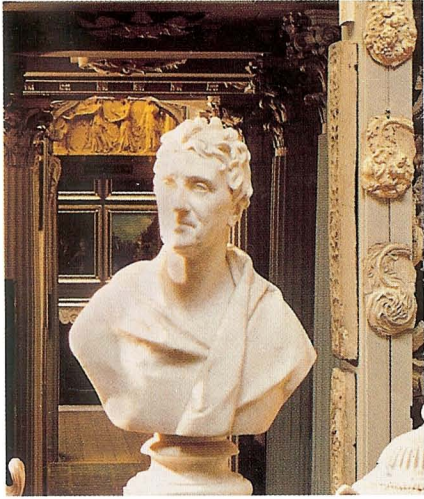


## Sir John Soane, 1753–1837



**‘Soane distilled Classical architecture into his own highly distinctive and poetical style’**

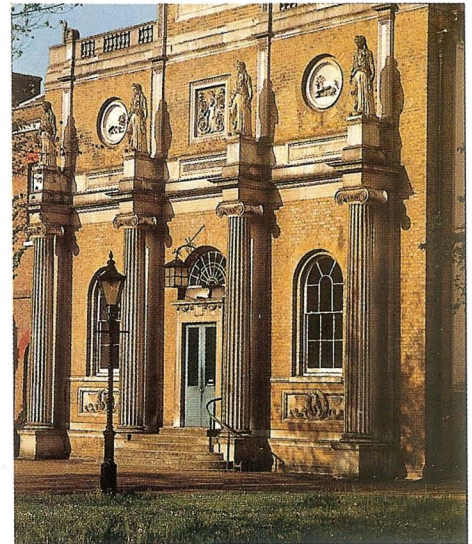
Sir John Soane was one of the most inventive late-Georgian architects. He distilled Classical architecture into his own highly distinctive and poetical style, responding imaginatively to the Picturesque ideal with a romantic use of light and colour that finds a parallel in the paintings of his friend J. M. W. Turner. Although never entirely confident in his handling of proportion, Soane brought an intensity and precision to his buildings and made daring use of new technology. But his real skill lay in his masterly treatment of space and abstraction of conventional detail: he created some of the most sublime interiors of his age. It is a tragedy that so few outstanding examples survive. His Westminster law courts were demolished in the 1880s, his Bank of England in the 1920s, and many others besides. Forgotten by the Victorians, Soane’s reputation was revived in the 20th century, when he became an almost cult figure among Moderns, who admired his astylar Classicism and brilliant handling of space. Few others have been so inspirational to leading architects of the modern age, from Richard MacCormac Philip Johnson and Louis Kahn, to Sir Giles Gilbert Scott, whose K2 telephone-box design of 1924–26 features a Soanian flattened dome.

### Career

The seventh child of a bricklayer, John Soane was 15 when he joined the office of George Dance Jr, who was to have a formative influence on his development as a neo-Classical architect. Dance had a fine architectural library, taught him to appreciate music, art and literature, and helped him enrol at the Royal Academy Schools in 1771. There, Soane was particularly inspired by the lectures of Thomas Sandby and William Chambers, and went on to win the academy’s Silver and Gold Medals, the latter, in 1776, for his design for a triumphal bridge.

By this time, he had moved to the Mayfair office of the fashionable architect/speculative builder Henry Holland, where he worked from 1772 to 1778. Holland’s collection of ancient marbles must have left a strong impression on his young clerk, who lodged with him at this time. Still more significant was a trip to Italy on a travelling scholarship from the RA in 1778–80. Soane made measured drawings of ancient and modern buildings in Rome and other sites, and met Piranesi, who gave him four plates from his *Vedute di Roma*. He travelled to Naples with the future Earl of Bristol, who promised commissions that came to nothing, and made other more fruitful social connections among the Grand Tourists he met in Italy.

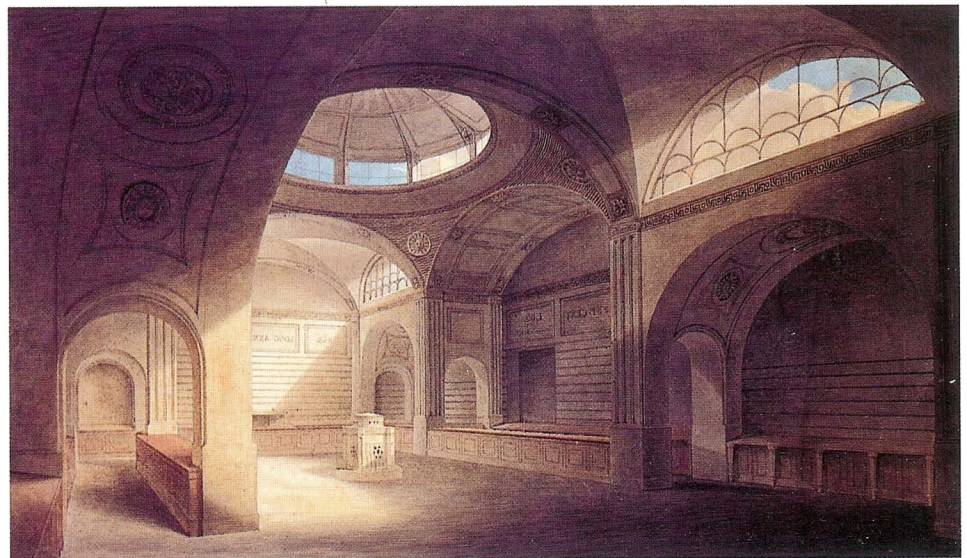
Soane’s early years in practice were marked by a series of private and mostly modest commissions for estate buildings and country houses, such as Letton Hall, Shotesham Park and Saxlingham Rectory in East Anglia. Although he was still relatively obscure during the 1780s, his diligence, economy and attention to detail singled him out.



