

Illuminated Printing

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Illuminated Printing – "A method of printing which combines the painter and the poet" (William Blake)

In Blake's time, conventional printed texts or illustrations were produced by etching the design into a copper plate (intaglio). This method was called copy engraving, and was a very time-consuming and intricate craft, as large sheets of copper had to be carefully cut, polished, and treated with acid-resistant film before the engraver could transfer (or copy) his design by tracing it with a needle onto the surface of the plate.

Blake developed a new engraving technique, called relief etching, which was also time-consuming and expensive, but more expressive than the traditional method. Most importantly to Blake, it allowed him complete control over both the creative and productive processes. The method is said to be the result of a vision that Blake experienced, in which his brother Robert, who had died as a young man, appeared to him and told him how he could achieve it. Blake called the method "illuminated printing", because the pages printed from such plates were coloured by hand ("illuminated") with watercolours.

Blake's method consisted of reversing this method by etching the design in relief, which meant that instead of etching his design *into* the copper plate, he etched away the *background* of the design, leaving the design itself standing up *in relief*, similar to a woodcut. He achieved this by drawing and writing onto the copper plate with an acid-resistant liquid (using brushes and quill pens), and waiting until the liquid dried. Then he would expose the copper plate to acid, which etched away the untreated parts of the copper, leaving his texts and illustrations untouched. Because printing produced a mirror image of the text and illustrations, Blake had to write the text backwards so that it would appear the right way round when printed!

Next, the plates were inked with one or more colours and printed under light pressure in an etching press. The areas that were etched away could also be dabbed with colour and printed at the same time. When each page was finally printed, Blake or his wife Catherine would "illuminate" the prints, that is to say they would decorate them by hand with watercolours. The term "illuminated" implies colouring, specifically of manuscripts.

Blake's "illuminations", or illustrations, were actually intricate pieces of artwork, and were considered to be an integral part of the poem. They often served to expand the meaning of a poem, and in some cases they were necessary in order to understand the meaning at all. Perhaps this is what Blake was referring to when he described his illuminated printing as "a method of printing which combines the painter and the poet".