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R E V I E W

Blake e la sua epoca. Viaggi nel tempo del sogno [Blake and His Age. Journeys in the Time of Dreams]. Curated by Alice Insley.¹ La Reggia di Venaria, Turin, 31 October 2024–2 February 2025.

Blake e la sua epoca. Viaggi nel tempo del sogno. Ed. Alice Insley. Turin: Hopefulmonster, 2024.

Reviewed by Luisa Calè

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¹ WALKING toward La Venaria Reale, the visitor was greeted by a poster featuring a Blake watercolor, *Oberon, Titania, and Puck with Fairies Dancing*, which embodied the theme of the exhibition—journeys in the time of dreams—set against the royal seat looming at the end of the street. Blake’s dreams took on a peculiar inflection in the grandiose architectural framing of La Venaria Reale outside Turin in northern Italy. This baroque palace embodies the Savoy family’s dynastic and territorial ambitions from the mid-seventeenth to the nineteenth century, lead-

1. Curator of British Art, 1730–1850, Tate Britain.

ing up to the unification of Italy, which was completed in 1870. What kinds of dreams can be shaped in such a setting is a question that raises a further counterfactual to be added to Blake's thwarted hopes to flesh out his temperas into great public works. The Tate's experiments in exploring and reinventing his counterfactuals have included magnifying some of his works as photomontages: the 2019–20 retrospective showcased a composition in which one of Blake's biblical designs had been repurposed as an altarpiece in St. James's, Piccadilly. During the same exhibition, his design of Urizen as great architect from the frontispiece for *Europe a Prophecy* was projected onto the cupola of St. Paul's, producing a numinous portent. What would European visual culture look like if Blake had had a Grand Tour or if he had taken his works on tour to exhibit abroad? What might it look like in post-Brexit Britain? Following the Fitzwilliam's imagination of Blake's German exchanges in *William Blake's Universe*,² Blake at La Reggia di Venaria was the first Italian retrospective, drawing on the Tate collection to seed his work in Italian public culture.³ This ini-

2. See my review of the Fitzwilliam exhibition in *Blake* 58.3 (winter 2024–25).

3. For context, see *The Reception of William Blake in Europe*, ed. Sibylle Erle and Morton D. Paley, 2 vols. (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2019), which includes my chapter on Blake in Italy.

tiative was part of a three-year partnership between Tate Britain and La Reggia di Venaria to exhibit British Romantic art, starting with landscape with John Constable (2022) and J. M. W. Turner (2023) and finishing with Blake. In turn, Blake's works will travel to the Museum of Fine Arts in Budapest in September 2025 in what amounts to the first exhibition of Blake originals in Hungary,⁴ and then to the National Gallery of Ireland, Dublin, in 2026.

1: Horror and Danger

- 2 The journey through the time of dreams started with feelings associated with danger and horror; stepping into a darkened blue room suggested the realm of the unconscious. The curatorial narrative explained the subjective lure of the irrational and emotional, the desire for spirituality and escape routes in the context of a “world in turmoil,” responding to the humiliation of defeat in the American

4. In 2007 an exhibition in the art nouveau Reök Palace, Szeged, Hungary, put Blake's *Comus* illustrations, represented by colored lithographs published by Bernard Quaritch in 1890, and Goya's *Caprichos* in dialogue with the twentieth-century Hungarian painter, photographer, and writer Béla Kondor (1931–72); see Ágnes Péter, “The Reception of Blake in Hungary,” *The Reception of William Blake in Europe* 2: 568.



War of Independence and the commotion produced by French and Haitian Revolutions. The introductory information panel invited visitors to look for Blake's "twisted and contorted bodies, and his treatment of anguish and torment," just as "British artists increasingly explored the power and perils of the natural world, distorting light, scale and space to stir the viewer's emotions."⁵ In addition to the wall text that situated Blake within a shared group response, the curators chose to display a statement by Samuel Palmer to convey Blake's influence: "He was energy itself, and shed around him a kindling influence; an atmosphere of life, full of the ideal."⁶