**Pitzhanger Manor, Ealing, Soane’s country residence, which he bought in 1801 and rebuilt (retaining Dance’s additions) for his collections. The frontispiece is derived from Roman triumphal arches, echoing his Lothbury Arch at the Bank of England**

A dramatic turning point came in 1788, when, thanks to the support of William Pitt the younger, he won the post of architect to the Bank of England, which he held for 45 years. Soane extended and rebuilt much of the complex ‘in a style which was, far and away, the most original architectural language in Europe at that moment’ to quote John Summerson. His reductive treatment of the Classical vocabulary gave his banking halls an ‘intensity and economy of means’, and he made bold structural use of new technology.

One of the few major buildings by Soane that has survived (rebuilt after bomb damage)



**The Bank Stock Office looking north, the Bank of England by Joseph Michael Gandy. Dating from 1791–92, this was the first of Soane’s magisterial banking halls, destroyed in 1925. It combines Roman grandeur with Picturesque naturalism, abstracting conventional forms and substituting them with diagrammatic ornament. It celebrates Soane’s fondness for top-lit domed chambers, plays of light and shade and Laugier’s theories of primitivism**

## Breakfast Parlour, 13, Lincoln's Inn Fields, London WC2

*What to look for*

Part of the Sir John Soane's Museum, this perfect Soanian interior, dating from 1812, shows Soane's mastery of small spaces and many of his favourite architectural ideas

**1** The saucer-dome, derived from a design by Dance, is the Leitmotif of Soane's style.

'Forming a rich canopy,' to use Soane's words, it is lit by 'an octagonal lantern-light, enriched with eight scriptural subjects in painted glass' and incised with linear decoration

**2** On each side, concealed skylights filter light down from above, intensifying the atmosphere and spatial ambiguity created by Soane's trick of pushing back the wallplane

**3** Soane used reflections to great effect, even inserting strips of mirror into the book-cases. More than 100 convex mirrors stud the arches and dome here, although, interestingly, these were an afterthought, added in the 1830s

**4** A glimpse of antique fragments fulfills Soane's love of Picturesque vistas—one of the 'fanciful effects which constitute the poetry of Architecture'

**5** Flaxman's *Victory* was put here 10 days before Soane's death, in front of Gandy's view of the family tomb



is the Dulwich Picture Gallery of 1811–14, a sublime exercise in abstracted Classicism, whose powerful massing owes much to Vanbrugh. Commissioned by the painter Sir Francis Bourgeois RA and incorporating a vast domed mausoleum for its founders, this was Britain's first public art gallery.

Soane's interest in the 'Poetry of Architecture' developed partly in response to the Picturesque movement. This is most strikingly demonstrated at his London home, 13, Lincoln's Inn Fields, which he rebuilt and moved into in 1812, between acquiring Nos 12 and 14, and transformed into a shrine to his tastes and passion for collecting. Filled with paintings, architectural models,

drawings, antiquities, sculpture and plaster-casts, Soane's extraordinary house-museum was intended to educate and inspire his students; in 1833, he entrusted it to the nation to be open free of charge 'for the benefit of the public' ([www.soane.org](http://www.soane.org)).

Among its curiosities are elements that express something of Soane's tendency towards introspection and melancholy. He was tenacious, irascible and easily slighted, socially uneasy and a prolific self-publicist. Preoccupied with monumental state buildings and with assuring his place in history, Soane published many volumes of his own designs and polemical writings. He and his wife, Elizabeth Smith, had four sons, two of

whom survived infancy. That neither wished to follow him into architecture was a lasting disappointment, and he never got over his bitter estrangement from George, who attacked him cruelly in the press.

But Soane's ambitious and hard-working temperament was rewarded with a knighthood and many top commissions and official appointments. The highpoint of his career came in 1806, when he was elected Professor of Architecture at the RA (a complete volume of his lectures was published in 1996). He died in 1837, and was buried in St Pancras old cemetery in the tomb that he had designed for his wife in 1815, one of his most influential buildings. 🐦

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