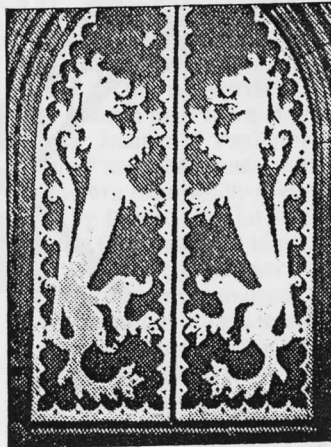


# Home

SECTION

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## Revisiting the Gothic Passion of Pugin



Graham Miller

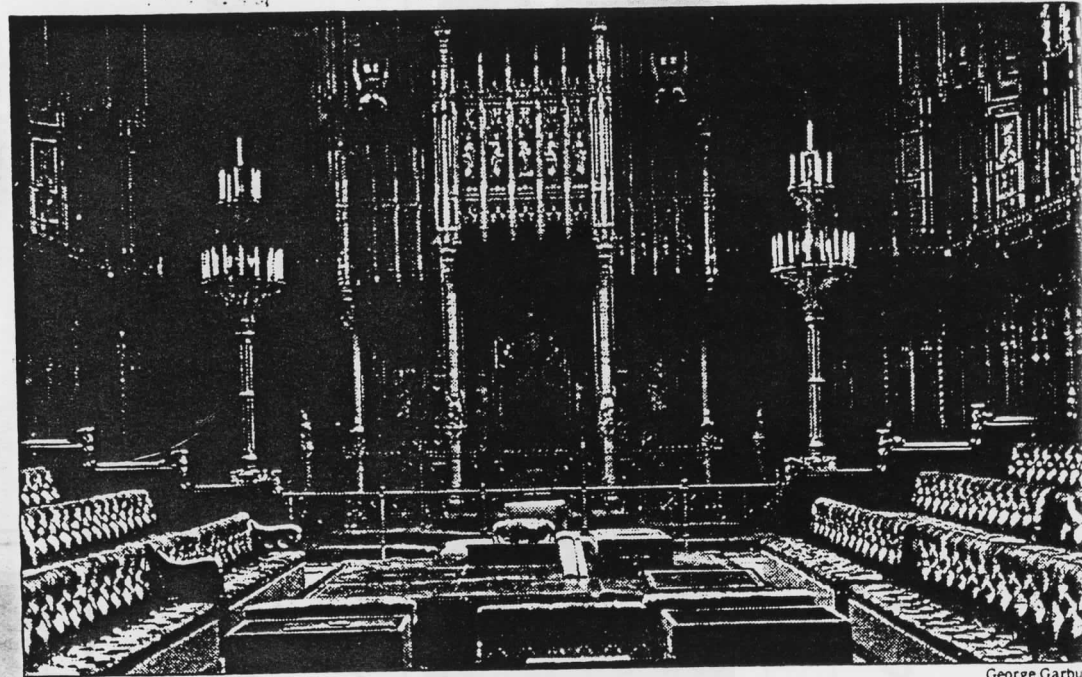
Heraldry on St. Giles's Church doors, by Pugin.

Delighting in Gothic frenzy, by John Russell.

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Pugin, shown below, was extremely versatile, designing, from left, a glazed garden seat, the interior of the House of Lords and wallpaper for the Palace of Westminster.



George Garbutt



Bard Graduate Center

On any list of England's high achievers in the early Victorian era, Augustus Welby Northmore Pugin (1812-1852) would have a place of honor. He was architect, all-purpose designer, polemicist, evangelist, impresario and entrepreneur.

When he wrote, it was as if he had a sharpened cutlass in his hand. When he sat down to the drawing board, designs poured from his hand as if from a spigot. He was admired throughout Europe for his championship of what became known as the Gothic Revival. Catholic and Protestant alike were to find in the Gothic esthetic of the pointed arch a soaring inspiration. In medieval ornament, they would find truth mated with beauty.

Pugin (pronounced PEW-jin) did not live to see it all, but his influence was to extend throughout Europe and from New Zealand to the West Indies and the United States. In his view, the United States had never had a Gothic past, but he soon put an end to that. Architects the world over took their inspiration from him. Without him, New York would not have had either St. Patrick's Cathedral or the Cathedral of St. John the Divine in their present form.

Pugin's universal driving frenzy



Graham Miller

can be sensed in "A. W. N. Pugin: Master of Gothic Revival," an exhibition through Feb. 25 at the Bard Graduate Center for Studies in the Decorative Arts, at 18 West 86th Street. Within the limits of a relatively small space, and thanks to Paul Atterbury, an English Pugin scholar, the exhibition gives a vivid idea of Pugin's achievement.

