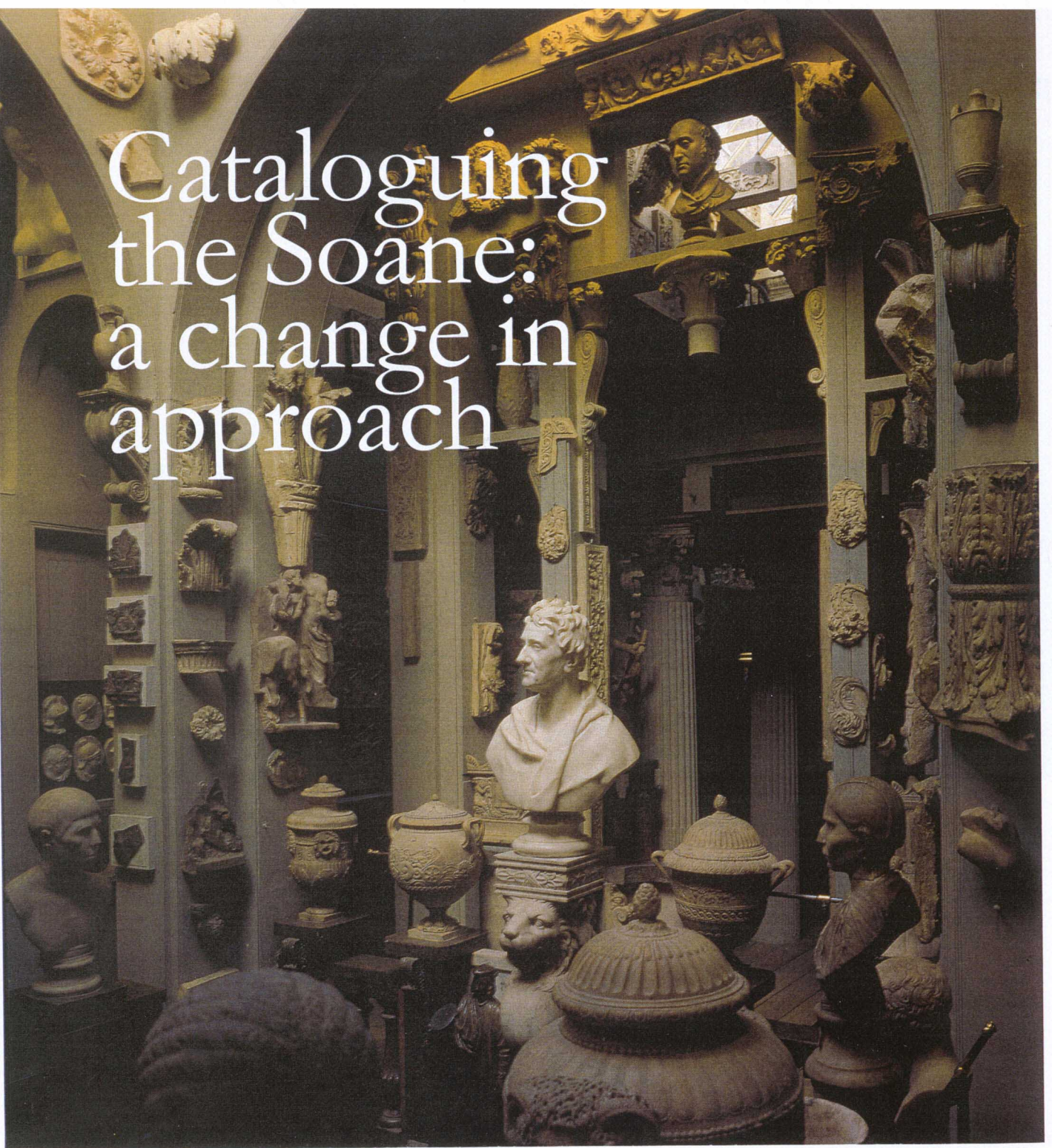


# Cataloguing the Soane: a change in approach



Faced with the challenge of publishing catalogues of the Soane Museum's varied collections, **Tim Knox**, the museum's director, decided to give online publication priority over books. He explains his reasons for this radical new direction.

