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I.

Understanding Egyptomania.

The case of the *Sarcophagus of Seti I* in Sir John Soane's Museum.

The Sir John Soane Museum in Lincoln's Inn Field could be described as the symbolic pivot of Soane's legacy and memory, a "web of complex associations and memorializing narratives in which every detail is designed to enshrine some aspect of his life for the benefit of future generations".¹ The architect of the Bank of England and Professor of Architecture at the Royal Academy had collected and displayed a prolific collection throughout the years. The result is a unique house-museum in which antiquities are an essential part of a brilliantly conceived domestic *Gesamtkunstwerk* exemplifying two paradigms of British collecting, the Antiquarian and the Neoclassical.²

Soane was influenced by the Enlightenment generation of the 18th-century, but he was also not part of it. He was speaking a similar language, but he had a different perspective, embodying both Neoclassical precepts and Romantic *Senshucht*.³ To this extent, the acquisition in 1821 of the *Sarcophagus of Seti I* (1300 BC), originally part of the Henry Salt's collection, is to be intended as a crucial moment for the transition from a private collection to a public museum as well as the sublimation of Soane's two souls. As a sort of a *climax*, Soane created a powerful narrative around this object as a reference to intellectual pursuit and to the triumph of the artistic soul over the decadent body.

In order to understand Soane's reception of *antiquaria*, the first section outlines the context in which Egyptomania started to spread and the system of knowledge that it represented. The second one examines the museum's early constitutions and its founding mission, highlighting the importance

¹ Wolfgang Ernst, 'Frames at Work: Museological Imagination and Historical Discourse in Neoclassical Britain', in *The Art Bulletin* 75, no. 3, 1993, pp. 481-498, p. 481, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/pdf/3045970> (accessed 01/11/2018).

² Jas Elsner, 'A Collector's Model of Desire: The House and Museum of Sir John Soane', *The Culture of Collecting*, ed. Jas Elsner and R. Cardinal, (London, Cambridge and Melbourne, 1994), pp. 155-76 p. 167, <https://www.academia.edu/34194401> (accessed 01/11/2018).

³ For more information about Soane's relationship with Romanticism, see Sophie Thomas. *Romanticism and Visuality*, (London, 2008).

of the Sarcophagus acquisition as a shifting point for the collection. The final section discusses Soane's contemporary legacy, demonstrating how Soane's willing is still preserved and documented to the general public (Fig. 1).



Fig. 1 View from the Dome. Francis Chantrey, *Bust of Sir John Soane*, 1830.

Swan, to be later known as Sir John Soane, was born at Whitchurch, Oxfordshire, in 1753. Son of a stonemason, he started working as an errand boy by the architect George Dance before moving to the office of Henry Holland, until the late 1770s.⁴ In 1802 he was appointed full Royal Academician, becoming the third Professor of Architecture at the Royal Academy in 1806, a post that he held until his death.⁵

His personality, as well as his legacy, are complex to define. He was, as the projects that he realised, always floating between lights and shadows, life and death, merging Enlightenment and Roman Neoclassical thoughts to Freemasonry and decadent themes.

Still as a pupil, Soane started to develop an intense interest for Egyptian and Roman art. At that time, Egypt had a strong political appeal: it was seen as the first ancestors of emperor dynasties. Therefore, the use of its symbology within the Roman model was used to reinforce the rising of the new French Empire (1804), or its defeat.⁶ In this sense, the acquisition of the Sarcophagus could be considered as the result of both a personal interest and of a political and cultural context into which Egyptomania was spreading. Egypt, through the Enlightenment, was also seen as the home of all ancient magical

⁴ Gillian Darley. *John Soane: An Accidental Romantic*, (New Haven, Conn., 1999), p. 10.

⁵ Darley, *John Soane*, p. 11.

⁶ Clifford Edmund Bosworth, 'Henry Salt, Consul in Egypt 1816-1827 and Pioneer Egyptologist', *Bulletin of the John Rylands Library* 57, no. 1 (1987), pp. 69-91, p. 82.

lore and Pyramids were regarded as “its supreme embodiment, the elucidation of whose real significance would prove a source of illumination to mankind”.⁷

Unusually for his time, Soane was a keen student of *Hypnerotomachia Poliphili* (1499) by Francesco Colonna which presented “a hallucinatory world of classical ruins and gardens” including Egyptian-inspired monuments such as obelisks and elephants.⁸ Soane’s early knowledge and fascination for Egyptian art, as well as his appeal for ruins, originated from this model as suggested by the later manuscripts *Crude Hints towards a history of my house* written by the architect in 1812. Soane, in the guise of an Antiquary, imagined his home as a future ruin, inspected by visitors speculating on its origins and function, whether it would be interpreted as a Roman Temple dedicated to Jupiter, a burial site or a magician’s lair.⁹

