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‘An Ornamental Structure and Very Likely to be Damaged . . . ’: 
Sir John Soane’s Tomb in St Pancras Gardens, London

by ROGER BOWDLER AND CHRISTOPHER WOODWARD

Sir John Soane’s tomb in St Pancras Gardens, London (Fig. 1), has a claim to popular fame as the inspiration for Sir Giles Gilbert Scott’s design of the K2 telephone kiosk. It is also one of only two tombs in London to be listed Grade I; the other is Karl Marx’s in Highgate Cemetery.

Although no taller than a telephone box, it is the most assertive tomb to be designed by a British architect for his own use. It is a masterpiece of multum in parvo — or, as Soane’s assistant said of his master’s Museum, ‘a conglomerate of vast ideas in little’. Previous studies have tended to evaluate the structure in the context of Soane’s architectural style, as an extreme expression of a highly personal manner. Studied in the context of the Georgian churchyard its design is even more startling: it was the boldest, subtlest, and most perplexing tomb in London. Soane broke every rule in the highly conventional language of churchyard commemoration, prefiguring the bombastic exuberance of the Kensal Green necropolis by two decades.

ELIZA’S DEATH

Soane was buried here in 1837 but the tomb was originally designed for his wife, Eliza, who died in 1815 at the age of 53. Her death was all the more traumatic to Soane because it was precipitated by the disloyal actions of George, their younger son. Two anonymous newspaper articles ridiculing Soane’s abilities as an architect were published in London’s Champion newspaper on 10 and 24 September 1815. When Eliza, seriously ill from gallstones, saw them she said, ‘This is George’s doing. He has given me my death blow. I can never hold up my head again.’ She died in the early hours of 22 November and was buried nine days later. Subsequently, George was exposed as the anonymous author and Soane displayed the fatal articles in the house, labelled with an inscription carved on a blunt piece of wood: ‘Death Blows given by George Soane / 10th & 24th: Sept. 1815.’
Fig. 1. View of the Soane tomb in St Pancras Gardens, London, from south-west

Fig. 2. View by Henry Parke, a pupil of Soane, of the monument under construction, 17 April 1816 (SM 63/7/13). Reproduced by courtesy of the Trustees of Sir John Soane’s Museum, London
The burial ground at St Pancras had opened in 1802, on a site adjacent to the ancient church which gives the area its name. It serviced the parish of St Giles-in-the-Fields, which contains No. 13 Lincoln’s Inn Fields, and whose old churchyard was notoriously overcrowded. The new burial ground joined a necklace of new cemeteries which had encircled the capital from the early eighteenth century onwards. Both St Martin’s-in-the-Fields and St James’s, Piccadilly, had overspill burial grounds within a mile of St Pancras.

Figure 2 shows the banality of the site. It was a flat field of heavy clay, and the picturesque old church of St Pancras was concealed by a perfunctory brick boundary wall. This view was painted by a pupil of Soane in April 1816 to show the progress of the construction of the monument placed over her grave. A superstructure of this type had no practical function but was purely rhetorical, expressing the grief of the relict and elevating the thoughts of the audience above the grim reality of bodily decay. A more urgent priority was the construction of a vault in the days before her funeral on 1 December. Eliza was buried in a subterranean brick chamber on a plot purchased by Soane and measuring 7 ft by 7 ft 6 in. Its envelope of masonry protected the body from the cold earth, and thus addressed the relict’s natural horror of the loved one’s decay; no less importantly, as freehold property it ensured that the interments would never be disturbed. A vault was a privilege for the wealthy and, as London’s population soared, the corpses of the poor would regularly be disinterred to make room for new arrivals. As early as 1818 a bone house was built at St Pancras to house such remains; no wonder that a writer of 1867 described the ground of the cemetery as ‘fetid and feculent’. Protection from grave-robbers was also an urgent requirement and the Soane vault was capped with a heavy slab of stone. Bodies had been snatched from this very site, and the adjacent churchyard of Old St Pancras was notorious in this respect.

However, the danger of grave-robbery was only acute in the immediate aftermath of burial: decomposition made the corpse unappealing, even for an anatomist.

