

CONSERVATION

Cutaway
of No.12
Lincoln's
Inn
Fields



The new and enlarged conservation centre is housed on an entire floor and is noted as number 12.

No. 12 No. 13 No. 14
Sir John Soane's Museum Foundation

SOANE FOUNDATION MEETS CHALLENGE

In this issue we celebrate the behind-the-scenes conservation operations that breathe life into Sir John Soane's Museum, the treasury of art and architecture in Lincoln's Inn Fields, London.

In 2008, director Tim Knox in consultation with Mike Nicolson and Ken Gray, suggested that the Sir John Soane's Foundation assume responsibility for one facet of the Museum's ambitious campaign to return Soane's exquisite private apartments to their former brilliance, create more ample exhibition and education facilities, create a new conservation center and improve visitors' services.

The Board of Directors of the Soane Foundation saw "Opening up the Soane" as an opportunity for the Museum's American supporters to make a fundamental contribution to its future. So we debated what to support. We thought big. And, finally, we unanimously chose conservation as the focus of a five-year fundraising effort, now in its third year.

In retrospect, we could not have made a more

astute investment. In calling for the accurate reinstatement of eight of the historic rooms and their contents by 2014, the Museum's expansion program set a demanding timetable for the curators and conservators who are responsible for preparing the objects for display.

We have come to appreciate the way in which the Soane Museum, as an historic house, has a particular philosophy for conservation and a uniquely varied set of conservation challenges. Often, the goal is not only to preserve an object, but also to ensure that it harmonizes with its surrounding objects, as Soane would have arranged them. We have also learned that conservation undertaken today can provide further evidence and data to inform future treatments. The Museum is taking down detailed records, both written and photographic, on the condition of objects before and after treatment. The entire conservation process, and the push to open the new rooms, is enabling the Museum to develop an overall strategy for the conservation of objects as groups, as well as for individual works, that will serve it well in the future.

A VOICE FOR BALANCE

Margaret Holben Ellis (Peggy) is Director of the Morgan Library & Museum's Thaw Conservation Center and Thaw Professor of Paper Conservation, Conservation Center, Institute of Fine Arts, New York University. With nearly three decades of conservation and research experience, she is one of this country's preeminent conservators of works of art on paper.

in the last few decades?

Peggy: Documentation and examination



Peggy Ellis in the lab at the Morgan Library & Museum

Soane Foundation (SF): You have been a gracious friend to the Soane Foundation, and have visited the Museum and meet several of the staff there.

Peggy Ellis: Yes, and the interesting thing about the Soane is that it wasn't always a museum, it was a functioning house. So evidence of use becomes part of the story, in the same way that we may love something that was heavily used in our own family's history.

The Soane is charged with caring for architectural models, which everybody agrees are some of the most difficult three-dimensional objects to conserve. Models are usually very intricate and made from a number of different materials and often they have not been well cared for because they're big and awkward to move. And while it is a general trend nowadays to recognize architectural models as important historic artifacts, in the past they were often pushed aside because they were not considered to be "fine art."

SF: What are the basics that are necessary for a conservation center?

Peggy: You need an overall collections care plan and an area to carry out conservation procedures, such as examination, documentation and basic treatments, all of which the Soane now has.

The emphasis should be on preventative conservation. Doing everything to arrest or slow down the processes of deterioration. Rather than labor- and time-intensive single item treatments, it's more about addressing issues and the basic things.

SF: How would you say conservation has changed

techniques have changed a great deal with the digital imaging revolution. And, oftentimes, just the way in which we diagnose a problem is more accurate and less invasive. We can really get below the surface now and, with infrared and ultraviolet special imaging techniques, without great expense, see things in ways we never could before. A lot of analytical instrumentation wasn't portable before and now it is. We can actually carry around an x-ray fluorescence spectrophotometer, which can be used to identify pigments—it's the size of a loaf of bread.

