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Napoleon Mourning Ring Comes 'Home' to the Soane Museum



The mourning ring originally belonged to Sir John Soane, celebrated architect and founder of the Eponymous Museum, founded in 1833.

LONDON.- [Sir John Soane's Museum](#) in London and independent charity [The Art Fund](#) today announce the return of a lost treasure to the Museum – a gold mourning ring containing a lock of Napoleon's hair, one of Sir John Soane's prized possessions. This acquisition is a triumph for the Museum, which was unable to acquire the ring at auction earlier this year.

The mourning ring originally belonged to Sir John Soane, celebrated architect and founder of the eponymous Museum, founded in 1833. It was one of his most treasured private possessions, but was not left to his Museum, featuring on his will among other items to be kept "as heir looms in my family". However, it eventually passed out of the family's ownership and was deemed 'lost'. This autumn, thanks to a £30,000 grant from The Art Fund and support from Soane enthusiasts, the museum reclaimed this lost treasure for a total of £41,000 and returned it to its original home.

The ring first went on sale at Christie's in June this year - marking the first time the Museum had had news of its whereabouts since Soane's death in 1837. One of only two pieces of jewelry specifically bequeathed to Sir John Soane's family, the ring was recognized as a significant, personal, item to be returned to Sir John's extraordinary collection.

On the day of the June sale, the Museum was the under-bidder. Frustration turned to delight, however, when the buyer learned of the Museum's interest and felt that the ring should return to its original home.

With the generous support of The Art Fund and private donors, The Soane was finally able to purchase the ring as it had hoped, enabling the Museum to enhance its presentation of another aspect of Sir John's complex and enthusiastic personality.

Tim Knox, Director of Sir John Soane's Museum said: "Soane had a horrible fascination with Napoleon and this ring, with its plait of the vanquished Emperor's hair, was the ultimate trophy. We are thrilled to get it back to its old home."

Andrew Macdonald, Acting Director of The Art Fund, said: "This unique relic offers an insight into the cult status of Napoleon at Sir John Soane's time, as well as the tastes and obsessions of Soane himself. The Art Fund is delighted to help bring home this forgotten treasure to the Sir John Soane's Museum where visitors will be able to see it in its true context."

Frank Dobson, MP for Holborn & St Pancras, said: "The Sir John Soane's Museum is one of Holborn's hidden gems, and it is wonderful news its fantastic collections have been enriched with this curious and very special acquisition. We extend a big thank you to The Art Fund and Soane enthusiasts for making the acquisition possible."

Like many fashionable, literary and aristocratic people of his time, Soane was fascinated by Napoleon. The lock of hair contained in the ring was presented to Sir John by Elizabeth (Betsy) Balcombe who was the daughter of an official on St Helena where Napoleon was imprisoned. As a child, Betsy became a favorite of the Emperor and she later wrote memoirs of their friendship.

Sir John Soane's Museum Archive contains the following brief letter of presentation from Miss Balcombe: "Knowing how much Mr. Soane esteems the reliques of great men Miss E. Balcombe presents him with a lock of Bonaparte's hair received by her from the hands of that great Personage." Soane must have commissioned the ring to contain this 'relique'.

Hallmarked London 1822, the year after Napoleon's death on St Helena, the ring contains a lock of plaited brown hair. A French inscription on the inside reads (in English): "This lock of hair of Napoleon Buonaparte was presented to John Soane Esquire by Miss Elizabeth Balcombe." It also includes the words Prier Pour Moi (pray for me). The French inscription is something Soane might well have chosen, particularly in the context of Napoleon, as he had a passion for all things French.

The creation of a commemorative mourning ring adds an additional dimension to Soane's fascination with the Emperor, something clearly expressed in a number of places in his museum, but in particular in an arrangement of items on the south wall of the Breakfast Room displaying two contrasting portraits of Napoleon – one as a young and idealistic soldier, the other as the bloated Emperor on the eve of his downfall.

Visitors to the Museum will be able to view this distinctive jewel when it goes on display later in November.

Sir John Soane's Museum | The Art Fund | Napoleon | Tim Knox | Andrew Macdonald | Frank Dobson |

Today's News

November 13, 2009

Tormented Italian Master Caravaggio and Francis Bacon Connect in Rome Show

Claremont Museum of Art to Remain Open through 2009

Thieves Steal Edvard Munch Artwork from Oslo Art Dealership

Cindy Sherman to Receive The Jewish Museum's Man Ray Award

Ex Real Madrid President Lorenzo Sanz Investigated Over Art Exports

Baltic Appoints New Chairman and Welcomes New Curator

ART 20 and Modernism Art Fairs Become One and Open at Park Avenue Armory

Art Gallery of Alberta Reveals New Logo Designed by Vision Creative Inc.

Dates for Prospect 2, Second New Orleans Art Biennial, Announced

Walters Art Museum and Johns Hopkins Announces Major Collaboration

Sarah McCrory Appointed New Curator for Frieze Art Fair 2010

Artwork for Unreleased Beatles Album to Highlight Fall Auction at Bonhams

Napoleon Mourning Ring Comes 'Home' to the Soane Museum

Photographic Masterworks from MoMA to be Shown at Irish Museum

Royal Scottish Academy Presents 350 Works for 183rd Annual Exhibition

Chipstone Foundation Promotes Green Living at the Milwaukee Art Museum


Langley Academy Designed by Norman Foster Officially Opens

Miami Art Museum to Present Carlos Bunga in First U.S. Solo Show

Austin Museum of Art Kicks Off New Works Project Space with Jade Walker

Portrait of Marilyn Horne Donated to the National Portrait Gallery

Menu

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