**T**he myriad collections of the Sir John Soane's Museum, London – ancient and modern sculpture, plaster casts, pictures, works of art, furniture, gems, architectural drawings and models, books, drawings and prints, and other items – were bequeathed by Sir John Soane for the benefit of the public on his death in 1837 (Fig. 1).

It is a closed collection; almost nothing has been added to it and very little has been alienated from it or destroyed. However, while much of Soane's unique collection is visible to the general visitor, few are aware of the full significance and richness of our holdings; this is especially true of the books, drawings and prints in the Research Library, as well as gems and other artefacts, which constitute the museum's unseen collections.

Since the museum's foundation, its 11 successive Curators have sought to list and classify Soane's extraordinary legacy, In 1986,

The works illustrating this article are in Sir John Soane's Museum, London.

1 The Dome room in the museum: Sir Francis Chantrey's bust of Soane is surrounded by an array of Greek and Roman marbles and architectural casts. Photo: Martin Charles

during Peter Thornton's curatorship, a new catalogue of Soane's architectural library was begun by Eileen Harris and Nick Savage, while the architectural models and drawing instruments were catalogued in 1988. In 1989 a start was made on cataloguing Soane's voluminous archive, and Lynda Fairbairn began her *Catalogue of Italian Renaissance Drawings*, published in 1998. Under Margaret Richardson, who succeeded as Curator in 1995, cataloguing the collections became a priority. Jill Lever's catalogue of the museum's drawings by George Dance, father and son, appeared in 2004. The Museum's significant collection of stained glass, much of it in store and unknown, was catalogued by Michael Peover in a special issue of *The Journal of Stained Glass* in 2005.

Perhaps the most significant advance was made in 2002, when the concise catalogue, encompassing, with a few important exceptions, all the architectural drawings in the collection was published on the Museum website ([www.soane.org](http://www.soane.org)). Interestingly, this valuable resource has caused a drop in visitors to the Soane Museum Research Library, but those who do make appointments know exactly what they want to see, and are better informed and more demanding as readers.

Other catalogues long in gestation and awaiting publication include Valentin Kockel's catalogue of the cork models, and Martin Henig and Gertrud Seidmann's catalogue of Soane's collection of antique and modern gems. Cornelius Vermeule's 1950 catalogue of Soane's Graeco-Roman marbles has been revised and added to, although it too has remained unpublished. In 2006, Stephen Massil completed a three-year fixed-term contract to catalogue the books in Soane's 'General Library' – work on the 'Architectural Library' having been largely completed – but more work remains to be done editing all these entries for the online library catalogue.

Despite all this activity, it is true to say that the museum's progress in cataloguing its collections has been frustratingly slow

and expensive. Nor have our catalogues, produced with so much care and expense, been as widely accessible as they should and could be. Over the past three years, the museum has been trying to find a way to streamline the production and publication of catalogues of its collections, without compromising on scholarship and quality. Some progress has been made.

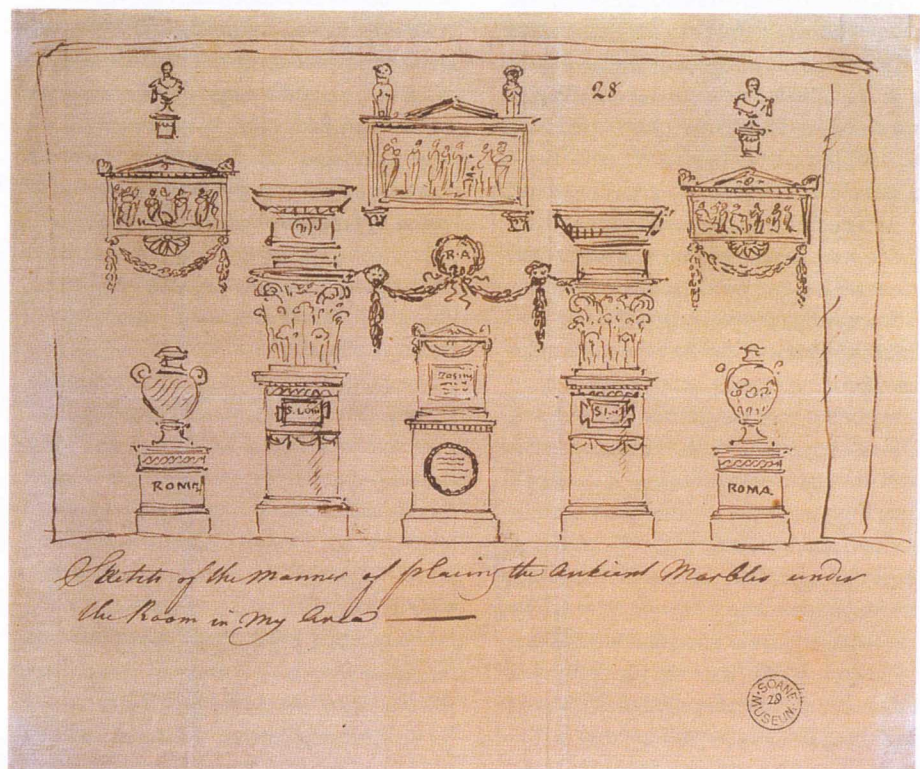
The challenge is crystallised by the 9,000 drawings from the Adam office acquired by Soane in 1833 that are one of the museum's great treasures (Fig. 2). The original specification for the Adam catalogue was modelled on that developed for other catalogues of the museum's drawings collection – impressive, scholarly volumes in hardback, with black-and-white illustrations and duotone covers, themselves based on the acclaimed catalogues of the Royal Institute of British Architects Drawings Collection, produced (with admirable speed) in the 1970s. However, sales of these catalogues – which each cost over £150 – have been low, being mainly confined to institutions, and it is an expensive and old-fashioned way

