

Soane's Sublime Alter Ego

J.M. Gandy "Architectural composition to show the comparative characteristics of thirteen selected styles of architecture."

The line separating genius from madness can be perilously thin, and watching an artist teeter between the two can be thrilling. That adjective best describes *Joseph Gandy: Visionary Architect*, an exhibition at Richard L. Feigen & Co. in New York through July 22. This first-ever North American survey on Gandy, who was long known only to architectural antiquarians, is an eye-opening event in every way.

Because Gandy (1771-1843) devoted so much of his career to depicting the designs of Sir John Soane, his posthumous reputation has waned and waxed with his employer's. But they've been on a roll since 1999, when Gillian Darley's acclaimed Soane biography and the superb Soane retrospective at London's Royal Academy

confirmed him as England's greatest architect between Hawksmoor and Lutyens. **The Sir John Soane's Museum Foundation, New York's poshest architectural fan club**, has even made him fashionable, a fact not lost on art dealer Richard Feigen, a generous supporter of the group.

Many people wrongly assume that all classically trained architects were master draftsmen. Soane saw his shortcomings and shrewdly hired Gandy, also a practicing architect, to give his presentation drawings the irresistible mix of drama, sex appeal, and slight vulgarity that clients always fall for. The men were matched in nervous energy, relentless perfectionism, and obsessive attention to detail. It sometimes seems as though Gandy completed Soane's architectural thinking for him, showing precisely how a finished building would look in a specific setting, unlike the vague terrain of typical renderings.

Many of their collaborative schemes were imaginary, including hypothetical views of Soane's buildings in ruins, a Romantic conceit influenced by the prints of Giovanni Battista Piranesi that were all the rage during Soane's youth. The combination of what Gandy described to Soane as "my ready hand and your mind" was unbeatable. In certain respects, Gandy sacrificed his ambitions in service of a vastly superior talent. But Soane—irrational, irascible, and vindictive even to his nearest and dearest—literally repaid the debt by supporting Gandy through his lean later years. Gandy, perhaps as aware of his limitations in design as Soane was in drawing, followed his star, whose ascendance now illuminates this fascinating fellow traveler.

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