

# Portraits and Personalities

SIR JOHN  
SOANE'S  
MUSEUM

## A TRAIL THROUGH SIR JOHN SOANE'S MUSEUM

'This is, emphatically, the Age of Personality!' exclaimed Soane's contemporary, the poet Samuel Taylor Coleridge. This trail highlights some of the varied personalities represented in Soane's collection, giving an insight into his family life, his circle of friends, his professional connections and the people he admired.

• *The trail begins in the Library-Dining Room*  
*Above the chimney-piece in the Dining Room*

### 1. Portrait of the Architect



This portrait of Soane by the distinguished portrait painter Sir Thomas Lawrence (1769-1830), President of the Royal Academy, was completed in February 1829 and exhibited at the annual exhibition at the Royal Academy the same year. The richly-ornamented gilt frame is by George Morant and Sons of New Bond Street.

The seventy-six year old Soane is portrayed wearing a brown curly wig and clothes that were, by this date, somewhat old-fashioned. As George Wightwick commented, in a lengthy and illuminating description of Soane's appearance: 'The idea of John Soane in a pair of loose trowsers and a short broad-tailed jacket, after the fashion of these latter times, occurs to me as a more ludicrous than Liston's Romeo'.

Wightwick goes on to say that 'Sir T. Lawrence's portrait of him ... is extremely like; but the facial breadth, though in a certain light it may be warrant, was decidedly flattering in respect to what was its general seeming'. The truth of this observation can be borne out by comparing the Lawrence portrait with one in the Picture room by John Jackson painted at almost the same time, in which Soane is looking more his true age.

Soane hung this picture, by the current President of the Academy, opposite one by Sir Joshua Reynolds, the Academy's first President from 1768-92, who had presented the young Soane with the Gold Medal for Architecture in 1776, at the start of his career.

The mirror surrounding both pictures makes them seem to float in space and the reflections link each closely to the other as they are viewed by those entering the room.

*Look at the pedestal to your right, beneath the 'canopy' that divides the Library and Dining Room: you will find 2. to the right of the glass case, the lower of the two busts (the upper one is of the Emperor Napoleon)*

### 2. Bust of an executed forger

The execution of Dr. Dodd for forgery was the talk of London in the spring and early summer of 1777, when Soane was 23. William Dodd (1729-1777) was a man of letters best known for editing *The Beauties of Shakespeare*, an anthology of quotations first published in 1752. He later became a clergyman, known as a supporter of charities such as the Magdalen Hospital for Penitent Prostitutes. A popular preacher whose fashionable dress earned him the nickname 'the Macaroni Parson', Dodd's pursuit of advancement inevitably led him into debt. In February 1777 he sought to satisfy his creditors by discounting a forged bill of exchange for £4,200, allegedly drawn by his former pupil the Earl of Chesterfield, but was arrested four days later and convicted of capital forgery.



Dodd was sentenced to death and hanged at Tyburn on 27 June 1777 despite a popular campaign to obtain mercy for 'the unfortunate divine' including a number of petitions and the support of Dr Johnson, who wrote a number of speeches and prayers published under Dodd's name. Soane must have been impressed by this news story in the year prior to his grand tour, because nearly half a century later in 1825 he purchased this small bust in bronze. A great admirer of Shakespeare, Soane also owned at least two editions of Dodd's most successful work.

### 3. A family friend and artistic advisor

Drawn about 1817, this exquisite pencil portrait by the sculptor John Flaxman (1755-1826) is of his wife Nancy's sister, Maria Denman. The Soanes and Flaxmans were close friends for many years and Maria was often with them, visiting John and Eliza at their country house, Pitzhanger Manor, or sharing a seaside holiday with her sister and Eliza in Margate.

After Flaxman's death in 1826, Soane stayed in close touch with his sister-in-law and almost immediately began acquiring pieces of the sculptor's work for his collection, Maria helping him to decide on their selection and arrangement. She continued to send items for his collection right up to the time of Soane's death (see no. 14).



