

# Bibliomania; or Book Madness

SIR JOHN  
SOANE'S  
MUSEUM

## A TRAIL HIGHLIGHTING THE LITERARY CONNECTIONS IN SOANE'S COLLECTIONS

*'A nice little easy museum in a private house, and all sorts of pretty things to see. My dear love, trust your old Teresa. Come to Soane!'* - Heart and Science, Wilkie Collins, 1883

*'...the place gives one the impression of a sort of Saturday afternoon of one's youth - a long, rummaging visit, under indulgent care, to some eccentric and rather alarming old person.'* - A London Life, Henry James, 1888

A lifelong bibliophile, John Soane might have delighted in the fact that his Museum went on to have a lively second life on the printed page, providing an atmospheric backdrop for an illicit tryst in a Henry James novella and serving as the home of a murdered MP in a PD James mystery. Indeed, the story of Soane's own life - from his humble beginnings as a bricklayer's son to his meteoric rise to fame as one of the Regency era's premier architects - is no less fascinating than any work of fiction, and it was a trajectory enabled in part by Soane's love of books and learning.

As Soane's biographer Gillian Darley writes, 'His passion for the printed page dated from his early years at school...From those days on, he would always find pleasure in books: when he travelled he made straight for the bookshops, when he felt unhappy, he rearranged his shelves or bought more volumes. He borrowed books and lent them to his friends. He encouraged his pupils and assistants to share his enthusiasm; he enjoyed quotations and classical literary references. He liked nothing better than to design a library for a favourite client. Even when his eyesight was failing, he ensured that someone was available to read to him.'

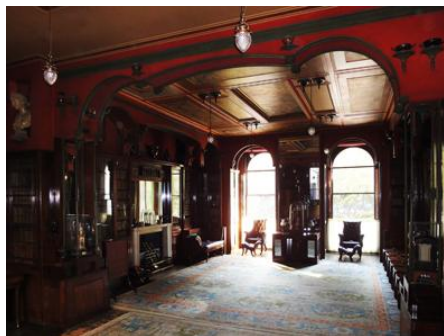
Although Soane's architectural collections have always been the principal strength of the Museum, his library of nearly 7,000 books is equally exceptional, notes Nicholas Savage, Librarian of the Royal Academy of Art. 'First, like his career, [his library] was entirely of his own making. Secondly, he appears with very few exceptions to have kept every book, pamphlet and scrap of printed paper even that came into his possession; and thirdly, most amazing of all, this whole assemblage has survived intact—an extremely rare occurrence for any private library and quite unique in the case of an architect.'

Most of Soane's books can be viewed in the bookcases throughout the house, although some are housed in No. 14 Lincoln's Inn Fields in the Museum's research library (open by appointment.) Their arrangement, however, is not entirely as Soane had them: during the 1920s they were separated into 'Architectural' and 'General Books' and re-arranged to make access for students easier.

This trail highlights the literary aspects of Soane's collection and its setting.

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

*'It was difficult to imagine the room being used for dining, or indeed, for any purpose other than the admiring contemplation of the architect's romantic obsession with spatial surprise.'*—Adam Dalgliesh, *A Taste for Death* (P.D. James, 1986)



In this elegant space, the finest and largest of his house, Soane entertained his guests at dinner amidst a myriad of mirrors multiplying row upon row of gilt spines glinting in the candle-light. From the two window recesses at the south end of the room, busts of Homer, Shakespeare, Elizabethan dramatist Ben Jonson and historian William Camden (who

wrote the first topographical survey of Great Britain and Ireland) kept a watchful eye over the proceedings.

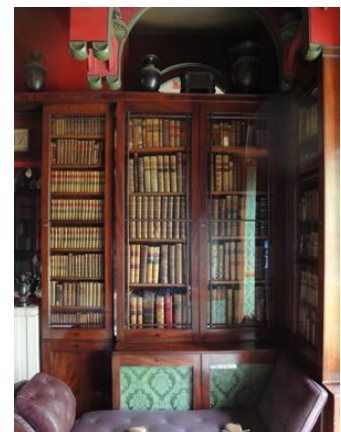


According to Nicholas Savage, Soane's placing of his library at the social centre of his house had nothing whatever to do with any practical use (dining rooms are far from ideal places to handle books) and everything to do with the fact that it was the matrix from which he derived the entire arrangement of his whole home as a museum. As the first room that visitors would see upon entering the house, the library played a central role in what Soane termed the 'union of the arts': the close connection between literature, painting, sculpture and architecture.

### Bookcases to the right-hand side of the fireplace

#### 1. A fledgling bibliophile

During Soane's Grand Tour of Italy in 1778-1779, a friend he had met during his travels sent him a six volume edition of Laurence Sterne's *Tristram Shandy*. Soane often discussed books with his friends and the novels of his early years--the works of Sterne, Richardson, Smollett in English and those of Le Sage and Rousseau in French were to remain his favourites throughout life. Some of these



books can be found in octavo volumes in the bookcases to the right of the fireplace. Soane's reading tastes, although somewhat old-fashioned, conformed to the literary tastes of his generation. A notable exception was his distaste for Gothic novels and the 'romantic' works of Regency writers like Jane Austen. He once told his son John, 'I was never fond of romances...such works I was early taught to look upon as trash for silly girls.' There are hardly any in the collection other than Horace Walpole's celebrated *Castle of Otranto* (1764) and Matthew Lewis' *The Monk* (1796). Others seem to be here because they are part of a set of an author's collected works (for example, Tobias Smollett), because they are in French (probably acquired for language practice) or because they belonged to Mrs Soane.

