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Résumé de l'article

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William Blake and the Napoleon Factor: Rethinking Empire and the *Laocoön* Separate Plate

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Abstract
This essay examines a distinct shift in William Blake's thoughts on empire, and argues that his *Laocoön* separate plate marks the culmination of his revised views. While Blake initially distinguished negative, commercial and tyrannical forms of empire from positive, non-tyrannical forms of empire that he conceived of as founded upon the arts, he subsequently did away with these distinctions, and came to see an irremediable link between imperial and commercial worlds. By situating Blake's changing views on empire against the backdrop of the empire-building of Napoleon as it relates to the appropriation of art, this essay clarifies the particular focus on empire and commerce of so many of the *Laocoön* separate plate's inscriptions.

Biographical Note
Rosamund Paice is a Principal Lecturer in English at the University of Portsmouth. Her research on William Blake focuses on the relation between the written and the visual, and the artistic and the commercial, and has appeared in *Blake: An Illustrated Quarterly*. She also works on aspects of community and exclusion in the poetry of John Milton, on which she has been published in *Early Modern Literary Studies*. Her current book project is "Competing Loves in Milton's *Paradise Lost*".

1. In an annotation to the contents pages of Joshua Reynolds' *Works* (1798), penned circa 1798–1809 (*cf.* Erdman, *Complete Poetry and Prose* 886),[1] William Blake described art and science as "the Destruction of Tyrannies or Bad Governments" and "The Foundation of Empire": "Remove them or Degrade them & the Empire is No More—Empire follows Art & Not Vice Versa as Englishmen suppose" (E636). In a parallel statement, found in the "Public Address" of *circa* 1811, Blake wrote, "let it no more be said that Empires Encourage Arts for it is Arts that Encourage Empires" (E577). During the latter years of the eighteenth century and the first decade or so of the nineteenth century, then, Blake evidently allowed for a form of empire that is not founded on "Tyrannies" or "Bad Governments."

2. Blake pits commerce against both art and empire into the late 1800s and very early 1810s. In the "Public Address" (1809–10), he writes:

> Commerce is so far from being beneficial to Arts or to Empire that it is destructive of both [. . .] for the above Reason of Individual Merit being its Great hatred. Empires flourish till they become Commercial & then they are scattered abroad to the four winds (E574)

The values of exchange and barter are also figured as retrograde to the arts and empire in the preface to *Milton* (c. 1804–1811), where "Hirelings" are stated to have found their way into military, political, and educational centres: they "would if they could, for ever depress Mental & prolong Corporeal War." Artists are called on to take a stand against "fashionable Fools" who "depress [their] powers by the prices they pretend to give for contemptible works or the expensive advertising boasts that they make for such works." When Blake then states "We do not want either Greek or Roman Models if we are but just & true to our own Imaginations," by implication he is associating those models with both "Corporeal War" and the commercialisation of art. Significantly, though, Blake still confines himself to an attack on commerce for corrupting the platforms of empire ("the Camp, the Court, & the University"; E95), and links this corruption to specific models of empire: he does not reject empire itself outright (*cf.* Eaves, *Counter-Arts* 174).

3. This essay argues that Blake's changing perspective on empire emerged in response to an example of early nineteenth-century empire-building that relates directly to the *Laocoön* statue: the issues and events surrounding the Napoleonic art confiscations led Blake to do away with his distinction between tyrannical and non-tyrannical empires, and to see instead an irremediable link between imperial and commercial worlds. This antipathy towards empire and commerce is encapsulated in the *Laocoön* separate plate, an engraving regarded by Blake as his "creed" (*cf.*

Bentley, *The Stranger from Paradise* 498), and so the culmination of his matured artistic conclusions.

4. By the time he began to engrave the inscriptions for his *Laocoön* separate plate (printed 1826–27; **Fig. 1**), Blake was setting the aims of empire in direct opposition to his own as artist: "Empire against Art," he inscribed, "See Virgil's Eneid Lib Vl v 848" (E274). The passage from the *Aeneid* referred to is paraphrased by Blake in *On Virgil* (c. 1820):

> Virgil in the Eneid Book VI. line 848 says let others study Art: Rome has somewhat better to do, namely War & Dominion[.]

He continues:

> Rome and Greece swept Art into their maw & destroyed it a Warlike state never can produce Art. It will Rob & Plunder & accumulate into one place, & Translate & Copy & Buy & Sell & Criticise, but not Make. (E270)

The movement from "Rob" to "Criticise" encodes Blake's emerging identification of empire with commerce, and identifies the "Warlike state" with the world he saw around him. Not only "[sweeping] Art into their maw & [destroying] it," such states are also unproductive: they do not "Make," and are thus in direct opposition to the creative imagination. Art, in this system, has become commodity—something that is bought and sold, robbed, plundered, and hoarded.