On her own death in 1861 Maria bequeathed the remainder of the sculpture from Flaxman's studio to University College London where it can be seen today in their Flaxman Gallery.

• *Proceed through the Study, through the door to the left of the Lawrence portrait, and enter Soane's Dressing Room*

*Turn to see on the south wall, above the doorway between the Study and this room*

### 4. A flirtatious lady

Soane seems to have first met the young Eleanora (Nora) Brickenden while staying with his old friend Richard Holland in Devon in 1811. As Gillian Darley writes, 'Soane, always susceptible to flattery and attention from women, was superficially ensnared by the impressionable vicar's daughter from Hereford'. In the summer of 1813 she was in London and seen in Soane's company. Eliza, Soane's wife, away in the country but tipped off by a friend, wrote to her husband, 'I really



think that there is much more fuss made about Miss B than she deserves. For in my opinion any woman turned thirty that affects to be romantic and professes platonic love, 'tis only a cloak for intrigue'. Eliza broke off her friendship with the artist of this portrait, Clara Maria Pope (c.1767-1838) considering her to be disloyal for painting it.

Eleanora eventually married a clergyman by the name of the Revd. Mr. (later Archdeacon) Davies and went to live in Brecon, from where she continued a correspondence with Soane until the end of his life.

• **Walk through to the back of the Museum and turn right into the Picture Room**

On the west side of the Picture Room, over the doorway

## 5. A Posthumous Patron

Presiding over the Picture Room is Sir William Beechey's portrait of Sir Francis Bourgeois (1756-1811). Today Bourgeois is chiefly remembered as the founder of Dulwich Picture Gallery, but in his own day he was known as a picture dealer, Royal Academician and a leading landscape painter. Bourgeois and Soane were close friends and Soane's notebooks first record Bourgeois's visits to Soane's house Pitzhanger Manor in Ealing, in 1803. Later that year, Bourgeois, Soane and Beechey took the same side in a major dispute at the Royal Academy concerning the presidency of Benjamin West.

At his death from a riding accident, Bourgeois left a collection of over 350 paintings and a large endowment to build a new gallery at Dulwich College, recommending Soane as its architect from his deathbed. Soane executed the commission on a shoestring, for no fee, creating the first custom-built public picture gallery in Britain, and the hanging of this portrait, overlooking Soane's own Picture Room, may be a deliberate homage. Dulwich remains, to this day, an exemplar for the design of picture galleries across the world. Bourgeois's reputation as an artist did not last, but three of his paintings can be seen in the Museum, including 'A Hen defending her chickens from the cat', which hangs opposite his portrait, at the top of the wall above the fireplace.

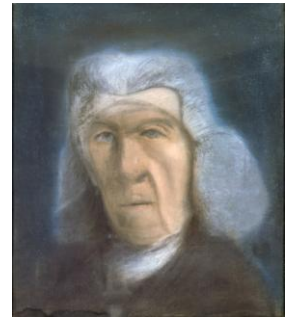


Behind the South planes on the upper left of the Recess: please note this item is only visible for limited periods when the planes are open

## 6. The curious doctor

This peculiar pastel portrait, painted by the satirist and poet Dr John Wolcot (alias Peter Pindar) depicts the celebrated personality and notable eccentric Dr. Messenger Monsey (1693-1788). After successfully treating the Earl of Godolphin, Monsey was manoeuvred by his grateful patient into the position of Physician at the Royal Hospital Chelsea, a post which he held from 1742 until his death

(at 94) in 1788. Monsey was a great wit and was popular in political and literary circles of the time. He counted among his friends Sir Robert Walpole, Elizabeth Montagu and, for a time, David Garrick. In his will he famously bequeathed an old velvet coat to one friend whilst the buttons went to another. The artist, John Wolcot (1738-1819), was a Truro doctor whose comic verse, published under the pseudonym 'Peter Pindar', poking fun at the foibles of the royal family and the court became well known in the 1780s.