## 2. An enlightened thinker



Soane owned three editions of *The Complete Works of Montesquieu* and he re-read Jean-Jacques Rousseau's *Confessions* many times throughout his life. Soane's own solitary and self-tortured nature seems to have made him feel particularly close to Rousseau (1712-78). One of the museum's early curators, Arthur

Bolton, notes, "In the state of profound gloom into which Soane was cast by his wife's death on 23 November 1815, he found consolation in the emotional outpourings of the persecuted Rousseau. What Soane found in his *Confessions* was a desperate appeal for sympathy from someone who, like himself, believed that he had been persecuted and misunderstood through a difficult life." On the fly leaf of one of his three copies of the book (the 1783 edition), Soane made a rapid ink sketch of Rousseau's tomb at Ermenonville, north-east of Paris, which he had, disappointingly, been unable to visit on trips to Paris in 1814 and 1819. This particular copy is in the bookcase to the left of the fireplace in the Library, bookcase 19 [today the two sections are numbered GL25 and GL26] which is where it is recorded in 1831, 6 years before Soane's death – a favourite book to be pulled out and read by the fireside sitting in one of his two comfortable armchairs perhaps.

## 3. A sage alter-ego

Alain-René Le Sage's novel *Gil Blas* (*L'Histoire de Gil Blas de Santillane*), published in French in 12 parts between 1715 and 1735, was one of Soane's favourite books from his earliest days. He owned ten editions and re-read it countless times over the years, evidently identifying keenly with the hero – a self-made man who is the victim of plots and misery but who rises to the top. Soane's pupil and amanuensis, George Wightwick, recalled visiting him in Bath in 1826-27 and spending evenings beside the fireplace 'reading aloud from a French edition of *Gil Blas* while Soane sat behind the firescreen ... it was the more curious to hear him, every now and then, exclaim, in a tone of admiring and compassionate interest "P-o-o-r Gil!". Wightwick recalled that '*Gil Blas* gave place to a free communication on the subject of John Soane and his family sorrow....and he would bring tears to my eyes with the narration of the sufferings of his wife and himself under the conduct of his sons.' (see 37. below)

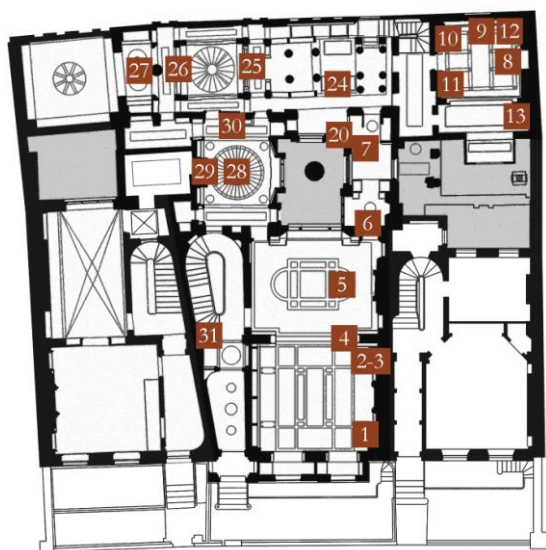
*Look at the pedestal beneath the canopy that divides the room (on the east, fireplace, side of the room): find the small bust to the lower right of the vase in the glass case*

## 4. An executed forger

The execution of Dr Dodd for forgery was the talk of London in the spring and early summer of 1777. William Dodd (1729-77) 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, whose fashionable attire earned him the nickname 'the Macaroni Parson'. Dodd's pursuit of advancement inevitably led him into debt and in February 1777, he sought



to satisfy his creditors by discounting a forged bill for £4,200. He 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 bronze bust. A great admirer of Shakespeare, Soane also owned at least two editions of Dodd's most successful work.



GROUND FLOOR



BASEMENT



## Dining room ceiling

### 5. 'Pandora, 'Whom the gods endowed with all their gifts'

The ceiling of the Library and Dining Room is decorated with a series of paintings by Henry Howard, RA (1769-1847). They were commissioned in 1834 and completed only shortly before Soane died. The panels over the dining room table were inspired by a scene from John Milton's epic poem *Paradise Lost* referring to the story of Pandora and her famous vase, from which came all the cares and miseries of life. The quotation attached to the painting's title comes from Book IV, Line 714, in which the un-fallen Eve is considered 'more lovely' than her mythological counterpart, Pandora, 'whom the Gods Endowed with all their gifts'. Soane may have chosen the theme as a mirror to the story of his life, which he felt had been full of evils and problems, and he referred to the Pandora myth in two of his earlier writings. He also owned a first edition of *Paradise Lost*.

It is possible that the female figure of 'Night' in the second panel from the fireplace, draped in a black veil, is a portrait of Mrs Soane, whose death in November 1815 was such a dreadful blow to Soane. A model for her tomb, which he designed in 1816 and in which he was himself buried in 1837, stands as a *memento mori*, (reminder of mortality) just a few feet away, beneath the canopy dividing the Dining Room from the Library.



The *Paradise Lost* reference was continued by Soane into the niche at the foot of the main

stairs, just outside the door to this room, in which he placed, in the mid-1830s Flaxman's plaster model for *The Archangel Michael overcoming Satan*. This begins a series of literary references which continue up the main stairs and lead the visitor to ascend symbolically from the genius of Milton to the glory of Shakespeare. (See no. 31 below)

### • Leave the Library- Dining Room by the door to the right and enter the Study

Above the doorway through which you entered

### 6. Plaster cast of 'The Apotheosis of Homer'



Soane's collection contains two casts of 'The Apotheosis of Homer', taken from the original marble in Palazzo Colonna, Rome, which was purchased by the British Museum in 1819. The subject is one which is often depicted in classical and neo-classical art, showing the ancient Greek poet Homer's *sapotheosis*, or elevation to divine status. Soane attached great importance to poetry which he saw as the sister of architecture and painting. His library includes several copies of Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey* and a set of the engravings illustrating Homer by his good friend John Flaxman and three busts of Homer are on display in the Museum (in the Library, the South Drawing Room loggia and the Ante Room). His poetic tastes were Augustan rather than Romantic: it was Homer, Ovid, Horace, Virgil and Ovid who captured his imagination rather than the

poets of his day such as Keats, Wordsworth, and Byron. His library contains no works by the first two and of Byron's works only *Childe Harold*, *Don Juan* (Cantos 1-5 only) and 3 volumes of shorter works. He knew Samuel Taylor Coleridge, who attended one of the evening parties held to celebrate Soane's acquisition of the Seti I sarcophagus in March 1825, but of his works there is only the short poem *The Devil's Walk* (13 stanzas by Coleridge but then extended by Robert Southey and published under a pseudonym in 1830) in his library.

