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## In London, More Than An Eyeful

By *Edward Schneider*  
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Even though they are as likely to design blobs as they are traditional buildings, today's architects are still taught the classical forms of ancient Greece and Rome. It certainly was gospel in the late 18th and early 19th centuries, when Sir John Soane practiced in London.

Soane (1753-1837) was the architect of the Dulwich Picture Gallery and Chelsea Hospital and was the official "surveyor," or house architect, to the Bank of England. His lucrative practice enabled him to cram his house full of ancient and not-so-ancient friezes, capitals, statuary and funerary objects, architectural drawings, paintings; you name it.

That may sound like either the attic from hell or a museum. Soane viewed it as the latter: Even in his lifetime, budding architects and other visitors were welcome to tramp around the house -- except in bad weather, when they would have muddied the carpets. And, by act of Parliament, on his death it became the aptly named Sir John Soane's Museum.

Most museum-goers have seen depictions of the way art used to be hung in galleries: walls virtually covered in canvases from edge to edge and from eye level to ceiling. It certainly makes an impression, but perhaps too much of one: It can be overwhelming, and it surely makes the works difficult to see.

Well, as you approach the Soane, get ready to be overwhelmed. The itinerary starts gently enough, in the dining room/library, which, like the other domestic rooms on view, is full of objects but not entirely stuffed with them. Immediately, you should note Soane's canny use of light: There are mirrors everywhere to maximize available illumination. As you walk through the additions to the house, which were built for displaying the collection, you will see all manner of windows, skylights and other openings that enable light to get down even into the basement, assisted by more mirrors of various sizes and types.

What, then, is all this light being shed on? It is tempting to simply make a list of the museum's contents, but that would require a special supplement to today's Post. One item is a little drawing (in the dining room) of the tomb Soane designed for his wife. It's amusing because its dome inspired the design of the iconic red British phone booth (first deployed in 1926 and fast disappearing).

Then, in a tiny study there is a plan of the house's system of drainpipes, a useful reminder that architecture is not just about the design of monuments for the ages. From the study (in which, by the way, you will not want to try to swing a cat), you can look out the window at the recently restored Pasticcio, a column that, in a way, illustrates architectural history: It is made up of Roman and Norman fragments and is topped with (what else?) a cast-iron pineapple.

As you move along, you will be distracted by hundreds of sculptural fragments, but you must not fail to look at the picture gallery off to the right. It contains some treasures, including the original paintings of Hogarth's "The Rake's Progress" series and, tucked behind a panel, a painting of Soane's Bank of England building as it might have looked as a 2,000-year-old ruin (had it survived; it was mostly demolished in a 20th-century redesign, an act one architectural historian called "the greatest architectural crime, in the City of London, of the twentieth century").



Sir John Soane's London house became a museum after the architect's death in 1837. (By Martin Charles)

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Finally, down in the crypt, as it's called, is the Egyptian sarcophagus of King Seti I (around 1300 B.C.), carved out of one massive block of limestone. It is pretty spectacular in itself, but, as with much in the Soane, viewing it is enhanced by a story: Soane bought it in 1824 after the British Museum wouldn't pay the asking price of 2,000 pounds. Once he installed it, a feat that involved partial demolition and restoration of the building, he celebrated with a three-day party, inviting nearly a thousand guests.

The Soane is one of those quirky museums you can make of what you will. You can spend 45 minutes here marveling at the seeming goofiness of it all, or you can take a lot longer and get a real sense of what Soane and his contemporaries were all about.

*Sir John Soane's Museum*, 13 Lincoln's Inn Fields, London, <http://www.soane.org>. Open Tuesday-Saturday, 10 a.m.-5 p.m., plus 6-9 p.m. on the first Tuesday of each month. Free; Saturday morning guided tour about \$6.60.

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