

# CHAMBERS OF GOLD

A PHOTOGRAPHIC SERIES  
OF STATE BEDS  
BY DAVID LEVENTI

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WORDS MARVIN HEIFERMAN

*A bed, elevated from the ordinary to the extraordinary, transforms the mere bedchamber into a symbol of power. Fundamental change in the world political scenario has made public some spaces in which rulers of the past have granted entry only to privileged guests, into what were essentially reception rooms of the most intimate degree, and whereupon birth and death, tragedy and renewal, have been decided and witnessed. The photographer David Leventi's wish to access the bedchambers of some of history's mighty and powerful has been prompted, in his own words, by his curiosity surrounding "the notion that some element of genius or insight comes through sleep, at the most private of moments".*





The State Bedchamber  
Chatsworth House, England

*opening spread, on the right*  
Bedchamber of King Louis XIV  
Versailles Palace, France

*opening spread, on the left*  
Incomparable Moiré in Rouge  
by Schumacher

*“It is a common experience that a problem difficult at night is resolved  
in the morning after the committee of sleep has worked on it.”*

*John Steinbeck*

Early in human history, a few hundred thousand years ago, beds were humble — depressions found or dug into the earth by nomadic peoples, filled in with leaves, straw, ashes and animal skins — more situations than things. Mattresses came later. The oldest extant one, from 80,000 years ago and unearthed by archeologists in South Africa in 2020, has an outer layer woven from reeds and grasses and was stuffed with other varieties of plant matter. In millennia that followed, ancient Egyptians raised mattresses and bed-frames up on legs and away from dirt, ground-level insects, rodents and snakes. They topped them with linen sheets and solid headrests made of stone, wood or metal. By the time the Roman Empire fell, beds were more comfortable and specialized. There were chamber beds for sleeping, marriage beds, table beds where people ate, beds to study in and beds to transport the dead to their funeral pyres.

A few years ago, David Leventi began making photographs of bedding solutions of yet another vintage and pedigree, and in locations where European kings, queens and aristocrats rested nightly between the sixteenth and nineteenth centuries. Leventi’s prior body of work — gorgeously detailed, large-format color photographs of empty, ornate opera houses built during a similar time span — often hinted at multiple themes, among them architectural, decorative and cultural continuity. These recent, more intimate, very formal still photographs hit similar notes. But when you engage long enough with them to get beyond the deluxe, matchy-matchy interiors they so carefully present, more complicated thoughts and historical narratives arise.

While it’s the luxurious detailing that makes these images pleasurable, the omnipresence of curtaining gives them an unexpected edge by suggesting things unseen. Leventi has described these photographs as being about the “*space of power*,” which helps to explain why, as calm and lovely as they are, these interiors are provocative. They trigger speculation: What took place in these bedchambers that supported such lavishness? Who got to lord over who before retiring for the night? What bedside diplomatic schemes

were hatched, what eroticism explored, what descendants conceived? What finery was donned and removed in these showiest of places? With valets, maids and servants often only steps away, what was and wasn’t private?

These elegant images, paradoxically, tend to lead to untidy tidy thoughts: how over-the-top aesthetics sometimes relate not only to taste and privilege, but to unhappy endings. According to palace inventories, among the 413 beds belonging to the French “Sun King,” Louis XIV, were some so sumptuously pearl-encrusted and heavily embroidered with silver and gold that the velvets beneath them failed to show through. Leventi’s photographs of carved, gilded and inlaid empty beds — beyond enumerating the trappings of overly refined, high-maintenance lifestyles — also lead you to consider the vulnerabilities of the seemingly invulnerable. Marie Antoinette was so reviled for her lavish Versailles lifestyle and profligate spending that she became known as “*Madame Déficit*” before French revolutionaries carted her off to the guillotine. King Ludwig II of Bavaria, who rose to power at the age of eighteen, withdrew from the rigors of ruling and spent so much of his attention and resources on castle construction and decoration that governmental ministers declared him insane.

Should your eyes and/or mind wander, while looking at these stately images, don’t be surprised. If you catch yourself entertaining then-versus-now home-furnishing comparisons or having boudoir-related thoughts, chalk that up, too, to Leventi’s pictures’ canny conceptual sidebars. Predominantly about the past, they can’t help but remind us of contemporary shelter magazine spreads, the ones that obsess over what we now call the “primary” bedrooms of today’s trendsetters, powerbrokers and celebrities. What’s interesting about Leventi’s new project and, in fact, all other “George Washington slept here...” sorts of photographs, beyond all they depict, is what they mirror back to us about the excitement and spectrum of things we feel — from curiosity to awe to *schadenfreude* — when carpets so relentlessly, so perfectly, so beautifully match the drapes. ■



