Neuschwanstein Castle

Neuschwanstein Castle was commenced by the Bavarian King Ludwig II in 1869 and never completed. He saw it as a monument to medieval culture and kingship, which he revered and wanted to imitate. Built and furnished in medieval styles but equipped with what at the time was the latest technology, it is the most famous work of historicism and the embodiment of German idealism.

Formative influences and models

The father of Ludwig II, Maximilian II, acquired the nearby Hohenschwangau Castle, seat of the knights of Schwangau in the Middle Ages, and rebuilt it from 1832 in the Gothic style. Here Ludwig, who was born in 1845, developed a passion for the Middle Ages. He learned much about the legends and history of the period from the murals and through avid reading. From 1861 he was decisively influenced by his encounter with the music dramas of Richard Wagner, who heightened the effect of the medieval sagas with incredibly powerful music. Ludwig first saw ‘Lohengrin’ and ‘Tannhäuser’. These were followed by ‘Tristan und Isolde’ and ‘Der Ring des Nibelungen’, and Wagner’s adaptation of the saga of the Grail King Parzival (‘Parsifal’), with whom Ludwig II identified in his later years and with whom he was identified by Wagner. One of the most famous castles in Germany, the Wartburg, had been renovated and refurnished in 1867 and became a direct model for Neuschwanstein. In the 19th century, building in historical styles meant ‘perfecting’ them, also with the help of modern technology and historical studies. As a thoroughgoing idealist, Ludwig II clung to an already completely outdated belief in such perfection.
From the outset Ludwig II wanted his 'New Castle' to have a larger and more magnificent version of the Wartburg's 'Singers' Hall' as a monument to the chivalric culture of the Middle Ages. The final result was a combination of the motifs from two Wartburg halls, the 'Singers' Hall' and the 'Festival Hall', which however were not intended for performances or even festivals. The other commemorative room, the Throne Hall, was only added in 1881, when in his later years Ludwig II also wanted a version of the legendary Grail Hall corresponding to the description of medieval poets, in order to glorify Christian kingship. This room is however also a reference to his own dynasty. The room programme, the most comprehensive and complicated of the 19th century, was designed by Ludwig II himself, who was well read and interested in many different areas. For structural reasons it had a steel construction like a modern functional building, which was encased in plaster. Each of the adjacent residential rooms is dedicated to a saga. From 1880 a 'cabinet' was turned into a small artificial grotto, based on the Venus grotto in 'Tannhäuser' with coloured electric lighting and a real waterfall.

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Although heavily in debt, Ludwig II always wanted to go on building. When the banks threatened to seize his property, the government had him certified insane and interned him in Berg Palace. Here, on 13 June 1886, he died in Lake Starnberg. His 'New Castle', which he now thought of not as the Wartburg but as the Grail Castle, and which no outsider was ever allowed to enter, was opened to the public from 1 August 1886. It was only named Neuschwanstein after his death and is one of the bestknown and most frequently visited and photographed buildings in the world.