

Art and death

The Dulwich Picture Gallery, London SE21

On the bicentenary of its foundation, Gavin Stamp considers the astonishing story of this much-loved gallery

Photographs by Robert Sanderson

IN 1811, Alleyn's College of God's Gift, a small charity in a South London village founded by the Jacobean actor-manager Edward Alleyn, was given both money and a collection of some 370 paintings under the will of the half-Swiss artist and collector Sir Peter Francis Bourgeois. The paintings, originally assembled by Bourgeois's close friend, the French dealer and collector Noel Desenfans, for the last king of Poland before his country disappeared from the map, had earlier been offered to the British nation to form the nucleus of a national gallery, but that offer had been declined. Under the terms of the will, the college was to house the paintings and construct a mausoleum for Bourgeois and his late friend and, eventually, Desenfans's Welsh widow. The architect nominated to achieve this end was Bourgeois's friend Sir John Soane, and the eventual result was an art gallery with a mausoleum attached. The building also included accommodation for almswomen.

Such, in outline, was the genesis of what was, according to Sir Nikolaus Pevsner, 'the first independent building erected to be a picture gallery'. It opened to the public in 1817, and made Dulwich famous. Admission was by ticket and the paintings could be viewed on five days of the week, with free entry on a Tuesday. Although some distance from central London (where the tickets had to be obtained), many made the journey because of the quality of the art. John Britton wrote in 1832 that an excursion to Dulwich 'forms one of the most delightful intellectual trips

which the neighbourhood of the metropolis affords'. In the early days, Royal Academicians were entertained at Dulwich at special dinners or parties.

Today, the picture gallery flourishes. Exhibitions attract large audiences and many visit Dulwich simply to see the building, which is now revered as one of the best of Soane's surviving works. All this is cause for celebration, given the difficult history of the institution and the vagaries of that famous architect's reputation. But few of the comfortable residents of Dulwich Village who now delight in the picture gallery, enjoying its cafe and attending the private views, probably grasp quite how peculiar, not to say weird, the place is, both as an institution and as a work of architecture.

No other art gallery or museum in Britain contains the bodies of its founders; the only parallel in Europe is in Copenhagen, where the remains of the sculptor Bertel Thorvaldsen lie under the centre of the courtyard within the wonderful museum built to honour him and display his work. The Dulwich Picture Gallery is an early example of what has been called the 'donor memorial', a product of the contemporary romantic enthusiasm for memorials and mausolea. Soane and his clients—Bourgeois, Desenfans and the latter's wife, Margaret—engaged in what might be seen as a cult of death. Indeed, Soane had already designed and built a mausoleum for them in the backyard of the house in Charlotte (now Hallam) Street in Marylebone where they lived as an unusual *ménage à trois*. The survival of that last resting place ➤



↑ Fig 1: The eastern, entrance front of the gallery today: almost all that is visible dates from the 20th century, and is not by Soane. → Fig 2 facing page: Soane's spinal enfilade of top-lit picture galleries, now redecorated in the original colour scheme