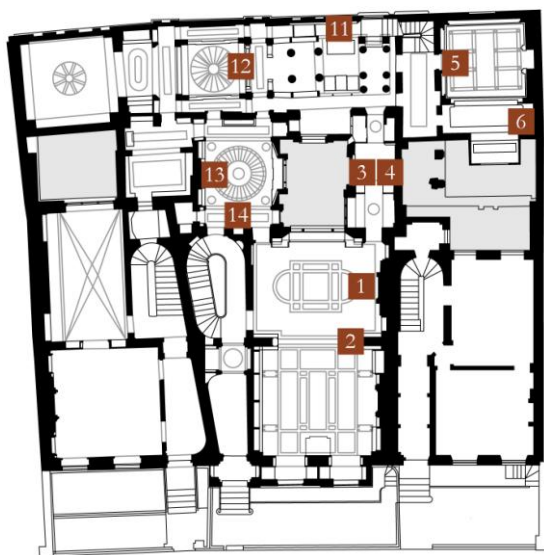
After his appointment as Clerk of Works at Chelsea Hospital in 1807 John Soane would no doubt have heard recollections of the curious Dr. Monsey. This portrait was given to Soane in 1832 by John Taylor, Editor of The Sun newspaper.

• **Leave the Picture Room and walk down the stairs on your right. At the foot of the stairs walk to the end of the passage and turn left into the Monk's Parlour**

West side of the Monk's Parlour standing on top of the plan chest in front of the lantern model

## 7. A lonely Monk

This 18th-century Italian carved black wood figure of a monk with a rosary stood here in Soane's day and was described by him as a portrait of 'Padre Giovanni' – the imaginary medieval occupant of this 'Monk's Parlour'. Of course the name 'Padre Giovanni' is a play on Soane's own name, meaning 'Father John' and



GROUND FLOOR



BASEMENT





so the statue adds to the humour of this intriguing mock-Gothic interior. Soane's friends seem to have enjoyed his identification of himself with his fictional hermit – Nancy Flaxman even sent him a set of rosary beads as a gift, in a small wooden box with an inscription to 'Padre Giovanni'.

• **Exit the Monk's Parlour and walk straight ahead along the passage, turning left into the Basement Ante Room**

*You will see an arrangement of busts on the centre table*

## 8. Characters ancient and modern



This careful arrangement of busts seems to be Soane's tribute to a small group of famous men of his own day and suggesting that they bear comparison with those of the Antique Roman world. In the back row, left – right, are a Roman marble bust, possibly of the Emperor

Augustus, (63BC – 14AD); a plaster bust by John Gibson (1790-1866) of the actor John Philip Kemble (1757-1823) and a Neo-classical (18th century) marble bust of a youth in the Early Imperial Roman style (it is impossible to know whether this is a portrait of an unknown man in Roman style or an imitation of an ancient head). Kemble, the brother of the celebrated actress Sarah Siddons, was famous for his portrayal of 'Coriolanus', the 'noble Roman' of Shakespeare's play and his placing here, flanked by imperial Romans, reminds viewers of this.

In the centre of the front row is a bust by the French sculptor Louis Parfait Merlieux (1796-1855) of Baron Cuvier (1769-1832), which is flanked by two plaster casts of the heads of the sons of Laocoon in the famous Antique statue now in the Vatican Museum. Georges Cuvier was a French naturalist and zoologist who was a scientific advisor to Napoleon – he urged the Emperor to create public museums. He played a leading role in establishing the scientific disciplines of comparative anatomy and paleontology by comparing living animals and fossils. He was the first to show that extinction was a fact and proposed that this was due to geological 'catastrophes'. The two heads of Laocoon's sons represent the expression of extreme emotion, for which this ancient statue group was famous. It may be deliberately ironic that they are close to Kemble, who was famous for just the opposite – a grave and noble demeanour – when on stage.

