



Blessing  $\frac{7}{12}$

Blair H.S. 33.

# Blessing

Blair Hughes-Stanton

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## Not on display

**Title/Description:** Blessing

**Artist/Maker:** Blair Hughes-Stanton

**Born:** 1933

**Object Type:** Graphics

**Materials:** Ink, Paper

**Technique:** Wood engraving

**Measurements:** Page: h. 325 x w. 184 mm

**Accession Number:** S.86ai

**Production Place:** England, Europe

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Blair Rowlands Hughes-Stanton (22 February 1902 – 6 June 1981) was a major figure in the English wood-engraving revival of the twentieth century. William McCance who worked with Hughes-Stanton said of him, 'He was an expressionist...but to find an expressionist who is able to take an intractable medium like wood engraving and make it a flexible instrument for his fancy and sensuous flights is unique.' [1]

Wood engraving is a printmaking technique, in which an artist works an image into a block of wood. Functionally a variety of woodcut, it uses relief printing, where the artist applies ink to the face of the block and prints using relatively low pressure. Hughes-Stanton's wood engravings have only been known to a narrow public, largely because the majority appeared in private press books of limited circulation. Similarly, the few dozen of his personal independent engravings were printed in small editions.

Hughes-Stanton was taught by Leon Underwood at Byam Shaw School of Art. Underwood's influence on him and several of his contemporaries was to be considerable. In 1921 Hughes-Stanton was among the first students (that also included Henry Moore) at the Leon Underwood School of Painting and Sculpture. He was also officially attending the Royal Academy Schools, along with Gertrude Hermes (his future wife). The American Marion Mitchell started the students wood-engraving. Underwood encouraged and joined his students in the new activity. His woodcuts probably inspired and influenced the students technically and emotionally.

In 1930 Hughes-Stanton started an affair with Ida Graves, poetess, reader for the Stage Society and later novelist, the same year. For the next three years, the affair would cloud his family life, and his professional relationships at the renowned Gregynog Press. However, the relationship energised an

output of work for Gregynog, and later his own and other presses, which lasted until the outbreak of the Second World War, nine years later, and which was to prove the best of his career.

In the early 1930s Robert Sainsbury was a collector of private press books and he was keen to offer Hughes-Stanton the financial and moral support to set up his own Gemini Press in 1933. Robert Sainsbury was originally a friend of Ida Graves, the artist's second wife. It was she who in fact introduced Sainsbury to Jacob Epstein, and Hughes-Stanton who introduced Robert Sainsbury to Henry Moore and to the contemporary art world in general, which allowed him to amass the amazing collection now housed at the Sainsbury Centre. [2]

This wood engraving is the first of twenty-three illustrations made by Blair Hughes-Stanton for *Epithalamion* (1934). Put together by Hughes Stanton and Ida Graves, it was designed to be the ultimate embodiment of his idea of the perfect collaboration between writer and artist. The idea was incorporated into the name of his new press, *Gemini Press*, which Hughes-Stanton set up and published *Epithalamion* under, with financial and moral support from Robert Sainsbury. The artist founded Gemini Press '...to make books in which there is a real fusion of between contemporary writer and artist, and where possible a definite collaboration of from the start, so that the book is integral and not a decorated or illustrated vehicle of text.' [3]

Some of the later engravings however are more in the style of work the artist did in 1934, or precursors of that work. The couple moved to Essex and had a son. The big Columbian press that Robert Sainsbury had bought for Hughes-Stanton was installed in the barn there. The printing of *Epithalamion* was completed in 1934. Only half of the 50 specials, and 175 of 300 ordinary copies, were either sold (by booksellers) or given as gifts or review copies. Notable among the direct purchasers of the specials were Alan and Robert Sainsbury (both valued friends and patrons) and others including HRH (George V) and the British Museum. Jacob Epstein was among several artists who bought ordinary copies.

*Epithalamion*, meaning nuptial song or poem in praise of the bride and groom, is a sequence of sexual imagery and symbolism, a celebration of love, consummation, and conception. However, marriage was out of the question for the artist and poet, even though Gertrude Hermes had divorced Hughes-Stanton, because Ida's marriage to Herbert Marks could not be dissolved without his ruin.

Entitled *Blessing*, this print illustrated Stanza XXIII:

'Chime out you bells of bright recurring flowers  
with motive clappers open to the winds,  
and emulate the frail recording stars  
that echo to this anniversary  
of crowning bridal hours.

The hills bestow the shady robes of peace  
to sheathe the limbs of interceding lovers,  
the seas declare their inward liberation,

and gird the habitation of heir hearts.

The roving moon grants them the full increase,  
and by her beam discovers  
the plangent tides of love-devising sleep.

Herald the sun who sits upon the throne  
motioning bold planets with his lofty hands  
to some resolved conclusion not his own,  
who by love's virtue covers  
the womb of sentient worlds with rigid light,  
he renders his beloved alchemies  
that fuse the rising blood in transmutation  
within the swift concession of his endless might.

Then all acclaim the sum of love's renown  
garland the Bridegroom and his chosen Bride,  
and praise the small irrevocable crown.'

Inspired as he was by D.H. Lawrence's views on death and by his death itself, Hughes-Stanton was even more impressed by his utterances on morality and life. The artist was permanently affected by Lawrence's belief in the vital importance and indeed rightness of responding to one's basic animal instincts, rather than any superficial, taught morality, and by his new and frighteningly frank, if ultimately unresolved, examination of relations between the sexes. Hughes-Stanton's approach to his work was always unashamedly personal rather than attempting to be completely objective. As a result, the engravings carry a highly emotional charge. [4]

Katharine Malcolm, June 2023

[1] Penelope Hughes-Stanton, *The Wood-Engravings of Blair Hughes-Stanton* (Private Libraries Association, 1991), ix

[2] Hughes-Stanton, p.66

[3] Hughes-Stanton, p. 37

[4] Hughes-Stanton, p. 35

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