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The ART of Collecting



Sir John Soane amassed more than 30,000 architectural drawings. When he ran out of wall and surface space, he put works in drawers and cabinets—some of which have now been opened.

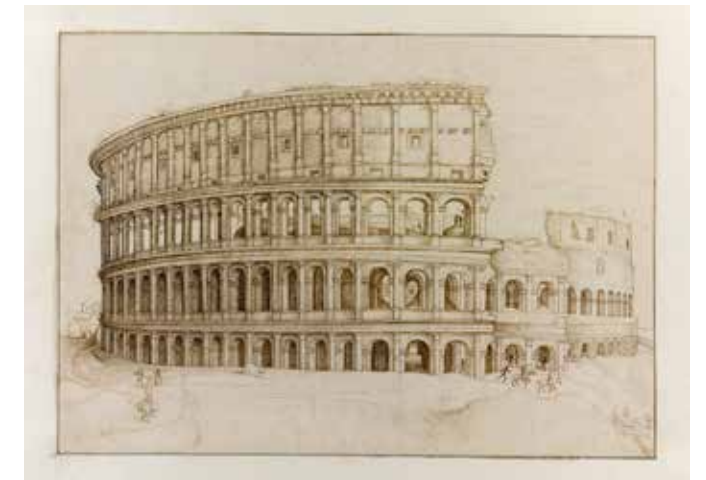


For a museum curator, editing is one of the hardest jobs. When Frances Sands, the Sir John Soane's Museum's Curator of Drawings and Books, was commissioned to write a book about the architectural drawings in the London institution's collection, she had to find eighty of the best examples from their holdings of more than 30,000. While Sands recognized the offer to write the book as an honor and scholarly thrill, she also experienced the task as being "truly painful and heartbreaking," because every centuries-old drawing in the collection—in her opinion—is a masterpiece worthy of inclusion. And now, for a show she has entitled "Hidden Masterpieces" (March 9–June 5), she has had to winnow down the collection to only twenty-three drawings, making for more personal heartbreak.

She went throughout the museum, the former home of British architect, teacher, and art collector Sir John Soane (1753–1837), to unlock cabinets and drawers, pulling out drawings that have rarely, if ever, been seen by the public.

While Sands admits that most exhibitions revolve around a theme, "Hidden Masterpieces," she emphasizes, has none. "It's a 'best bits' or a 'smorgasbord of deliciousness,' to be cinematic about it." Sands has unrolled many a drawing, read among Soane's library of leatherbound volumes, and leafed through folios of hand-colored drawings to choose what is on display. Among the treasures (all kept onsite in the three nineteenth-century townhouses that comprise the museum) available for public viewing are a circa-1550 engraved view of Rome's Colosseum, an exuberant *capriccio* (or imagined architectural edifice) by Piranesi, an 1817 aerial drawing revealing the plan of Stonehenge, a plate from a volume of Indian and Persian miniatures, and a dramatic 1806 cutaway of Paestum's Temple of Neptune.

Soane was more than just a prolific collector of paintings,



The "Hidden Masterpieces" show at London's Sir John Soane's Museum, reveals some of its treasures. Opposite: A plan drawn in 1767 for the ceiling of a circular dressing room. Clockwise from top left: A *capriccio* created circa 1750 by Piranesi; a Flemish illumination from a *Book of Hours*, produced after 1512; a depiction of Rome's Colosseum, circa 1550; an elevation of a chimney piece, rendered circa 1690, for Hampton Court Palace.

PHOTOGRAPHY BY Gareth Gardner
WRITTEN BY David Masello



architectural fragments, and decorative objects; he was an early advocate for recognizing the intrinsic artistic value of architectural drawings. While such elevations, floorplans, and renderings served as practical presentations of buildings and ancient sites, many were drawn with such elegance and personal flair that they also become a form of art. “Architectural drawings are dismissed as lesser works of art,” Sands says, “and I hope this show will be a corrective of that notion. Of all the objects in the Soane collection, there are far more works on paper than anything else.”

Apart from issues of space, many of these drawings on display have not been brought out of storage in recent years for practical reasons—either because they are sensitive to light, the paper is fragile, or they have been exhibited in the past and have needed, as Sands says, “a rest period” before being taken out again.

The Soane Museum collection clearly reflects the vision, if not the eccentricity, of its owner. The 13-by-12-foot Picture Room is stacked with 118 paintings. Enough scale models of ancient buildings occupy shelves to create a city. A room devoted to an ancient Egyptian sarcophagus feels more like a burial chamber, while interior columns throughout are adorned with every manner of architectural fragment. Artificial lighting is kept to a minimum, so as to replicate the conditions under which the objects were seen in Soane’s pre-electrical age. The exhibition galleries, though, especially the one in which “Hidden Masterpieces” is situated, are illuminated with modern-day, museum-quality lights. As Sands emphasizes, “Elsewhere, we want the lighting to be at a lower level. Soane was a master of natural lighting techniques, allowing light, for instance, to shine through skylights for a dappling effect.” The strongest metaphorical light, however, shines on the drawings chosen for the exhibition—the result of Sands’s decided effort to be as “even-handed as possible” in selecting works that represent the entirety of Soane’s collection.

Despite its rather diminutive scale, the Soane has a dynamic international reach. Members of New York’s highly active Soane Foundation, for example, help support the institution from afar. While the Foundation was not directly involved in the creation of “Hidden Masterpieces,” Sands emphasizes how “these kinds of activities and exhibitions could not take place without them. While their members are in another continent, they remain engaged with us. We think of the Foundation as our fairy godparent.”

Now that carefully chosen and even obscure works are fully visible again, Sands emphasizes, “What I personally hope to achieve with this exhibition is to show off a portion of these materials that few get to see. It’s an incredible privilege to work with a world-class collection of drawings. We want to share these glories with the public.” ■



Top to bottom: No. 13 Lincoln's Inn Fields is one of the three townhouses that make up the Sir John Soane's Museum; architectural friezes and busts are part of the collection; Sir John Soane filled his small Picture Room with 118 paintings.