### 7. Mini-libraries

Soane probably worked in this small Study and used the adjacent Dressing Room to wash and prepare to greet visitors. On his desk is a book carrier, which he could use to transport small volumes with him around the house. The adjacent cupboards, currently used to house small objects from his collection, were bookcases containing his choicest architectural books.



A further bookcase was incorporated into the Dressing Room – beneath the desk. As you explore Soane's house you will notice bookcases in almost every interior, indicating perhaps not just ingenuity in accommodating a large library in an already crowded town house but also the fact that Soane had poor sight and may have needed to move around the house to ensure that he was always reading in the best possible light.

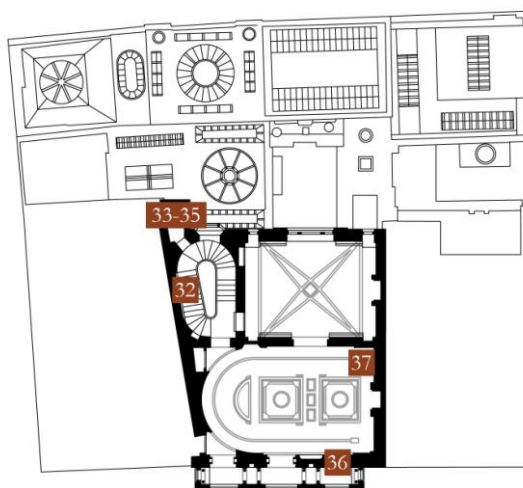
### • Walk through to the back of the Museum and turn right into the Picture Room

Opposite the doorway through which you entered, high up above the fireplace

### 8. 'Milton composing Paradise Lost'



The seventeenth-century poet John Milton was blind by the time he wrote his famous epic poem, and he composed *Paradise Lost* by committing 20-line segments to memory each night, dictating them each morning to family



FIRST FLOOR

members or paid amanuenses. This watercolour by Richard Westall RA was exhibited at the Royal Academy in 1802 and later in 1814 at Westall's own exhibition, by which point it had been acquired by John Soane. In her poetic account of the Museum, which Soane included in his own *Description* published in 1835, his friend the novelist Barbara Hofland noted the painting's exceptional quality: 'never had that excellent Artist a more happy conception of poetic dignity or filial tenderness, for all that the eye, the mind, or the heart requires in a subject of such touching interest.'

## 9. More bookcases...



Running around the room are a series of beautifully made very shallow bookcases with mahogany doors inlaid with ebony and elaborate brass columns between them. These were made in 1824 by John Robins. In Soane's day there was a small recess in the centre of the run of bookcases on the north wall in which a small table was stowed, which could be pulled out when needed. It seems that this room too could be used as a small library.

### Right of doorway

## 10. 'Richard II landing at Milford Haven'



The artist William Hamilton painted this for Boydell's Shakespeare Gallery, a collection of pictures commissioned and displayed in Pall Mall by the 18th-century engraver and publisher John Boydell in an effort to foster a school of British history painting. The gallery opened in May 1788, and the entire contents were sold and dispersed when it closed in 1805. The painting's subject is drawn from Act III, Scene II of Shakespeare's play *Richard II*. It depicts the king's arrival in Wales from

Ireland, shortly before his surrender to Henry IV in 1399. *Richard II*, written around 1595, is the first play in Shakespeare's second history tetralogy, a series of four plays that chronicles the rise of the house of Lancaster to the British throne. Soane bought this painting from the Christie's sale of the Boydell gallery's contents upon its closure.

### Left of Doorway

## 11. 'The Italian Count, or Ezzeliero, Count of Ravenna musing over the body of Meduna, slain by him for infidelity during his absence in the Holy Land'



This painting by Swiss-born Henry Fuseli, who held various posts at the Royal Academy during Soane's tenure, including, twice, the post of Professor of Painting (two copies of his lectures are in Soane's library) was exhibited at the Academy in 1780. In his *Life* of the painter, John Knowles relates the following anecdote on Fuseli's inspiration for the painting: 'Fuseli frequently invented the subject of his pictures without the aid of the poet or historian, as in his composition of *Ezzeliero*... On one occasion he was much amused by the enquiry of Lord Byron: 'I have been looking in vain, Mr. Fuseli, for some months, in the poets and historians of Italy, for the subject of your picture of *Ezzeliero*: pray where is it to be found?' 'Only in my brain, my Lord,' was the answer: 'for I invented it.'

Fuseli's attempt at a 'Milton Gallery' in the early 1800s was unsuccessful, and Joseph Farington's diary records Fuseli's irritation at Soane's failure to acquire one of his portraits: 'He said that on His sending a Print of the Milton work to Soane, which work He before subscribed to, Soane returned the Print with a note declining to take any more ....' "for this simple reason, That He had more Prints than guineas." ' Fuseli did not think it worth while to make a reply, and feeling slighted, noted that 'this additional instance of Soane's peevish & little mind [was] expressed in a manner which might only have been expected from a Footman.'