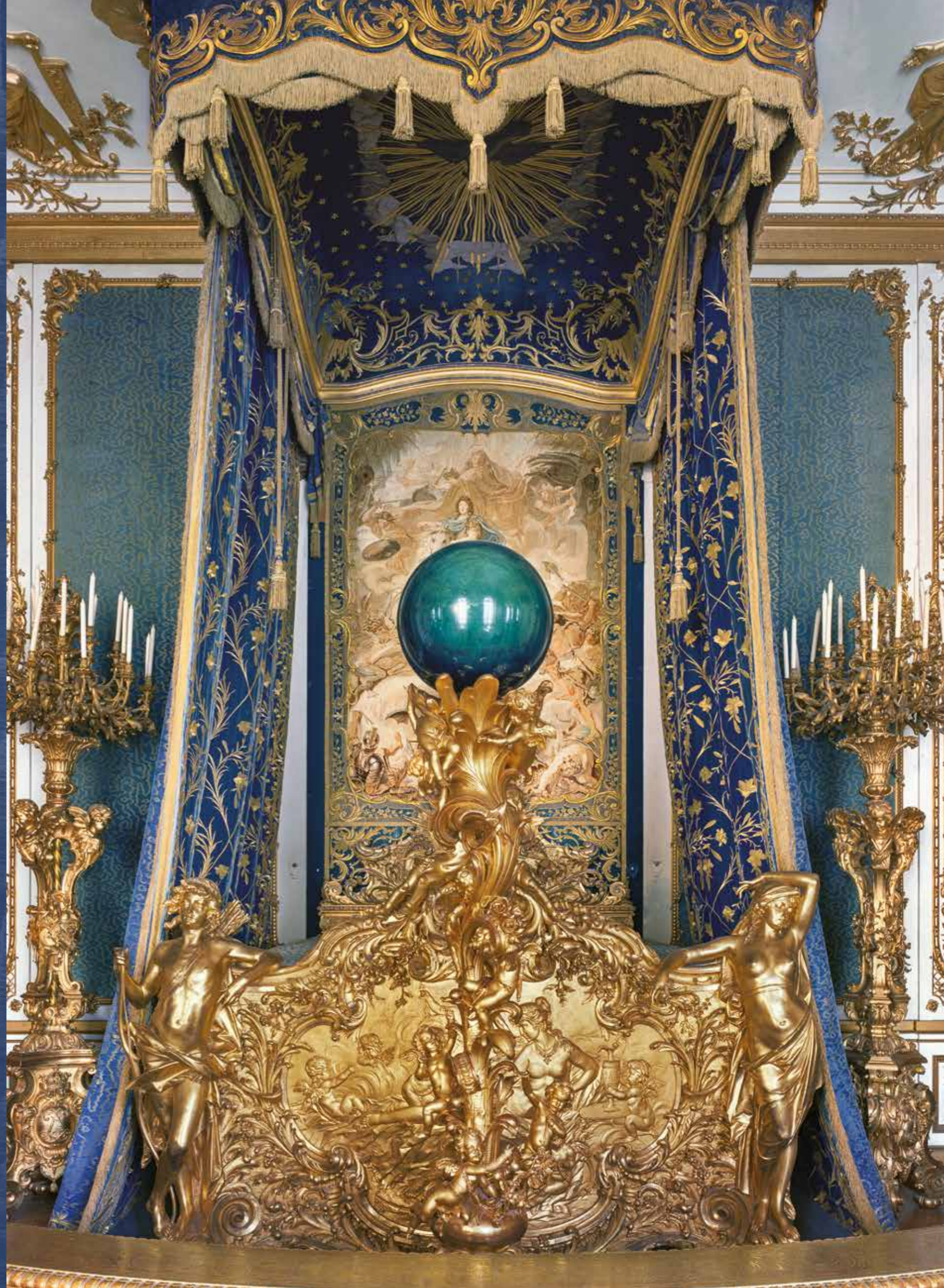
The State Bedchamber  
Herrenchiemsee Palace, Germany

*on this page*  
*Incomparable Moiré in Sky by Schumacher*



The Embroidered Bedchamber  
Houghton Hall, England

*on this page*  
*Incomparable Moiré in Sky by Schumacher*



Bedroom of King Ludwig II  
Herrenchiemsee Palace, Germany

*on this page*  
*Incomparable Moiré in Marine by Schumacher*



Green Velvet Bedchamber  
Houghton Hall, England

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*Incomparable Moiré in Vert* by Schumacher



Bedchamber of Empress Maria Feodorovna  
Pavlovsk Palace, Russia

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*Incomparable Moiré in Citron by Schumacher*



Bedchamber of Queen Marie-Antoinette  
Château de Versailles, France

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*Incomparable Moiré in Rose by Schumacher*