Exhibitions

In Pursuit of Antiquity
The Soane Gallery, Sir John Soane’s Museum, London
1 February–1 June 2008

The really astonishing thing about this very illuminating and rich (if quite small) exhibition is that it draws entirely on the resources of Soane’s museum. It shows material from the second half of the eighteenth century, when many more artists joined the grand tourists, as well as products of Soane’s own workshop, though the museum does also own a great deal of earlier material such as the Montano and the so-called Coner albums, witnessing to former centuries’ pursuits of the antique. The drawings, books, and models gathered in this show were among those that Soane collected so as to turn his house into a kind of academy, and his office into a place of study that could become its nucleus—a hope he never quite realized.

Unlike his even more successful contemporary, “jolly Jack” Nash, Soane was a learned architect as well as a very successful one. Being wonderfully acquisitive, he gradually built up an archive of drawings and a large collection of paintings and sculptures, as well as architectural fragments and plaster casts, many of which were almost collaged into the walls of the museum when it was both his home and his office; it was moreover an office where the notion of pupilage was not just a conventional title for cheap employment. When the family undertaking of the Adam Brothers, whom he much admired, was finally wound and sold up, Soane bought almost the whole archive. But he also bought drawings by their enemy William Cham-
bers, as well as by George Dance and Charles Cameron, and also commissioned a whole panoply of dramatic views and presentation watercolors from his assistant-amanuensis Joseph Michael Gandy (the subject of an earlier show in the same gallery), while investing in models both of antiquities and of his own works. Soane's passion for seeing his buildings skeletal, as it were—most famously in Gandy's perspective view of the Bank of England as a ruin (which remains fixed and on display in the picture-room of the house)—is exemplified in the exhibition by a cut-away perspective of Holy Trinity, Marylebone (still standing, though now converted into a bookshop and offices), surrounded by excavations. Two small, elegantly dressed figures discuss the plan in the foreground and give it a ruinlike allure.

In the Holy Trinity perspective, the figures are gesticulating with a measuring rod, similar to the one held by the indefatigable traveler and stuttering attorney, Henry Parke, in the dramatic drawing that presumably shows him (he was also a diligent surveyor of antiquities) as a student on top of a vertiginous ladder propped against the improbably flawless forty-one-feet-high column of the Temple of the Dioscuri (which both he and Soane thought was that of Jupiter Stator) on the Roman Forum (there is a plaster version of the restoration in the museum “corridor”). In the drawing, the column supports an equally improbably restored cornice, the whole shown against a sketchy but far-fetched Roman background. The exhibition also includes drawings by other pupils, George Basevi, for instance, whom Soane seems to have thought the most talented. Basevi died the kind of death Parke’s drawing seems to presage—though he did not fall off a ladder, but through the floor in the tower of Ely Cathedral.

The other end of Soane’s passion for antiquity is represented here by a splendid Piranesi Capriccio that he bought with all the other Adam possessions. It is a sanguine underdrawing, partly confirmed in ink and watercolor, of a vast affair of stairways, colonnaded apses, and obelisks. Most of Piranesi’s drawings of the Paestum Temples are also in the museum picture room. Soane much admired their passion and verve, and the dramatically lit way he disposed his collection, juxtaposed in sudden lapses of scale and theme, seems to echo Piranesian fantasy, though his own vision of antiquity was much closer to that of another architect-draughtsman represented in the show, Charles Percier, one of the two creators of the Empire style for Napoleon, whom Soane also, and rather unpatriotically, admired.

Even a visitor who knows the museum should not limit himself to a visit of the exhibition. It cannot afford a measure either of Soane’s passion for antiquity or his magpie, paranoiac collecting or yet his need to startle the visitor into a sense of the unity of old and new in an architecture that has no clear precedent. This is suggested in the exhibition by the curious set of Gandy watercolors of the ‘Tyringham house in Buckinghamshire at different times of day, augmented by a larger one of the building’s brick carcass stripped of all antique ornament, and so paradoxically sloughing off all the weight of antiquarian scholarship that this exhibition eloquently displays. If Soane’s collecting was indeed deranged, this exhibition must leave even a casual visitor with a sense of real gratitude for the great architect’s pathological acquisitiveness.

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Steps off the Beaten Path: Nineteenth-Century Photographs of Rome and its Environs
American Academy in Rome, Italy
24 November 2007–11 January 2008

With its urban fabric relatively unchanged since the mid-eighteenth century, Rome stood poised in the two decades preceding the Risorgimento on the threshold of a new era. Soon to be transformed into the capital of the newly established nation of Italy, Rome remained in this period a preindustrial city firmly under the control of its last papal ruler, Pius IX Mastai-Ferretti (1846–78). The American Academy in Rome’s exhibition, Steps off the Beaten Path: Nineteenth-Century Photographs of Rome and its Environs, provides a rare glimpse of the Eternal City in the years preceding this momentous change. The exhibition consists of eighty photos of Rome and the Roman campagna dating from the 1850s to the 1870s from the collection of Delaney and W. Bruce Lundberg, who curated the exhibition with John Pinto.

In contrast to photographs of Rome’s veduta tradition, which emphasize the city’s monuments and history, the photographs of this exhibition convey a more intimate sense of Roman daily life in the nineteenth century in which the present and past are creatively juxtaposed. The works focus on the city’s less familiar aspects and demonstrate a heightened interest in structure, fragments, and historical layers that underscore how new technologies and a sense of urgency ushered in new ways of viewing and representing Rome. The greater precision of glass wet plate and albumen prints, in comparison to the paper negative and salted paper prints that predominated in photography’s earliest years, provided for a new sense of objectivity that informed the examination of less familiar aspects of Rome. This transition also responded to a desire to document photographically the vestiges of Rome’s past as they came to be increasingly threatened by demographic and developmental pressures, and many of the works on display were commissioned by the amateur archaeologist John Henry Parker expressly for this purpose.

Parker’s efforts to record the city’s architecture proved timely, for the decision to establish Rome as Italy’s capital led to its reshaping as the cutting of new avenues through the urban fabric redefined the cityscape. The extent of the city’s transformation in the latter decades of the nineteenth century may be gleaned from an examination of the 1866 census map of Rome on display, where now familiar boulevards, such as the Vía...