### Inside the right-hand plane on the north side of the room

## 12. 'Scene from Shakespeare's The Merchant of Venice'

This painting was exhibited at the Royal Academy in 1828. It depicts a scene from Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice*



featuring Lorenzo and Jessica seated in the garden of Portia's House:

*"How sweet the Moonlight sleeps upon this bank,/Here will we sit and let the sounds of music/creep in our ears—soft stillness of the night/Become the torches of sweet Harmony/Sit Jessica, look how the floor of Heav'n/is thick inlaid with patterns of bright gold"*

Soane commissioned this painting from Danby via Sir Francis Chantrey as a charitable gesture when Danby was in severe financial difficulties—and paid him £152 10s for it. Chantrey wrote to Soane that the first instalment 'came at a most fortunate moment—indeed, I have reason to think it may be the means of keeping him sinking.'

*In the Picture Room Recess (behind two sets of folding planes on the south wall of the Picture Room: you will need to ask the warder to open these for you); Left-hand (east) wall*

## 13. 'Mr Kemble as Coriolanus, Act IV, Scene I'



This painting by Francis Bourgeois may have been exhibited at the RA in 1799. John and Eliza Soane would have seen John Philip Kemble, one of the greatest Shakespearean actors of the day, performing at the Theatre Royal, Drury Lane and the Theatre Royal, Covent Garden. One great pleasure the couple shared was a love of the theatre, attending shows together even before they became engaged in 1784. There are numerous references in both of their diaries about performances they attended, sometimes accompanied by one or both of their sons.

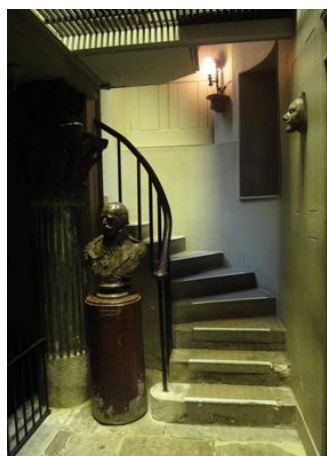
In 1825, Soane acquired Kemble's own copy of the celebrated First Folio of *William Shakespeare's Comedies, Histories & Tragedies*, dating



from 1623. Not only had the volume belonged to the celebrated actor but it had also been owned by James Boswell the younger, co-editor of *The Plays and Poems of Shakespeare* (1821; there is a copy in Soane's Library). Like many collectors before and since, Soane was particularly attracted to copies of books previously owned by famous people. What he prized above all was the way his possession of a book that had belonged to someone in the past that he admired could affirm his present judgement of both the book itself and its former owner. Soane also owned copies of folios 2, 3 and 4 of Shakespeare's works, further demonstration of his enthusiasm for the plays of England's greatest literary genius. He also owned a set of the Steevens edition of *Twenty of the plays of Shakespeare* (1766) which had belonged to another celebrated actor, David Garrick.

- **Leave the Picture Room and descend the stairs on your right to the basement crypt; pause in the passageway at the foot of the stairs**

#### 14. A subterranean catacomb

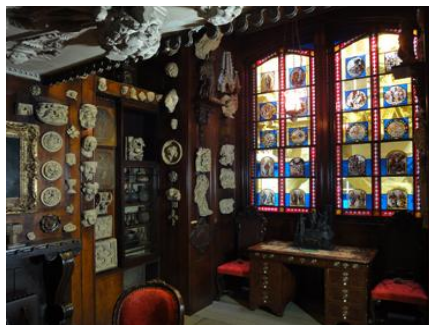


Soane's basement crypt was filled with funerary monuments and is lit from above through grilles and light wells similar to those of the ancient Roman catacombs. Mrs. Hofland noted the change in atmosphere, with the light 'subdued, yet sufficient [to evoke that] sentiment ... proper to the visitants of the dead'. Appropriate character is created by 'that exclusion of light ... so desirable in a scene where we may exclaim with Milton "Hail divinest melancholy"'. As Soane quoted her words in his own *Description* of 1835 we must assume that he found her use of this quotation from Milton's poem *Il Penseroso* (which extolls the poetic inspiration of melancholy) appropriate to describe the atmosphere of his crypt. On the wall at the foot of the stairs, on the left, is a life mask of the famous actress Sarah Siddons, the sister of John Phillip Kemble.

- **Enter the Monk's Parlour which is on your left**

#### 15. 'Parloir of Padre Giovanni'

The Monk's Parlour or, as Soane called it, the 'Parloir of Padre Giovanni' is part of the 'monastic' suite which Soane installed in the basement in the early 1820s, consisting of the



Monk's Cell, the Parlour itself and the Monk's Yard, visible through the Parlour window. With its elaborate ceiling, valuable works of art and chairs cushioned in crimson silk, its 'luxuries do not quite accord with the simplicity and voluntary poverty demanded by conventual life,' it was noted in by Barbara Hofland in 1835, 'but they are far short of the princely luxuries of the Prior of Alcobaca, described with such rich inimitable humour by the author of *Vathek*.' *Vathek* was an immensely popular gothic Orientalist novel written by the eccentric aristocrat William Beckford in 1782.

Like Soane, Beckford was an impassioned collector whose tastes were much influenced by his travels abroad. Five years after *Vathek*'s publication, Soane was commissioned to design a picture gallery for the home of Beckford's father, Alderman William Beckford, Fonthill Splendens in Wiltshire. The gallery would have been the first in a line of top-lit, canopied spaces—Soane's signature—however the scheme was never realized. Mrs Soane later purchased *The Rake's Progress* series from a sale of Alderman Beckford's paintings at Christie's in February 1802; Soane's large Canaletto view of the *Riva degli Schiavoni* in Venice came from another Beckford sale, this time of pictures belonging to the younger William, in 1807.

