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Sir John Soane's Model Room

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An architectural trove of masterpieces in miniature, the architect's house has been lovingly restored

The restored Model Room at Sir John Soane's Museum, London, with the Pompeii model on its original 'cake stand' display

In November 1836, less than three months before he died, the architect Sir John Soane put his personal papers — letters, business correspondence and accounts connected to his architectural practice — into the drawers and cupboards of his house at 13 Lincoln's Inn Fields and sealed them up, leaving instructions that they were not to be opened for 30, 50 and, in some cases, 60 years. It was a final stage in the preparations for his legacy, which he'd begun almost 30 years earlier, when he had bought the house and drawn up the first plans to turn it into a museum.

"The acquisition of number 13 came quite soon after Soane was made professor of architecture at the Royal Academy," says Helen Dorey, who is deputy director of the museum and its current Inspectress — a title written into the 1833 Act of Parliament that secured Soane's house and its contents as a public museum after his death. "It's quite clear from his writings that the reason he wanted to acquire this larger building next door [to his first house at number 12] was specifically to start making his collections available, initially to those RA students. Even in 1812, the year he's

completing his rebuilding of number 13, the house is described as 'an academy of architecture' in the press."

Soane's early designs for the house had included a "model room" or "plaister room", which eventually became the present Dome. For anybody who visits Sir John Soane's Museum today, this is one of its most spectacular features: a double-height atrium that runs from the basement to a glass skylight above, its walls barnacled with Greek and Roman marbles and casts. From a balustrade at ground-floor level, visitors can look down to the "sepulchral chamber" into which, on May 15 1824, Soane lowered his most expensive acquisition: the alabaster sarcophagus of King Seti I (1294-1279 BC), for which he had paid £2,000.

This wasn't the only "model room" Soane planned, however. He was a firm believer in the importance of models — "Wherever a model has been dispensed with, I am afraid the building has suffered in consequence thereof, either in solidity or convenience, and perhaps both," he told his students at the Royal Academy. In 50 years of architectural practice he commissioned hundreds for his private houses and public buildings, many of which survive — there are 44 for the Bank of England alone. And to his collections of ancient fragments, statues, paintings, drawings and porcelain he added models of classical Greek and Roman buildings, some of which he had seen first-hand while on a travelling studentship to Europe between 1778-80, awarded by George III and the Royal Academy.

By the end of his life, his collection of models was displayed in a specially designated "Model Room" on the second floor of 13 Lincoln's Inn Fields. At its centre was a huge cork model of the ruins of Pompeii, as they had looked in 1820, supported on a specially commissioned three-tiered stand, eight-feet square, with brass pillars — rather like a giant wooden cake stand — with smaller models arranged around its edges. It had a plan chest in the base where Soane stored his own drawings, and some of his collection of those by other architects.

"The Model Room came quite late in Soane's life," Dorey explains. "Soane was making models for his own practice right from the beginning, and those models presumably lived in his office. But the idea of a room, with historical models, doesn't really start until the 1820s. Soane is 70 by then. Mrs Soane died in 1815 and it's 11 years after that, in 1826, that he bought all those cork models. God knows why he did it. He had to commission this vast stand to take the Pompeii model and he put it in his drawing room for a year or so. It must have been so inconvenient."

Model Room c.1834-35

But for Soane, the son of a builder, who had joined the household of Charles Dance, clerk of works to the City of London, at 15, the models must have represented the most formative period of his life. In the two years he spent in Europe, he visited classical sites across Italy and Sicily, travelling back through Switzerland, Germany and Belgium. And ever afterwards, in the designs of his buildings, his

collection of artefacts and not least his architectural models, he paid tribute to the classical ruins and temples he had visited as a young man.

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His first cork models were bought in the early 1800s but it wasn't until 1826 that he acquired the Pompeii ruins, still the largest model in his collection, which had been brought back from Italy by one of his pupils, John Sanders. Then, in 1834, with the Act of Parliament agreed, Soane bought 20 small, exquisitely detailed plaster-of-Paris models of classical buildings made by the French model-maker François Fouquet (1787-1870). He paid £100.

Sir John Soane; portrait by Thomas Lawrence, 1828

Fouquet and his father Jean-Pierre recreated classical buildings and monuments to exact scale — not in their ruined state, as Soane would have seen them, but as they would have looked when first completed. Each was protected by a glass case or dome, and among them was a 10.5in-high replica of the Roman Temple of Vesta at Tivoli, which Soane had visited while staying in Rome and of which he made measured drawings. He already owned a model of the ruined temple in cork — the kind of souvenir aimed at visitors on the Grand Tour. But the Fouquet model was a perfect replica of the temple built in the 1st century BC. It would influence many of Soane's future buildings, most notably the "Tivoli" corner of the Bank of England, part of his extensive work for the bank, much of which was destroyed in the 1920s.

