *Enoch*. Using "inv" without a date suggests that Blake had stopped acknowledging the printable matrix, had stopped recognizing the technical and ontological differences between large color prints and his temperas, frescos, and watercolors. He was now, in other words, treating *Pity* 311 in the same way he treated his other paintings and original works on paper, panel, and canvas.[44]

43. Qtd. in Joseph Pennell, *Lithography and Lithographers: Some Chapters in the History of the Art* (New York, 1898), 285.

44. Dante Rossetti, Captain Butts, Anne Gilchrist, and Alexander Gilchrist all thought the color print drawings were paintings. W. M. Rossetti, who compiled the first catalogue raisonné, eventually convinced them otherwise, his primary piece of evidence being not Frederick Tatham's essentially correct account of the process (see *Rossetti Papers 1862–1870*, 16), but the discovery in early 1863 of Blake's March 1806 account with Butts, which identifies them as prints (William Michael Rossetti, *Selected Letters of William Michael Rossetti,* ed. Roger W. Peattie [University Park, Pa., 1990], 13; see also Gilchrist, *Life of Blake*, 2:256).

For these reasons, I propose that "WBlake / inv" is the second of the three post-1805 signatures. It is a variant of the format of "[date] WBlake inv" used in 1807 and 1808. "Fresco W Blake inv" appears to have followed shortly afterward, with "fresco" in place of the date. Blake first used the word "fresco" in 1809, in his *Descriptive Catalogue* to his exhibition of that year. He described nine of the sixteen works in the exhibition as "fresco." All nine appear to have been executed between 1800 and 1808, with one or more possibly contemporaneous with the monoprints of 1795.[45] Of these nine, five are extant, yet none was identified as "fresco" on its surface. Had Blake theorized about his experiments in and practice of painting in "water colours"—that is, the opaque water-miscible paints that he had used to produce monoprints and temperas—on gessoed canvas as "frescos" (E, 527) after their execution, describing rather than prescribing the practice? Whether that was so or not, he appears to have viewed his earlier experiments in painting with these colors to produce monoprints in light of his 1809 exhibition. The monoprints, though, were on wove paper, unlike his other "frescos," which were on canvas. Technically, with the monoprint, the millboard matrix would be the "fresco," since it, like canvas, was prepared with gesso or plaster, akin to a wall, and painted in "water colours." The painting pulled from the matrix was a "fresco" once removed. Nevertheless, Blake explicitly identified five monoprints on wove paper as paintings, albeit a specific kind of painting, and he signed them accordingly, with "inv" and without dating the matrix.[46] He appears to have signed them around the time of his exhibition.

The signature "Fresco W Blake inv" explicitly emphasized the painting part of Blake's hybrid medium, privileging the medium's presence over the design's date of conception or the execution of its absent matrix. Blake had used the phrase "Painted in Fresco by William Blake" in the inscription of the *Chaucers Canterbury Pilgrims* engraving, dated October 8, 1810, and repeated it in 1811, in *An Allegory of the Spiritual Condition of Man* (Butlin 673), which he signed over four lines in gold or yellow-gold paint: "Painted in / Fresco by / Wm Blake // 1811." But in two other frescos of 1810, *Adam Naming the Beast* (Butlin 667) and *The Virgin and Child in Egypt* (Butlin 669), Blake did not use the phrase "Painted in"; he signed them "Fresco / by / Willm Blake / 1810."[47] The

45. In the *Descriptive Catalogue*, Blake notes that "picture" number VI, "A Spirit vaulting from a cloud," was "done many years ago, and was one of the first Mr. B. ever did in Fresco; fortunately or rather providentially he left it unblotted and unblurred, although molested continually by blotting and blurring demons; but he was also compelled to leave it unfinished for reasons that will be shewn in the following" (E, 546). This untraced work appears to have been executed between the monoprints and biblical temperas, not as a color print but as a "picture," and thus possibly as a step toward the series of temperas that he started to execute for Butts in ca. 1799.