Fig. 1: William Blake, *Laocoön* separate plate, copy B, printed c. 1826–7. Robert N. Essick Collection, Altadena, California.

5. The act of seizing artworks from subjugated nations, as the Romans did, is an obvious example of plundering, but there is also plundering in the appropriation of art meant for one purpose for another purpose—as when engraving is used to reproduce an art work originally conceived and produced in another medium, rather than uniting invention, or conception, and execution as an original itself (*cf.* Eaves, *Counter-Arts* 179; Eaves, *William Blake's Theory* 153–4; Viscomi 32, 36). These might be described as physical and mental plundering's, though Blake makes little distinction between the two, seeing them both as symptomatic of a wish to subjugate: "Who first spoil & then destroy Imaginative Art For their Glory," he wrote on *Laocoön*, "is War and Dominion" (E274). By the 1820s, then, Empire meant to Blake the subjection to commercial society of both other lands and the imagination; it meant spiritual and artistic degradation: "Where any view of Money exists Art cannot be carried on. But War only" (*Laocoön*, E275).

6. In 2003, I revisited the question of the engraving's composition and printing dates, arguing that, although it was certainly printed in 1826 or 1827 (*cf.* Essick and Viscomi 241), it showed signs

of having been developed from an unused commercial plate, possibly for Abraham Rees' *Cyclopædia*, for which Blake produced a set of engravings in 1815 (Paice, "Encyclopaedic Resistance" 56–60). This suggestive connection between the *Laocoön* engraving and the Rees commission makes 1815 a year worth interrogating, and the events of the Napoleonic art confiscations not only an interesting part of the *Laocoön* sculpture's history "in which the *Laocoön* had become a trophy of war and empire" (Paley, "י ה & his two Sons" 213; *cf. Traveller* 68–70, 99–100), but a compelling empire-related context for Blake's engraving itself.

7. Blake's personal antipathy towards the hackwork involved in commercial book engraving and the highly public affair of the confiscated artworks' repatriation dovetail suggestively, and point to a reason why what appears to have been an unused commercial engraving of a classical statue found a new and powerful relevance for Blake, becoming the focus, in the years that followed, for the related attacks on artistic enslavement by commerce and the enslavements of empire and corporeal warfare that we find on the *Laocoön* separate plate in its end state. Moreover, the engraving's extended attack, whilst personal to Blake, would have been recognisable to those uninvolved with Rees' *Cyclopædia* or whichever other commercial commission led to the production of the central image.

8. In his 1802 essay, "A Comparison of the Present State of France with that of Rome," Samuel Taylor Coleridge wrote of the art confiscations: "the finest parts of Europe have been pillaged in order to convert Paris into a new Rome, a metropolis of the civilized world" (313). The majority of the "pillaging" had been carried out in Italy by French troops under the command of Bonaparte, then still a general—or, to put it more accurately, French military successes had forced Pope Pius VI to sign the Peace of Bologna (June 23, 1796) and the Treaty of Tolentino (February 19, 1797), by which thousands of Italian artworks and the Papal archives were ceded to the French as part of the spoils of victory (*cf.* Paley, "י ה & his two Sons" 212; *Traveller* 68).

9. Evidently Bonaparte perceived the advantages of bringing himself into the fore on such an occasion, and he took it upon himself to subsidise a triumphal march of the artworks back to Paris (*cf.* Mainardi 157 and 162 n. 23). This culminated in the *Fête de la Liberté*, the grand entry of the Italian artworks into the city on the ninth of Thermidor, in the sixth year of the Republic (that is, on July 27, 1798, the sixth anniversary of the overthrow of Robespierre), and the procession involved a huge convoy of "objects of art and materials of science [and natural history]—books, statues, manuscripts, and pictures" (St John 70; *cf.* McClellan 122). While the Italian

confiscations had not been the first made by the French—the tradition having been established well before Napoleon crossed the Alps—the size and splendour of the booty from Italy had eclipsed all others; and now they would be forever associated with the name and career of Bonaparte (*cf.* Gould 30–31).

10. The primary glories of the procession were the sculptures, whose crates were decked with "laurel-boughs, bouquets, crowns of flowers, flags taken from the enemy, and French, Italian, and Greek inscriptions" (St John 71–72). The banner introducing the sculptures read:

> *La Grèce les céda; Rome les perdus;*
> *Leur sort changera deux fois; il ne changera plus.* (*La Decade* 301)
> Greece gave them up; Rome lost them;
> Their fate has twice changed; it will not change again. (Translation by McClellan 123)

Among the foremost of these sculptures were such iconic works as the four bronze horses of St Mark, the *Apollo Belvedere*, the *Venus de Medicis*, and the *Laocoön*.