• **Continue along the basement South Passage, turn right at the end and then enter the Sepulchral Chamber where the great alabaster sarcophagus of Pharaoh Seti I rests at the heart of the Museum.**

*No. 9 is the right-hand of the two busts under the north arch (in front of the wooden mummy case lying horizontally beneath the arch)*

## 9. A cult hero

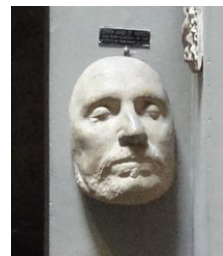
This fine Roman marble bust is a portrait of Polydeukes, the 'favourite' of the notorious



Herodes Atticus. He is shown wearing a Greek-style *himation* rather than a Roman toga, a demonstration of how much Greek culture influenced the Roman world. Tiberius Claudius Herodes Atticus (101-177 AD) was born a Roman citizen in Greece but became a somewhat notorious political figure in Rome. He was Consul in 143 AD and a personal friend of the Emperors Hadrian and Antonius Pius. Herodes had numerous homosexual affairs, of which the most famous was the last one, with the adolescent Polydeukes, one of his students. When Polydeukes died in Athens in around 173-174 AD, Herodes was inconsolable, inaugurating a personality cult of his beloved, commissioning games and inscriptions in his memory, erecting statues and memorials to him and proclaiming the boy a "hero". In doing this, he was imitating the Emperor Hadrian who had posthumously proclaimed his lover, Antinous, a god.

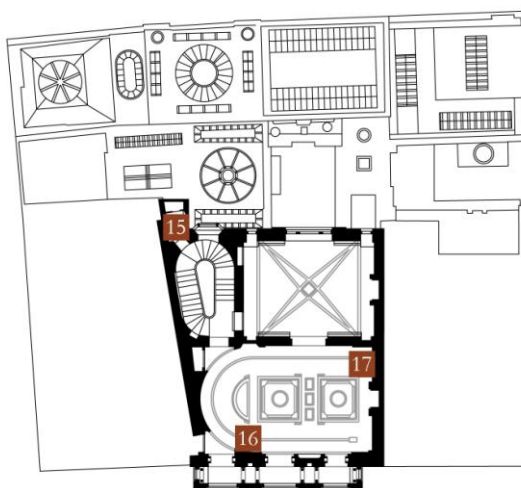
*In the north-west corner of the Sepulchral Chamber hanging on the wall, low down*

## 10. Death mask



This death mask, almost certainly of Oliver Cromwell, was believed by Soane to be that of the naval mutineer Richard Parker (1767-97). In his 1836 Description of his house and Museum he remarks on the '... striking resemblance ... of Parker's appearance to that of [Oliver] Cromwell'. The death mask is not mentioned in Soane's earlier 1832 Description, suggesting that he acquired it between the two publication dates.

Parker, who hailed from Exeter, was a seaman. Constantly in debt, he married the daughter of a Scottish farmer. Having exhausted her money he escaped prison by re-enlisting in the navy. There he played a leading role in the Mutiny on the Nore of 1797, for which he earned the sarcastic soubriquet 'Admiral Parker'. Despite at one point blockading the Thames, the mutiny failed. Parker was captured, tried and hanged from the yard-arm of his ship, The Sandwich, on 30 June 1797 while his wife watched from a small boat nearby. Parker's body was initially buried at



FIRST FLOOR

Sheerness but then secretly retrieved by his wife and taken to London where it was exhibited in the Hoop and Horseshoe tavern near Tower Hill. There was much public interest and a death mask was probably made by William Clift, former assistant to the famous surgeon and collector John Hunter, at that time. Magistrates, fearing public unrest, ordered Parker's body to be buried and it was reinterred at Whitechapel in July 1797. The death mask remained in Clift's possession and eventually entered the collection of the Hunterian Museum—on the other side of Lincoln's Inn Fields at the Royal College of Surgeons, in the late 1940s, where it remains today.

