

ART MARK STEVENS

# Gothic Romance

*Pugin, the designer-architect who once flouted his contemporaries' obsession with classicism, now offers a powerful foil to our own revivalist mania.*

Pugin's richly gilded monstrance was used to display the sacramental Host and bless the congregation.

**A**W.N. PUGIN (1812–52) IS THE ARTIST MAINLY responsible for establishing the Gothic as the national style of England in the nineteenth century. He was the architect of buildings ranging from cathedrals to barns, and he designed the interior of the new Palace of Westminster, which includes the Houses of Parliament. He created Gothic-inspired rooms, furniture, jewelry, metalwork, pottery, clothing, stonework, typefaces, stained glass. As a polemicist, he challenged more effectively than anyone else of his time the dominance of “the classical” in Western culture, and he laid out principles of design that remain influential today. Not bad for a man who died at 40.

That would be reason enough to see **A.W.N. Pugin: Master of Gothic Revival**, at the Bard Graduate Center for Studies in the Decorative Arts (an institution at 18 West 86th Street that deserves to be better known to New Yorkers) through February 25. But the show—a reduced version of an exhibition at the Victoria & Albert Museum in London—should also fascinate those engaged in our own contemporary struggles over style. Today, many postmodern artists and architects are, like Pugin, obsessed with the past. Yet Pugin offers a powerful and poignant contrast to our own revivalist enthusiasms, for he sought to find in the past (in his case the Middle Ages) not just a delightful reservoir of form but also a profound criticism of the present—and the promise of a new world.

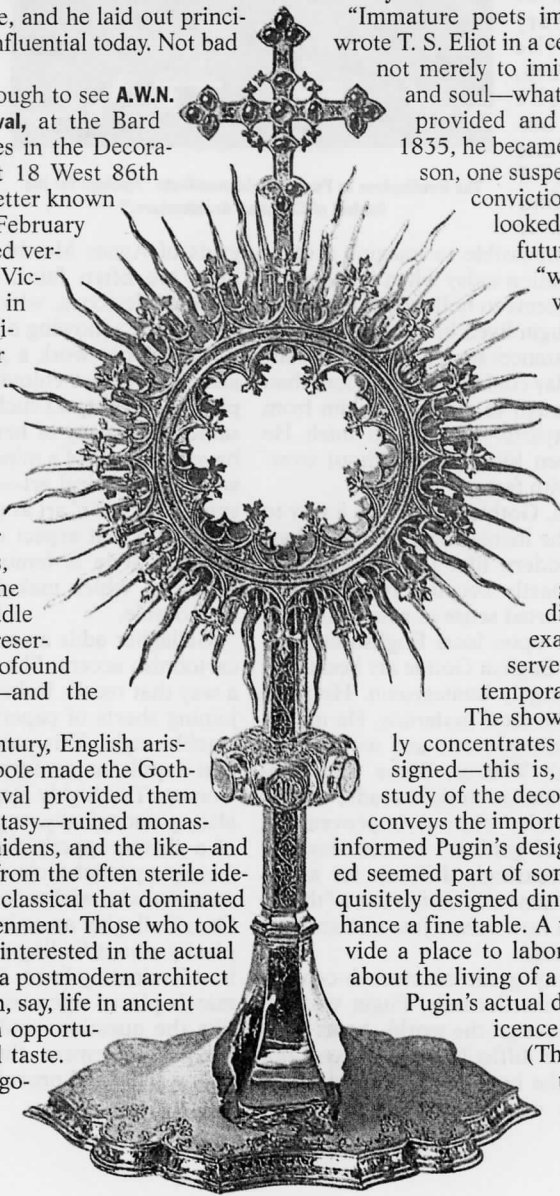
In the late eighteenth century, English aristocrats such as Horace Walpole made the Gothic fashionable. The medieval provided them with a darkly romantic fantasy—ruined monasteries, knights, blushing maidens, and the like—and offered a theatrical escape from the often sterile idealization of reason and the classical that dominated thinking during the Enlightenment. Those who took up the style were no more interested in the actual reality of medieval life than a postmodern architect would today be interested in, say, life in ancient Greece. The Gothic was an opportunity to irritate conventional taste. It was the next act in the ongoing play of style.

Pugin was himself attracted to the picturesque charm of the medieval and certainly knew how to employ fashion to generate business. For “The Great Exhibition of the Works of Industry of All Nations, 1851,” held in the Crystal Palace, he concocted a fantastic “medieval court”—a kind of stage set where the public could buy his secular and ecclesiastical objects. What elevated Pugin’s passion for the Gothic above the usual marketing of fashion, what gave his designs the conviction of serious art rather than the sentimental allure of nostalgia, was that he was also brave and foolhardy enough to be in deadly earnest about the medieval.

