ONCE-IN-A-LIFETIME GATHERING OF REGENCY DESIGN TO BENEFIT SOANE FOUNDATION

Supporters of Sir John Soane’s Museum are invited to preview Inspired by Antiquity: Classical Influences on 18th and 19th Century Furniture and Decorative Objects at Carlton Hobbs Gallery on Wednesday, January 19, 6:30 to 8:30 p.m. Thanks to Mr. Hobbs’ generosity, the opening reception will benefit the Foundation.

“We are honored to have Sir John Soane’s Museum Foundation as the opening night beneficiary,” said Carlton Hobbs. “This is the single largest collection of Thomas Hope pieces to come onto the market since the sale at Deepdene in 1917, featuring 40 pieces inspired by antiquity, including an important group of Hope pieces from the Philip Hewat-Jasoor collection of Regency furniture and works of art. A fabulously successful banker, connoisseur, collector and designer, Hope was one of the key figures to shape Regency taste and, in so doing, revolutionary British design for decades to come.

As a highlight of the evening, Tim Knox, director of Sir John Soane’s Museum in London, will deliver a talk entitled, In Marble Halls: Showing off Antique Sculpture in British Country Houses c.1700-1800, on the classical influence on 18th and 19th century design. A contribution of $100 per person is suggested to support a special conservation fund administered by the Soane Foundation for work at the Soane Museum. The lecture will be at 5:30 pm; lecture tickets are an additional $25 per person, seating is limited, advance reservations required. Email or call the Soane office for details and reservations 212-223-2012.

Inspired by Antiquity: Classical Influences on 18th and 19th Century Furniture and Decorative Objects will remain on view at Carlton Hobbs LLC at 60 East 93rd Street, New York, NY, through February 14, 2011.

200+ LUCKY SUPPORTERS TAKE HOME ART CARDS

Early this fall, serious fun was had at Sir John Soane’s Museum with the presentation of a most ingenious exhibition comprising more than 200 uniform postcards that had been transformed by a host of architects, artists, photographers, and designers “Inspired by Soane”. These very same miniature works of art were then later sold anonymously via secret ballot at the Museum’s Soane Banquet, the glittering and festive dinner dance held in the Banqueting Hall, Whitehall, on the evening of October 7th to benefit the Museum’s “Opening up the Soane” program.

Damien Hirst, Daniel Libeskind, and Vivienne Westwood are just a few of the many artists and architects who responded to the Museum’s call to take part in the project. Twenty-five works were submitted by Americans, including Robert Venturi, Daniel Libeskind, Bille Tors, Todd Williams, Michael Graves, A. Eugene Kohn, Joel Barkley, Cameron Mactavish, Ivan Chermayeff, Thomas Gordon Smith, and Stuart Weerde, among others. “I am struck by the sheer variety and quality of the cards we received and the project’s testimony to the admiration and affection felt for the Soane Museum by so many of the greatest names in the creative industries of our time,” says Tim Knox, director of the Museum. A complete listing of cards and artists may be found at www.soane.org/exhibitions/inspired_by_soane.
Michael J. Waters, the 2009 recipient of the Soane Foundation Travelling Fellowship, took a moment earlier this year to discuss his ongoing research with Stephanie Stokes, a member of the Board of Directors of the Soane Foundation.

Stephanie Stokes: You are back from a month in London; there were spent delving into the rich holdings of 16th and 17th-century drawings, prints, and treatises at Sir John Soane's Museum and also somewhat familiarizing yourself with other English collections.

As I understand it, in your research project you are proposing that prints of architectural columns, capitals, bases, and cornices were catalysts for shaping architects' views of the orders in the Renaissance—and that the application of the classical vocabulary was flexible, rather than rule-bound, during the period.

