

Michael Davis, *William Blake: A New Kind of Man*. Berkeley, University of California Press, 1978. 181 pp., illus., \$6.95

Hardy George

Volume 6, Number 1, 1979

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1077153ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/1077153ar>

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

UAAC-AAUC (University Art Association of Canada | Association d'art des universités du Canada)

ISSN

0315-9906 (print)

1918-4778 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this review

George, H. (1979). Review of [Michael Davis, *William Blake: A New Kind of Man*. Berkeley, University of California Press, 1978. 181 pp., illus., \$6.95]. *RACAR : Revue d'art canadienne / Canadian Art Review*, 6(1), 69–71.
<https://doi.org/10.7202/1077153ar>

which Sir Anthony had written earlier himself. Seen in this light, the day the Fontana volume arrived at the Courtauld Institute takes on special significance. It may have marked the inauguration of Braham's involvement with the project to publish the drawings. A dozen years later he, in conjunction with the German-trained scholar Hellmut Hager, has produced a new departure in the *Studies in Architecture*. Unlike most of the others, the Fontana book is a catalogue and not a monograph. I shall return to this distinction at the end of the review.

It would seem that in the subject of Carlo Fontana's drawings, the two authors found that their interests dovetailed well. They were able jointly to produce a brief but full critical history of Fontana and of the provenance of the volumes. This is followed by the scholarly catalogue proper, which runs to 783 individual items. Between them, Braham and Hager divided the task of cataloguing more or less evenly: Hager took the ecclesiastical commissions, Braham the secular ones. In the process of binding the drawings into volumes, Fontana had dispersed them. Now, for the first time, they are regrouped according to commission. Each subsection is prefaced by a note, some of them of considerable length. These notes – especially those by Hager – form mini-essays of the most scrupulous scholarship, complete with up-to-date bibliography. But the fact that the notes precede the actual entries does tend to separate the two: it is almost as if the drawings themselves were incidental rather than beautiful and individually significant. Some entries could be improved by a slightly broader scope. The section on the Ospizio di S. Michele Prison, for instance, fails to emphasize enough the innovative nature of this Roman structure (Fig. 4). Fontana designed it with solitary confinement cell blocks around a central work space – the *silentium* (so named because of a large inscription on the wall admonishing silence). The unique combination of solitary confinement, silence, and enforced labor foretells the development of the late-eighteenth- and nineteenth-century penitentiary. In fact, the great prison reformer John Howard made a point

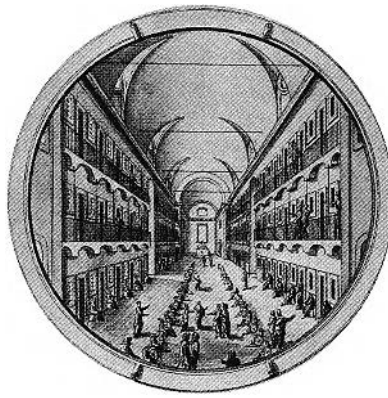


FIGURE 4. Fontana, Interior of the Ospizio di S. Michele Prison, Rome. Braham and Hager, fig. 362.

of studying the S. Michele institution when he visited Rome in August 1778. Howard's connection with S. Michele might have enlivened the specific entry in question.

The mention of Howard brings up an interesting piece of information overlooked by the authors. In the second, and subsequent editions of Howard's book, *The State of the Prisons*, an engraving was included of the first-floor plan and longitudinal section of the S. Michele prison. In format, if not in medium, the print resembles very closely the Windsor drawings. The plan, however, differs in details from both the Domenico de' Rossi version published in 1721, or Fontana's own final scheme. Howard mentioned that his illustrations were "procured ... by the kindness of Mr. Jenkins." He meant, of course, Thomas Jenkins, the English art dealer resident in Rome. Jenkins could have acted as intermediary to obtain for Howard original, now lost, Fontana drawings. This would explain how the Howard illustrations closely resemble Fontana's drawings without being exactly comparable to any surviving ones. The new evidence in the form of Howard's engraving supports the authors' hypothesis that Fontana intended a publication on S. Michele, and for that purpose removed a number of drawings from the Windsor volume 181, hence its apparent missing pages. Thus the stray drawings of S. Michele would have become separated from the bulk of Fontana's collection before its sale in 1716. In one form or another the loose drawings were

handed down until 1778, when Jenkins passed them on to Howard. It is only right to add a word of caution at this point. A flourishing trade of making copies existed in Rome to satisfy the craving of later eighteenth-century Grand Tourists for souvenirs. Jenkins may have supplied Howard with facsimiles of Fontana's drawings, rather than the originals themselves.