11. Such displays feed popular imaginings, and the statues appear as prominently in these as they did in the procession itself. Most of the statues were kept within their crates for protection, but it is recorded that some at least were displayed to the crowds on massive carts. The four horses of St Mark were among these, but they are bronze (*cf.* McClellan 123). It is unlikely that a marble statue such as the *Laocoön* would have been jeopardised in this way, especially after the care was taken in transporting the works from Italy. Although a depiction of the procession showing the Laocoön on a cart does exist (porcelain vase; *cf.* Cuzin, Gaborit, and Alain Pasquier 230, fig. 12), this was produced much later, in 1813, and we should probably allow for artistic license. Nevertheless, reports of the time in England indicate a general belief there that several major sculptures were on display (*cf.* McClellan 123), and such images no doubt reflect, as well as fed, popular ideas about the procession.

12. Napoleon deployed his visual symbolism to good effect, and the procession appears to have been met, in large part, with popular enthusiasm. Many Frenchmen regarded the spoliation of Italy as the reward of military virtue over decadence, and the parade of its treasures encouraged an idea of the French as the ordained inheritors of ancient Rome. As the artist Louis-Pierre Baltard wrote:

> *Le Muséum National et les objets précieux qu'il renferme, sont le prix du sang et de la vie de nos concitoyens, morts au champ d'honneur.*

Les Artistes français sont dignes de cette conquête; ils en sentent toute l'importance. (2)

The National Museum and its precious contents are recompense for the lives and blood of our fellow citizens spilled in the field of honour. French artists are worthy of this prize; they fully recognise its importance. (Translation by McClellan 121)

13. In removing the greatest treasures from Italy and parading them through Paris, Napoleon was also making the point that the centre of the artistic, and civilised, world had relocated (*cf.* Gould 43 and 65; Taylor 540; and McClellan 119). The refrain of a contemporary song reflects this view:

Rome n'est plus dans Rome;
Tout heros, tout grand homme
A changé de pays:
Rome n'est plus dans Rome;
Elle est toute à Paris. (*Le Rédacteur* 4)
Rome is no more in Rome;
Every Hero, every Great Man
Has changed country:
Rome is no more in Rome,
It is all in Paris. (Translation by McClellan 123)

This association of France with Rome was implicit in the very use of a triumphal procession to bring the captured art treasures into Paris. It was, as Cecil Gould remarks, "as close to a literal and deliberate imitation of a Roman triumph as the revolutionaries ever achieved" (Gould 66). Indeed, it was perhaps the greatest achievement of Roman imagery during Napoleon's rise to power and ascendancy, and certainly one of the earliest indications of his imperial intentions.

14. During their stay in Paris, the finest paintings and statues were housed in the Louvre—by then the *Musée Nationale*, or national museum, of France. There, they were inevitably the subjects of much interest, and contemporary productions attest to the *Laocoön* statue's prominence. For example, a medal produced in 1804 by the Paris Mint (possibly cast to commemorate the renaming of the Musée Nationale as the Musée Napoléon in 1803) shows on its obverse the laureated head of Napoleon, and, on its reverse, a view of the entrance to the Louvre, terminated by the hall and group of *Laocoön* ([Grandmaison] no. 77, plate 30). The statue's central positioning suggests that it was seen as representative of Napoleon's power as well as France's newly-gained artistic empire.

15. Not all Frenchmen, however, found the displacement of the artworks palatable. Andrew McClellan's history of the Louvre highlights one of the tensions surrounding the appropriation of the artworks:

> As a result of Bonaparte's Italian campaign the Louvre took on an increasingly military air. The symbolism of war and military might replaced that of popular triumph over despotism. Artists and the public now had the army to thank for the museum as much as the Revolution. (McClellan 121)

As early as 1796, before the artworks had even been taken from Rome, forty-seven of France's most distinguished artists addressed a petition on the subject to the French Legislative Directory ("Pétition d'artists au Directoire exécutif"), a translation of which was produced in *The London Courier* of October 12, 1815:

> We fear that that enthusiasm which impassions us for the works of genius, may mislead with respect to their real interests, even their most ardent friends; and we entreat you to weigh maturely this imposing question, whether it be useful to France, or advantageous to the Arts and Artists in general, to remove from Rome the monuments of antiquity and the *chefs d'œuvres* of painting and sculpture which are contained in the Galleries and Museums of that Capital of the Arts. ("The Works of Art")

No doubt the fear of possible recriminations dictated the courteous—even cautious—tone of the supplicants.

