

. . . after deeply perplexing himself as to the mode of accomplishing the publication of his illustrated songs, without their being subject to the expense of letter-press, [Blake's] brother Robert stood before him in one of his visionary imaginations, and so decidedly directed him in the way in which he ought to proceed, that he immediately followed his advice, by writing his poetry, and drawing his marginal subjects of embellishments in outline upon the copper-plate. . . so that the outlines were left as a stereotype. . . . The plates in this state were then printed in any tint that he wished, to enable him or Mrs. Blake to colour the marginal figures up by hand in imitation of drawings. (Smith, 1828, qtd. in Bentley, Blake Records 460)

By the end of 1788, the first portion of that singularly original and significant series of Poems [Songs of Innocence], . . . had been written; and the illustrative designs in color, to which he wedded them in inseparable loveliness, had been executed. . . . He had not the wherewithal to publish on his own account; and though he could be his own engraver, he could scarcely be his own compositor. Long and deeply he meditated. How solve this difficulty with his own industrious hands? How be his own printer and publisher? . . . After intently thinking by day and dreaming by night, during long weeks and months, of his cherished object, the image of the vanished pupil and brother at last blended with it. In a vision of the night, the form of Robert stood before him, and revealed the wished-for secret, directing him to the technical mode by which could be produced a facsimile of song and design. (Gilchrist, Life of Blake, 1863)

the form of the illuminated book was "influenced by books of medieval illumination. "
(Hagstrum)

Blake's "method can be defined as an attempt to recapture the effect of a medieval page, but in a technique which admits of reproduction." (Blunt)

"Perhaps [by 1784] Blake was already considering how to combine the engraving of words and drawings on copper, as a means of creating coloured prints of poems which would resemble illuminated manuscripts." [davis 30]

the illuminated book was an intentional "return to the integrated manuscript containing word and picture individually created with a minimum of mechanical intervention. "
(Easson)

"To create anew both the illustrated book and its reader, to bring into relief the infinite form of the book hidden by fragmentation of its art, Blake created his method of Illuminated printing." (Easson)

Blake intended to "wed together his poems and designs and to issue them to the public on his own account, independent of the publishers who had shown themselves unwilling to receive them." (Russell)

"It is no wonder that Blake found no publishers for the abstruse mysticism and allegory of his prophetic books, and he was no doubt led by mere circumstances into devising his own means of production, i.e. the etching of text and design in relief." (Hind)

"preferred. . . to be a martyr for his religion, i.e. Art, to debasing his talents by a weak submission to the prevailing fashion of art in an age of artistic degradation. " (Crabb Robinson)

Blake expected his method, "at a single blow," to "make him independent of publishers as well as of patrons, so that he could achieve personal independence as both poet and painter," and thereby effect "a revolutionary break from patronage and commercial exploitation." (N. Frye)

divided labor, or fragmentation, "fundamentally violated [Blake's] ideas about art..." and that the "illuminated books were partly designed as an artistic escape from those narrow commercial anxieties," and "as a way of putting body and soul back together...[which] are conception and execution, the integrity of art and the artist, and ultimately of civilization itself..." (Eaves)

Blake "tried to produce his own works in deliberate defiance of his period's normal avenues of publication. Blake retreated to a method of literary production which antedated even the patronage system of the 18th century. And as for the commercial system of his own day, this was an institution from which he early sought to gain his independence." (McGann)

"Blake is one of the most notable technical innovators in the history of art. his technical innovations were part of a rebellion against the artistic dominance of the aristocracy and commercial bourgeoisie. It involved a struggle to transform the relations of artistic production in favor of the creative artisan. Blake's invention of the "illuminated book" (where text and illustration are etched together on the same plate), and the colour print, were technical innovations whose real driving force was the historic need to transform the conditions within which art was produced. This is part of the revolutionary nature of Blake's art." (Crehan)

Illuminated Books were "produced only one copy at a time, as [Blake] got commissions" (Davids and Petrillo)

The seventeen copies of Visions of the Daughters of Albion are thought to have been "printed and coloured over a period of about thirty-two years, " with copies A-E in 1793-5, two color-printed copies (F and R) in 1795, copies G, H, I-M between 1796-1800, and copies N-P in 1821-25 (Bentley, Blake Book 465). The first sixteen copies of Innocence and nine copies of Songs are thought to have been produced between 1789-1800, with the remaining copies of Innocence and Songs printed between 1802 and 1808 and 1814 and 1827 (Blake Books 382). The "sixteen surviving copies of TheL were probably coloured and sold over a period of about thirty-eight years," with copies A-B, D-E ca. 1790-95, and G-J, L 1796-1803, and copy F ca. 1806, and copies M-Q around 1815 or later (BB 118). America's fourteen copies are thought to have been printed between 1793 and 1821 (Blake Books 87).

"During the day [Blake] was a man of sagacity and sense, who handled his graver wisely, and conversed in a wholesome and pleasant manner; in the evening, when he had done his prescribed task, he gave loose to his imagination." (Cunningham, 1830)