Through a selection of watercolours, engravings, drawings and oil paintings, CaixaForum Madrid offers visitors a unique chance to discover one of the most representative and influential of British artists

**William Blake (1757-1827)**

**Visions in British Art**

Engraver, painter, poet. The archetypal complete artist, William Blake (London, 1757-1827) was widely misunderstood and scorned in his day. However, he now unquestionably occupies a prominent position in the history of western culture thanks to his original and visionary concept of art, fuelled by his rejection of social, religious and academic dogmas. Rebellion and mysticism are the defining characteristics of his work. Through his engraving, painting and writing, Blake interpreted the great political and social events of his day, questioning the status quo and seeking new artistic techniques that would better enable him to express his concerns. In this, he distanced himself from the neoclassical conventions that were so closely associated with the ideas of the Enlightenment. Blake’s work is also inextricably linked to the visions that accompanied him throughout his life, and from which he obtained a constant source of inspiration. In depicting these visions, he created a unique iconography that transports the viewer into a mythical realm where the forces of Good and Evil are locked in eternal combat. *William Blake (1757-1827). Visions in British Art*, organised by Tate Britain and produced by ”la Caixa” Foundation, takes a fresh look at the artist and his influence on later British art. Comprising more than one hundred works – seventy by Blake himself and another thirty by outstanding British artists influenced by his legacy – *Visions* is the first exhibition on this extraordinary artist to be organised in Spain since 1996.

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Madrid, 2 July 2012. tomorrow, Lluís Reverter, Secretary General of "la Caixa" Foundation, and Carolyn Kerr, Senior Curator at Tate Britain, will officially open the exhibition William Blake (1757-1827). Visions in British Art, the first retrospective to be devoted to this crucial English artist in Spain for the last fifteen years.

As part of "la Caixa" Foundation’s cultural programme, the exhibition responds to the aim of reclaiming and recognising the legacy of great artists who transcended the conventions of their day. Ahead of their times, such artists provided a source of inspiration and encouragement to future art movements. Following the shows devoted to Eugène Delacroix and Francisco de Goya as, unquestionably, precursors of modernity, this vindication of figures who marked a turning-point in art history now continues at CaixaForum Madrid with an exhibition devoted to William Blake, one of the most representative artists of western culture.

William Blake (1757-1827). Visions in British Art, organised by Tate Britain and produced by "la Caixa" Foundation, pursues the line of action established by the latter aimed at establishing strategic alliances with leading cultural centres, such as the Prado Museum, the Louvre Museum and the Museum of Contemporary Art of Barcelona. This is the third major joint venture undertaken by "la Caixa" and Tate Britain, following on from the exhibitions devoted to William Turner and William Hogarth.

This major retrospective brings together 74 works by Blake — including watercolours, engravings, drawings and oil paintings — complemented by some 30 pieces by later artists that were influenced by him.

Although he began his career as a draftsman at an early age and enjoyed relative initial success through his engravings, William Blake’s non-conformist theories of art and his revolutionary ideas about the world were not understood until many years after his death. Rejected and scorned by the society of his time, Blake is now unanimously recognised as an all-round artist (engraver, painter and poet) who, transcending the neoclassical conventions of his time, opened the door to a concept of art set free from the constraints of social, religious and academic dogmas.
This revolutionary concept, along with the visions that accompanied him throughout his life and provided a source of artistic inspiration, are the defining traits in Blake’s themes and techniques, and largely explain why rebellion and mysticism always go hand-in-hand in his work.

Blake was opposed to the status quo and used different techniques to depict his personal interpretation of the great political and social events of the day. He was a radical, independent free thinker whose art reflects the moral debates and social problems of his age.

His non-conformist spirit also drove Blake to reject the neoclassical artistic conventions associated with the values of the Enlightenment and to seek new techniques the better to reflect his concerns. In order to obtain the effects he sought in line and colour, Blake created his own techniques whilst roundly rejecting certain predominant procedures.

Blake was also a strong proponent of the imagination over reason, believing it to be not merely a faculty of the soul, but the very embodiment of human existence. In this, too, he was a visionary artist. The elaborate symbolism and overwhelming mysticism of his work are infused with his visions of other worlds and the afterlife. Drinking from this source of inspiration, Blake created a unique cosmological system that transports us to a mythical realm in which the forces of Good and Evil are locked in eternal combat.