16. Naturally, in Britain there was a great deal of uncomplicated, anti-Napoleonic sentiment regarding the confiscations. George Huddesford, in his *Bonaparte* ballad, makes a reference to Bonaparte's "plunder" when he puts the following words into the mouth of the Emperor:

> "To sanction each crime I've a heavenly mandate;
> "So for his soul's health,
> "When the secular wealth
> "Of the Pope I made free with, his pride I diminish'd;
> "And his claim to a mine
> "Of treasure divine
> "Ascertain'd, when his course apostolic was finish'd." (14 [6.96–102])

Outbursts against Napoleon are also found in contemporary treatises on the arts. In a book of etchings of artworks and architecture published in 1799, Charles Heathcote Tatham calls the subjugation of Italy, and the removal of its artworks "calamitous" (Tatham 3);[2] and James

Dallaway, in the "Advertisement" to his *Anecdotes of the Arts in England* (1800), writes that he has "indulged an illusion, and made frequent references to works of art in Italy, as if they had been spared by the modern spoilers of Europe." This, he continues, is for two reasons: firstly, he is reluctant to relate what he calls "the predatory violence" with which the artworks have been "torn from their ancient station"; and secondly, he states, the accounts of the removal or destruction of the artworks "are too vague and unworthy of reliance" (Dallaway vii–viii). These untrustworthy accounts are, by implication, French accounts, and so France is associated with things deceptive and destructive to the arts. By contrast, "Every man of taste," writes Dallaway, "will congratulate himself, that England, is the seat and refuge of the arts" (viii).

17. Yet there were those who viewed the situation differently, those for whom such an array of masterpieces just across the channel was an attractive prospect. Of course, whilst France and Britain were at war and the artworks were Napoleon's captives Britons found it "very difficult, if not impossible, to gain access to many of the originals" (Tatham 3). However, many Englishmen took advantage of the Peace of Amiens (March 25, 1802) to visit the Louvre, which now housed so many of the Italian treasures (Taylor 559). Blake himself anticipated the access that would be facilitated by peace, in a letter to John Flaxman of October 19, 1801, in which he states that he hopes "to see the Great Works of Art, as they are so near to Felpham, Paris being scarce further off than London"; "But," he continues, "I hope that France & England will henceforth be as One Country and their Arts One, & that you will Ere long be erecting Monuments in Paris—Emblems of Peace" (E718). Blake never did make this trip; indeed, his subsequent quietness on the matter suggests that he later lost his eagerness to visit Napoleon's Paris. At this point, however, his enthusiasm for the proximity of the artworks, and their use as symbols of a nation's greatness, is clear.

18. An earlier letter, this time to George Cumberland on July 2, 1800, adds further detail to our picture of Blake's views on national art at the turn of the nineteenth century. In this letter, Blake congratulates Cumberland on his patriotic "plan for a National Gallery being put into Execution," asserting the plan's necessity to England's state as a nation:

> Such is the Plan as I am told & such must be the plan if England wishes to continue at all worth notice as you yourself observd only now we must possess Originals as well as France or be nothing. (E706)

Erdman notes that

> In reality such national encouragement of art was even further off than peace, but these warm thoughts helped Blake "begin to Emerge from a Deep pit of Melancholy," as he told Cumberland. And he was further cheered when the "few friends I have dared to visit in my stupid Melancholy" pointed to the cultural growth of London "in so few years from a City of meer Necessaries" to "a City of Elegance in some degree". (Erdman, *Prophet* 364-65; *cf.* Erdman, *Prophet* 359)

However, "national encouragement of art" could involve many things, and, while there was no great movement in Britain at this time to nurture artists like Blake, there were many expressions of anxieties about the paucity of great artworks and monuments in Britain, and of the quest for national art to represent the nation's glory. Moreover, Blake's approval of Cumberland's plan centres on his high estimation of France's "Originals," a word that he uses elsewhere in relation to what he considered to be ancient artworks, sacred but lost (*cf. Chaucers Canterbury Pilgrims* E78; *Descriptive Catalogue*, E530, E531). Blake came to regard the *Laocoön* sculpture as only a copy of one of those "Originals" (*Laocoön*, E273), and, sometime between 1804 and 1811, prioritized "our own Imaginations" over Greek or Roman Models in the preface to *Milton*. However, in 1800 he considers France to have "Originals" in its possession, and, rather than hoping for England's art empire to be built upon the foundations of newly-produced artworks, at this stage even Blake associates the nation's artistic prestige with possession of great works from previous eras and distant cultures.

