

A facsimile of life

William Blake at the University of Melbourne

Lucy Cooper

The Universitas 21 Museums and Collections Award is a unique and exciting exchange for students of the University of Melbourne and the University of Birmingham. The one-month placement is designed to expose students to various aspects of heritage occupations, to let them share ideas and information, and to strengthen international relations. I was the fortunate winner of this award and completed my placement in Melbourne in July–August 2014.

During my placement I was given projects that took me out of my comfort zone, testing and strengthening the skills I had acquired from other volunteering roles. As an example, I will describe one of the most interesting projects I undertook, working with the University of Melbourne Library's Rare Books and Print Collection teams. My work revolved around the renowned English painter and poet William Blake (1757–1827), who is considered to be a central figure in the history of poetry and visual arts in the late 18th and early 19th centuries. He produced a diverse oeuvre that was largely unrecognised during his lifetime. Although I was already very familiar with Blake's work, which is a staple in the United Kingdom's secondary school art and English curricula, my research at



Melbourne was not centred upon his most famous works. Instead I focused my research on two engravings, *Grandison*¹ and *Beggar's opera, Act III* (detail pictured above), created during Blake's seven-year apprenticeship (between the ages of 14 and 21) with engraver James Basire.

These engravings represent two important stages in Blake's early career. *Grandison* was part of a three-plate series designed by the painter and illustrator Thomas Stothard to illustrate an epistolary novel popular at the time: *The history of Sir Charles Grandison* by Samuel Richardson. The relationship between Stothard and Blake was an important one: slightly more than half of all of the reproductive book illustrations Blake produced between 1780 and 1790 were based on Stothard's work—a substantial body of work, which

would have helped Blake become financially independent. The graphic involvement with Stothard also helped Blake's stylistic development as he varied between traditional bold and linear techniques for drawing-room scenes, as with *Grandison*, and a progressively more supple style that he refined for the rendering of outdoor scenes, which can be seen later in his illuminated books.

Beggar's opera, Act III represents the pinnacle of Blake's career as a commercial engraver. In 1788 Blake was hired by the publishers John and Josiah Boydell to make an engraving of William Hogarth's painting of a scene from John Gay's satirical ballad opera *The beggar's opera*. The plate is a significant achievement in the art and craft of composite etching and engraving. The range of techniques displayed place it among



Previous page: William Blake after William Hogarth, *Beggar's opera, Act III*, 1820, etching and engraving (seventh state), 44.9 × 58.2 cm (plate), (detail) published by Baldwin, Cradock and Joy. Accession no. 2009.0104, presented by the Friends of the Baillieu Library 2009, Baillieu Library Print Collection, University of Melbourne.

Left: Lucy Cooper at the Baillieu Library in 2014.

the work of England's finest masters of the profession, such as William Woollett. Blake's fee is not known but it must have been the largest he had received up to that point, and quite possibly the most he was ever paid. Never again would Blake receive such a significant commission; nor would he surpass the technical proficiency of *Beggar's opera, Act III* in copy engraving, despite this print's considerable success.

As well as examining these two fascinating engravings, I was directed to the entire 50-volume collection of Blake facsimiles produced in France by the Trianon Press and edited by Geoffrey Keynes, a leading expert on Blake's oeuvre. During my time in Melbourne, the National Gallery of Victoria mounted an exhibition of relatively short duration (April–August 2014), highlighting some of the rarest Blake pieces in the world. Blake's chosen medium of watercolour on paper is highly susceptible to light damage, so display periods must be short and carefully managed. Because opportunities to see his original works are so limited, facsimiles provide excellent access for the everyday scholar. Published between 1951 and 1979, these exquisitely made facsimiles have been lauded as the finest ever produced of the work of William Blake. They are of such

high quality that they can scarcely be distinguished from the original works held by renowned connoisseurs such as Lessing J. Rosenwald and Paul Mellon.² They were produced in strictly limited editions, numbering between 20 and 1500 copies.

A notable item among the Blake facsimiles at the University of Melbourne is *The book of Thel*.³ This is a special edition of the book, numbered II of XX, and shows the progressive stages of producing one plate, starting with the basic collotype printing in two colours (red and blue) followed by the application of watercolours by hand with the assistance of stencils. Blake produced several versions of this work between 1798 and 1818; in the earlier copies the colouring is pale and tender, to reflect the delicacy of the poem. In the 1815 copy, which was subsequently reproduced by the Trianon Press, the tints are stronger and sometimes heightened with touches of gold, which makes for an astounding facsimile. Here, the one plate is shown in 13 stages. In other volumes, as many as 40 hand-applied watercolour layers were used to create just one plate. All the works were printed on paper manufactured to replicate what Blake would have used, reproduced wherever possible at the original size, and with the addition of his monogram

as a watermark on each leaf. The bibliographic entry and commentary on each of the texts at the beginning are enlightening for both the casual inquirer and the engaged scholar.

The facsimiles of William Blake's work held in the University of Melbourne Library's Rare Books Collection are invaluable for the study of Blake's art, and as a fan I feel fortunate to have been able to research these works and help promote the collection.

Lucy Cooper is studying for an MA in heritage management at the University of Birmingham. Her experiences in Melbourne helped secure her employment at the National Trust, where she helps manage the collections of a historic house.

Items from the Rare Books Collection can be requested for use in the Cultural Collections Reading Room, third floor, Baillieu Library, see www.lib.unimelb.edu.au/collections/special/.

- 1 William Blake after Thomas Stothard, *Grandison*, 1781, plate 7 from the series *Sir Charles Grandison*, etching and engraving (third state), 16.9 × 10.9 cm (sheet). Reg. no. 1959.4766, gift of Dr J. Orde Poynton, 1959, Baillieu Library Print Collection, University of Melbourne.
- 2 'Arnold Fawcus and Trianon Press', University Library, University of Santa Cruz, <http://library.ucsc.edu/speccoll/arnold-fawcus-trianon-press>.
- 3 William Blake, *The book of Thel* (1789), facsimile edition, Boissia, France: Trianon Press, 1965. Rare Books, Baillieu Library, University of Melbourne.