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Sir John Soane's Magical Museum

London's Greatest "Secret" Inspires San Francisco's Paul Wiseman And Other Top International Designers, Historians and Architects

BY DIANE DORRANS SAEKS

San Francisco interior designer Paul Vincent Wiseman says it's his favorite museum in the world. Wiseman is so fond of Sir John Soane's Museum in London that he takes his clients there and has made the architecture and interiors essential study for his design partners and colleagues.

Whenever he is in London, Wiseman heads to 13 Lincoln's Inn Fields, where he spends several hours enjoying the collection of thousands of paintings by artists such as Canaletto and Piranesi, observing Soane's prodigious use of mirrors and light, and immersing himself in the architectural detailing and subtle color schemes.

"I've visited every important museum on the planet, grand and modest, and Sir John Soane's Museum is my favorite," says Wiseman, who founded his design firm, The Wiseman Group, in San Francisco twenty seven years ago. His company, which includes forty staff members, is considered one of the leading design firms in the world, with projects in Hawaii, New York, London, Los Angeles, Montana and California. Current projects include an important residence in Hawaii with Mexican architect Ricardo Legoretta.





OPPOSITE Sir John Soane designed his living room and adjoining dining room as one large space. His obsession with detail, ornamentation, trompe l'oeil and geometry resulted in superbly detailed walls and ceilings and a sense of drama. The front windows overlook trees in the park. Soane was also fond of circular convex mirrors to increase the apparent size of rooms and to add drama and mystery to his architecture. LEFT The breakfast parlor, a former dressing room, was given its present glory in 1812. Soane wanted a succession of magical effects from spherical shapes, arches and moldings, and the shallow domed ceiling. Artfully, he created the illusion of a larger, grander space.



Sir John Soane (1753-1837) was the architect of the neoclassical Bank of England and the small but exquisite Dulwich Picture Gallery. Over several decades, he rebuilt three adjacent town houses overlooking an elegant London square. They were completed in 1823.

Soane, a fine and confident classically trained architect and interior designer, decorated the rooms lavishly with his own collections of "Grand Tour" Roman statuary, classical paintings of architecture of antiquity gathered on travels to Italy, and other treasures including an Egyptian sarcophagus, hundreds of Roman marble sculpture fragments, and Hogarth's famous "The Rake's Progress." Displayed in every room of the house, on walls and stacked on shelves and hinged mounts, they now form part of this admired connoisseur's legacy.

One reason why Paul Wiseman is drawn to Sir John Soane's Museum is that it retains the allure and character of an early nineteenth century private house. "My favorite part of the house is the back where all his antiquities are displayed," he says. "It's surreal, playful, and very personal."

Thanks to the museum's knowledgeable direction and careful focus, it feels fresh and relevant, and the superbly maintained, elegant

In the picture room, Soane designed a series of swinging planes that were devised to display his extensive collections. A series of ink drawings by Piranesi are shown to great advantage. Soane met Piranesi in Rome and clearly was enamored of Piranesi's architectural imagination and sense of interior grandeur.



design and classical flair could translate smoothly into today's interiors.

"I love the eccentricity of it all," says Wiseman. "It's a true collector's house. He had a singular vision. Soane was avant garde with his use of skylights which cast light into the lower rooms."

Sir John Soane, R.A., was indeed idiosyncratic. He was the son of a bricklayer and worked within the framework of the admired classical idiom of the time to create unique commercial and residential structures.

Sir John Soane's Museum remains as the best example of his genius in the singular and enduring design of the residence. Currently under renovation is Number 14 Lincoln's Inn Fields, which was also designed by Soane, and will house the Robert Adam Study Center while providing much needed additional space for the museum.

Soane had two sons, but he left his residence to the public by Act of Parliament in 1833. The Soane's house and its contents survive today, exactly as they were in his era, giving architectural students and visitors a rich glimpse into his extraordinary collections, the artful manner in which he displayed his sculptures and paintings, and his décor.

"I always feel Soane is present in the house," says Wiseman. "The museum is so alive, you almost expect to see him sitting at a desk or walking through the gallery. Every visit is inspirational. Once I attended a dinner with the museum closed and all rooms lit by candles. It was magical—exactly how Soane himself would have experienced and enjoyed it." H

THE SIR JOHN SOANE'S MUSEUM FOUNDATION

Sir John Soane's Museum Foundation in America was founded in 1991 to further Soane's goal to educate the general and professional public in architecture and the fine and decorative arts and to support . Its programs have attracted more than four thousand students, educators, curators, architects, decorators and collectors. To join the group and support its mission:

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