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ARTH 226 Paper Prompt #1 (Science)

The Conception of Man: Understanding William Blake and Jan Van Rymsdyk's Art Through Their Approach to Science

Introduction

A critical question that the Enlightenment sought to answer was the definition of personhood. With the emergence of medical science, a new perspective of considering the human body was introduced. The effect of this on art, as well as artists, is significant. In this paper, we consider "Elohim Creating Adam" (1785-1790) by William Blake (1757-1827) and "The Anatomy of the Human Gravid Uterus" (1774) by Jan Van Rymsdyk (c.1730-c.1790). Blake and Rymsdyk present two distinct stories of human birth; by investigating the interactions both artists have with science, we can explain their vastly different conceptions of man.

Man of Flesh

In "The Anatomy of the Human Gravid Uterus", Rymsdyk faithfully records the results of William Hunter's dissection of pregnant women in over 30 illustrations. In this particular plate, Rymsdyk presents us with a frontal view of an exposed fetus nested in a womb, a static snapshot of one part of man's reproductive cycle. Such an illustration, in Hunter's words, "preserve a very perfect likeness of such subjects as we but seldom can meet with or cannot well preserve in a natural state."[1]

It is clear to us that this image is intended for scientific observation: the subject sits squarely in the center of the pictorial plane, and Rymsdyk has left out anything that does not

[1] William Hunter, *Two Introductory Lectures, Delivered by Dr. William Hunter, to His Last Course of Anatomical Lectures, at His Theatre in Windmill-Street*, 1784.

enhance our understanding of the human gravid uterus – the background or the rest of the mother's body. Indeed, there is barely a woman depicted here: we see only her womb, and her dismembered thighs. We can see into her, yet the image tells us nothing about the mother's personhood. There is no sense of identity in this image, even the face of the fetus is turned away and concealed from the beholder. Rymsdyk renders us the visceral textures of the different anatomical parts of the womb, making them distinct and identifiable to students of anatomy: the papery thin folds on the membrane surrounding the fetus, the wetness of the umbilical cord, the stretchiness and stickiness of the flesh lining that is folded away to expose the womb.

But for a scientific observational piece, the intricacy in this work reveals an unusual artistic sensibility. Although the subject matter is grotesque, there is a certain beauty captured in the attention to lighting, depth and texture. Rymsdyk's careful attention to the shadows created across the fetus, the creases of the skin, the puckering of the fetus' ear and the folding of its fingers, suggest a pride in his work as one beyond a simple anatomical illustration.

This is certainly true of how Rymsdyk views himself. In Museum Britannicum[2], Rymsdyk acknowledges his work as a draftsman ("Designer"), which was deemed as inferior to the intellectually elevated work of a "Painter".[3] However, he still sees himself as a "Painter", in spite of his failure to gain recognition as a portraitist.[4] To earn a living, Rymsdyk was forced to be an anatomical illustrator, which he was very skilled at. This was facilitated by the forces of his time, where the scientific innovation of print had created a demand for illustrations. A new scientific class had also replaced old systems of patronage: scientists often hired illustrators

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[2] Museum Britannicum (1778) was a book of illustrations of artefacts from the British Museum, done by Rymsdyk with his son, Andreas van Rymsdyk.

[3] The full quote is: "I flatter myself that I have been very useful as a Designer, and Sacrificed my Talents to a good Purpose, more so than any Painter of my Profession in this Kingdom."

[4] Harry Mount, "Van Rymsdyk and the Nature-Menders: An Early Victim of the Two Cultures Divide," *Journal for Eighteenth-Century Studies* 29, no. 1 (March 2006): 79–96, https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1754-0208.2006.tb00636.x.

to make records of their work.[5] It is in this context of scientific encroachment on the realm of arts that a character like Rymsdyk, who is situated between both spheres, can emerge. Rymsdyk despises his work, he calls himself "a Man that has been ill used and Betrayed"[6], and blames a "Doctor Ibis", who is undoubtedly William Hunter, who did not give credit to Rymsdyk in "The Anatomy of the Human Gravid Uterus".

