

Current and coming

BY ALLISON ECKARDT LEDES

A. W. N. Pugin and the Gothic revival

DURING HIS LAMENTABLY short life, Augustus Welby Northmore Pugin was a prolific and innovative designer of ecclesiastical and secular buildings, furniture, woodwork, metalwork, jewelry, textiles, wallpaper, ceramics, stained-glass windows, and books. (An article about Pugin appeared in *ANTIQUES*, June 1994, pp. 858–867.) An exhibition mounted in the wake of the large retrospective show held at the Victoria and Albert Museum in London last year is on view until February 25, 1996, at the Bard Graduate Center for Studies in the Decorative Arts in New York City. Entitled *A. W. N. Pugin: Master of Gothic Revival*, the exhibition includes 144



examples of his work in nearly every medium, arranged in five sections: the Gothic revival style in England before Pugin; Pugin's ecclesiastical designs; the Houses of Parliament, which represent Pugin's skill at designing a total work of art; domestic commissions; and Pugin's last great work, the Medieval Court at the Great Exhibition held in London in 1851.

Pugin was never formally educated, although his father was a draftsman for the well-known architect John Nash (1752–1835). For the design of his own house near Salisbury, which paved the way for the Gothic revival style, Pugin drew on his knowledge of the medieval Gothic style acquired during sketching trips he and his father made to France.

He incorporated this solid grounding into the objects and buildings he designed during the remainder of his career. Also significant in this early period was Pugin's conversion to Roman Catholicism, which later played a critical role in the churches and domestic interiors he designed. However, although Pugin drew his inspiration from medieval buildings, he did not copy them. He advocated modern methods of manufacture and an extension of the medieval craftsman's reliance on natural forms for ornament, urging the incorporation of plants unknown in the Middle Ages. With his remarkable eye for pattern and color he created designs for wallpapers and textiles that were adapted splendidly to mechanical reproduction.

His philosophy of design was entirely down to earth. He wrote in his *True Principles of Pointed or Christian Architecture* (1841), "The two great rules

for design are these: 1st, that there should be no features about a building which are not necessary for convenience, construction, or propriety; 2nd, that all ornament should consist of enrichment of the essential construction of the building...the smallest detail should have a meaning or serve a purpose...and the designs should be adapted to the material in which they are executed." The few surviving commissions entirely carried out by Pugin perfectly exemplify this philosophy.

Pugin exhausted himself with commissions that were made more complex because he designed not only the buildings but every aspect of their interiors. Even with the collaboration of many skilled craftsmen, he had a nervous collapse in February 1852, which, combined with mercury treatments he was undergoing, contributed to his untimely death that fall at the age of forty.

The catalogue of the exhibition contains contributions by ten scholars including Paul Atterbury, the editor of the volume. It has 420 pages, 195 color plates, and 230 black-and-white illustrations and may be obtained for \$45 (paper covers) from Bard Graduate Center for Studies in the Decorative Arts, 18 West 86th Street, New York, New York 10024.

(Continued on page 746)



Jardinière designed by Augustus Welby Northmore Pugin (1812–1852), made by Minton and Company (founded 1793), Stoke-on-Trent, England, and John Hardman and Company (founded 1838), Birmingham, England, 1850–1851. Earthenware tiles set in a gilt cast-iron frame; height 11¾, width 10 inches. It was designed for the Medieval Court of the Great Exhibition held in London in 1851. Victoria and Albert Museum, London.

Design for wallpaper for the Palace of Westminster, London, by Pugin, c. 1851. Pencil and wash on paper, 24¾ by 20¾ inches. Victoria and Albert Museum.

Chalice designed by Pugin and made by John Hardman and Company, c. 1847. Stamped with the town and maker's mark. Parcel-gilt silver, enamel, and jewels; height 7 inches. The chalice was made for the Church of Our Lady and Saint Alphonsus in Worcestershire, England. Roman Catholic Archdiocese of Birmingham, England; photograph by Graham Miller.