The same year he moved his collection, including the stand and the Pompeii model, into a newly designated model room on the second floor overlooking Lincoln's Inn Fields, which until her death in 1815 had been his wife Eliza's bedroom.

"As soon as that Act is passed, Soane does certain things, which I think are very interesting," Dorey says. "One is that he moves the bust of himself, which was in a very modest position, to the middle of the dome area, opposite [the statue] Apollo Belvedere, sort of surveying his collection. And then about a year later, he makes, you could call it, a final sacrifice — not that he says anything about it, we're deducing this — of giving up Eliza's bedroom, which had been kept presumably as she left it, and dismantles it to make way for the model stand.

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>
> - Sir John Soane

"After the passing of the Act, people could ask to come here and see the house," Dorey explains. "We don't have any visitors' books for that period, so we don't know how many people came, but we are presuming that some did."

François Fouquet's model of the Temple of Vesta, Tivoli (1800-30)

After Soane's death in 1837, the trustees moved quickly. "George Bailey [Soane's chief clerk, the first curator] was expected to come and live here," says Dorey. "That is what led to the second floor largely being dismantled. Within the first year they sold various bits of furniture. They sold his bed — what was Bailey supposed to do, sleep in Soane's bed? — I think they just thought, 'This is really not appropriate, these are private things.' So George Bailey moved in and the Model Room remained intact until about 1850. Then they moved the stand, and by 1900 it's all been dismantled."

Not only dismantled. The enormous model stand was cut in two, and Pompeii with it. "The model was cut in half so it still fitted on the stand, and the half they cut off was thrown away," says Dorey. "I honestly believe that they would have thrown the whole thing away if it hadn't been for the fact that it had a plan chest in the middle and they didn't have anywhere to put those drawings. I have a strong suspicion that James Wild, who was the curator at the time, was so radical he would have been tempted to get rid of it entirely."

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For the next 80 years, the models in Soane's collection were distributed around the house or kept in store. The cut-down stand ended up in the basement. Some were badly damaged, particularly during the second world war, when the museum was twice hit by bombs and closed to the public.

When it reopened in 1947, Soane's endowment was no longer enough to keep it afloat and a grant-in-aid was agreed by the Treasury, which has been given annually ever since. In the following decades the building was turned inside out by continued renovation projects. In 1969 the trustees took back 12 Lincoln's Inn Fields from rental, but it would be another 20 years before a model room was set up there by the then curator Peter Thornton.

"He set up a sort of a shadow of Soane's own Model Room," Dorey says. "He put the cut-down stand in there and arranged many of Soane's other models on the stand and around the outside of the room. It was a lovely space and we used to take people up there on the tour on Saturdays. But of course it wasn't the original Model Room and it wasn't the original arrangement."

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Seti I's sarcophagus, in situ (Joseph Michael Gandy, 1825)

Only after the purchase of the freehold to number 14 (a house Soane built but never lived in) in 1996, another decade of reorganisation, and the instigation of a plan called "Opening Up the Soane" in 2009, would Soane's original Model Room be completely restored and reinstated to Soane's exact specifications on the second floor of 13 Lincoln's Inn Fields.

It will open next month with its original pictures back on the walls, its models restored to their original positions, with the three-tiered stand, restored to its original size, holding the newly restored ruins of Pompeii, the model that inspired Soane to set aside a room almost 190 years ago.

The entire second floor of the museum will be open to the public. It includes Soane's bathroom, with his bath in its mahogany casing; his blue-and-white china on the mantelpiece; the original wallpaper design, reprinted from the original sample books at the V&A; and the original doors, found elsewhere in the museum and rehung.

"What's brilliant about this building is that very little is thrown away," says Jane Wilkinson, head of the conservation team.

Detail of the largest model in the Soane collection, showing the ruins of Pompeii in 1820 (attributed to Domenico Padiglione) restored to full size

It has been her task to restore and care for the more than 100 models that are finally going back on display. "The major cleaning and restoration work was done in 1998-99," she says. "There was a major show on Soane at the RA, and a lot of models went to that. I went over every single model going into that exhibition and we assessed what needed doing and then I did it. I not only got them ready, I went every two weeks and dusted them. So this time we'll be surface cleaning . . . there are small repairs because a lot of the wooden ones were quite thrown together, and often the fixing adhesives fail." The cork models, she adds, are "a bit of a nightmare to look after. They're so friable."

