

Sir John Soane's Model Room

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Sir John Soane (1753–1837) was born the son of a bricklayer in Goring-on-Thames, near Reading, England. He began his architectural career at age fifteen, joining the office of George Dance the Younger in the City of London. When he was eighteen, he enrolled at the Royal Academy as an architectural student, attending the evening lectures given by the Professor of Architecture Thomas Sandby, and in the same year starting work for Henry Holland. It was during these years that Soane must have first encountered the antique world, and especially the buildings of ancient Rome that so inspired him in his later work: the Temple of Vesta at Tivoli; the Temple of Castor and Pollux in the Forum, hailed since the Renaissance as the most beautiful example of the Corinthian order in the world; the Pantheon; and the ruins of the Emperor Hadrian's Villa at Tivoli.

In 1776, Soane won the Royal Academy Gold Medal for Architecture, and as a result was awarded a traveling scholarship paid for by King George III. He set off for Italy at 5 A.M. on March 18, 1778, a date he remembered with nostalgia for the rest of his life. After arriving in Rome on May 2, Soane was soon writing to a friend that his attention was entirely taken up in seeing and examining the numerous and inestimable remains of antiquity, and of the "zeal and attachment" he felt for them. He asked his friend to imagine "with what impatience I have waited for the scenes I now enjoy."

Soane's time in Italy was spent visiting antique, Renaissance, and contemporary buildings from Genoa, Vicenza, and Verona in the north to Paestum and Sicily in the south. He often took detailed measurements of monuments by climbing to dizzying heights and dropping a plumb line or using a measuring rod, and he filled many journals with notes and sketches.

Soane returned to London in 1780 and set up his own architectural practice. He married an heiress, Elizabeth Smith, in 1784. Using contacts made in Rome to good effect, he rapidly made a name for himself. In 1788, he

was appointed architect to the Bank of England, a job he later described as the "pride and boast of my life." The Bank was his masterpiece—a miniature city within the City, with fortified walls, triumphal arches, courtyards, and vast top-lit banking halls reminiscent of Roman Baths. Soane remained as the Bank's Architect for forty-five years, only retiring at the age of eighty in 1833. His other masterpieces include Britain's first public art gallery, the Dulwich Picture Gallery; dining rooms at Nos. 10 and 11 Downing Street; work at numerous country houses; and the Soane tomb, one of only two Grade I listed tombs in London. Soane had a long association with the Royal Academy of Arts in London, where he was elected Professor of Architecture in 1806, a post he held for thirty-one years. In 1831, he was knighted by King William IV. Despite failing eyesight, Soane continued working until shortly before his death in 1837 at the age of eighty-four.

Soane is regarded as the father of the architectural profession in Britain, and his work still provides inspiration to architects across the world, from Arata Isozaki in Japan to Richard Meier at the Getty Center in Los Angeles to Richard MacCormac at the Ruskin Archive in Leicester. England's famous red telephone box was inspired by Soane's designs.

Sir John Soane's house, museum, and library at No. 13 Lincoln's Inn Fields, London, has been a public museum since the early nineteenth century. Soane moved into the square in the 1790s, when he bought, demolished, and rebuilt No. 12 (1792–94). After his appointment as Professor of Architecture at the Royal Academy, he went on to acquire, demolish, and rebuild No. 13, a larger property, to accommodate his ever-growing collection of architectural antiquities. When he was over seventy, he bought, demolished, and rebuilt No. 14 (1824–25), extending his museum premises across the rear of that house. Throughout the whole period, Soane also made continuous alterations to his "Museum," adding more objects to his arrange-

ments, seeking always to enhance the "poetic effects" and picturesque qualities of the architectural setting and to create didactic displays for the benefit of his students. One of the last of these alterations was his Model Room, created in 1834–35 in what had been his wife's bedroom on the second floor. The room housed imaginative displays in which historic and contemporary architectural models, including depictions of antique buildings in both ruined and reconstructed states, were displayed alongside one another, surrounded by framed drawings of Soane's own works.

In 1833, Soane negotiated an Act of Parliament to settle and preserve his house and collection for the benefit of "amateurs and students" in architecture, painting, and sculpture. The Act stated that the arrangements of objects must be preserved "as nearly as possible" as they were left at the time of his death. The Soane Museum, with its evocative displays, remains one of the world's greatest house museums.

Soane's friend Isaac D'Israeli wrote to him in a letter of 1835, "Your museum is permanently magical, for the enchantments of art are eternal. Some in poems have raised fine architectural edifices, but most rare have been those who have discovered when they had finished their house, if such a house can ever be said to be finished, that they had built a poem."

Soon after Soane's death in 1837 his Model Room was disbanded to make way for curatorial offices. This represented not only the loss of one of Soane's most evocative interiors, but also to some degree diluted the centrality of architecture to Soane's conception of his house and collection.

The acquisition and restoration of No. 14 Lincoln's Inn Fields, next door to the Museum, has made it possible to plan the restoration of the Model Room as part of a program of works which, if fundraising is successful, will be completed by 2012 and will see the whole of the second floor, including Soane's Bedroom, Bath Room, Oratory, and Mrs. Soane's Morning Room, restored.

For images of Sir John Soane's model room and models, see pages 26, 92–93, and 170–171.