

Miscellaneous Marvels

SIR JOHN
SOANE'S
MUSEUM

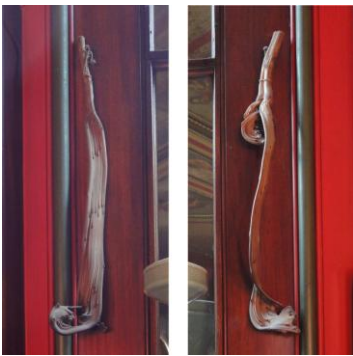
A TRAIL HIGHLIGHTING A SERIES OF UNUSUAL AND CURIOUS TREASURES THAT MAY BE FOUND AMONGST THE MANY DIVERSE RICHES IN SOANE'S COLLECTION

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

Hanging either side of the North window (to your left as you enter the room)

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', before 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 and into the courtyard to see the following objects

2. Soane's Pasticcio

The 'pasticcio', a 23-foot high composite column made up of Ancient and modern architectural fragments, was erected in 1819 in the centre of the courtyard. Its installation was the culmination of what could be seen as Soane's search for a centrepiece, a quest for a suitable Piranesian feature to represent architecture at the heart of his Museum. During his time in Rome, Soane may have seen similar arrangements of fragments in the courtyard of

the Palazzo Farnese, and he was certainly inspired by the *capricci* (fantasy assemblages of classical antiquities) illustrated by Piranesi. Soane's *pasticcio* was composed of capitals and other architectural fragments representing various styles of architecture. Rising from a neoclassical base which came from Chiswick House, the pasticcio incorporates such varied elements as a 14th century Islamic capital and a copy of a 'Tivoli' capital like those used by Soane on the Bank of England, which were inspired by his favourite Roman building, the Temple of Vesta at Tivoli.



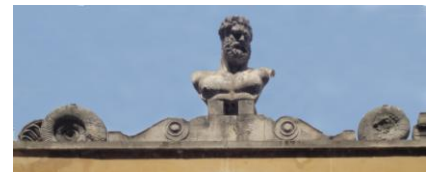
After Soane's death the *pasticcio* gradually became unstable and had to be dismantled in 1896, but after two decades of work, 2004 saw the return of the reconstructed *pasticcio*, incorporating the surviving sections as well as faithful recarvings of the unsalvageable portions. Once again, the central Monument Court was transformed into a celebration of Architecture.

Different sections of the *pasticcio* can be viewed through the windows in the Dressing Room, Basement South Passage recess, Basement Ante-room and Breakfast Parlour. In the Basement Ante-room Soane designed a special canted window to frame the dramatic upwards view of the Tivoli capital.

On the skyline, flanking the bust of the Farnese Hercules

3. 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 much-eroded examples 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 might 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, lying horizontally

4. A monster sponge

Incongruously placed 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

5. 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, using them throughout his house-museum as decorative objects or, in the form of single animal legs (known as monopoedia) 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 6

6. Skeleton

Before being given to Soane, this skeleton 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, although there is no evidence that he had the door to the cupboard open so that visitors could actually see it.



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.

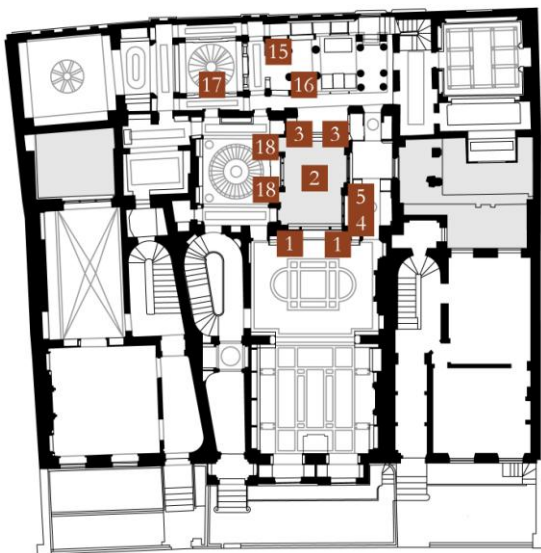
• Continue down the stairs walk ahead and turn left into the Monk’s Parlour

In the glass-fronted case ahead of you

7. ‘Uncommon’ Pottery



Soane placed these very exotic vessels in the Monk’s Parlour and although they are not European medieval; they certainly represent something remote from the Greco-Roman world. This is in fact one of the earliest collections of Peruvian pottery of the pre-Columbian period. When Soane purchased it he wrote ‘I doubt their antiquity but they are uncommon’. They are from the north coast of Peru from the area around Trujillo. One or two may be from the Moche or Mochica culture and date from before 600 AD. The rest are from the Chimú culture from about 900 but before 1450 AD, when that culture was overrun by the Incas. Some are quite rare outside Peru.