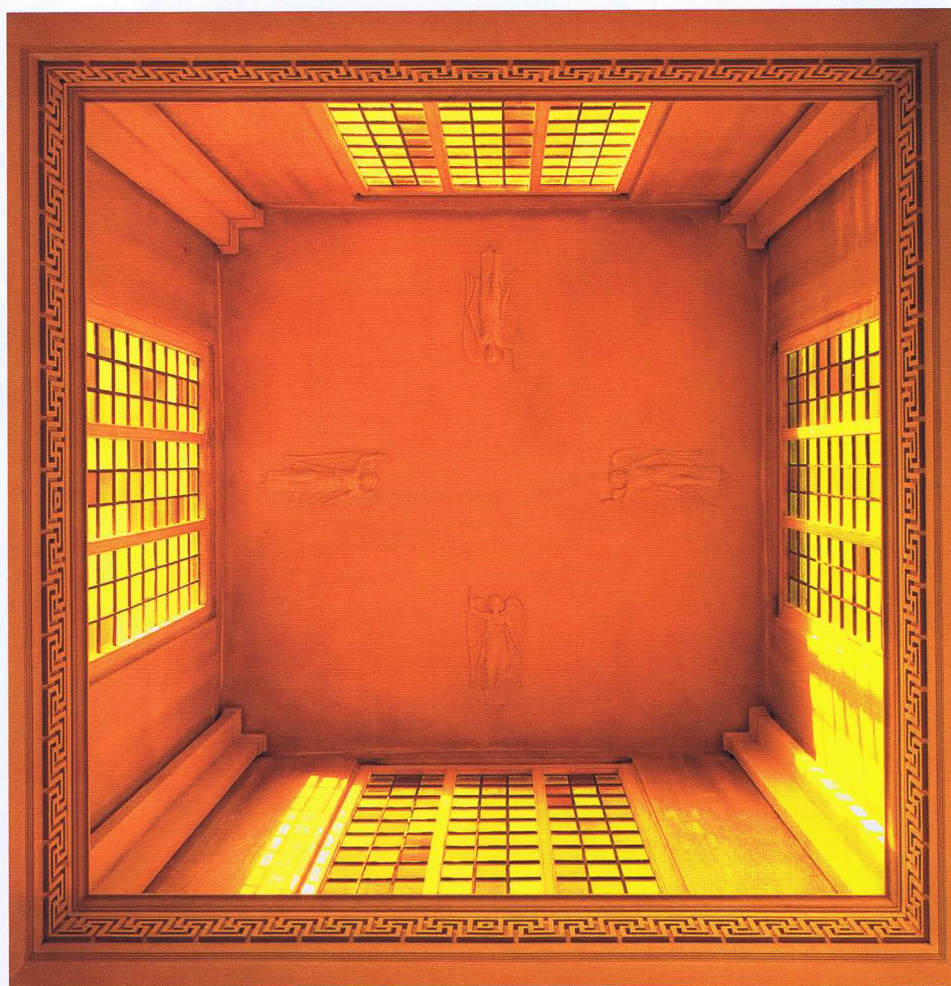
was not, however, secure, as the Duke of Portland had rejected Bourgeois's attempt to purchase the lease of the house; hence the need for the new mausoleum in Dulwich.

Dulwich College was then a small, incompetent and corrupt charity, which required two Royal Commissions to reform and convert it into the large Victorian public school that produced P. G. Wodehouse and Ernest Shackleton. For all its indolence, the college was clearly unhappy with the mausoleum proposed by Soane: not only would it upstage the tomb of Edward Alleyn in the chapel, but it was entirely devoid of conventional Christian symbolism. Soane wanted to site it in the centre of the prominent east entrance front, but, in the end, after producing many redesigns and alternative schemes, he placed it at the rear, on the west side of the gallery (**Fig 5**), between the two short ranges housing the 'poor sisters'. The Dulwich commission clearly meant much to Soane; he took no fee, and even seems to have considered leaving his own collection to the college before deciding to memorialise himself in Lincoln's Inn Fields. The puzzling fourth, empty sarcophagus in the gallery mausoleum may well have been intended for the architect himself.

'Few visitors to Dulwich probably grasp quite how peculiar, not to say weird, the place is'

The mausoleum (**Fig 4**), with its symbolic, non-functional free-standing doors, funerary objects placed above the parapets and its internal ring of unfluted Greek Doric columns, is by far the most elaborate part of the building. The top-lit central spine of galleries (**Fig 2**) is, in contrast, rather severe and utilitarian, the enfilade articulated by plain arched openings. It is often not appreciated how much the linear and abstract Soane style was due to economy. The college was not at all generous with the budget, and necessity obliged Soane to build in a 'plain and substantial manner' in ordinary yellow London stocks, rather than in stone. Nor was the building finished as he intended, with a central porch to the east and an open arcade along this elevation. For a century, this side of the building consisted of a plain brick wall relieved by blank arches with open, almost free-standing brick arches at each end.

The completed building was not altogether convenient. A simple door now opened directly into the central gallery, which was not practical or good for the paintings. In consequence, a small entrance porch was



↑ **Fig 3** above: The lantern over the mausoleum, with the windows filled with amber glass to create Soane's desired *lumière mystérieuse*. → **Fig 4** facing page: Inside the mausoleum, looking towards the founders' tombs from the door leading into the galleries

added at the south end, which was replaced in 1867 by a larger and wholly incongruous extension, with the required 'retiring rooms', designed by Charles Barry Jr, architect of the magnificent red-brick and terracotta New College buildings half a mile to the south. The modern architects who so admire Soane tend to see him as a proto-functionalists, as well as a master in the handling of natural light, but, in truth, contemporaries found the lighting inadequate. The original gallery skylights were glazed only at the sides, and William Hazlitt wrote that they 'are so contrived as to "shed a dim", though not a "religious light" upon the pictures'. Only in the mausoleum, lit from above through amber glass to produce the *lumière mystérieuse* Soane loved, was the level of illumination appropriate (**Fig 3**).

