

Flaxman at the Soane

SIR JOHN
SOANE'S
MUSEUM

A TRAIL THROUGH SIR JOHN SOANE'S MUSEUM

The sculptor John Flaxman (1755-1826) was a close friend of John Soane. The two met through the Royal Academy, where they both held professorships: Soane was Professor of Architecture from 1806 and Flaxman Professor of Sculpture from 1810. Their wives, Ann (known as 'Nancy') Flaxman and Eliza Soane and Mrs Flaxman's sister, Maria Denman, also became close friends, holidaying in Margate together and enjoying weekends at the Soanes' country house, Pitzhanger Manor, in Ealing. Sadly Mrs Soane died in 1815 and Nancy Flaxman in 1820.

After John Flaxman's death in 1826 the contents of his studio and house in Buckingham Street, just off Fitzroy Square, were inherited jointly by his sister Mary Ann Flaxman and sister-in-law Maria Denman, who continued to live there. Miss Denman remained a close friend of Soane, visiting him frequently and even helping him to draft the *Description* of his house and Museum published in 1835. In June 1833 she wrote to Soane 'I have been looking through the studies in Buckingham Street and find so many beautiful things that I think we cannot fail finding some ...that may suit you ... I think ...I had better...call on you some day and walk through your Museum in order to ascertain what places there are to receive works of art as to dimension and form, as by that I think your choice must be regulated'. Her letter refers to Flaxman's 'studies' i.e. his plaster working models for sculpture commissions, of which we know from other sources nearly 1,000 remained in his studio at his death. Between 1834 and Soane's death in 1837 Maria Denman supplied 75 Flaxman models for Soane's Museum, as well as a number of drawings. In addition, she also sold or gave Soane approximately 70 other objects from Flaxman's collections (casts, antique marbles and miscellaneous items including the male human skeleton which Flaxman kept in his studio and used for anatomical studies). Some had almost certainly been collected by Flaxman when he was living in Italy from 1787 to 1794; others were acquired in England. The fact that Soane acquired much of Flaxman's private collection of sculpture and casts means his Museum today provides a unique glimpse into Flaxman's sculptural world.

This trail guides visitors to works either by Flaxman or from Flaxman's personal collection which were acquired by Sir John Soane for his Museum. The plans show the locations of the objects.

• To begin the trail please turn right out of the Entrance Hall into the Dining Room, and then enter the Study via the door to the left of the fireplace. Pass through the small Study into the oak-grained Dressing Room

On the south wall, at high level to the left of the shelf over the door

1. Maria Denman



This portrait in black chalk, is by John Flaxman. Although it is dated 1817 it was probably presented to Soane in about 1834 by Maria Denman.

• Continue through the narrow passage and into the Museum

The next items can be found to the right, behind the fluted column furthest from you

2. Roman terracotta cresting

Two frames containing fragments from Roman terracotta cresting plaques (used on the ridges of roofs) or wainscot plaques collected by John Flaxman. All are thought to originate from Rome.



Upper frame: the fragments include one of the goddess Athena (helmeted and seated) in a shipbuilding scene and another of Victory sacrificing a bull. All are variations on standard types of Roman terracotta plaques produced in the 1st Century AD.



Lower frame: the fragments include a woman approaching a candelabrum, Eros standing amongst stylized acanthus leaves and a scene showing fauns and satyrs gathering grapes.

• Walk across the large floor grille into the Picture Room

The trail pictures are inside the planes on the north side (to your left as you enter)

Please note that out of consideration for other visitors you may have to wait for the member of staff on duty to open these doors until a group has gathered or until other visitors have finished looking at works hung on the outside of the planes.

To the left of the large Italian lake view (A.W. Calcott's *The Passage Point*), upper picture

3. A tapestry cartoon from Raphael's studio



The head of a fair-haired man, seen in profile, with a serene expression: a fragment from a tapestry 'cartoon' (a preparatory drawing) for the 'Presentation at the Temple', from Raphael's studio (probably by Tommaso Vincidor), tempera on paper.

To the right of The Passage Point

4. A Flaxman copy, painted in oils



This is a copy of another fragment of a tapestry cartoon by Giulio Romano or Tommaso Vincidor for 'The Massacre of the Innocents' made by John Flaxman in oil and tempera on paper. Flaxman acquired the original fragment of which this is his painted copy from the Duke of Argyll's sale in 1779. He later gave it to the artist John Saunders of Bath and it is now in the National Gallery of Scotland.

