

## PARADISIACAL HOUSE OF THE QUEEN.(The Complete Taj Mahal)(Book review)



**From: The Architectural Review | Date: 1/1/2007 | Author: Davey, Peter**

### THE COMPLETE TAJ MAHAL

By Ebba Koch. London: Thames & Hudson, 2006. [pounds sterling]39.95

As everyone knows, the Taj Mahal is a wonder of the world so much so that, until you go there, it seems boring: so symmetrical, stereotyped and iconically exhausted. In fact, it is much more than that. The famous dome and minarets are just part of a great complex, most of which still exists in almost perfect condition. Curiously, for all its fame, there has been no monograph on the monument, a gap that Ebba Koch's new book fills with efficiency. She is professor of art history at Vienna university and an expert on Mughal architecture, so she has been able to set the Taj in a multitude of contexts--among others, historical, topographical, cultural, technological and stylistic.

It was built by Shah Jahan (the most splendid of the Mughal emperors) as a magnificent memorial to his favourite wife, Mumtaz Mahal--remarkable in itself, for seventeenth-century Muslim rulers were not noted for overt attention to their spouses. It was designed (perhaps by the emperor, in the way that Hadrian is supposed to have designed the Pantheon) as what Koch calls the 'paradisiacal house of the queen', and it was intended to take its place as part of a series of magnificent garden pavilions, now nearly all gone, that fragrantly lined the banks of the Yamuna as it flowed through Agra, then the Mughal capital.

Stylistically, the white marble mausoleum is derived from the Muslim tradition of creating octagonal memorial structures that Koch traces back to the seventh-century Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem. The Taj is set in a rigidly gridded Mughal garden with a central canal in which the mausoleum's dome and minarets are reflected; its flanking lawn parterres are still trimmed by bullock-pulled mowers. It is only when you get close to the great red sandstone plinth that you begin to see the extraordinary quality of the work, in which multitudes of plants are raised in relief. Daffodils, tulips, lilies, poppies, irises and roses continue the botanical theme in the marble dados of the mausoleum: gradually, it becomes clear that the whole structure is covered by flowers and Koranic quotations. In the tomb chamber, the white marble dados and the cenotaphs of Shah Jahan and his wife are covered in pietra dura flowers of blue lapis lazuli, red jasper, greenish jade and quartz, yellow marble and many other coloured stones to create ravishing friezes of flowers. So magnificent are these that it used to be thought that they were created by Italian craftsmen, but they surpass any European Renaissance pietra dura work in quantity and sheer elegance. You can almost smell them. Koch describes all this, and much more, with great precision. New measured drawings by Richard Andre Barraud are precise and clear. Looking at the book is the next best thing to going to the place, but even this meticulous coverage cannot represent the awesome moment of coming into the Mughal garden through the great gate, when you see the mausoleum first, quite small framed in the arch of the gate, then, after a few steps, you come out to find the mausoleum, vast, white and delicate dominating all around it.

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