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How Sir John Soane outmanoeuvred his opponents to become a neoclassical hero

A new exhibition tells of the architect's path to greatness — despite some sceptical clients, writes **Damian Arnold**

Sir John Soane is one of Britain's most celebrated architects but the untold story of a career that flourished in the first three decades of the 19th century is how he outwitted often sceptical clients into accepting neoclassicism long after the style had given way to the dominant fashion for the neo-gothic. Soane's achievement in designing so many public buildings, churches, galleries and houses, is put into perspective by how quickly his reputation declined after his death. His popularity revived only in the early 20th century.

A new exhibition at the Sir John Soane Museum tells the story of how he sold his increasingly unfashionable notions to society. The starting point is Soane's extraordinary home in Lincoln's Inn Fields, which he used as a shop window. Visitors would be greeted by two caryatids standing like sentinels on the entablature (based on the Erechtheion at the Acropolis in Athens) and ushered down into vault-like spaces suffused with natural light and full of treasure — classical artefacts and Egyptian sarcophagi eccentrically arranged in every nook and cranny. It was hoped that if potential clients felt as though they were in ancient Athens they might actually commission Soane to build them one to be adapted into a grand residence.

Many of the rich bankers, who came into Soane's ambit after the architect

Visitors would knock on the door of Soane's house and ask for a guided tour

was appointed as architect and surveyor of the Bank of England building in 1788, did just that. Soane was the son of a bricklayer. The personable young man's rise to the top was based on talent but it was oiled by the early patronage of William Pitt, who helped him to win the position at the Bank of England and the chance to mix in high society.

Soane made the most of what began as a relatively modest brief to oversee repairs at the bank. He handled the "moneycrats", as he called them, so deftly that repairs evolved into a refacing of the bank's screen walls in a classical style. Over the course of a long career as the bank's surveyor, he doubled its surface area with his designs.

Once appointed as an official architect of the office of works, he had the chance to decorate the façades and interiors of public buildings with classical detailing, but he began to encounter opposition from snuffy civil servants — whom he contemptuously labelled "dilettante architects". An early example was Soane's neo-palladian façade for the law courts at Westminster Hall. A campaign by the MP Henry Banks, who lived opposite, led to it being demolished and replaced with a neo-gothic façade.

Soane learnt from the humiliation. Presenting drawings for his next big commission, Holy Trinity Church, Marylebone, he encountered similar resistance to his neoclassical vision. Soane was asked to make alternative drawings in Norman and neo-gothic styles. He proceeded to depict the



Sir John Soane in an 1804 portrait by William Owen. Below, Soane's visions for Holy Trinity Church, Marylebone, as painted by Joseph Michael Gandy. Soane subtly used the paintings to persuade his clients to choose his preferred design



church in the three styles in a painting by his favourite draughtsman Joseph Michael Gandy, being careful to bathe his favoured neoclassical design in heavenly light. He got his way.

Like any architect down the ages, Soane battled with tight budgets, and the consequent need to refine some of his designs adds to their charm, says Abraham Thomas, director of the Soane museum. "He did have difficulties with clients, especially the church ones, and he often had to work within budgets of just £20,000 for his famous churches. As a result, his classicism can be quite restrained and minimal, without much decoration or embellishment — a bit like early 20th-century Modernism."

Soane also used his attachment to the Royal Academy, where he had been an award-winning student and later a professor of architecture, to curry public favour for his architectural style and quash opposition. At the RA's annual exhibition he submitted proposals for his buildings. Beautiful pictures that took Gandy nearly a month to paint would be presented alongside the oils and watercolours. Like the other works of art on display, Soane fictionalised his proposed buildings by setting them in bucolic landscapes and portraying stylised versions of the buildings, shorn of mundane details such as chimneys.

One client charmed by these landscape paintings was the banker William Praed, to whom Soane was introduced by the Marquis of Buckingham and who commissioned Soane to design a house for him in Tythingham, Buckinghamshire. Another exhibit shows a beautiful wooden model of the house that Soane had made. Each of the three layers can be detached to show the detailing inside.

His greatest selling point remained his own house, but even there Soane had to battle against planning regulations that forbade projecting façades in the square. One of the prize exhibits in the show is a recently discovered drawing by Soane of the Portland stone façade of the house. It was part of the evidence Soane used to win a court case, arguing that the Royal College of Surgeons and two other buildings in the square also had a projecting façade and had created a precedent. Soane won his case and developed the building that he had conceived as "a kind of ruin of antiquity" where people could wander about and encounter treasure.

Curious members of the public started knocking on the door and making appointments to see the interiors, that would later be described in the *Oxford Dictionary of Architecture* as "one of the most complex, intricate, and ingenious ever conceived". Soane's housekeeper doubled up as a tour guide. If visitors were particularly important, Soane would do the tours himself.

Without his schmoozing and good connections to support his talent, his reputation suffered after his death in 1837, but he had secured his longer-term legacy by persuading the government to pass an act of parliament to convert the house into a museum.

Nearly two centuries later, the house is still one of London's favourite museums and in May an upper storey of No 13 will open to the public, including Soane's bedroom, bathroom, model room and personal oratory. The great eccentric, who had so many run-ins with officialdom, has had the last laugh.

Building a Dialogue: the Architect and the Client, Sir John Soane Museum, runs until May 9