46. Gilchrist's comment about "fresco on paper" (*Life of Blake,* 1:245) refers to his own copy of *Elijah/God Judging Adam* (Butlin 295), which was signed "Fresco W Blake inv," and which he knew as *Elijah in the Fiery Chariot*.

47. The signatures are recorded without breaks in Butlin (667, 669), as though they, too, were written on one line, but they were in fact broken into four lines in both temperas.

signature "Fresco W Blake inv" is textually closer to these 1810 works, which suggests that this form of the signature may predate the Chaucer inscription and that Blake elaborated rather than distilled information in the course of the year. This sequence of signing would make the five monoprints the first extant works Blake actually signed as "fresco." And this would date their signatures between the preparation of the exhibition and the Chaucer engraving, that is, between late 1808 and late 1810.

In sum, the sequence, dates, and formats of the signatures on the monoprints appear to be:

Table 9. Proposed dates for various signature formats on Blake's monoprints

Date signed	Signature	Number so signed
ca. 1795–96	Blake	3
ca. 1805	WBinv/1795 and 1795/WBinv	8
ca. 1806–7	WBlake 1795	3
ca. 1807–8	WBlake / inv	1
ca. 1808–10	Fresco W Blake inv	5

In conclusion, the nine signed monoprints not sold to Butts appear to have been sold between 1806 and 1810 to three different collectors. Blake appears to be the one making the decisions about which works to sell or not sell, selling individually or in small groups only those prints with duplicates so as to keep one complete series of twelve designs intact. Sales appear to have prompted their signatures as well as refinishing, as was the case with Butts's monoprints in 1805. In comparison, many, but not all, of the unsigned monoprints, those known to have passed through Mrs. Blake and Tatham, seem "unfinished." They were rudimentarily finished at the time of printing but were not given their final, higher finish, which Blake apparently gave them once they were sold.[48]

Unfortunately, contemporary information about how, when, or to whom Blake sold artworks is extremely rare. Only six letters are extant between 1806 and 1818, when Blake responded to Dawson Turner's enquiry about his "different Works." This twelve-year period, in its lack of historical records, resembles the twenty-year period between 1779 and 1799, when many copies of the illuminated books were sold

48. Joyce Townsend (*William Blake, The Painter at Work,* ed. Townsend [London, 2003], 89) and Butlin (*Paintings and Drawings*, 156) also notice that some monoprints seem unfinished and that impressions were probably finished when sold. The impressions that seem unfinished were pulled in 1795 but never signed or sold by Blake: *Christ Appearing* 327, *Good and Evil Angels* 324, *Hecate* 318, *Lamech* 298, *Naomi* 300, *Nebuchadnezzar* 302, and *Pity* 312. The conditions of the four untraced impressions, all apparently from 1795, are not known; the separate pulls of 1795–96 and ca. 1805 were finished, even the two not sold in Blake's lifetime: *House of Death* 322 and *Elijah/God Judging Adam* 296.

but only six letters are extant and none records a sale. Indeed, nearly thirty of Blake's forty-nine years as a professional engraver and artist lack documentation in the form of letters. Little wonder scholars seize upon whatever documentation exists. The dots we connect, however, often provide distorted pictures. Locating three monoprints signed "Blake" among unspecified works in Butts's post-1805 invoices is a case in point. It distorts both when Butts acquired the works and when Blake first sold them, and it obscures a disturbing truth: documentation for the sale of Blake's works of art is the exception; its absence is the default.

