

Fictional Guidenotes

to Sir John Soane's Museum, Lincoln's Inn Fields

by Bernard Cohen, writer-in-residence

No. 1 of 6, July 2002

1st mistranslation from a Chinese vase

Dear Sir,

I am delighted to invite you to attend a banquet in celebration of good weather.

Please join us at Home next Tuesday.

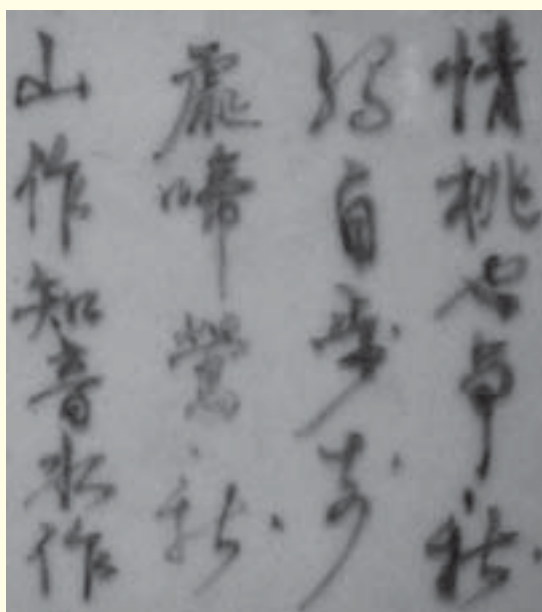
Enclosed please find directions for your journey. That is, a detailed map of the area and suggested route is delicately rendered low down on the inside of this vessel. Without exposing this map, you will have difficulty locating us. Mapless, you would miss the meat. Dare I suggest your journey would also be fruitless?

Unfortunately, at least for you, there is no known substance capable of repairing the fine ornament should it become damaged.

But think on this: the ornament does not consider itself fine. It does not consider itself rare either.

In summary, my dear Englishman, you are faced with a choice of friendship or flower arrangement, wine-drinking or water-bearing, meal or mantelpiece, party or property.

I am to the east of your present position, but the way is not straightforward. Shall we meet, or do you choose souvenir over supper?



Crates and crates, I picture. I can easily imagine you with your packing, which takes as much time as travel.

See that I am smiling.

Sincerely, and in the spirit of the game,

L___ B___

About Fictional Guidenotes

*Fictional Guidenotes are written by Bernard Cohen, writer-in-residence at Sir John Soane's Museum. They will appear monthly from July to December 2002 and will also be available via the museum website at <http://www.soane.org>. Bernard is the author of four novels, of which *Snowdome* and *The Blindman's Hat* are currently available in the UK. For more information, please see Bernard's website at <http://www.hermes.net.au/bernard>.*

Copyright Notice: All text in these guidenotes is copyright © Bernard Cohen 2002. All images in these guidenotes are copyright © Sir John Soane's Museum 2002.

The architect's changing aspect

1.

Soane waits in his library. From the distance of a room-width his mouth appears slightly open; he seems anxious, awaiting judgment. He offers all this (picture only a tentative sweep of the hand, certainly not the full arc). Will his visitors appreciate it? It is a commonplace that time will tell, but Soane cannot rely on such saws. The visitors have always lacked consistency. They change from decade to decade, breeding and ageing, ageing and breeding, expressing enthusiasm but taking their enthusiasms away with them to store who knows where and for who knows how long.

Sir John Soane does not move. Here is the paradox: visitors return after a year or a generation and they find him changed. They remember him as younger, or firmer, or more determinedly serious. The visitors return day after day, sometimes a dozen at a time and sometimes singly. They enter and turn right. They gaze at the anxious-looking Soane who does not meet their eyes.



2.

His lips have drifted together, relaxed. Perhaps there was no gap in the first place. He is at ease in his chair, while the visitor stands.

3.

The architect is positively cocky, his twisted smile daring his visitor to claim an understanding of the surrounds. He keeps a secret. His secret lies somewhere between earnestness and dry humour, but it is impossible to determine exactly where. It is a secret which shimmers, a dynamic stasis. For this effect he has spent half a lifetime of arranging and re-arranging, designing and redesigning, aligning and realigning, modelling and remodelling, layering and relayering, comparing objects truly and with insincerity.

The visitor enters. Soane's smile twists and twists.

4.

He thinks about getting up to greet his visitor. He flexes the muscles in his upper left leg to uncross it from the right, tilts slightly forward (a degree or two at most), tightens his hands for an instant, bracing for weight. The visitor halts. Perhaps Soane will say something. Perhaps he will stand and come forward, hand outstretched. Perhaps he will open his arms and embrace the visitor, more heartily than either anticipated. They stand apart. They are embarrassed together. Perhaps he will stand but then turn away, remembering something upstairs or in his study. The visitor will remain, lost against a background of infinite reflections. The visitor will wait. The visitor will look here and there. Perhaps Soane will stand. For a moment, Soane flexes his legs as though to rise – but decides against. Should the visitor feel snubbed, or doubly at home?