19. Perhaps surprisingly, given Blake's expressed interest in artistic unity with France, his position on art and the performance of national identity at this stage was in keeping with that of the British government. For all the British hostility to the 1798 procession of the works of art, late eighteenth-century politics was generally performative, and Britain was not only playing the same art game as Napoleon (though not as successfully), but was also criticized during this period—and by Britons—for its displays: John Thelwall's argument to book 2 of "The Hope of Albion," for example, refers to the Britain's "pompous procession[s]" (Thelwall 178). Moreover, Cumberland's plan for a National Gallery was by no means the only plan to increase Britain's artistic—in particular, it's monumental—profile. As early as 1796, the British government established a committee to oversee the erection of public monuments to national heroes; in 1802, the Committee of National Monuments, whose members were elected by the Royal Academy, superseded that committee. Naturally, John Flaxman, RA, was commissioned to produce a series of memorials for St. Paul's Cathedral, celebrating heroes of the Napoleonic Wars. The most well known of Flaxman's monuments is his commemoration of Nelson, commissioned in 1809, and

erected in St. Paul's in 1818; but Flaxman also received other commissions, including one in 1803, for a memorial to Admiral Earl Howe. Both monuments show the great influence of the Roman metaphor on Flaxman's conception of Britain's glory; in fact, a preliminary drawing for the Howe monument expressed the Earl's naval achievements entirely in Roman images, with Howe even sporting a toga (*cf.* Irwin 155–61).

20. In the letter to Flaxman of October 19, 1801, Blake seems to be referring to a yet another monumental scheme, when he writes that he "rejoice[s] hear that your Great Work is accomplish'd" and links that "Great Work" to "The Reign of Literature & the Arts" (E717). This may well be a reference to Flaxman's most ambitious sculptural design project, in this case for a monument to be situated in the open air, on top of Greenwich Hill. Flaxman's work on this began in 1799, after a public subscription was opened for the erection of a monument to recent naval victories, which was specifically meant to rival those of France (*cf.* Irwin 165). The committee invited artists to submit sketches and models for a column, but, while other artists seem to have adhered to this request, Flaxman "disapproved of the idea of a column, and countered with ideas for either a triumphal arch or a gigantic statue" (Irwin 163). David Irwin records that "The triumphal arch seems to have gone no further than the drawing stage"; the plans for a colossal statue of Britannia Triumphant with war heroes decorating its pedestal, however, were not only transformed into a model, and exhibited at the Royal Academy in 1801 (perhaps allowing Blake to consider this work "accomplish'd"), but also justified in a pamphlet, Flaxman's first noteworthy publication, which was printed with his designs engraved by Blake (Irwin 163–165; *cf.* Erdman, *Prophet* 336–7; and Essick, *William Blake's Commercial Engravings* 77–79 and figs. 181–184). Blake, therefore, was not simply a bystander: he had an active concern in the creation of this vast monument intended to forward the national spirit of art, but also set up in opposition to France.

21. In *English Bards and Grecian Marbles*, Stephen Larrabee remarks that, when Flaxman visited Paris during the 1802 period of peace, he "alone among the English artists, ruled by great scorn for the tyrant [Bonaparte], refused to look at the statues" in the Louvre (258; *cf.* Cunningham 329–330). The October 1801 letter, however, suggests that prior to Flaxman's visit, Blake was either rather insensitive or believed that his friend felt some admiration for Bonaparte's artistic project. Furthermore, given Blake's evident enthusiasm for, and optimism about, "see[ing] the Great Works of Art" himself (E718), and his high hopes for a political and artistic union between France and Britain, there can be little doubt that he and Flaxman would have discussed the latter's

experiences in Paris, and what seems to have been Flaxman's change of heart regarding Napoleon.

22. The effect on Flaxman of his Paris visit might account for the strange absence of references to the artworks in Blake's subsequent letters; it might also form the beginnings of Blake's changing attitude towards both empire and Greek art. As with Blake's references to empire, in Blake's earlier writings positive references to Greek art can be found, but it is after this period that they are replaced by outright condemnation. For example, he writes to Dr. Trusler, on August 16, 1799, of living "to renew the lost Art of the Greeks" (E701); and, on July 2, 1800, he writes to Cumberland of "the immense flood of Grecian light & glory which is coming on Europe" (E706). It is later that Blake presents the influence of Greece and Rome (both associated with empire) as oppressive, and Greek art as "Mathematic," in contrast to the purer, "Living Form[s]" of Gothic art (E270).

23. From being a supporter of Napoleon's empire-building foray across Europe—"When France got free [from monarchical tyranny] Europe 'twixt Fools & Knaves / Were Savage first to France, & after; Slaves" (annot. Reynolds, E641)—Blake finally assumed his place alongside the rest of the disillusioned radicals. His anti-Napoleonic statements, however, took on a tenor entirely different from the outbursts of his fellows. Although, in the entire corpus of his extant writings, he makes just two references to Bonaparte, these references are important because they display a sense of perspective that is not found in the demonising of many of the Romantics (Paice, "Blake and a 'curious hypothesis'"; *cf.* Bainbridge 12).

24. Blake's first recorded statement concerning Napoleon occurs in a letter to William Hayley, written on May 28, 1804:

> as the French now adore Buonaparte and the English our poor George; so the Americans will consider Washington as their god. This is only a Grecian, or rather Trojan, worship, and perhaps will be revised in an age or two. (E749–50)

It is clear that the potency of the reference to the Trojans (supplanting that to the Greeks) must be that Troy fell to the Greeks; in turn, the Greek empire, and, subsequently, the Roman Empire, took their places in the chain of perpetual risings and fallings. Because Napoleon is a false god, he cannot be relied upon; therefore, France's imperial status—like that of Troy, Greece and Rome—may be "revised."

