A Marriage of Flamboyance and Delicacy of Taste

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ADA LOUISE HUXTABLE

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There is a show so rich, so beautiful, so superbly documented and so full of splendor at the Cooper-Hewitt Museum, 90th Street and Fifth Avenue (through May 23), that only in New York could it be submerged in an overload of high-decibel cultural events.

But anyone who misses "The Royal Pavilion at Brighton" not only forfeits a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity—Queen Elizabeth II does not lend a selection of Brighton's royal historic furnishings at the drop of a crown, nor are palatial doors and panels removed from the Pavilion's rooms and transported overseas as a usual thing—but also a once-in-a-lifetime coupling of both the Brighton and Cooper-Hewitt collections of Pavilion drawings. These include John Nash's incomparable "Views" and Frederick Crace's designs for the interiors. This is work of exquisite inventive genius: art, craft and fantasy at a high point in civilized history.

The Brighton Pavilion, built by the architect John Nash at the English seaside resort between 1787 and 1822 as a summer residence for the Prince Regent who became King George IV, is one of the great, exotic pleasure palaces of the world. Remodeled and expanded from Henry Holland's earlier Palladian structure, this landmark structure is an outrageous and marvelous Oriental caprice of onion domes, minarets and colonnades of vague "Hindoo" persuasion and magnificent Chinoiserie themes and details. It marries extravagant flamboyance and supreme delicacy of taste.

Like so many major works of architectural art, the Pavilion's survival has been chancy, and it has undergone extensive scholarly restoration in recent years. Short of visiting the Pavilion itself, however, the Cooper-Hewitt exhibition offers a remarkably first-hand experience. And even at Brighton it would not be possible to see the wealth of beautiful watercolors brought together here that are the precise, original documentation of this spectacular design project.

But it is not just the stunning show—a major coup for any museum—that should lure the visitor; the Carnegie Mansion that is the new home of the Cooper-Hewitt (it opened last fall in the rehabilitated house as the official design museum of the Smithsonian Institution) is equally an event this spring.

Go now, while the wisteria is in full bloom on the garden side. Walk through the newly-shining, somber, plant-filled rooms where carved wood and ornate ceilings glow in the light of a Tiffany chandelier or catch sunlight from the glass-roofed conservatory. Pause in the handsome reception hall; take the baronial stairs, rather than the elevator, to the second exhibition floor, and when you are through, linger in the peaceful garden opposite the green and blossoming park. (Beauty is never redundant.)

Experience the small museum and all of its unique pleasures in this day of maximized institutional collecting. One does not need to be steamrollered by magnificence. This sense of place, of art and urbanity, in an evocative setting of human scale, permits an extra dimension of intimate re-

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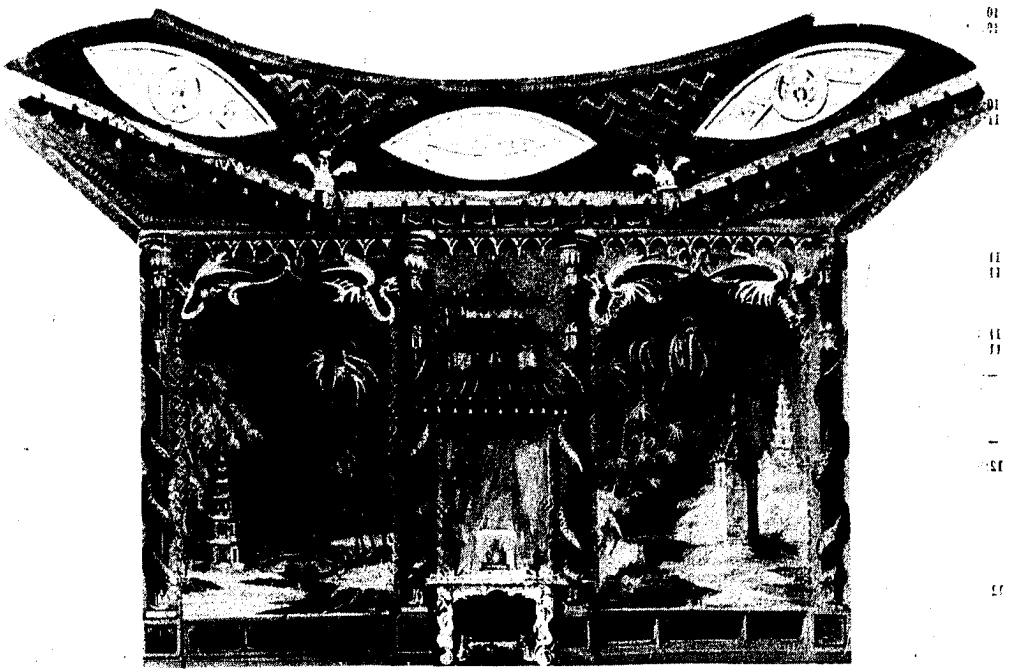

