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The Soane after Soane: Housing the Museum

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allow for a multitude of interpretations, to mediate presentations of a life to the public, and the Carlyles will continue to be refashioned according to modern-day museological practice, as objects and artifacts become available, and as audience expectations and knowledge change.

Notes

- 1 For a full literature review of the Froude–Carlyle controversy and its aftermath, see Jones.

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The Soane after Soane: Housing the Museum

SOPHIE THOMAS

Sir John Soane’s Museum.—This valuable collection was opened yesterday to the public for the season, and during the day there was a great number of visitors. The arrangements are very satisfactory, and the collection is so varied as to gratify every taste. The preminent [sic] object is, of course, the alabaster sarcophagus which the testator obtained from the late Mr. Belzoni for 2,000 guineas. The museum

will continue open every Thursday and Friday in this and the two succeeding months, tickets being obtained on previous application.

—Notice in *The Times* (5 April 1839)

AS SIR John Soane approached his death in January of 1837, it is possible that he took a modicum of solace from the fact that—four years earlier—he had arranged through an act of Parliament for his remarkable house and its contents to be preserved, unaltered, for the benefit of the public. Trustees would be appointed to allow access “to Amateurs and Students in Painting, Sculpture and Architecture . . . for consulting and inspecting and benefiting by the said collection.”¹ Given Soane’s well-known anxiety about his legacy, however, it is more likely that he died with no certainty at all about the fate of the building and the extensive collections it contained, which he had spent much of a lifetime amassing: his museum of architectural fragments and casts, books, models, plans, paintings, drawings, and sculptures, and an eclectic array of curiosities, such as the alabaster sarcophagus (fig. 1). No doubt he would have been delighted by the efforts made in recent years to restore his house and museum to its original state, effectively undoing a long period of if not outright neglect then a slow accumulation of thoughtless alterations on the part of a series of curators and trustees, particularly in the nineteenth century. But while the museum has come back into its own, now enjoying (or perhaps suffering from) long queues of visitors at its gate, its reputation in the Victorian period was openly contested.

Commentary published in the decades following Soane’s death reflects the perception that the institution was uncertain of its identity and purpose, a product perhaps of an uneasy blending of “house” and “museum” (particularly once the house had been stripped of active, living, domestic purpose)—at a moment, historically, when museums were increasingly becoming the very things (public, rational, orderly) that Soane’s had never been. The dominant narrative, certainly, is that the museum fell quickly out of step with the times (with which, arguably, it had never really been in step).² To some extent, its eccentricities derive from the stamp of its owner’s personality, evident in the museum’s highly subjective and theatrical arrangements, often involving imaginative rather than rational juxtapositions presented in artfully contrived architectural spaces. The result was not universally admired; visiting in 1838, Gustav Friedrich Waagen remarked that “the whole, notwithstanding the picturesque, fantastic charm, which cannot be denied, has, in consequence of this arbitrary mixture of heterogeneous objects, something of the unpleasant effect of a feverish dream” (33). Over time, the principles guiding Soane’s work as an architect also fell out of favour—and his reputation declined—to the point where William Burges declared the museum in 1863 to be a “very useless institution” (qtd. in Knox 37).



FIG. 1: Sir John Soane's Museum in Lincoln's-Inn-Fields: The Sarcophagus-Room.
The Illustrated London News: June 25, 1864

Another factor to consider with respect to the museum's identity crisis after Soane's death is underscored by a detailed account of the house offered, later in the year of Soane's death, in the *Monthly Supplement of the Penny Magazine*—namely, its essential character as a private house: “To admit the public indiscriminately into a small private house, in the same way as they are admitted into the British Museum, or any other national depository of art, would not only be incurring risk of loss and damage, or at least of great deterioration, but would be defeating the uses of the property.” As a kind of “model-house,” Soane's object, the writer continues, was to demonstrate “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.” Moreover, “the house, though consisting only of a few rooms of but limited extent, is an architectural kaleidoscope, presenting a great variety of combinations within a very small space” (458). Anna Jameson, in her 1842 *Handbook to the Public Galleries of Art in and near London*, characterizes it as “Lilliputian,” and thus vulnerable, in view of the increasing number of visitors reportedly passing through. She notes that “on some days the visitors have amounted to between five and six hundred” (549).

In spite of the problems inherent in making a museum out of a house, even one that already housed a museum within its walls, visitor interest was undeniably strong—and within a year of Soane's death, a letter to the editor of *The Times* laments the apparently arbitrary restrictions on its opening days:

Sir,—I this morning called at Sir John Soane's Museum, in Lincoln's-inn-fields, to request permission for a party of friends to inspect it, when I was most civilly informed that it was closed for the season, and would not be open to the public again until the month of April. That this now national collection should not be thrown open in wet or dirty weather I can easily understand, but surely the trustees can have no sufficient reason for closing the doors during the innumerable clean days between August and April in every year! (W.H.C.)

