

# The Humble Servant:

Ceramic art inspired by  
William Blake and Swedenborg

DIANE EAGLES | 2017

Opening 19 Oct 2017  
| exhibition runs 18 Oct - 30 Nov 2017 | 9.30 am-5.00 pm Mon - Fri

Organized in conjunction with the Bloomsbury Festival





Diane Eagles. Photograph by Malcolm Smith

THE HUMBLE SERVANT | DIANE EAGLES  
Ceramic art inspired by William Blake and Swedenborg

THE HUMBLE SERVANT is an exhibition of 4 hand-built ceramic pieces inspired by the engravings of William Blake for a pattern book of Josiah Wedgwood's queensware tableware in 1817. Adorned with quotations from Swedenborg's writings, and echoing the style of Blake's hand-coloured plates from his Lambeth poems, the ceramics replicate creamware of the period, with hand-applied coloured lead glaze and transfer printing.

The pieces recreate some of the items from the series of ceramic designs for Josiah Wedgwood etched by William Blake for the 1817 catalogue of queensware tableware. The designs originate from 1815, at a time when Blake's financial and public fortunes were at a low ebb. It is likely that John Flaxman, one of the most significant artists employed by Wedgwood (and a founding member of the Swedenborg Society too), was the link for the improbable etching commission. The works are in stark contrast to the visionary imagery Blake is famous for, perhaps indicating his desperate circumstances at the time, and one of the brief letters to Wedgwood shows Blake signing himself 'humble servant'.

Rather than the Wedgwood etchings being seen as a humiliating and servile act of a forgotten man, the ideas of domestic wares, of service to others, of the giving and taking in of actual and spiritual nourishment, will result in a fitting memorial to Blake, Swedenborg and Flaxman.

To accompany the exhibition this guide includes a brief biography of Diane, information on exhibition opening times and a Q&A with the artist.

## Q&A WITH DIANE EAGLES

### *Where did the idea for the project come from?*

A few years ago whilst doing some online research about William Blake, I came across an image of two of Blake's engravings which he prepared for Wedgwood, alongside an accompanying letter. The images are very unlike Blake works, and yet I think they hold a sliver of his 'style', adding vitality to these static objects (Fig. 1). As a ceramic artist I immediately wanted to do something linked to the images, but at the time, I wasn't sure what form this would take.



1 Two engravings and a letter to Wedgwood from William Blake



2 An example of 18th-century motto ware

### *When did the opportunity arise to work on the idea?*

I used to work near the Swedenborg Society and I knew about their work and promotion of the arts linked to Swedenborg's writings, although predominantly through film. I called in one day and saw the poster for *Wayside Pulpits* curated by artist Bridget Smith. I'd known for a long time about William Blake's link with Swedenborg, and it was then that I had the idea of combining the words of Swedenborg with the Blake ceramic engravings. I had a meeting with Stephen McNeilly, Executive Director, and he mentioned that Wedgwood was a Swedenborg follower

and just recently he'd been thinking about how to represent this with ceramics in the bookshop. It felt providential.

### *How did you go about making the work?*

I knew something of Swedenborg's writing but I had to look for short quotes, similar to the religious motto ware of the period (Fig. 2). I also wanted to put something of Blake's better-known creative work into the designs. In particular I was drawn to Blake's *Songs of Innocence and of Experience*. These inspired the ceramics' decorative elements. (Figs. 3-6) I did further research at the V & A looking at Wedgwood queensware and also examined Blake's 18 original Wedgwood engravings in the British Museum Print Library, they're surprisingly small, and very intense. (Figs. 7-10)

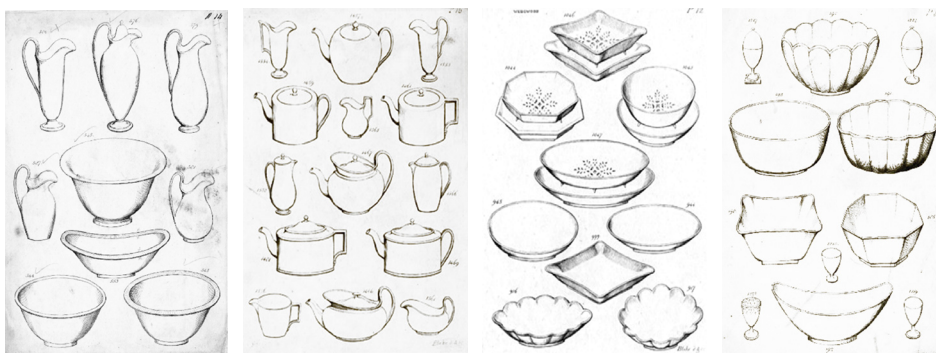


3-6 Blake's illustrated poems from *Songs of Innocence and of Experience*

### *It seems like the work took a long time?*

Yes, the research around replicating 18th-century earthenware of the period took quite a lot of time. I used a white earthenware clay and casting slip and a low-fire glaze to simulate creamware formed in the