25. Blake was not the first to have drawn admonitory parallels between Napoleonic France, Troy, and Rome. After Bonaparte's occupation of the Papal Legations (1796), the royal librarian Thomas James Mathias wrote, "And lo! by Buonaparte's iron pen, / The tale of Rome may be Troy's tale again" (Mathias 285 [4:43–44]). The suggestion is that, for all the French claims about being the inheritors of Roman greatness, in conquering Rome, France is acting against itself, perpetuating the chain of imperial falls. Even William Godwin, who, like Blake, had at first been supportive of the events in France, had the eponymous hero of *St. Leon* (1799) appeal to the image of fallen Troy as a precursor for France in what is presumably intended as an authorial augury in view of the imperial pretensions of Napoleon's France:

> Months, years, cycles, centuries! To me all these are but as indivisible moments. [. . .] I shall become familiar with the rise and fall of empires; in a little while the very name of France, my country, will perish from off the face of the earth, and men will dispute about the situation of Paris, as they dispute about the scite [sic] of ancient Nineveh and Babylon and Troy. (Godwin 108–110)

Perhaps, for Blake, references to the cyclical rise and fall of empires suggested a connection with his notion of the individual going through states and actions that have existed and been acted countless times, and will be again throughout eternity (*cf. Jerusalem* 73.45, E229): empires have always sought to adorn their lands with the greatest works of art, often by taking them from conquered nations, and always would.

26. Blake makes his other written reference to the French leader in the "Public Address":

> Let us teach Buonaparte & whomever else it may concern, that it is not Arts that follow & attend upon Empire[s], but Empire[s] that attends upon & follows The Arts. (E577)

Given that the involvement with the arts for which Napoleon was most famous was the relocation of the thousands of artworks to Paris, this rallying cry suggests that, by 1811, Blake's opinion of the French leader was focused on the plundering of Italy. In defiance of the slavery conceit encoded in the Italian artworks' procession into Paris, Blake announces empire as art's attendant: the transportation of the pieces becomes a useless gesture, since all it proves is the dependence of the empire on the arts. Yet, even here, Blake still allows for the possibility of non-tyrannical empires, empires that recognise a power higher than them. Moreover, the empire created by Napoleon may be of the tyrannical mould, but Blake's phrasing implies his belief that Napoleon can be taught—perhaps a lesson that would lead to the destruction of his tyranny, perhaps a lesson in the Blakean order of things that would lead to his redemption.

27. Of course, the Napoleonic Empire did fall—like Troy, like Rome—and the artworks remained in their Parisian palace only a little longer: following the French defeat at Waterloo in June 1815, the majority began to be returned to their former owners. Obviously, this was a slightly less glamorous affair than their arrival in Paris. *The Times* and *The London Courier* recorded the daily departure from Paris of its looted art in the autumn and early winter of 1815, and, on October 3, 1815, the *Courier* described the stripping of the Louvre as "the chief cause of public irritation [in Paris] at the present":

> to all but strangers, the long gallery of the Museum presents the strongest possible image of desolation; here and there a few pictures, with a greater number of empty frames, giving greater effect to the disguised nakedness of the walls. ("French Papers")

The *Courier* of October 16 contains extracts of letters from the artist and papal emissary, Antonio Canova, who stayed in Paris to oversee the removal of many of the artworks. From one of these missives we know that what he describes as "the first two statues in the world, the *Apollo* and the *Laocoon*" were removed from the Louvre on October 5, 1815 (Canova).

28. A flood of French and English artworks and verse celebrated the removal of the artworks from the Louvre and their restoration to Italy. Some of the forays into art were little more than that, and amongst these must be numbered a coloured engraving entitled "L'Artiste Français Pleurant les Chances de la Guerre" ("The French Artist Mourns the Fortunes of War," c. 1815; **Figure 2**). In the background of the picture, outside a building representing the Louvre, the *Laocoön* and the *Apollo* appear on open carts, ready to be led away by the Allied soldiers. The artist is foregrounded, handkerchief in hand; his easel and painting (possibly of a biblical scene) have been cast down by his side, apparently in tearful despair at so great a loss. Perhaps we are supposed to infer that this is the last painting he will ever be able to finish, because he has been so traumatized by the event. Some grieving ladies add to the effect, as they walk past the statues. The fact that the sculptures are shown on open carts is presumably intended to parody the procession that brought them into Paris seventeen years before: again, we have evidence that the statues were imaginatively conceived of as having been on open display as they travelled.

