

Life & Times Exhibition

William Blake

Tate Britain, London, 12 September 2019
to 2 February 2020

LOST IN TRANSLATION

Tate Britain was built partly on the profits of slavery, from the toil on the sugar plantations of Alabama and the Caribbean.¹ The Tate & Lyle business flourished with the blood, sweat, and tears of captive Africans forcibly transported or born captive in the British colonies. Perhaps it's a form of atonement for this legacy for the Tate to embrace an artist who believed in emancipation and social justice.

William Blake died almost 200 years ago in 1827, two decades after the British slave trade was abolished in England. He witnessed the ferocity and venom of the Gordon Riots and the prejudice and hate that suffocated minds.

He lived at a time of rapid industrialisation and the 'dark Satanic mills' of child labour, the cruelty of poverty and homelessness on the streets, the indoctrination by the Church

of England, the hypocrisy of corrupt politicians, and the subjugation of women.

Blake had a portfolio career as an engraver, poet, and artist, and, walking around the gallery, I get a sense of an emerging theme. There are Gothic shackled figures in anguish and relentless images of rising, flying, and escaping spirits.

There is a figure of a naked Newton, crouching with a compass, mocking the notion that science can unravel the beauty and mystery of the universe. There are illustrations from *Songs of Innocence and Experience* (an illustrated collection of poems by Blake) including an African child stroking the blond hair of a white boy. So many of these images have inspiration drawn from mythology as well as from Michelangelo and Shakespeare.

This is an intimate exploration of social and cultural influences on Blake, offering an insight and deeper appreciation of his creativity, spirituality, and quest for freedom from 'mind forg'd manacles'.

However, there is something missing from the art: the vivid imagined images, chariots of fire, passion and fervour that the poetry conjures are lost in translation.

During his life he failed to impress his contemporaries and his wife had to borrow money for his funeral. Despite this, he remained true to his moral values. He was a rebel; radical,



William Blake. *Capaneus the Blasphemer*, 1824–1827. National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne.

revolutionary, and resilient; and he still says something enduring to me about my life: there is more meaning to life than striving for popularity, likes, and retweets on twitter.

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William Blake (1757–1827). *The Ghost of a Flea*, c. 1819–1820, Tate.



REFERENCE

1. The Tate galleries and slavery. Tate, 2019. <https://www.tate.org.uk/about-us/history-tate/tate-galleries-and-slavery> [accessed 21 Nov 2019].