In this period very few burials had any memorial above ground. Records for a comparable cemetery, that of St George’s Bloomsbury, show that of the 186 people buried there in 1815 only two were given tomb-stones. In Georgian London death was as hierarchical as life: a tombstone, or an engraved slab, was the most basic form of memorial and a chest-tomb was a privilege for a fractional percentage of the population. At the apex of the pyramid was the mausoleum, a sepulchral structure with an accessible interior. At Sir Howard Colvin’s count, approximately 70 mausolea were built in Britain in the reign of George III.

Soane began to consider the form of a monument to Eliza three months after her death, in February 1816. Since opening in 1802 the burial ground had acquired no monuments of note; only a single chest-tomb is visible in views of the site. The Soane family tomb would have no rivals. In 1826 the sculptor John Flaxman, Soane’s friend and Britain’s other outstanding neo-classical artist, was buried a few yards away but under a plain stone slab.

**Description of the Design**

The core of the executed monument is an upright, rectangular block of marble with Eliza’s epitaph inscribed on the west face (Fig. 3). This is enclosed by a quadruple
Fig. 3. View of south elevation, showing epitaph to Sir John Soane

Fig. 4. Preliminary design, showing Soane’s initial conception (SM 63/7/26). Reproduced by courtesy of the Trustees of Sir John Soane’s Museum, London

Fig. 5. Perspective view of Soane’s design by Joseph Gandy, exhibited at the Royal Academy in 1816 (SM 14/4/8). Reproduced by courtesy of the Trustees of Sir John Soane’s Museum, London
aedicule formed of four Ionic columns supporting pediments, also carved from marble. This is placed inside a canopy formed by a shallow dome placed on four piers. Surmounted by a pineapple, it is made of Portland stone. This, in turn, is enclosed by a balustrade whose heavy parapet, also of Portland stone, is carved in ornamental patterns of a design which is unique to Soane. The balusters are of Coade stone, the only off-the-peg element of the design.

The marble memorial block is a double cube of Carrara marble, costing £57 in a masonry contract totalling £425.12 ‘I never saw such beautiful marble anywhere’, remarked Soane’s friend the poetess Mrs Hofland when she visited that summer.13 The quarries at Carrara had been closed to British stone-merchants throughout the years of war with the French, and Soane was one of the first to benefit from their re-opening after the fall of Napoleon. For posthumous commemoration this type of marble was the classical material par excellence. Marble had been introduced to London’s churchyards some considerable time before. At St George’s-in-the-East there is an opulent marble memorial to the Raines family of 1725,14 and Henry Joynes, builder of Blenheim, was buried at Hendon in 1754 under an urn-topped pedestal of marble. Its use remained rare, however, owing to its poor weathering in the English climate. Lavinia Banks, daughter of the sculptor Thomas, justified the simplicity of the brick ledger she chose for her father’s tomb in Paddington churchyard by observing that ‘the white marble placed in the open air would not have answered the purpose of securing his respected remains.’15 The sheltered position of Soane’s block of Carrara marble emphasizes its preciousness, and also the architect’s perfectionism in the use of materials: the epitaph to Eliza remains legible to this day.

The use of marble is all the more emphatic because of its startling blankness: its surface is left bare of ornament, almost as if too precious to carve. The intended effect is shown by the view painted for the 1816 Royal Academy exhibition by Joseph Gandy, Soane’s perspective artist and visualizing amanuensis (Fig. 5). The duller surface of the Portland stone canopy is contrasted with the shimmering surface of the marble block, which glows as if a translucent block of ice. Eliza’s monument was conceived as a pure, unblemished core placed within a protective, masculine embrace.

