

THE HOUSE THAT **SIR JOHN** BUILT

Although Bank of England and the Dulwich Picture Gallery are among architect Sir John Soane's greatest achievements, it may be his house that becomes his greatest legacy

written by Michael Fielding



With its split-level flooring and intriguing use of mirrors, the Sir John Soane Museum, which was the original home of the architect, is a must-see for anyone with a serious interest in architecture. A visitor walks away with a rare glimpse at the innerworkings of a genius who went on to become one of Britain's most brilliant architects.

The museum, located at No. 13 Lincoln's Inn Fields, in London, was one of three houses Soane demolished and rebuilt at the site, beginning with No. 12 in 1792. He moved on to No. 13 beginning in 1808 and concluded with No. 14, which he rebuilt beginning in 1823. In 1833, Soane negotiated an Act of Parliament to preserve the house and his collection to benefit students of architecture, an idea he had come up with in 1806 when he was appointed as professor of architecture at the Royal Academy. When he died in 1837, the act was enforced, allowing students and the public to study the collections.

With the addition of No. 13, which was converted into a gallery to display the architect's collection of plaster casts and marbles, Soane's unique style of architecture was evident. Split-level flooring, a labyrinthine layout, and his inventive use of lighting have made a lasting influence on modern architects.

The museum itself is a journey through Soane's life as a premier architect.

A simple solution to expanding tight spaces seems to be found in the use of mirrors, and Soane utilized several mirrors in the Library, where they were placed behind exhibits and above the bookcases. At night, the illusion of expanded rooms was intensified with the glimmer of candlelight. Among the architect's unique collection are two Apulian vases, which rest in the



■ **Above** To expand tight spaces, Soane found a simple solution in the use of mirrors. Soane utilized several mirrors in the Library, where they were placed behind exhibits and above bookcases.

■ **Left** The Dome area contains classical busts, urns, and fragments of sculptures.

■ **Opposite Page** Intended to create the atmosphere of a garden room, the ceiling vault in the Breakfast Parlour is painted to imitate a trellis entwined with honeysuckle and columbine.



■ More than 100 pictures are contained in the Picture Room, whose walls are actually hinged screens. The screens open to reveal a statue of a nymph illuminated from above in dramatic yellow lighting.

Dining Room, and Cantonese chairs made of padouk wood inlaid with mother of pearl.

Soane sketched his designs in the Study, a small room where a collection of antique marble fragments formerly owned by architect Henry Holland have been displayed since 1816. The display of these fragments continues in the corridor beyond the dressing room. There, a narrow space is filled with casts, including a full-sized cast of the cornice and a portion of a capital of the Temple of Castor and Pollux in the Roman Forum.

Built on the site of the stable yard of No. 14 Lin-

coln's Inn Fields in 1824, the Picture Room features a series of pictures by William Hogarth—"The Rake's Progress" and "The Election"; both originals. Also featured in the high, top-light room are portraits of Soane and his wife as well as scenes of India and a painting by Sir James Thornbill. More than 100 pictures are contained in the room, whose walls are actually hinged screens, behind which are more drawings and watercolor paintings of many of Soane's designs. The screens open to reveal a statue of a nymph illuminated from above in dramatic yellow lighting.

In the Cell and the 'Monk's Parlour', where Soane would bring his guests to tea in the early evening, a suite of rooms were created for the monk Padre Giovanni—an invention of Soane to satirize the fashionable tendency toward the Gothic. In fact, the restricted space, dark colors and stained glass of the Cell were intended to create a sense of melancholy. It was Soane's belief that Gothic architecture could teach modern architects how to establish atmospheric effects with light and space, although he disregarded the period's whimsical ornamentation.

Ruins in the nearby 'Monk's Yard' were assembled from fragments of 13-century masonry from the Palace of Westminster. A wooden ceiling boss in the parlor is a rare surviving fragment from the destroyed Painted Hall at Westminster.

Reminiscent of Roman catacombs, the basement Crypt includes plaster models of famous marble monuments. Among the objects in the Crypt is the sarcophagus of Pharaoh Seti I—one of the most important Egyptian antiquities ever discovered; it is carved out of a piece of calcite limestone. Soane bought the sarcophagus in 1824 after the British Museum refused to buy it for the asking price.

