

Northwestern

MARY AND LEIGH

BLOCK MUSEUM OF ART

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William Blake, "Ancient of Days," frontispiece for *Europe a prophecy*, 1794, relief etching. The Rosenbach, Philadelphia.
Photographer: Jonathan Donovan

Block Museum to explore 'William Blake and the Age of Aquarius'

50th anniversary of the 'Summer of Love' celebrated with major exhibition and publication

EVANSTON - The Block Museum of Art will present a major exhibition on British poet and artist William Blake (1757–1827) and the 20th century counterculture artists he inspired.

“William Blake and the Age of Aquarius” will run Sept. 23, 2017, through March 11, 2018, at the Block Museum, 40 Arts Circle Drive on Northwestern University’s Evanston, Illinois campus.

The first exhibition to consider the impact of Blake on American artists from the end of World War II through 1970, the show features more than 150 paintings, drawings, photographs, films, posters and other medium from the 50s, 60s and 70s and more than 50 rare Blake rare engravings and pages from illuminated books which have been loaned from major collections including The Rosenbach in Philadelphia and the Yale Center for British Art.



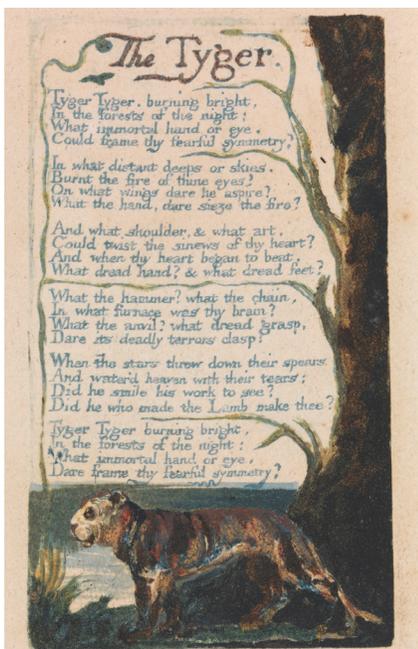
John Stephan, Painting for cover of *The Tiger's Eye*, issues #5-8, c. 1948, oil on canvas. Yale University Art Gallery, courtesy of John J. Stephan

In his own lifetime, William Blake was a relatively unknown, eccentric and nonconventional artist with a strong political bent. From the 1940s through the 1960s, some 200 years after his birth, Blake became a model of non-conformity, self-expression and social and political resistance. In the summer of 1967, more than 100,000 young people streamed into the Haight-Ashbury district of San Francisco to celebrate peace, love, music and mind-altering drugs. Many of the artists, poets and musicians associated with the “Summer of Love’s” anti-war sentiment embraced the work of Blake and used it as a compass to drive their own political and personal evolutions.

The exhibition is curated by critic, activist, and Northwestern Professor of Art History Stephen F. Eisenman in consultation with Corinne Granof, curator of academic programs at the Block. “William Blake and the Age of Aquarius” will feature both well-known and under-recognized American artists who cited Blake as an inspiration, and present their work alongside Blake’s.

“This exhibition, the first to explore William Blake’s impact on 20th-century popular culture, is populated by beats, hippies, poets, rockers and artistic voices of the counterculture. Blake’s

protests against the conventions and repressions of his own society became a model for many young Americans, particularly those disillusioned by social conformity, consumerism, racial and gender discrimination, environmental degradation and the Vietnam War,” notes Eisenman.



This is also the first major museum exhibition to present Blake’s prints and illuminated poetry such as “Songs of Innocence and of Experience” side by side with objects from 20th-century art and popular culture. This approach illuminates new trans-historical connections between these periods.

“This exhibition plays to Block’s strengths, which has a history of placing art in a broad historic and cultural context by exhibiting together art, archives, popular and material culture,” said Lisa Corrin, the Museum’s Ellen Philips Katz Director. “This approach also exemplifies Block’s mission as a teaching museum, and the University-wide emphasis on cross-disciplinary inquiry.”

William Blake, “The Tyger,” from *Songs of Innocence and of Experience*, plate 42, 1794, color-printed relief etching with watercolor on cream wove paper. Yale Center for British Art, Paul Mellon Collection.

“William Blake and the Age of Aquarius” will build upon the Block Museum’s recent focus on art and culture of the 1960s undertaken with “A Feast of Astonishments: Charlotte Moorman and the Avant-Garde, 1960s–1980s,” to expand understanding of a unique facet of mid-20th century counterculture, as well as make a contribution to existing scholarship in the fields of art history and American cultural studies.

