

Some Thoughts on Flaxman and the Engraved Outlines

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No one, to my knowledge, within the substantial literature on John Flaxman (1755–1826) has stressed the surge of creativity that must have powered his enormous production of drawings during 1792 and 1793 in Rome. Yet the feat of having produced ‘a series of compositions on principles of the antients’ for the *Iliad*, *Odyssey*, Dante’s *Divine Comedy* and the *Tragedies of Aeschylus* in such a concentrated period is truly remarkable.¹ Even more so as Flaxman was mainly working on them at night, according to a much-quoted letter to Romney: ‘My employments at present are, finishing Ld Bristols Great Group in Marble, making a model for a Restoration of the Torso Belvidere & in the evenings, making a Series of drawings from Homer and Dante which are engraving.’² This was in addition to keeping up his observational and study notebooks, making life studies, travelling (including his visit to Orvieto with William Young Ottley in September 1792), undertaking a group of personal religious illustrations and leading a very full social life as documented in his wife’s diaries.

The numerous preliminary sketches and compositional studies for these publications bear witness to Flaxman’s thoroughness and thoughtfulness in preparing the ‘Outlines’. This generic term given to his published engravings by contemporaries and later commentators was not in fact employed by the artist himself, although the preparatory drawings clearly depend on simplified contours without shading.³ Flaxman intended them to ‘give the young artist the true principles of composition, with effect and without confusion, to produce the chief interest of his subject by grand lines of figures, without the intrusion of useless, impertinent, or trivial objects.’⁴ The preliminary drawings, now scattered in many collections, are mainly compositional studies that move from rough first ideas in graphite overlaid with pen and ink to quick repetitions



224. John Flaxman, *Sheet of Preliminary Studies for Homer's Iliad*, 1792–93, pen and grey ink over graphite, 268 x 195 mm (London, British Museum).

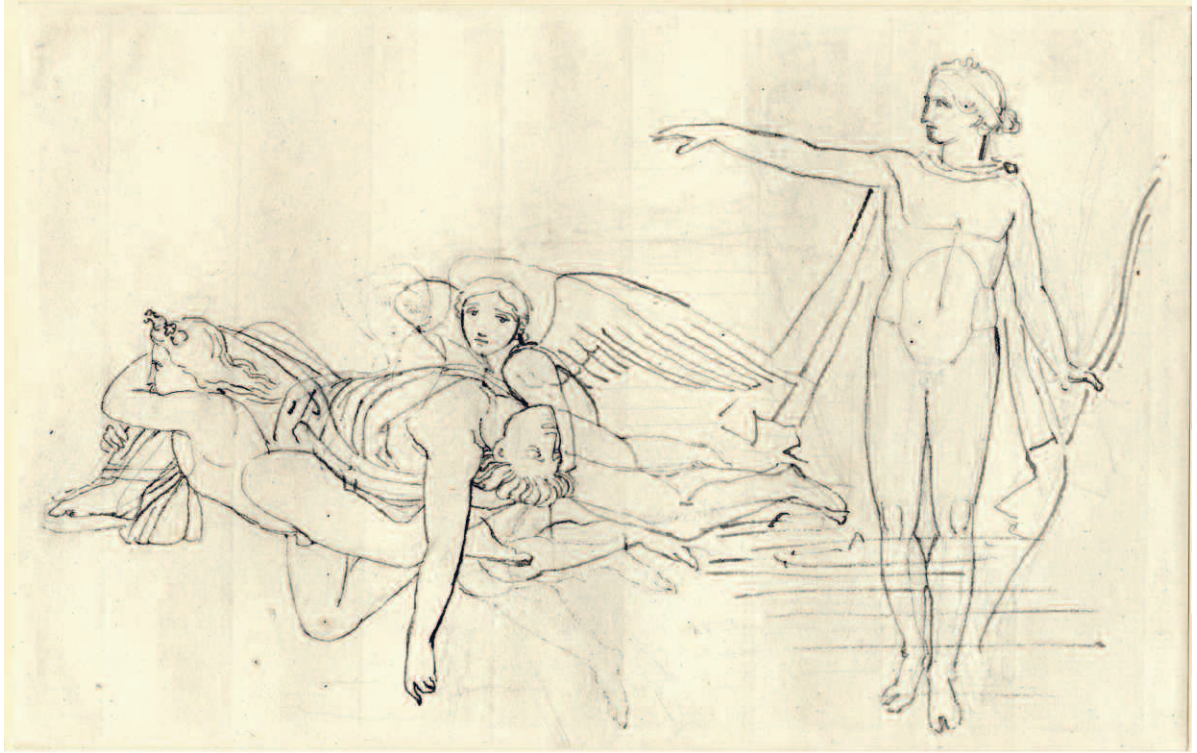
of established arrangements where figures are summarily abstracted in a brisk shorthand (fig. 224). Finally, there are stages of resolved drawings with attention to facial expression and telling but decorous postures, ges-