#### 16. A monastic alter ego

Soane's invention of the fictional 'Padre Giovanni', his monastic medieval alter ego ['Father John'], perhaps served as a parable for his own familial disappointments and his melancholic, brooding temperament, which became more pronounced after the death of his wife in 1815.

Two decades before Soane invented his monastic personage, another monk, the pious Father Ambrosio, was the subject of one of the most popular gothic novels of the period, *The Monk: A Romance*. The immature and salacious tale of Ambrosio's violent downfall, the result of carnal lust for a woman disguised as a monk, was written by Matthew "Monk" Lewis, whom Soane had met at his Pitzhanger estate in 1804. At that time, Soane had probably delighted in showing Lewis, popularizer of the literary gothic craze, his own basement 'monk's dining room', a pre-cursor of the Monk's Parlour here at Lincoln's Inn Fields.

Lewis later became friends with Soane's son George, who much to the architect's great disappointment opted to forego a career in architecture to pursue writing. George went

on to pen a number of rather second-rate gothic novels, which Soane remarked upon disparagingly. For Soane's closest friends, the knowledge that George was pouring out plays and novels in a similar vein to the pastiche medievalism that Soane had set out to satirize in his Monk's Parlour may have been rather unsettling when they were invited to take tea in this parlour.

#### 17. 'Alas Poor Fanny'

Outside the window, in the Monk's Yard, you may contemplate the sham ruins of the 'once noble monastery' of Soane's imaginary monk and the monument to Mrs Soane's lapdog with its epitaph 'Alas poor Fanny'. You might be reminded of the famous lines from Shakespeare's *Hamlet*: 'Alas, poor Yorick! I knew him, Horatio: a fellow of infinite jest, of most excellent fancy.' The seemingly obvious allusion to Shakespeare has led to another possible source of inspiration being overlooked — one that would have been equally familiar to Soane and his contemporaries.



Soane was a great admirer of the novelist Laurence Sterne, acquiring copies of *A Sentimental Journey through France and Italy*, *Sermons*, and Sterne's *Letters* as early as 1778, perhaps to take with him on his grand tour. Whilst in Rome in 1779 a friend sent him Sterne's comic masterpiece *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy* — a novel which had enjoyed immediate success when the first parts appeared in 1759. Soane quoted from *Tristram Shandy* and *A Sentimental Journey* in his lectures and his fondness for Sterne is clear from the annotations in his copies of the books, and from the numbers of copies that he owned. *Tristram Shandy* is known for its lack of conventional form: the story begins with the eponymous hero's conception, but breaks into so many detours and imaginary dialogues with the reader that he is not actually born until book 4, and there are numerous typographical oddities such as the use of dashes of various lengths, missing chapters, a blank page where the reader is invited to draw a character's portrait, and a black page to mark the death of the village parson, Yorick. It contains a famous passage describing the grave where Yorick lies buried 'under a plain marble slab, ... with no more than these three words of inscription, serving both for his epitaph, and elegy', and on this page the gravestone inscription is printed within a monumental frame: 'Alas, poor YORICK!' While Soane

may have been quoting Shakespeare, he probably had Sterne's earlier quotation in mind.



The whimsy of Soane's mock-medieval monastic apartments inhabited by the imaginary 'Padre Giovanni' is an echo of Sterne's playfulness. Sterne's influence on Soane's gothic suite may even go further: in vol. 1, Yorick encounters a Franciscan monk in Calais. His name, we later learn when Yorick hears of his death, is 'Father Lorenzo': perhaps another imaginary monk who inspired Padre Giovanni?

## 18. 'It is pleasant to be nonsensical in due place'



Soane's intention with the monastic suite seems to have been to satirize the current fashion for gothic revivalism both in prose and architecture, while at the same time producing a picturesque arrangement of space and objects, many which are of a medieval character and were intended to produce an atmosphere of studious gloom and to 'impress the spectator, with reverence for the monk'. Nonetheless, he also stressed that the whole thing should not be taken too seriously by ending his account of these rooms in his 1835 *Description* with a quote from the Roman lyric poet Horace, 'Dulce est desipere in loco,' ('it is pleasant to be nonsensical in due place').

- *Leave the Monk's Parlour and walk along the passage ahead of you: as it opens out to the left you will see an arrangement of busts on the table in the centre of the Basement Ante Room*

## 19. A tribute to acting skill

The group of busts on this table includes one, centre of the back row, of the famous actor John Philip Kemble as Cato, one of his most famous roles. He was well known for playing the parts of great Roman nobles in



Shakespeare's plays and this may explain why he is flanked by busts of Roman aristocrats. The expressive nature of acting may have inspired Soane to place in the front row two casts of the heads of Laocoon's sons from the famous antique group – exemplars of extreme expressions of human emotion.

- *Continue along the passage, turning right at the far end and then right again to enter the Sepulchral Chamber, where the great alabaster sarcophagus is displayed in the centre*

## 20. A prized possession

The acquisition of the imposing sarcophagus of Pharaoh Seti I (1294-1279 BC) was Soane's greatest coup as a collector, eclipsing all his other purchases and costing more than any of them. 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 too expensive).



Over the course of three days on 23, 26 and 30 March 1825, Soane held evening receptions to which 890 guests were invited to view "the Belzoni Sarcophagus and other antiquities...by lamp light". Soane mounted the events both to celebrate his purchase and to support the Exhibition of Egyptian Antiquities mounted in Leicester Square by the recently widowed Sarah Belzoni, who wanted to raise funds for family members.