Despite their personal conflict, the two men shared the perspective that art should accurately represent observations of nature. This is part of a greater trend in the scientific thought of the time, where natural philosophers endeavored carried out scrutinized nature closely and hired illustrators to create meticulous records of these observations.[7] As the Professor of Anatomy at the Royal Academy, Hunter's empirical approach, where he called upon students to represent objects as they are seen, "blemishes and all", was in direct conflict with the idealization and aestheticizing of nature that Joshua Reynolds espoused.[8] Rymsdyk criticizes the Royal Academicians for being "Nature Menders", who paint from a distance that only represents the effect of nature, or as he drily puts it, "the Distance for an Artist to get a good deal of Money, and use much Art, but shew little of Nature."[9] Whereas Reynolds sees the intellectual role of an artist as one of interpreting a grand idea from nature, and attention to minutiae as simple amusement or trickery, Rymsdyk takes on an empirical approach, lauding the close imitation of nature as the best way of appreciating it.[10] Chardin's The Ray (Fig. 1)

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[5] Amy Ione, "Art and Anatomy: Critics and Hired Hands," in *Art and the Brain* (Brill, 2016), 141–52, https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004322998.
[6] Jan van Rymsdyk, "Conclusion," in *Museum Britannicum, Being an Exhibition of a Great Variety of Antiquities and Natural Curiosities, Belonging to That Noble and Magnificent Cabinet, the British Museum. Illustrated with Curious Prints, Engraved after the Original Designs, from Nature, Other Objects; and Wit Distinct Explanations of Each Figure, by John and Andrew van Rymsdyk, Pictors.* (London, 1778).
[7] Mount, "Van Rymsdyk and the Nature-Menders."
[8] Amy Ione, "Art, Anatomy, and the Hunter Brothers," in *Art and the Brain* (Brill, 2016), 119–40, https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004322998.
[9] Jan van Rymsdyk, "Preface," in *Museum Britannicum.*
[10] Mount, "Van Rymsdyk and the Nature-Menders."

comes to mind as a painting of grisly guts, but is celebrated by the Academy for its effect rather than accuracy. The ray's exposed organs, while vibrantly painted, lack the rich detail that Rymsdyk gives us in his illustrations. Thus, Rymsdyk was an outsider to the art theoretical tradition that dominated his time, which could explain his lack of success as a portraitist.[11] The scientific obsession with accuracy can be seen clearly in another of Rymsdyk's anatomical pieces for Hunter (Fig. 2). The shadow that is cast on the fetus' head by light passing through a windowpane is included in the illustration, although it serves no educational purpose.[12] Such an inclusion reminds the beholder that these illustrations are factual renderings of real specimens, rather than an aestheticized image that has passed through the imagination of the artist. We thus see how Rymsdyk's interactions with science informs his conception of man as a material one.

Man of Spirit

On the other hand, Blake's "Elohim Creating Adam", a retelling of the Biblical creation story, presents a different view of the birth of man. While it too depicts a physical birth, we see nothing of the flesh and guts that Rymsdyk offers. Instead, Blake gives us more dramatic flair, painting us an imaginative scene of the moment of mankind's creation (in his opinion), where Elohim (God) is pushing a splayed-out Adam into the earth following the Biblical fall. The figure of Elohim, with ornately patterned wings, eclipses the sun. The expressions of Elohim and Adam induces despair and terror, and the dark tones of color with a reddish undertone hints at a sinister violence. Man's fall has torn him from the spiritual realm and made him mortal, and his fleshly

[11] Mount.
[12] Martin Kemp, "Style and Non-Style in Anatomical Illustration: From Renaissance Humanism to Henry Gray," *Journal of Anatomy* 216, no. 2 (February 2010): 192–208, https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1469-7580.2009.01181.x.

body is now a source of suffering.[13] The human body is seen as a prison[14] – Blake's Adam is crucified upon the earth, his legs bound by a serpent. There is no science in Blake's view of man, rather, the materialism of science is seen as a restraint upon man.

