

Discover the extraordinary range of William Blake's artistry with two very different hand-painted copies of *Songs of Innocence and of Experience*

William Blake, *Songs of Innocence and of Experience*. London: privately printed, 1794 and 1826. 7 1/16 inches x 4 7/8 inches (180 x 124 mm), 54 plates; 8 1/2 inches x 5 1/8 inches (216 x 130 mm), 54 plates.

William Blake (1757–1827) began life as a professional engraver, copying the designs of other artists for prints. He set up on his own and married, but it was, perhaps, discouragement after the death of his younger brother and apprentice, Robert, in 1787 that turned him from ordinary work to give visual form to his own compositions. “In sketching designs, engraving plates, writing songs, and composing music, he employed his time, with his wife sitting at his side, encouraging him in all his undertakings. As he drew the figure he meditated the song that was to accompany it, and the music to which the verse was to be sung, was the offspring of the same moment.” So a contemporary recalled the visionary process, of which Blake's plates, engraved in relief with text and illustration combined and colored by hand, are the sole and now rare witnesses.

Songs of Innocence was first completed in 1789 and enlarged as *Songs of Innocence and of Experience* in 1794. These are now some of the most famous lyrics in the English language. From the introduction, “Piping down the valleys wild,” to “The Ecchoing Green,” “The Chimney Sweeper,” and “The Tyger,” there is hardly one that does not stir conscious or unconscious memories. The pictures, head- and tailpieces, vignettes and line-fillers that provide the visual accompaniment to the songs, are an integral part of each composition. The least line has a meaning and purpose, augmenting text and picture alike; only the tunes are lost, though other composers since have set many of them to music. They remain, light but deeply serious, simple but capable of endless reinterpretation, the most vivid and approachable of all Blake's visions.

Readers have occasionally attempted to derive a linear narrative thread through the *Songs of Innocence and of Experience*, but Blake's inconsistent

arrangement of the plates in various copies ultimately frustrates any such endeavor. There are thirty-four distinct plate orders of the *Songs of Innocence* and *Songs of Innocence and of Experience*. In a manuscript dating after 1818, Blake specifies an order for the combined *Songs*, but there is only one copy that actually subscribes to it (Copy V [1821], Morgan Library). These two examples, Copy C and Copy Z, are quite differently arranged. With the combined *Songs*, as with all of Blake's illuminated works, readers must realize that no two copies are exactly alike, and that each was intended to be a radically distinct work of art.

These are one of the first and one of the last copies of the *Songs of Innocence and Experience*. Copy C, 1794, has delicate pastel shadings that effect a balance between design and poem, with neither given precedence over the other. Copy Z, 1826, on the other hand, reflects the vivid coloration of Blake's last great project, the designs for Dante's *Divine Comedy*.

Copy C has gilt edges and is bound in contemporary gilt citron morocco; the second compartment of the has morocco lettering piece reading "songs | of | innocence." The embossed seal of William E. Moss (a leading collector of Blake's books) and the gift label of Lessing J. Rosenwald recording the donation to the Library of Congress are on the front pastedown.

Copy Z is bound in dark purple straight grain levant morocco, gilt-stamped, front panel with "blake's | songs | of | innocence | and | experience," spine with "songs | of | innocence | and | experience" in the second compartment and "by blake" in the fifth, gilt edges. The front pastedown bears the bookplate of Blake's patron Henry Crabb Robinson, annotated by him in pencil, "ætat 88 | to | Edwin W Field | 11 Mar 1863," and of Willis Vickery, as well as the gift label of Lessing J. Rosenwald recording the donation to the Library of Congress. The bookplate of Frank Brewer Bemis is on the front free endpaper.

Octavo code: Blkin1,2