

Press Release

Egypt Uncovered: Belzoni and the Tomb of Pharaoh Seti I

Soane Gallery, Sir John Soane's Museum, Wed 11 October 2017 – Sun 15 April 2018

To coincide with the 200th anniversary of the discovery of the tomb of Pharaoh Seti I by the Egyptologist Giovanni Battista Belzoni (1778–1823), Sir John Soane's Museum will present *Egypt Uncovered: Belzoni and the Tomb of Pharaoh Seti I* – a new exhibition revealing the story behind the Museum's most treasured possession.

Known as 'The Great Belzoni', Giovanni Battista Belzoni was one of the most famous and pioneering explorers of his age, and played a crucial role in the development of Egyptology as a scientific discipline. A former circus strongman based in London, in 1815 Belzoni took up the role of engineer in Egypt, charged with the removal of large and heavy antiquities. This included the seven-ton bust of Pharaoh Ramesses II, taken from the king's memorial temple at Luxor that now sits in the British Museum.

On 17 October 1817, Belzoni made his finest discovery: he found the tomb of Ramesses' father, Seti I comprising ten vividly painted chambers decorated with thousands of hieroglyphs, and Seti's elaborately carved white alabaster sarcophagus.

Seti reigned for 13 years (BC 1291–1278), and was a great military pharaoh of the 19th dynasty, pursuing campaigns in Syria and Lebanon. Seti's reign marked a period of re-birth for Egypt, during which art and culture reached a sophistication rarely equalled in subsequent centuries. This is evident in the quality of the reliefs in Seti's tomb, which were among the most sophisticated in the Valley of the Kings. Belzoni found the wall paintings in excellent condition with some of the artists' brushes and paints even left on the floor. Belzoni and his assistant Alessandro Ricci meticulously copied the reliefs in a series of stunning watercolours, a number of which, on loan from Bristol Museum and Art Gallery, feature prominently in the exhibition.

The huge alabaster sarcophagus which originally held Seti's mummified remains was removed by Belzoni and eventually purchased by John Soane in 1824, who gave it pride of place in the Sepulchral Chamber at the heart of the Museum. According to Belzoni, the sarcophagus '*merits the most particular attention, not having its equal in the world, and being such as we had no idea could exist.*'

The exhibition brings the story of the sarcophagus up to date. Alongside Belzoni's accounts of its discovery and tales of the high profile 'sarcophagus parties' Sir John Soane held in 1825 for



'distinguished fashionables and literary characters' to celebrate his purchase, the exhibition also presents more recent conservation and research into the object. In addition, the exhibition will feature a new high-resolution 3-D digital scan of the sarcophagus by Factum Arte, which will be displayed adjacent to real fragments of its broken lid.

Bruce Boucher, Director of Sir John Soane's Museum says: 'The Sarcophagus of Seti I is Sir John Soane's Museum greatest treasure and has captivated visitors since its installation in 1824. The exhibition will feature wonderful loans from Mougins Museum of Classical Art, the Daniel Katz Gallery, the Bristol Museum and Art Gallery, and the British Museum, as well as objects from our own collection. It offers an opportunity to mark an important bicentennial and to explore the fascinating stories around this exceptional work of art.'

Related book

A fully illustrated book will be published by Pimpernel Press to accompany the exhibition. *Sir John Soane's Greatest Treasure: The Sarcophagus of Seti I* has been written by Dr John Taylor, Assistant Keeper, Department of Ancient Egypt and Sudan at the British Museum, with an essay by Helen Dorey, Deputy Director and Inspector of Sir John Soane's Museum.

Egypt Uncovered: Belzoni and the Tomb of Pharaoh Seti I is kindly supported by Daniel Katz Gallery, London, with additional support from Christian Levett.

Soane's Ark: Building with Symbols

Wed 11 October 2017 – Sun 21 January 2018, Foyle Space
Curated by Ferdinand Saumarez Smith, Factum Foundation

To coincide with the tercentenary of the official foundation, in London, of Freemasonry in 1717, *Soane's Ark: Building with Symbols* explores Soane's work for the Freemasons. Its centrepiece will be the stunning re-creation, by Master Woodcarvers Houghtons of York, of Soane's 'Ark of the Masonic Covenant'. This piece of ritual furniture was built in honour of the unification of Ancient and Modern Masonic Lodges in 1813 but destroyed by fire in 1883. Other works featured in the show include Soane's own Masonic Apron, books from Soane's collection relating to Freemasonry and a stunning watercolour by J. M. Gandy showing the Ark in its intended location in the (now lost) Great Hall that Soane designed for the Freemasons on Great Queen Street – one of his greatest interiors.

Related book

A book of essays, *Soane's Ark: Building with Symbols* will accompany the exhibition, beginning with an introduction by Ferdinand Saumarez Smith describing the exercise of re-creating the Ark. Douglas Burford, like Soane a former Grand Master of Works at the United Grand Lodge of



England, writes about the Ark in that context and finally Dr James Campbell discusses Sir John Soane and Freemasonry. The book is fully illustrated and published by Factum Foundation.

Soane's Ark: Building with Symbols has been generously supported by the United Grand Lodge of England and Factum Foundation for Digital Technology in Conservation.

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Notes to editors:

About Sir John Soane's Museum

Sir John Soane's house, museum and library at No. 13 Lincoln's Inn Fields has been a public museum since the early nineteenth century. On his appointment as Professor of Architecture at the Royal Academy in 1806, Soane (1753-1837) began to arrange his books, classical antiquities, casts and models so that students of architecture might benefit from access to them. In 1833 he negotiated an Act of Parliament to preserve the house and collection after his death for the benefit of 'amateurs and students' in architecture, painting and sculpture. Today, Sir John Soane's Museum is one of the country's most unusual and significant museums with a continuing and developing commitment to education and creative inspiration.

Listing information

- *Egypt Uncovered: Belzoni and the Tomb of Pharaoh Seti I*
Wed 11 October 2017 – Sun 15 April 2018, Soane Gallery
 - *Soane's Ark: Building with Symbols*
Wed 11 October 2017 – Sun 21 January 2018, Foyle Space
- Sir John Soane's Museum, 13 Lincoln's Inn Fields, London, WC2A 3BP
Opening hours: Tuesday to Saturday inclusive, 10am-5pm | Admission: Free

Visitor Information

The museum is open free: Tuesday to Saturday inclusive, 10am-5pm. It is also open on the first Tuesday evening of each month from 6-9pm. www.soane.org

Events

A public programme of activities for children and families centring on the discovery of the tomb and Seti's sarcophagus will be accompanied by curator led talks and a Sarcophagus themed 'Soane Late' night event aimed at adults.