Blake's creation scene has echoes of Michelangelo's "The Creation of Adam" (Fig. 3). This artistic reproduction brings to mind Seneca's analogy of childbirth: that the "resemblance between imitated and imitator is akin to that of father and son, [where] parentage is subtly perceptible because similarity and difference mingle in the offspring."[15] Michelangelo was one of Blake's favorite masters, and his influence shows – the muscular bodies of Adam and Elohim, the out-stretched arms of the characters, and the relative simplicity of the background are features common to Michelangelo's work.[16] But Blake's creation scene is darker and puts God and man in conflict with one another. Where Michelangelo's God and Adam reach out towards one another, Blake's Elohim smashes Adam into the ground.

Blake's work reflects his sentiments towards the Enlightenment. Blake opposed the Reynoldsian model of abstraction and idealization, as well as the Hunterian model of natural imitation.[17] For Blake, the imagination was his guiding principle. In his words, "'All Forms are Perfect in the Poets Mind but these are not Abstracted nor Compounded from Nature but are from Imagination."[18] While Rymsdyk finds himself unsatisfied that painting has not gone far enough in its factual imitation of nature, Blake is unsatisfied for the opposite reason. For him,

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[13] Tristanne Connolly, "Graphic Bodies," in *William Blake and the Body* (Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire ; New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002), 25–72.
[14] Leslie W Tannenbaum, "Transformations of Michelangelo in William Blake's The Book of Urizen," *Colby Quarterly* 16 (1980): 33.
[15] Carolina Mangone, "Like Father, Like Son: Bernini's Filial Imitation of Michelangelo," *Art History* 37, no. 4 (September 1, 2014): 666–87, https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-8365.12109.
[16] Tannenbaum, "Transformations of Michelangelo in William Blake's The Book of Urizen."
[17] Connolly, "Graphic Bodies."
[18] Connolly.

art should not be confined to what we can see but should "exult in immortal thoughts."[19] Blake resented the "scientific" view of creation, which he blamed on the mathematician Isaac Newton, geologist James Hutton and anatomists William and John Hunter. [20] He saw them as imposing their view of the creation on the rest of the world, as if they were gods themselves.[21] Blake's derision can be further seen in his portrait of Isaac Newton (Fig. 4). In Newton's obsession with his rules and geometric models, he turns his back on the beauty of the coral reef he sits upon. The naïve simplicity of Newton's sketch is contrasted by the detail and dignity of his body, the "human form divine … which links man to God."[22] Blake's satire is clear: man's attempts to render the world material and quantifiable are futile; it is only in the intangible spiritual lineage that we can distill the essence of man.

Like Rymsdyk, Blake appreciated the close study of detail. However, unlike his contemporary, it is not out of a scientific tradition that Blake's inclination is cultivated. Blake apprenticed under John Basire, an accomplished engraver.[23] While Basire's studio comes into contact with medical publications and even prints a few anatomical illustrations, Blake was not involved.[24] Blake's love for the details is cultivated during his apprenticeship under the severe and precise style of his mentor.[25] Furthermore, his romantic imagination was ignited by the grandeur of the old Gothic churches and monuments that he encountered during this time.[26] He studied the works of the old masters, such as Raphael and Michelangelo. When he joined the

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[19] Osbert Burdett, "Apprenticeship and Marriage, 1771-1787," in *William Blake*, 2012, 11–21, http://sbiproxy.uqac.ca/login?url=http://international.scholarvox.com/book/88835836.
[20] George H. Gilpin, "William Blake and the World's Body of Science," *Studies in Romanticism* 43, no. 1 (2004): 35–56, https://doi.org/10.2307/25601658.
[21] Ione, "Art and Anatomy: Critics and Hired Hands."
[22] Tannenbaum, "Transformations of Michelangelo in William Blake's The Book of Urizen."
[23] Burdett, "Apprenticeship and Marriage, 1771-1787."
[24] Connolly, "Graphic Bodies."
[25] Burdett, "Apprenticeship and Marriage, 1771-1787."
[26] Burdett.

Royal Academy in 1779, his unique style had already been established. Blake recounts raging at his teacher George Michael Moser for reprimanding him for studying the old masters and advising him to study Le Brun and Rubens instead.[27] While Rymsdyk saw the details as the end goal in the artistic imitation of nature, Blake spoke of a "language of art"[28] that could only be learnt through the study of detail and executed by the inventive imagination.

