THE PALACE MADE OF WINDOWS

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"With ganial foire
Thransfuse me loyre,
Ye sacred nymphs of Pindus,
The whoile I sing
That wondthrous thing,
The Palace made o' windows!"

—Thackeray: "Mr. Molony's Account of the Crystal Palace"

Undoubtedly we have to thank her careful Hanoverian upbringing for the fact that Victoria, Queen of England and Empress of India, was a voluminous and unrestrained diarist. Her account of the events of May 1, 1851, was particularly detailed and rapturous.

"This day," the entry in her journal begins, "is one of the greatest and most glorious days of our lives, with which to my pride and joy, the name of my dearly beloved Albert is for ever associated! It is a day which makes my heart swell with thankfulness.

"... The Park presented a wonderful spectacle, crowds streaming through it,—carriages and troops passing, quite like the Coronation, and for me, the same anxiety. The day was bright and all bustle and excitement. ... The Green Park and Hyde Park were one mass of densely crowded human beings, in the highest good humour and most enthusiastic. I never saw Hyde Park look as it did, being filled with crowds as far as the eye could reach. A little rain fell, just as we started, but before we neared the Crystal Palace, the sun shone and gleamed upon the gigantic edifice, upon which the flags of every nation were flying. We drove up Rotten Row and got out of our carriages at the entrance on that side. ... The sight as we came to the centre where the steps and chair (on which I did not sit) was placed, facing the beautiful crystal fountain was magic and impressive. The tremendous cheering, the joy expressed in every face, the vastness of the building, with all its decoration and exhibits, the sound of the organ (with 200 instruments and 600 voices, which seemed nothing) and my beloved husband, the creator of this peace festival 'uniting the industry and art of all nations of the earth,' all this was indeed moving, and a day to live for ever. God bless my dearest Albert, and my dear Country, which has shown itself so great to-day."

Exterior view of Joseph Paxton's glass edifice in Hyde Park, designed for the Great Exhibition of 1851. The Museum is currently holding an exhibition celebrating the centenary of the Crystal Palace. The Victorian atmosphere has been created through paintings, sculpture, prints, and various decorative objects.
"The Great Exhibition of the Works of Industry of All Nations, 1851," to give it its official title, remained open to the public until October, a matter of one hundred and forty-one glorious days (not including Sundays, on which it was kept closed). During that time, over six million people paid to wander through what Ruskin rather grumpily referred to as "the cucumber frame between two chimneys." One old woman of eighty-four walked all the way from Cornwall to view with her own eyes the glass wonder of the age, and, according to The Times, "foreigners also came, their bearded visages conjuring up all the horrors of Free Trade." On May 30, the old Duke of Wellington, a daily and enthusiastic visitor, wrote to a friend: "Prince Albert has insisted upon all the children at the Schools being sent to see the Glass Palace! which certainly augments the Crowd and is remarkably inconvenient, as they move in strings!"

Thackeray penned an elated "May Day Ode" to celebrate this "rare pavilion, such as man Saw never since mankind began."

Dickens, somewhat less enchanted, reported: "I find I am 'used up' by the Exhibition. I don't say there is nothing in it: there's too much. I have only been twice, so many things bewildered one. I have a natural horror of sights, and the fusion of so many sights in one, has not decreased it. I am not sure that I have seen anything but the Fountain, and the Amazon."

In any case, his was but one discordant note in a vast paean of rapture. None of the dire things which had been predicted (as the result of the Palace's construction or the influx of so many foreigners) occurred. The throngs gaped with open and unstinting admiration at such varied displays as the Kohinoor diamond, Hiram Powers' bare but highly moral life-size marble statue of The Greek Slave, the queen's ivory throne from India, a monstrous carved Austrian bedstead in zebrawood, machinery of all kinds, cases of stuffed animals acting out human situations (from Württemberg), and artistic manufactures from all the corners of the globe. It was the world's first International Fair.

An extraordinary confluence of time, ideas, and individuals had made this Crystal Palace possible. To begin with, it came at a time when man's faith in science as a benevolent patron goddess of progress was at its height. The builders of the Great Exhibition of 1851 firmly believed that the education of the lower classes and the free exchange of trade and ideas among the nations were all that were required to assure world peace. Furthermore, the idea of the machine was still new enough for the Palace to serve as a vast and glittering setting for the nuptials of industry and art.