The evenings were a huge success as eminent guests such as JMW Turner and the poet Samuel Taylor Coleridge milled through Soane's museum and crypt, which were spectacularly lit by some 108 lamps, chandeliers and candelabra. Soane himself seems to have been responsible for theatrically orchestrating the dramatic light and shadow effects, which may have included the placement of lamps inside the sarcophagus. In his 1835 *Description*, Soane incorporated one of the most poetical descriptions of his lamplit evenings, penned by his novelist friend Barbara Hofland:

*'Seen by this medium [lamplight,] every surrounding object ... becomes subservient to the sarcophagus ... all...are but accessories to its dignity and grandeur; a mingled sense of awe, admiration and delight pervades our faculties and is even oppressive in its intensity... Deep masses of shadow, faint gleams that rise like ignes fatui from the adjoining crypt, lights that shine like illustrious halos round marble heads, others more vague and indistinct, yet beautiful in their revealings, present appearances beheld*

*as in a dream of the poets' elysium ... By degrees this space becomes peopled - figure after figure emerges from the crypt and corridors, where they had loitered in the gloom; they assemble around the sarcophagus, which sheds from within a pale, unearthly light on the silent awe-struck beings that surround it...'*

A further marvellous description survives by Mary Russell Mitford in a letter to the diarist Benjamin Robert Haydon:

*'The first person I met...was Coleridge...[then] I was pushed against Turner, the landscape painter with his red face and white waistcoat, and...was carried off my legs and irretrievably hustled to where the sarcophagus lay. Soane's house is a perfect labyrinth...It was the finest fun imaginable to see the people come into the Library after wandering about below, amidst tombs and capitals, and shafts and noseless heads, with a sort of expression of delighted relief at finding themselves again among the living, and with coffee and cake.'*

It is clear that Soane was deeply interested in Belzoni's sarcophagus from the outset, keeping newspaper cuttings relating to its discovery and visiting the British Museum in 1822 to see the sarcophagus after its arrival in London. Later that year, he attended Belzoni's exhibition held at the Egyptian Hall, Piccadilly, comprising a full-size model of two chambers in the tomb of Seti I, reconstructed using 'casts in plaster Paris, from wax impressions [made] on the spot' and many objects from the tomb. Soane purchased a copy of Belzoni's *Description of the Egyptian Tomb* which accompanied the exhibition and this probably helped inspire Soane to create his own 'Egyptian Crypt' in the basement (out of what had formerly been his wine cellar) in the 1830s.

- *Leave the Sepulchral Chamber through the arch on the east side to enter Soane's 'Egyptian Crypt'*

## 21. Setting for a tryst



The Crypt was used to great dramatic effect in the Henry James novella *A London Life*, when Laura Wing unwittingly witnesses her married sister's illicit assignation with a suitor during a violent thunderstorm while visiting the Museum with a friend.

*'One of the keepers told them that there were other rooms to see--that there were very interesting things in the basement. They made their way down--it grew much darker and they heard a great deal of thunder--and entered a part of the house which presented itself to Laura as a series of dim, irregular vaults--passages and little narrow avenues--encumbered with strange vague things, obscured for the time but some of which had a wicked, startling look, so that she wondered how the keepers could stay there. 'It's very fearful--it looks like a cave of idols!' she said to her companion; and then she added--'Just look there--is that a person or thing?'*



*As she spoke they drew nearer to the object of her reference—a figure in the middle of a small vista of curiosities... a vivid flash of lightning... penetrated into the room and illuminated both Laura's face and that of the mysterious person. Our young lady recognised her sister... At the same moment the figure turned quickly away, and then Laura saw that it was accompanied by another, that of a tall gentleman with a light beard which shone in the dusk. The two persons retreated together—dodged out of sight, as it were, disappearing in the gloom...*

*On the wall of the far right-hand compartment in the light-filled recess along the north wall*

## 22. A touching tribute



Two memorial tablets to Mrs Soane (d. 1815) and John Soane, jun. (d. 1823), the architect's eldest son. The latter contains a verse written by Soane's friend, Barbara Hofland (c.1770-1844).

Barbara Hofland was a poet, children's writer and eventual author of sixty novels who became a friend of the John and Eliza Soane in about 1811-12, shortly after moving to London from Harrogate with her new artist husband, Thomas Hofland. She told her mother in a letter that Eliza Soane had, 'sought me unknown, unintroducted; invited me for the express purpose of being good to me, a stranger in London ... struggling with great difficulties' and the two women became close friends. Mrs Hofland obviously admired Soane enormously and in September 1814 published a note, *The Merchant's Widow and her family* in which he was featured by name. A widow's little boy Edward, who is described viewing Soane's Rotunda at the Bank of England and an area full of sculpture which sounds like the Museum, expresses the aspiration "to be just such a man as Mr Soane, an architecture gentleman" Despite the warm praise and perhaps due to the rather different feelings of his own sons, Soane took exception and the passage was removed in future editions, without affecting his life-long friendship with Mrs Hofland.

*Hanging on arch of south wall*

## 23. Scenes from Paradise Lost

Two small plaster reliefs by Soane's friend, the celebrated sculptor John Flaxman, depict scenes from Milton's *Paradise Lost*: 'Satan



flying from the angels Gabriel and Ithuriel' and 'Adam and Eve in Paradise'. In his Royal Academy lectures, Flaxman urged sculptors to take subjects from this celebrated epic poem.