The first reference to the design of the tomb in Soane’s diary is for Sunday 11 February 1816. A friend called at midday and after his departure Soane stayed ‘At home the rest of the day about Monument &c’ until friends came to dinner, at five o’clock.16 In those few solitary hours of Sunday afternoon Soane conceived the idea represented by Figure 4, the first of a sequence of 43 drawings at Sir John Soane’s Museum. The inner aedicule and the marble block are shown as they were to be executed but the outer canopy is bare of ornamentation, emphasizing the strength of its embrace. The dome is a monolith of almost oppressive weight and to Summerson it seemed ‘brutally crude and primitive — almost dolmen-like’.17

Summerson found a source for its unusual form in a Roman cinerary urn illustrated by Montfaucon in L’Antiquité Expliquée (1719), a heavily-annotated copy of which is in Soane’s library.18 Alternatively, James Stevens Curl has suggested that the use of shallow segmental arches to form a canopy may be influenced by Freemasonry, noting the correlation of pediments of this form to the Egyptian Temples of Isis which were so significant to the cult and that in 1813 Soane had been appointed Grand...
Superintendent of Works to the Freemasons’ Hall.\textsuperscript{19} Soane chose this form of dome for its spatial effect, however, and not for any symbolic reason. Its use predates his investigation of Masonic iconography by several decades, and nor was the shape ‘lifted’ from an antique source. It was devised in 1786 when William Beckford had commissioned him to convert a low and windowless corridor at Fonthill Splendens, Wiltshire, into a picture gallery and in response Soane designed a sequence of shallow top-lit domes.\textsuperscript{20} These became the leitmotiv of his personal style, refined to perfection in the Breakfast Room at No. 13 Lincoln’s Inn Fields (1813). Soane had put the same form to external use in designing the cupola of Dulwich Picture Gallery (1812) and acroteria to the gate-piers at Pitzhanger Manor in Ealing (c. 1800). Here, however, it is not a dome but a small and ornamental finial, the finishing touch to a tiered composition. The tomb represents its first external use of this form as a dome enclosing an entire structure.

The inspiration for this change is a hitherto undiscussed monument in the churchyard of St Mary’s in South Woodford, London: the Raikes mausoleum (Fig. 6). This was erected in 1800 to house Martha, wife of William Raikes, and two years later she was joined by her brother Job Matthew, Governor of the Bank of England. Soane, the Bank’s architect, was involved, but only to the extent of supervising the final stages of its construction. His journal for 29 September 1800 records a visit to Woodford to survey ‘works done by Mr Gibson’, and in October 1801 he was approving payments to the letter-cutter.\textsuperscript{21} It is not known if ‘Mr Gibson’ is Jesse Gibson (c. 1748–1828), an architect with strong City connexions. Its design is reminiscent of the sentinel pavilions designed by Gabriel in the Place de la Concorde, Paris (1755).

The mausoleum is a gaunt cube of Portland stone with the angles expressed as bare shafts, capped by a heavily-stepped roof and four pediments of shallow segmental form. Its façade does not invite access to the internal space. The Soane tomb, and particularly its initial visualization (Fig. 5), uses masonry to express protective weight in exactly the same way but succeeds in combining this forbidding gravitas with a vulnerable transparency. It fuses the Raikes mausoleum with the aedicular type of monument exemplified by the cenotaph erected to honour Jean-Jacques Rousseau in 1794 (Fig. 7).

The aedicular form had been chosen for the grandest internal church monuments from the thirteenth to the seventeenth centuries but its use in churchyards was rare. There were a handful of notable eighteenth-century precedents, however. The most famous was the monument to Sir Hans Sloane (d. 1753) at All Saints’, Chelsea, carved by Joseph Wilton in 1763, in which an urn is placed on a high plinth and enclosed by an aedicule. A less well-known example was at St John the Baptist, Hillingdon, where an elaborate Grecian canopy carried on eight Doric colonettes enclosed the sarcophagus of John Rich (d. 1761), the celebrated theatrical impresario and creator of the English pantomime.\textsuperscript{22} Soane would have admired Sloane as the greatest benefactor of public collections of his day, and Rich for his theatrical and artistic patronage.

