

Colour in Soane's House

Thorvaldsen's Museum is without doubt one of the most colourful museum buildings anywhere in the world. It is a pearl set in the very centre of Copenhagen that has been cherished by its successive Directors since Thorvaldsen's day and is maintained by an enlightened government. Long may the Danish people continue to regard this striking building and its distinguished contents as a treasure of incomparable value, both in aesthetic and cultural terms.

It may seem almost impertinent to write about another museum that is scarcely less colourful, and is indeed slightly earlier, when one is trying to do honour to the present Director of Thorvaldsen's institution, but this short essay is offered not only as a token of affection and respect for Dyveke Helsted but also as a further small piece to drop into the jigsaw-puzzle that helps us the better to understand how Thorvaldsen's Museum came to be built and came to look as it did – and as it still does today.

The earlier museum in question is that established by Sir John Soane in London, at Number 13, Lincoln's Inn Fields. This occupies the ground-plot of a standard London house suitable for a professional man, with the main block forming part of a terrace fronting onto the street, and a yard at the back with outbuildings. Soane rebuilt the house in 1812-13 with the main block as the domestic quarters for his wife and himself and with the drawing-offices for his extensive architectural practice erected in his backyard. But by 1812 he had already amassed a considerable collection of works of art and of plaster casts taken from mainly antique Roman buildings, and parts of the building at the back were therefore formed as a museum from the outset. Soane's collection grew; there was never sufficient room for it. He was always extending the exhibition-space wherever this was possible and, where this was not the case he crammed ever more items into whatever space actually was available.

By the time Soane died, in 1837, he had filled his house, the outbuildings and the backyard with works of art of great variety. "Sir John Soane's object was to show how much could be done in a very limited space; how a dwelling-house, without losing its domestic character and privacy, could be made to combine, at almost every turning much of those varied and fanciful effects which constitute the poetry of architecture and painting."¹ Schinkel, who saw the Museum when the collection was still growing, found the display "auf die abenteuerlichste Weise ... aufgestellt", with "Mittelalter, An-

1. *Monthly Supplement of The Penny Magazine*, London, October 31st – November 30th, 1837 (i.e. nine months after Soane's death).



Sept. 9. 1825

View of part of the Collection of Antiquities - from the head of the Poros. -

Fig. 1. Watercolour of 1825 showing Seti I's sarcophagus (here called The Poros) standing in the Crypt beneath the Dome at the centre of Soane's Museum. Note the coloured glass in the lantern which threw a golden light over the plaster casts and marbles on display.

tike und Modernes durcheinander ... auf Höfen ... in kapellenartigen Räumen, in Katakomben und Salons, herculaneisch und gotisch verziert.”² Michaelis, surveying Classical sculpture in English collections in the middle of the last century, thought it “the most tasteless arrangement that can be seen” and speaks of the “impression conveyed by so wild a confusion of promiscuous fragments” being “bewildering and fatiguing.”³ Even English contemporaries of Soane, who had not yet perceived the wonders that could be achieved by the application of the new, rigorous and methodical *Kunstgeschichte* could express the view that “objections may be made to some of the arrangements and the whole may be said to be too crowded ... It is a model-house, intended for architects, artists and persons of taste and ... is intended more for the benefit of ‘such people’ than for the use of the public indiscriminately.”⁴ Soane, for his part, must also have seen his arrangements of Classical fragments (many of them plaster casts rather than originals, a distinction which meant less to him, an architect needing an anthology rather than a cabinet of curiosities) as following a long tradition going back to the great collections of Classical marbles set up, in often quite casual arrangements, in the courtyards and halls of Renaissance and Baroque palaces in Rome which had so impressed him when he visited that city as a student in the late 1770’s. What is more, it must be remembered that Soane lived in his house which “although apparently adapted merely for display ... contains every domestic accommodation and comfort for a small family.”⁵

Soane was proud of his house and he wanted the visitor who came to view it to appreciate the subtleties of his architecture, the ingenuity of his arrangements and the pleasing effects of his colour-schemes. He had many watercolours and drawings executed to record the appearance of his rooms, and he published a *Description* in book-form of his house, written by himself.