Flaxman's ownership of the two original cartoon fragments and his making of a careful painted copy of one of them illustrate his close interest in physiognomy and in the portrayal of contrasting emotions through facial expression. He probably treated these two works as a pair in his own collection long before Miss Denman presented them to Soane in the 1830s.

- **Passing out of the Picture Room, turn right and begin to go down the stairs**

Item 5 is three steps down, on a stand to the left.

5. A celebrated statue

A cast of the antique statue of *Hercules in the Hesperian Gardens*, from the original in the



British Museum. Flaxman studied this statue from a young age: Soane also owned a wax model of its torso made by Flaxman as a boy.

- **Proceed down the stairs and at the bottom walk straight ahead and then turn right into the Basement South Passage, pausing to view object 6**

On the left, in the recess behind the Chinese dogs

6. Masterful drapery



A plaster model of a reclining female figure for Flaxman's monument to Mrs Helen Knight in

the Church at Wolverley, Worcestershire, c.1801. Soane carefully displayed this model within a cast of an Elizabethan fireplace and alongside fragments of antique sculpture and a large sculpted sea shell to highlight Flaxman's mastery of draperies by this comparison with antique and natural forms.

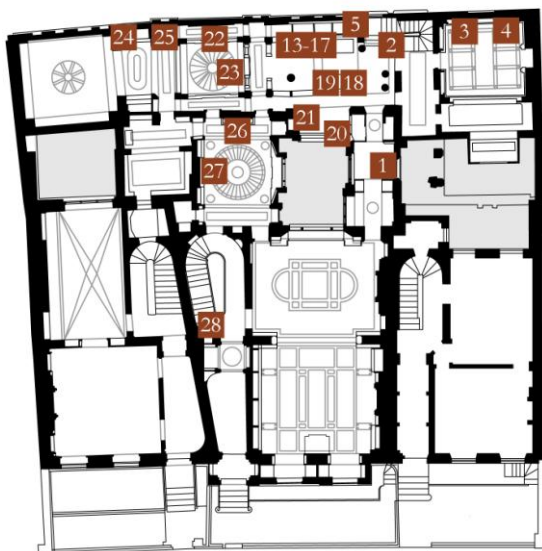
- **Continue past the pair of Gothic iron chairs and turn immediately right and then right again to enter the Crypt**

On your right-hand side

7. Britannia Triumphant



A plaster model by John Flaxman, c. 1799-1801. A public competition was held in 1799 for a column as a monument to recent naval victories. Flaxman disliked the idea of a column and submitted this design for a colossal seated figure of Britannia on Greenwich Hill. The model was exhibited at the Royal Academy in 1801 but Flaxman's gigantic monument was never built.



GROUND FLOOR



BASEMENT

On the walls either side of 'Britannia'

8. Graceful simplicity



Two plaster models for Flaxman's monument to Georgina, Countess Spencer in the Church at Great Brington, Northamptonshire, c.1818: *Charity* on the left, *Faith* on the right.

Flaxman's funerary monuments frequently incorporate his favourite theme of the affection of a mother for her children, treated with a graceful simplicity of outline and with the same marvellous naturalism, conveying intimacy and tenderness, which is found in his drawing of family groups. His formula of paired Christian virtues, such as *Faith* and *Charity*, was the basis for many commissions.

On the walls within the arch

9. Pure line



These four small works perfectly illustrate Flaxman's mastery of pure line, without any complex background detail. The Holy Family (the infant Christ and his parents Mary and Joseph), seen in the *Adoration of the Magi*, was the original exemplar or model for all his scenes of family love. The two pieces on the right illustrate scenes from John Milton's epic poem *Paradise Lost*, a work that Flaxman, in his Royal Academy lectures, urged sculptors to take subjects from.

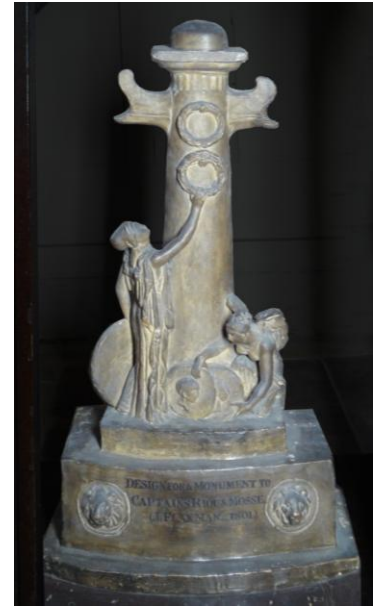


On the left are *The Adoration of the Magi* (top) and *Joseph's Dream*; and on the right *Satan fleeing the angels Gabriel and Ithuriel* (top) and *Adam and Eve in Paradise*.



