From a Coleridge Opium Dream
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Architecture

From a Coleridge Opium Dream

By ADA LOUISE HUXTABLE

WE have dreamed, since childhood, of going to Brighton to see the Royal Pavilion, but although many dreams have been fulfilled and many pilgrimages made, this trip has eluded us. And so we keep a mental picture of a fairytale fantasy of the palace of Kublai Khan at the English seaside—a psychedelic pleasure dome surrounded by tatty rooming houses and all the banal trappings of a too-accessible seashore resort.

Indian domes, pavilions, minarets and verandas enclose gigantic rooms of elaborately invented orientalia and chinoiserie-that-never-was, translated into plaster, paper, iron, gilt, crystal and Spode confections that teeter between magnificence and vulgarity but never touch the conventional or real. This is John Nash's 1797-1827, £502, 797 (plus six and ten) superfolly for the Prince Regent—all extravagance, *trompe l'oeil* and no rules. No wonder it bothered Victoria, who abandoned it and dispersed its furnishings among more gemütlich castles.

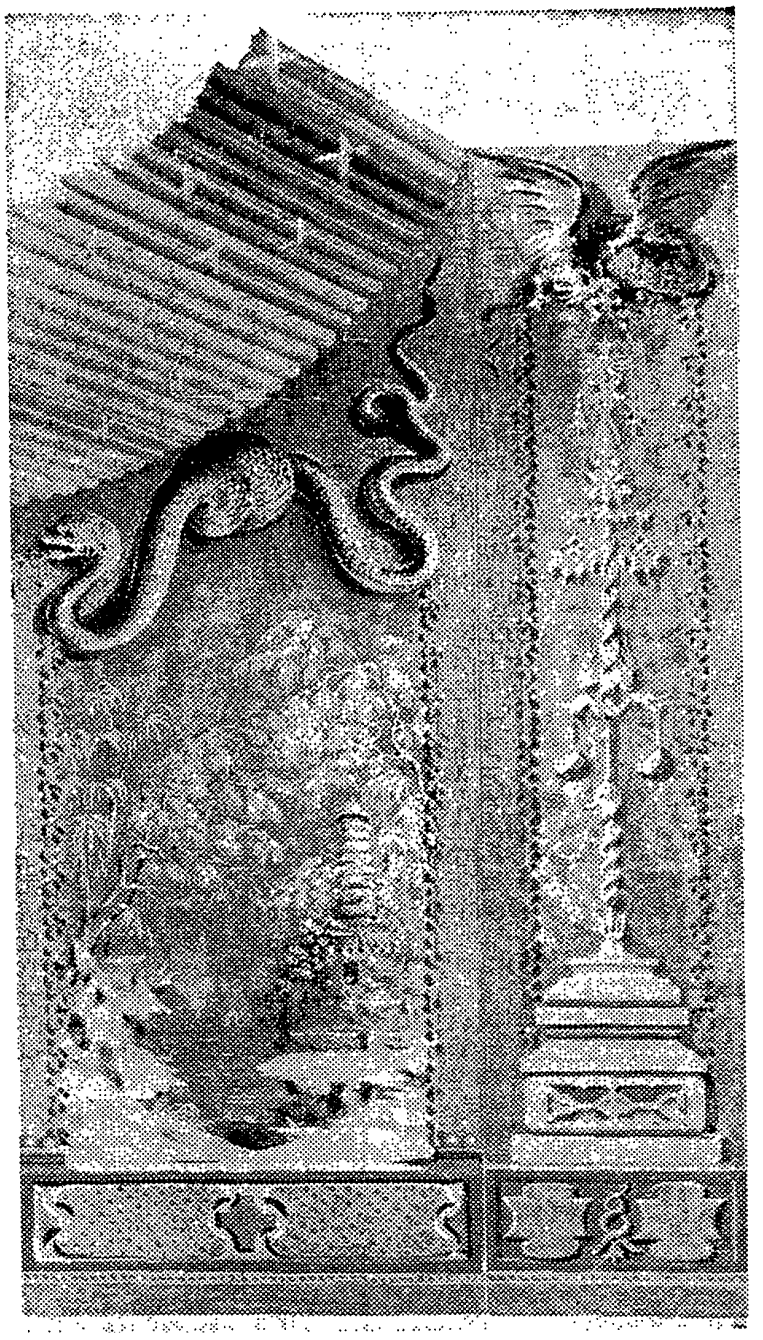
When the Brighton Pavilion was finally put back together again after World War II, the British restorers found their source material in America—at, of all places, New York's Cooper-Hewitt Museum, now a branch of the Smithsonian Institution. In 1948, a private English collector had put on the market the original drawings of the palace rooms — a set of exquisite renderings by Frederick Crace and Robert Jones and others of the firm of Crace and Sons, who functioned as Nash's right arm in the Pavilion's interior design — and Cooper Union bought them. The restoration work was done by east-west pilgrimages and photograph exchange, reinforced by the return of original furnishings that had been scattered to other palaces.

