

Spectrum

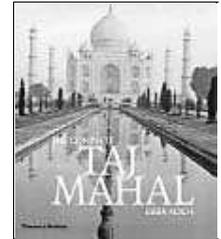
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Design divine

The Taj Mahal represents the heavenly garden where the departed await entry to heaven, according to archaeologist Ebba Koch who spoke to Vimla Patil on her bestseller *The Complete Taj Mahal*

The Taj Mahal, standing majestically on the banks of the River Yamuna in Agra, is known all over the world as the ultimate tribute to the romance between Emperor Shah Jahan and his beloved queen Mumtaz Mahal. Ebba Koch, professor of Asian Art in the Department of Art History at the University of Vienna, Austria, researched the architecture and history of this monument for 30 years.



"My recent book *The Complete Taj Mahal* takes the art and archeology lovers all over the world through a many-splendoured journey into and around this world-famous monument to love," says Koch. "The pictorial journey that I offer in this book is unparalleled for experiencing the glory of that bygone age when emperors engaged innumerable Asian and European architects and a workforce of thousands over 11 years (1632-1643) to create 'a mausoleum that is recognised as the culmination of the Mughal architectural tradition.' The Taj Mahal, one of the seven wonders of the modern world, is certainly what Shah Jahan wanted it to be: 'The masterpiece of the days to come'. The book carries an unprecedented 378 illustrations, 274 of them in colour. It tells the story of how this magnificent edifice was planned, constructed and the beautiful series of gardens that surrounded it on the River Yamuna. It points out the relationship between the mausoleum and the bustling city of Agra in the days of the Mughal Empire.

"Much has been written on the romantic aspects of this majestic structure. There have been films, poetry, literature and every kind of creative effort to narrate the love story of Emperor Shah Jahan and his Queen Mumtaz Mahal. But little has been said about its architecture. Historical research shows that Shah Jahan conceived its design as representing the heavenly Garden of Allah, where the dead await the Day of Judgement. Its design with the surrounding *char-bagh* style gardens and the series of gardens on the riverfront (now lost), was meant to recreate what Shah Jahan thought was the divine garden."

Published this year by Thames and Hudson, the book is one of the year's bestsellers in the art world. Koch has been conducting major surveys on the architectural concepts of the Mughals in the Indian subcontinent. "Agra was a flourishing centre of Mughal art whose foundation is symmetry," she says, "The monuments built by several Mughal emperors in Agra suggest that they intended to create a fusion of their own architectural and artistic style with the genre of the earlier rich and varied heritage of India. The wonderful mixture of virginal white marble used to build the Taj and red sandstone used for building the fort and the environs of the Taj, signify that the colours also combined of two cultures. The floral inlay work on the Taj is symbolic in its motifs and style. The flowers chosen in the designs are associated with funereal services. Every floral ornamentation – the famous *pietre dure* inlay in white marble with precious stones and the rich relief carving in marble and red sandstone – have symbolic meaning. The quotation from the *Koran* that is carved in perfect symmetry on the entrance arch says that all souls of the dead wait in the Garden of Allah before the Day of Judgement arrives. The Taj is a replication of this garden, where the souls of the emperor and his beloved queen await their final departure to the presence of Allah. The ancillary constructions and tombs, the guesthouse and quarters of the caretakers of the tombs – all had a specific meaning in the complete plan of the monument. So also, the caravanserai and the bazaar completed the complex, though these are now



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all but lost."

Koch reconstructs the spectacular row of gardens that Shah Jahan created along the River Yamuna, because of the significance of water to a tomb or mausoleum. "The symbolisms and techniques used in the construction of the entire Taj complex are absolutely fascinating," she concludes, adding that the history of Taj becomes even more interesting from the 18th century when the British colonial rulers realised its importance. Few people know that Queen Mumtaz Mahal (earlier Arjumand Begum) was the third wife of Emperor Shah Jahan (earlier Prince Khurram) and had thirteen children. She died at the age of 39 in her 14th childbirth on June 17, 1631 in Burhanpur on the banks of the Tapti, where she had accompanied her husband. She was first buried in the Zainabad Garden in that city. Legend says that before dying, Mumtaz Mahal obtained a promise from her husband that he would build a grand memorial to immortalise their love. Accordingly, her body was exhumed and brought six months later to Agra, to be buried in the Taj Mahal. The cenotaph in the Taj is a solemn structure and built in keeping with the Emperor's promise!"Koch has been architectural adviser to the Taj Mahal Conservation Collaborative since 2001 and her earlier book *Mughal Architecture* is the standard work on the subject. She lectured on *Complete Taj Mahal* during a recent lecture tour in India.

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