Directly opposite *Britannia Triumphant* (number 7), in the middle recess of the north wall, standing inside the large domed model for a clock case

10. Two naval heroes



Model for monument to Captains Edward Riou and Robert Mosse, both killed during Nelson's attack on Copenhagen in 1801, by John Flaxman, plaster, 1801. This is a sketch for a monument in St Paul's Cathedral but again, another sculptor was preferred to Flaxman, the final work being executed by Charles Rossi.

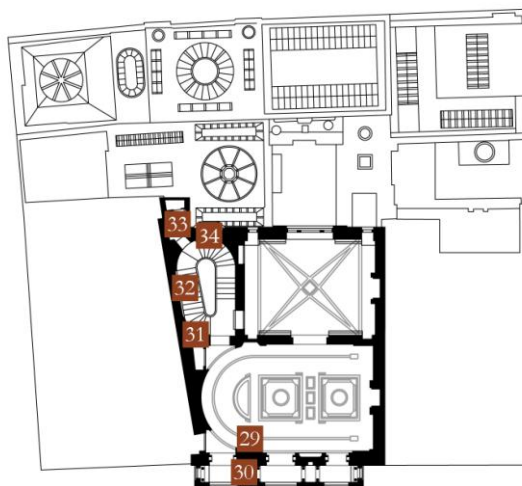
• Proceed towards the Egyptian alabaster sarcophagus in the centre of the Sepulchral Chamber

Under the arch as you enter the Chamber (at the head of the sarcophagus), left-hand niche: upper shelf

11. A female figure



Fragment of the top of a Roman cinerary urn (a receptacle for the ashes of the dead), with a reclining female figure, marble, 1st or 2nd century AD. The fact that Flaxman acquired many pieces of antique sculpture, which, like this one, feature headless figures with elaborate draperies, demonstrates his keen interest in the contours of the human figure and his close study of lighting and the flow and fall of drapery.



FIRST FLOOR

Opening to the Sepulchral Chamber, west side (at the foot of the sarcophagus – close to the colossal bronze bust on a column), on the wall above the right-hand niche

12. A breast-plate

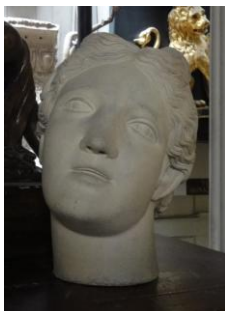


Cast of part of an antique breast-plate with an Amazon and two griffins, plaster. This cast was acquired by Soane with other items from Flaxman's collection in the 1830s

• *Passing out of the Sepulchral Chamber through the west arch, turn left and then walk along the basement south passage to return to the ground floor via the staircase by the Monk's Parlour down which you came. At the top of the stairs turn right to enter the Colonnade central passage*

On the cupboard, right-hand side

13. A Romano-British Diana



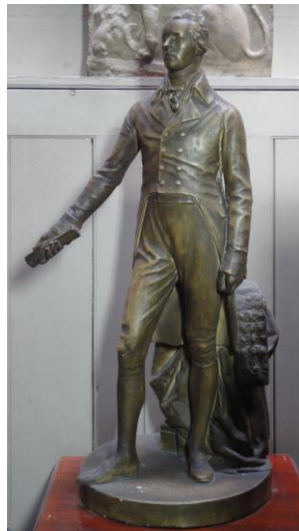
A cast of a Roman bronze head of Diana found in Bath, plaster. Flaxman described this head at length in one of his lectures speculating that it might be an early example of a British sculpture made during the Roman period – a copy from a Roman original.

• *Move along the Colonnade*

Just beyond the cupboard on which number 13 is displayed, on a wooden stand, set back, right-hand side

14. William Pitt

Model for a statue of William Pitt the younger by John Flaxman, plaster, c.1807. The statue was commissioned from Flaxman by the Glasgow City authorities. It was completed in 1812 and is now in Glasgow Old Town Hall. Behind the model of Pitt, on the wall either side, are casts from the base of an antique candelabrum which were once in Flaxman's collection. Below those to the right is an intriguing small panel of a crucified thief,



which may be a model for an unidentified work by Flaxman himself.

