

# In London, Entering an Architect's Mind

BY PETER TRIPPI



Many *Fine Art Connoisseur* readers visit London regularly, but perhaps not all of them have yet discovered one of its most extraordinary destinations. As its name suggests, Sir John Soane's Museum is the brainchild of John Soane (1753-1837), the most brilliant British architect of his era. In 1792, he and his wife bought a plain brick house in central London. Over the next three decades, they unified it with two neighboring houses, rebuilding all of the structures to their own specifications. Elizabeth Soane died in 1815, but her husband survived another 22 years, further developing the interiors as a manifestation of his unique aesthetic. Indeed, exploring Nos. 12, 13, and 14 Lincoln's Inn Fields (which overlook a leafy rectangular park) is rather like entering Sir John's mind, and it is telling that he himself referred to the complex as a museum.

Stuffed with artifacts ranging from ancient sculptures to contemporary paintings, plus salvaged pieces of architecture like arches and niches, Soane's interiors are particularly memorable for their lighting.



The facades of the three houses that comprise Sir John Soane's Museum; Photo: Martin Charles

Thomas Lawrence (1769-1830)

*Portrait of Sir John Soane*

1828-29, Oil on canvas, 54 1/2 x 43 1/2 in.

Sir John Soane's Museum, London



The Picture Room features swinging, double-sided panels that maximize the number of artworks on view, including important examples by Canaletto, Piranesi, and Hogarth. Photo: John Bridges

Throughout his career, this architect sought to channel and animate natural light, a quest that still leads to surprising, even mysterious, experiences in his spaces. The architecture critic Paul Goldberger believes that Soane's spirit "has always represented not so much classicism itself as invention, as creative imagination, as pushing the envelope of architecture. Soane wanted to make people see space and feel space as they never had before." Indeed, each room here is defined by its own light and coloring, and many are enlivened further by Soane's fantastical explanations of how they came to be (e.g., the "Monk's Yard" and "Basement Crypt").

Wending one's way through the museum is pleasure enough every few years, but its custodians do not rest on their laurels, instead mounting rotating exhibitions that keep devotees coming back every season. In March, they opened *Marking the Line*, for which four contemporary ceramic artists have created new works in response to Soane's ideas, and on view through May 18 is an exhibition reuniting 17 sketches that form the last great project of the 18th-century master Giovanni Batista Piranesi. Cataloguing and research of the museum's vast collections are intensifying, too. Stored here, for example, are more than 9,000 drawings from the 18th-century architectural practice of Robert and James Adam; all of them will be posted online by 2015, a huge service to scholars and architects worldwide.

#### MORE SOANE FOR MORE PEOPLE

Because it is so intimate and crowded with treasures, the museum can accommodate only 150 visitors at a time. Though it has always been a cult destination for architects and designers, word of its charm

has spread worldwide through tourist guides, which means that well over 100,000 people now visit annually. (It's not uncommon to find a line of people waiting out front on the sidewalk.) The trustees' logical response to this situation is the three-phase *Opening up the Soane* initiative, through which public space will ultimately grow by one third. After one year of building work, Phase 1 was completed last summer at No. 12, which now harbors a new exhibition gallery, cloakroom, and shop. Most important, its conservation center, named after the American donors John A. and Cynthia Fry Gunn, is 50 percent larger than its predecessor. And for the first time, the museum now has an elevator for visitors, though Sir John would be pleased by its discretion: it is utterly invisible in the breakfast room, where a "bookcase" magically opens to reveal the lift when it's needed.

This April, the museum launched Phase 2 of its initiative. By late 2014, the second floor of No. 13 will witness the restoration of eight richly decorated interiors dismantled long ago, including the room where Soane exhibited his collection of architectural models. Fueling these rooms' re-creation is a set of period watercolors that illustrate exactly how they once looked, as well as the written inventory of Soane's possessions just after his death. And beginning in 2015, Phase 3 of *Opening up the Soane* will restore distinctive features to the back of the museum, including the "catacombs" and a flexible interpretation space.

Considering its dramatic impact on everyone's experience of the museum, the total cost of *Opening up the Soane* seems a bargain at £7 million (roughly \$11 million). Of course, operational costs will necessarily grow



In No. 12, a “bookcase” opens to reveal the newly installed elevator. Photos: Lewis Bush

as the spaces do, and it’s unfortunate that funding from the national government continues to shrink due to budget cuts. The initiative has been deftly launched and managed by director Tim Knox, who has just moved on to the Fitzwilliam Museum at Cambridge University; he leaves the Soane in good shape, however, and his successor (as yet unnamed) has reason to be optimistic.

Happily, the expansion of the conservation center and a new part-time conservatorship were underwritten by members of the Sir John Soane’s Museum Foundation in America, which has promoted and raised funds for the institution since its founding in 1991. The foundation’s next benefit gala is scheduled for May 14 in New York City, and in October its members will explore Rome, Naples, and Paestum in Soane’s footsteps. On offer throughout the year across America are lectures and private visits to museums and fairs, so readers of *Fine Art Connoisseur* may want get involved soon. ■

**Information:** The museum is entered via 13 Lincoln’s Inn Fields, London, WC2A 3BP, England, 44.207.405.2107, [soane.org.uk](http://soane.org.uk); its American foundation can be reached in New York City via 212.223.2012 or [soanefoundation.com](http://soanefoundation.com).

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All photos courtesy of the Trustees of Sir John Soane’s Museum.



A watercolor view of Sir John Soane’s bedroom painted on October 20, 1825