Educated in the Renaissance tradition, which taught that near perfection in art had been achieved in only a few Greek and Roman sculptures and buildings, Soane established the museum believing that the foundation of a student's education should be the study of classical principles of design. As a result, the Dome contains classical busts, urns, and fragments of sculptures probably inspired by Piranesi's engravings of dramatic scenes of Roman ruins.

The New Picture Room was not designed by Soane, but was added to the museum in 1890 to display the three Venetian scenes by Canaletto in a clearer light to be more easily studied by art students. The room also includes a portrait by C.W. Hunnemann of Soane at age 23, an ivory table and chairs made in India, and a cork model of the Temple of Vesta at Tivoli. The circular structure inspired Soane to design the Tivoli

INSPIRED BY SOANE

Discover the similarities between Soane's work and the architecture of world-famous architects

Richard Meier was extremely precise in defining Soane's value. When the Director of the Getty Center in Los Angeles decided to have the painting galleries illuminated by natural light, Meier immediately drew inspiration from the Dulwich Picture Gallery. Soane achieved indirect lighting by having an angled coving to the room, reflecting diffused light on to the paintings below. Meier adapted Soane's section to the Getty, building large scale models of the Dulwich interiors in the California sunshine. The end result does not resemble Dulwich; Meier turned to Soane at one stage in the process, and then moved on.

Juan Navarro Baldeweg has been more determined in his pursuit of Soane. The Spanish architect, also an acclaimed painter, has been captivated by the interiors of Soane's museum for many years and has reinterpreted the Breakfast Room several times—most recently in the Palacio de los Congressos in Salamanca. The ceiling of its auditorium is 1,500 tons of reinforced concrete, and seats more than a thousand. It effectively combines the sunny lightness of Soane's interiors with the grandeur of the Pantheon in Rome.

Also in Spain, Rafael Moneo's Museum of Roman Art in Merida is now recognized as one of the finest buildings of the 1980s. Situated in the ruins of a Roman city, statues and architectural fragments are displayed as if they have been freshly excavated, catching the light in the display as if natural light was being used. In the basement of his museum, Soane fabricated a similar context, teasing the visitor with the pretense that lifting a paving stone will reveal more than antique fragments.



■ **Left** The exterior of the Sir John Soane's Museum at 13 Lincoln's Inn Fields in London.

■ **Below** South Drawing Room. Portraits of Soane at age 51 and Soane's two sons hang in the drawing rooms.



Corner at the Bank of England.

Soane built No. 12 Lincoln's Inn Fields in the 1790s, before his collection had grown large. The restoration of the Breakfast Parlour in 1994-95 was made possible by a 1798 watercolor of John and George in the Parlour. Intended to create the atmosphere of a garden room, the ceiling vault is painted to imitate a trellis entwined with honeysuckle and columbine.

The adjoining Dining Room was converted into the Soane Gallery in 1995. Alternating exhibitions feature the museum's collection of 30,000 architectural drawings by Soane and other architects such as Robert Adam and Sir Christopher Wren.

A shallow canopy dome, colored light cast by concealed skylights, and the use of more than 100 pieces of mirror bring to life the poetry of architecture in the small No. 13 Breakfast Parlour. In it hangs one of the earliest portraits of Napoleon, commissioned by Mme. Beauharnais, who later became Empress Josephine. Also in the room are displayed colored engravings of the wall paintings in a small Roman villa excavated in the 1770s.

Soane even built a memorial to William Shakespeare at the curve of the staircase up to the first floor Drawing Rooms. It contains a cast of the original bust from the parish church of Stratford-Upon-Avon and pictures by Henry Howard that illustrate the bard's works. Portraits of Soane at age 51 and Soane's two sons hang in the Drawing Rooms.

Today many critics, who wonder how architects can borrow from a style that itself borrowed from ancient symbolism, question Soane's influence in modern architecture. One of Soane's commissions — the Dulwich Picture Gallery—demonstrates challenges even modern architects face. Paintings are enjoyed by daylight, which unfortunately damages them if directly hit by sunlight. At the Dulwich Picture Gallery, Soane created an angled coving to the room to reflect dif-fused light.

Furthermore, the gloomy London sky was transformed by Soane into a seemingly radiant Mediterranean light through the use of colored glass, an influence felt worldwide today. Mirrored rooms, the use of sky-lit domed interiors, and screen walls all are lasting influences of Sir John Soane, who forged ahead despite criticism. His designs most obviously paid tribute to ancient Greece and Rome, and he eschewed Classicism, favoring what he believed to be a more faithful interpretation to the designs of the ancients. ■