1. This description is contained in a letter of 26 October 1793 from Flaxman to William Hayley, now in the Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge. The letter also mentions his intention to make ‘groups of basrelievos, suited to all the purposes of Sacred and Civil Architecture.’ A small group of wash drawings with figures modelled in light and shade, in the Huntington Library, Pasadena, California, are the preparatory drawings for such reliefs, but the project was not completed.

2. Flaxman letter to Romney, 12 September 1792, for which see W. Hayley, *The Life of George Romney, Esq*, London, 1809. The present continuous tense of the last sentence implies ‘in the process of being engraved’, a form also employed by Nancy Flaxman in a letter quoted below in note 12.

3. George Romney, for example, used this term in a letter to William Hayley of 18 July 1793; Hayley, *op. cit.*, pp. 201, 203.

4. Letter to Hayley, 26 October 1793.



225. John Flaxman, *Sleep and Death Bearing the Body of Sarpedon*, *Rejected Design for Homer's The Iliad*, 1792–93, pen and grey ink over graphite, 156 x 242 mm (London, British Museum).

tures and drapery. They chart how Flaxman moves towards ever more economical pictorial story-telling through suppression of unnecessary detail and simplification of forms. The drama or literary impact of each scene is told through the interactions of bodies, with only the most minimal indications of place, depth, ground plane, architecture or furniture to suggest the setting.

In addition, the preparatory drawings, particularly for *The Iliad*, reveal how the artist adjusts and flattens out spatial relationships into strictly lateral compositions without perspectival depth and with minimal overlap, reminiscent of Classical reliefs and vase painting. For example, a beautiful drawing in the British Museum, *Sleep and Death Bearing the Body of Sarpedon* (fig. 225), a study for Plate 25 of *The Iliad*, suggests, by comparison with the final, less dramatic and strictly horizontal en-

graved image, that it was rejected because the spatial complexity of the body borne by flying figures was incompatible with Flaxman's aim of composing on a frontal plane. The hanging but elegant left arm of the drawn corpse and its thrown-back head constitute a powerful icon of death, just as the simplest of facial indications (especially the down-turned eyelids) on the face of the winged figure act as linear codes of sadness and resignation, missing from the engraved version with its expressionless facial features.⁵ Unusually for Flaxman, one can clearly see the pentimenti and the redrawn limbs. The final study for the engraving, in brown ink, is in the Royal Academy collection. The diagonal arrangement of the figure has been changed to a less dramatic composition parallel with the picture plane as in the engraved version, although the drawn heads are more expressive in the drawing.

5. For discussions of 'encoded' lines, see D. Petherbridge, *The Primacy of Drawing: Histories and Theories of Practice*, London and New Haven, 2010, pp. 198–99 and D. Petherbridge, 'Constructing the

Language of Line', in *John Flaxman 1755–1826: Master of the Purest Line*, edited by D. Bindman, London, 2003, pp. 6–13.

The recent invaluable volume of the Walpole Society, with its scholarly editing of Flaxman's Italian notebooks undertaken by Hugh Brigstocke, Eckart Marchand and Alison E. Wright, reaffirms the eclectic sources of Flaxman's imagery and allows us to understand how and why they were synthesized in the Outlines.⁶ In these completely original compositions, Flaxman seamlessly combines Classical figuration from reliefs, sculptures, engravings and 'Etruscan' vases with forms derived from medieval and early Renaissance sources, life studies and observational sketches of everyday life.⁷ He sets out to humanize the gods and to Christianize Greek bodily forms by imbuing personal beauty and grace with the 'moral virtues, or the influences of providential direction' of the moderns.⁸ This Protestant project is not out of step with the deliberate policies of the Catholic Church in Rome to appropriate and incorporate the Classical past during the eighteenth century that led to the establishment of the Capitoline Museums in 1734 and the Museo Pio-Clementino in 1771.⁹ A historically significant terracotta sculpture by Giovanni Volpato of the 1780s in the Museo Civico d'Arte Antica, Turin, depicts Pope Pius VI resting an arm on a herm with the head of Pericles, in a cool and expressionless meeting of Catholicism and enlightened paganism.