5.

On a Wednesday in early spring Soane gazes across the room, over the visitor's shoulder. A woman stretches a serpentine arm through her long hair. Nearby, a child watches, fascinated by her beauty and daring and composure and, possibly, by the architect's risk in

staring so openly. The woman's hair grows almost noticeably. Her arm flicks this way and that. Soane is transfixed.

6.

He gestures towards the museum interior. He is notorious is well as famous. The visitor might expect a glimpse of temper. Soane sits, boiling within (is it not possible?) or avuncular and benign.



7.

Poor Soane. He has grubby streaks, a sign of folding, some buckling (minor), a smudge, scuffs along one edge and a possible waterstain, further slight folding, a yellowish pigment spot, clusters of tiny pinholes, abrasions, some appearance of bleaching, green smudge, stitching holes, damaged elevations, border pigment losses, small amounts of ink-spotting, limited foxing, rippling, demi-hole or nick, scattered kinks.

8.

Soane's smile twists and twists. He is an old man playing a game. He is foxing. He can outstare anyone.

9.

Moist-eyed and pleading, he grasps memories but then finds them unbearable. He cannot stop the thoughts in his head. All this sitting interferes with work. All this thinking about wrong matters, about family life and one's place in the world and the attitude of certain gentlemen. It is not possible to choose what one is to forget.

10.

He's still here. You'd expected him to move somewhere? One hundred and sixty-five years and the architect will decide to climb those impossible stairs into secret box-filled rooms at the top of his house. Gripping the banister, he will haul himself step by step to the top. He may have to rest on the landings. After a time he'll find his room. He'll be exhausted, as exhausted as a royal or a receptionist, a professional who spends all the day greeting. He'll lie down, sleep immediately, sleep and sleep and when he wakes the next day, he'll decide again (and for the first time in one hundred and sixty-five years) whether to meet those questioning or sympathetic faces.

11.

His pale forehead is made more pale still by the faux-unkempt dark locks. Does he dye his hair? People speak of the fashion for wigs. He's seventy-five years old, and no sign of greying. Despite these efforts, if they are efforts, he has an old man's eyes, slightly clouded. The word 'cataracts' enters the visitor's thoughts.

12.

Against red velvet, Soane's face is crescent-shaped and pale. His nose leans to the right and the chin so slightly leftwards. Caricaturists could capture him in two curved strokes as the man in the moon. Or a half-smiling scimitar.

This rich red curtain, which must be some artist's backdrop, might also slide forward, under and around the architect's chair, enveloping him. At his age, the future promises only to smother.

13.

His face is full of hopeless (consciously hopeless) desire. Although Soane might like to imagine ruins – his own work in ruins, cities, regimes, families – it is his own body which has first succumbed. It is inevitable but still shocking. He is unpicking over time.

14.

But not moving.

Notes towards further mistranslations from a Chinese vase

This vase: transmitted across oceans, bobbing all the way to England, transformed from vase to souvenir to gift — all its vaseness translated out of it.

The vase sitting on a shelf, waiting to be read.

There it sits, promising story. Facing it, most of us also face the limits of our literacy. How do we read it? What can we take from it? Oriental feelings, constellations of delicate brushstrokes.

No longer vessel for flowers or narrative, all utility is instead invested in carpets and silks and business deals, in other vases more quickly made. Over the years, foreign countries close and open. Here is a map of international relations: vase lip mouths 'open' while yet the neck underneath constricts. Sometimes this map portrays the East, and sometimes England.

*

A vase is standing in England, in this English air, and (like this house) the atmosphere holds molecular traces of the Orient. Drifting, drifting east and west: the air, trade, centuries of visitors, increments of knowledge.

The air circulates, rises and sinks with changes of temperature, out and in, in and out, governed by a thoughtless, cerebellar earth, this vase inhaling and exhaling, slowly and chaotically, breathing for decades, for epochs.

Ah yes, are we not translators all — as the keynote persuades a potters' convention — taking worldly promises and making of them what we will, things and dreams with which lives are lived? Are we not offered vessels, needing only to hollow them from abundant materials? Shall we not dig and mould, as humans must do? Do not mud and heat translate at our touch into love and beauty?

Some in the auditorium might prepare cracked and glaze-blackened hands to applaud this sentiment, or (more simply) the end of speaking. Others do not agree that the earth is there so easily for the taking.



Contribute your own fictional guidenotes

Bernard Cohen is developing a website for museum visitors to contribute their own writing about objects, spaces and ideas from Sir John Soane's Museum. To contribute, please visit the museum website at <http://www.soane.org>. You may also email your contribution to

bernard.cohen@kcl.ac.uk. Finally, you may post your contribution on disk to Bernard Cohen, writer-in-residence, Sir John Soane's Museum, Lincoln's Inn Fields, London WC2A 3BP, United Kingdom. Please send email or post contributions in text-only format.