Soane's acquisition of the death mask reflects his interest in newsworthy events of his own lifetime, although at almost four decades distance. However, in this case he was duped by the seller of the death mask – his is very different to the genuine death mask of Parker and by comparison with other examples is clearly that of the Lord Protector of England who died in 1658. It is a curious thing that such a famous death mask, which would presumably have appealed to Soane in its own right, should have been sold to him with such a convoluted fake history attached to it!

• **Retrace your steps, returning to the Ground floor the way you came via the staircase near the Monk's Parlour. At the top of the stairs turn right into the Colonnade.**

You will see no. 10 on the north wall, to your right

## 11. A tragic mask



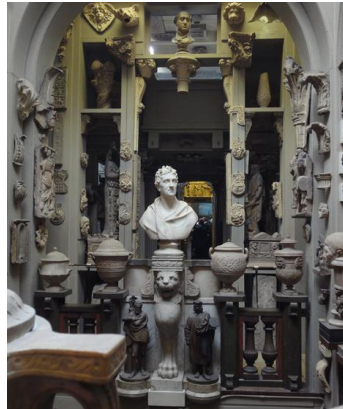
This marble 'tragic' mask was originally part of a Roman fountain of the first century AD. The jet or stream of water from a spring or aqueduct would have flowed through the mouth into a decorative basin below. Such fountains were both for use and ornament: poorer Romans would have had to procure all their water from public fountains. Tragic and comic masks were the symbol of ancient Greek theatre, in which the actors (all men) wore colourful masks made of shaped and stiffened linen, with an open mouth and eye holes to speak and see through. The most famous example of a similar fountain mask is the *Bocca della verita*, ('the mouth of truth'), now in the church of Santa Maria in Cosmedin in Rome, which is said to be a lie detector. Legend has it that if anyone told a lie with his or her hand in the mouth of the mask, it would be bitten off.

• **Now proceed along the Colonnade straight ahead to the Dome Area**

On the east balustrade, facing the large statue of Apollo

## 12. A union of architecture, painting and sculpture

These portrait busts are at the very heart of the Museum. In the middle Sir John Soane presides over the scene he has created, in the form of a marble bust by his friend the sculptor Sir Francis Chantrey (1782-1841). He began sitting for it in 1827, when Chantrey asked him to come for a sitting and "to bring your head with you". It was finished in 1829 and Chantrey maintained "that as a work of art I have never produced a better", commenting that he was not sure whether it was more like John Soane or Julius Caesar! Above, 'affording a bird's-eye view of part of the Museum', is a bust of the artist Sir Thomas Lawrence, who painted the portrait of Soane (no. 1) and below are statuettes by John Flaxman of Michelangelo and Raphael (models for figures Flaxman made for Lawrence in about 1826).



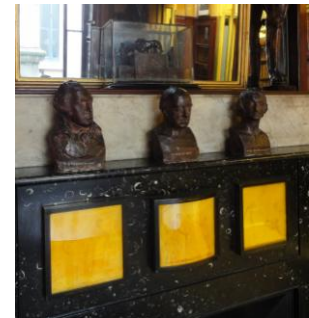
Soane believed that students of architecture must also study painting and sculpture in order to achieve greatness and he sought to inspire his students through the union of the arts he created in his museum (the first published guidebook was called *The Union of Architecture, Sculpture and Painting*). This arrangement of busts and statuettes symbolises this union, associating Soane and his contemporaries in all three arts with the most celebrated figures of the Renaissance. It also celebrates the Royal Academy, where Soane and Flaxman were Professors and Lawrence, at the apex of this arrangement, a distinguished President as well as linking the work of Chantrey and Flaxman not just each with the other but with the Renaissance and Antique sources of their inspiration that surround them in the form of Soane's casts and marbles.