On the shelves, at ground level, right-hand side of the Colonnade central passage

15. A Roman foot



Fragment of a sandalled left foot from a colossal statue, Roman, marble.

To the right of the foot

16. A Greek relief



Greek funerary relief, marble, of the 1st or 2nd century AD.

On the shelf behind the figure of the Ephesian Diana (a multi-breasted goddess), right-hand side of the Colonnade central passage

17. Two marble fragments

Left: (numbered 1149), fragment of the lower right corner of a Greek (Attic) votive relief with a female and male figure clad in elaborate draperies. Probably 4th century BC. Right: (numbered 1150), the lower left section of a



Greek sepulchral or votive relief, perhaps showing a funeral banquet. To the left is a nude boy with (centre) a draped female figure seated on a throne and a female attendant leaning on the cushions. Probably from the Greek Islands, marble, 3rd century BC.

• *Pass along the Colonnade, turn left at the end and left again and walk along the Museum South Passage*

On the north side, (on your left) fixed to the cupboard

18. A frog, Cupid and a grasshopper



Fragment of a small relief frieze with a border of bead and reel moulding at the top. On the flower stalk and tendrils of a plant are a frog (left) and a cupid stalking a grasshopper. Terracotta coloured to imitate bronze, c.50 BC.

In a frame and fixed to the pier immediately to the left of the cupboard

19. A walking cow



Fragment of a relief of a cow walking left, Roman, marble. The excellent feeling for the cow's anatomy in this finely carved piece must have appealed greatly to Flaxman. Its simplicity and strength makes an interesting contrast with his careful copy of the frenetic, emotionally charged *Laocoon* standing alongside.

- **Turn round**

On the south side to the left of the window

20. Joshua Reynolds



Model for a statue of Sir Joshua Reynolds (1723-92) by John Flaxman, plaster, c.1803-13. Flaxman was commissioned to produce this full-size statue as one of four 'benefactors of the English people' to be placed beneath the crossing of St Paul's Cathedral. The other three statues were by John Bacon the elder and were of John Howard the prison reformer, Dr Samuel Johnson and the orientalist Sir William Jones. Flaxman had known Reynolds and his image of him has great conviction: it was praised during Flaxman's lifetime for its 'noble bearing'. Beneath Reynolds' left hand, carved on a column, is a relief of Michelangelo - the artist Reynolds most admired.

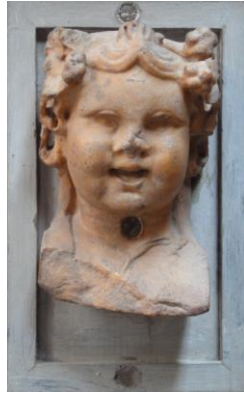
To the right of the window, on the wall next to Cupboard 100

21. Three more marble fragments

Top: fragment of a female head from a relief in the Forum of Trajan, Rome, marble, 1st century AD.



Middle: fragment of a female head from another relief in the Forum of Trajan, Rome, marble, 1st century AD but carved in the style of the Greek 5th century BC.



Below: small bust of the infant Dionysos crowned with vine leaves and grapes, marble, Roman.

- **Walk back along the South Passage, (away from the Picture Room) to enter the Dome area and look immediately to your right**

On the east side, north wall, top two items

22. Flaxman and Ghiberti



Top: *Mercury conveying Pandora to Epimetheus*, relief by John Flaxman, plaster, c.1804-5. This panel illustrates Pandora brought to earth, a subject from the ancient Greek author Hesiod's *Works and Days*. Flaxman used this panel as the inspiration for one of his line illustrations to *Works and Days*, published in 1817. Soane acquired two versions (the other much smaller). Below: Plaster cast of a bas-relief panel of *The Giving of the Law* from the celebrated bronze doors of the Baptistery at Florence, known as *The Gates of Paradise*, by Lorenzo Ghiberti (executed between 1425 and 1452). Flaxman much admired Ghiberti's first set of doors for the Florence Baptistery (1404 to 1428) for their strong linear qualities. However, this cast is from Ghiberti's second set of Baptistery doors which Flaxman liked less because of their complex perspectival settings.