The most interesting modern example of the aedicule was the cenotaph erected to Jean-Jacques Rousseau in the gardens of the Tuileries in Paris in 1794, in preparation for the ceremonial interment of his ashes in the Panthéon (Fig. 7). The urn is placed inside an aedicule mounted on a podium but is inaccessible, isolated in a basin of
Fig. 6. The Raikes family mausoleum in the churchyard of St Mary's, South Woodford, London, built in 1800. English Heritage Photographic Library

Fig. 7. The cenotaph to Jean-Jacques Rousseau erected in the Tuileries, Paris, in November 1794, painted by Hubert Robert. Oil on canvas, 62 x 81 cm. National Gallery of Ireland

Fig. 8. The tomb in an imaginary landscape, a watercolour made by a Soane pupil in March 1816. The sarcophagus of Jean-Jacques Rousseau at Émenonville is visible on the right-hand side (SM 14/4/9). Reproduced by courtesy of the Trustees of Sir John Soane’s Museum, London
water. Flanked by poplar trees, the cenotaph evokes the philosopher’s original grave on an island at Ermenonville, the garden near Paris where he died in 1778. Soane was a follower of Rousseau, and his sarcophagus at Ermenonville is included in the background of a later watercolour by a pupil which places the Soane tomb in an imaginary landscape (Fig. 8). Whether Soane knew what the temporary shrine of his hero looked like cannot be proved; yet the combination of an aedicular tomb, transparent yet sheltering, with the cult of the quintessential man of feeling is too striking to be overlooked.

At the end of February, two weeks after he had conceived the monument, Soane added a balustrade to the design. This is illustrated by Gandy in Figure 4. This is remarkable enough: every other tomb in England, however grand, made do with a slender iron railing. But Soane was not satisfied, and in a design of 12 March he monumentalized this screen by adding the decorations visible in Figure 11: scrolled pediments as acroteria, ornamental ridging, and even sculptures of cherubs. He also considered treating the entrance as a gateway with a low, heavy lintel — as also seen in Figure 8 — but soon abandoned this idea. Perhaps he remembered how small the structure really is: the mourning figures in Figure 4 would be 18 inches high in reality.

This monumental surround strengthened Soane’s protective embrace but, simultaneously, he made the inner sanctum more vulnerable by constructing a flight of steps to the vault. Pharaonic in mood, they descend to an entrance sealed with a stone slab (Fig. 9). This feature required the purchase of a second, adjacent burial plot at an extra expense of £37 16s. od. The standard method of entering a vault, as was necessary each time a member of the family died, was to burrow down at one end of the tomb and insert the coffin through this narrow trench; some of the lower slabs on late Georgian tombs are actually inscribed ‘vault this end’. The entrance created by Soane was unique. The only other example in London of a similar arrangement is the neoclassical tomb of the great engineer Sir Joseph Bazalgette (d. 1891) in Wimbledon churchyard. Bazalgette constructed London’s great sewers, and the descent to his subterranean vault is faced with massive blocks of stone which evoke this Herculean achievement. In Soane’s case the only possible explanation is his psychological compulsion to display his wounds, as evidenced by his public exhibition of the ‘Death Blows’ articles.

We are also reminded of the mausoleum he designed at Dulwich Picture Gallery (1812) for the bodies of its founders, Sir Francis Bourgeois and Mr and Mrs Noel Desenfans. Colvin has observed that the unique feature of this mausoleum was the way in which Soane presented burial in theatrical terms, placing the dead on the stage and the viewer in the position of an auditorium. Sarcophagi are placed on three sides of the chamber while the visitor stands on the fourth, as if on the threshold of mortality.

Dulwich is a mausoleum, and hence has an accessible internal space. St Pancras is a churchyard monument; so the suggestion of an inner volume was perhaps a steeper challenge. The visitor’s gaze, and his thoughts, are drawn to the inner sanctum but he is denied physical access. The conflict between resistance and enticement is the essence of Soane’s design, and it is this tension which gives this diminutive structure such a mesmerizing presence.
Fig. 9. The tomb from the south, showing the exposed entrance to the family vault below the monument.

Fig. 10. Elevation of the preliminary design showing the symbolic ornamentation, drawn by a Soane pupil on 13 February 1816 (SM 63/7/3). Reproduced by courtesy of the Trustees of Sir John Soane’s Museum, London.