Last week, the Cooper-Hewitt Museum opened an exhibition of 45 of the small, beautifully detailed drawings, called, "A Stately Pleasure Dome, the Brighton Pavilion." It can be seen from 10 to 5 Mondays through Saturdays, until Nov. 12.

A visit to the show may not be a visit to the Pavilion, but it is an equal experience in a different dimension. Here is the handiwork of the artist, the design intimately and freshly conceived; it is as if no time had passed. This is a dialogue in pastel watercolors and gentle pencils, to be savored not only as drawings but as direct communication at the instant of invention, without the cultural misinterpretations of intervening decades. These formal elevations are full of delicacy and deliciousness, the taste and feeling of the moment untouched by the brutal or subtle transmutations that have affected the real thing.

The exhibition, prepared by Christian Rohlfing and Elaine Dee, is reinforced with just the right source material. There is the influential volume of Thomas Daniell's "Oriental Scenery" (1795-1807), the great taste-making book of Indian buildings, and Sir William Chambers's rare "Designs of Chinese Buildings" (1757), the only reference of first-hand Chinese examples.

Also displayed is Humphrey Repton's marvelous pop-up volume in which the celebrated landscape architect sold the idea of an "Indian" remodeling of the existing Brighton buildings to the Prince Regent. He presented, with overlay flaps showing the same buildings, an ordinary present and an oriental future. The Prince bought the idea, but not the design, since the project was aborted at that moment by his recurring debts. Later, Repton lost the commission to Nash.



Drawing of the music room of the Brighton Pavilion
The palace of Kublai Khan at the English seashore

There are samples of bamboo or fretwork patterned and marbleized wallpapers from the Pavilion, both in original end-of-rolls found during restoration, and in American reproductions from the museum's examples. But it is in the drawings that one really savors the decorations of clouds, foliage, rocks, trees, bamboo, birds, dragons dogs, snakes, peacocks, pagodas and bells.

According to Mrs. Dee's labels the immense chinoiserie landscape wall paintings of the music room "conjure up China as a romantic fairyland, imprisoned in a huge lacquer cabinet of red, yellow and gold." They are an improbable brilliant gold on crimson walls, and there are huge lotus chandeliers like upturned glass umbrellas, the largest measuring 10 feet across. The 15-foot high porcelain pagodas designed for the music room now stand in the yellow drawing room.

Along the walls in the banqueting room, where the tables are kept permanently set with an orgy of brilliant porcelain and crystal, standing lamps with lotus shades are held by gilt dragons on cylindrical vases of dark blue Spode porcelain on carved and gilt pedestals. Mantels are all pure invention, compounded, fascinatingly, of eastern architectural elements.

It is all a completely "made-up" style. The Brighton Pavilion is an experience-expanding creation of the 19th century, and one might even say of the 19th-century drug culture—an opium dream on an unlimited budget straight out of Coleridge. (It should be noted that some things were subsequently toned down; far-out colors were changed here and there and more conventional crystal chandeliers substituted for a few of the lotus models.) Many of the design sources were actually literary. Details follow descriptions from Coleridge and Marco Polo. Although some furniture was brought from China, everything else was invented.

The purpose, according to Nash, was "giving the whole an Eastern flavor." In the 19th century, this came under the heading of the Picturesque — a noun, capitalized. According to Christopher Hussey, confirmed by Henry-Russell Hitchcock, the Picturesque was a point of view as much as a style. It ran the gamut from the extravagantly esoteric at the top to naive exoticism at the bottom, always informed by a romantic love of imperfectly perceived and warmly admired distant peoples, times and places. It was the antithesis of the later archeological revivals.

Before Nash's transformation of Brighton into an Indian-Chinese-Saracenic dream it was an elegant classical house that had been remodeled by Henry Holland. "Festive and frivolous," Hitchcock calls the change, at the same time pointing out its fully architectural and monumental scale. It is a tour de force of art and taste, inside and out.

Perhaps the most enchanting and revealing item in the exhibition is a complete cross section through the palace from Nash's commemorative volume issued in 1826 for the Pavilion's completion. In serene aquatint, it shows construction and furnishings, with the wood bracing of the onion domes sharing honors with the chandeliers and curtains. Gaudy or gorgeous, nothing has touched it since.