Throughout much of the nineteenth century, in broad agreement with terms set out by Soane himself in the 1833 Act of Parliament, the museum was open to the public only for limited periods of time. In 1844, for example, periodical notices indicate that it was open on Thursdays and Fridays from 10 a.m. until 4 p.m. from April to June (and also on Tuesdays for visitors to London from abroad). For many years thereafter, the pattern, announced by the museum's trustees, was remarkably constant: the museum would be open on Tuesdays from February until the end of August and on Thursdays and Fridays during April, May, and June (and always by prior, written application to the curator or perhaps a trustee). Meanwhile, throughout the century,

one finds articles in the press openly expressing “public discontent” that the Soane Museum should be inaccessible nine months of the year due to the “jealous defences” drawn round the museum by its trustees, who wilfully disregard their discretionary powers on this point (“The Soane Museum”).

Perhaps these limitations and “jealous defences” ultimately contributed to the museum being less and less frequently visited—or at least to a perception that it was not as well known as it should have been. An 1859 letter to the editor of *The Times* describes, with apparent surprise, a visit to this mysterious house, about which there is an air of “perpetual repose,” for no one is ever seen coming or going. Yet once acquainted with its contents—“some of the most interesting things I have ever seen”—the writer expostulates: “Why is not this Museum open as freely as the British Museum? It is silly to put barriers in the way of seeing things which are put into a Museum just that they may be seen” (F.G.). A few years later, in 1862, when a bill passed Parliament permitting the trustees to lend the museum’s famous collection of Hogarths to the Great Exhibition of 1862, it was hoped that some of these restrictions might be relaxed, for “during the 50 days it is open in the year not more than some 4,000 people visit it, at a cost to the trustees of 10s. per visitor.” Moreover, “it will probably be news to many of our readers to hear that there is a Soane Museum at all, and not one in 20 of those who have heard of it know where it is hidden away in Lincoln’s-inn-fields” (“International Exhibition”). By 1881, an article in the *London Evening Standard* entitled “A Neglected Museum” aimed pointedly to reacquaint readers with its existence and its contents. Leaping forward to 1906, in spite of a modest increase to attendance numbers, with seven thousand visitors a year, we find familiar complaints being voiced. Further articles in *The Times* suggest this could be remedied by the production of a “proper catalogue of the treasures, with a full use of modern methods of illustration” (“Sir John Soane’s Museum”) and “that it would be a considerable help to the would-be visitor if he could be certain of admittance (when he has discovered the existence and whereabouts of the museum from ‘Whitaker’s Almanack’) at whatever reasonable time of the day, week, or year he happened to be in the neighbourhood” (Davies).

If the Soane Museum had slipped somewhat from public notice as the nineteenth century drew to a close, others’ stars were rising, for “during the present century the development of museums has made considerable progress in this country.” Thus begins an account of the Soane Museum by Alan Cole in the *Art Journal* for June 1882; under the name of “museum,” Cole continues, “people expect to find institutions well lighted and conveniently planned, in which objects in orderly arrangement can be looked at and studied” (174). This was the outward-looking (and public-minded) model espoused by his father, Henry Cole, in the development of the South Kensington Museum in the 1850s. The Soane Museum, formed several decades earlier and with different ends in mind, is by no means, he notes, such

a “modern” museum. Rather, in the tradition of other museums with origins in private houses, such as those of John Tradescant and Sir Hans Sloane, it developed in a more organic manner. In spite of the inevitable limitations of this counter model, Cole’s article, which offers a detailed account of the most important features of Soane’s collection, affirms its continued importance, and aims to prevent it being eclipsed by the new. Clearly the expectations of the public had acquired an urgency that was entirely in keeping with museological developments at other institutions—yet the eccentricities of the Soane, at the very least, help us to take their measure.

Notes

- 1 A copy of the act (dated 20 April 1833) was appended by Soane to the 1835 edition of his *Description*, 101–09. See pp. 101–02.
- 2 For an elaboration of that argument, see Thomas.

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Private and Public: The Cuming Collection

MARY ADDYMAN

IN 1902, the *Journal of the British Archaeological Association* published the obituary of the collector and antiquarian Henry Syer Cuming. Cuming, born in 1817 in Walworth, South London, had been an active member of the BAA since it was formed in 1843 and was well known within the organization.