Fig. 11. View of tomb from north-east, showing ornamental balustrade and the cherubs in the dice.
SYMBOLISM

The basic form conceived on Sunday 11 February was soon overlaid with symbolism, as represented in a drawing made by a pupil three days later (Fig. 10). Soane’s choice of symbols can be understood by turning to David Watkin’s Sir John Soane: Enlightenment Thought and the Royal Academy Lectures (1996). Since his appointment as Professor of Architecture in 1806 Soane had immersed himself in the study of Enlightenment ideas and the search for ‘first principles’ in architecture. The family tomb is the first uncompromised architectural expression of this intellectual study and, in particular, his conviction that the symbolic ornament of a modern structure should be justified by its function. As has been noted, no traditional Christian symbol is in evidence.

The finial of the tomb is a pineapple. This was commonly used in the decoration of Roman cinerary urns as a symbol of regeneration, and in a lecture illustration reconstructing Hadrian’s mausoleum in Rome Soane crowned its dome with ‘a pineapple of bronze.’ Watkin has suggested that its use may also have been prompted by the writings of Pierre-François Hugues (1719–1805), the art historian, pornographer and self-styled Baron d’Hancarville. In d’Hancarville’s theories the ancient religions of the world shared a common symbolic language, with the pineapple representative of the creator.

Incised into the face of each pediment is a wavy, continuous line which Colvin has interpreted as a symbol of eternity. No source has been established for this but it may be connected to Soane’s involvement in Freemasonry; as mentioned, he had been appointed Grand Superintendent of Works two years before. C. R. Cockerell was later to describe the similar pattern used by Soane in the Rotunda of the Bank of England as ‘a certain Masonic wave, characteristically called Whore’s Lace’.

As has been described, in Soane’s final embellishments of the design the flat parapet around the structure became curved in form, decorated with rows of semi-circular antefixes (Fig. 11). Its design can be understood as an abstraction and miniaturization of the lid of an antique sarcophagus. Each corner pier is faced by rectangular drops, described by Colvin as ‘stalactite-like fingers’. Their source remains a mystery but Summerson has compared them persuasively to a similar pattern painted as cornice decoration in the Front Parlour of Pitzhanger Manor (1802), in itself derived from the murals in the Roman villa which Soane saw excavated in the grounds of the Villa Negroni, Rome, in 1778. They might also be compared to the dentil cornice of bare brick which Soane favoured: the façade of No. 12 Lincoln’s Inn Fields (1792) is one of several examples. Whichever the original source, the ‘stalactite-like fingers’ underline his interest in the abstract tendencies in Roman art, and his tendency to reduce three-dimensional sculptural ornament to linear patterns incised into a surface. The piers supporting the dome of the tomb have capitals incised with a pattern of a Greek key and volute, a version of the Ionic capital which Soane had introduced in interiors of the Bank of England.

The balustrade around the structure incorporates sculptures of young boys, each holding a snuffed torch to symbolize the extinction of life. This is the attribute of Thanatos, the Greek personification of Death, and was commonly found on classical
sarcophagi. Its appearance in English tomb sculpture remained relatively rare, particularly in external situations. Perhaps the most prominent example of its revival in recent sepulchral tomb sculpture was Canova’s monument to Pope Clement XIII in St Peter’s, Rome (1783–92). There, a languid boy is dwarfed by a domineering figure of Faith but the cherubs in Soane’s tomb offered no such consolations.

The final element in the iconography of the tomb is the serpent coiled around the circular drum surmounting the dome. Serpents were not an uncommon sight in English churchyards: the monuments to Sir Hans Sloane and John Rich included them, as did the majority of Soane’s monumental designs from the tablet to Claude Bosanquet in St Stephen’s, Coleman Street, London (1786) onwards. But the serpent at St Pancras is unusual in two respects. Firstly, it is swallowing its own tail, an emblem of eternity known as an ouroboros. This device appeared twice in George Wither’s Collection of Emblemes of 1635 and its earliest use as an architectural ornament in Britain is on the tomb-chest of Francis Barker (d. 1710) in the churchyard at Petersham, Surrey. Its next appearance is as a bas-relief in John Wood’s design for an altar at Tyberton church in Herefordshire (1728–32); there, it was Masonic in inspiration. Although it became a popular device in mourning jewellery, Wood’s bas-relief remained an isolated example of its use in architecture. Secondly, Soane was the first architect to use the ouroboros to encircle an entire structure. The idea came from George Dance, his first teacher, who exhibited a design for a circular mausoleum entwined by a serpent at the Royal Academy exhibition of 1785. The design was not executed but the drawing must have been scrutinized by Soane, for two months later he coiled an ouroboros around the base of a memorial column erected in the grounds of Felbridge Hall, Surrey.