A common thread running through Blake's work is the spirituality of man, that he possesses a creative, imaginative component that science fails to observe, and that science as an intellectual movement has erased. We see that Blake's spiritual (sometimes mystical) conception of man comes into conflict with the material conception espoused by the more scientifically-inclined. For this reason, Blake was an outsider to the Enlightenment ideals of the artistic tradition helmed by Reynolds, even though he was a member of the Academy.

Contemporaries in Conflict

Although it is unknown if Blake and Rymsdyk knew each other, it is certain that they brushed shoulders with many of the same characters. Blake was a neighbor of John Hunter, for whom Rymsdyk did illustrations for too. William Hunter taught Anatomy to the Royal Academy (Fig. 5) in the same time period that Blake was attending as a student. The scene that Zoffany could be interpreted as one of unity: art and science co-existing and flourishing in the same space, a topic of concentrated intellectual study. However, Mount reads this scene as the depiction of the "moment at which a fissure portending the final rift between the arts and the sciences was

[27] Blake writes in his annotations to Reynolds' Discourses: I was once looking over the prints from Raphael and Michelangelo in the Library of the Royal Academy. Moser came to me and said, "You should not study these old, hard, stiff and dry, unfinished works of art. Stay a little and I will show you what you ought to study." He then went and took down Le Brun and Rubens' galleries. How did I secretly rage! I also spoke my mind! I said to Moser, "These things that you call finished are not even begun: how then can they be finished? The man who does not know the beginning cannot know the end of art."

[28] Burdett, "Apprenticeship and Marriage, 1771-1787."

opening up."[29] Blake's disdain for the scientific obsession of his time is representative of a new cohort of artists who questioned the principles of the Enlightenment[30], a prelude to the Romanticism movement that would soon emerge.

Blake is disgusted and appalled by the Hunters' work. He finds it ironic that for the Hunters to articulate and understand 'life', they have to make observations from death and work obsessively with it.[31] He engages directly with the images of Rymsdyk's articulation of Hunter's vision in "The Anatomy of the Human Gravid Uterus" with Plate 15 in "First Book of Urizen" (Fig. 6). In this image, Blake retells the creation of Eve by applying a grotesque Hunterian view of pregnancy and birth. The character Los 'gives birth' to the first female from his mind and Blake's accompanying text adopts graphic description and language echoing the Hunters' scientific observations in obstetrics. We can see in Blake's imagining of childbirth that the large globular mass that contains the "child" is much like the roundness of a pregnant womb, a shape familiar to us from Hunter's work. The detail in the veins and tendrils attaching the mass to Los is reminiscent of the "uterine veins" described by the Hunters.[32] Blake's contempt for such a conception is punctuated by his name for this monstrous child – "Pity".

Rymsdyk and Blake are both victims of an authoritarian Reynoldsian regime of art production. Reynold's model of imitation and idealization became the mode of the day with the foundation of the Royal Academy in 1768.[33] The Academy became a platform for Reynolds to not only propagate but enforce this school of thought. Even an eminent character like William Hogarth became the subject of ridicule after publishing his Analysis of Beauty (1753).

[29] Mount, "Van Rymsdyk and the Nature-Menders."
[30] Ione, "Art and Anatomy: Critics and Hired Hands."
[31] Gilpin, "William Blake and the World's Body of Science."
[32] Gilpin.
[33] Mount, "Van Rymsdyk and the Nature-Menders."

Rymsdyk aspired to join the Royal Academy but was never successful, revealing a tension between him looking down on their method as inferior and his bitterness[34] over his exclusion from the elite society of professional painters. In a similar vein, Blake had a negative experience at the Royal Academy, bristling under Reynolds' critique of his work.[35] Blake's opposition to the Reynoldsian model is further elaborated in his annotations of Reynold's Discourses. He was seen by his contemporaries as a madman and only achieved fame and recognition after his death.