Soane's Royal Academy friends might have remembered, when they looked at these busts and statuettes, that the Academy's first and most famous President, Sir Joshua Reynolds, giving his last Discourse at the Royal Academy, had wanted his last public word to be the name of 'Michelangelo' – the greatest of all creative artists. Soane is certainly placing himself in illustrious company.

• **Leave the Dome Area by the south doorway close to the Apollo and turn left to enter the Breakfast Room**

On the black marble mantelpiece

## 13. Three wise men

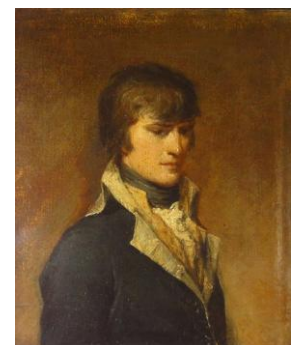


The three small terracotta busts on the mantelpiece are by the sculptor John Flaxman (1753-1826), Professor of Sculpture at the Royal Academy from 1810 to his death. They represent (from left to right), the poet and writer William Hayley (1745-1820); John Flaxman senior (1726-95) the sculptor's father and Henry Howard, RA (1769-1820) the painter. They were given to Soane in 1836 as part of a large group of Flaxman sculptures presented by Flaxman's sister-in-law Maria Denman (see no. 4) and placed in the Museum during the last months of the architect's life. Hayley was a literary celebrity of his age. His poetical essay *Triumphs of Temper* (1781) went to 14 editions and in 1790 he refused the post of Poet Laureate. Hayley had been a pupil of John Flaxman and later addressed his *Essay on Sculpture* (1800) to him. This little model is perhaps related to the marble bust made by Flaxman (together with a bust of the painter George Romney) for Hayley's house at Earham, Sussex, c.1781.

Henry Howard was a friend both of Flaxman and Soane. In the 1830s Soane commissioned Howard to paint the ceilings in the Library-Dining Room in his Museum, at about the time that Howard was appointed Professor of Painting at the Royal Academy (1833). His bust, significantly, looks towards one of his own works, *The Contention of Oberon and Titania* on the south wall of this room.

Look to the left of the clock

## 14. A fallen hero



Soane was a great admirer of Napoleon, as were many of his contemporaries, and on this wall is a group of Napoleon exhibits. To the



left of the clock, Napoleon is depicted at the age of twenty-eight in a small portrait painted by the otherwise unknown Italian artist Francesco Cossia at Verona in 1797. Soane believed it to have been the earliest portrait of Napoleon in existence, although it is now known that at least three portraits predated it. It was, however, the first portrait of Napoleon to be seen in England. Commissioned by Soane's friend, the fashionable London artist Maria Cosway, it entered Soane's collection some time in the late 1820s.



The portrait on the right is a miniature of the Emperor by Jean-Baptiste Isabey, painted on the island of Elba in 1814 when he was in exile. It was originally lent to Soane by Lady Beechey, who noted that 'no one, I am sure, will more highly prize it'.

The portraits are shown in Soane's original arrangement, which deliberately contrasts the image of the youthful and idealistic hero, lost in noble thought, with that of the corpulent self-proclaimed Emperor and fallen tyrant.

Despite the Emperor's long wars with England and his final defeat and exile, his fascination for Soane did not diminish. He acquired portraits, busts, a pistol, medals and books from the imperial library. In the year following Napoleon's death he turned a gold ring, bought some years earlier, perhaps for Mrs Soane, into a mourning ring in which he placed a lock of Napoleon's hair, presented to him by Betsy Balcombe who had befriended the Emperor on the Island of St. Helena. The ring is inscribed in French *Cette boucle de cheveux de Napoleon Buonaparte a été présentée à John Soane Ecuyer [Esquire] par Mademoiselle Eliza Balcombe and Prier Pour Moi* ['Pray for me'].