Blake’s Diverse Influence

Blake’s art, poetry and political ideas had unique currency in postwar America, unifying artists working across various media. The exhibition brings together artists who used Blake’s lyrics as titles, experimented with printing techniques and innovative combinations of image and text and cited Blake’s worldview in letters, diaries and essays. Artists and musicians as diverse as Diane Arbus, Bruce Conner, Jay DeFeo, Robert Frank, Allen Ginsberg, Stanley William Hayter, Jimi Hendrix, Agnes Martin, Ad Reinhardt, Maurice Sendak, The Doors and The Fugs will be featured, united by the influence of Blake on their work.

An early section of the exhibition will focus on artists working in the mid-1940s who discovered Blake’s unique voice in such poems as “The Tyger” and “The Shepherd” and drew inspiration for their own work from his ideas. These will include Sam Francis, Stanley William Hayter, Agnes Martin, Jackson Pollock, Charles Seliger, Robert Smithson and Clyfford Still among others.

Another exhibition theme focuses on Beat culture and the role of radical poet Allen Ginsberg in promoting Blake to fellow poets and writers. It will examine Blake as a model for the artist as outsider and bring together works by Helen Adam, Wallace Berman, Bruce Conner, Jay DeFeo, Robert Frank and Jess.

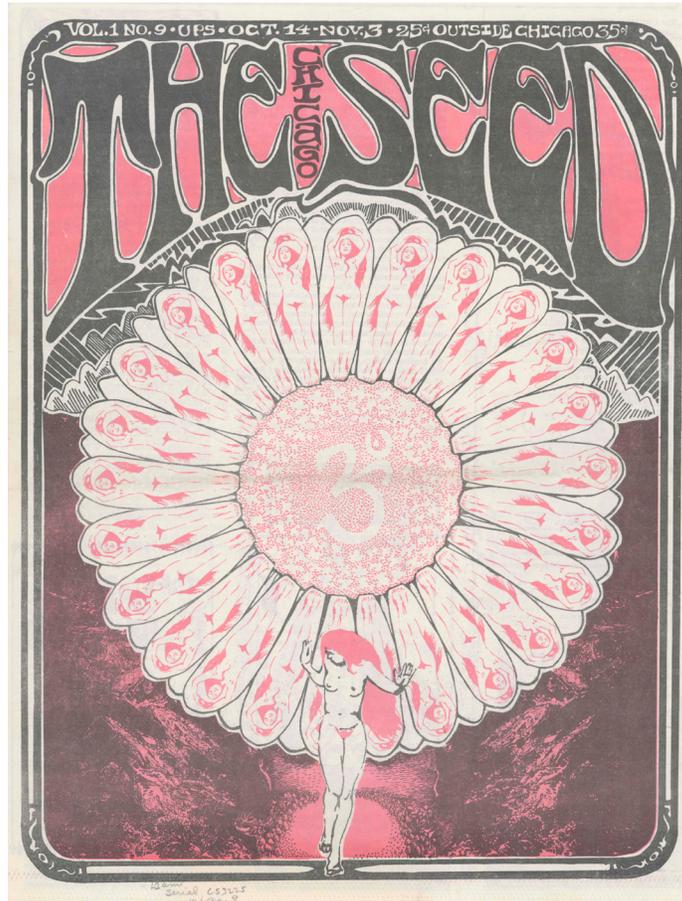
A final section inspired by Blake’s famous phrase “the Doors of Perception” will trace the wider circulation of Blake’s art and imagery and how it permeated popular culture as the alternative movements of the 1960s came to full fruition. Including classic concert posters and music this section will examine Blake’s influence on artists and musicians who embraced psychedelia and Timothy Leary’s call to “Tune in, turn on, drop out.”

Related Events

The exhibition “William Blake and the Age of Aquarius” will be complemented by a variety of engagement programs throughout Fall 2017 and Winter 2018, which use the exhibition as a springboard to explore Blake’s continued contemporary influence, the relationship between image and text, and the resonance of the art and politics of Blake’s work. Considering parallels between Blake’s time, mid-twentieth-century America and today, museum events and speakers will touch on such topics as political repression, social transformation, and struggles for civil rights.

Opening Day Program: “Blake, Now and Then” Saturday, Sept. 23

“William Blake and the Age of Aquarius” kicks off with an opening day program including a conversation with Stephen Eisenman and W.J.T. Mitchell, Blake scholar, editor of “Critical Inquiry” and Gaylord Donnelley Distinguished Service Professor of English and Art History at the University of Chicago. The talk will explore Blake’s role within his own time, his influence on countercultural American artists and musicians of the 1960s and the ways in which Blake’s independence, imagination and resistance to authority continues to resonate in contemporary life.



Cover of the Chicago Seed, vol. 1, no. 9, 1967. Charles Deering McCormick Library of Special Collections, Northwestern University Libraries

Exhibition Credits

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The Block Museum of Art is a member of the Northwestern Arts Circle, which brings together film, humanities, literary arts, music, theater, dance and visual arts. Search for events across all artistic disciplines at Northwestern Arts Circle.

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