However, to conflate Rymsdyk and Blake into the same category of Royal Academy outsider would be to ignore the vast differences between these two characters. We could speculate that Blake would see Rymsdyk as an inferior, who, while sharing in his love for the minutiae, fails to surpass that, and is someone entirely devoid of imagination. Rymsdyk may similarly admire Blake for his natural detail, but balk at how he has infused his imagination throughout the work.

Conclusion

It is a sad irony that the same scientific moment that contributed to the transformation and emergence of anti-Academy characters like Rymsdyk and Blake also ensured their lack of success and artistic recognition in their time. We return to the image of the conception of man: Rymsdyk's material, while Blake's is spiritual. By considering the approach both figures take towards science, we can understand how much Rymsdyk and Blake diverge from the prevailing Enlightenment opinion, and from each other.

[34] In Museum Britannicum, Rymsdyk laments: How many people have you not Ruined and dishonoured by refusing to accept of their Performances? Which were better than the best of Yours – if you discouraged those that are doomed by the wisdom of God to be Excellent Artists, and will encourage them that were never designed to be such; do you not hinder the one from becoming great; and will not the other disappoint his Encouragers; and become a dishonor to himself and his profession?

[35] Connolly, "Graphic Bodies."

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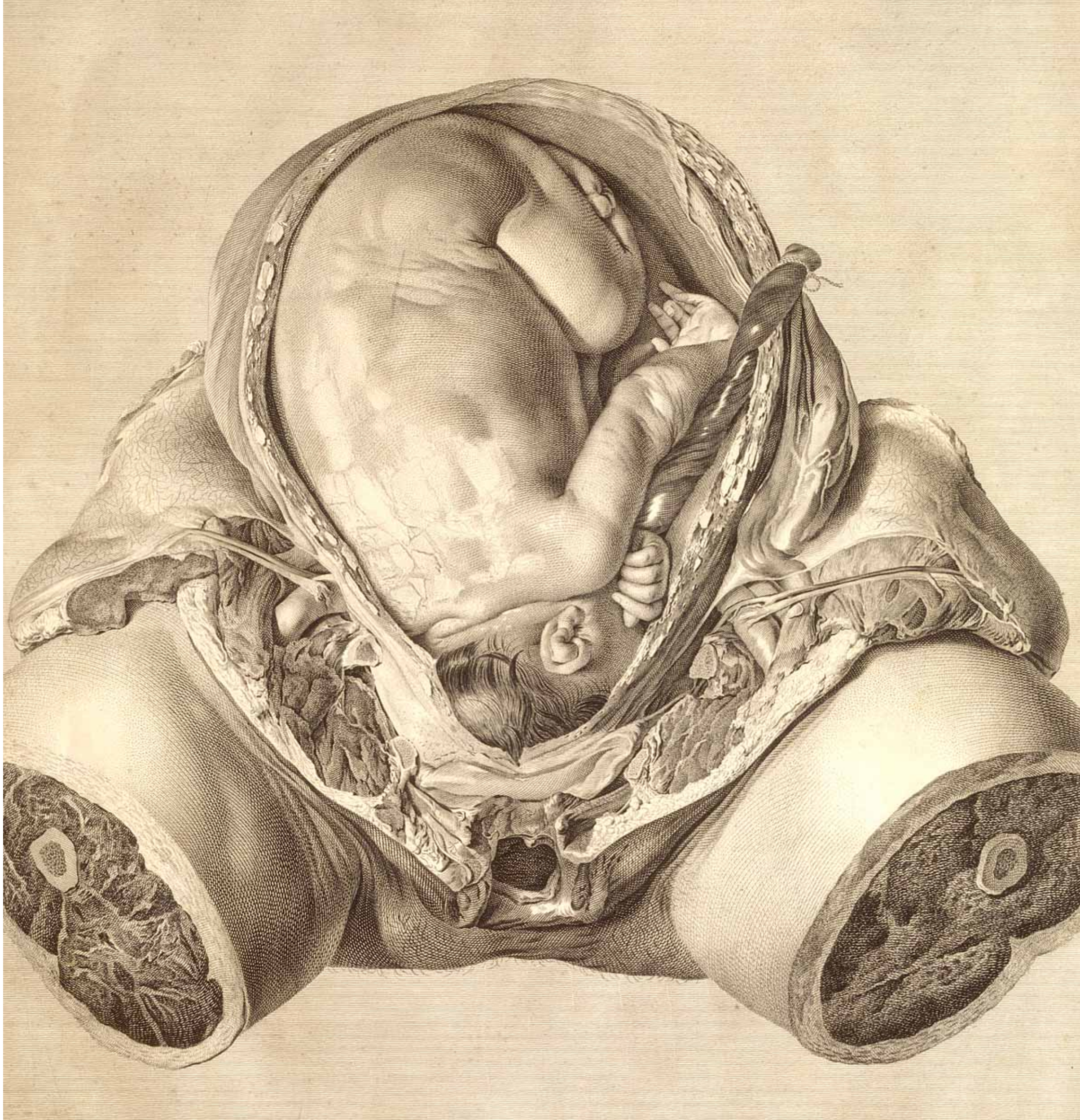
Tannenbaum, Leslie W. “Transformations of Michelangelo in William Blake’s The Book of Urizen.” *Colby Quarterly* 16 (1980): 33.