GROUND FLOOR



BASEMENT

- As you leave the Monk's Parlour walk straight ahead along the passage

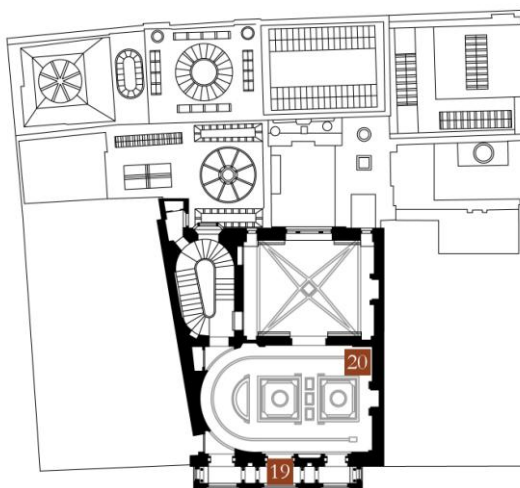
On the shelf in the recess on your left-hand side

8. 'A grotesque animal'



It is not known when or where Soane acquired a pair of plaster Chinese guardian lions - lion dogs - which he described as 'antique heraldic monsters' in his 1835 *Description*. Today, only one of his pair survives - the one on the right in the photograph above - and this sole survivor was long a mystery. For many years it sat in the Deputy Curator's office, its original inventory number lost until, through careful tracing of its different locations in the Museum over many years, it was identified as the 'Grotesque Animal - query Hindoo or Chinese, Japanese', recorded in the 1837 inventory. Its number revealed its original location and it was returned to its original position in the recess of the basement passage. A suitable replacement for its missing twin was found at auction (2010) - on the left in the photograph. This is a very close likeness of the lost dog it replaces, although executed in earthenware rather than plaster and slightly smaller.

In the orient, these fierce yet playful lion dogs (known as *shishi* or *koma-inu*) traditionally stand guard outside the gates of Shinto shrines and Buddhist temples. They are usually depicted in pairs: one with mouth open, to ward off evil spirits and one with mouth closed, to keep good spirits in (although some experts maintain it is the other way round!).



FIRST FLOOR

- Immediately past the pair of Gothic iron chairs, turn right into the narrow passageway

Hanging on the left wall

9. Slave shackles



These items, recorded as 'An iron negro shackle (sic)' and 'A coupling collar (iron)' in the museum's 1837 inventory were described by Soane as 'implements of iron, to the honor of humanity no longer in use'. They would have been acquired sometime between c.1790 and January 1835, but we are uncertain as to their time and place of origin.

Shackles and neck collars of this type were among the many devices used to control and restrain African slaves during their capture and journey across the Middle Passage to the Americas and West Indies. The Slave Trade Act, passed by Parliament in 1807, made it illegal to capture and transport slaves within the British Empire, but slavery itself was not abolished until the Slavery Abolition Act in 1833.

Soane backed a number of charitable causes and though not an abolitionist campaigner, he

was sympathetic to the movement and had strong connections with the Thornton family, who were noted evangelical reformers and cousins of William Wilberforce, the pre-eminent abolitionist. Godfrey Thornton was a Director of the Bank of England at the time that Soane was appointed as the Bank's 'Architect and Surveyor' in 1788. Soane later went on to redesign Thornton's country house, Moggerhanger and to work for the Thornton family for more than 30 years.

- Turning right, enter into the crypt. Along the north wall is a triple recess with light filtering down from above

Near the ground in the left-hand compartment of the recess

10. Cork model of Temple of Fortuna Virilis



Soane owned fourteen cork models, including this model of the Temple of Fortuna Virilis, perhaps made in England in the late 18th century. The temple is situated on the banks of the Tiber River in the Forum Boarium, Rome, and dates from the late 2nd century BC when it was dedicated to the Roman god of rivers and seaports. In the 9th century AD, it was converted to a Christian church, which accounts for its good state of preservation. Its style represents a merging of both Etruscan and Greek design.