“Immature poets imitate; mature poets steal,” wrote T. S. Eliot in a celebrated aside. Pugin sought not merely to imitate but to recapture—body and soul—what he thought the Middle Ages provided and modern life destroyed. In 1835, he became a Roman Catholic. The reason, one suspects, was only partly religious conviction. Pugin was a utopian who looked to the past rather than the future for a conception of social “wholeness”—for a unified world with everything in its right place. In 1836, he published a polemical tract called “Contrasts, or a Parallel Between the Noble Edifices of the Middle Ages and Corresponding Buildings Showing the Present Decay of Taste.” In this book, he was not only interested in the religious or fanciful side of medieval society. He argued, for example, that its architecture served the poor better than contemporary architecture did.

The show at the Bard Center naturally concentrates on the objects Pugin designed—this is, after all, a center for the study of the decorative arts—yet successfully conveys the importance of the wider vision that informed Pugin’s designs. Everything Pugin created seemed part of some larger enterprise. An exquisitely designed dinner plate did not simply enhance a fine table. A workbench did not just provide a place to labor. Each served a larger idea about the living of a significant life.

Pugin’s actual designs combine wit with reticence and fantasy with reserve. (This is a quality rarely found today, when sobriety seems joyless and fantasy bela-



bored.) Even a gorgeous golden monstrosity in the shape of a sunburst—a liturgical object created to inspire an ecstatic contemplation of the sacramental Host—does not challenge an orderly idea of space. Much like the great modernist architects, Pugin despised ornament for ornament's sake, arguing that "all ornament should consist of enrichment of the essential construction of the building." And he believed that structures should not engage in trickery: "... there should be no features about a building that are not necessary for convenience, construction or propriety." In short, the stylist was also a moralist.

One way Pugin hoped to locate an essential honesty in art was through scholarship. With study, he would pass through the persiflage of contemporary style to the deeper truth; clarify the sources, in other words, and the world might yet find redemption. It

is almost impossible to imagine a comparable situation today when scholarship habitually seems to hollow out historical meaning. Pugin lived in the best intellectual circumstances for a utopian. Scholarship in his day could teach him more than a little—enough to distinguish him from the trivial stylists—but not too much. He could deepen his dream without overcoming it with fact.

For Pugin, Gothic design was a way to challenge the increasingly abstract character of modern life. He disliked "the classical" partly because it seemed to him an imported sense of rules, imposed from above upon local English culture. He revered English Gothic art because it appeared largely homegrown. He liked to work with local materials. He understood the idiosyncratic and would have agreed with William Blake that "improvement makes straight roads; but the crooked roads, without improvement, are roads of genius." In our day, it's proved increasingly difficult for art to extract the same conviction from "the local," which now seems just one strategy among others.

Like many great nineteenth-century artists and intellectuals, Pugin was not afraid to redesign the world. Apart from all the other difficulties that attend this ambition, the horrific experience of the twentieth century—when political

world-makers of both the right and the left caused such suffering—has forced the best artists, architects, and designers of today to be more circumspect. That's too bad. The decorative arts can be a delightful toy and a stylish bait for attracting money. They can also be something more than that. You can find a better world in a bowl.

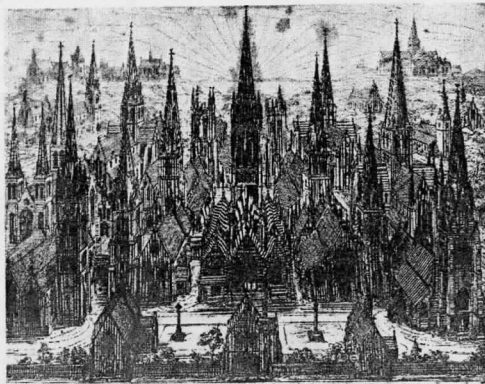
ELLEN GALLAGHER, WHO WAS, UNTIL RECENTLY, little known in the art world, aroused a great deal of favorable comment at last year's Whitney Biennial. Now she is having her first show at the Mary Boone Gallery, through February

24. An African-American woman who is 30 years old, Gallagher is exhibiting seven pictures that, remarkably enough, can please constituencies in the art world that normally have little in common.

At a distance, Gallagher's pictures look rather like the

grids of Agnes Martin. The marks and lines are often faint. Gallagher plays with subtle tones, which sometimes resemble the yellowing of paper as it ages; this gives her work a gentle flicker. An austere eye that enjoys formal contemplation will respect such pictures. At the same time, many of her tiny marks also have the shape of a minstrel's lips. Those who like political art—and typically despise "formalist" art as elitist—will be attracted to that aspect of her work. The political style is famous for its visual shouting, which makes her whispering memorable.

Gallagher adds an occasional, overtly cartoonish accent. She uses materials in a way that recalls Robert Rauschenberg, joining sheets of paper in a patchy, collagelike style. This patchiness may suggest a quilt, an art form associated with women. The highly elegant surface may also, paradoxically, suggest the poverty of a sharecropper's shack. Is this work merely a pastiche, clever but shallow, by an artist who wishes to have it all ways? Or is Gallagher an artist of unusual complexity who is finding a way to reconcile, in a fascinating form, the competing demands placed upon contemporary art? I like the questions and the uncertainty. They complement the ambition of a young artist and provoke a strong desire to see more.



The frontispiece to Pugin's bold manifesto "Apology for the Revival of Christian Architecture."

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