Then there was the building itself: a thing of unexpected beauty, and thoroughly revolutionary in its fearless use of functional materials. Until that time the Victorian soul had been confined in the airless, lightless, overdecorated limbo of Neo-Gothic taste. The Crystal Palace, through its thousand windows that looked out into infinity, dared to let the sunlight in. It is true that the sunlight, once admitted, exposed a galaxy of absurdities and a clutter of gadgets. But then it also illuminated the figure of the Victorian man, blinking slightly as he emerged into a new world of material prosperity, humanistic idealism, and intellectual inquiry. If it was a world of patented water closets and Landseer's dying stags, it was also one for which Tennyson had written:

"Is this an hour
For private sorrow's barren song,
When more and more the people throng
The chairs and thrones of civil power?"
The Medieval Court of the Crystal Palace, arranged under the superintendence of A. W. Pugin. “On his entrance the visitor was struck with the awe which is so often felt in a sanctuary: the place was, as it were, set apart from the rest of the exhibition.”
was to progress to a higher, nobler order of life.”

It was Prince Albert who rearranged and set in permanent order the royal collections of paintings and drawings, which he had found in haphazard disorder. It was he who encouraged students and art historians to use them and who was one of the first to grasp the importance of photography as a means of comparison in scholarship. He understood, furthermore, that the time had come for government to step in and take the place which heretofore had been that of the private patron. His practical mind saw the importance to British trade of maintaining a high level of artistic taste in its manufactures. The answer to that was a free interchange of ideas with other countries and the bridging of the gap between the fine arts and industrial design.

This last had already been done with some effectiveness in the Silesian manufacturing center of Liegnitz. Earlier in the century the Freiherr von Minutoli had opened for public use the Minutoli Institute. This was an extraordinarily well-rounded collection of objects of

_Fruit dish, emblematical of the civilization of mankind, shown by M. J. Wagner of Berlin_

“A time to sicken and to swoon
When Science reaches forth her arms
To feel from world to world, and charms
Her secret from the latest moon?”

Over the dome of the Crystal Palace, hovering there as its earnest guardian angel, loomed the figure of the prince consort. Albert had been brought up in the heart of German mid-nineteenth century liberalism. His gifts of mind had been carefully nurtured by travel and companionship; his serious and somewhat heavy philosophical bent had been encouraged. As a result, he was as deeply (if humorlessly) concerned with art and music as he was with the weightier philosophical problems of his time. To this concern he brought the weight of his grave sense of public responsibility. Victoria’s consort was imbued with the idea of beauty as a highly moral instrument whereby “mankind

_Small table, with painted plate-glass top, designed and executed by Morant of London_
A view of the United States section at the Crystal Palace, showing Hiram Powers' Greek Slave and a display of vulcanized india-rubber boots. From the "London Illustrated News"

decorative art, drawn from any and all imaginable sources. The object of this collection was to supply models of fine workmanship and good design for the use of Prussian manufacturers. It was, as far as we know, the first reference collection ever made for the benefit of contemporary designers. If Albert had not actually visited the Institute, he was undoubtedly aware of its existence.

Everything in the prince's education and background, as well as his concern for the advancement of British taste, combined to prepare him for the sponsorship of the Great Exhibition. At various times since 1798 the French had been having their national exhibitions. In London, the Society of Arts, of which Albert had been president since 1843, had also arranged shows of manufactured goods in 1847, 1848, and 1849. The last had been so successful that a more impressive display, along the lines of the Paris Exhibition of the same year, was planned for London's Hyde Park in 1851. There was, however, one difference. The prince consort insisted that the 1851 show was to be international.

In the words of the prince himself:

"Gentlemen—The Exhibition of 1851 is to give us a true test and a living picture of the point of development at which the whole of mankind has arrived . . . , and a new starting point from which all nations will be able to direct their further exertions. I confidently hope the first impression which the view of this vast collection will produce upon the spectator will be that of deep thankfulness to the Almighty for the blessings which He has bestowed upon us already here below; and the second, the conviction that they can only be realized in proportion to the help which we are prepared to render to each other—therefore, only by peace, love and ready assistance, not only between individuals, but between the nations of the earth."

There is another figure that now rises beside Albert's. It is Joseph (later Sir Joseph) Paxton, that remarkable example of Victorian enterprise and public spirit. The queen, filling her
LEFT: Specimen of an ornamental garden structure in cast iron, shown by the Coalbrookdale Company at the Crystal Palace in 1851.

