

Miscellaneous Marvels

A TRAIL FOR MUSEUMS AND GALLERIES MONTH 2006

During the month of May the Soane Museum is celebrating Museums and Galleries Month, an annual event sponsored by the Campaign for Museums to promote and raise awareness of museums and art galleries all over Great Britain. This year's theme is 'Making Connections: past, present and future'.

This trail highlights strange and little-known 'hidden treasures' from Soane's collections. Some, such as the ammonites in the Monument Court or the group of ancient Roman marble animal paws in Soane's Study, are always on display but are often overlooked. Others – like Soane's mummified cats and a Maori spear – have not been seen by the public in living memory.

• *The trail begins in the Library-Dining Room*

Hanging either side of the north window

1. 'Natural curiosities'



William Lodder presented Soane with these 'beautiful spontaneous excrescences of nature' on the morning of 15 March 1820. He wrote to Soane later the same day hoping they would be 'worthy a situation amongst your curious and numerous collections' and explaining that they had been cut from an ash tree in Stainstead Park, near Emsworth, Sussex, by a woodsman named Bolton. Mr Bolton had displayed them as ornaments on his cottage fireplace as 'a great curiosity', presenting them to Mr Lodder in 1817. Soane was fascinated by natural forms, especially as they might relate to the origins of architecture. In his 1835 *Description of his house* he commented on the view of the Monument Court from this window, with its *Architectural Pasticcio and assemblage of ancient and modern Art*, adding that *the lovers of Grecian art will be gratified by comparing the outline of this work [the pasticcio – the column in the centre of the yard] with the two natural productions on the sides of the window, found growing in the hollow of an old oak pollard.*

• *Look through the window onto the courtyard to see objects on the skyline*

2. Antedeluvian snails

Ammonites were prehistoric sea creatures. Their spiral shells, used for protection and buoyancy, could grow up to 3 metres in diameter. They became extinct 65 million years ago but many fossilised examples survive. Soane acquired a number of such fossils for his collection. Two can be seen outside on the roof above the Monument Court and there are more in the Crypt. Soane was interested in the beauty of the ammonite shell and how it may have influenced the development of architectural forms. It was widely believed that ancient Greek builders had based the capital, or head, of the Ionic column on such shells. Inspired by this, Soane's first teacher, the architect George Dance Junior, copied the ammonite shell to create his own unique architectural order which Soane much admired. These capitals later became the hallmark of the Regency builder Amon Henry Wilds. Wilds no doubt enjoyed the pun on his name. Examples can be seen on villas and houses in south London and Brighton.



• *Leave the Library-Dining Room by the door to the right, to enter the Study*

On the shelf across the window

3. A monster sponge



Amongst the Roman fragments which belonged to Soane's early teacher Henry Holland is the curious natural form of a Neptune's cup sponge, lying horizontally on the shelf across the window. Soane was intrigued by its form but did not know what it was – he commented in his 1835 *Description of this house* that *A large fungus from the rocks of the island of Sumatra ... will be appreciated by the lovers of natural history.* To the left of the sponge is a small piece of Gorgonian coral (a branching skeleton of coral) mounted on a piece of Porites coral – the two elements would not occur like this in nature and so this is a made-up object, a good example of the kind of man-made 'curiosities' that were in circulation at this period. Soane believed this to be an authentic piece and an early note describes it as a 'natural curiosity obtained by a diver in 4 fathoms of water on the coast of Ceylon'.

Hanging either side of the window

4. Marble paws

Collected by the architect Charles Heathcote Tatham (1772–1842) in Rome between 1794 and 1796, these ‘paws of animals, of extraordinary execution’ formed part of a collection of antiquities acquired for Soane’s former teacher Henry Holland. They once formed the feet of ancient Roman marble furniture – tripods, altars and thrones – rather than statues of animals themselves. Tatham later published engravings of many of these antique fragments in 1799 and 1804, popularising their use in furniture and decoration by the designers of the Regency era. Soane was fond of sculptured animal feet – or *monopaedia* as they are known – using them throughout his house-museum as decorative objects or as supports for busts, including his own bust by Sir Francis Chantrey under the Dome.

