

Soane's large-scale watercolours illustrating the Classical Orders: from the earliest and simplest Tuscan (left), to the Corinthian (centre), which was, according to legend, inspired by acanthus leaves. The Ionic Order (right) had curved capitals like ram's horns

For the love of Order

Jeremy Musson revels in an exhibition devoted to powerful images of the great Classical Orders, which provides a vivid insight into the world of Classical architecture

FROM the Renaissance onwards, the Classical Orders (rules for the details and proportions of columns) were appealed to as part of the rediscovery of ancient wisdom. For centuries since, architects have tried to recapture the scale and quality of ancient Classical architecture in modern work—indeed, some still do today. In the early 19th century, when Sir John Soane became the RA's Professor of Architecture, he made the systematic exposition of the Orders a central part of his lecture programme.

Soane set out with industry and discipline to explain what the Orders were, how they had arisen, how they should be used—and how they should not. For these purposes he had, as for all his lectures, a series of large-scale watercolours drawn up, to be used as modern lecturers use slides or PowerPoint

held up by his pupils in front of an audience of RA students.

Soane's assistants prepared the images, and used exactness in detail and emphatic light and shade so that they could be easily seen (or rather read) from a distance. Some 30 of these beguiling images, selected from the 1,000 or so that survive, are the basis for a new exhibition at the Sir John Soane's Museum. Most of them have never been exhibited before, and thus the colour, line and suggested shadow are as vivid as they would have been 200 years ago.

Here, we meet the Orders: the Tuscan (then believed to be the earliest and simplest, associated with the post-and-lintel construction of 'the Primitive Hut'), the Doric (also early, plain and solid), the Ionic (with curled volutes, compared to ram's horns, for its capital) and the Corinthian (the most decorated capital, which was

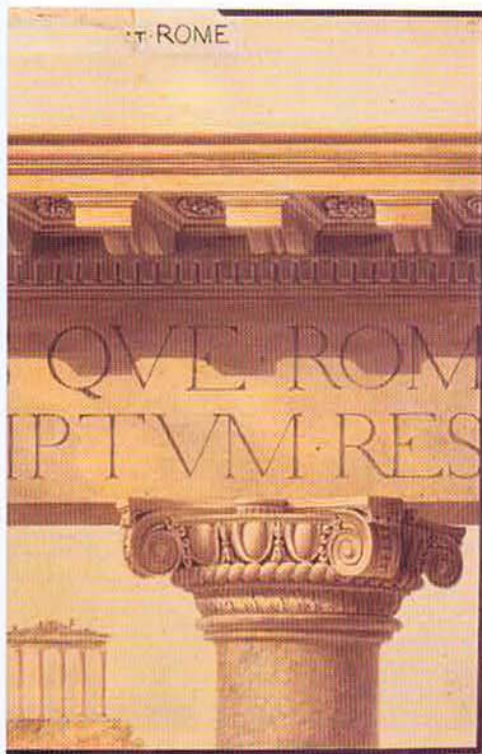
'For Soane's lectures, he had a series of large-scale watercolours used as modern lecturers use slides'

modelled on the leaves of the acanthus plant). These lecture drawings explore the myths of their origins, and the traditional associations. The Doric was considered masculine, the Ionic slender, graceful and feminine, as was the Corinthian.

Soane was suspicious of the ancient origin myths, although he spelt them out nonetheless. Rather, he believed in going back to basics, that the origin of all architecture could be traced to forms of nature. He looked to the

authenticity of the Greek versions of the Orders over the head of the Roman and Palladian versions. He was scathing of the Composite Order, a Roman confection, and he had comparative images drawn to refute the view that the Classical Orders evolved from Ancient Egyptian architecture. He scorned the 18th-century inventions of the French and Britannic orders.

Soane himself travelled not only to Rome, but also to Sicily, where the surviving Greek Doric temple at Paestum had only been recently discovered. Thus, his hard-won encounter with the earlier manifestation of Classical architecture gave him an exciting edge of authority. His textual authority came from his reading of Vitruvius's 1st-century-BC architectural treatise, the only treatise on the subject to survive from the ancient world, although it was



architectural models. Soane was an avid collector of architectural books, and among the gems here is a mid-15th-century north-Italian album, filled with ebullient freehand ink-and-wash sketches of capitals of varying orders, as fresh as if they had been drawn yesterday.

To the Renaissance generations, as to those of Soane and his pupils, the Classical Orders were an everyday part of life, and it is curious to think how ubiquitous they are in British architecture, from town houses to country houses, from colleges to railway stations. To understand them better, anybody with even the most modest interest in architecture would benefit from a tour of this engaging, compact exhibition.

'Order: Myth, Meaning, and Beauty in Architecture', at the Sir John Soane's Museum, 13, Lincoln's Inn Fields, London WC2 (020-7440 4246; www.soane.org) runs until January 30, 2010

certainly not the only one written.

This exhibition has been curated with great sensitivity by Dr Jerzy Kierkuc-Bielinski. The main lecture images were never framed or mounted and seem to float against a neutral background, accompanied by

Next week Anne Dunn: early works at the Redfern Gallery

The origin myth of the Corinthian Order

Vitruvius himself set out, in Book IV of *De Architectura*, the unlikely but beguiling myth of the Corinthian Order. 'A Corinthian virgin of marriageable age fell victim to a violent disorder. After her interment, her nurse, collecting in a basket those articles to which she had shown a partiality when alive, carried them to her tomb, and placed a tile on the basket... The basket was accidentally placed on the root of an acanthus plant, which, pressed by the weight, shot forth, towards spring, its stems and large foliage, and in the course of its growth reached the angles of the tile and thus formed volutes at the extremities. Callimachus, who, for his great ingenuity and taste was called by the Athenians Catatechnos, observed the basket and the delicacy of the foliage which surrounded it. Pleased with the form and novelty of the combination, he constructed from this hint thus afforded, columns of this species around Corinth, and arranged its proportions by perfect rules.' Whatever his view of the myth, Soane believed 'art cannot go beyond the Corinthian order: the whole is of the most correct proportions and of the greatest variety'.



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...from this nightmare

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