Soane stipulated that his Trustees “shall not suffer the arrangement in which the said Museum .. shall be left ... to be altered” and this request, which is enshrined in an Act of Parliament of 1833, has largely been upheld. Indeed, it is quite remarkable how much of Soane’s arrangement of his house remains exactly as he made it; we can check this by referring to the contemporary drawings and watercolours. Almost every item stands or hangs in the position in which he placed it. Nevertheless, the house is not *exactly* as he left it. Some objects have been moved for reasons of security and on grounds of conservation. But most of the changes are due to “institutionalization”. Window-curtains, so important a feature in a Regency house, became faded and worn and were discarded, not to be replaced. Carpets, specially chosen by Soane, likewise became worn and were thrown out, to be replaced by cheap substitutes of very different



Fig. 2. A very revealing quick sketch of the Corridor outside the Picture Room showing how the yellow glass in the skylight cast a warm light over the plaster casts on the walls. The whiteness of the floor indicates how the scrubbed firwood boards once looked.

2. K. F. Schinkel: *Reise nach England, Schottland und Paris im Jahre 1826*, edited D. Bindman, Berlin, 1986.

3. A. Michaelis: *Ancient Marbles in Great Britain*, English edition 1882.

4. *Penny Magazine*, loc.cit. (note 1).

5. *The Mirror of Literature, Amusement, and Instruction*, London, April 6, 1833.



Fig. 3. The Picture Room in 1825, the year after its completion with the huge 'moveable planes' open to reveal Westmacott's *Nymph*. The walls have recently been repainted the sombre greenish-brown colour shown here.

character. Scrubbed wooden floors were covered with linoleum because they were too troublesome to keep clean. Electric light was introduced (in 1897) and provided light from sources not dreamed of by Soane (although he would have handled electric lighting brilliantly if he had been given the chance) so that shadows fall quite differently to those brought about by oil-lamps standing on tables or by the fire in the grate. The colours of some walls have been changed to a lighter shade more in keeping with the fin-de-siècle longing for 'sweetness and light'. The gilding of picture frames has been muted, either deliberately or by age and everything has become patinated by dirt, by atmospheric pollution from coal-fires and



(more recently) from car-exhausts, as well as by the enthusiastic handling that visitors indulge in so freely.

The result is that the Museum and its contents are for the most part grubby and look tired. This of course produces an atmosphere, a 'look' which is currently much admired and it is admired because so many of us today are delighted by antiques and by old houses filled with antiques. By their very definition, it is best that antiques should not look too new. They must have a patina, while signs of wear and tear, not to say shabbiness, are in no way a disadvantage.

By the time photography became widespread, at the beginning of the present century, fashion dictated that new rooms should be furnished with antiques and not with new furniture; and this fashion had by then become well established, having reigned for nearly half a century. So when journals like *Country Life* began publishing photographs recording the state of the great country houses, what was there set out for all to admire and to imitate was a late-Victorian state in which distinguished antiques played a major role. In many cases, because the agricultural slump of the 1880's had left many owners

Fig. 4. The Library in 1822, seen from the Dining Room end. The windows were later moved outwards to embrace the loggia outside. Note the brightly gilded frames.

relatively poor, shabbiness was also no longer shameful. At any rate these early photographs crystallized 'the country house look' and established a criterion by which all 'historic interiors' tend nowadays to be judged.

That this '1910 image', as it has been called, had very little to do with what rooms looked like in the past (except in 1910, of course) is easily forgotten and Soane, although he regarded himself as an antiquarian, would surely be surprised to see his house in its present state if he could visit it now. He would find most of his objects still in place but he would wonder what had happened to the colours, to the brilliance, which were such important features of his creation. Surely he would not have been pleased to see his rooms looking so drab.

Let us now quickly review some of the effects that are lacking.

The gilded frames round his many paintings are mostly dark brown today. Shortly before Soane died he paid a bill for 784 *books* of gold-leaf for his picture-frames. All the frames must therefore have been brilliant when all this gold had been applied, but people today by and large find freshly gilded frames offensive, claiming they cannot see the paintings they surround. Of course, if the paintings are faded and dirty, over-bright frames may well detract from the picture but some of Soane's paintings are in a very good state and the frames ought anyway not to be actually dirty, whatever the state of the painting. Some compromise must surely be sought whereby the frame comes back into its own as an essential element of the ensemble.