The Victorians despised the spare Soane manner, of course, but some contemporaries also disliked it, and the most entertaining criticism of the building was written in 1822 by the Rev T. F. Dibdin: 'What a thing! What a creature it is! A Maeso-Gothic, semi-Arabic, Moro-Spanish, Anglico-Norman, a what-you-will production! It hath no compeer, there is nothing like it above the earth, nor under the earth, or about the earth.

It has all the merit and emphatic distinction of being unique.' Unique it certainly is, and Soane's genius for abstraction, for paring down forms to thin planes of brickwork—combined with his use of ornamental grooves and the symbolism of death—was given full rein. Sir John Summerson once tellingly described Soane's style thus: 'There is always a temperamental factor, expressing itself in a sense of deflation, as if all mass had been exhausted from the design... His architecture never commands; it shrinks into itself and nervously defines the spaces which it encloses.' This is particularly evident at Dulwich. Summerson nevertheless considered the gallery 'the apex of his achievement', but there is surely truth also in Ian Nairn's view that it is 'one of Soane's most original, least satisfying designs'.

Whether or not the modern visitor admires or dislikes the plain architecture at Dulwich, few, I think, appreciate that the building they see from the gates in College Road is not really by Soane at all. The only bricks visible that were laid in his time are those forming the recessed attic and the typically strange chimneys that rise above. Everything else belongs to the 20th century (**Fig 1**). To provide wall space for further bequests, a series



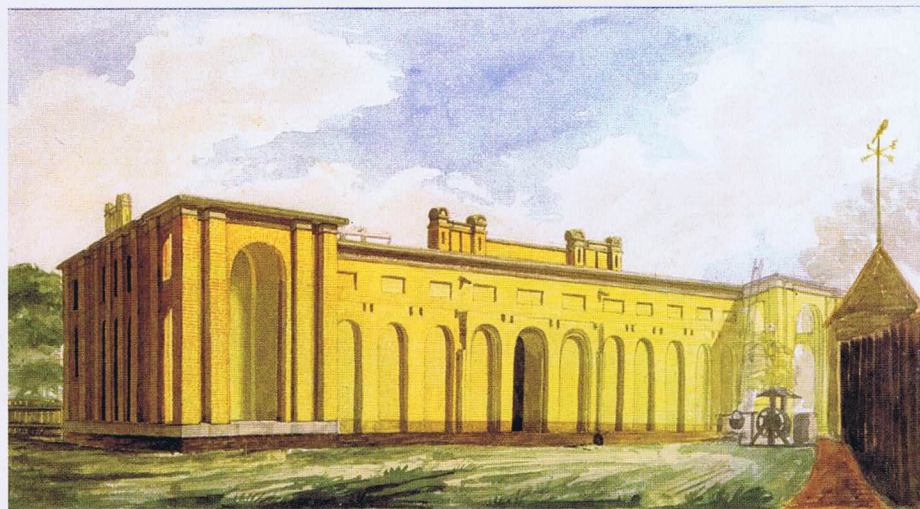
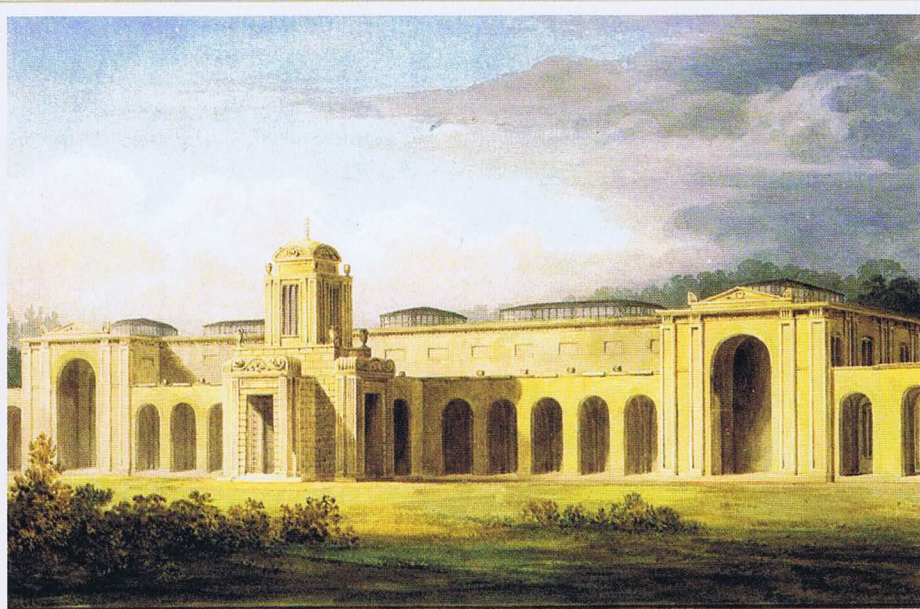
SIR PETER FRANCIS BOURGEOIS K. R. A.

