

## Scans reveal ‘doodling’ William Blake’s earliest engravings

A detailed face and a tiny arrow, which became a recurring motif in the artist’s work, have been discovered on copperplates he handled as an apprentice



The poet and painter William Blake made the engravings while he was a teenage apprentice

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Perhaps he was bored. It’s likely that he was tired too. Nevertheless, at some point when he could find time away from his tasks as an apprentice engraver, the young William Blake turned over a piece of copper and practised the skills that would make him a master.

Now, 250 years later, high-tech scanners have found doodles they believe are the poet and painter’s earliest original engravings.

“What we’re looking at is a sort of personal-private art,” said Mark Crosby, associate professor of literature at Kansas State University and a fellow of the Society of Antiquaries whose research led to the discovery of the engravings. “That’s what’s so staggering about them. He was making these not so anyone else would see them and certainly not that they were ever printed.”

The engravings are on copperplates contained in the archive of the Bodleian Libraries at the University of Oxford. They came from the studio of James Basire, to whom Blake was a teenage apprentice between 1772 and 1779. One side of the plates have images used to illustrate *Sepulchral Monuments in Great Britain* by Richard Gough, who bequeathed the plates to the Bodleian. However, on the other side, the verso, tiny doodles that are almost invisible to the naked eye can be found.



Blake was working on copperplates to illustrate the book *Sepulchral Monuments in Great Britain* but on the reverse are his hidden engravings, below



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The engravings include a distinctive arrow motif that would appear repeatedly in [Blake's work](#) but most striking is a delicate and detailed face no bigger than a thumbnail. These indications of Blake's nascent style, and also that he had spent time in Westminster Abbey on the Gough project, mean the engravings can be attributed to him.

“Later in his life, in 1801, Blake referred to engraving as ‘drawing on copper’,” said Crosby, whose research is appearing in the journals *Print Quarterly* and *Blake Illustrated Quarterly*. “We get that sense of him drawing on copper with these doodles. The remarkable thing about the face is it's so tiny: the eyes are barely three or four millimetres in diameter. He's working on a minute scale in a very controlled way.”

Blake arrived at Basire's workshop as a 14-year-old apprentice but had already taken classes at the prestigious Henry Pars drawing school in the Strand. His talent was obvious but these plates show his commitment to practising his craft in minute detail. Often he is trying to perfect Basire's house style, along with hatching, cross-hatching and semicircles.

On other occasions, it seems that Blake let his imagination take flight. The arrow he made is only 18mm long but would go on to appear in works such as his illustrations for *Paradise Lost*.



His minuscule arrow became a recurring design in his work

The face, with its sweeping curves and detailed eyes was later partly obscured by repoussage, hammering out from the opposite side, but images taken by the Bodleian's ARCHiOx scanning technology picked out the quality of Blake's work.

“Like any sort of creative type, we associated doodling with the creative impulse,” Crosby said. “Blake flipped over the plate and doodled.”