Soane’s interest in the emblem was quickened by his preparation for the Royal Academy lectures. D’Hancarville had stressed the serpent’s symbolic significance and while reading this passage Soane noted that the reptile was ‘an emblem of the sun of time of eternity and by the Egyptians worshipped as a divinity.’ Barbara Hofland, his close friend and a poet, had a more personal interpretation in a eulogy to Eliza published in January 1817. Describing John Soane’s connubial bliss she commented:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{Hath he not also known (unblest in this)} \\
\text{To drain from Disappointment’s bitterest source} \\
\text{The very dregs of vile ingratitude,} \\
\text{(The ‘Serpent’s Tooth’, which gnaws while it destroys,)}
\end{align*}
\]

The serpent feeding on itself becomes a symbol of self-destructive ingratitude and, more poignantly, of George’s betrayal. Thus the tomb was biographical construction as much as an architectural one. Soane’s sepulchral trademark, the serpent, found no more emotive employment than this.

It is also possible to interpret the skeleton hurling a spear in Joseph Gandy’s view of the tomb as a personification of George. George’s epitaph would have been inscribed on this north-facing tablet if he had been admitted to the family vault. The figure of the skeleton is directly derived from Roubiliac’s monument to Mrs Nightingale in Westminster Abbey (1761) and from Bernini’s monument to Pope Alexander VII in St Peter’s, Rome. However, its presence in Gandy’s perspective does not mean that
Soane proposed its inclusion in actuality, as has been argued. This traditional Christian symbol of Death was becoming extinct in funeral iconography and it would have been all the more incongruous in a monument which so proudly displays the cerebral iconography of the Enlightenment. Gandy’s perspective is a representation of a design, not a design in itself. His role as an artist was to impress visitors to the Royal Academy exhibition and the most plausible explanation for the inclusion of this rattling anachronism is that he wished to heighten the emotional impact of the image.

CONSTRUCTION AND AFTER-LIFE
The erection of a monument was only one episode in the process of private mourning and public commemoration. Soane could not bring himself to visit St Pancras until the first anniversary of Eliza’s funeral, writing in his diary ‘Go to St Pancras... my wounds bleed afresh.’ The tomb was under construction in April 1816 and each day he dispatched a pupil to the site to make a small watercolour sketch showing its progress. Figure 12 is inscribed, ‘The monument as it appeared on Good Friday 12 April 1816.’ The dome was winched into place the following day; Figure 2 shows the state of progress on 17 April. Soane’s mental vision of the site is represented by four large drawings commissioned from his pupils during the final stages of its design, each a bird’s-eye perspective placing the monument in romantic isolation in an English Elysium of rolling, sylvan hills (Fig. 8). Once again we are reminded of Rousseau, the first public figure to be buried in a garden since antiquity.

Subsequently, a view was published as the frontispiece The European Magazine and London Review of January 1817, showing the tomb in the barren reality of St Pancras.
burial ground. It was highly unusual for a tomb of a private citizen to be given such prominence and, as though to underscore the curiously public nature of Soane’s grief, the image was followed by five poems: ‘Epitaphs by different Friends, offered as Tributes of Esteem, and for the Choice of MR SOANE’.

Barbara Hofland’s contribution was chosen as the epitaph. The burial ground at St Pancras was a continuous presence in Soane’s life. He was interred himself in 1837 but already, in 1823, had laid to rest his elder son John, a victim of tuberculosis. Four years later he refused George permission to bury his young daughter Caroline there. Father and son were never reconciled and George was never permitted admission to the family vault. The blankness of the tablet reserved for him on the north face of the monument serves as an implicit and ironic dedication.