Nowadays we are better at recognizing what not to do. For instance, rather than putting all your money into restoring your best picture, it might be more prudent for your institution to ensure that the entire collection is well cared for in storage and while on display.

Today we value the patina of use. Not everything has to look like new, especially in a place like the Soane, which for so long has been lit by candles and gas lamps. You don't want it to look like it's been spit cleaned. It's supposed to look like a house that people have lived in.

JOHN & CYNTHIA GUNN:
NO ORDINARY
PHILANTHROPISTS



Two dedicated supporters of the Soane Foundation have stepped forward to bestow the lead gift to fund the new conservation labs at Sir John Soane's Museum, now under construction in No. 12 Lincoln's Inn Fields. The John A. and Cynthia Fry Gunn Conservation Center will revolutionize the way in which the Museum cares for and interprets many of its delicate and storied artifacts.

"We see the Soane as so unique and central in the history of museums and architecture that we are delighted to support its restoration and renewal," say the Gunns. "Conservation is really at the heart of a historic museum like the Soane."

John and Cynthia Gunn give to what they love: and when they love, they become very involved. We Soanians have certainly experienced their engagement with architecture first hand in marvelous trips to Sweden, Derbyshire, Sicily, Russia, Ireland, and Istanbul, where the Gunn's zest for travel enhanced everyone's enjoyment. More than once, we have enjoyed watching them kick up their heels on a dance floor at our New York and London galas.

John, Cynthia and their children, Matthew and Lisa, attended Stanford University. Although the couple's philanthropy is extraordinary by any measure, their devotion to Stanford is a model of informed involvement: they have served as trustees, advisors, and founding members of new programs, as well as generous supporters.

Most recently, the San Francisco area couple have given the university a stunning new structure. The John A. and Cynthia Fry Gunn building, which houses the Stanford Institute for Economic Policy Research, has been designed by Ike Kligerman Barkley Architects of New York. Many readers will know the architects, Joel Barkley and John Ike as a good friends of the Soane, and their partner, Tom Kligerman, as the president of the Foundation's Board.

"We can't thank John and Cynthia enough for this generous gift and look forward to their continued friendship in the years to come," says Tom Kligerman.

WHICH IS THE ORIGINAL?



For almost a century, visitors have seen a display on the second floor staircase recess in No. 13 featuring the vibrant painting *The Opening of London Bridge*, 1831 by George Jones (Image left). Through work and research in the archives during the "Opening up the Soane" project, it was learned that this arrangement was actually done in the 1920s and was not true to the time of Soane's death in 1837. It is now in the works to rehang the arrangement to match the 1837 date. (Image right) Computer-generated images courtesy of John Bridges, Curatorial Assistant.

CONSERVATION BEGINS AT HOME

Sometimes the virtual world of the web is a collector's best friend, especially when a simple click can help you save anything from a collection of old master drawings to a christening gown.

The American Institute for Conservation of Historic and Artistic Works website at www.conservation-us.org is a case in point. This veritable treasure chest of resources offers advice on how

to choose a conservator and how to find one in your part of the country. It offers helpful tips for caring for all types of things, including architectural structures and detailing, manuscripts, prints, books, tools, jewelry, tableware, quilts, costumes, samplers, and flags.

The AIC also offers you the opportunity to establish connections with other who share your

JOIN US IN MEETING OUR GOAL

Please consider making a donation to help reach the Foundation's goal of completing the "Opening Up the Soane" campaign in the coming months. We are just over 88% towards fulfilling our pledge to the Museum.

All contributions are accepted and appreciated. A new level of support — the UK/USA Circle at \$300 — provides membership and newsletters from both the Foundation and Museum, plus adds to the coffers for the conservation fund. Other levels of support start at \$100 and go to \$250, \$500, \$1,500, \$5,000 and \$10,000. For more details, please visit the JOIN US page on our web site at www.SoaneFoundation.com or contact Chas Miller at 212-223-2012 or chas@soanefoundation.com

interest in preservation through publications, conferences, workshops, and daily networking opportunities. The Sir John Soane's Museum Foundation is a proud member.