- 3 The first wall to the left featured the theme of confinement through Blake's watercolor and graphite drawing *The House of Death*, depicting the plague victims' condition of confined waiting while an emaciated, bearded, elderly figure of death hovers, holding a dart above them. It was placed next to George Romney's ink and graphite drawing of *John Howard Visiting a Lazar House*. *The House of Death* was revisited in the large color print version illustrating *Paradise Lost* book 11 on the adjacent wall; its death is a more static figure hovering over the bound of the horizon, suggesting an indeterminate wait. Next to it *The Night of Enitharmon's Joy* captured a numinous nightscape associated with melancholy, witchcraft, and vaticination, with Enitharmon holding a book open, her finger resting on pages filled with indecipherable signs, while looking at a donkey, a frog, and an owl; a cat-faced bat hovers above, a mysterious and disquieting emblem.
- 4 A Grand Tour version of danger was documented by John Hamilton Mortimer's *Landscape with Banditti*, Philippe Jacques de Loutherbourg's *Travellers Attacked by Banditti*, and Mortimer's character drawing *Banditti Going Out in the Morning*, while another wall hang focused on captivity, with Mortimer's *The Captive*, George Richmond's *Fettered Nude Reclining against a Rock*, and Nathaniel Dance's *Two Women in a Dungeon*. The theme of suffering took a different turn in James Barry's *Study for Philoctetes on the Island of Lemnos*, which is inscribed in ink in the bottom-right corner: "There will appear more Agony & ye disordered leg will be more distinctly mark'd by having it stretched out in air without any support from ye rock he sits on."
- 5 The second room dedicated to danger and peril explored the sublime violence of natural catastrophes through oil paintings representing the deluge by Jacob More (1787), Francis Danby (1840), and William Westall (1848), with de

5. Wall text, room 1.

6. Samuel Palmer to Alexander Gilchrist, 23 Aug. 1855, cited from Martin Myrone, *The Blake Book* (London: Tate Publishing, 2007) 183.

Loutherbourg's *An Avalanche in the Alps* (1803). After taking in such catastrophes, visitors looked up to make out a portent suspended from above: *The Spiritual Form of Pitt*, one of the two pictures that Blake envisioned as public works thirty meters in height "suitable to the grandeur of the nation" (E 531), appeared as an incorporeal apotheosis projected onto a flimsy veil hanging from the high ceiling against a pitch-black area of the room. As a result, the idea of "spiritual form" was remediated as a dematerialized substance that evoked the experience of a phantasmagoria.

- 6 The final room devoted to horror and danger was inflected by a wall citation from *The Book of Los*:

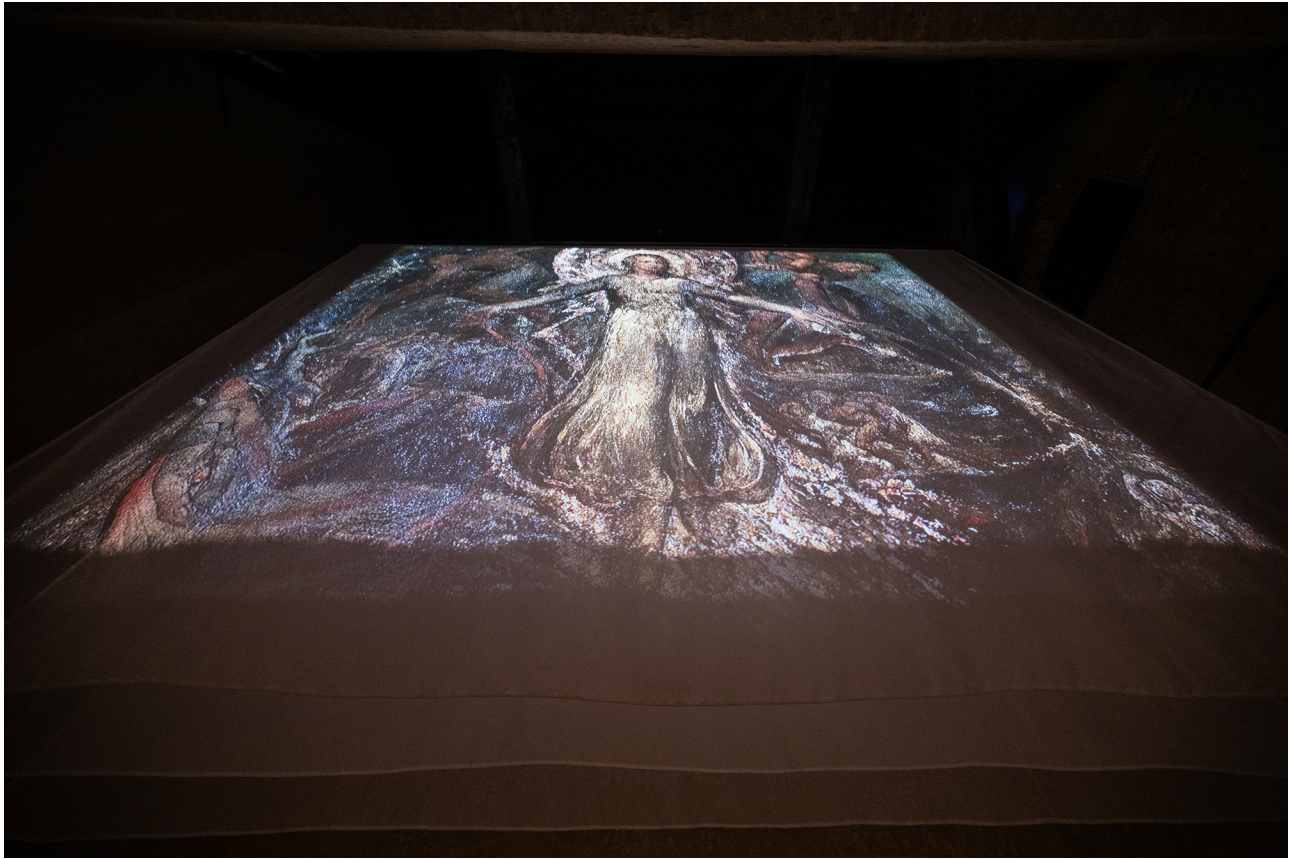
in trembling and horror they beheld him
They stood wide apart, driv'n by his hands
And his feet which the nether abyss
Stamp'd in fury and hot indignation
but no light from the fires all was
Dark [sic]