Conclusion

Blake sold three monoprints by June 1796 to Thomas Butts, signing them by scratching "Blake" with a needle into the paint layer. Blake sold eight more monoprints to Butts in July and September of 1805, signing them in pen and ink with his monogram, preceded or followed by "1795," even though two were painted and printed especially for the sale in 1805. In these cases, he apparently followed printmaking conventions by dating the execution of the monoprint's matrix instead of its impression. Doing so suggests that he perceived the monoprint as a kind of color print. He continued to do so with the next three monoprints he sold, signed "WBlake 1795" and apparently acquired by a single collector, here called Collector X. Among them was *Nebuchadnezzar* 303, printed as the second pull with *Nebuchadnezzar* 301 in 1805; had Blake presented it as a painting—dating the execution of the impression and not its matrix—he would have dated it "1805" or dropped the date entirely. On the next monoprint Blake signed, *Pity* 311 from the 1795 printing, he dropped the date, signing it "WBlake inv," as though he were signing a drawing or painting and not a multiple; he appears to have sold it to an unknown collector, here called Collector Y. Blake signed the last five prints that he sold as paintings, signing them in the same style, "Fresco W Blake inv," presumably between 1808 and 1810 to an unknown collector, here called Collector Z.

Blake's signing works of art signified the transfer of ownership, an act requiring information about origin, and hence the works' originality, which his autograph implied but Blake often made explicit by adding "inv." (On the other hand, that transfer apparently did occur without signatures, as unsigned finished works are in Butts's and Linnell's collections; see Butlin 670, 774). Shared style and placement of signatures on related works suggests that the works were likely sold together. Blake appears never to have signed works to indicate that they were ready to be sold. He signed works in the style of signature he was using in the period when he sold the work, as is evinced by the diverse signature styles among the monoprints, temperas, and watercolors executed for Butts between 1796 and 1810. Signatures can thus be in a style dating from later than the work of art signed.

The different styles of monoprint signatures, furthermore, appear to reveal Blake's changing perception of the thing signed, from color print to printed painting. The nine impressions signed in three formats, presumably between ca. 1806 and ca. 1810, appear to have the same provenance, in that all are recorded by Butlin as

"? Mrs. Blake; ? Tatham." This, of course, is the catalogue raisonné's default for both unsigned and signed works whose first owners are unknown or appear unconnected to Blake. Without written documentation to suggest otherwise, it is a safe designation. The question mark, though, indicates more than the absence of documentation; it also suggests that the work probably failed to sell in Blake's lifetime and passed to Mrs. Blake. Today, signed but unsold artworks pose no problems for us; they appear, however, to have been exceedingly rare for Blake. If the work was signed, it had sold. Blake did not sign upon execution or completion, as is evinced by the unsigned completed works—including monoprints—that passed through Tatham's hands. Based on the two groups of signed monoprints in Butts's collection, I believe Blake's general practice was to sign works of art upon sale.

Too small a sampling? Consider, then, all the finished paintings and watercolor drawings in the catalogue raisonné: all but one of the works known with certainty to have passed through either Mrs. Blake's or Tatham's hands were unsigned. The one exception is the watercolor *The Witch of Endor* (Butlin 144), signed "1783 W Blake inv"—and the idea that Tatham once owned it is inferred by its presence in the Sotheby auction of April 29, 1862 (see note 34). No other signed work is known, absolutely and without question, to have passed through their hands. Such a work's earliest provenance may be unknown and thus recorded as "? Mrs. Blake," but no solid evidence exists that it passed to her or that it was not sold in Blake's lifetime. What appears to be another exception is not one. *Christ Appearing* in the National Gallery of Art (Butlin 326) was signed "Fresco W Blake inv" and is recorded as having sold at Sotheby's, April 29, 1862, among many hundreds of Blake drawings, prints, and watercolors that were once owned by Tatham.[49] However, the first part of its provenance in the nineteenth century is mistaken and belongs instead to *Christ Appearing*