SOANE CONSERVATORS DIVE BACK INTO HISTORY AND FORWARD INTO SCIENCE

The painstaking and highly technical practice of conserving historical artifacts is most often a slow, grinding, and behind-the-scenes process. The vignettes below demonstrate, however, that each restoration is also its own unique and exhilarating voyage of discovery.

The Sarcophagus of Seti I

In public view during Museum opening hours last year, conservator Jane Wilkinson cleaned and studied one of the Soane Museum's great treasures, the Sarcophagus of Seti I. With



Restoring the Sarcophagus of Seti I

assistance from British Museum conservator Tracey Sweek, Jane removed loosened dirt from all the surfaces, using soft brushes and vacuums to avoid dirt being pushed into the carving; cleaned off further dirt with latex sponges; vacuuming to remove any remaining sponge particles; and finally, applied acetone with cotton wool swabs to degrease the surface and remove any remaining dirt. One misstep could have diminished the visual impact of the hieroglyphs or removed the last vestiges of the Egyptian blue pigment applied three millennia before. Thankfully, Jane was able to convince the British Museum to undertake some timely investigative work to help identify traces of the remaining blue pigment. These tests also gave the Soane a better understanding of the history of repairs to the object, which had apparently begun at a surprisingly early date: raman spectrometry identified a number of materials used in historic repairs, including calcite bound with resinous material and beeswax, and the black residues on the underside of the sarcophagus, which were found to contain carbon.

Early Nineteenth-Century Gilded Frame

A layer of rabbit skin glue and pigment had darkened to brown what had originally been the brightly gilt surface of an early 19th-century oil-gilded and decorated frame. Museum conservators are now cleaning away layers of dirt, watercolor, and rabbit skin size. They will then repair damage to the gesso surfaces and,



Cleaning a Frame

using molds taken from the decorative elements, reproduce and reinstate the missing details of the once expressive detailing. All the new areas will be oil gilded and the gilding toned, so that the new areas match the original gold hue of the frame, which will again hold one of Soane's drawings of a triumphal bridge and hang along the staircase of No. 13 Lincoln's Inn Fields.

Robert Adam's Ceiling Drawings

Robert Adam's drawings were once in danger of being used as wrapping paper, so far had his reputation ebbed in the years following his death. By acquiring 54 volumes of drawings by the Scottish architect, and thus preventing their dispersment, the elderly John Soane may be said to have rescued an important chapter of architectural history. Nowadays, more than a century later, the Soane continues to invest considerable time and resources to preserve the delicate works on paper. This volume of Adam's drawings of ceilings (#13) showed evidence of



Robert Adam's ceiling drawings (detail)

two hundred years of storage in the center of an industrial city, with the consequent accumulation of the effects of pollution. Its large, often highly finished and exquisitely colored drawings had also been heavily used by researchers. When conservator Margaret Schuelein began cleaning the volume, she began with the covers, especially at the top where dust naturally settles. Her aim was to remove any dust that might percolate down and damage the drawings. (Fine, sooty dust is acidic, and acids are destructive to cellulose, the principal component of paper.) Next, she employed a variety of erasers to cautiously clean the very fragile and brittle album pages and repaired tears with arrowroot paste and Japanese handmade paper. The 145 watercolor drawings required special attention: their 18th century pigments are quite soft and friable and a good number had been pasted onto the album pages and were becoming detached. To prevent future damage when a page is turned, she reattached the loose corners with new hinges, also made of arrowroot paste and Japanese handmade paper.

Plaster Cast of a Neo-Classical Cipher

Designed by Decimus Burton for a triumphal arch at Hyde Park Corner, this 19th-century cast reappeared not long ago during an audit of the Museum's permanent collection. The challenges to its restoration were considerable: there were decorative details to rebuild, a flaky and unstable painted surface to repair, and 17 pieces to re-assemble.



