

The Enchanted Palace

A journey through myths and fairytales

A review by Barbara Mack, Dipl - Theol.

☞ Kensington Palace exhibitions are closed for refurbishment". Shame! No wonderful dresses to see, no glimpse of royal glamour. That was my first thought when I tried to visit the palace last month. I was offered a temporary exhibition instead, called "The Enchanted Palace". In this review, I'd like you to join me on my journey into dreams and stories....

So, you enter the palace from the back and go through a small door, very ordinary. Certainly not what you've anticipated. As soon as you are inside, you see that something is different from anything you could have expected from visiting a royal palace. Toys, branches on the ceiling, decorations. Friendly members of staff explain what you'll see during your visit and guide you to the admissions desk. Once inside, you don't need much help: signposts show you the way. And if you get lost, no problem: there are friendly wardens everywhere, and in the "Room of Enlightenment" there is an enquiry desk.

This exhibition doesn't want just to show you things: it wants you to ask. It leads you on a quest, a journey of discovery to the princesses who lived in Kensington Palace. Seven princesses, a special room for each (the only exceptions being the last two who share the "Room of Dancing Princesses"). It's your challenge to find out all their names and all their stories. If you do a good job, the Dance Card which is attached to the utterly beautiful exhibition guide, will be completed. But it is not always easy to find them: many questions have to be answered, many hints followed. Some clues are well hidden. Look around, look at places where you don't expect information. This is no ordinary museum experience.

The first room (after having admired the big tree in the "Room of the Beginnings") is the "Room of Royal Sorrows". Which princess may have lived here? Why was she so unhappy? Which sorrows led to the tears which are carefully collected in all those flagons on the table? And when was the last time you cried?



Dancing into a dream: In the "Room of the dancing princesses"



Princesses never sleep alone: Remembering Princess Victoria

Passing the "Room of Enlightenment" you reach the "Seat of Power". How will it feel to sit on it? Think about the opportunities and burdens of having power. You are invited to feel it yourself! Just sit down!

The "Room of Flight" tells a tragic story. Look for the name of the princess to whom it belongs and read the mystical story of her life in the big fairy-tale book that is provided for you here (like in all other rooms! But beware: some of the stories are not easy to understand - you have to think about them, as you do with fairy-tales).

Through the "Room of Palace Time" with its magnificent clock, you reach the "Room of the World, World in a Room". A big drawer in the centre of the room invites you to discover a lot of secrets, and to contemplate on what is important for you.

But there are not only princesses to trace. In the "Room of Royal Secrets" the incredible story of Peter, the feral child, is told, and you can see his den. In the "Gallery of War and Play" the dreams of every little boy come true. Here you can play what boys like - no matter if they are kings or only "little princes". Toy soldiers stand on guard, and they may be used by the visitors, as it is with wonderful classical games. The "Rooms of Lost Childhood" on the other hand reminds you that not all children who lived here were happy and that being a little prince or princess could be a tough life.

Then you'll reach "The Room of a Sleeping Princess". Historical reality and fairy-tales mingle together in this room that is dedicated to one of the most famous residents of Kensington Palace.

Visiting the next room will certainly touch you deeply. It is the "Room of the Dancing Princesses". Look at the wonderful dresses and jewels, and read the touching stories of these two women you will recognise at once.

continued...

The Enchanted Palace (cont.)

Now you will see the last of the seven princesses. But before you meet her, think about all those often invisible and forgotten “good ghosts” who kept the Palace going - the chamber maids, the cooks and servants - in the “Room of Fish and Beer”.

Next, you’ll be witness to a horrible altercation in the “Room of Quarrels”. In this exhibition you don’t only see the things - you can also hear them. Listen closely....and see how a life-long friendship vanishes...

The last room of the exhibition is called “The Gallery of Shadows”. And there they are, the shadows: just look around, you will discover them. In the gloom their presence is more subtle. No, they are hidden. You have to look closely, and in unusual places: the corners, the ceiling. Here you can also make sure that you haven’t missed a dance with one of the princesses. And you can take a last look into their faces. Just stay here for a while and contemplate in peace and quiet everything you’ve heard and seen.

You’ll find that this is not an “easy” exhibition. It doesn’t allow you just to skim the surface, to stroll through glamorous rooms and exclaim “Ah....how nice”. It urges you to dig deeper. Into history, into biographies, into emotions, those of the seven princesses, and your own as well. The handy guide book, called “Kensington Palace. Essential Tales” (£4.99) provides the information you might need. Beautifully done, with historical pictures and insight, it will help you. I’d have liked more pictures though, photographs of the brilliant and mind-boggling installations. But then again, when you leave the exhibition, you’ll find that you’ve gone through a weird and wonderful dream. And dreams are meant to be imprinted in your mind rather than in books, aren’t they?

Though this is only a very small part of the Palace, you can easily spend a long time here. Your visit could last one to one and a half hours, but it is more likely that you’ll get absorbed in all the wonders you will discover and spend two hours and longer, half a day even, and it won’t get boring, not even for children. There is so much to discover, to try, to listen to and to see.

Admission (£12.50 for adults, £11.00 for concessions and £6.25 for children) may seem a little dear, that’s true. But if you are a girl who likes princesses, a woman who likes dresses and gossip, a person who likes a mental challenge, if you are a romantic, if you love the stories behind history, or if you are a curious child...in short, if you just have a taste for the extraordinary, you’ll find that it is worth every penny.

You’ll be enchanted.



Not what to expect in a Royal Palace: Modern and extraordinary decorations.

The Enchanted Palace

The Enchanted Palace Exhibition is running in a section of Kensington Palace while the palace is undertaking a total restoration and refurbishment. The show runs until early 2012. To find out more and to book tickets, please go to www.hrp.org.uk/EnchantedPalace.

About Barbara Mack

Barbara Mack is a German theologian who also studied history and German language and literature. She works as a teacher at a grammar school. She is an enthusiastic traveler with a particular interest in Britain and especially London.

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