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# Love's Emancipation

Blair Hughes-Stanton

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**Not on display**

**Title/Description:** Love's Emancipation

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

**Born:** 1933

**Object Type:** Graphics

**Materials:** Ink, Paper

**Technique:** Wood engraving

**Measurements:** Page: h. 325 x w. 183 mm

**Accession Number:** S.86g

**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 *Love's Emancipation*, this print illustrated Stanza VIII:

'So is she dispossessed of liberty,  
having the mindless freedom of my breast,  
that, captive, loves to constancy,  
wherewith to raise an image of my name  
and fashion me in close idolatry.

From my undying sun espouse a flam,  
a part of that bright total of my blood  
convert, and gender me again.

When the night's fetters cleave upon her thighs,  
and innocence is wrought invisible,  
when shackles bind and govern her uprisings,  
and webs suspend her dreams between our eyes,  
the shall she gain forgotten liberty  
of bondage indivisible,  
release her days from blind captivity,  
and live a captive still;  
within my breast she lies idolatrous  
prisoner to that lost twilight of the world  
compounded of my quick unbounded will.

Now love's emancipation is set down,  
and I upon the limbs of my beloved  
tender 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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