**Leave the room by the door to the staircase and begin to climb the stairs to the first floor**

*Between the ground and first floors you will find the Shakespeare Recess, a niche off the Staircase*

## 15. A Shrine to the Bard

Soane left school at 13 so his tastes in literature were those of an autodidact. The classic British triumvirate of Shakespeare, Milton and Defoe were his chosen authors, with Shakespeare as his favourite.

This plaster cast, taken in 1814 from the bust above Shakespeare's tomb in the church at Stratford-upon-Avon was made by George Bullock (1778-1818) at the behest of Soane's friend the antiquarian John Britton. Bullock, a sculptor turned furniture designer and



entrepreneur, for a time ran an office in Liverpool with Joseph Michael Gandy, an architectural draughtsman who worked for Soane for over 30 years. It was in their office that John Soane junior worked for a brief period.

Bullock and Britton believed the bust to be a good likeness of the bard, Bullock perceiving "evident signs of its being taken from a cast". Their interest in Shakespeare's physiognomy led them to invite the pioneer phrenologist, Dr J.C. Spurzheim, to view the plaster cast over breakfast.

Soane's love of Shakespeare led him to purchase two other busts, twenty paintings of Shakespearean subjects and copies of all four folios of Shakespeare's published works. In addition he created this Shakespeare Recess off the staircase as a shrine to his favourite author.

**Continue up the stairs and enter the South Drawing Room**

*Between the two right-hand openings into the loggia ahead of you as you enter*

## 16. Portrait of Mrs Soane



Eliza Smith, whom Soane married in 1784, was the niece and heiress of a wealthy London builder, George Wyatt. Vivacious and kind with a great capacity for friendship, Eliza died suddenly in November 1815 leaving Soane heartbroken.

This portrait by John Flaxman the sculptor, who was a great friend of the family, was sketched one evening after dinner in 1810 as John and Eliza entertained their guests in the Drawing Room in No. 12 Lincoln's Inn Fields where they were then living.

Many years later, wanting to find a present to

give Soane in celebration of his recent award of a knighthood by William IV, J.M.W. Turner, another close family friend, found the portrait in a sale of the effects of the artist John Jackson (who had evidently borrowed it as a model for his posthumous portrait of Mrs. Soane which hangs in the Picture Room). Soane hung his present in this position in the South Drawing Room, adding beneath it the touching inscription which also appears on Eliza's grave and shows just how much he missed her ('Dear friend, I can no longer hear your voice – teach me what I must do to fulfil your wishes').

*On the east wall to the left of the fireplace*

## 17. Soane's 'cruel and flinty-hearted sons'

This portrait of Soane's two sons by William Owen (1769-1825) was exhibited at the Royal Academy in 1805, together with a portrait of Soane himself, also by Owen, which hangs to the right of the fireplace.

John (on the right), who was eighteen when this was painted, had gone up to Trinity College, Cambridge, the previous autumn and is shown wearing his university gown and holding his mortar board. He was already exhibiting symptoms of the tuberculosis that was to lead to his early death at the age of thirty-eight in 1823, and although he showed some talent for architecture and spent a period as a pupil in the office of Joseph Michael Gandy, he lacked the physical robustness and perhaps also the application to succeed in the profession.

George, who was fifteen at the time of the portrait, joined his elder brother at Cambridge, where began his habit of incurring heavy debts which became the scourge of his later life, and which, Soane believed, led to his mother's early death in 1815 along with his authorship of anonymous articles criticising his father's architecture which she described as her 'death blow'. George's behaviour led to a permanent estrangement from his father and to his being cut out of his father's will. He tried but failed to prevent the passing of the Soane Museum Act in 1833. 'Smitten with a passion for dramatic writing', as Soane described him, George enjoyed some measure of critical if not financial success, with some eighteen published works to his name when he died, aged seventy-one, in 1860.



*Trail originally produced for Museums and Galleries Month 2007 with contributions by Stephen Astley, Stephanie Coane, Helen Dorey, William Palin and Sue Palmer. It was revised 2010 by Joni Rendon and designed by John Bridges*