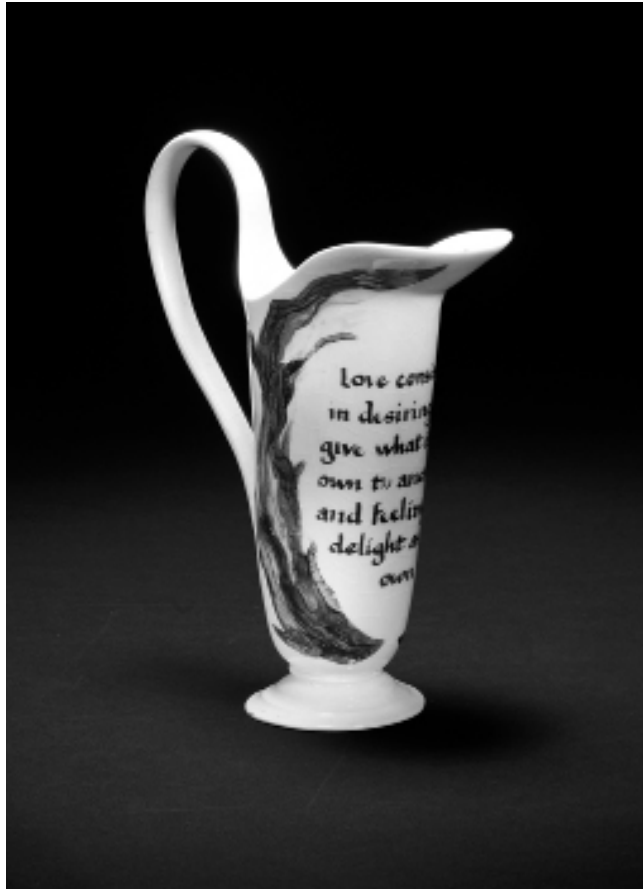
style of Wedgwood queensware. I then made plaster moulds and tried to emulate Blake's calligraphic style for the transfer lettering. In a matter of weeks I also had to learn about overglaze painting with powdered enamels for the motto style, a very tricky process and slow, with each stage requiring a different firing. Most of the works were fired four to five times or more.



7-10 A sample of Blake's engravings for Wedgwood

*There's a lot about William Blake in the work.*

Yes, I wanted my work to stay close to Blake's home studio style of printing and hand colouring. I was also touched by the link to Wedgwood from Blake's friend John Flaxman, who was one of the principal designers for Wedgwood. It seems possible that Flaxman supported Blake to get the engraving work, in response to Blake's financial need. It seemed to me a particularly Swedenborgian gesture from Flaxman and Wedgwood to give friendship and support in this way, and the letter from Blake to Wedgwood signing himself, 'your humble servant', seems to acknowledge his gratitude to them.



Diane Eagles. Photograph by Malcolm Smith

## THANKS TO:

Stephen McNeilly and The Swedenborg Society for hosting the exhibition  
The British Museum Print Library for access to the Blake engravings  
Malcolm Smith for the Photography. [www.studiounderthestairs.org.uk](http://www.studiounderthestairs.org.uk)

DIANE EAGLES is a London-based ceramic artist. Diane has exhibited work at The Wellcome Collection, Kingston Guildhall & Morley College, Draper Hall, Dulwich Artists' Open House, Morley Gallery, Waterloo, and the Contemporary Crafts & Design Fair, Chelsea. Her work has also featured on the cover of *The International Journal of Art Psychotherapy*. She is also a founding member of the ceramic artist's collective, The Associated Clay Workers Union (ACWU). To view examples of Diane's work visit her website at [www.edensclay.co.uk](http://www.edensclay.co.uk)

For sales and enquiries please contact Diane at [dianeeagles@yahoo.co.uk](mailto:dianeeagles@yahoo.co.uk)



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The Swedenborg Society  
Swedenborg House  
20/21 Bloomsbury Way  
London  
WC1A 2TH  
[info@swedenborg.org.uk](mailto:info@swedenborg.org.uk)  
+44 (020) 7405 7986  
[www.swedenborg.org.uk](http://www.swedenborg.org.uk)  
Charity registration number: 209172

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