

William Blake's boyhood doodles are discovered after 250 years: Scans reveal a smiley face etched by the poet on copperplates he handled as an apprentice

By [Shivali Best For Mailonline](#)

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He's widely regarded as one of the greatest poets of all time.

But it seems that even William Blake was prone to doodling as a child.

Scientists have discovered a series of boyhood doodles engraved on copperplates by Blake around 250 years ago.

One of the previously unknown doodles depicts an arrow - a frequent motif across Blake's works.

Meanwhile, another doodle depicts a miniature face.

'When I first saw the face, it was a staggering moment. I almost fell off my chair,' said Mark Crosby, a Blake expert who found the engravings.

'I was looking back at something that had been made 250-odd years ago that hadn't been seen before.'



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Blake's poem 'And did those feet in ancient time', better known as 'Jerusalem', is often considered England's unofficial national anthem, while 'The Tyger' is a staple of English textbooks.

But before his poetry career took off, Blake had worked as an apprentice to engraver James Basire.

Mr Basire made pictorial prints - one of the main ways to print illustrated books at the time.

Many of Blake's engravings are invisible to the naked eye.

However, they were found using new, high-resolution scanning technology at the Bodleian Libraries at Oxford, to which the copper plates had been bequeathed in 1809.

Among the engravings discovered on the reverse of the plates are a series of hatching, cross hatching, semi-circles and motifs made with burins and dry point compasses.

According to Dr Crosby, these are suggestive of an apprentice honing their craft and emulating Basire's house style.

The scans revealed an engraved miniature face in incredible detail, consisting of two eyes, a partial nose and lips.



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Before his poetry career took off, Blake (pictured in 1807 portrait by Thomas Phillips) had worked as an apprentice to engraver James Basire

Elsewhere, the O in a plate maker's mark reading 'LONDON' was found neatly hatched in a fashion 'reminiscent of youthful colouring in'.

Meanwhile, another uncovered motif is a short-shafted arrow, approximately 18mm in length and etched into the plate with a burin.

According to the experts, similar arrows or darts frequently occur as pictorial or textual motifs in Blake's work, appearing significantly in two of his watercolour paintings of Milton's *Paradise Lost*.

Dr Crosby, whose research will appear in two peer-reviewed journals, said the discovery also provided other insights about Blake when he practiced at Basire's studio.

'These doodles reveal personal, intimate moments that were not intended to be seen by anyone other than the artist,' he said.

'For the first time since they were made, we can now see the practice work and doodling of the young apprentice responsible for, amongst other things, the tiny visionary face that emerges from the copperplate to return our gaze across two and half centuries.'

Who was William Blake?

William Blake (1757–1827) was an English engraver, artist and poet renowned for his visionary works.

Born in London, he created iconic poems like 'The Lamb,' 'The Tyger,' and the stirring 'Jerusalem.'

Blake's oeuvre spanned lyrical Songs of Innocence (1789) to prophetic texts like Visions of the Daughters of Albion (1793) and Jerusalem (1804).

Often producing, printing and selling his own works with his wife Catherine, Blake's genius was unrecognised in his time, though he is now celebrated as a pioneering Romantic poet.

His spiritual visions profoundly influenced his mystical and imaginative compositions.

Blake's life unfolded amidst humble beginnings and considerable adversity.

Despite financial struggles and societal indifference, his unwavering commitment to his artistry and visionary beliefs defined his singular path in the Romantic era.