While in Rome in 1776, as part of his three-year grand tour founded by the Royal Academy, Soane’s fantasizing and mannerist knowledges of the past became real. During this period, his way of displaying and collecting took form, especially thanks to Giovanni Battista Piranesi. In *Crude Hints*, he explicitly signals his debt to Piranesi when commenting on his house staircase “this very space, if a staircase, could only have been one of those Carcerian dark staircase represented in some Apollo del Belvedere of Piranesi’s ingenious dream for prisons” (Fig. 2).¹⁰



Fig. 2 Giovanni Battista Piranesi. Frontispiece of *Carceri d'invenzione* di G. Battista Piranesi archit. Vene, 1761.

⁷ Bosworth, ‘Henry Salt’, p. 83.

⁸ David Watkin, ‘Built Ruins: The Hermitage as a Retreat’, in *Vision of Ruin. Architectural Fantasies & Design for Garden Follies*, exhibition catalogue, Sir John Soane’s Museum (London, 1999), pp. 5-14, p. 13.

⁹ Helen Dorey, ‘Crude Hints’, in *Vision of Ruin. Architectural Fantasies & Design for Garden Follies*, exhibition catalogue, Sir John Soane’s Museum, (London, 1999), pp. 53-78, p. 53.

¹⁰ John Soane, ‘Crude Hints towards an History of my House in L[incoln’s]I[nn]Fields’, in *Vision of Ruin. Architectural Fantasies & Design for Garden Follies*, exhibition catalogue, Sir John Soane’s Museum, (London, 1999), pp. 61-74, p. 63.

Piranesi not only influenced Soane's conception of space, but also his understanding of Egyptian art. In his *Apologetical Essay in defense of the Egyptian and Tuscan Architecture* (Fig. 3), which included a series of Egyptianizing tables projects for the Caffè degli Inglesi in Piazza di Spagna where Soane was used to spend his time, Piranesi presented his historicizing approach to architecture advocated by his early mentors, Carlo Lodoli (1690-1761) and Giambattista Vico (1668-1744), in which Egypt was seen as the source of early Roman architecture, rather than Greek.¹¹



Fig. 3 Giovanni Battista Piranesi. Longwall of the Caffè degli Inglesi, plate 45 of the *Divers Manners of Ornamenting Chimneys and All Other Parts of Houses*, 1769.

While in Rome he became also acquainted with the Egyptian and Etruscan collection of Cardinal Alessandro Albani and with the studies of the two Prefect of Antiquities of the Museo Pio Clementino, John Joachim Winckelmann and Ennio Quirino Visconti.¹² The two catalogues later became primary resources for Soane's *Description of the house*, the museum-guide written by the

¹¹ Gian Paolo Consoli. 'Architecture and History: Vico, Lodoli, Piranesi' in *The Serpent and the Stylus: Essays on G.B. Piranesi*, ed. in Mario Bevilacqua, Heather Hyde Minor and Fabio Barry, (Ann Arbor, MI, 2006), pp. 195-210, p. 196. See also Kevin M. McGeough. 'Imagining Ancient Egypt as the Idealized Self', in *Eighteenth-Century Thing Theory in a Global Context: From Consumerism to Celebrity Culture*, ed. Ileana Baird and Christina Ionescu, (Burlington, VT, 2013), p. 89-110, p. 96. For Piranesi's project of the Caffè degli Inglesi see, Giovanni Battista Piranesi. *Divers Manners of Ornamenting Chimneys and all other Parts of Houses Taken from the Egyptian, Tuscan, and Grecian Architecture*, (Rome, 1769). In reference to Piranesi conception of Egypt Art see Rudolf Wittkower. "Piranesi's Contribution to European Egyptomania", in *Selected Lectures of Rudolf Wittkower*, (Cambridge, 1989), pp. 36-59.