Despite all his preparatory work on the Outlines, Flaxman received only small initial payments from his commissioning patrons and never benefited from royalties from the widely circulated engravings, which made him rather detached from their success. The international fame of the Outlines has generally been at-

tributed by historians to the timeliness of their production by engraver Tommaso Piroli (1752–1824) in Rome, with its influential international population of artists and Grand Tourists.¹⁰ Certainly Flaxman's name was closely linked with that of Piroli in most of the subsequent editions that retained the original frontispieces, even when, as in the standard 1805 London edition of *The Odyssey*, other engravers, including William Blake, James Parker and James Neagle were substantially involved.¹¹

Flaxman was evidently introduced to Piroli, a fashionable engraver who had studied with Piranesi, by Mrs Georgina Hare-Naylor (d. 1806) who commissioned *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey*. We gather from Flaxman's letter to Romney quoted above, corroborated by a letter from Nancy Flaxman of 15 December 1792, that the engravings, including those after Dante, were prepared almost simultaneously with the drawings.¹² This suggests that there must have been a close collaboration between artist and printmaker, yet in spite of the richness of notebooks, journals, letters, poems and published texts associated with Flaxman, we know absolutely nothing about his relationship with Piroli. Nor indeed do we know what he felt about any of the later engravers of his works (excluding Blake) or his opinions of their productions, and how they related to his own inventions.

There are stylistic differences in the Homer plates prepared by Piroli, Blake, Parker and Neagle, although they all follow Flaxman's range of graphic conventions. These constitute a firm and enclosing bodily outline, variably thicker or darker in some contours, with the

6. H. Brigstocke, E. Marchand and A. E. Wright, *John Flaxman and William Young Ottley in Italy* (Walpole Society, LXXII), London, 2010.

7. Years later, in his Royal Academy lecture on Composition, Flaxman drew on his Italian experiences to construct a history of the persistence of Classicism: 'Grecian composition may be traced in the biblical basso-relievos of Orvieto by Nicolas and John Pisani; in the noble bronzes of the life of Christ on the pulpits of St Lorenzo in Florence, by Donatello in the bronze gates of St John's Baptistery, in the same city, by Lorenzo Ghiberti, and in the paintings of Raffaele and Michael Angelo.' J. Flaxman, *Lectures on Sculpture as Delivered before the President and Members of the Royal Academy*, new edition, London, 1889, p. 49.

8. Ibid, p. 163. In 1826 Flaxman confirmed to Ludwig Schorn, the editor of *Kunstblatt*, that 'It was the purpose of my academy lectures to show that art under Christianity, was superior to that of paganism, since Christian ideas are more sublime ...' W. Vaughn, *German Romanticism and English Art*, New Haven and London, 1979, p. 84.

9. See *Roma e l'Antico: Realtà e visione nel '700*, edited by C. Brook and V. Curzi, Rome and Milan, 2010, pp. 91–103.

10. Flaxman's great supporter Hayley went to great lengths of na-

tionalistic doggerel to nullify the importance of Italian influences in Flaxman's 'influence sublime'. He accompanies these verses with a footnote chastising Montesquieu and Winkelman [*sic*] for the 'supposition that the inhabitants of England labour under a natural incapacity of attaining excellence in the fine arts'; W. Hayley, *An Essay on Sculpture in a Series of Epistles to John Flaxman*, Esq. R.A., London, 1800, pp. 33–34.

11. On the history of the London editions with their additional plates and, in the case of *The Odyssey*, re-engravings, see G. E. Bentley Jr, *The Early Engravings of Flaxman's Classical Designs: A Bibliographical Study*, New York, 1964. Piroli himself engraved three different sets of plates. There are updated international publication tables in the exhibition catalogue, *Flaxman: la difusió del model clàssic: Homero, Esquilo, Hesíodo, Dante*, Bilbao, 1996.

12. Flaxman 'is employ'd & that closely too – in making a compleat set of drawings from Dantes Heaven, Hell, & Purgatory, consisting of one hundred & ten – from which engravings are Making for Mr. Hope, after these (or rather going on at the same time) are a set of drawing from Homer's Iliad and Odyssey ...'; letter from Nancy Flaxman to her sister-in-law Mary on 15 December 1792, British Museum Add MS 39780, fol. 197.



226. John Flaxman, *Briseis Taken from Achilles and Thetis Invoking the Giant Briareus*, 1792–93, pen and grey ink over graphite, 252 x 192 mm (London, British Museum).