Below the bust of Soane on the east balustrade either side of the lion monopodium pedestal

23. The 'union of the arts'

Models for statuettes of Michelangelo (left) and Raphael (right) by John Flaxman, plaster, c.1825. Flaxman made statuettes of Raphael



and Michelangelo for Sir Thomas Lawrence and exhibited a pair of plaster models for them, perhaps this pair, at the Royal Academy in 1826. The figures were placed in the Dome area in this position to associate Flaxman with his contemporary Sir Francis Chantrey, who sculpted the bust of Soane just above. A subtle reference to Lawrence is included in the arrangement, with a bust of him placed high up behind the bust of Soane. The arrangement brings together Michelangelo, Raphael, Flaxman, Chantrey, Soane and Lawrence to symbolise the 'union of the arts' which Soane wanted his Museum to represent.

On the west side, in the lobby to the right, behind the statue of Apollo, right-hand side, high up on the right

24. Animal anatomy

The skull of an animal: as a sculptor Flaxman was interested in both human and animal anatomy.

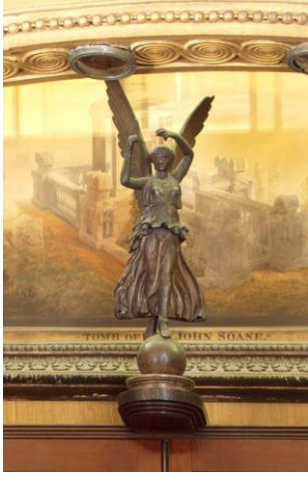


- **Leave the Dome area via the door in the south west corner, near the large statue of Apollo, and then turn immediately left and enter the Breakfast Room**

On the north side on top of the bookcase (to your left as you enter)

25. Victory

A plaster cast of an antique figure of Victory, the *Victoria von Fossombrone* (c.150AD), said to have been brought from Rome by John Flaxman. The celebrated antique gilt-bronze statue from which this cast was made was shipped to Kassel in 1777 (where it remains in the Museum today) so either Flaxman acquired a cast made in Rome (perhaps by the famous Righetti brothers) or he bought this one when he passed through Kassel on his way back to England in 1794. The original bronze



was well known to the Neoclassical sculptor Antonio Canova, whom Flaxman knew in Rome, and Canova placed his version of it in the hand of his gigantic naked statue of Napoleon, now at Apsley House in London.

This cast was given to Soane by Maria Denman and fixed on the bookcase in front of a watercolour of Mrs Soane's tomb under the immediate direction of Sir John Soane on 10th January 1837, just 10 days before his own death: a carefully planned arrangement which symbolises victory over the grave.

West side, on and above the fireplace

26. Objects by and belonging to Flaxman



Top: a showcase containing a Roman bronze lion, a small Roman *lar* figure (a household god for a private family shrine or *lararium*) and a small figure of a 'Philosopher' (right) modelled by Flaxman. On the mantelpiece: three early terracotta busts by Flaxman, c.1780s: Left: William Hayley (1745-1820), the poet. Centre: John Flaxman senior (1726-95), the sculptor's father. Right: Henry Howard, RA (1769-1847), painter. Howard was a close friend of both Flaxman and Soane, who commissioned the ceiling paintings in the Library and Dining Room from him. His bust looks towards his own painting, *The Contention of Oberon and Titania* on the south wall of the Breakfast Parlour.

Set into the black marble fireplace: three white plaster reliefs by Flaxman displayed under yellow glass: Left and right: models for a silver vase presented to the actor J.P. Kemble (see 30 above) on his retirement from the stage

showing Kemble crowned by Melpomen and Kemble inspired by the genius of Shakespeare. Centre: a model for a vase presented to Dr W.S. Goddard on his retirement as headmaster of Winchester College 1809.

• *Pass through the door to your left and walk towards the main Staircase leading up to the first floor*

On your left in a niche at the foot of the stairs

27. St. Michael



St. Michael defeating Satan, a model for a much larger marble sculpture at Petworth House, Sussex, by John Flaxman, plaster painted in imitation of bronze, 1822.

• *Continue up the Staircase to the first floor and enter the South Drawing Room*

Ahead of you, on the wall

28. Mrs Soane

Pencil sketch of Mrs Soane by John Flaxman, 27 September 1810, presented to Soane by J.M.W. Turner in 1831.



Flaxman made this informal sketch of his friend Eliza Soane 5 years before her death in 1815. It eventually found its way to the studio of the artist John Jackson where it formed the basis for the posthumous portrait of Mrs Soane commissioned by her husband in 1829 and completed in 1831 just before Jackson's

death. Turner bought it from the posthumous sale of Jackson's belongings and presented it to Soane as a gift on the occasion of his knighthood, awarded by William IV for services to architecture in the same year.