of five galleries was added along this front between 1909 and 1938. These were largely the work of E. T. Hall and his son, E. Stanley Hall, and what is remarkable about them is that they were designed in the Soane manner and were respectful to the original building. For although Soane's reputation was beginning to recover at the beginning of the century, the elder Hall's taste is suggested by the jolly Edwardian Baroque library he designed for the New College site a few years earlier. The last addition, the gallery at the north-east corner, was by that most subtle architect, H. S. Goodhart-Rendel.

'The mausoleum, with its symbolic doors, funerary objects and Doric columns is the most elaborate part'

The door through which visitors now enter the gallery is even later, however. Until the Second World War, the entrance was at the south end. In 1944, one of the V1 flying bombs that rained on South London badly damaged the western side of the building and half demolished the mausoleum (Fig 6). After the war, pleas were made that it should be fully restored and the college, much to its credit, agreed. An immaculate reconstruction was carried out by the college's surveyor, Austin Vernon, in 1950–53, with the aged Arthur Davis of Mewès and Davis, architects of The Ritz, as consultant. The opportunity was then taken to sweep away Barry's southern porch and to add a new entrance to the central Edwardian gallery on the east side—thus realising Soane's original intentions at long last. As elsewhere, the details were taken from the original building, so most visitors quite reasonably assume that this porch is by Soane himself.

The new brickwork, with its careful tuck-pointing, blends seamlessly with the old. This, unfortunately, cannot be said of the most recent alterations to the gallery. As part of the extension and refurbishment works carried out by Rick Mather Architects in 1995–2000, which resulted in the connecting glazed cloister, lecture room and cafe being built along the edge of the Old College and along College Road, valuable improvements were made to the interior. Lower roofs were then put on the intervening galleries along the east front to allow more of Soane's attic to be visible, but also, for some reason, the external walls, with arched windows separated by paired pilasters, were replaced by new brick walls with blank arcades. And the



Dulwich through the designs

The top image is one of several unexecuted designs by Soane for the Dulwich Picture Gallery, dating from 1811/12, with the mausoleum placed in the centre of the east front. The lower painting shows the east side of the gallery nearing completion, drawn by one of Soane's assistants on August 12, 1812; this is how the building looked for almost a century.

pointing of this brickwork is discordant in colour and ineptly carried out, thus making the new work—unlike the earlier additions to Soane's building—conspicuous.

Sad to say, the exemplary post-war reconstruction inaugurated the bleakest phase in the gallery's history. As a schoolboy at Dulwich, I first encountered Soane's masterpiece almost half a century ago. We were not, I recall, much encouraged to visit this cultural resource; indeed, both gallery and chapel were, in theory, out of bounds to the school's minority of boarders. The gallery was then open only in daylight hours, as there was no electric light (not installed until 1974); the interior, painted a drab light grey, felt cold and bleak; and the place seemed unloved and attracted few visitors. And it was not possible to enter the mausoleum, thus denying Soane's clear intentions and the possibility of 'conversing with our departed friends who now sleep in

their silent tombs'. Soon after came a series of thefts of paintings and, in 1969, the gallery nearly closed through lack of funds.

As a listed building, of course, the Soane structure would not have been demolished, but there was a real risk that the whole collection might be sold. In the event, the picture gallery was rescued by Giles Waterfield, who was appointed director in 1979. He embarked on an ambitious policy of lending, fundraising and generally reinvigorating the place. This culminated in it being transferred from the college governors to an independent board of trustees in 1994, allowing it to flourish as it now does. Perhaps one day, a bust of Waterfield should join those of Desenfans and Bourgeois in Soane's extraordinary mausoleum, as one of the benefactors of this most remarkable and unique institution.

For opening times, telephone 020–8693 5254 or visit www.dulwichpicturegallery.org.uk



↑ *Fig 5 above:*
The exterior of
the mausoleum
today; in the
background is
the new steeple
that was raised
over the Old
College Chapel
by Charles Barry
Jr in 1865–66.

→ *Fig 6 right:*
The mausoleum
after a V1 flying
bomb had demol-
ished much of
the west side of
Soane's Gallery
on July 12, 1944



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