

Lifestyle

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People perform during a flash mob, for the launch of a new makeup line by German fashion designer Karl Lagerfeld on Place Vendome in Paris. — AFP

'MAD' KING'S LOST GIFT TO WAGNER GETS RARE SHOW

Kept safe in a silk-lined box by its Belgian "custodian" lies a piece of the historic legacy of German composer Richard Wagner that was nearly lost forever. The Lohengrin vase, made of porcelain, was given to Wagner more than 150 years ago by Ludwig II, the "mad king" of Bavaria, whose passion for building fairy-tale castles was matched only by his love of Wagner's operas. It was believed lost after Allied bombing in World

War II destroyed much of Bayreuth, the town where Wagner built the legendary theatre that now hosts an annual music festival. But one fragment emerged after the war and was taken to the Belgian capital, Brussels, in 1949, where it has largely remained out of sight in the intervening years. A group of Wagner devotees recently received a special viewing during a production in Brussels of the opera "Lohengrin"—the work that first bewitched Ludwig—and an AFP reporter was given a rare glimpse.



Belgian organ builder Partrick Collon displays in Brussels a piece of the "Lohengrin Cup", created by Ludwig II of Bavaria for late German composer Richard Wagner. — AFP photos

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Patrick Collon, the renowned organ maker and art expert who now owns the fragment, said that "Ludwig was barely 18 years old when he started thinking about this vase, and he obsessed about it for six months. His diaries are full of it." "After Ludwig became king he sought out Wagner, who was hiding from his creditors, all over central Europe. He found him a year later and gave him this vase in May 1865 for his 52nd birthday," added Collon, 75.



A piece of the "Lohengrin Cup", created by Ludwig II of Bavaria for the late German composer Richard Wagner.

'First creation'

Saved from the ruins of the defeated Nazi Germany in 1945, the fragment at first looks insignificant, consisting of just the blue and gold base of the urn-like vase, and part of one rounded side. But it sheds an intriguing light on the extraordinary friendship between the young Ludwig and the older Wagner. The eccentric Ludwig is best known for designing the fantastical Neuschwanstein near Munich which served as the model for Disney's

Sleeping Beauty Castle. A minor king under whom Bavaria lost its independence to Prussia, Ludwig has nevertheless gone down in history as a patron of the arts, especially of the equally erratic Wagner.

Ludwig was just 15 and infused by the old German legends when he first saw Wagner's "Lohengrin", based on the traditional story of the Swan Knight, and which later became the inspiration for Neuschwanstein Castle. Two years later, Ludwig became obsessed by creating a porcelain vase featuring scenes from Lohengrin. "It was Ludwig's first creation. He didn't make it himself but he imagined it, he dreamed up the scenes that were painted on it by his drawing teacher," the German landscape painter Leopold Rottmann, said Collon.

Rottmann's watercolours of the receptacle—the only surviving evidence of what it looked like in full-show four scenes from the opera and have a lid and handles in the shape of a swan. The fragment in Brussels shows a gilded swan, the tragic heroine, Elsa, on a balcony, and the two villains Telramund and Ortrud. It is the only piece that survived the Allied bombing of Bayreuth on April 5, 1945. Two other similar vases — a Tannhaeuser Cup and a Flying Dutchman Cup—were destroyed on that day.

'Horrors of war'

"It was said that it had disappeared and that nothing was left of it. But in 1949 the Wagner brothers (Wagner's grandsons Wolfgang and Wieland Wagner) were able to get a piece in a pretty box to a Belgian benefactor," said Collon. "At the end of her life, she gave it to a musician friend. When the friend died it was passed to me."

The benefactor—identified by Collon only as Juliette, contributed to the post-war reopening of the Bayreuth festival in 1951 and was nicknamed "Joan of Arc" by the Wagner brothers. The Brussels fragment is an object of fascination for music lovers. "A smart friend once said to me: 'in the end, it's moving because it's broken,'" said Collon. "This fragment has survived all the horrors of war." — AFP



A piece of the "Lohengrin Cup", created by Ludwig II of Bavaria for the late German composer Richard Wagner.



This picture in Brussels shows a piece of the "Lohengrin Cup", created by Ludwig II of Bavaria for the late German composer Richard Wagner.

Prince Harry and Meghan Markle: A tale of love at first sight



A pedestrian walks dogs past waxwork figures of Britain's Prince Harry and his US fiancée Meghan Markle, during a photo opportunity arranged by Madame Tussauds, near Windsor Castle in Windsor, west of London yesterday, as preparations continue ahead of the forthcoming Royal wedding. — AFP

It was love at first sight for Prince Harry and Meghan Markle, who both quickly sensed their brief encounter on a blind date could blossom into something much, much bigger. They were set up by a mutual friend when US actress Markle was passing through London in July 2016, with the couple later revealing they knew little about each other. The speed of their relationship surprised them both. "The fact that I fell in love with Meghan so incredibly quickly was a confirmation to me that all the stars were aligned. Everything was just perfect," said Harry.

Less than two years later, they will tie the knot at Windsor Castle on Saturday, sealing a relationship that rapidly grew outside of the media spotlight—and survived when it went public in explosive fashion. When the couple first met for a drink, both were taken aback. She was 34 and a divorcee of three years; he 31 and with a few fundered relationships and his 10-year army career recently behind him. Harry had never heard of Markle or watched "Suits", the US television legal drama series she had starred in since 2011. "I was beautifully surprised when I walked into that room and saw her," he recalled, and thought to himself: "I'm going to really have to up my game here!"

Bonding in Botswana

Bonding over their passion for the good causes they represented, they immediately set up a second date for the following day. A few weeks later, he persuaded her to join him camping out for five days in Botswana, which Harry called a "huge leap" to take so soon—but one that paid off. "We were really by ourselves, which was crucial to me to make sure that we had a chance to get to know each other," he said. As Markle continued filming "Suits" in Toronto, the pair never went longer than two weeks apart.

Their romance was under cover for the first five or six months, and largely

conducted through nights in behind closed doors. "We were able to really have so much time just to connect," said Markle. The prince said the royal family had been very supportive of the relationship, including his grandparents Queen Elizabeth II and Prince Philip, his father Prince Charles, as well as his brother Prince William and his wife Kate.

Harry said they had frank conversations about what her future could entail and found it a "huge relief" to have finally found someone comfortable with the pressure and lifelong job that he comes attached with. Royal author Andrew Morton, who penned a biography of Markle, said the speed with which she fell for Harry was surprising as the TV star was a lifelong cautious character. "He was more of the supplicant than Meghan. He had more to gain and Meghan has more to lose by her agreeing to be his bride," Morton told AFP, in an unusual role reversal for the prince.

'This is not a game'

Harry publicly confirmed they were dating in November 2016 with a highly unusual statement blasting racist "abuse and harassment" directed towards her. "It is not right that a few months into a relationship with him that Ms Markle should be subjected to such a storm," his communications secretary Jason Knauft said. "This is not a game—it is her life and his." The angry statement, going way beyond the lengths Harry went to for previous girlfriends, confirmed how seriously he was treating this relationship. Eventually, Harry proposed in November 2017. The couple were having a cozy night in at Nottingham Cottage, the two-bedroom home they now share in the grounds of London's Kensington Palace, roasting a chicken. "It was just an amazing surprise. It was so sweet and natural and very romantic. He got on one knee," the actress said. —AFP