On the ground floor, the visitor can sample, one after another, indications of Pugin's first youth and of the earlier burgeonings of Gothic fancy, like Strawberry Hill, the famed home of Horace Walpole. His close and early knowledge of Paris — his father was a French illustrator and

architectural draftsman who fled during the Revolution — is also touched upon, as is his delight in drawing ancient buildings in Basel, Cologne, Rouen and Amiens.

Upstairs, the show turns into an explosion of color and a pandemonium of ideas. This was the Pugin who could put his mind to anything from the state chair on which the Prince Consort sat at the opening of Parliament in London to a tiny portable font for infants who were too ill to go to church to be baptized.

Pugin the convert to Roman Catholicism is there in strength, thanks to generous loans of objects from Britain. Again, he could do anything — chalice and reliquary, miter and monstrance — with a palpable exuberance. The second floor also includes a mammoth armoire that he delighted to build for his own use. (Never did he err, however, from the principles that are laid down in the catalogue: "revealed construction, control of ornament, overall integrity and truth to sources.")

That one man in the course of a short life should have done so much is nothing short of extraordinary.

He was immensely precocious. At 15, he was hired for a guinea a day to make drawings for the Gothic furniture that was needed at Windsor Castle. In that same year, a member of a famous firm of goldsmiths spot-

ted him copying a print by Dürer in the British Museum.

Such was the precision of his drawing that he was soon asked to design the Coronation Cup, a sumptuous but correctly medieval confection of silver-gilt, diamonds, other precious stones and enamels. It makes a truly spectacular contribution to the show.

All his life, he was around craftsmen and craftsmanship. He knew how things were done and who was best at doing them. He had very strong ideas about design, and after a shaky start in business he learned how they could best be marketed.

Though deeply attached to medieval practices in art and design, he knew that his first youth was also the time at which new materials and new ways of using them for industrial purposes were transforming the very nature of Britain.

The present was a matter of continual excitement to him. A born polemicist, he embraced — and to a large extent personified — the Gothic Revival. But he did not look only backward. While others might have daydreamed about medieval arts and crafts, Pugin wrote that "the steam engine is a most valuable power for sawing, raising and cleansing stone, timber and other materials."

When a way to color-print designs onto ceramics was invented in 1848, Pugin at once saw the potential of

flat pattern in strong colors on hard-wearing materials. He had some tiles made for his own use, and it was thanks to his enterprise that floor after floor in the Palace of Westminster, or Houses of Parliament, was covered with tiles made in the Minton factory from wildly inventive designs by Pugin. (The large majority of those floors are still in use, by the way, after nearly 150 years.)

Pugin was a compulsive worker. In one month in the summer of 1843, he completed designs for two cathedrals and a church. When the architect Sir Charles Barry was at work on the new Houses of Parliament, which were the largest and most complicated public buildings ever erected in London, he was delighted to have Pugin as his lieutenant.

And Pugin did just about everything, except designing the buildings. (Even there, he is said to have had some kind of say in the final appearance of Big Ben.) He did inkwells, standing desks, chairs of state, notice boards, bracket clocks, color-printed ceramics, stained glass, ashtrays, wallpaper, carpets, hinges, coal buckets and grates.

If there is such a thing as designer's block, he never suffered from it. Where other men sat hunched in despair over the drawing board, Pugin always had time to tell ribald stories, rock the table with laughter

and anathematize his rivals.

He could design an alphabet that marched across the page as if trumpet and drums had been present at its birth. And he liked nothing better than to make jewelry for his three successive wives and his daughters — whole parures, with headband, necklace, brooch and pendant cross.

The House of Lords in London bears his mark to this day (and very luxurious it is, too). So does much of the House of Commons. Few people have made magic of so many sorts within four walls.

It did not always have to be grand. He knew exactly what the market would bear. He also knew how to cut costs without resorting to what he called "vile trash."

Nor did he put on airs, in conversation or in dress. At home, he dressed as often as not in "pilot cloth" — a heavy, dark blue woolen material used for naval officers' overcoats.

He built houses for himself, over and over, dreaming most often of "a substantial Catholic home, not very large, but solid." He should have lived out a long, happy and productive life in one of them. But when he was 40, the effects of overwork and what was called "nervous fever" brought on a mental breakdown.

He died soon after. But what he left behind, and what we see at the Bard Center, is cause for jubilation.