(*The Book of Los* 3.45-4.1, E 91)

Extrapolated from a passage about Los and natural catastrophes—Los's name did not appear in this excerpt, nor did the paragraph numbers in Blake's illuminated book—this quotation could be taken to inflect the reception of the surrounding pictures. On the same wall, *The Body of Abel Found by Adam and Eve*, a stunning ink, tempera, and gold on mahogany from Blake's late period, was placed next to a chalk, ink, and watercolor drawing of *The Punishment of the Thieves* (1824–27), illustrating the eighth circle of hell (Dante's *Inferno*, canto 24), and *The Blasphemer*, an ink and watercolor illustration to Leviticus 24:23, which was among the biblical inventions that Blake painted for Thomas Butts in the early 1800s. The caption noted the contrast between the vigorous body being punished and the elderly figures stoning him as a negative comment on a religion of vengeance. The room also featured watercolor shipwrecks by François Louis Thomas Francia and Alexander Cozens. Another wall displayed literary subjects—Henry Fuseli's *Lady Macbeth Seizing the Daggers*, from Shakespeare, and Samuel Colman's *The Death of Amelia* (1804?), a character struck by lightning in James Thomson's *The Seasons* (1727)—while another was taken up by the apocalyptic scene of Colman's *The Destruction of the Temple* (1830–40).

2: Fantastical Creatures

- 7 The second theme of the exhibition, "Fantastical Creatures," documented the late eighteenth-century fascination with "images of the supernatural and fantastical, the startling and monstrous": "Such outlandish creatures gave [artists'] imagination free reign [sic] while meeting the new



taste for the shocking and horrifying. In a world where enlightenment ideals and progress were increasingly questioned, the irrational and other-worldly seemed much more appealing.” Blake’s “visions” were put into conversation with “apparitions, witches and monsters in literature and folklore,” “fanciful or grotesque creatures” summoned by graphic artists to “expos[e] the vices of contemporary society.”⁷

- 8 Blake’s spectacular tempera *The Ghost of a Flea* hung at the center of a wall dedicated to the visionary heads that Blake painted for John Varley. The caption cited the anecdote about this subject appearing to Blake as a vision—“There he comes! His eager tongue whisking out of his mouth, a cup in his hand to hold blood, and covered with a scaly skin of gold and green”—then claimed that Varley “witnessed Blake’s vision.”⁸ By contrast, the catalogue more cautiously suggested that Blake made Varley believe he was painting what came to him as a visionary experience, explained

7. Wall text, room 2.

8. Allan Cunningham, *The Lives of the Most Eminent British Painters, Sculptors, and Architects*, 6 vols. (London: John Murray, 1829–33) 2: 148, cited in Alice Insley, “Blake e la sua epoca. Viaggi nel tempo del sogno,” *Blake e la sua epoca* 30.

within the wider context of the mystical and supernatural reception of Blake among the group of the so-called Ancients. The visionary heads were also documented with a sketch of *The Head of the Ghost of a Flea*, as well as John Linnell’s copy of *The Man Who Built the Pyramids* below a series of sketches by Varley.

