

The Fantasies Of Ludwig II

By ADA LOUISE HUXTABLE

THE eccentricities of Ludwig II of Bavaria are legendary; his Disneyland palaces have been tourist attractions since they were constructed in the 1870's and 80's. Their extraordinary design and decoration, representing dreams and delusions inspired by everything from Wagnerian romanticism and German mythology to the ritual splendors of the Bourbon Kings and who-knows-what Freudian impulses, were far out even in the 19th century, which was not given to understatement.

Among the best known, or more correctly, notorious, products of Ludwig's royal patronage are the turreted castles in operatic Alpine settings, the garlanded grottos lighted red or blue by an early electric generator, and the ornately gilded furniture and objets d'art that carried rococo to its ultimate contortions. If much 19th-century taste has been looked on as laughable until recently, Ludwig's has been considered ludicrous. It is only now that this recent chapter in art history, so long condemned for its eclecticism and excess, is being studied seriously.

In another first for the Cooper-Hewitt Museum at 2 East 91st Street, a selection of original drawings and artifacts from those palaces has been brought over for display in this country. The exhibition, which, surprisingly, has not been billed as the treasures of anything, contains paintings, drawings, furniture, clothing, gilded bronze, silver, ceramics and textiles of overwhelming luxury. Or-

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ganized jointly by the Cooper-Hewitt in New York and the Victoria and Albert Museum in London, the show can be seen through March 25. There have been generous grants from German institutions and corporations and an informative catalogue has been published by Debrett's Peerage, called "Designs for the Dream King, the Castles and Palaces of Ludwig II of Bavaria."

The material on view consists of exquisitely skilled renderings of every phase of Ludwig's design fantasies, culled from a collection of about 3,000 drawings in the Ludwig II collection at Nymphenburg. They range from preliminary concepts to final working

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drawings for anything from buildings to place settings. Whatever Ludwig's peculiarities, and in large part because of these peculiarities, this is a remarkable chapter in the history of the decorative arts.

Ludwig II was, of course, a prodigious builder; beginning modestly by remodeling his quarters in the Munich Residenz in the 1860's, with ancien régime grandeur, he progressed to the construction of the castles and palaces of Neuschwanstein, Linderhof and Herrenchiemsee in the 1870's and 80's. The purpose of these palaces, with their pavilions, gardens and grottos, conceived in medieval, Byzantine, rococo or exotic Eastern styles, was to embody all of the King's many personas, from the divine ruler with a mystic mandate to Sultan or Sun King.

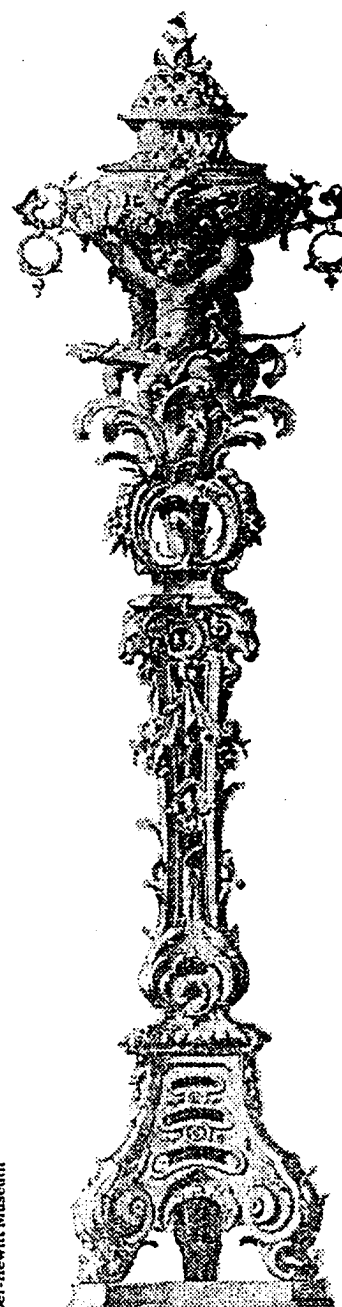
The result is a series of unbelievably extravagant stage sets. This work has been habitually dismissed as romantic and retardataire, but within the restrictions that the King set — he relied heavily on stage designers for his concepts and insisted that his architects not deviate from them — the designs are often genuinely creative and always beautifully executed. For this reluctant ruler, ultimately declared insane and imprisoned, his dream world and the incredible energy and money he expended on it were an alternative to reality.

It was all created for an audience of one. Ludwig's was a totally solitary splendor, with the King alone in his Hall of Mirrors or State Bedroom (he

spent only 10 days at the Versailles-like Herrenchiemsee), or sitting at table with a single set of monumental flatware in a bronze doré gondola capped by goddesses, or in solitude in his own theater for complete Wagnerian or dramatic performances for which he was the only spectator.

This obsessive design adventure produced one of the most unusual episodes in royal patronage. Every object in every room of every castle was specially designed and personally ap-

proved and carried out by the finest craftsmen, from Louis XIV throne chairs with gold bullion embroidery to monumental sponge and brush holders of elaborate Meissen porcelain that look like banquet tureens, and inkstands like elaborate reliquaries. To see the superb original drawings with the no less superb completed objects is a memorable, if unsettling, experience. There is something hypnotic about these unreal heights of decorative excess.



Design for incense burner at Linderhof.



Design for Neuschwanstein's Sängersaal, a hall for singing



Design for a bowl presented to Richard Wagner in 1866

But it is interesting and important to note that no other age could have produced quite this same kind of excess; it was only the historicism and eclecticism of the 19th century that made it possible. Art history was the invention of the 19th century, and the methodology devised by the German art historians still survives. This meant that "educated" taste and the "educated" eye embraced many periods and styles. Eclecticism was a sign of erudition and discrimination. And it

was common to seek the exotic in time and place.

Ostentation was equally common; it was an approved sign of privilege. Ludwig obviously overreached wildly, even for a monarch with an inventive mind and an insatiable urge to build. Stylistically, there is an unexpected kinship of this work to so much that is labeled Victorian, in its emphasis on the picturesque, its strong polychromy and ornamental patterns covering all surfaces.

Whatever repressions, frustrations,

disappointments and urges Ludwig expressed by building, he left a remarkable production. "These are my favorite companions," he said of the things he commissioned for his fantasy life. "They appear and disappear at my will." Those curious castles and their contents are the perfect swan song of an extravagant era of end-of-the-line richness and intricate craft that died with the 20th century.