



SACRED WINDOWS

An invitation to gaze into heaven's stained
glass windows
Beauty, Truth, and Goodness



Sunday, January 23, 2022

A Gorgeous Castle Built by a Madman

Greetings!

Neuschwanstein Castle in Bavaria (Southern Germany) predates the creation of the modern movie industry, but it has all the elements of a make-believe movie set on steroids.

Perched on a cliff in an idyllic setting, full of charm, breathtaking in beauty and in the wild drama that was the life of its creator, it's almost a real-life fantasy.

So it's not surprising that when **Walt Disney** visited Bavaria and saw the castle (sometime before the production of the movie *Cinderella* in 1950), he decided to model the **centerpiece of his fairy tale** creations on it.

The comparisons with actual Disney castles are astounding!



Real but Ephemeral Beauty

Man-made beauty can take your breath away at times, but there is always something about it that reminds us of **the fleeting nature of human creations**. Human gifts of art and creativity fall like sparks from the fullness of God's own creative Being. Humans are creators because we are made in His image and likeness. Animals aren't so blessed.

Yet, it's good to remember that **we are always co-creators with God**. Our powers of creation do not extend to creating things out of nothing, or creating the mathematically perfect structure of the material world, the majesty of the mountains, or the deep, complex beauty of living beings and natural systems. These are the fruits of God's creative powers alone.

We have to use the materials that God created first as our means of fashioning beautiful things in this world. And, as beautiful as human works can be, everything humans create is **somehow flawed, temporary, or ephemeral** in comparison with God's works.

A Colorful History



Neuschwanstein is a good example of the passing and oftentimes flawed beauty of human creations. **King Ludwig II of Bavaria** (1846-1886), the visionary creator of this amazing work of architecture, was about as imperfect a leader as Germany has ever produced – which is saying a lot – but he was *unquestionably a colorful and artistic character!*

His **short life of forty years** was a tragi-comedy of sorts that left in its wake some magnificent works, which hopefully will outlast his equally incredible failures and mistakes that marked his young life.

Ludwig inherited the throne of the kingdom of Bavaria at age 18 when his father Maximilian died (1846). **Two years later he lost all real political power** when Bavaria was defeated in war with its powerful neighbor to the north, Prussia, and was made a vassal of the larger German empire.

When the disparate kingdoms of Germany united to choose an Emperor, Ludwig was passed over in favor of his cousin Wilhelm, who was the grandfather of **the famous Kaiser Wilhelm II** known to history.

It is said that King Ludwig was a dreamer from his youth and that he greeted his loss of political power by retreating from reality into a fantasy world of his own creation, focusing on building fairy-tale castles and feeding his **obsessive admiration for the German composer Richard Wagner**. There is some merit to the theory, as we will see.

Neuschwanstein is really the king's monument to Wagner, who never set foot in the place. The castle contains a boutique theater meant for Wagnerian operas, and Ludwig intended most of the 200 rooms to be modeled on themes from Wagner's works. **(Only fourteen rooms were actually finished.)**

The Mad King

Based on his unstable personality, his many eccentricities, and a lot of poor decision-making, the moniker of the "mad King Ludwig" became the **official story line propagated by his enemies**. The reality is more complex and probably quite pragmatic.

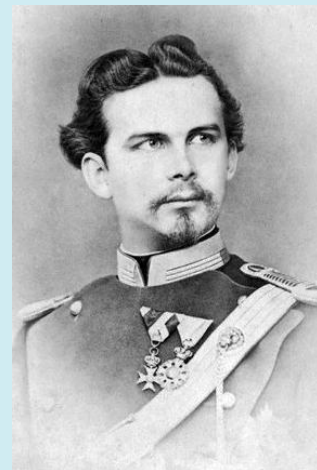
The real problem was that Ludwig spent most of his two decades as king building castles and accumulating debt. In a word, **he spent money like a drunken kaiser**. A great deal of money. Ludwig built *four castles* in that short time, and his magnum opus, Neuschwanstein, alone cost over \$48 million – unfinished.

Supposedly, he used only his family fortune to build them, but that didn't mean his extravagances had no impact on his kingdom. **Ludwig borrowed money from every bank in the realm** (and beyond) to finance his fantasies, and then repeatedly *threatened to commit suicide* when his creditors came to collect!

Finally, when Ludwig had racked up over \$115 million in debt (pretty impressive for a 40-year-old guy who didn't even have a credit card) and wasn't paying his workers, the kingdom's ruling class had had enough. **They declared the king legally insane** and arrested him after a brief standoff at the castle. German efficiency at its finest.

Three days later the king died in *amysterious drowning accident* together with the very psychiatrist who had declared him insane – hmmm – I told you this was a colorful and tragic story.

An old Latin phrase about **the vanity of vanities** comes to mind: *Sic transit gloria mundi*. (*Thus passes the glory of the world.*)



Ludwig's Beautiful Legacy

Despite his tragic end, it's **hard to fault Ludwig for the magnificent castle** he left to posterity. Even though he himself lived in the



unfinished Neuschwanstein a total of only 172 days, he is said to have supervised every detail of its building, and his vision and placement of it were spectacular.

Here are a **few details** that will help you appreciate the true beauty and wonder of this castle:

Name: Schwanstein ("Swan Stone") was the name of the family castle where Ludwig had spent his summers growing up. He had that old castle re-named so he could use "New Swan Stone" – Neuschwanstein – for his pet

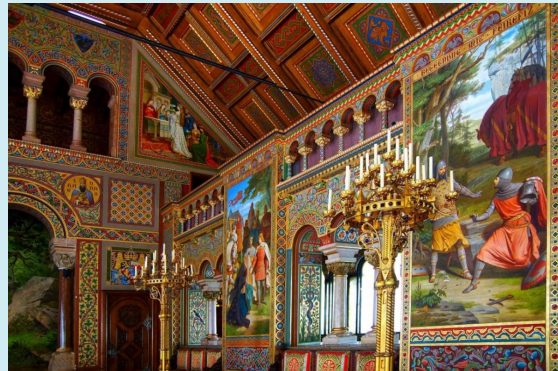
project. (When you're king, you can do things like that.) Some believe he **named it after the character "The Swan Knight"** in Wagner's opera *Lohengrin*.