49. Most if not all the Blake items in the Sotheby's auction on April 29, 1862 once belonged to Tatham, who, upon Mrs. Blake's death, claimed all of Blake's remaining works and sold them for almost thirty years. He sold a substantial portion of his collection to the printseller Joseph Hogarth, who compiled around 1843 a "portfolio of Blake drawings" that John Ruskin acquired for £100 but returned, describing it as a "mass" of drawings of uneven quality (*Works of John Ruskin,* ed. E. T. Cook and Alexander Wedderburn, vol. 36, *The Letters of John Ruskin, 1827–1869* [London, 1909], 32–33). Hogarth appears to have reconfigured and resold the portfolio to a client who was buying other prints and drawings from him, which, along with the Blakes, were in the 1862 Sotheby's auction. Moreover, six months before the auction, Tatham was corresponding with Gilchrist and Anne Gilchrist about Blake's life, works, and techniques; six months after the auction, he was corresponding with W. M. Rossetti about works for his catalogue. Yet neither Anne Gilchrist nor Rossetti knew of this auction. The handful of works from it that Rossetti recorded in his catalogue came from owners and not Tatham or the sales catalogue (Joseph Viscomi, "Blake in the Marketplace 1852: Thomas Butts, Jr. and Other Unknown Nineteenth-century Blake Collectors," *Blake/An Illustrated Quarterly* 29 (Fall 1995): 40–69 at 56). The full argument that Tatham was not the auction's vendor is given in chapter 10 of my *Printed Paintings*.

in the Tate (Butlin 327).[50] The mix-up comes from thinking the print dealer Joseph Hogarth bought all of his Blakes from Tatham (Butlin 307), including the four monoprints that sold as part of his stock in 1854: *Nebuchadnezzar* 303, *Christ Appearing* 326, *Newton* 307, and *House of Death* 321, all of which were signed.[51] Their earliest provenances are recorded as "? Mrs. Blake; ? Frederick Tatham." According to the hypothesis presented here, however, they were first sold between 1806 and 1810 to collectors X and Z.[52] Probably there are exceptions of which I am not aware, but a few exceptions a rule of thumb makes, which is that works sold after Blake's death were unsigned and that signed works were sold by Blake.[53]

If signed works signify sales—if signatures are themselves the written documentation of a sale—then Blake's market and audience was larger than is generally acknowledged, his economic situation slightly better, and his artistic appeal and reputation slightly wider. If we concede the validity of this form of textual evidence, then the Carlylean figure—as distilled through Carlyle's disciple Gilchrist—may have been more grounded, less rejected by or indifferent to the connoisseurs and collectors of his day, and less dependent on just Butts, Hayley, and Linnell.

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50. Butlin acknowledges that the early provenances of the design's two versions may have been confused. The unsigned Tate impression (327) should be recorded as: "? Mrs. Blake; ? Frederick Tatham, sold Sotheby's 29 April 1862 (186 as "The Resurrection") £2.10.0 bt. Palser; . . . ; J. W. Pease, bequeathed 1901 to Miss S. H. Pease, sold Christies 2 December 1938 (57) £75 bt. Martin for W. Graham Robertson, bequeathed 1948 to the Tate Gallery." The signed National Gallery of Art impression (326) should be recorded as: " . . . Joseph Hogarth, sold Southgate's 7–30 June 1854, 17th evening (7112 as "Our Saviour appearing to His Disciples, in colours") 8/-bt. M. Sharp; . . . W. A. White by 1919; Rosenbach's, sold by 1930 to Lessing J. Rosenwald."

51. Hogarth also sold "The Almighty accusing Eve, *in colours*" (lot 1922), which Bentley identifies as *Satan* 292 (*Sales Catalogues*, *1800–1899*). This identification, however, requires confusing a bat-winged, beardless virile warrior for the Almighty, which seems unlikely.

52. Only three drawings with Tatham's inscriptions—which describe or identify the subjects—can be traced without doubt to the 1862 auction (Butlin 643, 647, 654). None of the seventy or so works he inscribed to verify Blake as artist, e.g., "vouched by Frederick Tatham," was in the auction; all of these can be traced to 1863 and later, which is to say, Tatham apparently sold them after Gilchrist's *Life of Blake* helped create a market for all things Blake.

53. The "fresco" of *Canterbury Pilgrims* (Butlin 653) may be an exception, in that Blake included it in his exhibition and noted that it was for sale but would remain in his possession until the engraving was finished. It is signed "WBlake" and dated "180[8]"; it was acquired by Butts, but whether it was signed and dated for the exhibition or the sale to Butts is not known.