



Soane office, Royal Academy Lecture drawing of the work of Sir John Vanbrugh, 'Goose-Pie House', Whitehall, perspective, SM 75/4/4

Vanbrugh: The Drama of Architecture

4 March – 28 June 2026

300 years after his death, a major new exhibition exploring one of the UK's greatest architects, Sir John Vanbrugh (1664–1726), will open at Sir John Soane's Museum, London.

Hailed as '*The Rockstar of the English Baroque*' and '*The original starchitect*', Vanbrugh designed some of the UK's most admired and loved country houses, including Blenheim Palace and Castle Howard, with each one featuring his signature ability to exploit the emotional impact of architecture by making exciting and dramatic use of light and shadow, recessions and projections.

Sir John Soane (1753-1837) cited Vanbrugh as one of his great influences, remarking that he had "*all the fire and power of Michelangelo and Bernini*".

The exhibition will feature never-before-exhibited drawings from the collections of the V&A, the Royal Institute of British Architects (RIBA), the National Portrait Gallery and Sir John Soane's Museum, including many in Vanbrugh's own hand. It is an opportunity to see a selection of Vanbrugh's drawings for major projects like Castle Howard, but also smaller, more experimental plans for schemes such as the housing estate he envisaged at Greenwich.

Perhaps overshadowed by his contemporaries, Nicholas Hawksmoor (c.1661-1736) and Sir Christopher Wren (1632-1723), the emotional impact and imagination of Vanbrugh continue to be admired, particularly by architects, in the centuries since. The exhibition will, therefore, highlight Vanbrugh's enduring architectural ideas and influence, including on two of the most influential architects of the 20th century, Robert Venturi (1925-2018) and Denise Scott Brown (b.1931), whose only UK building is the Sainsbury Wing of the National Gallery in Trafalgar Square, completed in 1991. A new short film by filmmaker Jim Venturi, their son, and Anita Naughton will explore their connection to Vanbrugh and will be available to see in the Museum's Foyle Space.

Although his body of architectural work was not large, he almost single-handedly popularised the ornate, full-blooded Baroque style that became *de rigeur* for grand country houses. Vanbrugh's bold and daring designs extended beyond country houses to temples, belvederes, pyramids and other garden features. The originality of such work means he is also credited with a vital role in the development of the 18th-century English garden.

Vanbrugh: The Drama of Architecture is an appropriate title, as he was also one of the country's great Restoration dramatists, with his architectural work just as bold and daring as his risqué plays, such as *The Provoked Wife* (1697) and *The Relapse, or, Virtue in Danger* (1696).

It is also the title of the new biography of the architect by Sir Charles Saumarez Smith CBE, which was published in November 2025. He has co-curated the exhibition with the renowned architect and academic, Roz Barr.

Charles Saumarez Smith, co-curator of the exhibition says: *"I am so delighted that Sir John Soane's Museum is celebrating the tercentenary of John Vanbrugh's death with a comprehensive exhibition of his drawings, many of which were only acquired by the V&A in the 1990s and are being shown in public for the first time. They demonstrate the ways in which Vanbrugh sketched out ideas for his houses, including Castle Howard, and was fascinated by the design of small houses after he had acquired an estate on the hill between Greenwich and Blackheath where he constructed a small medieval castle for himself."*

Roz Bar, co-curator of the exhibition says: *"Vanbrugh was central to the Baroque movement in English architecture, creating the most renowned and spectacular country houses ever to be seen, even to this day. He was a true creative - a prolific playwright, and this is brought to life in the grand, theatrical, and romantic buildings he went on to create. It has been overwhelming to discover the incredible collection of his hand sketches at the V&A Museum, which demonstrate the rigour and thought process of how he worked that reveal so much of life as an architect in the 18th century."*

Will Gompertz, Director of Sir John Soane's Museum says: *"Soane was a great admirer of Vanbrugh's work, fondly describing him as 'the Shakespeare of Architects', and so I'm sure he would have been delighted with the chance to see Vanbrugh's genius on display in his Museum. Vanbrugh: The Drama of Architecture will introduce new audiences to the work of an architect, dramatist and radical, whose plays, drawings, and buildings continue to inspire, 300 years on."*

This exhibition has been supported by the following individuals and organisations: The Ancaster Trust, The Estelle Trust, The McCorquodale Charitable Trust, The Christopher and Henry Oldfield Trust, Basil and Maria Postan, Lord and Lady Sassoon, The Tavolozza Foundation. We are also grateful for generous loans from the V&A.

DATE FOR THE DIARY - There will be a Press View & Photocall for *Vanbrugh: The Drama of Architecture* on 3 March 2026.

NOTES TO EDITORS

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About Sir John Soane's Museum

Sir John Soane's house and collection at No. 13 Lincoln's Inn Fields has been a national museum since the early nineteenth century. Designed by renowned architect Sir John Soane and filled with his world-class collection of paintings, sculptures, artefacts and models, the Museum retains the same fabric and design as at the time of Soane's death in 1837. Today, the Museum encourages access to Soane's legacy in its broadest sense: architecture and design, creative originality, a commitment to learning and enquiry, and the connections between past and present that the Museum and its collections reveal. The Museum is open Wednesdays to Sundays, 10am to 5pm. Entry is free. There is no need to pre-book – you can walk in on the day. Sir John Soane's Museum, 13 Lincoln's Inn Fields, London, WC2A 3BP. More at www.soane.org | #SoaneMuseum | @soanemuseum

VANBRUGH300

Presented by the Georgian Group – the conservation organisation founded in 1937 to protect and promote Georgian heritage – VANBRUGH300 will include events and activities across the year at six of the architect's most significant creations: Castle Howard (Yorkshire), Blenheim Palace (Oxfordshire), Seaton Delaval Hall (Northumberland), Grimsthorpe Castle (Lincolnshire), Kimbolton Castle (Cambridgeshire) and Stowe House (Buckinghamshire). The aim is to broaden the awareness of Vanbrugh through exhibitions, displays, free education programmes and lectures, kicking off on the weekend of 27 March at Seaton Delaval and running throughout the spring and summer. Everything you need to know can be found on a dedicated website, www.Vanbrugh300.co.uk

FOR MORE INFORMATION AND TO ARRANGE INTERVIEWS

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