Carlo Fontana, the authors admit, was not an especially inspired architect. They hope, however, that a full monograph on him will one day be forthcoming. One wonders whether their exhaustive catalogue, with some greater breadth of scope (as noted above), does not achieve much the same desired effect as a monograph. With a chance to expand upon aspects of Fontana's career, position, and influence, the sort of catalogue produced by Braham and Hager could stand in lieu of a typical monograph. For this reason I urge the authors to pursue their stated goal of publishing a sequel to the present volume. The second one would contain the Fontana drawings not now at Windsor. Of the thirty known volumes, fifteen are dispersed: one in Leipzig, another in Rome, a third in Modena, three in the British Museum, two in the Soane Museum, and the seven others have so far eluded discovery. So Hager and Braham have dealt only partially with the entire problem. And it is a shame that everything could not have been done at one time, because the distinction between Windsor and non-Windsor volumes has nothing to do with the contents, which surely reinforce one another. Even though only half the story is told, it is a credit to the authors that we wish to know the rest; when we do, the real need for a monograph will be clear.

PIERRE DE LA RUFFINIÈRE DU PREY
Queen's University
Kingston

MICHAEL DAVIS *William Blake: A New Kind of Man*. Berkeley, University of California Press, 1978. 181 pp., illus., \$6.95.

Michael Davis's concise general biography of William Blake offers an up-to-date study of the poet-artist's creative genius and unique

vision. A book of this kind does not replace or challenge the standard, authoritative works by Sir Geoffrey Keynes, Mona Wilson, Sir Anthony Blunt, and Northrop Frye, but it does have a rightful place in 'the great Blake industry' that has recently produced a number of specialist books and catalogues. Although Davis's well-illustrated book is being reviewed here for art historians, it is more closely related to the sound and older literary tradition of Keynes, with something of the socio-historical and political correlations of David Erdman, rather than aligned with the art-historical approach of Sir Anthony Blunt, Martin Butlin, and David Bindman. Michael Davis, however, like all good Blake specialists, understands the necessity of approaching the 'all-embracing power' of Blake's mind, art, and poetry as a total subject. Blake's synthesis of word, image, and idea presents a challenge which discourages the art historian who relies too heavily on the glossy terminology of connoisseurship, and considers literature, the occult, and psychology outside the realm of the discipline.

Davis has not been embarrassed by the artist's visions, and unquestioningly relates the stories about the four-year-old Blake seeing God's head at the window, and at the age of eight or ten seeing a tree filled with angels. Davis does not concern himself with the validity of these tales and others of the same kind passed on to Blake's first biographer, Alexander Gilchrist (1863), who gathered many of his accounts from men who had known the artist. This is something that would bother the 'new left' art historians who have recently discovered Marxism and are busy trying to decipher the true nature of realism.

Davis traces Blake's life and work from his youthful years in London, including his apprenticeship with James Basire, the stint at the Royal Academy, the lasting impressions left by the American and French Revolutions, and his studies of the mystical writers Paracelsus, Boehme, and Swedenborg. Blake's mature years and the patronage of the minor poet and writer William Hayley, his stay at Felpham, brought to an end with charges of seditious utterances which caused the artist and his wife to return to London (17 South Molton Street),

and his difficult dealings with the Publisher R.H. Cromek are given adequate attention. The final chapter, 'Prophet With His Disciples,' concerns Blake's meeting with John Linnell in 1818 and the consequent contact with two other young artists, John Varley and Samuel Palmer. In this last chapter there is an interesting account of the 'Visionary Heads (1819),' a series of drawings or portraits of conjured-up images of historical characters from the past who 'sat' for Blake in the presence of Varley. Davis does not air the possibility that this episode might have been distorted by Victorian commentators, nor does he mention Martin Butlin's definitive account of the 'Visionary Heads' (*The Blake Sketchbook of 1819*, 1969), but he does state that Blake 'began them in a spirit of fun' for the young Varley who was a 'firm believer in astrology, palmistry, ghosts, and visions.' There is also a full account of Blake's vision of the ghost of a flea, experienced, sketched, and described in the presence of Varley as a creature with 'his eager tongue whisking out of his mouth, a cup in his hand to hold blood, and covered with a scaly skin of gold and green.'

