

ANALYSIS OF WILLIAM BLAKE'S WATER-BASED PAINTS ON PAPER USING NON INVASIVE METHODS

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Unconventional among the artists of his time, William Blake's individuality was manifested not only in his writings and subject matter but also in his techniques, in which he departed from contemporary and prevailing trends. His work has led to numerous studies and interpretations over the years, which more recently extended to technical aspects. A comprehensive technical study at the Tate Gallery several years ago aimed at providing answers to questions regarding his painting methods and materials, as well as enhancing the appreciation of his art work and understanding the changes that have occurred in them.¹

Analysis of the pigments used in William Blake's watercolours and Large Colour Prints dating from the 1780s to the 1830s, from the Tate Gallery collection, a project funded by the Wingate Foundation, was carried out in 1999 and 2000. The principle purpose of the study was to employ non-invasive methods of examination in order to establish the palette used by Blake. A non invasive approach was imperative to this study, since the paint layer in a large number of the works examined is very thin, characteristic of the watercolour technique.

The investigation employed a combination of simple and more sophisticated analysis techniques, primarily False-Colour IR photography and *in situ* Raman Microscopy (in collaboration with the Department of Chemistry, University College London). The same analytical techniques were applied to six Large Colour Prints and seven watercolours, from Blake's early, middle and late periods. It was also intended to compare the results of Raman analysis with those of false colour IR photography.

A small number of pigments were consistently and conclusively identified, with several other pigments identified less conclusively. Both informing and limited in different ways, False Colour IR and Raman microscopy proved valuable for this study when used jointly, complementing each other.

The findings confirm that Blake used a small range of pigments, often no more than one or two of each colour group. This is compatible with results of other studies, indicating that Blake's choice of pigments was remarkably consistent in all media, and he probably used the same pigment range as most artists of his era. The study of the physical components of these works provides an excellent insight into the artist's studio, without damaging the artwork by removing samples for analysis.

ENDNOTES

1. Townsend, Joyce H. (editor). William Blake The Painter at Work, Tate Publishing, London, 2003.

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