Placement: The narrow ridge in the Tyrolian foothills upon which Neuschwanstein is built had been the site of an older castle in ruins. The 425-foot platform of rock falls directly away into the steep Pöllat Gorge some 650 feet below but offers a **magnificent view of the Alps in the background** and the broad, fertile valley below. The **nearby Swan Lake**, which was made popular by Tchaikovsky's ballet, is in the low-lying area to the north. The castle's setting could not have been more pristine.

Concept: Ludwig's vision for Neuschwanstein, which he outlined in a letter to Wagner, was as a sort of medieval knight's castle. That explains several large images and carvings of St. George slaying a dragon that can be seen on both the exterior and the interior of the castle. Unlike castles of bygone eras, however, this one has no fortifications – **it was meant not for battle but for sheer beauty!**



King Ludwig's Throne Room



Detail of the Hall of Singers

Style: Its main architectural style is Romanesque, fitting the revival of that same style in Europe during the 1800s. The **highest tower reaches 213 feet**. Its interior is eclectic, incorporating classical European motifs, Moorish architecture, and a throne room that looks as if it could have been plucked right out of a Byzantine cathedral.

Modern aspects: Neuschwanstein may be the first European castle ever built with **modern accommodations** such as steel construction, electricity, flushing toilets and plumbing, hot water, and even telephones (a new technology in the 1880s)!

Quirky aspects: We shouldn't be surprised that a highly personal building project reflects in some way the quirky personality of the builder. Here are just a few of the quirks:

- Neuschwanstein was **designed by a theater set designer**, not an actual architect;
- It has a dining room meant to seat only one person;
- The castle has no royal court, just residential areas for the king and his servants;
- **A planned chapel was never finished** (*priorities, Ludwig, priorities!*);
- There is a theater on the top (6th) floor called The Hall of Singers that never actually featured a performance of Wagner's operas and which contains **paintings of battle scenes** where the combatants shed no blood (I love that one!); and of course, true to its name, it has
- A swan pool and an artificial cave (grotto) with a lit waterfall!

There is a certain irony to one final quirk: the ornate **throne room** of Ludwig's magnificent castle **lacks the one thing** that would have made it a true palace: *a throne*.

Neuschwanstein is truly beautiful, yes, but it's good to remember that someday even this glorious structure will be just another set of ruins on a hill. ***Oh, the passing splendor of this world's beauty!***

The only beauty that endures rests in the hands of the Creator of all beauty.

Don't Miss This Brilliant Video

[Drone's Eye Video of Neuschwanstein](#) (duration, 2:28)

Feature Articles

If King Ludwig had survived into the 20th century he might have been lucky enough to hear the singing of **one of Germany's greatest tenors**: Fritz Wunderlich, a loyal son of Bavaria.

Read the story of his remarkable talent and listen to a short clip of his magnificent voice in our first feature: "[The Remarkable German Tenor Who Left Us Too Soon](#)". Bavaria is a land of *wunder*, indeed.

[The Remarkable German Tenor Who Left Us Too Soon](#)



The story of a castle on a hill gives us occasion to feature the story of a **glorious temple to the Sacred Heart** set on a hill overlooking Barcelona. (See below.)

Enjoy our **one-page Mini-Window** explanation of the "[Expiatory Temple of the Sacred Heart](#)" and its unique history as our second feature today. [Link leads to Mini-Window Architecture page.]

[Visit the Newsletter Archives](#)

Many thanks and blessings!

Peter Darcy

The Expiatory Temple of the Sacred Heart

Background

This amazing structure stands on the summit of Mount Tibidabo (1602 ft. above sea level) overlooking Barcelona, Spain. It took 50 years to complete (1902-1951). During St. John Bosco's visit to the city in 1886, the citizens gave him the parcel of land on the mountain as a gift to construct a large basilica similar to the Sacro Cuore basilica in Rome or Sacre Coeur in Paris. Hence, this basilica is also dedicated to the Sacred Heart (called Temple-Sacred Coeur in the native Catalan).

In the middle of its construction, the temple was a victim of the virulent anti-Catholic attacks of the Spanish Civil War, having its facade and grooves vandalized and the statue of Christ torn down. It weathered the storm and was officially consecrated during the 19th International Congress held in Barcelona in 1952.

The reason why it is called an "expiatory" temple is that the journey from the dark crypt, through the light-filled basilica, to the pinnacle of the structure symbolically represents the soul's journey of sin and repentance to the heights of sanctity.

Art-Facts

- A tiny hermitage stood on the mountaintop and was incorporated into one side of the huge basilica.
- The statue of the Sacred Heart at the pinnacle of the spire is made of bronze and has a viewing platform at its base from which visitors can see the entire city of Barcelona and surrounding areas.
- Styles of architecture: crypt: Romanesque (exterior); Neo-Gothic (interior); basilica: Neo-Gothic.
- The basilica is full of beautiful religious art: dozens of statues, many of which are founders of religious orders such as Don Bosco himself; stunning stained glass windows; Stations of the Cross made from alabaster; and exquisite mosaics in the crypt.
- The twelve pillars that form the external frame of the church are each topped by the statue of one of the twelve Apostles. Inside the frame are four smaller towers surrounding the main tower and spire.

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