- 9 Blake’s visionary heads were set in a supernatural context, compared to ghost scenes including *Lord William and the Ghost of His Nephew*, Susanna Duncombe’s *The Ghost Scene from “The Castle of Otranto,”* subjects from an album by Dance—*The Ghost of Mrs. Swellenberg’s Uncle; A Monster Emerging from a Cave; A Dog-Headed Monster in a Cave, a Lilliputian Figure Below*—and Mortimer’s *Three Skeletons*.
- 10 A small room juxtaposed Blake’s “Behemoth and Leviathan” from *Illustrations of the Book of Job* with sea subjects by Mortimer: *Caliban; Fish Devouring Shell Food; and A Sea Monster with Fish*. A sheet of caricature head studies by Mortimer communed with Thomas Rowlandson’s *Queen Anne’s Bounty* and *The Judge*. The theme of the room was announced by a wall citation from *Jerusalem*, presented as follows:

The Giants & the Witches & the Ghosts
 Of Albion dance with Thor & Friga.
 & the Fairies lead the Moon along
 The Valley of Cherubim
 (Jerusalem 63.13-14, E 214)

This passage resonated with the themes of the whole section dedicated to fantastical creatures, and offered thematic continuity with and commentary on the next section.

3: Enchantments

- 11 This third theme was illustrated with *Oberon, Titania, and Puck with Fairies Dancing* (c. 1786) from Shakespeare's *Midsummer Night's Dream*, hanging next to the information panel detailing the "persistence of fairies and spirits in the visual arts." Adjacent to Blake were Romney's fancy portrait of *Tom Hayley as Robin Goodfellow* (1789–92) and *Puck or Robin Goodfellow* (1792–93), a study from Sir Joshua Reynolds's painting for the Boydell Shakespeare Gallery, with Theodor von Holst's *The Fairy Lovers* underneath it signaling the erotic potential and danger of the fairy theme, "reflecting contemporary anxieties about female sexuali-

ty."⁹ The wall was dominated, however, by the large oil painting *The Shepherd's Dream*, which Fuseli painted for the Milton Gallery (1799–1800). This painting captures the dream as a moonscape dance of fairies holding hands in a circle as they do in Blake's watercolor, but in this case they are suspended in midair above a sleeping shepherd and drawn from a different source, a simile in *Paradise Lost* comparing the devils in Pandemonium to a "Pygmean race ... or faery elves" engaging in midnight revels that "some belated peasant sees, / or dreams he sees" (1: 779-86). The wall was completed by another *Midsummer Night's Dream* subject, *Ariel on a Bat's Back* by Henry Singleton. On the adjacent wall, William Etty's *The Fairy of the Fountain* activated the theme's sexual potential through the attraction of the female nude, alongside Romney's prophetic fancy portrait head of *Lady Hamilton as Cassandra* and Fuseli's *The Debutante* and *Charis Phykomené*.

- 12 The other long wall in the room extended the theme of enchantment to include Nordic elements through two large oil paintings: von Holst captured the sorceries of Walpurgis Night in *Fantasy Based on Goethe's "Faust"*; Turner's *A Sub-*

9. Wall text, room 3.



ject from *Runic Superstitions* was inspired by Norse myths. The rest of the wall was taken up by flying leaves. William Young Ottley's watercolor drawing *A Flight of Angels* was placed next to four female subjects that Blake had originally invented for *The First Book of Urizen*, *The Book of Thel*, and *Visions of the Daughters of Albion*, but subsequently printed in two copies without the accompanying text as single leaves around 1796, the first being a set of color samples for Ozias Humphry. On display were samples of the second copies, finished around 1818 with the addition of framing lines and emblematic captions. In this context, Blake's single leaves resonated with the iconography of Christian and pagan flights of fairies, angels, and witches, Enitharmon with child in midair potentially activating the folk myth of witches kidnapping children.