The tomb was also a presence at his home at No. 13 Lincoln’s Inn Fields, built just two years before Eliza’s death. Soane displayed a scale model of the monument in the Library-Dining Room, commemorating Eliza and also reminding him of his own inevitable entombment. As he grew older and blinder, the shadow of his memento mori loomed larger on its sombre red walls. In 1828 he published a résumé of his career, Designs for Public and Private Buildings, which concluded with a ground plan of his house and Museum and, on the facing page, a view of the tomb. The first is captioned a ‘Temporary Domicile’ and the latter his ‘Domus Aeterna’, the classical conception of a mausoleum’s purpose.

SOANE AND POSTERITY

What motivated Soane to erect a monument of such assertiveness? The tomb was a deeply moving eulogy to Eliza but it was also a monument to Soane himself. Her epitaph is on the side elevation of the monument and Soane’s is on the south, inscribed over the entrance to the vault: Sir John Soane / R.A. F.R.S. / Architect to the Bank of England / &c &c &c (Fig. 3). Eliza was the first occupant, but Soane would always be foremost.

At one level, the monument proclaims Soane’s social status and his desire to establish a dynasty of architects. Born the son of a country bricklayer, he was deeply sensitive to his rivals’ taunts regarding his humble origins. The assertive stance of his monument, its bespoke design and its costly materials, proclaim the achievements of a self-made man in the same way as the projecting stone façade of No. 13 Lincoln’s Inn Fields shoulders aside the plain brick fronts of more reticent neighbours. In this it prefigures the bourgeois triumphalism of the Kensal Green Cemetery, opened in North London in 1833. This private necropolis celebrated the self-expression of the self-made and was in itself inspired by the cemetery of Père Lachaise in Paris whose monuments Victor Hugo had derided as ‘hideous, frilly little buildings with their boxes and compartments where Parisians tidy their fathers away into drawers. . . Family vaults, the ultimate bourgeois chest of drawers.’

And does Soane’s profession also help to explain the importance he attached to his monument? Is an architect particularly sensitive to the mutability of posterity, taught that architecture is the most enduring of the arts but every day handling perishable materials and haggling over the short-term demands of clients and contractors?
Probably, but a comparison of Soane with his contemporaries shows that he was the only architect to use his own tomb to challenge posterity. Every other successful practitioner of the Georgian period followed the example of Sir Christopher Wren, buried in the crypt of St Paul’s Cathedral with a modest tablet inscribed SI MONUMENTUM REQUIRIS CIRCUMSPICE. Wren’s monument was an exemplar in two respects: firstly, in suggesting that an architect should be remembered by his contribution to the built environment shared by the public and not by his private monument and, secondly, that he should choose a humble burial in proximity to an acknowledged masterpiece. Dance, Mylne, Wyatt, Wyatville, Adam and Chambers are recorded by modest memorial slabs in locations which confirm their public status. John Wood of Bath, Talman, Gibbs, Hawksmoor, Holland and Nash have monuments in their local churches and churchyards, each of which is deliberately self-effacing. The only architect’s monument to rival Soane’s is Thomas Archer’s at Hale in Hampshire but this is better explained by his status as an independent gentleman.51

A more rewarding explanation can be found by exploring new ideas of commemorating artistic genius for posterity. In an important essay, Giles Waterfield has placed Soane in the vanguard of the Romantic movement of creating artists’ shrines, showing that although it was the founders’ wish to be buried in ‘some little nook’ of the Dulwich Picture Gallery it was the architect’s initiative to display their sarcophagi in a central and dominant position.52 To Soane, the mausoleum was the Gallery’s centre of spiritual gravity and an integral element of any sightseeing visit to the collection. Waterfield compares this to Canova’s church and mausoleum begun at Possagno, Italy in 1818 and Bertel Thorvaldsen’s Museum in Copenhagen. This began construction in the 1830s and at his death in 1844 Thorvaldsen was buried in the central courtyard.