The Neo-Classical Cipher Cast before restoration

After testing a small area with saliva, conservator Jane Wilkinson found that what appeared to be ingrained dirt was in fact a dark paint finish over an earlier pale layer. She decided to dry clean the surface to preserve the later historic paint finish—in part, because the cast was to be displayed with objects of a similar dark finish. The process involved removal of loose dirt using a soft brush and vacuum; sealing the raw surfaces of the breaks with a solution before assembly; and working out a planned sequence of re-assembly, because the pieces could only be fitted together in a specific order. To this end, each piece was temporarily numbered on the verso for identification and then put together step by step. A photographic record was made showing the order of assembly.

When she had finally assembled the cast, Jane rebuilt its missing decorative elements using an acrylic-based filler and re-inforced the verso by applying strips of fiber-glass gauze fixed with polyester resin along the repair joints. Now, once again, the Cipher is strong enough to hang vertically in its original location in the Museum's staircase.



Fully restored Cipher

PASSING THE BATON...AND THE DUST CLOTH

The Soane Foundation recently caught up with Deputy Director Helen Dorey and Head Conservator Jane Wilkinson via that newfangled mode of communicating: Email.

Soane Foundation: Helen, how long has conservation been a priority for the Museum?

Helen Dorey: Sir John Soane himself conserved his collections. He had pictures cleaned and frames re-gilded (in one year he bought 654 books of gold leaf for the purpose!) and had blinds installed in all his interiors to regulate light. He may even (judging from imaginary drapes shown in a fantasy watercolor by J.M. Gandy) have considered placing drapes over delicate watercolors to protect them from light—although there is no evidence that he had any actually installed in his house.

We see many bills in the Soane archive from after his death, during the 19th and 20th century, for re-painting plaster casts, mending frames, and cleaning oil paintings, as well as for regular cleaning and dusting. Some of the efforts, such as 'washing' casts, may have unwittingly caused damage, as water tends to drive dirt into a plaster surface and fix it there permanently.

It was not until Peter Thornton was appointed Curator in 1984 that permanent conservation staff were retained by the Museum; he also allocated rooms on the second floor of No. 12 to serve as conservation studios and applied for money from the Henry Moore Foundation for the specific care of sculpture.

Conservation for the first time became a permanent daily concern of the Museum under my watch as Deputy Director and has expanded and professionalized following the appointment of Tim Knox in 2005. Under Tim, the team has grown to include part-time Conservator Lucy Swettenham, and all warding staff regularly participate in housekeeping training run by Jane Wilkinson, with assistance from the National Trust Head Housekeeper, Helen Lloyd.

SOANE TREASURES VERY CAREFULLY DISPATCHED AROUND THE WORLD



Stephen Astley, Curator of Drawings

Curators have to be convinced of the merit of lending, however. "Travel is inherently risky," says Stephen Astley, the Soane Museum's Curator of Drawings, "and to lend from the Soane collection can leave the Museum with a hole in its displays."

The loan process has also grown more complicated over the last 20 years, requiring the Museum to, among other tasks, check on the security of the borrowing Museum with the National Museum Security Advisor, prepare reports on environmental conditions, and secure insurance or government indemnity.

The Soane lends drawings mounted and framed for protection. No detail is too small to consider. Packing cases are custom-made by specialist

SF: Jane, how have conservation efforts changed at the Soane during your time there?

Jane Wilkinson: I've come to understand that the Soane's artifacts are valuable because of their context—that, in a sense, the collection is more than the sum of its objects. So, in considering a treatment, we look at the whole room. For example, we are currently cleaning, repairing, and gilding frames. Next we will hang them in their actual places, so we can apply tones that go well with the other frames. We are always looking at the whole room.

