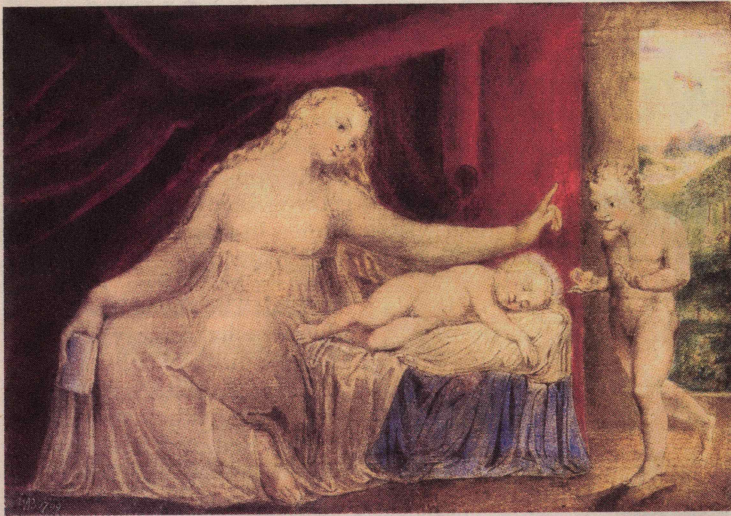


VISUAL ARTS



"The Virgin Hushing the Young John the Baptist" (1799), a rare William Blake painting on display at the gallery.

CHARLES DESMARAIS *Art*

Blake's works at S.F. gallery speak to today

In a very real sense, there is no such thing as "contemporary" art. Once something is made, it is part of history, whether a thousand years have passed or just a day.

They require closer attention than a big-screen movie epic, but there may be no works more powerfully current in their impact, more chillingly foreboding than William Blake's "Illustrations of the Book of Job." He published his engravings for the biblical story in 1826, drawing the imagery from watercolors he painted in 1805-06.

Blake gouged lines onto copper plates with steel burins — simple chisels no different from the ones Albrecht Dürer used three centuries earlier — then inked the plates and printed the images on paper. No fancy tools, no sophisticated technology. Just 315 copies, all burning with a timeless intensity.

John Windle has been a respected antiquarian bookseller in San Francisco for 40 years. Last month, he opened the William Blake Gallery as an adjunct to his shop in the famous 49 Geary St. art building. He claims it is the only such gallery in the world, with the largest collection anywhere of works for sale by the incomparable British mystic poet-artist.

The shop is charmingly stuffy, quietly muffled by walls packed with fine old books. When I visited, the bookstore had to be closed so that the single attendant could open the gallery: The owner was in Europe. Don't let the closeness of the space and the donnish air put you



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off. The first exhibition, "Al-ways in Paradise: A William Blake Chrestomathy," is transporting.

In addition to the complete "Job" — an impeccably fresh set of the nearly 200-year-old works from the first printing — there are two even rarer paintings, a broken set of Blake's "Illustrations to Dante's Inferno" and other choice

items. Alongside are oddities like his last engraving — a calling card for a friend — and commercial projects, all accompanied by impeccable scholarly annotation.

Ridiculed by many, ignored by most during his lifetime, Blake cut an independent trail that would be hard enough to follow even in our own more liberal time. "What is grand is

necessarily obscure to weak men," he wrote in a famous letter. "That which can be made explicit to the idiot is not worth my care."

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John Windle Antiquarian Bookseller photos