- *Passing out of the Crypt through the West arch, turn left and follow the passage to return to the Ground Floor the way you came. At the top of the stairs, take the second right into the Museum South Passage*

*On top of the cupboard, right-hand side*

## 24. The Laocoon group



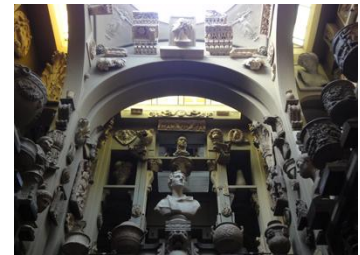
This plaster sculpture is a small version of the celebrated antique 'Laocoon' sculpture, now in the Vatican Museum, which depicts the episode immortalized by Virgil in the *Aeneid* when Laocoon and his two sons are strangled by a serpent on the seashore outside the walls of Troy. Among Soane's earliest literary possessions was a volume of the works of Virgil in Latin, published in 1712 and inscribed on the frontispiece with John Soane's signature in 1770.

- *Proceed straight ahead into The Dome Area and pause at the east balustrade.*

## 25. A diffusion of warm and cheerful light

The dome area is lit through a variety of skylights containing lemon yellow and darker amber glass which create a variety of effects which vary with the time of day, time of year and weather conditions. Barbara Hofland, in her account of Soane's Museum, noted that no

collector, however successful in obtaining Roman antiquities, could 'add the pure ether and the glowing skies of those more-favoured climes' and that through his use of coloured light to throw washes of colour over works of art Soane had brought painting to 'embellish Architecture and Sculpture'. Soane shared his obsession with colour and light with the post-Newtonian poets, such as James Thomson, who published *The Seasons* in 1730 (Soane owned a 1794 edition of this work as well as a copy of Thomson's collected works, which he bought in 1808). To Thomson, as to Newton, the golden light of yellow was the most luminous and beautiful of all colours and this is the dominant colour with which Soane bathes his Museum.



*Directly in front of you, hanging beneath the balustrade supporting a row of cinerary urns in front of the over life-size statue of Apollo.*

## 26. Persephone



This long sculptural frieze, originally from the collection of Robert Adam, is the front panel of a much repaired late Roman sarcophagus and depicts the *Rape of Persephone* – the celebrated ancient Greek myth of the abduction of Persephone (daughter of Zeus and the goddess of the harvest, Demeter or Ceres) by Pluto (Hades), king of the underworld. This panel was known in the Renaissance and has been repaired many times with heads and arms moved each time in order to tell the story the panel was then thought to represent. Soane paid £10.10.0 for it at the sale of Robert Adam's effects in 1818.

*Behind the Apollo*

## 27. A place to read



Concealed in a niche in the back of the base of the Apollo, directly beneath his bottom, is a small pull-out circular gate-leg table. This

would have enabled Soane to consult the books in the bookcases which once lined this area (in his day there was a solid wall between this space and the adjacent green-painted 'New Picture Room' – that room is at the back of Soane's first house, No. 12, and was only connected through to the Museum in the way we see it today long after Soane's death).

- **Leave the Dome area by the door to the left (south) of the statue of Apollo and then turn left to enter the domed Breakfast Room**

*'It was, he knew, architecturally one of the most interesting rooms of the house, and one, perhaps, most typical of Soane's style ... each wall fitted from floor to ceiling with glass-fronted bookcases between which fluted pilasters rose to a dome topped by an octagonal lantern decorated with richly coloured glass.'* - Adam Dalgliesh (*A Taste for Death*, P.D. James, 1986)

## 28. The Poetry of Architecture



Soane wrote that the architect must 'think and feel as a Poet, combine and embellish as a Painter and execute as a Sculptor'. He felt that poetry had a close affinity with architecture and in describing this Breakfast Room with its skylights filled with a combination of yellow and stained glass, its mirrored doors and plaster dome studded with small convex mirrors, he points out that his combination of variety of outline, spatial intricacy and coloured light produced 'a sequence of those fanciful effects that constitute the poetry of architecture'.

*On the South wall*

## 29. 'The Contention of Oberon and Titania'

The small bust of Henry Howard, RA, over the fireplace is placed so that it looks towards his own painting on the south wall, which depicts the quarrel concerning the 'little changeling boy' in Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (Act II, Scene I). The painting was exhibited at the Royal Academy in 1832 when it must have been seen by Soane, who purchased it for £250 in November of the same year. He later commissioned the ceiling paintings in the Library-Dining Room from Howard (see object 4), who dined regularly at 13 Lincoln's Inn Fields, both as a friend and also to help Soane arrange his painting collection and discuss the presentation of the

architecture lectures. Soane and Howard were colleagues at the Royal Academy and when Soane's failing eyesight prevented him from delivering his lectures towards the end of his life, it was Henry Howard who read them for him.

*West wall*

## 30. Bust of William Hayley



To the left of the bust of Henry Howard on the mantelpiece is a terracotta bust by Flaxman, representing the poet and writer William Hayley (1745-1820), who was a celebrity of his age. His poetical essay *Triumphs of Terror* (1781) went to 14 editions and in 1790 he refused the laureateship. Hayley had been a pupil of John Flaxman and later addressed his *Essay on Sculpture* (1800) to him.

- **From the Breakfast Room go up the main staircase to the first floor to the South Drawing Room, pausing to look at the next item in the small niche at the foot of the staircase**

## 31. St Michael Overcoming Satan



This small plaster statue painted in imitation of bronze is a sketch model made by John Flaxman in 1822 in preparation for the full-scale work in white marble which was commissioned by Lord Egremont for Petworth House, Sussex. A further full-size (11-foot tall) plaster model that Flaxman exhibited at the Royal Academy of Arts can today be seen in the Flaxman Gallery at University College, London. This is the most famous of Flaxman's statues and the subject

is derived from John Milton's *Paradise Lost*, in which the Archangel Michael commands an army of angels loyal to God against the rebel forces of Satan. Armed with a sword from God's armoury, he defeats Satan in personal combat, wounding his side.

*Further on up the stairs*

## 32. 'Falstaff in disguise led out by Mrs Page'



The painting represents a scene from Act IV, Scene 2 of *The Merry Wives of Windsor*. It was painted in Rome by James Durno for Boydell's Shakespeare Gallery, and at the time of the gallery's closure, it was bought by Mrs Soane for 9 guineas.