On the whole Michael Davis's book reads easily and smoothly, and even though there is a disturbing absence of footnotes, another trend that publishers have been following in the production of art books, the material seems adequately researched. At the end of the book one finds a useful bibliography. This section makes one aware not only of the vast number of books on Blake, but also drives home the fact that most of these books have been published since World War II. This is particularly true of the section reserved for books on Blake's composite and visual art.

Michael Davis and other recent Blake scholars purport to offer a unique appreciation of Blake as a poet, artist, and mystic. Bevis Hillier, in his article (in the *Times Literary Supplement*) on David Bindman's recent *Blake As An Artist*, reminds us that 'the scholarly industry' surrounding Blake which grew up in the post-war period had in general 'little regard for paintings.' There were, however, a few late-nineteenth-century Blake enthusiasts who exhibited some ap-

preciation of Blake's unusual abilities as a poet and painter. For example, Richard Garnett, a Keeper in the Library of the British Museum, considered the 'position of William Blake among artists ... exceptional,' adding that for 'no other painter of like distinction, save Dante Rossetti, can it be said that his fame as a poet has fully rivalled his fame as a painter.' Garnett felt the 'artistic and poetical monuments of his [Blake's] genius nearly balance each other in merit and in their claim upon the attention of posterity.'

Most authors writing about the long neglected late-nineteenth-century French and Belgian Symbolist painters, with the exception of John Rewald, have referred to Blake in discussing the important influence of the English School. There is much more hard documentation, however, on the influence of the Pre-Raphaelites, particularly Rossetti and Millais and the later Burne-Jones, and Blake's role in the development of Symbolist art is never made clear. The Symbolists shared with Blake the attitude that the observation of an actual subject was of secondary importance in the creation of a work of art. They also shared his use of a rhythmical, bounding line and expressive colour. Blake's notions of androgyny, the marriage of good and evil, man's restricted vision of this world, and the idea that the artist should reveal infinity and unleash or pay recognition to the darkest desires of the human heart, are themes which one finds with symbolist poets, theorists, and artists of the late nineteenth century.

In the recent books by Philippe Jullian, Edward Lucie-Smith, and John Milner on Symbolist Art, Blake is recognized as a painter and poet who provided exemplary works for Rossetti and the Pre-Raphaelites, and who, in turn, indirectly influenced the French Symbolist painters. Blake's extensive use of 'sharp and wiry' line and his even washes of pale acid color seem related to Florentine art, and for this reason he can be considered not only as a precursor of the Pre-Raphaelites, but his work more directly relates to the Florentine style of some of the Salon de la Rose Croix painters who also illustrated poetry.

One of the rare direct reactions

to Blake's work from a late-nineteenth-century French artist comes from Auguste Rodin. When Arthur Symons, one of Blake's turn-of-the-century biographers, showed Rodin some of Blake's drawings and explained 'He used to literally see these figures; they are not inventions,' the sculptor replied: 'Yes, he saw them once, he should have seen them three or four times.'

In the second half of the nineteenth century there was a growing interest in the poetry and mysticism as well as the 'minuteness and exactitude' of Pre-Raphaelite painting. The Pre-Raphaelites were exhibited in the Expositions universelles of 1855, 1867, and 1878, and the critics Ernest Chesneau, Gustave Planche, Maxime du Camp, Paul Gantz, Louis Enault, Paul Mantz, Arsène Houssaye, and Paul Lepricur wrote assessments of the works of Rossetti, Hunt, Millais, Burne-Jones, Watts, and Whistler. They were important in introducing English art to the French artists associated with the diverse developments of late-nineteenth-century Symbolism.

In an article titled "Les Beaux arts à l'Exposition Universelle — Angleterre" (*Gazette des Beaux-Arts*, 1867), Paul Mantz laments the passing of the early-nineteenth-century English artists James Ward, David Roberts, Francis Danby, William Dyce, David Cox, and Thomas Uwins, but does not mention Blake. Later Duranty (*Ibid.*, 1878), in a rambling discussion of the PRB and their predecessors, Hogarth, Reynolds, Lawrence, and David Wilkie, again does not mention Blake. Thus Blake, who should have been appreciated as a forerunner of Rossetti, seems largely to have been overlooked.

One of the first important studies of Blake published in France was carried out by Pierre Berger (*William Blake, Mysticism et Poésie*, 1907), but this is principally an appreciation of his poetry and mythic visions, and few references are made to Blake's art — and there are no reproductions. One of the most interesting passages speaks of Blake's penetrating vision which perceived not only the 'material world' but the 'soul of things' and beyond the 'mystical plane, the world of those beings which do not come within the field of our vision.'

