

# CLASSICAL VISIONARIES

*President Thomas Jefferson (1743-1826) and Sir John Soane (1753-1837) by Danielle S. Willkens*



Thomas Jefferson and John Soane developed their careers and collections on opposite sides of the Atlantic Ocean, yet their lives shared remarkable parallels and connections. Both men lost their fathers at a young age and quickly became dedicated, introspective students. King George III largely initiated the career of each: Jefferson's patriotic prose in the Declaration of Independence launched his forty-year long career as statesman and the Royal Academy granted Soane a transformative travel grant. Their mutual admiration of the architecture of ancient Rome, particularly the Pantheon, is unmistakable, although Jefferson, unlike Soane, never actually experienced the city for himself. While Jefferson lacked a formal education as an architect and Soane boasted the facility of draftsmanship, both men pursued a variety of architectural projects that spanned scales and programs. Professors of classicism, but prophets of design deviations, Jefferson and Soane both embraced new technology, methodology, and sectional qualities in their architecture.

Jefferson and Soane each tackled the difficult task of designing their own "essays in architecture," or personal residences, and both became wedded to their intricate house-museums after they lost their wives. Monticello and Soane's residence at Lincoln's Inn Fields were both designed over the span of more than forty years. The homes were experiments in the manipulation of light and intricacies of carved space, and served as vessels for the abundance of diverse collections. Drawings, models, mirrors, curiosities, and gadgets adorned every open fragment of wall

space and spilled from marble tables and cases. Their experimentations in residential architecture blurred the line of the public and private by providing dedicated spaces for solitary study and contemplation while also engaging the Enlightenment principle of dissemination through the program of a museum.

Retirement was never really actualized by either gentleman: they pursued other design projects, maintained correspondences, and reluctantly stayed within the public lens in a variety of ways. Through the later years of their lives they each exchanged letters with their mutual friend Maria Cosway, and read, collected, and received students. Although Jefferson and Soane never met, one can only imagine the spectacular conversations they could have shared in a coffeehouse given the similar structures of their lives and interests.

Today thousands of visitors still enjoy the pleasure of experiencing Jefferson's Monticello and Sir John Soane's Museum: they are organic edifices that seem to have a life of their own beyond the assembly of brick and plaster. *(continued)*



*Pantheon, Rome, Italy © Danielle S. Willkens*

## WHAT I ADMIRE ABOUT SOANE:

*Thoughts from two of our 2009 Honorees*

**Jaquelin T. Robertson**  
Architect/Urban Planner  
Cooper, Robertson & Partners

I try to go to Soane's museum in Lincoln's Inn Fields when I'm in London. Like Covent Garden, Greenwich, St. Paul's, and Regents Park Chiswick, "The Soane" is a "pilgrimage site," which, like Monticello, I've gotten to know in stages.

The first time I saw Lincoln's Inn Fields, I must have been 14 years old on a trip abroad with my family. It was quirky, colorful, filled with statuary, models, mirrors, drawings, skylights; and it stayed with me. Years later, while studying at Oxford, I began to understand how good it was. Later still, while on a Yale Traveling Fellowship in Cambridge, Soane was being reevaluated (along with Palladio); there were trips and long night discussions with the likes of Colin Rowe, Jim Stirling, Sandy Wilson, and Peter Eisenman. It was not just Soane's architectural "excavations," his collecting of related artifacts, but his playfulness with light, his layered articulation of powerful small spaces, the way in which he took traditional details and simplified and streamlined them, the cantilevered staircase and its elegant banister all the way down to the Crypt at Lincoln's Inn Fields. And, of course, there was the Dulwich Gallery and those drawings of the Bank of England.

Soane was blessed to be born in the midst of an architectural culture moving into high gear—Inigo Jones, Christopher Wren, Lord Burlington, William Kent Nash, the Adam brothers, etc; an extended period of historic moment, English Palladianism, and the Doric Revival. I began to connect significant dots: Soane, Jefferson, and Karl Friedrich Schinkel—I always think of the three together, each significantly changing architecture in their respective countries. *(continued)*

**David Morton**  
Associate Publisher of Architecture  
Rizzoli International Publications

I was just out of college the first time I went to England. As a student of Southern American literature, I knew nothing about architecture. All I had ever seen was what I grew up around in Florida—Spanish Revival and Mid-Century Modern. But one night at my hotel in Bloomsbury I overheard some people talking about a most amazing place. What could it be? I asked them and was told about an extraordinary house at Lincoln's Inn Fields, which was not far from the hotel.

I got up early the next morning, had a full English breakfast, and hit the road. Soon I was in front of numbers 12, 13, and 14. Number 13 was weird. Among other things, I wondered what those chopped-off columns were doing hanging off the front? But the more I looked at it the more I became fascinated. What I liked was that it was so eccentric. I had never seen anything like it, or anything like what I found inside. "Oh my god," I thought, "this was the home of a certified obsessive!" But the longer I stayed, the more it intrigued me. And because I stayed so long, a very nice lady who worked there realized I was in a bit of a daze and came over to talk to me. She told me all about John Soane, about the house, about his collecting, and about Neoclassical architecture.