Fig. 2. Anon., "L'Artiste Français Pleurant les Chances de la Guerre," 1815. Bibliothèque nationale de France, Paris

29. Productions in verse also revel in the restoration of the artworks. Part 2 of George Croly's "Paris in 1815" contains a long section dealing with the Louvre, and praising the artworks on the verge of being stripped from it: "The spoiler's spoil'd," writes Croly, clearly relishing the irony of France's situation (Croly 92; 2.26.226). Felicia Hemans added her voice to the chorus, dedicating a substantial twenty-three lines of her celebratory 1816 poem, the "Restoration of the Works of

Art to Italy," to praising the *Laocoön* group. Interestingly, Hemans also draws attention to the tradition of conquering armies that have plundered artworks, and, perhaps intentionally, echoes the language of the French *Fête* when she refers to the artworks as "precious trophies" (Hemans 151; line 89).

30. Combining art and literature, *Doctor Syntax's Life of Napoleon* (1815) includes a section on the money and artworks that Napoleon had obtained from Pope Pius, in which William Combe refers to the trophy artworks as "relics" (57–58). The accompanying engraving by George Cruikshank, entitled "Seizing the Italian Relics," develops this statue–relic association by showing the *Venus de Medicis* alongside urns and crosses. While seizing the artworks is implicitly equated with religious desecration, therefore, characteristic anti-Catholic bias ensures that the Vatican also comes under fire for treating artworks as relics to begin with. To Cruikshank and Combe, and probably to Blake too by this time, the art confiscations smacked of a superficial rather than substantial engagement with art. That the engraving is dated "1st December 1814"—a good sixteen years after the confiscations, but only shortly after Napoleon's first abdication in April 1814, and at the beginning of the speculation about the statues' return—again shows that the earlier appropriation of the artworks was still very much present in the cultural memory.

31. The repatriation of the artworks in late 1815, and the responses to these events, coincides with Blake's production of at least one engraving of the *Laocoön* sculpture for Rees' *Cyclopædia* (not necessarily also the one that became the annotated separate plate, although the intersection of these contexts remains suggestive). We might have expected Blake to be in celebratory mood after this: surely here was art being delivered from the bonds of an empire that had failed to recognise the authority of art. The *Laocoön* engraving, however, is no such celebration: it continues to warn. This was perhaps in part because the artworks had simply been returned to their former domicile, Rome, the seat of a previous empire. Yet Blake's warning tone must also have had something to do with Britain's position concerning the return of the Napoleonic art confiscations, and indeed Britain's position on plundering in general.

32. After the removal of the art treasures to Paris, and especially after Napoleon's downfall, there was a new aspect to the British concerns for artistic prestige. In a note to Canto 2 of his 1809 poem, the *Elements of Art*, Martin Archer Shee remarked:

> Had we succeeded in our long projected march to Paris, and acquired by the right of conquest, the privilege of plundering the general repository of imperial pillage; the

> Author confesses, that he would have seen with a very patriotic exultation, a detachment of the committee of Taste under some adventurous virtuoso, or a well selected rifle corps of the Royal Academy, appointed to invade all the recesses of the Louvre—to dislodge its most illustrious inhabitants, and as prisoners of war, conduct them to assist in adorning the triumph, and advancing the arts of his country. (Shee 107; *cf.* Essick and Viscomi 223 n.; Paley, "יהו & his two Sons" 213; *Traveller* 69)

In 1815, there were suddenly "homeless" art treasures across the water, and there were many more voices clamouring for Britain's armies to transport at least some of them to London, for display in a museum or gallery there (*cf.* Jenkinson 453; Quynn 447; Taylor 573). On October 3, 1815, *The London Courier* (No. 7197) even reported that there was a rumour in Paris that "the *Apollo* goes to England." Though the Allies eventually decided that it would be wiser to take the less hypocritical route, and return all works possible to their former homes (*cf.* Quynn 448; and Mainardi 160–161), there was, among some Britons, a feeling that they had been denied what they deserved.

33. This was not the only occasion on which Britain's imperial ambitions were evident. Britain had been amassing her own empire, and her subjects had been plundering their own art treasures: the Elgin marbles, which arrived in London in 1807, are the most obvious example. Although the impetus behind such gains was more obviously commercial than military, parallels with Napoleon's France and Imperial Rome would have been hard for Blake to ignore. As the next in line to succeed the Roman Empire, the British had become the "Spoilers"—or sometimes only the would-be spoilers—this time putting commerce before art, appropriating the productions of others for its own purpose.