Frederick Crace's design for the music room of The Royal Pavilion at Brighton, in the Cooper-Hewitt exhibit

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sponse to everything on display. The Cooper-Hewitt is a notable enrichment of New York life.

To see the show, bypass the Brighton treasures on the ground floor temporarily, and begin on the second floor, with Sir Thomas Lawrence's portrait of the King at the east end of the galleries. Stand eye to eye with this pleasure-loving monarch for a moment; his vitality and sensuosity are inescapable. And then note the contemporary cartoons that surround him: the fat, gouty King he became; the bitter jibes at the outrageous extravagance of the "Chinese Court" at Brighton.

If you have purchased the slim, but excellent catalogue ($5), this is the time to look at the color photographs—there are only drawings in the exhibition—of the wildly sumptuous rooms that George IV monitored to the last detail.

You then have a choice of heading directly for some of the actual furnishings of those rooms, or of preparing yourself for them by immersion in the drawings by Augustus Charles de Pugin and Frederick Crace and others of the Crace firm of designers and manufacturers that served the King. (Most people rush to the objects; I keep the candy till last.)

Turn left and you will find the ivory-veneered sandalwood chairs, the cabinets with rose silk panels and bamboo details topped with Chinese dignitaries, the gold and white open cabinet with mirrored niches for precious Chinese porcelains, the royally gilded Regency chairs in colored satins, the six-foot candelabrum or the lotus-shaded pedestal lamp of cobalt Spode and ormolu dragons that are parts of giant sets lining ornate rooms. Some of the finest articles are the work of Robert Jones; all date c. 1770 to 1823.

The installation, by the designer Vincent Ciulla, is sensitive and direct. The furnishings are grouped in humidity-controlled areas, but the appropriate drawings are located nearby. One can turn, for example, from the furniture and the samples of surprising pink and blue bamboo wallpaper to see them all in place in the elegant renderings of the Corridor.

On the ground floor, there are more treasures, including a pair of the Music Room doors, in two shades of red, shimmering with mica and gold and topped by belled pagodas, panels of Chinese figures from the Banqueting Hall, lacquered doors from the Saloon, and huge gilded serpents and sunflowers.

But it is through the drawings that one really enters the Pavilion's dream world. Cooper-Hewitt acquired about 200 of the Crace drawings of both first and second design stages in 1948, when the museum was hidden away at Cooper Union; they are one of the plums of its extraordinary collection. Here, carried out in intricate detail, are the bold schemes of lacquer red and sky blue, of purple, pink and gold, of Chinese fretwork and Regency trompe l'oeil, the snake-wrapped columns, the exotic wall and ceiling panels, papers, porcelains and fabrics, in an explosion of impeccable art and craft.

Students of modern architecture will also find, on the second floor, that fabulous and familiar drawing shown in textbooks, of the Brighton kitchen with its palm-topped cast-iron columns, copper pots and tables filled with a sea of silver-domed servers. All the rest has been deemed too extravagantly frivolous for today's functional esthetic.

But is it? Is Brighton really too far from contemporary experience to be relevant or real? I do not believe so. I do not think this esthetic adventure should be left to decorators for instant trashing. The need for fantasy, for delight, is deep and universal, but it is too often confused in today's merchandising mentality with trendy gimmicks and cheap tricks. This door to the spirit is a growing concern of serious architectural practice. The relationship of fantasy to art is a profound subject, never more magnificently explored than at Brighton. ■