227. John Flaxman, *The Departure of Briseis from the Tent of Achilles*, 1792–93, graphite, pen and ink on light grey laid paper, 237 x 300 mm (London, Royal Academy of Arts).

interior musculature indicated by fine or dotted lines. Figures are lightly silhouetted against passages of controlled horizontal hatching, which also serve to indicate stylized clouds, skies or solid ground planes, or to suggest shadow or a slightly deeper background plane as in a bas-relief. Often all these readings are combined in one seemingly simple graphic passage of widely spaced horizontal hatching. This can be seen in an interesting British Museum sheet with two carefully drawn but subsequently rejected compositional versions from *The Iliad* (fig. 226). In the top study Briseis is led away by the Erybates, but turns away from them to look back towards Achilles. This tense and dramatic interaction, emphasized by the spatial grouping and orientation of her 'guides', has been changed in the final drawing from the Hare-Naylor family collection in the Royal Academy of Arts Library (fig. 227). Here, as in the published engraving, figures are evenly spaced in profile postures in the manner of shallow Classical reliefs and the attention-claiming gulf between Patroclus and Briseis has been reduced, while the guides have already turned to march away. The horizontal hatching

that acted as a darker foil for framing the figures in the British Museum drawing becomes a decorative adjunct in the demure Royal Academy drawing, and even more so in the engraved and affectless published version by Piroli.

The British Museum sheet also contains a square composition of *Thetis Invoking the Giant Briareus*, which was emptied out and extended horizontally in the final version. Horizontal hatching is employed here as shading for one of the giant's arms as he emerges from the earth in response to the nymph's summons, and also serves to establish an indeterminate ground plane which twists upwards behind her tense posture. It is relevant to note that thickened lines describing the head of the giant are the result of a speedy redrawing, just as the emphases of Thetis's arm, leg and drapery are a quick reaffirmation of her incantatory pose. The reversal of the giant head in the engraving and the emptiness of the background make this a much less dramatic version than the powerful early drawing (fig. 228).

I have indicated how Flaxman himself deliberately reduces narrative drama in the progression of his

preparatory studies.¹³ In addition, a significant diminution of the subtlety and expressivity of his drawings occurs in each engraved translation, although the economy, spaciousness and general layout of his compositional models are adhered to. There is a major loss in the subtlety of facial expressions, which are infantilized or rendered as indistinguishably bland by Piroli, Parker and Neagle and less so by Blake.¹⁴ Parker employs a weaker engraved line than the others, and all of them apply the calligraphic Neoclassical convention of contrasts of thicker and thinner outlines in a far more mechanistic manner than Flaxman, for whom, as indicated above, the thickening of line is not about style but about correction, redrawing or rhythmic emphasis.

Flaxman's drawings depend on flexible pen lines made in grey (very occasionally light brown ink) over tentative and exploratory graphite under-sketches. We can clearly see how the original quick movements of the graphite are tamed into 'pure' linear reductions in the pen and ink overdrawing. These strengthened contours seek to inscribe more meaningful and angular or gentle rhythms dependent on whether the figures are in 'violent action' or 'tender subjects'.¹⁵ They are therefore part of Flaxman's drawing and thinking processes, and not the stylistic or decorative inflections of his engravers, applied more or less arbitrarily. George Cumberland, as has often been noted, condemned the error of those 'professional artists, and professional diletanti' who 'publish works copied from the ancients, or invented in their stile, with outlines *thick and thin alternately* like the flourishes of a penman'.¹⁶ He admits that he alludes to 'the very tasteful *Homer* and *Eschylus* of Mr. Flaxman; and the last volume of Sir William Hamilton's *Grecian vases*' but directs his ire is at the 'heavy translation' of Mr. Tischbien [*sic*] that are 'materially unlike the originals.' Tischbein's drawings, of course, had been engraved by Piroli. The very feeble engravings that accompany Cumberland's text (which Mr Blake had 'condescended' to make from his anaemic originals) do not allow for any tonal variations of line, but instead illustrate Cumberland's praise of 'pure,

flowing and fine' outlines. He argues that '*forms are beautiful in proportion as the transitions of their lines are gradual* [...] for as sharpness cuts on the eye and renders objects more visible, so it is apt to bring the line itself to be more noticed than the form it describes' and 'profiles ... which are learnedly softened ... seem like figures surrounded by air.'¹⁷

It is interesting that Cumberland conflates both Flaxman's and Tischbein's drawings with the engravings of the printmaker. His comments on linearity may have been awkwardly expressed, but he attaches 'moral' worth to the distinction between a line that is inseparable from its representation and one that asserts a dominance beyond the unity of the artwork, claiming also that a 'rough outline is preferable to a very sharp one'. His views, focussed around practice but also philosophically resonant, could well have been part of a debate of the time that was known to Flaxman. A. W. Schlegel, in his well-known endorsement of Flaxman's *Outlines* in a favourable German review of 1799, had stated:

