Sir John Soane's divine clutter

By Harry Eyres
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Jeremy Bentham, the founder of utilitarianism, and the architect Sir John Soane, who were almost exact contemporaries, though never friends, both ensured for themselves an odd kind of immortality: the former arranged for his body to be preserved for posterity, while the latter conceived an extraordinary physical continuation for his mind. Bentham's body and Soane's mind can be found quite near each other in west-central London: Bentham sits in a wooden cabinet at University College London (his head is a wax copy, alas), while Soane's mind lives on in the Sir John Soane's Museum in Lincoln's Inn Fields, about to embark on a £7m refit called "Opening Up the Soane" (the last £500,000 still to be raised).

The Sir John Soane's Museum is a museum like no other. I remember going to see it when I was still at school and immediately liking it, though I would not have been able to say quite why, or to pin my enthusiasm on any particular object. According to the dapper and smart new director, Tim Knox, the museum has a strong appeal for the elusive 16-30-year-old bracket, the kind of young people you imagine would rather be on Facebook than going to some fusty old house in a lawyers' district of London.

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Now I'm a bit older I still like the Soane, and can come up with a theory about why it might appeal to the young. It is a place liberatingly free of cant: the educational cant that tells you that you should be learning about the history of western painting; the scientific cant that will fill you with facts and explanations; above all, the cant of good taste.

The Victorians loathed Soane, who was neither seriously Gothic nor seriously Greek, and the museum languished in the later 19th century, featuring unflatteringly in Henry James's tale *A London Life* (though James did call the museum "one of the most curious things in London"). Soane committed a terrible sin by being eclectic; by filling his house with an unclassifiable collection of occasional masterpieces – paintings by Hogarth, Watteau and Canaletto – and odd plaster casts, a huge model of Pompeii, the tomb of his dog and, in the basement, the magnificent alabaster sarcophagus of the Egyptian pharaoh Seti I. (Nowadays, of course, eclectic can be positively glossed as postmodern.)

Inscribed all over its outside with hieroglyphics, and with an exquisite carving of the goddess Nut on its inner base, Seti's sarcophagus is probably the most amazing object in the museum.

Showing me round what Soane called his "sepulchral chamber", Tim Knox launched into a virtuoso explanation of how it came to be there, which was also much appreciated by other visitors who may not have known that they were getting a free talk by the director (entry to the museum is also free, as Soane stipulated in his will).

"Soane bought it for £2,000, which was a hefty sum in those days, after it had been turned down by the British Museum. Nowadays they're green with envy.

After he bought it he held a three-day party during which he surrounded the sarcophagus with lustres, mirrors, oil-lamps, so that it glowed. We still light the setting around it for special events."

The unstoppable Knox then launched into a digression on the flamboyant discoverer of the sarcophagus, the theatrical strongman turned Egyptologist Giovanni Belzoni. "The skills he learned as a strongman made him an expert in extracting extremely heavy objects." The presence of this 3,000-year-old sarcophagus can't help making me think that the Soane is itself a kind of pyramid, which would make Soane a megalomaniac. But it is a pyramid with differences, and he was a benign megalomaniac.

If pyramids were designed to shut out the light, Soane's museum is mostly about letting it in, in all sorts of odd and ingenious ways.

The exhibition spaces at the back of the house are largely top-lit; in fact the impression one gets from wandering around is of shafts of light breaking in from all angles. These architectural innovations are much admired by postmodern architects.

But it is definitely not sweetness and light; Knox sounded positively gleeful when he told me, down in the sepulchral chamber: "We keep this deliberately dark and confusing. I want to make it even darker."

Many museums nowadays seem to be following well-intentioned diktats involving education and access and in the process are losing their souls. The Soane has a very strong educational dimension; Soane himself as professor of architecture was a passionate pedagogue, often inviting as many as 600 students into his house for lectures.

The "Opening Up the Soane" project will enhance that, making the great collections of renaissance and architectural drawings more available.

But Knox is adamant that education and interpretation will remain in the background and will not swamp the primary experience of looking.

Above all, the Soane is the perfect counterblast to Bentham's abstracted utilitarianism; offering not the greatest happiness of the greatest number, but a singular and eccentric vision which has the power to inspire millions.

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