• Continue through the Dressing Room and down the stairs to the basement, pausing to look through the window, half-way down the stairs, into the Monk’s Cell to see item 5

5. Skeleton

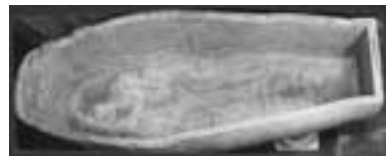
Before being given to Soane, this skeleton had belonged to his friend, the celebrated sculptor



John Flaxman (1755–1826). Flaxman would have used the skeleton as an anatomical guide to help him produce accurate and realistic representations of the human body. Soane appears to have been more interested in how this curiosity could enhance the ‘gothick’ atmosphere of the crypt of his Museum. An inventory made in 1837 shows that the skeleton was displayed here in the Monk’s Cell where the imaginary monk Padre Giovanni was supposed to have slept. After Soane’s death, the Trustees wanted to send the skeleton back to Flaxman’s sister-in-law, arguing that it had no connection to the rest of his collection, but for some reason it was never returned. The skeleton is held together with iron rods and copper wire with cork sections between the vertebrae of the spinal cord.

The skeleton is on display especially for Museums Month 2006

• Turn right at the end of the corridor at the foot of the stairs, go along the passage (past the opening containing a pair of Gothic iron chairs) and turn right. The Sepulchral Chamber is through the arch on your left, with the sarcophagus, item 6, in the centre



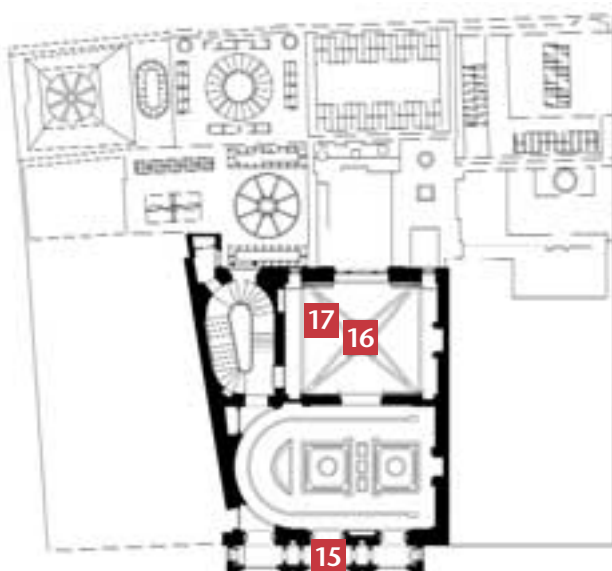
The imposing sarcophagus of Pharaoh Seti I (1294–1279 BC), now in a glass case added for protection in the 1860s, is carved out of one immense block of Egyptian alabaster, or, more correctly, aragonite. Discovered in the Valley of the Kings by the Italian explorer Giovanni Battista Belzoni, it was shipped to England and purchased by Soane in April 1824 for the

colossal sum of £2,000 (the British Museum having rejected it as being too expensive). It is covered inside and out with hieroglyphs (originally filled with blue-green pigment): passages from the Book of Gates, describing the soul’s passage through the afterlife. On the bottom is the figure of the Goddess Nut, to whose safekeeping the body of the dead King was committed. Seti’s mummy, together with that of his son, Rameses II and other members of the royal family, can be seen in the Egyptian Museum in Cairo.

The appeal of this piece for Soane lay in its immense age, the consummate skill with which it had been carved and the evidence it provided of ‘the customs, art, religion and government of a very ancient and learned people’. Its mystery was greatly enhanced by the fact that in his lifetime the hieroglyphs had not yet been deciphered.

7. Mummy case

Beneath the arch to the north of the sarcophagus is the lid of an Egyptian mummy case featuring a bearded face and a wig with lappets. The wood (probably sycamore) would once have been painted, but no traces now remain. Dating from c.1250 BC, it is thought to have been brought to England in 1737 by Richard Pococke. Later in the Gallery of the Duke of Richmond in Whitehall, it was in Soane’s collection by 1808–09 having been presented to him by the architect John White, who also gave him the large cast of the Apollo Belvedere in the Dome area two years later in 1811.



FIRST FLOOR



GROUND FLOOR

8. Cinerary vase

At the foot of the sarcophagus, standing on a column, is a magnificent Roman cinerary vase of oriental alabaster. Such vases were made to hold the cremated ashes of the dead, alabaster usually being used for people of higher rank. Soane purchased this at Lord Mendip's sale in May 1802 for £15.0.



• **Passing out of the Sepulchral Chamber through the West arch, turn left and follow the passage round into the Basement Ante-Room**

As you walk along this passage you will see two sectional ammonites in frames fixed to the piers to your left (see 2. above).

On the table in the Basement Ante-Room

9. 'Strange objects in a glass case'

Little is known about this curious pairing, first noted during an inventory of the Museum stores in 1960 and shortly afterwards described as 'strange objects in a glass case'. The case is a nineteenth-century addition, but the objects inside it may well have been collected by Soane.