A number of popular exhibitions in 18th and 19th century London featured models of ancient monuments in their displays. Cork was a perfect material for model-making as its structure already resembled weathered stone. Apart from being acquired as souvenirs, cork models were attractive as objects in collectors' cabinets and also used as reference material for architects.

One of the most comprehensive exhibitions of cork models was Dubourg's Exhibition on Duke Street, which opened in 1798. Illustrations show that Dubourg's display was very similar to the arrangements in Soane's own Model Room, first created in the front attic in 1829 and later moved to the front room on the second floor in 1834 where it was very much expanded and elaborated (see image at right). The room was dismantled after his death but will be reinstated as part of the *Opening up the Soane* project. It is likely that Soane's model of the Temple Virilis, which he purchased in 1832, may have originally been displayed in Dubourg's exhibition.

• *Through the arch on your left move into the Sepulchral Chamber, where the sarcophagus is displayed*

11. The Sarcophagus

The imposing sarcophagus, or coffin, 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.

Lying horizontally beneath the arch to the north of the sarcophagus is

12. Mummy case

This 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 of this 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.

13. Cinerary vase

At the foot of the sarcophagus, standing on the right-hand column, is a magnificent Roman cinerary vase of oriental alabaster.



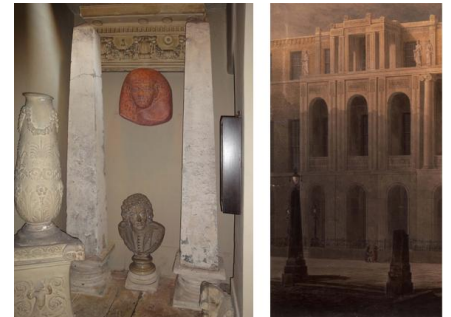
Such vases were made to hold the cremated ashes of the dead, alabaster usually being used for people of higher rank. Soane purchased this at Lord Mendip's sale in May 1802 for £15.0.

Beyond the large bronze bust, against the north wall are

14. Two obelisks

These obelisks formerly stood outside in Lincoln's Inn Fields. The form is Egyptian in origin. Obelisks became popular in Georgian England and were used for a variety of practical and decorative purposes; these served

as lamp posts supporting oil lamps before the installation of gas lighting in the square. (see detail of watercolour by J.M. Gandy below).



• *Passing out of the Sepulchral Chamber through the West arch, turn left and follow the passage to return to the Ground Floor the way you came using the stairs by the Monk's Parlour*

As you walk along this passage you will see two sectional ammonites in frames fixed to the piers to your left (see 3. above).

• *At the top of the stairs, turn right into the Colonnade. At the far end, on the right, you will find item 15*

15. 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 Poggia 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 16

16. A Maori spear

This mysterious object was described in early inventories of 1837 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.

• **From the Colonnade move into the central Dome Area and look over the balustrade**

On the South side, to your left, on the shelf

17. Architecture and nature

This collection of items was 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.



• **Leave the Dome area by the door to the left (south) of the statue of Apollo and enter the domed Breakfast Parlour**

18. 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 outlived her mistress by 5 years, dying on Christmas Day 1820 at the age of 16 or 17. She 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**

19. Columns in the loggia



The loggia (the passage which runs along the front of the house, beyond the yellow curtains)

Trail leaflet was originally produced for Museums Month 2006 with text written by Tim Knox, Helen Dorey, Stephen Astley, Sue Palmer and William Palin. It was updated by Joni Rendon and Helen Dorey in 2011 and designed by John Bridges.

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.

Either side of the chimneypiece are

20. Mahogany pole firescreens

These oval silk embroidered firescreens, depicting two young women holding sheet music, were possibly embroidered by Mrs Soane. They appear to be those visible in the 1825 view of the South drawing room in their original pole screens, however in the late 19th century they were discovered unframed in a drawer. The minutes from the Trustees meeting of 9 January 1893 directed them to be 'suitably framed and glazed'. Later, they were reinstated in their original position in new recreations of the pole screens.



Although there is no evidence that Mrs Soane was a keen embroiderer, she did enjoy dressmaking and there are many references in her letters and diaries to gowns or dresses which she made for herself. She probably gained inspiration from studying numerous fashion plates published at the time. Paper patterns were generally unavailable at the beginning of the 19th century, and the usual method was to unpick an existing garment as a pattern, tracing it onto thin paper pieces or onto the lining fabric of a new garment. There are also references to Mrs Soane making clothing for her sons, including shirts for George and a dressing gown for John.