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# *Sir John Soane's Museum: A Testament to One Man's Taste*

A complex of three houses rebuilt some two hundred years ago, the London museum is packed with books, art and artifacts collected by the boundlessly curious English architect.

By Willard Spiegelman

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The facade of Sir John Soane's Museum PHOTO: GARETH GARDNER

## *London*

*Si monumentum requiris, circumspice* (“If you’re seeking his memorial, look around”): Christopher Wren’s epitaph in London’s St. Paul’s Cathedral might also be invoked on behalf of Sir John Soane. His house and museum at Lincoln’s Inn Fields constitute a legacy greater than all his other buildings (primarily the Bank of England—now merely the façade—and the Dulwich Picture Gallery). Three conjoined properties offer a look into the mind and the collecting mania of England’s leading architect of the late Georgian period, whose vision received its

fullest realization 200 years ago (1823-24) when he bought and proceeded to restore the last of his three houses.

A bricklayer's son who made good, Soane (1753-1837) left his house to the nation, to be preserved in amber with his thousands of possessions intact. The collections contain 30,000 architectural drawings; 7,783 books (including a 1623 First Folio of Shakespeare); illuminated medieval manuscripts, stained glass, and mosaics; plus three-dimensional objects of every sort. Bronzes, urns, busts, marble statues, plaques, Etruscan vases, columns, plaster casts, terracotta pots and random fragments, as well as an Egyptian sarcophagus and Chinese chairs, fill almost every inch of space. If the Victoria and Albert Museum is Britain's imperial attic, Sir John Soane's Museum is one man's miniaturized autobiography as well as his creation.



Bust of Soane by the sculptor Francis Chantrey PHOTO: JOHN STEAD

Walking through it can be vertiginous and claustrophobic, with narrow corridors, and vistas both vertical and horizontal competing for your attention. The experience is also enchanting and revelatory. Small enclosed spaces open onto larger ones. Skylights and domed ceilings illuminate inner spaces; grills set into the floors admit light even into the basement. Modest courtyards make greenery available to the eye deep inside the house. With ship-shape efficiency (is it cramped, or is it cozy?), Soane managed to find space for everything, including the multiple items that were part of an architect's professional studio. One little room provides work stations for his apprentices. This well-lighted

space includes a patent model for laying sewers, as well as drawing instruments and casts of architectural details from Roman temples.

Soane seems to have thought of everything. He accumulated an encyclopedic record of architectural history as well as evidence of his personal tastes. Like many architects, he operated best when challenged by limitations. Everything has a purpose as well as a place. "Look around" is an easy command.

Soane took the obligatory Grand Tour of the Continent as a young man, in 1778-80, returning to England 120 pounds in debt, too poor to have brought anything back with him. The Continent then essentially closed down to tourists, owing to the French Revolution and the Napoleonic Wars. Soane managed two shorter, later trips to France, in 1814 and 1819. Otherwise, he remained at home. He married well. His architectural practice flourished, with both private and public commissions. He made all his purchases in Britain. An 1833 Act of Parliament allowed him to bequeath everything to the nation.



The 'Monk's Parlour' PHOTO: GARETH GARDNER

Between 1792 and 1824, Soane purchased three adjacent townhouses, tearing them down, rebuilding and then joining them, and constantly making re-adjustments for his family, his office, and his collections. Although individual riches abound, the whole is certainly greater than the sum of the parts. Gothic and classical styles mingle. In the basement, Soane installed the "Monk's Parlour," partly a satire on the rising popularity of Gothic styles, partly a genuine attempt to produce a gloomy atmosphere and, in Soane's words, "impress the spectator with reverence for the monk." Among the ruins and fragments, Soane

commissioned a hot-water furnace to warm parts of the upper stories. Utility and whimsy go hand-in-hand.

The combination of elegance and practicality is most evident in the small second-story Picture Room, designed in 1824. Soane had to figure out a way to exhibit his many works of two-dimensional art, to keep them both close at hand and rotating. He did not invent, but he certainly took advantage of, a mechanism of hinged panels, which allow layers of pictures to slide back and forth on three of the room's walls. The most important works are Canaletto's stunning "Riva degli Schiavoni," and two sets by Hogarth, "A Rake's Progress" and "An Election," the latter of which the actor David Garrick bought from the artist. Soane purchased them in 1823 from the estate of Garrick's widow.



The Picture Room PHOTO: GARETH GARDNER

The museum unfolds the panels at intervals throughout the day. One Friday morning at 11, those on the south side were opened to reveal 12 perspective drawings of Soane projects (some real, some imagined, like a design for a triumphal entrance to London). Work by Piranesi, Turner, Fuseli, Thomas Lawrence and lesser artists fills walls and niches throughout the other rooms.

Any residence reflects its owner. Philip Johnson's austere Glass House in New Canaan, Conn., epitomizes a modernist, Zen-like urge to banish decoration and keep things clean. The Soane Museum is the opposite: a heap of rich and fanciful stuff both useful and decorative, the accumulations of a man with boundless curiosity, who admired and acquired Peruvian pottery and Japanese lion dogs, Gothic cast-iron chairs and the sarcophagus of the Egyptian King Seti I (13th century B.C.) as well as the more expected artworks of Greece and Rome.

In his "Essay on Man" (1733-34), Alexander Pope called our world "a mighty maze! but not without a plan." He unknowingly predicted the masterwork of Sir John Soane, whose phrase "the poetry of architecture" can stand as the motto for his entire museum.

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