That visit had a big influence on my life. I think it was instrumental in my becoming an obsessive collector of things, and of spending most of my adult life in architecture. I fell in love with the Neoclassical on that visit, and it is still my favorite. Over the years it has prompted many pilgrimages all over Europe to see the great examples. And to Washington, too, and even Staten Island—to Sailors' Snug Harbor—one of the undiscovered gems of New York.

### 200 YEARS AGO...1809

The dome and new offices were completed as an annex to No. 12 Lincoln's Inn Fields. From his journals we gather these items: 21 April 1809 'About Chelsea papers.' At this point in April 1809 Soane was very caught up in a dispute at the Royal Hospital Chelsea, where he was the Clerk of Works, about the site and design of a proposed new Infirmary. He had attended a Board meeting at the hospital the previous day (20 April) and attended a further one on Monday 24 April where he presented a report on the subject.

# SIR JOHN SOANE'S MUSEUM FOUNDATION

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# OPENING UP THE SOANE: THE SECOND FLOOR

*The restoration and opening to the public of the entire second floor of the Museum: Sir John Soane's Private Apartments and the Model Room*

Last autumn in this newsletter we celebrated the launch of the most ambitious fund-raising campaign in the history of Sir John Soane's Museum. Dubbed *Opening Up the Soane*, the ambitious multi-year program will, among other initiatives, restore and open to the public the entire second floor of the museum, including Sir John Soane's private apartments.

Now for a most felicitous update: Our earlier report had noted that an arm of Britain's Heritage Lottery Fund had turned down a grant request from the museum for Opening Up the Soane. In the intervening weeks, however, a different section of the Fund has awarded the museum £1M (or approximately \$1,425,000) for the project.

Certainly, the restoration of Soane's private apartments will add a new dimension to the visitor's experience, reflecting, as they do, the architect's personal life and raising questions as to why these unique interiors are as they are and how they compare with other interiors at the Soane.

Although the second floor rooms were shown to visitors in Soane's lifetime (and reviewed in the 1835 description he published), they were closed after his death. Until the end of World War II, they served as a curator's apartment, after which they became offices for museum staff.

In the coming months, the Foundation's newsletter will feature different views of the private apartments and other aspects of the total project of *Opening Up the Soane*. We begin in this issue with a charming contemporary watercolour of Soane's bedchamber.

The museum knows quite a lot about the exact appearance of Soane's private apartments from watercolours such as this one, as well as from descriptions and inventories, such as that taken in 1837, which listed a substantial number of objects, including: "chintz hung Mahogany 4-post Bedstead with drab Morine Furniture" and a "Mahogany Case of 3 Drawers with Mahogany

fronts, wainscot rims & bottoms, and a draw out shelf at top. A Mahogany Swing Dressing Glass, with 3 drawers, the glass 26 inches by 21 inches. 5 stained wood chairs with cane bottoms (very old). A Clock in Ornamental Case, made by Thwaites and Reed," together with other items.

*Opening Up the Soane* also includes other improvements such as up-graded visitor facilities, the creation of a new Exhibition Gallery and Conservation Studios, and improvements that will allow full disabled access to the museum. The museum aims to complete the project by 2012—the 200th anniversary of the building of No. 13 Lincoln's Inn Fields.



The Bedchamber from a watercolour looking West with a view into the Oratory and internal fenestration to the stairs beyond (1825)

## NEW BOOK FEATURES NEW INSIDER'S VIEWS OF SOANE'S HOME



Above image: Sir John Soane's Upper Drawing Office (also known as the Student's Room) with view through to the Dome Area (of No. 13) and into the New Picture Room (of No. 12); photograph © Derry Moore

Image on back cover: Octagonal lantern in breakfast parlour in No. 13 Lincoln's Inn Fields; photograph © Derry Moore

On the back cover of this newsletter is a detail of the extraordinary octagonal lantern in the breakfast parlour in No. 13 Lincoln's Inn Fields, which John Soane set with panels of Flemish stained glass. The image is just one of the new views of Sir John Soane's house shot by the legendary photographer Derry Moore and featured in a new publication, just out from the museum.

*Sir John Soane's Museum London*, by Tim Knox, with photographs by Derry Moore (Merrell, \$49.95) would not have been possible without the generous support of major donations from the museum's friends in the United States. We would like to thank:

Elizabeth and Stanley D. Scott  
&  
Ike Kligerman Barkley Architects  
&

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### CLASSICAL VISIONARIES (continued)

And although both men left behind a copious paper trail, most of Jefferson's in written form and Soane's through drawings, these homes illuminate their personalities, ambitions, insecurities, and legacies better than any singular record of pen on paper. As well, wonderfully strange connections seem to still bind the two legacies: the cabinets and furniture in the new Robert Adam Study Centre at Sir John Soane's Museum are made of American Black Walnut, harvested from land that was once part of Jefferson's farms.

