Many a race has come down to a photo-finish, and not just in sports. In the design competition for Central Park, the entry by Olmsted and Vaux was the last of 33 submitted—and in fact was a day late. For his post as Exhibitions Curator at the Soane, Jerzy Kierkuc-Bielinski got the required paperwork in on time, but it was a squeaker.

Slowing Jerzy down was the thought that his academic specialization—postwar American art—might not be especially apt for an academy of architecture like the Soane. However, given a first-class bachelor’s, double distinction at the master’s level and doctorate from the Courtauld Institute of Art, and encouragement from his old boss at the Holburne, where he started as a curatorial assistant, Jerzy decided at the very last minute to pursue the job. “I had one day to fill out the application and write a covering letter,” recalls Jerzy, “and I delivered them by hand to the Soane on the day of the deadline.”

That was more than five years ago, and since then Jerzy has overseen 19 exhibitions. His favorite, apart from the current one on Piranesi, was his first, on George Scharf, the 19th-century art critic, illustrator and director of the National Portrait Gallery. Jerzy now realizes that his previous art historical distinction at the master’s level and doctorate from the Courtauld Institute of Art, and encouragement from his old boss at the Holburne, where he started as a curatorial assistant, Jerzy decided at the very last minute to pursue the job. “I had one day to fill out the application and write a covering letter,” recalls Jerzy, “and I delivered them by hand to the Soane on the day of the deadline.”

In considering a new exhibition, Jerzy looks for ways to incorporate some of the backslab holdings of the Soane—the 30,000 drawings, the 7,000-volume library and the archive that the public generally doesn’t get to see. “What visitors initially experience when they come to the Soane are the rooms, which inevitably make an extraordinary impact. But they are only the tip of the iceberg,” says Jerzy, who was reared in Somerset and is of Polish background (the reason he collects prints of historical Polish figures). “I am always looking to devise an exhibition that will help visitors understand the work and story of our founder, Sir John Soane.”

There are occasional exceptions. “Sometimes there is an exhibition of such quality that—Soane link or not—it’s hard to pass up,” says Jerzy, citing the example of the showing in 2010 of the Winsor flower collages by Mary Delany fashioned in the 18th century. For the 21st century, Jerzy has kept exhibitions on-trend with displays of work by David Chipperfield. “I never lose sight of the fact that the Soane has a focus on architecture,” he says. Another consideration is ye olde bottom line. “I admit that in these days of tight budgets I have to think strategically: Will an exhibition drum up publicity and draw people in?”

To that end, Jerzy has promising bait. On view through April 27, 2013, Marking the Line: Ceramics and Architecture places the creations of present-day ceramists in the 19th-century rooms of the Soane for striking effect. A bit farther off is Thwarted Dynasty, tracing the male fashion plate from Beau Brummell up to the Sex Pistols and Alexander McQueen. “What many people don’t realize is that dandies were meant to be shocking and their attire went against the prevailing tastes of the day,” says the 40-year-old Jerzy, who lives in southeast London, in Brockley. Even more reflective of Jerzy, given his enthusiasm for mid-20th-century American art, is a proposed show about Charles Sheeler. Says Jerzy: “The influence of architectural drawing on Sheeler’s Precisionist paintings makes him an compelling artist to show at the Soane.”

Within the dazzling trove of Soane holdings permanently rests a series of drawings by Giovanni Battista Piranesi that Sir John Soane purchased for £14 in 1817 and used for his series of lectures on architecture at the Royal Academy.

These works, among the most significant examples of European graphic art extant, show views of the three great Doric temples in the former Greek colony of Paestum, located dramatically on a plateau not far from the coast of the Gulf of Salerno, a site Piranesi visited in 1777 on a taxing trip that ultimately cost him his life. Piranesi’s drawings of these ancient treasures were engraved and published the following year, posthumously, in his last great graphic project, Différentes vues de Pesto, along with two other drawings, one now in the Rijksmuseum and the other in the Bibliothèque Nationale de France.

For the first time ever, the Soane has united these powerful renderings in a focused exhibition that runs through Saturday, May 18, in London, before traveling to the Tchoban Foundation’s Museum of Architectural Drawing in Berlin and other venues (to be announced). Don’t miss the exhibition: It is an opportunity to view great works of art that also just happened to have revolutionized the understanding of early Greek Classical architecture.
SOME ESOTERICA ABOUT SOANE EXHIBITIONS

In the museum in London, a beautiful two-room gallery opened last year on the second floor of No. 12, thanks to the generosity of an anonymous American donor. Designed by Caruso St John and built by Gponton SpA, the meticulously detailed, classically inspired rooms augment the Soane's special exhibition space by nearly 50 percent. The new gallery inspires us to reflect on Soane exhibitions to date:

Most Offbeat Item Ever on Display on an Exhibition: Johnnyness Flaxtonitis, also known as a yellow-bellied flycatcher. A complete specimen, dried and in a glass tube, was borrowed from the Grant Museum of Zoology, University College London, for Piranesi: Etcher, Designer, and Architect.

Item Presenting the Most Challenge for Display: A work by Anish Kapoor entitled Vortex, formed from a container of yellow fluid that rotated at extremely high speed so that the liquid took on the appearance of a golden mirror.