¹² John Soane. *Description of the House and Museum on the North Side of Lincoln's Inn Field, the Residence of Sir John Soane. With Graphic Illustrations and incidental details*, (London, 1835) https://archive.org/details/gri_descriptiono00soan/page/n25 (accessed 23/10/2018), p. 4.

architect himself, suggesting how many of his acquisition in Sotheby's and Christie's were modelled upon the Roman-standard of 18th-century collections.¹³

Nevertheless, only after Napoleon's campaign of 1789-1801 Egyptian studies started to flourish around Europe. In 1789 the French troops acquired the *Rosetta Stone*, the key symbol of the Ancient Egypt world, before it was eventually overtaken by the British Army and then delivered to the British Museum.¹⁴

It is during this intense period of trades and rivalry between England and France that the Sarcophagus was found. The Sarcophagus was discovered in October 1817 by the Italian born explorer Giovanni Belzoni during the excavations of the Kings Valley.¹⁵ The expedition was funded by Mr Henry Salt, General Consul of England, and other Englishmen with the specific intention to donate it to the British Museum.¹⁶ Before leaving England, Salt had been commissioned by Sir Joseph Bakers to collect "antiquities and curiosities" for the British Museum, of which Bakers was one of the Trustees.¹⁷ Yet the reason behind Egyptomania was also political, as suggested by William Hamilton memorandum of August 1815 "it would be most cheerfully supported by an enlightened nation, eager to anticipate its rivals in prosecution of the best interests of science and literature".¹⁸

The alabaster piece, which eventually arrived in London in 1821, was first placed in the British Museum, to the trustees of which it was offered for £ 2,000.¹⁹ As Soane wrote in his *Description* "after much negotiation, the idea of purchases it for our National Collection was relinquished".²⁰ It was then acquired by Soane for the same price during a sale at James Christie's in 1824 (Fig. 4).

¹³ Soane, *Description of the House*, p. 4

¹⁴ John Ray, *The Rosetta Stone and the Rebirth of Ancient Egypt*, (London, 2007), p. 15.

¹⁵ Bosworth, 'Henry Salt', p. 84.

¹⁶ Giovanni Belzoni. *Narrative of the operations and recent discoveries within the pyramids, temples, tombs, and excavations, in Egypt and Nubia*, (London, 1820), p 24.

<https://archive.org/details/narrativeofopera00belz/page/n235> (accessed 24/10/2018).

¹⁷ Stanley Mayes, *The Great Belzoni. The Circus Strongman who Discovered Egypt's Ancient Treasures*, (London and New York, 2008), p. 114.

¹⁸ Mayes, *The Great Belzoni*, p. 114.

¹⁹ Soane, *Description of the House*, p. 32.

²⁰ Soane, *Description of the House*, p. 33.



Fig. 4 View of the *Sarcophagus of Seti I*, 1330 BC, in the Belzoni Chamber. Above it are urns and a frieze depicting the abduction of Persephone.

The year 1824 could be considered as the museum *anno domini*. In fact, due to the acquisition of the Sarcophagus, the collection started to be considered of public interest.²¹

The Sarcophagus was not only relevant for his artistic value but it had also an esoteric meaning which can be highlighted through its display in the collection. Before 1824 Soane's collection, which contained a high number of architectural models and drawings from the antique, was considered more as "an Academy for the study of architecture upon principles at once scientific and philosophical".²² A dozen of pupils from the Royal Academy was working in Soane studio, which ran in his house, surrounded by casts of Roman and Renaissance architectural models, using them to exercise in "drawing shadows" or studying in details the exact dimension and proportions of the classical orders.²³

²¹ In March of the following year, Soane's held three separate evening receptions in honour of its acquisition and to help Mrs Sarah Belzoni, the discover's widow, whose 'Exhibition' in Leicester Square (featuring a reconstruction of Seti I's tomb) was to open the following week. He invited his guest to view the Sarcophagus by lamplight and employed William Collins, manufacturer of stained glass and dealer in lighting appliances, to provide lamps throughout the house and inside the Sarcophagus. See Sir John Soane's Museum. *A complete description*, (London, 2008), p. 53.

²² Helen Dorey, 'Death and Memory: the Architecture of Legacy in Sir John Soane's Museum', in *Death and Memory. Soane and the Architecture of Legacy*, exhibition catalogue, Sir John Soane's Museum (London, 2015), pp. 7-19, p. 7.

²³ Danielle S. Willkens, 'Reading Words and Images in the Description (s) of Sir John Soane's Museum', *Architectural Histories* 4, no.1 (2016), pp. 1-22, p. 8.