4: Romanticising the Past

- 13 Upon entering the room devoted to "Romanticising the Past," starkly differentiated by the choice of vibrant green walls, the viewer was confronted with a wall quotation from Blake's *Descriptive Catalogue*: "The British Antiquities are now in the Artist's hands; all his visionary contemplations, relating to his own country and its ancient glory, when it was as it again shall be, the source of learning and inspiration" (p. 40, E 542). The need to hark back to the voice of the past can be detected in "Hear the voice of the Bard!," the poem that opens *Songs of Experience* (1794), as Insley's catalogue chapter points out. Yet to document this "symbol of resistance and defiance,"¹⁰ since the illuminated books are not well represented in the Tate collection, the exhibition displayed *The Bard, from Gray* (1809?), which also showcases experimentation with tempera, a technique from the past. The wall hang enabled comparison with an earlier painting on the same theme by Benjamin West (1778). The power of landscape to articulate a literary and archaeological past was documented by a depiction of Stonehenge; a Thomas Girtin landscape subject associated with Ossian; and a Turner associated with Spenser's *Faerie Queene*, which the caption suggested "might represent the Redcrosse Knight, abandoned and weakened, but not vanquished," perhaps "an allegory of Great Britain during the Napoleonic Wars." Literature was also represented by the second and only other Blake subject in this room, an early ink and watercolor drawing of *Lear and Cordelia in Prison* (c. 1779). Palmer's watercolor *A Hilly Scene* captured a conservative retreat to the past through idyllic scenes from the Kent countryside, to which the Ancients retreated, as Insley notes. So too Edward Calvert's "The Bride" can be read as a "nostalgic journey of the soul towards salvation embodied

10. Wall text, room 4.

in rural England."¹¹ The wall caption indicated that "stories from the English past could inspire national pride, bring a sense of escapism, or convey contemporary messages."¹²

5: The Gothic

- 14 Blake's appreciation of the Gothic as living form took an unusual route. Instead of chronicling Blake's encounter with the Gothic by way of his sketches and engravings of the sepulchral monuments at Westminster Abbey during his apprenticeship to Basire, a period that was central to the exhibition *William Blake: Apprentice and Master* at the Ashmolean in 2014–15,¹³ La Venaria placed him within a range of architectural and natural contexts, drawing on the Tate collection. There was only one Blake in the first room, *A Figure Standing in a Gothic Apse, Perhaps Empress Maud* (c. 1819), placed alongside castles by Alexander Cozens, John Sell Cotman, Robert Ker Porter, and George Cuiitt, while another wall featured ruins and architectural forms by Francis Towne, Turner, Edward Hawke Locker, and Girtin. The second room was informed by a wall citation, "Gothic is Living Form ... Living Form / is Eternal Existence" (E 270), drawn from *On Virgil*. This statement foregrounded the organic elements in all exhibits, from the works embedding architecture in vegetation in the previous room to the Gothic forms produced by groupings of bodies and trees in biblical subjects painted for Butts: the watercolors *The Entombment* (c. 1805) and *Judas Betrays Him* (1803–05) and the tempera *Bathsheba at the Bath* (1799–1800), depicting 2 Samuel 11:2. The captions drew attention to the visual traditions that Blake emulated: in *The Entombment* "the narrow, elongated forms, the repetitive arrangement of draperies, and clarity of line evoke medieval sculpture"; in *Judas Betrays Him* medieval tradition could be felt in the "disposition of trees, lance and raised arms suggest[ing] an arch, evoking Gothic architecture."
- 15 A foreboding shift in mood prepared for the next step in the exhibition's continuation through a wall quotation from a letter that Blake wrote to his friend John Flaxman, the sculptor: "Terrors appear'd in the Heavens above / and in Hell beneath, & a mighty & awful change / threatened the earth."¹⁴ The exit from this section took the shape of a narrow corridor ending in a Gothic arch opening onto an enlarged, backlit image of Virgil accompanying Dante through the door of hell from Blake's watercolor illustration of *Inferno* canto 3. In other words, viewers were made to feel that they too were about to enter hell.