We avoid sending things out of the house for conservation. The Museum often needs on-the-spot care. The other day someone noticed condensation on the mirrors. I dropped everything and managed the humidity in the house. You never know what it will be: tiny bits of damage here, water there, or a doorknob breaks. Everything is old. It is vital to have conservators near the collection.

SF: What is the primary challenge to conservation at the Museum?

Jane: One unavoidable risk is the presence of visitors. We are open to the public: more than 110,000 visitors come through this house a year. On a rainy day, wet clothes may alter the humidity levels in the rooms. And it is not just the public's effect on the environment, either: wear and tear is an issue. Typical of many 19th-century houses in London, the Museum has a good number of tiny spaces that people can easily reach into. Since we have no signs or ropes, it is a special challenge to convince visitors not to touch or bump into things. Our house manager keeps a warder's record of every time a visitor touches something—the range of what people touch is quite extreme!

We do try to minimize the impact by allowing only 75 visitors in the Museum at a time.

SF: How will the new facility help you address these issues?



Jane Wilkinson in the conservation lab cleaning an early nineteenth-century gilded frame

Jane: For a while now, a number of our most important books have needed conservation, but we have hesitated to transport them outside the Museum. As you know, we like to keep objects as they are. But, now, with the new John A. and Cynthia Fry Gunn Conservation Center, we will have room for a consultant to come in and concentrate on the library.

The new conservation center will be brilliant in so many ways: better lighting; new equipment; good, flexible work surfaces, including benches on wheels; and a water distilling system, which is so important.

We will open the studio to the public a couple times a year. We can't wait!

contractors. Curators choose frames that are strong enough not to distort, but deep enough to protect the picture's glazing from wobbly bits of paper and worse. The glazing is most often an acrylic sheet, which cracks rather than shatters; but pastels must be framed with glass, as the static electricity of acrylic can lift particles of pastel up off the artwork. Preparators wrap frames in thick polythene sheets, sealed with tape, both to protect the work of art against water and to act as a buffer against changes in humidity.

Cases are timber, lined with a waterproof membrane and topped with a sealable lid. Skilled packers surround the loan object with layers of archival polyethylene foam. The cleverest ones combine different densities: too soft, and an object might accelerate if the case was dropped; too hard, and the object might not be properly cushioned against shock.

Whenever possible, the Soane Museum specifies that a packing case be painted white—to reflect heat and show any knocks or scrapes. As well, devices called 'tell tales' can now be fitted on cases to reveal excessive tilting or jolting.

There was a time when Soane Museum couriers watched their cases onto the aircraft and even into the belly of the plane. The Lockerbie attack changed that, just as 9/11 was to further change matters. Now, ever earlier, Museum workers deliver a packing case to a plane strapped to an

aluminium pallet and covered in polythene. As a final touch, they tighten a net around the cargo: if too tight, the net distorts the shape of pallet, causing aircraft loaders to reject the cargo.

"I once stopped a case from travelling because cargo handlers had put cans of oil on top of it," remembers Stephen, who prefers to carry a small loan object by hand in a special case when serving as a courier. And, yes, the case gets its own seat, right next to him.

Once the plane touches down and the Museum's case is unpacked, the condition of the loan object is compared to the detailed condition report prepared before travel. Then two copies are made and signed by the Soane's courier and the borrower, agreeing on the state of the object on arrival.

For the duration of the loan, the borrowing museum will keep the case stored somewhere cold, but not air-conditioned. When the exhibition closes, its preparators will place the case in the gallery, so it can become acclimatized or 'conditioned' before the art work is put back in for travel.

Then the meticulous process is reversed for the journey home, so that the loan object can once again take its place in the magical interior world conjured by John Soane some 200 years ago.

ABOUT US *Mission Statement of the Foundation*

Sir John Soane's Museum Foundation provides a lively educational forum in the fields of art, architecture and the decorative arts within the Soanean tradition and financially assists Sir John Soane's Museum in London. For more details, please refer to our website: www.SoaneFoundation.com.

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