Soane had already started to orchestrate the transformation of his house into a public museum in the early 1810s with the publication of *Crude Hints towards a History of my House*. The *Crude hints* text is relevant in order to understand the early stage of the Museum.²⁴ As David Watkin suggests “this antique romance can be seen as anticipating Soane’s method of combining evocative works of art in his house and museum”.²⁵ Already in this text, Soane describes the structure of the Dome, built in 1808-09 and to be later renovated due to the arrival of the Sarcophagus, as the Museum, suggesting that a primary idea of it was already developing.²⁶

The *Crude Hints* text was followed, in the 1830s, by three different versions of the *Description of his House*, each “incrementally enshrining the permanence and significance of the collection”.²⁷ The three edition of the catalogue were all dedicated to the United Grand Lodge of England Grand Mason Augustus Frederick, Duke of Sussex.²⁸ It is in this series that the idea of the house-museum as a place to show “the union and close connections between Painting, Sculpture, and Architecture, Music and Poetry” was presented.²⁹ Yet, the development of the text and illustrations over successive editions not only imitate the dynamic of an expanding collection but also establish the relevance of the collection as publicly significant enough to become a Museum. In Soane’s case, “the process of classification and inventory was itself analogous to that of collecting and rearranging the collection; and all these efforts were themselves designed to elevate the pretensions of the fragments he owned into a coherent whole worthy of being a model Museum”.³⁰ Nonetheless, it was not until the entrance of the Sarcophagus that the museum could be considered ‘fulfilled’.

The first example of “union of the arts” is represented by the column in the Monument Court. The column, to which Soane’s refers as the *pasticcio*, is an assemblage of architectural fragments representing the evolution of architecture. It was deliberately inspired by Piranesi’s imaginary compositions combining “a base in the form of a Roman altar with a ‘Moorish’ capital, a neo-classical

²⁴ Susan G. Freidberg, ‘The Genesis of Sir John Soane’s Museum Idea: 1801-1810’, *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians* 43, no. 3 (1984), pp. 225-237, p. 227, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/990003> (accessed 24/10/2018).

²⁵ Watkin, ‘Built Ruins: the Hermitage as a Retreat’, p. 13.

²⁶ Dorey, ‘Crude Hints’, p. 54.

²⁷ John Elsner, “A Collector’s Model of Desire: The House and Museum of Sir John Soane”, *The Culture of Collecting*, ed. Jas Elsner and R. Cardinal, (London, Cambridge and Melbourne, 1994), pp. 155-76, p. 157, <https://www.academia.edu/34194401> (accessed 22/10/2018).

²⁸ “Giovanni Battista Belzoni (1778-1823) also belonged to the Masonic group centering on the Duke of Sussex, who attended Soane’s installation of the Belzoni Sarcophagus in 1825. Other members of this lodge who became Soane’s friends included James Pery (1756-1821), proprietor and editor of the Morning Chronicle, the leading organ of the Whig party. He was one of the few of Soane’s friends who was part of the official procession at Mrs. Soane’s funeral in 1815”. See David Watkin, ‘Freemasonry and Sir John Soane’, in *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians* 54, no. 4 (1995), pp. 402-417, p. 404.

²⁹ Soane, ‘Description of the House’, exordium.

³⁰ Elsner, ‘A collector’s Model of Desire’, p. 159.

element, a Norman capital and a cast-iron finial in Soane's characteristic style surrounded by funeral bronze urns".³¹ This might suggest that the Museum's supreme objects, the Belzoni Sarcophagus, was the last and missing piece to be added to the collection in order to create a "chain of art" through "feathers shed from the wings of Time".³²

Moreover, in the edition of 1835 Soane's targets moved from the "future architects" to "the antiquary", "the student", "the inquisitive man" and ultimately, in glimpse of the Romantic precepts, to "the most original thinker" and the "wildest wanderer in poetic contemplation" suggesting the importance of the collection for a broader public.³³ Besides, the desire to which his collection of antiquarian was displayed in their modern unity was in towards grand reflections on the "destinies of mankind" and to creative production, leading to the "heaven of inventions"³⁴. In this sense, the Sarcophagus was to be considered as the starting point in Soane's personal interpretation of the History of Art that was starting with Egyptian Art and culminating with his works³⁵.



Fig. 4 The Sarcophagus of Seti I in the Belzoni Chamber as illustrated in the *Illustrated London News* in 1864.

³¹ Soane, *Description of the House*, p. 29.

³² Jàs Elsner, 'Architecture, Antiquarianism and Archaeology in Sir John Soane's Museum', in *Appropriating Antiquity*, ed. Athena Tsingarida and Donna Kurts, (Brussels, 2002), pp. 165-216, p. 118.

³³ Elsner, 'A collector's Model of Desire', p. 190.

³⁴ Elsner, 'A collector's Model of Desire', p. 190.

³⁵ Susan Sidlauskas, 'Creating Immortality: Turner, Soane, and the Great Chain of Being', *Art Journal* 52, no. 2 (1993), pp. 59-65, p. 59, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/777239> (accessed 24/10/20).