Appendix: Images

Comparison Images



Rysmdyk, Jan van. *The Anatomy of the Human Gravid Uterus*. 1774. Illustration by Jan van Rysmdyk; Engraving by Robert Strange; under the direction of the anatomist William Hunter.

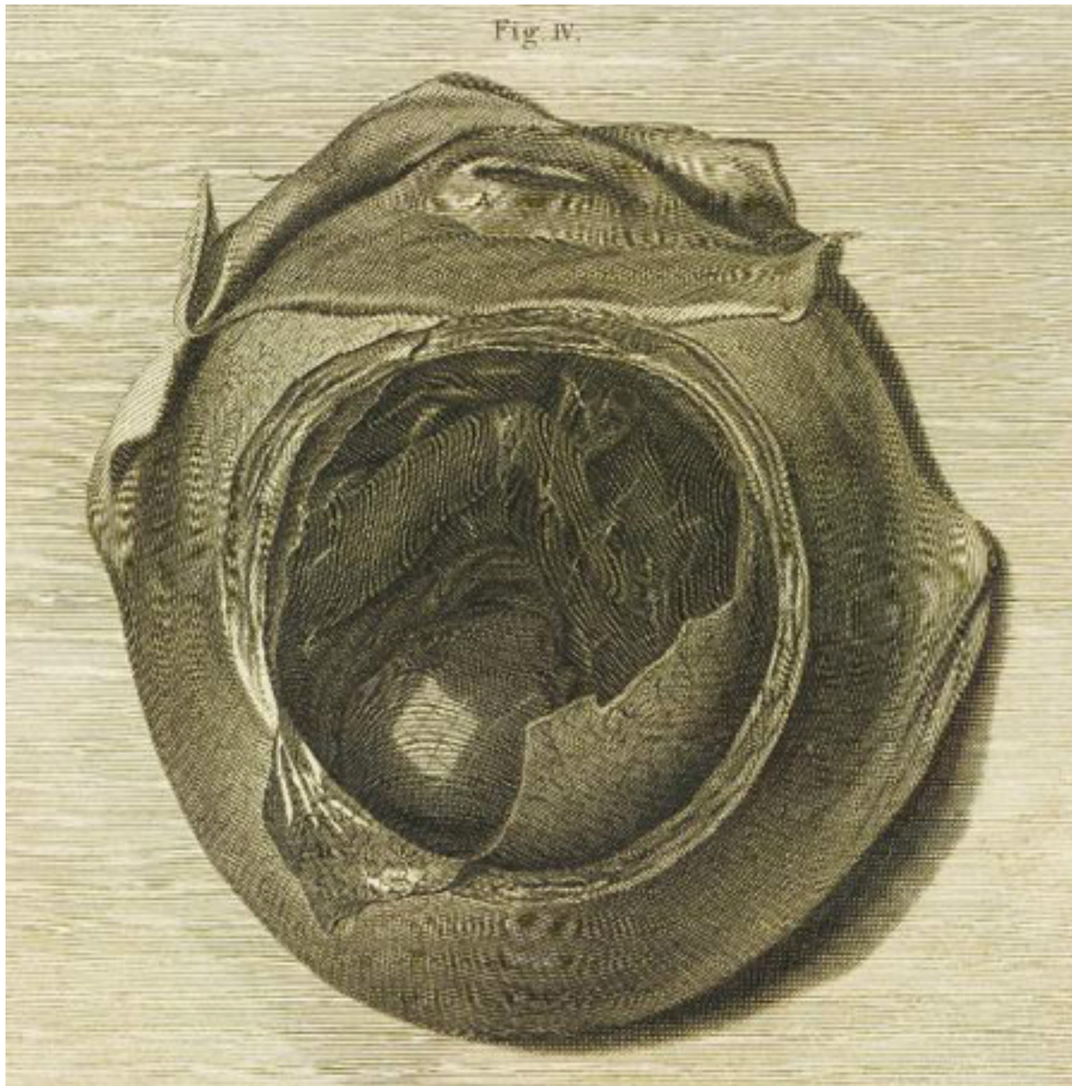
Blake, William. *Elohim Creating Adam*. 1795-1805. Color print, ink and watercolor on paper.