11. Insley 39.

12. Wall text, room 4.

13. Reviewed by Susan Matthews in *Blake* 50.1 (summer 2016).

14. Wall text: Blake to Flaxman, 12 Sept. 1800, E 707-08.



6: Satan and the Underworld

- 16 Introduced by a shift from rediscovering the past to imagining the future, “Satan and the Underworld” placed Blake’s engagement with the Satanic subject matter of Dante’s circles of hell in the context of “Biblical prophecies of the end of the world,” giving shape to “a sense of imminent apocalypse.” Next to the information panel hung the large color print *Satan Exulting over Eve* (c. 1795), then the tempera *Satan Smiting Job with Boils* (1826) and a design originally invented for plate 11 of *Urizen*, reprinted without the surrounding text but finished with the new caption “Every thing is an attempt / ‘To be Human’” around 1818, which, the exhibition caption suggested, is “open to interpretation,” being a “single leaf,” rather than part of the original illuminated book. This juxtaposition of works in different media and from different times demonstrates the persistence of the Satanic theme throughout Blake’s career, though the affect seems to change from radical sympathies to a more dystopian sense of torment. By contrast, the adjacent wall was monographic, focusing on Blake’s late watercolors for Dante’s *Commedia* through a selection of drawings illustrating *Inferno: The Inscription over the Gate* (canto 3); *The Devils with Dante and Virgil by the Side of the Pool* (canto 22); *The Wood of the Self-Murderers: The*

Harpies and the Suicides (canto 13); *The Primeval Giants Sunk in the Soil* (canto 31); and *Plutus* (canto 6). This hang followed a visual and geometrical sequence in placing the two vertically oriented drawings at the ends and the horizontal ones in between, rather than following the order of the literary text. The next wall illustrated demonic motifs by other artists, with von Holst’s *Charon* (1837) from canto 3 of Dante’s *Inferno* placed next to a painting depicting Milton’s *Pandemonium* (1840), formerly attributed to John Martin. On the wall facing Blake’s Dante, the extraordinary juxtaposition of his tempera *The Spiritual Form of Pitt* and the watercolor *Satan in His Original Glory* revealed similarities in the positioning and gesture of the arms, while John St. John Long’s *Temptation in the Wilderness* on the other side offered additional fitting commentary. So too did subjects from Milton’s *Paradise Lost*: Barry’s etching “Satan, Sin, and Death,” two rocky scenes by J. R. Cozens, and two watercolor devils by Dance, which illustrate a grotesque treatment. In the adjoining room were George Cumberland’s *Inside the Peak Cavern, Castleton, Derbyshire* (c. 1820) and five of Blake’s seven engravings from *Inferno* on the adjacent wall, as well as “The Fall of Satan” from a reprinting of *Illustrations of the Book of Job* and Edward Dayes’s *The Fall of the Rebel Angels* (1798).

William Blake: Reimagined Visions

- 17 The final room was dedicated to an installation on 138 LED panels, an immersive digital film directed by Sam Gainsborough and produced by Blinkink for the exhibition. It scaled up animations of twelve of the “most renowned works by Blake from the Tate’s Collection. ... The film brings Blake’s rich and imaginative universe to life.” The information panel related this experiment to Blake’s claims about his visions of great monuments in Asia in the *Descriptive Catalogue*, though the resulting cast of characters was perhaps closer to his visionary heads. The animations included some works in the exhibition—*Oberon, Titania, and Puck with Fairies Dancing*; *The Night of Enitharmon’s Joy*; *Satan in His Original Glory*; *The Ghost of a Flea*—integrated with subjects not included: the large color prints *Newton*, *Nebuchadnezzar*, and *The Good and Evil Angels*; *Cerberus* and the griffin featured in *Beatrice Addressing Dante from the Car* from Dante’s *Commedia*; and *The River of Life* (c. 1805) from Revelation 22:1-2.¹⁵ While in the advertisement produced for the 2019–20 retrospective, Gainsborough’s animation had taken Blake’s characters out of

15. See <<https://www.blinkink.co.uk/projects/william-blake-reimagined-visions>>.

Tate, into the streets and onto a basketball court, the animation for *La Reggia di Venaria* immersed the viewer in the phantasmagoric world of Blake’s supernatural characters: at the end of the journey, spectators have entered the world of Blake’s dreams.

- 18 Limiting the selection of works to the Tate collection led to the introduction of British Romantic art through Blake and Blake through British Romantic art, a particularly productive group portrait in the synoptic treatment of a theme by Blake and his contemporaries. Blake’s return to a theme using different techniques across his career was also revealing. Judging from comments I overheard during my visit in the final days, the exhibition held its public captivated. Newspaper coverage confirmed Italian enthusiasm for Tate’s Blakes. *La Repubblica* gave it a double spread and celebrated it as “fantastic, visionary, enigmatic,” claiming that after a visitor left *La Reggia*, “the majestic façades of Venaria Reale [were] animated by oneiric and enchanted projections and the large gardens of vegetation and fountains appear[ed] to be imaginary breathings of the works kept indoors.”¹⁶

16. Olga Gambari, “William Blake: visioni molto romantiche,” *La Repubblica* (22 Dec. 2024): 32-33 (my translation).