of disseminating information about the collections. New editions are unlikely, so new information, which is being constantly acquired, cannot be added to the entries.

On taking over as Director of the museum in May 2005, I was anxious to make its catalogues more useful, appealing and commercially viable. We initially explored the possibilities of producing books with a more attractive format and colour illustrations, reproducing all the drawings in an accompanying CD ROM so as to cut down on the need for long descriptive captions. However, the proposed improvements made publication even more expensive – both to produce and to buy.

In 2005 the decision was made not to publish the catalogue of Soane's library as a book but to make it freely available online via the museum's website. The following year, the trustees endorsed the decision to make all future catalogues of architectural drawings in the museum – and indeed all the catalogues issued by the Soane Museum – follow this format. This strategy will not rule out published catalogues in book form where they are viable and appropriate, or where special funding is made available to subsidise traditional publication, but the main thrust of the museum's energies will be directed towards publishing catalogues and other information online. The

2 A sketch by Robert Adam (1728-92) for arranging sculpture in his London home, 75 Lower Grosvenor Street, c. 1758-60. He and his brother James had collected the sculpture in Italy. Pen and ink, 196 x 232 cm



## BOOKS

appearance of online catalogues will be accompanied, where appropriate, with exhibitions in the Soane Gallery, and by attractive, well-illustrated books on the subject – commercial, stand-alone titles that can be sold independently from the exhibition for between £20 and £25.

This strategy will be implemented for the first tranche of the Adam collection to be ready for publication online, Professor Alan Tait's catalogue of the 'Grand Tour' drawings of Robert and James Adam. Over the past year all 1,000 entries have been edited and transferred on to the museum's database and are now ready to put online via our website. All the drawings have been digitally photographed and each catalogue entry will be accompanied by an image. The launch of the online catalogue of this collection will be accompanied by an exhibition at the Soane Gallery from September to December 2008 and the museum will publish an illustrated book, *The Adam Brothers in Rome: Drawings from the Grand Tour*, in association with Scala Press. This work has been generously supported by Mrs Gisela Gledhill in memory of her late husband, Richard Harris, with additional funding supplied by the Furthermore and Dunard Foundations.

Work is also progressing well on Jill Lever's catalogue of Soane's own drawings and Gordon Higgott's catalogue of the baroque drawings which have been entered directly onto the database. Both these groups of drawings have been digitally photographed – the little Soane sketchbooks presenting a peculiar challenge to the photographer. Jill Lever's work on the early Soane drawings is being supported by the Heritage Lottery Fund and will come to an end in 2009. Gordon Higgott worked at the museum from September 2005 to November 2006 on secondment from English Heritage, a project funded by the