Most Unusual Source for Item Borrowed for an Exhibition: Museum Handouts Sent in the Spirit of Cordial Collaboration—proof that even dukes recycle. For your copy of the 1879 Soane catalogue, please send two, one for yourself on YouTube by searching Soane-Giving-Our-Museum Handouts Sent in the Spirit of Cordial Collaboration. The weight of this marmoreal Colossal marble foot, Roman, 1st-2nd century AD, Found near Pavullo, Italy, was 13,000 pounds. 

SOME ESOTERICA ABOUT

Most Curatorial Challenge for Display: The above-mentioned yellow-bellied flycatcher was not only light-sensitive but also had to be in full color before coming to the museum for a period of about a week to ensure that it harbored no parasites detrimental to collections. Soane curators had to use the facilities of the neighboring Hunterian Museum at the Royal College of Surgeons of England to undertake this precaution.

Piranesi: Etcher, Designer, and Architect

Though he died 235 years ago this year, Giovanni Battista Piranesi lives on, not just at the Soane, but through the works of other artists who have drawn inspiration from the depth of his fantastical designs. Operating with a creative license that was utterly restrictionless, Piranesi broke all the rules—shifting scale radically, compressing images and warping spatial relationships—in such a manner that he is now recognized as a powerful contemporary influence. Just ask Robert A. M. Stern, Robert Venturi, Denise Scott Brown, Michael Graves, Daniel Libeskind, or Peter Eisenman—all gave Piranesi credit for being a major influence on their work.

But it is not just in the built world of today where that Piranesian influence obtains. His series of drawings called Fiore—fruity yet majestic spirals he rendered with mesmerizing, labyrinthine subtleties—create settings of the Cabinet of Dr. Caligari. And one could even argue—probably successfully—that there is a connection between Piranesi's darkest fantasies and a few of the shopping malls that sprang up in this country in the 1970s.

TIM KNOX BIDS A FOND FAREWELL

After eight years as the 11th director of the Soane (and the first, he points out, “to leave other than by death or retirement”), Tim Knox now becomes the 13th director of Fitzwilliam Museum at the University of Cambridge. This story has repository (which is about three times larger than the Soane and was designed, coincidentally, by Soane pupil George Basevi) contains a panoply of ancient Egypt and China treasures, superlative old master paintings, manuscripts and bronzes and Impressionist and contemporary art—providing some of the fodder for the course. Tim will be teaching in addition to his executive duties. These new roles have of course required relocation to Cambridge, but Tim isn’t complaining. “I get very splendid official lodgings,” he says, which he’ll be sharing with his partner, the noted landscape architect and historian Todd Longstaffe-Gowan—and their beloved dachshunds, Tiger and Sponge. “But,” he adds, “I’ll still keep one foot in London and won’t lose touch with my friends at the Soane.” We recently asked Tim for some of his reflections on his time here.

Visitors to the Soane are impressed that the museum has remained in the same state as its founder’s death in 1837, but changes are always afoot, aren’t they? What are some you were able to implement that have amplified Soane’s vision for his museum?

Yes, the Soane Museum is supposed to be some sort of time warp where nothing has changed for nearly 200 years. But actually over the years, lots of changes have been made to arrangements and the buildings that were alien to the spirit of our founder’s intentions. Putting back Soane’s arrangements in 15 hiatus-lotted rooms has probably been the most dramatic impact I have been able to make in my time at the Soane. It’s not all done yet, but we have researched and planned it all and raised all the money needed to completely restate Soane’s vision.

One of the necessities of being the director of a museum is occasionally leading tours. Is there one that stands out as particularly memorable?

HRH Princess Alexandra, the Duchess of Kent, is a charming and loyal supporter of the museum and lives in a Soane-designed house. I was showing her around one evening and I could swear that I saw, to my complete surprise, a large dial of icy cold water fall from one of our windows. If you asked the sky and she didn’t even flinch.

Eight years of being so involved with the life and work of one man—Soane—haven’t privileged you with a rare perspective on this 18th- and 19th-century personage. His greatness is well-established, but what were some of his surprising foibles?

Well, for a start, he wore an amber wig—you can see it in the Thomas Lawrence portrait and it cannot have convinced anyone.

What do you think Soane would enjoy about 21st-century London?

He would be astonished by its size and scale and the way it has changed, but surely delighted by the survival and success of his museum, and places like the Barbican Picture Gallery. I am sure he would be touched and amused by the Soanian red K2 telephone boxes, but disappointed by the demolition of the Soane-designed buildings on the site of his beloved dachshunds, Tiger and Spong. “But,” he adds, “I’ll still keep one foot in London and won’t lose touch with my friends at the Soane.”

You and Todd reside in an 18th-century merchant’s house replete with assorted agglomerations of art and natural history. Sounds Soanian, is it?

The Soane Museum is obviously a potent influence on our collections and arrangement—I have known the museum since I was 16. But arrangements at Malplaquet House are also inspired by country houses, especially the shelved book cases, which is where all the portraits and books, and the stuffed birds, seals and trophy heads come from.

Any valedictory words?

Listen carefully to the museum, and keep the thermometer!