The approach, she says, "is to do as little as possible. Because we are trying to keep the 1837 quality to things. And Helen's been doing an enormous amount of research which helps us locate where things should be."

"The inventories go room by room," Dorey explains, "so you can piece it all together. There was an inventory of the original Model Room. And there were also very helpful things like lists of fixtures and fittings, which describe all the mirrors in a room, or tell you about the doors or the fireplaces or the fire irons and the furniture.

"People have found it very difficult to absorb how much has had to be put back. There has been so much detailed work on every single element that we hope it really does look right. Our whole aim

Head of conservation Jane Wilkinson (left) with colleagues Lorraine Bryant and Claire Kooy-Lister in the conservation room

has been that if someone comes next month and they walk on to the second floor, they'll say, 'Well, how amazing that this was here all the time and I didn't know about it.'"

Of course, the work isn't complete. Last year, the museum instigated its "Adopt a Model" scheme, whereby individuals or companies could choose one from more than 100 models and fund it for a 10-year period. The money will be added to the museum's endowment fund, and until the end of June 2016, the Heritage Lottery Fund and the Department of Culture, Media and Sport will add £1 for every £2 raised, with a cap of £2m.

David Chipperfield, who is a trustee of the Soane and whose architectural practice has adopted the "Primitive Hut in a More Advanced State" — which Soane is thought to have used as a teaching tool — is a firm believer in the relevance of models. "Physical models are still very important," he says, "perhaps even more important than they were. Digital techniques do not replace the physical model because a physical model is also a way of exploring ideas. Digital renderings do not explore. They're devices to show seductive images to clients in simplistic terms. The model is an investigative tool and it hasn't lost its power at all."

Christian Levett, the hedge-fund manager whose collection of classical antiquities and ancient armour is housed in his museum in Mougins, in the south of France, has adopted the Pompeii model. At £50,000 it is the largest and most expensive adoptee. Levett's interest is in what it shows about the deterioration of classical sites. "It's interesting to see a depiction of how the sites looked at the time the models were made," he says, "and then compare them to what's happened, unfortunately, to a lot of these architectural sites today."

From left: Wooden model of Soane's own design for Tyringham Hall, Buckinghamshire (c.1793-94) and model of the Choragic Monument of Lysicrates, Athens (1800-30)

One model definitely in need of some loving care is Fouquet's fragile "Choragic Monument of Lysicrates", which was badly damaged during the war: a ruined, once perfect model of a ruin.

"Lost its dome," says Timothy Richards, who works with the Soane and is one of very few model-makers skilled enough to repair it. "That's the main problem with Fouquets," he says from his workshop in Bath. "Plaster is such an elegant material. It has wonderful qualities. It is a very porous material, and, left alone under its dome, it's completely happy. But the thing about Fouquet models — as soon as they lost their glass domes they were doomed." For him, the Fouquets count as geniuses. "The tiny tiles on the Choragic Monument . . . are exactly correct according to the Stuart

drawing [made by the architect James Stuart in 1752-54]. If you count across, they are exactly spot-on. At that kind of scale, it's unbelievable."

David Chipperfield's 'adopted' Primitive Hut model

The staff at the Soane are used to calamities but the outcome isn't always all bad. "Behind some boxing-in of a radiator we found a cardboard box full of all this broken plaster," Wilkinson recalls. "It was clear that it had come from a particular model that was very badly damaged in the war, and Helen asked me and another conservator to put it back together again. And when we got the stuff out and were going through it, I found this plaster finger, like that size" — she indicates about three inches — "and I went, 'I know where that's come from! It's from the Nymph!' In a recess in the picture room there is a plaster cast of a Westmacott statue called the Nymph, and one of her fingers was missing all the time I was working here." And the finger fitted.

"Of course it made total sense," she says, "because the window was blown in by a bomb blast. One of the warders probably went round with a dustpan and brush, swept everything up, put it in this box . . . And that's what's wonderful about working here, because you always feel that if you're looking for something, you might possibly find it, you just don't know where."

Soane's Private Apartments and Model Room, 13 Lincoln's Inn Fields, London WC2, will open to the public on 19 May. Access only through pre-booking. For details, see museum website (soane.org)

Photographs: Michael Bodiam

Courtesy of: The British Library Board; Sir John Soane's Museum; Industry Art

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