EXHIBITION SECTIONS

Engraver and artist

Blake was a precocious artist: he took his first drawing classes at the age of ten, going on to learn watercolour and to become an engraver by trade. However, although there was great demand for engravings amongst the bourgeoisie of the day, his highly personal plates enjoyed little success, and Blake was never able to secure a comfortable living from his art. His sincerity and his refusal to make concessions to contemporary taste, combined with his driving need to use art as a means of personal expression, estranged him from contemporary viewers.

It is true that Blake’s early works achieved a degree of success. However, as his style became more defined, the complex symbolism of his images caused spectators to reject an art they considered absurd, disturbing and in poor taste.
Prophetic books

Blake lived in turbulent times. Social revolutions and wars made their mark on his thought. Fiercely critical of the political, religious and moral system of the day, Blake was a revolutionary.

The prophetic books, produced for the most part between 1788 and 1806, are his most complex and original works: a series of long, illuminated poems that symbolically describe the events of the times. In them, Blake took inspiration from his visions, infusing his poetry with elements from different religious traditions, literary sources and esoteric ideas.

In his frontispiece to Visions of the Daughters of Albion (1793), Blake portrayed three personages chained together and to the rocks of England, prisoners of an arbitrary and repressive social moral code. In this work, one of his first prophetic books, Blake focuses on the themes of sexual freedom and equality between men and women.

The large colour engravings

In his huge colour engravings, Blake experimented with new themes, techniques and materials. His largest works, they take their inspiration from a wide range of sources, such as the Bible, Shakespeare, modern history and his own personal mythologies.

Whether they were watercolours, engravings or tempera paintings, Blake called all these works frescoes, establishing an association between his own work and the great murals of Italian Renaissance art. Blake’s frescoes, like the Vatican paintings of Michelangelo (his greatest influence in terms of style) employ narrative elements with didactic intent, aimed at the general public.

Bible scenes

Although Blake was baptised, married and buried according to the precepts of the Anglican church, he maintained a highly critical attitude to ecclesiastical power, integrated into State power, throughout his life.
Blake was a great reader of religious texts, particularly the Bible and its prophetic books. Studying and analysing it from his heterodox standpoint, he reached the conclusion that the Bible was a historic compendium, the work of various voices, inspired, but not dictated, by God.

Thomas Butts, a civil servant, was Blake’s main patron. Many of his commissions were related to Bible texts, and it was thanks to Butts, by no means a rich man himself, that Blake could enjoy minimal financial security and the freedom to pursue his ideas.

**Tempera painting**

Unlike most of his contemporaries, who painted in oil, Blake developed an innovative tempera painting technique that enabled him to produce clear, well-defined lines and obtain pure, bright colours. Firstly, he drew the main outlines in ink or paint. Next, he applied the colours, using gum, or sometimes glue, to bind them. This method enabled him to depict his visions though spectacular, striking images.

Another characteristic in Blake’s art is his approach to representing the human body. In his view, what should prevail here is the inner vision rather than observation of nature. Taking Gothic art and the painting of Michelangelo as his models, he believed that the body should express spiritual values and states. In his work, line and silhouette, rather than effect and colour, are the basic, crucial elements. This decision does not reflect merely an aesthetic preference, but a moral imperative.
The Book of Job

1818: at the age of 61, Blake was faced by a difficult financial situation. A young artist, John Linnell, then commissioned him to produce drawings for the Book of Job and watercolours to illustrate Dante’s *Divine Comedy*. Linnell also bought most of Blake’s published writing. The friendship and collaboration between the two flourished throughout the last ten years of Blake’s life, and Linnell’s legacy formed the bridge that connected Blake’s work to later generations.

Blake identified, both personally and professionally, with the story of Job: a good man who suffers, who rejects the idea that his own sins may be to blame for this suffering and who, in defence of his virtue, even confronts Yahweh Himself.