*At the turn of the stairs, pause at the Shakespeare Recess*

Soane was a man of his time in his veneration of Shakespeare as the embodiment of literary genius; Soane paid both visual and verbal homage to Shakespeare, constructing a Shakespeare Recess in his house, copying quotations from Shakespeare into commonplace books, collecting copies of the folios of his works and quoting from him in lectures.

## 33. Bust of Shakespeare



Shrines to the bard like this small recess were not uncommon in Soane's day. The bust of Shakespeare is an 1814 cast by George Bullock of the bust on the poet's monument in Stratford-upon-Avon. Soane and his wife Eliza visited Shakespeare's birthplace, a popular pilgrimage site even then, during a 13-day journey they undertook in August 1801. Entries in Eliza Soane's diary during the trip reflect Soane's remarkable energy: they were up most mornings at five or six, often visiting three or four different towns or monuments before travelling onwards to the next inn.



### 34. (Above) Lear and Cordelia



This work, exhibited by Henry Howard at the Royal Academy in 1820, was the first work Soane purchased from the artist. The painting depicts the final scene in *King Lear*, with the King restored to sanity and mournfully cradling his dead daughter Cordelia. Performances of *King Lear* were forbidden in 1788 in deference to the insanity of the reigning monarch, King George III. He died in January 1820, in the same year that Soane acquired this painting for his collection. The play must have had personal connotations for Soane, evoking the tragedy of his own life, an old man almost destroyed by the ungrateful acts of his children.

### 35. (Below) 'The Vision of Shakespeare'



This painting was commissioned by Soane from Henry Howard in 1830 and described by Soane as follows: "The Vision of Shakespeare"... represents the bard resting on the lap of Fancy, contemplating the "visions of glory" which she invokes while Lyrical Poetry, rising from the earth, invites him to ascend the brightest heaven of invention, Tragedy and Comedy are calling before him the shadowy forms of his principal dramatic characters: near him, Titania, watched by Oberon, is sleeping in her bower, and a train of fairies are sporting about him; on one side the stars are shooting from their spheres "to hear the sea-maid's music"; on the other side is the Tempest, the enchanted isle, and its inhabitants; above is Hecate riding on a cloud, and Genii, the offspring of Fancy, are hovering near her sweetest child."

The recess was restored in 2012 and the stained glass window, removed at the end of the 19th century, reinstated. This, along with the new white painted surround to the

painting *The Vision of Shakespeare* which gives it the quality of a marble monument or altarpiece and recreates the setting it had in Soane's day, has returned to this small space its original shrine-like character.

#### • Enter the South Drawing Room

*In the two east piers of bookcases, furthest from the door*

### 36. Before there was Baedeker...



These cases contain a selection of guidebooks from Soane's library. In 1778, Soane, then a young student of architecture, won a Royal Academy competition and was awarded a three-year travelling scholarship by George III. His subsequent Grand Tour of Italy was to provide inspiration throughout his work and life. Soane visited Rome, Pompeii, Paestum, Venice and Florence, as well as venturing further south to Sicily and Malta. Among the guidebooks he took with him on his travels was Anna Miller's *Letters from Italy* and his library contains a copy with the title page inscribed by Soane and a second copy of which volume II contains marginal notes that he made, occasionally disagreeing with the author (visible on shelf 32D). Soane evidently made the acquaintance of Miller before he departed for Italy and the two became regular correspondents. Among Soane's losses when the bottom of his trunk came loose along the roads of Switzerland during his return journey were drawings he had prepared in hopes of producing an illustrated edition.

Another guidebook used by Soane was Patrick Brydone's *A Tour through Sicily and Malta*. Like Miller's *Letters*, Brydone's book included many tips on local food, climate and customs as well as advice on where to stay. Brydone's tour was made in 1770, a time when Sicily was virtually unknown to British travellers and Soane may have used the copy of this guidebook (visible on shelf 33D) on his own trip to Sicily seven years later.

*This trail leaflet was compiled by Joni Rendon and Helen Dorey, with contributions from Stephanie Coane and Sue Palmer.*

© Sir John Soane's Museum, July 2012

*Above the fireplace, left*

### 37. '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. John (on the right), who was eighteen when this was painted, had gone up to Trinity College, Cambridge the previous autumn and is shown here wearing his university gown and holding a 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 late 1823. George, fifteen at the time of the portrait, joined his elder brother at Cambridge, where he began his habit of incurring heavy debts, which became a scourge of his later life. Soane had hoped that one or both of his sons would follow in his architectural footsteps, perhaps founding a dynasty like that of the Wyatts, but to his great disappointment, George was instead 'smitten with a passion for dramatic writing'. When George told his father of his interest in literature, Soane's response was to put him to work cataloguing his library in the summer of 1808. George completed the long job but signed off with a violent tantrum, throwing the ink and inkstand on the floor.

It was the shock of discovering the authorship of two of George's 'literary' efforts, in the form of anonymous articles attacking Soane's architecture in *The Champion* magazine, which Soane believed led to Mrs Soane's death in November 1815. Soane held his son responsible for his mother's death and it may well be no accident that her pencil portrait by Flaxman, on the south wall, gazes towards this one of her two sons. Beneath Flaxman's sketch is a touching quotation in French: *Chere aimé je ne peux plus entendre ta voix - apprends moi ce que je dois faire - pour remplir tes souhaits!* This may be from Madame de Staël's novel *Corinne* (first published in Paris in 1807). Soane owned two copies, both in French, of this celebrated novel, regarded as one of the most important works of early French romanticism.

George Soane later enjoyed some measure of critical if not financial success with eighteen published works to his name.