RIGHT: Cross section of the dome of the New York Crystal Palace, erected in 1853 to house the second International World's Fair.
The Destruction by Fire of the New York Crystal Palace, on October 5, 1858, five years after its erection. The site was at 42nd Street and Sixth Avenue. From a lithograph by Spearing and Stutzman, in the J. Clarence Davies Collection, Museum of the City of New York.
journal with her impressions of the Great Exhibition's opening, did not overlook his part in it. "All these Commissioners and the Executive Committee, etc., who had worked so hard and to whom such immense praise is due, seemed truly happy, and no one more so than Paxton, who may feel justly proud. He rose from an ordinary gardener's boy!"

It was, curiously enough, the very fact of Paxton's having been a gardener's boy, although not at all an ordinary one, which had saved the day for the Building Committee. The official design for the Exhibition building had aroused a storm of violent protest. For once the public's aesthetic rage was justified, as the design was for a hideous brick edifice straddled by a dome-shaped blister. Paxton, whose career had begun as gardener for the Duke of Devonshire, was by this time a public figure. He had, earlier in the year, devised a new glasshouse to suit the requirements of a special water lily. He now used the same principles of design and after nine days of concentrated work was able to submit to the committee a complete set of drawings for that vast, hitherto inconceivable greenhouse which Punch was to dub the "Crystal Palace" and which was to give the world a new sense of the use of glass in architecture.

The Great Exhibition of 1851 was followed by other International fairs all over the world. A New York Crystal Palace was erected in 1853, but its career was terminated by a disastrous, if spectacular, fire. Paris, Philadelphia, Chicago, St. Louis, San Francisco all followed suit. On each of them, even as late as the New York World's Fair of 1939, was strongly laid the mark of the original great fair of 1851. Some of these successors were gaudier, larger, more expensive. But, viewing them all in retrospect, none of them seems to have quite achieved the pristine wonder, the truly crystalline brilliance of that great glass expanse which drew the world to Hyde Park in the days when progress and peace seemed ready to march on interminably, hand in hand, to the greater glory of mankind and its works.

Perhaps the greatest and most lasting influence of the Great Exhibition of 1851 was its serving to crystallize, literally as well as figuratively, the future relationship between art and industry. The shell of the palace itself was moved to Sydenham, where it stood until it burned down in 1936. But the work of the commissioners of the exhibition did not end when the exhibition did. Under a supplemental charter they were appointed "as a permanent body to apply the surplus funds of the Exhibition in promoting the knowledge of science and art and their applications in productive industry." On a part of the site bought by the commission the Victoria and Albert Museum now stands. Starting its life as the South Kensington Museum, it was the first large museum to consist of objects bought specifically for public use. It houses, as the core of its collection, the objects which the queen and the prince consort purchased from the Crystal Palace. With its immense collection of decorative arts, the Victoria and Albert Museum serves, in an even broader sense, to fulfill the functions originated in the Minutoli Institute in Liegnitz. Its policy changed the direction of museums everywhere, and it is largely owing to its leadership that museums today no longer exist in vacuums. They realize their importance to modern manufacturers. In New York, the Metropolitan Museum's Costume Institute is a
ABOVE: A contemporary woodcut showing the educational collections in the South Kensington Museum in the 1870's. BELOW: The main gallery of the Metropolitan Museum, reminiscent in structure of the Crystal Palace, as it appeared shortly after its opening in 1880.
notable example of the way a museum can serve as a direct, working link with the world of contemporary design and industry. This is in complete accordance with the paragraph in the Museum’s Charter, dated 1870. Following the example set by that of the Victoria and Albert, the purpose of the founding of the Metropolitan Museum of Art was declared as that of “establishing and maintaining . . . a Museum and library of art, of encouraging and developing the study of the fine arts, and the application of arts to manufacture and practical life, of advancing the general knowledge of kindred subjects, and, to that end, of furnishing popular instruction.”

A ceremonial banquet, at which Albert presided, officially closed the Great Exhibition. It took place on the fifteenth of October, 1851.

On the eleventh of November the queen wrote in her journal:

“To Buckingham Palace, where we gave some directions relative to the numerous things we have bought at the Exhibition, and also things that have been given. Then we went to the Crystal Palace. The flags have been removed and the English side is almost entirely empty. On the foreign side, there are still a good many things left, but not many in the Galleries, and everywhere there are numerous packing cases. The organ is left. The canvas is entirely removed, and the beauty of the building, with the sun shining through, was never seen to greater advantage. One cannot bear to think of its all coming down, and yet I fear it will be the best and wisest thing. . . . —It is sad to think all is past now!”

The interior of the Crystal Palace shown in cross section. From an engraving of the time