The nest has been identified by the Natural History Museum as probably that of either a White-winged Cough (*Corcorax melanorhamphos*), or an Apostlebird (*Struthidea cinerea*), both crow-like birds of the family of *Corcoracidae*, which forage in small flocks and construct perfect bowl-shaped nests with mud in trees. White-winged Coughs and Apostlebirds only live in Australia – if this is so, how did Soane, who died in 1837, come to own it? Could this have been a curio brought

home by Captain James Cook from one of his voyages of discovery?

The mummified head has long been displayed with the nest. It is ancient Egyptian and of a high-status male of the 18th Dynasty (c.1250 BC) – the pluggings in the nostrils are characteristic of mummification processes at this date. The face of the mummy is well preserved and would have originally been protected by a 'mask' of a resinous paste – later mummies were not protected in this way and their features were often flattened by the tightly wrapped bandages. It has been suggested that this is all that remains of a famous mummy that belonged to the 3rd Duke of Richmond which was unwrapped by the Egyptian Society on 5 March 1742. This had a 'skull filled with bitumen and the head covered in a composition of gum etc about half an inch thick'. Soane owned a wooden mummy case 'from the Gallery of the Duke of Richmond at Whitehall' (on display in the recess next to the Sarcophagus of Seti I, see 7. above). Can he have also acquired his mummy's head from the same source?

This case is on display especially for Museums Month 2006



• **Walk along the passage and return to the Ground Floor the way you came using the stairs by the Monk's Parlour and Cell. At the top of the stairs, turn right into the Colonnade. At the far end, on the right, you will find item 10**

10. A wonder of the world

Soane's 'Ephesian Diana' is a much-restored Roman copy of a celebrated Greek statue which is supposed to have been the cult image in the Temple of Diana at Ephesus in what is now modern Turkey. The Temple of Diana at Ephesus – described as one of the Seven Wonders of the World by ancient authors – contained a huge idol of ebony or palm-wood, encrusted with gold, which later writers have identified with the 'many-breasted' Diana, goddess of the moon, who is usually depicted as a huntress. This image, with its elaborate mummy-like costume garlanded with offerings, probably reflects the influence of oriental religions. The so-called 'breasts' have been variously interpreted as sacrificial bull's testicles or leather votive pouches!

A number of ancient statues of this type survive. This one is first recorded in the mid-sixteenth century when it formed part of the collection of Pope Julius III (reigned 1550–55) at the Villa Poggio in Rome. It then lacked a head and arms, which must have been added in black marble in the seventeenth century. Soane bought the statue in London at the sale of the 2nd Earl of Bessborough in 1804 for 61 guineas.

In the niche on the opposite side of the Colonnade is item 11

11. A Maori spear

This mysterious object was described in old inventories as 'A Grotesque Staff' and 'said to have been the walking stick of Guy Earl of Warwick'. Guy of Warwick was a legendary medieval giant who is supposed to have gone on Crusades, rescued princesses, fought giants, dragons and other monsters, and finally ended up living in a cave as a hermit. However, this enormous spear – which is too cumbersome and heavily carved to have seen service as a weapon and must have been made for ceremonial purposes – is a Maori artefact from New Zealand. The natural form of the wooden branch from which it is made is carved with the distinctive tattooed tiki figures for which this culture is famous. No other spear like it is known to survive, and it is an interesting and early example of a Maori artefact in a historic English collection. It is possible that the confusion arose because Soane may have acquired the staff from Warwick Castle. The Hon. Charles Greville, brother of the 2nd Earl of Warwick, was a friend of Sir Joseph Banks and acquired material collected by Captain Cook.

On the south side, to your left, you will see a shelf displaying a collection of items designed to demonstrate the close connection between architectural or man-made sculptural forms and natural forms with a piece of 'brain coral' alongside casts of feet, and ribbon mouldings which resemble vertebrae.



Trail leaflet produced for Museums Month 2006 with text written by Tim Knox, Helen Dorey, Stephen Astley, Sue Palmer and William Palin.



BASEMENT

- Leave the Dome area by the door to the left (south) of the statue of Apollo and enter the Ground floor Ante-Room. You will find item 12 immediately to the right, on the table.

12. Sacrificial victims?



These desiccated corpses of two dried cats and a rat belonged to Sir John Soane, who in latter years displayed them, in this glass case, in an 'Oratory' adjoining his bedroom on the second floor of the Museum. He probably acquired the cats as curios in the course of his professional consultations. One of them was 'found in a house in Lothbury taken down to make room for the New Buildings of the Bank of England in 1803, between the wall and wainscoting of the Room, with the Rat in its mouth'. The other was found at Walpole House, near the Royal Hospital in Chelsea, 'under similar circumstances'. Cats – dead and alive – were quite commonly interred in buildings during construction work by superstitious builders, as primitive good-luck charms, or possibly to scare away vermin.