Their signs become almost like hieroglyphs, like those of the poet ... Just as the words of the poet are actually magic formulae for life and beauty (even if one does not observe their components or their secret power), so it appears to be true wizardry how, in a successful outline, so much soul can dwell in a *few delicate lines* (my italics).¹⁸ This leads me to propose – without any direct evidence – that Flaxman's unusually pale warmish grey ink that is tonally so close to the slight graphite underdrawing as not to disturb the coherence and unity of these first thoughts, might have been deliberately prepared by himself or to his specification. It certainly was not in common usage at the time. The pale colouration of the lines allows the human forms and minimal settings to float on the paper with a weightless airiness and clarity that the artist obviously prized.

The difference between Flaxman's original drawings and their relatively mechanistic interpretation in engraved prints that I have touched on in this brief account is, I believe, part of a much wider debate about

13. This seems to reflect the Winckelmann line, in his famous 1755 reference to the Laocöon sculptural group, that the Greeks rejected the excessive passions of *parathyrsos* in favour of 'sage' dignity and tranquillity. See *Winckelmann: Writings on Art*, edited by D. Irwin, London, 1972, pp. 72–73.

14. For example, Plate 2 of *The Iliad, Minerva Repressing the Fury of Achilles*, engraved by Blake, depicts the faces of the Grecian council members as mature and forcible adults.

15. Flaxman uses these terms in his essay on composition; Flaxman, op. cit., p. 152.

16. G. Cumberland, *Thoughts on Outline, Sculpture, and the System that Guided the Ancient Artists in Composing their Figures and Groups*, London, 1796, p. 16.

17. *Ibid.*, pp. 18–20, 26, the italics are Cumberland's.

18. A. W. Schlegel, 'Die Gemälde', *Atheneum*, Berlin, 1799, II, pp. 52ff. This translation is in Vaughn, op. cit., pp. 124–25. When he was shown Moritz Retzsch's *Faust* engravings in 1817 he objected to their minuteness of detail, claiming that 'every line should be significant'; Vaughn, op. cit., p. 85.



228. Tommaso Piroli after John Flaxman, *Thetis calling Briareus to the Assistance of Jupiter*, Plate 4 of *The Iliad of Homer Engraved from the Compositions of John Flaxman R.A., Sculptor* (London, 1805), engraving, 191 x 255 mm (London, Royal Academy of Arts).

the relationship of reproductive prints to their source imagery. Generally, this is addressed only in monographic publications where the discrepancies between an original work and the print 'after' the original are carefully examined. In the Flaxman literature, Robert Essick's commentary to the Dover edition of *Flaxman's Illustrations to Homer ...* (1977) contains explicit assessments of the variations introduced by Piroli.¹⁹ There are many instances in print history of opportunistic prints made posthumously or without an artist's consent; or even direct collaborations between artist and printmaker where no contracts or overseeing rights were negotiated to safeguard 'accuracy' or truth to the originals. It goes without saying that losses of quality in copy prints, or superimpositions of alien graphic styles or wild transcriptions of imagery can radically affect the reception and understanding of an artist's oeuvre. A case in point is the very curious manual of

Anatomical Studies of the Bones and Muscles, for the Use of Artists: From Drawings by the late John Flaxman, Esq., R.A., engraved by Henry Landseer ... Notes by William Robertson (London, 1833), in which the soft lithographic plates and Landseer's drawings bear no relationship whatsoever to Flaxman's reductive, economical and highly encoded method of working. The grainy images inform us about Landseer's own tactile approach to texture in anatomical illustration, but the appropriation of Flaxman's name calls for further research and debate.

The question of whether viewers of the Outlines were seeing *through* the dry or sentimental linearity and stylized forms of Piroli, Parker and Neagle to the subtlety of Flaxman's drawing, or whether their appropriations of Flaxman's concepts were what made the projects so very accessible and popular, cannot be easily answered. A study of why the Outlines were influential for so long would need to take these matters into account.

19. *Flaxman's Illustrations to Homer Drawn by John Flaxman Engraved by William Blake & Others*, edited by R. Essick and J. La Belle, New York, 1977. Bindman also comments that 'Piroli's line engraving

after the drawings for Homer, Aeschylus and Dante was notable insensitive and dry', in *John Flaxman, RA*, edited D. Bindman, London, 1979, p. 26.