<u>Supporting Images</u>

Figure 1

Chardin, Jean-Baptiste Simeon. *The Ray*. 1728. Oil on canvas.

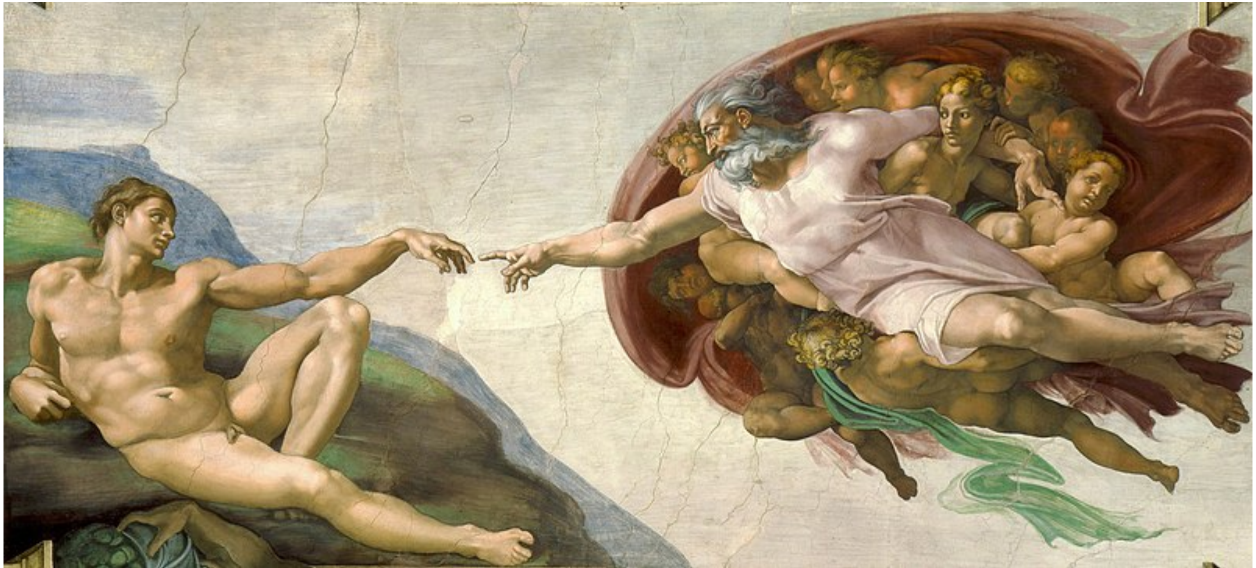
Figure 2



Rysmdyk, Jan van. *Fetus and Membranes from The Anatomy of the Human Gravid Uterus*. 1774.

Illustration by Jan van Rysmdyk; Engraving by Robert Strange.

Figure 3



Michelangelo. *The Creation of Adam.* 1511. Fresco.