Above the small bookcases in the openings to the loggia on the south side of the South Drawing Room

29. Georgian worthies

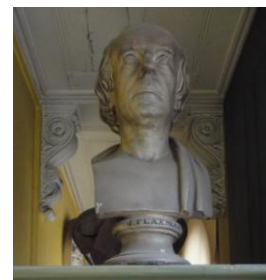


A series of small models for figures by John Flaxman. These have not been individually numbered but are, beginning at the fireplace end: First arch, left: John Philip Kemble, c.1826 for the statue in Westminster Abbey. Second arch: left: Marquis of Hastings, 1826 for the statue in Calcutta, India. Right: William Pitt the younger (c.1808 for the statue at Glasgow; see 14 and 32). Third arch: left: Sir Joshua Reynolds (c.1803-7) for the statue in St. Paul's (see 20). Right: Warren Hastings, c.1820 for the statue commissioned by the East India Company.

Above the model of Warren Hastings, on the first cross-beam of the loggia,

30. A later self-portrait

A self-portrait bust, in plaster, by John Flaxman.



• *Walk back out of the South Drawing Room on to the staircase and turn to your left*
On a decorative bracket on the Staircase to upper floors

31. A bust of William Pitt

Bust of William Pitt the younger by John Flaxman, plaster, c.1812. This bust is associated with Flaxman's designs for a monument to Pitt, see 7 and 30 above. Soane chose to acquire two figures of Pitt and



this bust when he had the chance to acquire items from Flaxman's collections. Soane owed much to the Pitt family as his youthful meeting with Thomas Pitt (cousin of William Pitt) in Rome had led later to his nomination for the post of Architect to the Bank of England, the job which he later described as 'the pride and boast of my life'. Soane was sympathetic to Pitt's Whig politics but also wished his museum to enshrine the memory of the most celebrated of his contemporaries. *Flanking the large framed architectural drawings of Soane's design for a Triumphal Bridge*

32. Flaxman and his wife



Pair of circular framed portraits of John Flaxman and his wife, Ann, plaster, probably based on wax models made in Rome between 1787 and 1794. These portraits were later used as models for Wedgwood versions. These are the only two works of sculpture by Flaxman acquired by Soane before the sculptor's death: Flaxman sent them to him as a testament to their friendship in August 1826, just four months before his death.

• After October 2012 you will be able to walk up the Staircase to turn of the stairs between the first and second floors

Ahead of you is the opening to

33. The Tivoli Recess: commemorating British Sculpture



The Tivoli Recess (to re-open in October 2012 after almost 100 years as a lavatory) contains, on the left-hand wall, Flaxman's relief after the celebrated Borghese Vase and *Grecian Feast*, (illustrated below) both youthful exercises after the Antique, juxtaposed with Thomas Banks' terracotta model for *Caractacus before Claudius* and a cast of his oval *Achilles and Thetis*. On the far wall is a plaster cast of Flaxman's famous *Achilles Shield*, inspired by the description in Homer, produced in silver by Rundell, Bridge and Rundell for King George IV in 1821. Either side of this are Flaxman's plaster figures of *Cupid* on the left and its companion *Psyche* on the right. The marbles of these figures were made for the poet Samuel Rogers.

In his Royal Academy lectures Soane referred to 'the genius of Banks, Flaxman, Chantrey, and other great sculptors of the age' and this recess is a 'shrine' paying tribute to them, lit through a stained glass window which was a copy of one designed by Reynolds for New College, Oxford. This recess honours British sculpture in the same way that Soane's earlier 'Shakespeare Recess', also created in 1829, honoured the greatest genius of English Literature.



Trail originally compiled 2003 by Claudia Celder and Helen Dorey Revised 2012 by Helen Dorey and Joni Rendon and redesigned by John Bridges

For a more detailed account of Soane's relationship with Flaxman and a full list of the items from Flaxman's collections which are now in Sir John Soane's Museum please see the Exhibition Catalogue *John Flaxman: Master of the Purest Line* which is available from the Museum shop online at www.soane.org



• Walk further up the stairs
On the right-hand window reveal

34 A youthful self-portrait



A circular, framed self-portrait by John Flaxman, white plaster, 1778-9. This is a cast of a terracotta modelled by Flaxman while he was still a young student at the Royal Academy (the terracotta is now in the Victoria and Albert Museum).