34. In his *Laocoön*, Blake conceives of the modern-day "Spoilers" as incarnations of Egypt and Babylon, "Who first spoil & then destroy Imaginative Art For their Glory is War and Dominion" (E274). In its extension back from Troy and Rome to Egypt and Babylon as the archetypes of empire, this inscription indicates one reason why Blake could no longer believe in a redeemable empire: no empire could be non-tyrannical because no empire ever had been. Moreover, the Egyptian association leads us to the symbolic reason why the exodus was not complete: "Israel deliverd from Egypt is Art deliverd from / Nature and Imitation" (E274). The enslavement remains until Art has been delivered from both, and, crucially, the modern-day incarnation of Israel's Egyptian bondage remained, even in 1826–27, in Britain's imperial ambitions, and its subjection of art to the forces of commerce. For Blake, until men could practice art free from the

constraints of visionless and commerce-driven reproduction, they would remain artisans, dispossessed of their spiritual home and in bondage to a foreign power.

35. Finally, and perhaps inevitably, Blake had come to believe that empire and commerce were two manifestations of the same thing: the desire for accumulation, particularly of the financial kind. As such they were also diametrically opposed to Christian values and visionary art: "The True Christian Charity [is] not dependent on Money (the lifes blood of Poor Families) that is on Caesar or Empire or Natural Religion" (E275); "Christianity is Art & not Money / Money is its Curse" (E274). For Blake, producing art that was true to itself involved a return to the divinely inspired "Originals" of the earliest Christianity, but in order to produce such art the artist must be without financial constraint. Blake knew too well that, as soon as need became a factor, the artist lost autonomy over his creations, having instead to manufacture what the religions or fashions of the day demanded. An artist who continued to produce non-conformative, inspired art under these conditions would risk poverty (*cf.* Viscomi 35). In a state where money is the goal, to enter into poverty voluntarily, and purely to produce the inspired images that are not in demand, is considered illogical, absurd, mad: "There are States in which all Visionary Men are accounted Mad Men," Blake announces on the *Laocoön* engraving; such States "are Greece & Rome Such is Empire or Tax" (E274). Blake's artist, therefore, is placed in a no-win situation: either he produces his visionary art but goes hungry, or he allows himself to become enslaved, perpetuating the vicious circle of "Art Degraded / Imagination Denied / War Governed the Nations" (E274).

36. For Blake, the latter was not only undesirable; it was spiritually dangerous. His message in the *Laocoön* is that, if art remained slave to the forces of empire and commerce, man's redemption would be jeopardised: "The Eternal Body of Man is The IMAGINATION [. . .] It manifests itself in his Works of Art" (E273). Without imagination, it follows, man has no Eternal Body. Art, in Blake's *Laocoön*, is being figured as an act of communion with God: we read along the left-hand side of the engraving, "Prayer is the Study of Art," "Praise is the Practice of Art," "Fasting &c. all relate to Art." Waging war on empire, uninspired art, and materialism, and suffering poverty through adherence to the ideals of true art, is proposed as a path to Eternal life. We may well regard this as the rather wishful thinking of an impoverished artist near the end of his life, but Blake clearly considered art's communion to be not just a personal issue, but a general cultural and historical one—one justifying such imperative inscriptions as "Without Unceasing Practise nothing can be done / Practise is Art If you leave off you are Lost" (E274).

37. In the absence of the necessary attention to personal redemption through art and imagination, materialism takes over, and war ensues. Moreover, redemption *through* art involves redemption *of* art. As part of this process, the *Laocoön* statue must be restored, not merely to its place in the Vatican (where it remained physically bound to the history of empire), but to what the engraving presents as the statue's most ancient meaning: it must be revealed and recognised as a copy of one of the "Divine Originals," the "Cherubim of Solomon's Temple," removed by the Greek copyists from its eternal significance and tied to "Natural Fact. or. History of Ilium" (E274; *cf.* Erdman, *Prophet* 531). Blake's *Laocoön*, then, is both an enactment of this restoration and a rallying cry to others: it is not only a matter of Art, but also of salvation. By converting the rejected copy-work of the plate into a unique work of art that highlights what he regarded as being the sculpture's original meaning, Blake not only redeems the statue, metaphorically liberating it from its enslavement to commerce and empire; he also redeems himself from the bondage of art-for-hire.

38. The *Laocoön* separate plate marks the endpoint of Blake's struggles with the notion of empire. In its revision of his former beliefs, it attacks everything for which he now considered the empire to stand, and which the Napoleonic art confiscations, and the controversies surrounding the artworks' return, had rehearsed. By using as the centrepiece to his plate a statue that he conceived as having been twice plundered, and by juxtaposing Virgil's expression of Roman values with his own statements, Blake not only symbolically overthrows the reign of the pagan gods and classical values in art; he also presents a call for art to resist empire, and rescue itself from its degradation by empire.

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[1] All subsequent references to this edition of Blake's works will be given as E followed by the relevant page number.

[2] Blake subscribed to Tatham's books, and so is likely to have encountered this opinion on the art confiscations (*cf.* Bentley, *Blake Books*, no. 744).