Getty Grant Program, with additional support from the Gilbert and Ildiko Baker Foundation. Dr Higgott's catalogue of the 83 Hawksmoor designs for Greenwich Hospital was posted online in 2006 ([www.soane.org.uk/drawings](http://www.soane.org.uk/drawings)). Although the site needs design improvements, and the images could be larger, it is both a foretaste of further instalments of this catalogue and an example of the high standard of scholarship that the museum is determined to maintain. The remaining 8,000

drawings of the Adam collection will be digitally photographed over the next few years in readiness for adding further blocks of material to the catalogue, divided up into four broadly defined themes – Adam country houses; town houses; urban schemes; and designs for furniture and decoration. The photography process – once again supported by Mrs Gledhill – will involve the creation of a concise catalogue of all the Adam drawings. Readers currently rely on a printed hand list, so the new concise listing of the drawings can be posted online in advance of full catalogue entries becoming available. Soane's library is now almost entirely catalogued, but the entries still need a final edit before they can be put online. In 2007, the museum appointed a three-year fixed-term contract post of Library Curator, to complete this work. Dr Stephanie Coane has already edited and published online over 1,200 catalogue entries for books, which join the catalogue entries for the acclaimed exhibition 'Hooked on Books', at the Weston Gallery, Nottingham University, in 2004. This entire catalogue, with its valuable essays on Soane's bibliomania by Eileen Harris and Nick Savage, is now out of print and was added to the museum's website in 2006. Harris and Savage's work on Soane's collection of works by Giovanni Battista Piranesi – a

3 *Minerva*, early 19th century, after the antique. Glass-paste cameo imitating sardonyx, in gold mount, 3.5 x 2.6 cm. This is one of 275 gems purchased by Soane from the 1st Duke of Buckingham and Chandos in 1834. Photo: Ole Woldbye

collection of exceptional interest formed by someone who knew Piranesi personally – is now also available online. We hope to add images as soon as funds will allow. Dr Harris has now turned her attention to the complexities of the 'Soane Case' – the various editions and proofs of Sir John Soane's own publications, of which the museum has the definitive collection.

But it is not only information about the museum's books and drawings that will be available online via the Museum's website. Under the direction of the Deputy Director, Helen Dorey, Cornelius Vermeule's catalogue of Soane's antiquities has now been edited and entirely transferred on to the museum's database in readiness for its publication online. Existing good-quality black-and-white images of all the pieces in the collection have been digitised so that each entry can be accompanied by a photograph. A special section with information about the museum's famous collection of Hogarth paintings was added to the website in 2007. All this new material has emphasised the need for us to redesign and upgrade the Museum's website, an expensive project for which we are currently seeking funds.

The Soane Museum's Damascene conversion to online catalogues has not, however, entirely stopped the production of scholarly books about the house and its collections. Where appropriate, these will continue to be produced. The museum's temporary exhibitions continue to be commemorated by handsomely designed catalogues and these make information available about hitherto unexplored aspects of the collection.

Older publications are regularly revised and edited; the museum's handbook, *The New Description* – first published in 1955 – was revised in 2007. A new and up-to-date illustrated book on the museum, written by me and illustrated with new photographs by Derry Moore, will be published by Merrell in early 2009. There are also plans for a revised edition of Joseph Links's *The Soane Canalettos* to coincide with the loan from the Soane

of Canaletto's *Riva degli Schiavoni* to the exhibition 'Views of Venice' at the National Gallery, London.

Two long-awaited projects will come to fruition over the next year. First is the publication of Valentin Kockel's catalogue of the cork models in Soane's collection. Funded by the Headley Trust and illustrated with specially commissioned digital photography of all the models, it should be available in 2009. Dr John Taylor's monograph on the sarcophagus of Seti I is also almost ready for publication – we await the inclusion of the new research and photography carried out in May 2008, when the sarcophagus was cleaned and consolidated. It is hoped that the catalogue of Soane's gems (Fig. 3) – an important collection of some 300 ancient and modern intaglios and cameos, once the property of the Braschi (the family of Pius VI), and Mgr Capece Latro, Archbishop of Tarentum – will be the subject of a future issue of a specialist journal.

This spring, Helen Dorey has been working with other experts on a definitive catalogue of the museum's furniture, to be published as a future issue of *Furniture History*, the journal of the Furniture History Society. It will be a tribute to the memory of Peter Thornton, Curator of the Museum from 1984 to 1995, who died last year.