A short article of 1903 by Frank Stokoe in *La Plume* seems to be one of the first on the artist-poet to appear in a journal associated with late-nineteenth-century Symbolism. Referring to Blake as 'le plus grand poète symboliste que le monde ait vu,' Stokoe summarizes the artist's life and work, concluding that 'Blake n'est pas, je crois, très connu en France. C'est pourtant un esprit courtois (un peu violent, il est vrai) à la vision claire, qui pénètre tout voile d'hypocrisie, esprit, me semble-t-il, qui serait fort sympathique au génie français.'

The Symbolists, who pioneered some of the most important developments in twentieth-century art, sought 'the symbol behind appearance, the eternal idea behind form' and shared Blake's hatred of materialism. Nevertheless, they failed to make contact with this 'new kind of man' whose mythology Michael Davis rightfully describes as representing 'the realm of the subconscious mind, source of inspiration and dreams.'

HARDY GEORGE
Concordia University
Montreal

CHARLES W. MILLARD *The Sculpture of Edgar Degas*. Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1976. 141 + xxiv pp., 143 illus., \$19.50.

Il n'y a pas lieu d'être surpris que ce soit Charles W. Millard, conservateur en chef du Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden de Washington, D.C., qui ait entrepris une étude sur la sculpture d'Edgar Degas. En effet ce musée qui, rappelons-le, fait partie de la Smithsonian Institution, possède une très belle collection de sculptures de cet artiste, certaines d'entre elles ayant récemment été présentées dans le cadre de l'exposition *Les Animaux dans l'Art*. De plus, il n'est pas inutile de souligner que l'ouvrage représente l'aboutissement de la thèse de Millard entreprise dans le courant des années soixante.

Le travail de Charles W. Millard présente un intérêt premier et fondamental: celui de combler un vide. Les études sur les peintures sont, nous le savons, beaucoup plus nombreuses que celles consacrées

aux sculptures — je dis bien *sculptures* et non *sculpteurs* — puisqu'il arrive qu'un seul artiste soit à la fois sculpteur et peintre, ce qui est justement le cas de Degas. Cet état de chose vient sans doute du fait que le médium pictural permet non seulement une plus grande diversité de sujets mais joint encore à l'attraction de la couleur le déploiement mural, sans oublier l'élément purement quantitatif, à savoir la somme d'œuvres produites, nettement supérieure en ce qui regarde le traitement bidimensionnel de l'espace.

Ainsi, l'évolution de la sculpture au XIX^e siècle constitue un sujet de recherche pour lequel beaucoup reste à faire, malgré des ouvrages récents d'une qualité certaine: je pense notamment à ceux de Maurice Rheims, *La Sculpture au XIX^e siècle* (Paris, 1972) et de Fred Licht, *Sculpture, Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries* (Londres, 1967) — ce dernier dépassant cependant le cadre du XIX^e siècle. De toute façon ces ouvrages, comme leurs titres l'indiquent, sont généraux. La monographie de Millard répond donc à un besoin évident. Et puis, le cas Degas est d'un intérêt très grand pour l'amateur d'art d'aujourd'hui. Nous avons là un sculpteur qui est déjà « moderne », au sens où l'on parlait au tournant du siècle de « l'esprit moderne » (le mot, déjà employé au XIV^e siècle, a hélas perdu beaucoup de sa vitalité). Il prépare à bien des points de vue le XX^e siècle. Or, dans la recherche sur la gestation de l'esprit moderne, on ne trouve là encore que des ouvrages généraux: celui, par exemple, de Jean Selz, *Découverte de la sculpture moderne* (Lausanne, 1963), traduit en anglais par Annette Michelon sous le titre *Modern Sculpture: Origins and Evolution* (New York, 1963), ou encore celui d'Albert E. Elsen, *Origins of Modern Sculpture: Pioneers and Premises* (New York, 1974), conséquent au catalogue de l'exposition de la Hayward Gallery de Londres présentée au public durant l'été de 1973 sous le titre *Pioneers of Modern Sculpture*.

En ce qui concerne la production de Degas, ce sont des articles et des essais qui ont jusqu'ici été publiés, dont certains du vivant de l'artiste, tel celui de George Moore, *Degas: the Painter of Modern Life*, paru dans le *Magazine of Art* (Londres, 1890).