



## WILLIAM BLAKE

**Born:** November 28, 1757 (London, England); died August 12, 1827 (London, England).

**Style and genre:** Eighteenth-century poet, writer, and artist whose work is considered some of the most visionary, creative, and enlightened of its kind.

William Blake was one of the most creative and visionary artistic talents of his time who brought his penetrating insight and deep beliefs to his art and writing. His fascination with mysticism and the spiritual began at the age of ten, when he allegedly experienced his first vision, seeing a tree in Peckham Rye, London, filled with angels. Blake claimed to experience regular visions and they inspired the profound spirituality inherent in his written and illustrated works.

He trained for seven years in London, with engraver James Basire, and studied at the Royal Academy. In 1782 he married Catherine Boucher, who assisted with the printing of his engravings and became a stalwart emotional and spiritual support. In 1783 he published his first collection of poems, *Poetical Sketches*, and in 1784 opened a printing shop with his brother Robert. He continued to work on illustrations and evolved a new type of etching called relief etching, which he used for illustrating most of his works. Amongst his most famous is *Songs of Innocence*, which celebrates the natural



ABOVE: An etching of Thomas Phillip's portrait of William Blake (1807).

RIGHT: *Pity* (c.1795) was inspired by a line from William Shakespeare's *Macbeth*.



world with a childlike enthusiasm; *Songs of Experience*, written at the end of the French Revolution, is much darker in tone and addresses the loss of innocence as an inevitable consequence of adult life. Blake later published both works together.

Between 1800 and 1820 Blake worked on the poem *Milton*, part of its preface became the hymn "Jerusalem," and the long and visionary prophetic book *Jerusalem, The Emanation of the Giant Albion*. At the time of his death Blake was working on a series of illustrations for Dante's *Inferno*, although unfinished, they are considered to be amongst his best work.

Blake believed strongly in racial and sexual equality and an encompassing humanity. He utterly rejected formalized religion, his comments often causing outrage, focusing instead on the power of the imagination. His work and his perception of the world was of enormous influence on writers, artists, and singers—in his own time and in the present day. **TP**

ABOVE: Blake's depiction of Isaac Newton (*Newton*; 1795) shows him as a divine figure.

### Blake on Trial

In 1803 Blake had to physically remove a drunken soldier, John Schofield, from his garden in Felpham, West Sussex. Schofield was reportedly causing a disturbance and urinating. Later Schofield alleged that Blake had uttered the words, "Damn the King. The soldiers are all slaves," and brought charges of assault and high treason against the writer. Blake was put on trial at Chichester, but was acquitted due to the lack of substantiated evidence. Following his trial he moved back to London, and later included a drawing of Schofield wearing "mind forged manacles" to illustrate a passage in his book *Jerusalem*.