The Divine Comedy

At Linnell’s suggestion, Blake illustrated Dante’s *Divine Comedy*. He began this work, which was to be published as a series of engravings, in autumn 1824. However, on his death in 1827, only seven plates had been printed, and his designs were at various stages of production. It is not known why most of these watercolours are devoted to Hell: perhaps because Blake was unable to complete the work.

Linnell’s commission led to the production of a large body of work: 102 watercolours and several original sketches. The *Divine Comedy* is not only the most important of Blake’s unfinished projects, but also one of his most outstanding works, in which we can appreciate the breadth and power of his imagination.

Illuminated books

The illuminated books, printed between 1788 and 1806, occupy the most prolific period in Blake’s career and testify to his daring technical and conceptual experimentation. His images were not to be understood only as illustrations to adorn the text, but as an important element that amplifies and complements it.

Images and words are engraved in relief. Before bathing it in acid, Blake painted the copper plate using a resistant solution. Having obtained the drawing
or text in relief, he applied ink and printed the work, using various colours for the same plate. This explains why we never find two identical versions of any given image, as Blake, assisted by his wife, Catherine, finished the engravings by hand, reinforcing the weaker lines and imbuing each piece with its own unique colour and texture.

Blake attributed the invention of this technique to his younger brother, Robert, whose artistic aspirations were ended abruptly by his tragic, early death in 1787. This terrible event had a profound effect on Blake, who insisted that Robert visited him in a vision, describing to him the principles of a new method of colour engraving.

**The Ancients**

The first artists to feel Blake’s influence were the members of The Ancients, a group of young painters, some barely out of the academy. Introduced to him by Linnell, these artists considered Blake to be a sage, a hermit pointing out the path they should follow. They were particularly attracted by Blake’s miniature painting and the visionary qualities of his work.

Although they shared Blake’s passion for Milton and the Bible, The Ancients were more conventional in their interpretations of these sources. They were not interested in Blake’s prophetic writing, nor in his complex mythological systems, which they considered impenetrable and impossible to imitate.

Nor did the works of The Ancients share any of Blake’s vehement social criticism, his representations or horror or his explicit sexual images. Rather, their art was more nostalgic, conceived as a reaction to industrial society.

**The Pre-Raphaelites and the Symbolists**

The artists who formed part of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood were more radical in their opposition to the artistic establishment than The Ancients, and followed Blake more closely in attacking the teaching and precepts of the Royal Academy.

From Blake, the Pre-Raphaelites took his treatment of space, colour and the dynamics of the human body, as well as many themes: love, death and judgement, the primacy of the inner eye and the transcendent body.

Symbolism emerged in the late-nineteenth century as an aesthetic, rather surreal, poetic reaction to the materialism of European culture. Blake was considered, retrospectively, as a symbolist whose robust spirituality and
personal mythology greatly influenced the artists that formed part of this movement. Like Blake, the Symbolists believed that the artist was a visionary, a prophet, and they created a figurative language that breathed new life into the historic genre and introduced psychology into art.

The leading exponent of this movement was G. F. Watts. In a series of large works, Watts developed a personal allegorical system aimed at transmitting arcane spiritual messages and denouncing the abuses of contemporary society. Although his images were often impenetrable, Watts enjoyed greater success than had Blake in his day. The times had changed, spectators accepted forms and themes that expressed a new sensibility, and the Symbolists were welcomed by the art establishment.

Dante Gabriele Rossetti (1828-1882) was a founding member of the Pre-Raphaelites and, with John Linnell (1779-1882) and Alexander Gilchrist (1828-1861), a key figure in the “rediscovery” of Blake in the mid-nineteenth century. Gilchrist, who was interested in writing a biography of Blake, learned that Rossetti possessed a book of his sketches. The two artists struck up a friendship and, when Gilchrist died of scarlet fever in 1861, Rossetti, assisted by his friend’s brother and wife, completed the biography. Rossetti and the Pre-Raphaelites established Blake as an indispensable reference point in modern art.

In 1918, John Linnell’s collection of Blake’s drawings and engravings went up for auction. In response, both public bodies and private collectors made great financial efforts to ensure that as many of Blake’s works as possible should remain in England.