An exciting – and novel – addition to the museum's publications are podcast tours, developed in 2007 and now available free via the Soane Museum website. These downloadable audio tours can be discreetly listened to with an ipod, an MP3 player, or even some mobile phones, saving the museum the trouble of having to supply and maintain its own audio equipment. Made by the museum in association with Vocal Heroes and sponsored by the Band Trust, we currently offer a 60-minute 'Classic Tour' of the museum, and a shorter children's tour spoken by the well-known actress Eleanor Bron, enlivened by sound effects such as the barking of Mrs Soane's dog Fanny. They have been so successful that two further podcasts will be added to the range this year. They demonstrate how modern technology can help us share and explain Soane's idiosyncratic creation without destroying its unique antiquarian atmosphere.

**Tim Knox has been Director of Sir John Soane's Museum since 2005.**

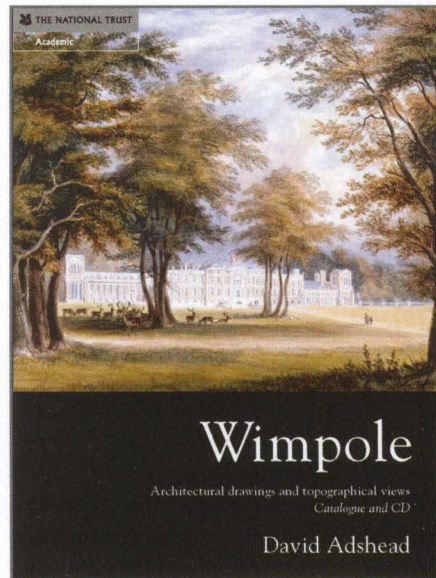
## An estate on paper

A catalogue of the drawings associated with Wimpole Hall emphasises why such works need to be in printed form, writes **Anthony Geraghty**.

Unlike most architectural catalogues, the contents of this book are determined not by a single architect or collection, but by a place: Wimpole Hall in Cambridgeshire, a property of the National Trust since 1976. David Adshead is the Trust's Architectural Historian, and his handsome catalogue pulls together an impressive range of graphic evidence, mostly designs for the house and grounds, but also survey drawings and topographical views. Some is owned by the Trust, but much is drawn from elsewhere: from the Royal Institute of British Architects, from Sir John Soane's Museum, from other collections in Britain, and from as far afield as the Hermitage Museum.

This substantial body of evidence – 322 items in all – is carefully related to other kinds of primary source (building accounts, family correspondence, visitors' descriptions, and so on), enabling Adshead to chart the history of Wimpole from the middle of the 17th century to the middle of the 20th. The importance of the material more than justifies the treatment.

*Wimpole: Architectural Drawings and Topographical Views* is intended as the first in a series of National Trust property-based studies. Let us hope so. Several houses in the Trust's portfolio, notably Nostell Priory and Tatton Park, have major collections of architectural drawings, and these would make excellent sequels. As long ago as 1947, as James Lees-Milne records in his diary, art historians were exhorting the Trust to publish catalogues of its collections. This is now starting to happen, and fine studies of the Dunham Massey silver and Hardwick textiles have appeared in recent years. The publication of these works, moreover, is timely, since they counter the regrettable



### Wimpole: Architectural Drawings and Topographical Views

DAVID ADSHEAD

THE NATIONAL TRUST, £25

ISBN 9781905400560

decline of the Trust's traditional means of disseminating research – the guidebook. The latest guides to Kedleston and Hardwick, to name but two, signal a depressing lowering of standards.

No such complaint, however, can be levelled against Adshead's scholarly book. His approach, as with all the best catalogues, is tailored to the material, and his strictly chronological arrangement reveals the accretive nature of the house and grounds. Thus the first entry, an estate map of 1638, 'reveals in a striking way the degree to which the shape and line of the medieval field and road systems, and the pattern of the planting, influenced... subsequent overlays'. This statement typifies the richness of Adshead's methodology. By setting the new against the old – the single intervention against the site's longer history – he draws out the importance of local topography and the developmental history of the house. This continuity occurred in spite of the discontinuous ownership of the estate.

The story of the present building begins in 1640 (or thereabouts), when Sir Thomas

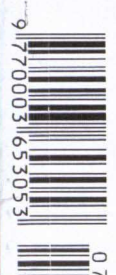
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