



William Blake, *Albion's Angel Rose*, 'Europe A Prophecy,' 1794  
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Responding to the upheavals of revolution and war in Europe and the Americas, visionary artist, poet, and printmaker William Blake (1757-1827) produced an astonishing body of work that combined criticism of the contemporary world with his vision for universal redemption. But he wasn't the only one. ***William Blake's Universe***, opening at the Fitzwilliam Museum in February 2023, will be the first major exhibition to consider Blake's position in a constellation of European artists and writers striving for renewed spirituality in art and life.

Organised in collaboration with the Hamburger Kunsthalle, and drawing on extensive research, this ambitious exhibition will explore the artist's unexpected yet profound links with important European figures including pre-eminent German Romantic artists Philipp Otto Runge (1777-1820) and Caspar David Friedrich (1774-1840). It will also place Blake within his artistic network in Britain, drawing parallels with the work of his peers, mentors and followers including Henry Fuseli (1741-1825), John Flaxman (1755-1826), and Samuel Palmer (1805 – 1881).

Featuring around 180 paintings, drawings, and prints, including over 90 of those by Blake, this major exhibition marks the largest ever display of work from the Fitzwilliam's world-class William Blake collection, with additional loans from the British Museum, Tate, Ashmolean and other institutions. Examples of the artist's most iconic and much-loved works including *Albion Rose* (1794–6) and *Europe: A Prophecy* (1794), will be joined by rarely exhibited artworks from Blake's oeuvre, including outstanding new acquisitions from the Sir Geoffrey Keynes bequest, displayed publicly for the first time since joining the Fitzwilliam collection. These include the trial frontispiece of Blake's prophetic book *Jerusalem* (1804–1820) and his spectacular large drawing *Free Version of the Laocoön* (c.1825). Additional highlights include the unique first state of *Joseph of Arimathea* (1773), produced by Blake as an apprentice aged 16, shown alongside a reworked version of the same image, completed by Blake in his mature years.

Visitors will have a special opportunity to discover the work of Runge, one of Germany's most important Romantic artists, who has been very rarely seen in the UK until now. Bringing together the largest number of Runge works in the UK to date, the exhibition will include the engravings from the *Times of Day* (1802-10) series, a defining work of German Romanticism. Representing not only the changing times of day, but the seasons, the ages of man and historical epochs, Runge obsessively returned to this important body of work, an extensive number of preparatory drawings and studies of which will be presented at the Fitzwilliam. Among the works on loan from the Hamburger Kunsthalle will be *The Large Morning* (1808-1809), a fragmentary oil painting widely considered to be one of the most important works from Runge's short career, cut short by his death aged 33.

Another highlight of the exhibition will be Caspar David Friedrich's seven sepia drawings *The Ages of Man* (c.1826) on loan from the Hamburger Kunsthalle. Thought to be inspired by Runge's interest in visual representations of time, the exquisitely delicate series is associated with the themes of change in nature, the cyclical representation of time and the temporality of human life.

*William Blake's Universe* will unfold in three main sections – past, present and future – with an introductory display of artists' portraits. 'The Past: Antiquity and the Gothic' will focus on the legacy of classical antiquity and Blake's turn towards the Gothic as an alternative source of inspiration, as well as a spotlight section on Flaxman, an artistic mentor to Blake who gained great acclaim in Germany and across Europe. 'The Present: Europe in Flames' will concentrate on the responses of Blake and his close contemporaries in Britain to the revolutionary 1790s. The third section, 'The Future: Spiritual Renewal', will show how visions of redemption from a fallen world became a central concern for Blake and his contemporaries in the post-revolutionary period. Jacob Böhme's mystical ideas about light and cosmic unity, which form a bridge between Blake and his German contemporaries, will be a central display.

*William Blake's Universe* is curated by David Bindman, emeritus Durning-Lawrence professor of the History of Art at University College London, and Esther Chadwick, Lecturer in Art History at the Courtauld Institute of Art. The exhibition will be accompanied by a fully-illustrated catalogue featuring new scholarship by the curators, as well as essays by leading academics Sarah Haggarty, Joseph Leo Koerner, Cecilia Muratori, William Vaughan and James Vigus.

**Curators David Bindman and Esther Chadwick said:** 'This is the first exhibition to show William Blake not as an isolated figure but as part of European-wide attempts to find a new spirituality in face of the revolutions and wars of his time. We are excited to be able to shed new light on Blake by placing his works in dialogue with wider trends and themes in European art of the Romantic period, including transformations of classical tradition, fascination with Christian mysticism, belief in the coming apocalypse, spiritual regeneration and national revival.'

*William Blake's Universe* is generously supported by the William Blake Trust, the Huo Family Foundation and the Fitzwilliam Museum Development Trust.

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## NOTES TO EDITORS

### EXHIBITION ENTRY

Visitors are invited to 'Pay What They Wish' for exhibition tickets. Tickets will be available online from 16 January 2024.

### ABOUT THE FITZWILLIAM MUSEUM

Founded in 1816, the Fitzwilliam Museum is the largest and oldest museum of the University of Cambridge. It houses over half a million objects: ancient Egyptian, Greek and Roman artefacts, medieval illuminated manuscripts, paintings from the European Renaissance to the 21st century, prints and drawings, coins and medals, ceramics and other applied arts from East and West Asia and Western Europe. The Fitzwilliam Museum is an internationally recognised institute of research and conservation.

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### ABOUT THE UNIVERSITY OF CAMBRIDGE

The University of Cambridge is one of the world's leading universities, with a rich history of radical thinking dating back to 1209. Its mission is to contribute to society through the pursuit of education, learning and research at the highest international levels of excellence. Cambridge was second in the influential 2023 QS World University Rankings, the highest rated institution in the UK. The University comprises 31 autonomous Colleges and over 100 departments, faculties and institutions. Its 20,000 students include around 9,000 international students from 147 countries. In 2022, almost 73% of its new undergraduate students were from state schools and more than 25% from economically disadvantaged backgrounds.

Cambridge research spans almost every discipline, from science, technology, engineering and medicine through to the arts, humanities and social sciences, with multi-disciplinary teams working to address major global challenges. In the *Times Higher Education's* rankings based on the UK Research Excellence Framework, the University was rated as the highest scoring institution covering all the major disciplines.

The University sits at the heart of the 'Cambridge cluster', in which more than 5,200 knowledge-intensive firms employ more than 71,000 people and generate £19 billion in turnover. Cambridge has the highest number of patent applications per 100,000 residents in the UK.

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