When the pinewood floors in Soane's museum were scrubbed, they became almost white. This reflected the light falling on the floors as if they were covered in snow. Dark green linoleum cancels out this charming effect and it is not at all in keeping with Soane's intentions.

In 1941 a bomb fell in Lincoln's Inn Fields and blew out most of the glass in the Museum's window. Now almost all the windows are filled with modern clear glass but Soane had coloured glass everywhere. In the Drawing Room, for instance, "on sunny days the coloured glass" would light up "every object ... with gorgeous hues" while in the main part of the Museum in the backyard, with its many skylights, "the tenderest hues of the primrose deepening to golden yellow, brilliant crimson, regal scarlet, emerald green, and splendid purple, shed their richest tints."⁶ There was deep red "Bohemian" glass in the windows on the staircase, making this cathedral-like, while the gloomy "Monk's Parlour" in the Crypt had a large window filled with ancient stained glass set in "modern glass" that had a "deep purple ground, relieved by red and yellow. This window is reflected in an opposite mirror". Not only did these effects "excite both astonishment and delight" in the breast of the visitor but Soane

6. *Penny Magazine*, *loc.cit.* (note 1).



felt that his collection of marbles and plaster casts – all tending to be rather dull in their pristine state of whiteness, at least to the uninitiated – hereby acquired “a diffusion of warm and cheerful light” which resembled, on sunny days, “the glowing skies of those more-favoured climates” by which he of course primarily meant those of Italy. Soane was something of an optimist, however, and the London weather too often let him down so the colourful effects he had contrived could not always be seen to advantage. When issuing invitations to those wishing to see his house, he had therefore to say that they were welcome “but not in wet or dirty weather”.

It has also just been discovered that Soane’s famous Picture Room did not have light grey walls and a white ceiling, as it had until last December, but walls of a sombre greenish brown and a ceiling that was a light brown. Such colours are kind to paintings and set off gilded frames in a most splendid manner. This scheme will have been restored by the time this is published and quite a few people will be surprised to discover that Soane used such full-blooded colours. But he was a very modern architect in his day. He had not only adopted the rich colour-scale of ‘Pompeian’ or ‘Greek Revival’ (for instance, in his Library where the walls are deep red, or at his villa at Ealing where his polychromatic Grecian colours have recently been restored), but he will have known all about the New Polychromy which sprang from Percier, through Hittorf, Gau and Semper, which was to sweep across the western world during the second

Fig. 5. The Dining Room at one end of the Library in 1825 showing the ancient stained glass set in ‘modern’ glass surrounds. In the courtyard may be seen the pinnacle of the ‘pasticcio’, a ten-metre-high column of superimposed architectural capitals of different periods which was removed in the 1890’s.

quarter of the nineteenth century, and was to be so triumphantly adopted by Bindesbøll and his team at Thorvaldsen's Museum.

Soane's museum is not like Thorvaldsen's, although the similarity was perhaps greater when Soane's building was fresh and clean; and there was probably no direct link between the two institutions in so far as their buildings are concerned. But in one quite different respect there must be a connection and that has to do with the fact that Thorvaldsen lies buried in a tomb at the centre of his Museum. My predecessor, Sir John Summerson, suggested that Soane would have liked to be buried where the great Egyptian sarcophagus now stands, in the Crypt at the focal point of his own museum.⁷ He arranged just such a site for the mausoleum of his friend, Sir Francis Bourgeois, at the centre of the picture gallery he designed and had built to house the latter's picture collection at Dulwich. So even if Soane's own Museum may not have much to do with Thorvaldsen's, Soane's Picture Gallery at Dulwich must surely have been a source of inspiration to the Danes, if only by reputation, when they were thinking how to build a museum worthy of their great national hero.

7. John Summerson: 'Sir John Soane and the furniture of death', *Architectural Review*, March 1978.

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