The cats are on display especially for Museums Month 2006

- Go through the door opposite the table to enter the domed Breakfast Parlour

13. A Druidic temple

This model shows the famous neolithic monument of Stonehenge, in Wiltshire. The model probably dates from the 1790s but must be before 1797 when a large trilithon (large arch created by resting one stone across the tops of two others) fell. It shows Stonehenge as it was before nineteenth- and twentieth-century restorations and the re-erection of many of the fallen stones. Made of cork, Soane possibly bought it in 1832 from the collection of the architect Charles Heathcote Tatham, or it might have come from the London model-shop of Dubourg, whose displays featured dramatic piled up arrangements of models of ancient ruins. Originally displayed in the Museum's crypt, it reflects Soane's fascination



with the monument. Soane owned several books on the subject and in 1813 sent three of his pupils to Stonehenge to survey the site and produce five large drawings to illustrate his lectures on architecture at the Royal Academy.

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14. The dog Fanny

Two portraits of Fanny, Mrs Soane's much loved and pampered pet dog, hang either side of the window; on the left, drawn by Antonio van Assen (died c.1817) in 1808 and on the right by James Ward (1769–1859) in 1822. In the Ward portrait Fanny, probably a Manchester terrier, is depicted as an architect's dog: sitting on a Corinthian capital and looking out across the Elysian fields towards the Erechtheion, one of the buildings on the Acropolis in Athens. The Ward portrait was used as a model by John Jackson when he painted the posthumous portrait of Mrs Soane with Fanny on her lap which can be seen in the Picture Room. Fanny is buried in a tomb in the Monk's Yard: you can see the inscription – 'Alas Poor Fanny' – from the window of the Dressing Room.



- From the Breakfast Parlour go up the main staircase to the first floor to the South Drawing Room

15. Columns in the loggia

The loggia (the passage which runs along the front of the house, beyond the yellow curtains) was originally open to the elements, part of the Portland stone 'balcony' (on three floors!) projecting forward from the brick façade of 13 Lincoln's Inn Fields, constructed by Soane in 1812. It was only in the 1830s that the windows were pushed forward to incorporate the space on the loggia into the volume of the drawing room. The loggia is articulated with four pairs of columns, apparently made of bundles of stems. These probably refer to the story that classical columns originated in nature, the capital representing flower heads and the fluting on the shaft of the column the stems of a bundle of reeds. The columns are painted green, perhaps in imitation of antique bronze, but also to echo the green of the Fields outside the windows.

- Go through the double doors into the North Drawing Room

On the Dance Cabinet in the centre of the room

16. Primitive architecture



These models were used by Soane to illustrate his annual lectures as Professor of Architecture at the Royal Academy in which he discussed the origins of architecture. They show stages in the evolution of the 'Primitive Hut', a rough timber construction made from tree trunks, to the Grecian Doric temple made from stone. This story, which dates back to the celebrated Ten Books on Architecture (c.27 BC) by the Roman author Vitruvius, was popularised in M.-A. Laugier's *Essai sur l'architecture* of 1753, which became central to Soane's architectural philosophy. Soane owned no fewer than 10 copies of Laugier's *Essai*. Alongside the two wooden models is a white plaster model, one of twenty purchased by Soane in May 1834, by the French model-maker François Fouquet. This shows a conjectural reconstruction of the Parthenon in Athens, the pinnacle of the evolutionary process which started with the Primitive Hut.

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On the easel

17. Prehistoric home life

In 1806 Soane was appointed Professor of Architecture at the Royal Academy, and from 1808 delivered annually a series of lectures. These were illustrated with large drawings held up at the front of the lecture room. This watercolour, by Charles Malton, a pupil of Soane's between 1802 and 1809, is one of these. Dated May 20 1807 it is from a series to illustrate Soane's first lecture showing how the Grecian Doric temple evolved from the 'Primitive Hut' – the theory expounded by Laugier. This view shows an intermediate stage, with tree trunks for columns, but before the invention of the pitched roof. Malton, whose father Thomas ran perspective classes attended by the young J.M.W. Turner, depicts a dramatic moment after a storm. 'Primitive' men bring fire from forest trees which have been set alight by lightning; inside the hut their families take shelter.

This watercolour is on display especially for Museums Month 2006