Mike Waters: Yes. My interest in the subject grew out of a master's thesis I worked on at the University of Virginia, with professor Cambell Bodey. I saw that these small single-leaf engravings, which measure on average 6½ by 3 inches and exist today only in a handful of print collections and libraries, had not been adequately studied, even though they played an important role as a kind of ‘anti-canon,' which worked in opposition to the concept of defined orders as found in the architecture treatises. They promoted the kind of ornamental variety that the Renaissance theorist Sebastiano Serlio termed ‘licentious' kind of ornamental variety that the Renaissance role as a kind of 'anti-canon,' which worked in publishing these prints.

SS: Many of these prints were used in the design process or how people physically interacted with them. I've seen many examples used in a variety of interesting and unstable ways—copied back into sketchbooks or cut and pasted to produce interchangeable parts, for instance.

Mike Waters: Thinking of a grammar of ornament without a clear syntax: you have the parts of speech, but there are no rules to assemble them in a clear, cogent fashion. It leaves a lot to the user to decide, which is important because it shows that classical architecture was very open-ended during this period. SS: In a sense, architecture was feeding the book and the book was feeding architecture.

Mike Waters: Yes. In the early Renaissance, books were produced for elite readers who played a role in elevating architecture to the level of painting and sculpture. But by the 16th century, books were also becoming geared to the worker, for the didactic purpose of teaching.

SS: For local builders, including the stonemasons.

Mike Waters: Yes, and there was also a fear in this

Throughout the mid-16th century, many architects in treatises urged the reader to choose ‘proper' models and attempted to establish rules to ensure that architecture would not be too ‘licentious.'

We see a similar phenomenon today, with the sprawl of information on the Internet and the like.

SS: Sir John Soane is an example of a great classical artist who was able to break the rules—but he had measured columns, so he knew how to alter the original for his personal vision.

Mike Waters: The Grand Tour was really like grammars or ornament books?

SS: The Grand Tour didactic purpose of teaching.

Mike Waters: Were any of these prints used in the design process or how people physically interacted with them. I've seen many examples used in a variety of interesting and unstable ways—copied back into sketchbooks or cut and pasted to produce interchangeable parts, for instance.

Mike Waters: The Grand Tour (or at least an example of a great classical artist) who was able to break the rules—but he had measured columns, so he knew how to alter the original for his personal vision.

Mike Waters: The Grand Tour was essentially like grammars or ornament books?

SS: Yes, and one also trains one's hand to replicate something that is modular and fits with the human body.

Mike Waters: I understand you have a position at the American Academy of Rome for next year. What are you going to do there?

SS: I started in architecture before I switched to history. And in Rome I'll be continuing my dissertation research mainly through hands-on work: working with builders, merchants and studying books.

Mike Waters: As we were just saying, by physically experiencing and measuring buildings, you gain a lot more than just measurements: you start to see things.

SS: For the local builders, including the stonemasons.

Mike Waters: What are you working on now?

Mike Waters: We know a good bit about how Sir John Soane celebrated Christmas, thanks to The Soane at Home: Domestic Life at Lincoln's Inn Fields (1998) by Sue Palmer, architect, Sir John Soane's Museum.

Soane's Office shut down briefly at Christmas and his holidays, he and Mrs. Soane would return to their ‘Christmas Day' at home after New Year's Day. At Christmas, the family would gather at their house in the Strand, where they would entertain their guests. Mrs. Soane was often seen to have visited the children at the Foundling Hospital either on Christmas Day or soon after, usually in company with her friend from Chiswick, Sarah Smith. Then at 4:00 pm they set out to dinner, usually with a number of guests, although in 1814 Mrs. Soane merely records ‘At home all day. Mr. Turner dined here.'

We are, in fact, still working on this with the next step being to transfer into one digital record as part of a Collections Management System, all that recording and measuring buildings, you gain a lot more than just measurements: you start to see things.

HD: There is to provide for an expanding audience a source of information about the Museum's works of art. It was Peter who initiated a system, which was based at the V&A—the Study Centre for the History of Art. We see a similar process of learning about textiles, silver, furniture, architectural history and measuring buildings, you gain a lot more than just measurements: you start to see things.