The evocation of sublimity through Freemasonry symbol was perhaps Soane's supreme achievement, and the Sarcophagus was playing a key role in it. Soane's extensive course of reading in the theory of the French Enlightenment made him aware that Freemasonry, to which he was initiated in 1813, could be regarded as the religion of the Enlightenment.³⁶ He reflected its deistic philosophy in his own references to God as "the Architect of the Universe" in his house, theory that was exemplified also through his intention to "unify the arts"³⁷. In the Dome area, with its glowering light and floating fragments, the evocation of the sublime is achieved through a vertical juxtaposition that exemplified a History of Art ascension. Soane himself still presides over the Dome Area in a bust by Francis Chantrey while statuettes of Michelangelo and Raphael by John Flaxman are at his feet.³⁸ As Helen Dorey suggests "Soane, Lawrence, Chantrey, Flaxman, Michelangelo and Raphael come together to represents the 'union of Architecture, Sculpture and painting 'but also to pay tribute to the Royal Academy where Lawrence was President and Flaxman and Soane professors".³⁹

This display creates a virtual triad in which death is exemplified by the Sarcophagus, while eternal life and wisdom are represented by the white cast of the Apollo del Belvedere. In this visual pyramid, which is the symbol of Freemasonry, Soane's torso is the central focus suggesting that his house was not only intended to be left to the public, but it was also his artistic mausoleum (Fig. 5).⁴⁰



Fig. 5 View from the Dome. Cast of *The Apollo del Belvedere*, c. 1819 and Francis Chantrey, *Bust of Sir John Soane*, 1830 in visual conversation.

³⁶ Watkin, 'Freemasonry and Sir John Soane', p. 402.

³⁷ Watkin, 'Freemasonry and Sir John Soane', p. 402. See also Soane, *Description of the House*, exordium.

³⁸ Willkens, 'Reading Words and Images in the Description', p. 6.

³⁹ Dovey, 'Death and Memory', p. 12

⁴⁰ Peter Thornton, *Colour in Soane's House*, (Copenhagen, 1989), p. 209.

Soane died in 1837 turning his collection into the public domain. Earlier in 1833, the collection was donated by an Act of Parliament to the nation with the stipulation that the “Trustees and their successors shall not (except in Cases of absolute Necessity) suffer the arrangement in which the said Museum or Collection or Library respectively shall be left by the said Sir John Soane at the time of his decease to be altered”.⁴¹ As John Elsner suggests the Act served to “embodies and freezes for posterity the moment at which collecting (and redeploying a collection) ceases, the movement when the museum begins”⁴². Moreover, what was preserved was not only just a collection, eluding its dispersion and assimilation to a greater whole, such as the British Museum, but its context of display to a fixed final state⁴³.

The *Sarcophagus of Seti I* is still considered as the greatest piece in Soane’s museum. As the museum display had frozen at Soane death, the museum had not lost its Edwardian appeal, although its complex *mise-en-scene* is difficult to understand. Besides, the visitor who enters the museum nowadays is probably not even well documented on the importance of the museum in his historical context. His visit will only limit to a voyeuristic experience, rather than fully appreciate the hidden histories of the museum.

Nevertheless, the intention to preserve and document the history to the public is pursued by a series of temporary exhibition such as *Diverse Maniere: Piranesi, Fantasy and Excess* (2014); *Death and Memory: Soane and the Architecture of Legacy* (2015-2016) and *Egypt Uncovered: Belzoni and the Tomb of Pharaoh Seti I* (2017-2018). All this exhibition shared as a common ground the relevance of the Sarcophagus within the museum tracing, each in a different way, its history and connection in the collection.

Once again Soane’s legacy, as documented by the contemporary art program of the museum, could only be understood while comparing his Roman Neoclassical appreciation of ancient art to his Freemasonry and Romantic spirit. Yet, Soane’s aim to “unity the arts” through is *Gesamtkunstwerk* is still well preserved, suggesting that his desire to lead to the “heaven of invention” is still pursued. The *Sarcophagus of Seti I* remains the museum *coup de théâtre*, proving the importance of Soane’s singular and eclectic contribution to the museological display of antiquities in the glimpse of his personal acknowledges of antiquities.⁴⁴

⁴¹ Soane, *Description of the House*, p. 101

⁴² Elsner, ‘A collector’s model of Desire’, p. 156.

⁴³ Elsner, A collector’s model of Desire’, p. 157.

⁴⁴ David Watkin, *Sir John Soane: Enlightenment Thought and the Royal Academy Lectures*, (Cambridge, 1996), p. 219.

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