Little by little, his work began to be seen in a new light: to his undisputed artistic worth were now added his moral values, which were accepted by the emerging new social classes. As a result, Blake, a national artist, became seen as one of the most representative and influential figures in British art.

**English Neo-Romanticism**

Blake’s work found an echo in certain early-twentieth-century English painters, who revived Romantic themes and forms.

**Cecil Collins (1908-1989)**
The loss of innocence, the expulsion from paradise and the search for spiritual life; these are themes common to both Blake and Cecil Collins, who always
denied the direct influence of the author of *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*. However this may be, Collins did share Blake’s religious inspiration.

**John Piper (1903-1992)**
Considering him a precursor, Piper frequently referred to Blake’s work in his essays on art. In 1948, he adapted some of Blake’s images in the set for Ninette de Valois’ ballet *Job: a Masque for Dancing*. In *The Forum*, moreover, Piper followed Blake’s lead and described architecture as a palimpsest of history.

**Graham Sutherland (1903-1980)**
Blake’s woodcut engravings of Virgil’s *Eclogues* and his watercolour illustrations of the *Divine Comedy* exercised a powerful influence over Graham Sutherland, who set his work *Black Landscape* in Clegyr Boia, a rocky outcrop in Wales similar to those that Blake portrayed in his engravings.

**Ceri Richards (1903-1971)**
Ceri Richards painted an interpretation of the poet Dylan Thomas’s plea “Do Not Go Gentle Into That Good Night”. Richards’ work suggests visual analogies to Blake’s luminous, dynamic figures.

**Eduardo Paolozzi (1924-2005)**
Eduardo Paolozzi’s work, which is often linked to Pop Art, contains complex references to the old masters, cultures from around the world, literature, philosophy and science. In his post-modernist *Newton*, a three-dimensional reworking of Blake’s portrait, the philosopher and mathematician appears as a fragmentary, robotic figure in which the mechanical and the human are fused.
William Blake (1757-1827)
Visions in British Art
4 July - 21 October 2012

Times
Monday-Sunday, from 10 am to 8 pm

Admission free to exhibitions

Information Service
"la Caixa" Foundation
Tel. 902 223 040
Monday-Sunday, from 9 am to 8 pm
www.lacaixa.es/obrasocial

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Multimedia Press Room
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ACTIVITIES PARALLEL TO THE EXHIBITION

• POETRY RECITAL
  Thursday, July 5, at 9 pm
  Summer Nights

  An all-round artist, William Blake was also a poet. *Songs of Innocence and Experience*, which he himself illustrated with drawings and watercolours, is one of the most outstanding collections of lyrical poetry in English.

  At this poetry reading, we shall combine Blake’s songs of innocence and experience with the work of poets who also explore the contradictory nature of the human soul.

  Jordi Doce, poet  
  Jorge Riechmann, poet  
  Carlos Marzal, poet  
  Antoni Marí, poet  
  Antonio Martínez Sarrión, poet

  Coordinated by: Antoni Marí, Emeritus Professor at Pompeu Fabra University, poet and writer

  Admission free  
  Places limited

• GUIDED TOURS OF THE EXHIBITION
  Guided tours for the general public

  Times  
  Mondays, at 6 pm  
  Tuesdays and Thursdays, at 7 pm  
  Wednesdays and Fridays, at 1 pm  
  Saturdays, Sundays and holidays, at 11 am and 6 pm

  Activity free of charge  
  Places limited  
  Registration at reception, half an hour before the tour begins

  Group visits, by arrangement
  Groups: minimum 10 people, maximum 30
  Advance registration: tel. 913 307 323
  Groups with their own guide must also reserve visits.
  Price: €15/group
Dramatised tours for schools
From 17 September to 21 October 2012
Levels: from primary school 3rd year, ESO secondary schools, baccalaureate and FPGM vocational training.
Times: from Monday to Friday, at 10 am and 11.30 am
Groups: maximum 30 pupils
Advance registration: tel. 913 307 323
Price: €18/group

• SENIOR CITIZENS
Coffee-debate with the arts
From July 10-31 and September 4 – October 16
Times: Tuesdays, at 5 pm
Registration: 913 307 300
Activity free of charge
Places limited