END NOTE: The Soane Foundation was one of the funders for the creation of these American Black Walnut cabinets, which were especially designed and crafted by Rupert Senior and Charlie Carmichael of Senior and Carmichael. The cabinets, which have been widely admired, now reside in the Robert Adam Study Centre, a newly created research facility on the second floor of No. 14 Lincoln's Inn Fields.

*Danielle S. Willkens, Associate ALA, FRSA, is a graduate of the University of Virginia, March '08; Sir John Soane's Museum Foundation Traveling Fellowship Award '07; Cambridge University St. John's College, M.Phil '06; University of Virginia, BS*

PLEASE NOTE: Sir John Soane's Museum Foundation will honor Jaquelin T. Robertson and Rizzoli International Publications for their contributions to the field of architecture. Charles Miers, Publisher, and David Morton, Associate Publisher, will accept for Rizzoli.

*Classical Visionaries: A Jeffersonian Evening* will take place on Tuesday, April 21, 2009, in the Rainbow Room at 30 Rockefeller Plaza, 65th Floor, New York City. For more information, or to purchase tickets, please visit [www.soanefoundation.com/gala.html](http://www.soanefoundation.com/gala.html)

### ROBERTSON: WHAT I ADMIRE... (continued)

But while Schinkel was able to build extraordinary buildings and pieces of cities, and Jefferson shaped both a region and a continent, Soane concentrated on refining a brilliant and idiosyncratic language of interior design and architecture which remains startlingly fresh and relevant.

Both Soane and Jefferson were introduced to Greco-Roman architecture traditions early on...but in very different ways. Soane not only read Palladio's Four Books and saw his buildings—the best exposure possible to the Roman Tradition—but got to Paestum (in Italy) to be confronted by the powerful simplicity of the Greek Doric Order. Jefferson, on the other hand, discovered Western Classicism as a student when he came across The Four Books in George Whyth's library in Williamsburg. While he called Palladio his Bible, he never saw the master's buildings, but as U.S. Minister to France, he was introduced (by his lady friend) to a great Roman ruin, the Maison Carrée at Nîmes, and used it as a model for the Virginia State Capitol. Not only was this the first use of the Roman Temple form for government purposes in the world but brought Jefferson, an outlander from the New World, up to speed with what was going on in Western architecture.

Jefferson was our country's first "political aesthete" who felt responsible for raising the taste of his fellow countrymen by designing buildings that exposed them to the best lessons of the past. Soane, of course, didn't have that burden, because he was always at the center of things. But Jefferson and Soane would have been drawn to one another. They shared the joy of invention and of reinterpreting the past; their houses became "idea factories," each of which continues to educate us. Thus "Jeffersoanism" is indeed an apt notion.

### PLANNED GIVING TO THE FOUNDATION

For those to whom the Soane has been important, who wish to make a bequest, the following language is suggested: "I give (the sum of \_\_\_\_ dollars and cents), (all or \_\_\_\_ percent of the residuary of my estate), the Sir John Soane's Museum Foundation, 1040 First Avenue, No. 311, New York NY 10022, for (its general purposes) or (programs, lectures, fellowship, Soane Museum). The bequest may be funded with cash, bonds, or marketable securities. The Soane Foundation is a not-for-profit, tax-exempt entity [501(c)3]. Contributions are tax-deductible. For more information, please contact Chas Miller at [chas@soanefoundation.com](mailto:chas@soanefoundation.com) or 212-223-2012.

### For more information...

Sir John Soane's Museum Foundation has a mission to provide a lively forum in the fields of art, architecture, and the decorative arts within the Soanean tradition and to assist financially Sir John Soane's Museum in London.

For details on Sir John Soane's Museum Foundation, including opportunities for support, a list of our Board of Directors, events, trips and other details, please refer to our website: [www.SoaneFoundation.com](http://www.SoaneFoundation.com).

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### WELCOME TO OUR NEW BOARD MEMBERS OF 2008:

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Portrait miniature of Maria Cosway by husband Richard Cosway - late 18th Century. Collection of Chippy Irvine (a gift from her father, the Rev. A. G. Grime) Photo: Mark Connolly

### Foundation Welcomes Charter Members

The Soane Supporter's Circle was officially launched in October 2008 at the opening of the San Francisco Fall Antiques Show. We thank those of you who have become Charter Members and remind our other friends that you, too, can become charter members by joining the Circle before December 31, 2009. For details, please visit [www.soanefoundation.com](http://www.soanefoundation.com).

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