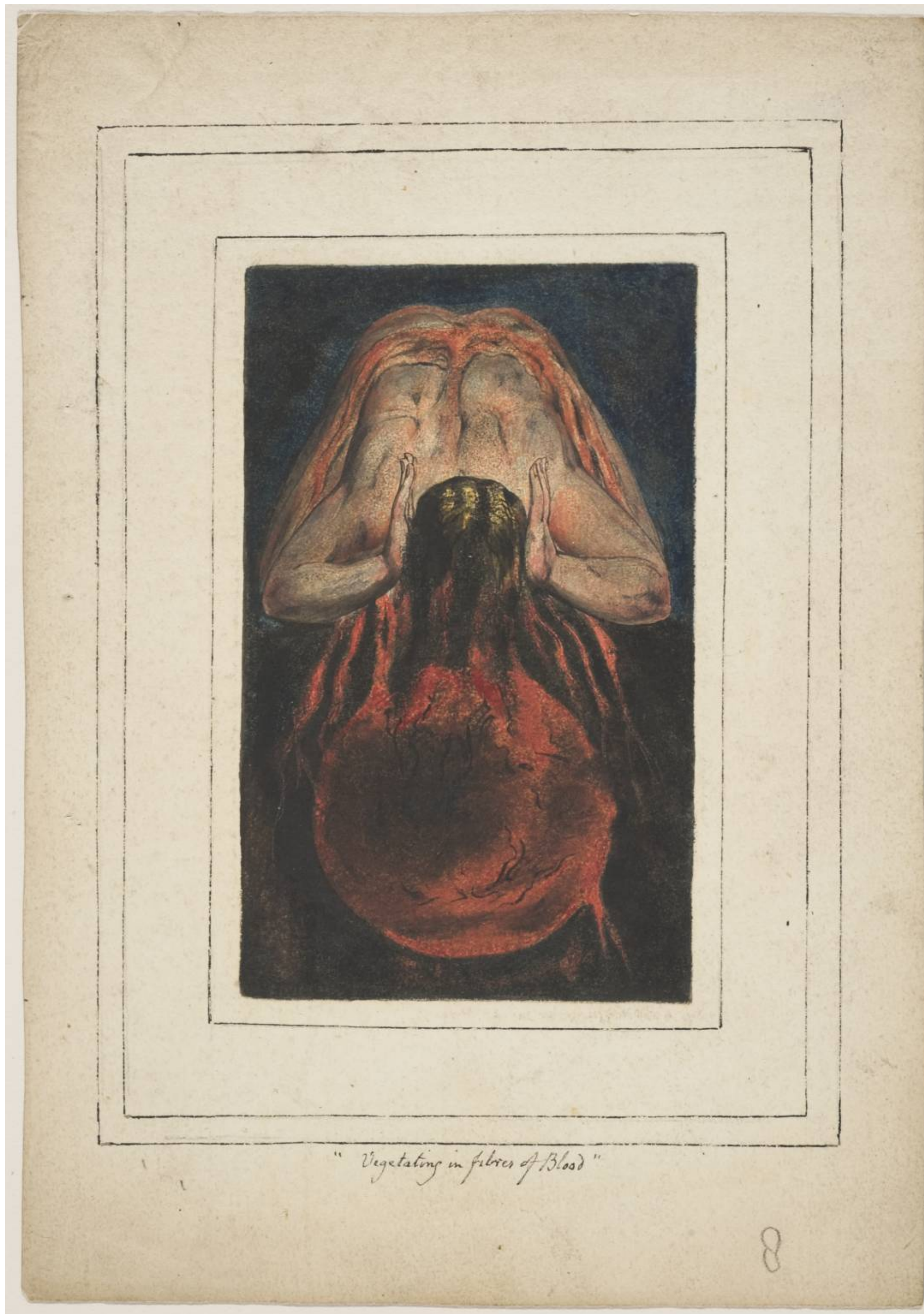
Figure 4

Blake, William. *Newton*. 1795-1805. Color print, ink and watercolor on paper.

Figure 5

Zoffany, John Joseph. *The Academicians of the Royal Academy.* 1771-1772. Oil on canvas.

Figure 6



Blake, William. *First Book of Urizen Plate 15: "Vegetating in fibres of Blood"*. 1796. Etching with paint, watercolor and ink on paper.