The ‘artist-memorial’ was an element in the Romantic period’s heroic expression of the artist, and is exemplified by Soane’s own Museum. Its creation has been described elsewhere,53 and one detail will suffice to illustrate the theme under discussion. Sir Francis Chantrey’s marble bust of Soane is placed on a pedestal in the central Dome of the Museum, presiding over a Piranesian scene of classical sculpture, antique fragments, and the sarcophagus of Pharaoh Seti I (Fig. 13). When the bust was delivered in 1830 it was displayed in a recess off the staircase containing more personal memorabilia but in October 1833 it was moved to the more public stage of the Dome,54 shortly after the house and its contents had become a public Museum by Act of Parliament. The Act included the stipulation that the Curator ‘shall keep it as nearly as possible in the state in which Sir John Soane shall leave it.’55 Soane was eighty years old and preparing for his permanent absence; it is almost as if he were withdrawing into the role of a ghost. In his 1835 Description of the Museum Soane incorporated rhapsodic passages of prose by Barbara Hofland, and it is when she meets her friend’s image that she pauses to reflect on how the generosity of Soane’s legacy had ensured ‘the permanency of this establishment. Other Museums have been scattered when their authors died, or have been individually lost, from their union with the national one...’56

Soane died on 20 January 1837. Ten days before his death he had made a final adjustment to the presentation of his collection. For many years a painting of the tomb at St Pancras had been hung above a bookcase on the north wall of the Breakfast
Room but now Soane placed a small statuette representing ‘Victory’ in front of this image, deliberately interrupting the visitor’s sightline. The significance of this gesture has been explained as an assertion of the victory of the spirit over Death. While his bones rotted at St Pancras, Soane’s spirit soared ascendant in Lincoln’s Inn Fields.

The burial ground at St Pancras was closed in the 1850s and in the following decade the Midland Railway sliced across its perimeter. The Soane tomb already showed signs of vandalism and neglect. His heirs did not maintain the structure, and none of his descendants were buried there. In 1870 the Curator of the Museum complained to the Parish about their failure to protect the tomb and the Rector replied, ‘Sir John Soane’s Monument is an ornamental structure and very likely to be damaged, and it is in fact quite out of place in a ground of this description, and we would submit to you that it would be much better to remove it to the Museum itself and put a flat stone over the remains to mark the place of interment.’

The Rector had failed to appreciate that the raison d’être of a monument is to be a symbolic shelter for the human remains buried underfoot. Nevertheless, he had unwittingly put his finger on the unique relationship between Soane’s tomb and his Museum. They were two sides of the same coin: an obsession with posterity.

The monument is in St Pancras Gardens on Midland Road, approximately half a mile north of St Pancras Station. The gardens are in the care of Camden Council and open during daylight hours. Restored by the Soane Monuments Trust in 1990, it has recently been vandalized.

NOTES

SIR JOHN SOANE'S TOMB

2 See Susan Palmer, The Soanes at Home (1997), pp. 79–80, for a description of her illness, her death, and her funeral.


5 The wall was demolished when the two burial grounds were amalgamated as St Pancras Gardens in 1877.

6 Recording drawing and site plan in Soane Museum, hereafter SM (63/7/2).


9 London Metropolitan Archives, P82/GEO/65: St George’s Bloomsbury, rough burial register 1814–27.


12 Payment to the mason Thomas Grundy. The total cost of his contract was £42 5s. 8d. (SM Private Correspondence XIV.C.1.20). The bill from the bricklayer, Thomas Poynder & Son, came to £107 18s. 6d.


14 According to Dr Eric Robinson of the London Geological Society the tomb to Anne Gibson (d. 1827) in St George’s Gardens, Bloomsbury, is one of the very earliest appearances of an outdoor marble tomb in London.

15 Writing in 1805; see Bowdler (1996), p. 29.

16 Soane Notebooks (SNB), 11 February 1816: ‘Mr Eliason at 12 / At home the rest of the day about Monument &c / Mr & Mrs Hofland dined here...’


18 Ibid., p. 134.


20 Christopher Woodward, William Beckford and Fonthill Splendens', Apollo (February 1998), pp. 31–40. The Picture Gallery at Fonthill was not executed.


22 1952 photographs in the NMR show the monument intact. Its subsequent dismantling is a considerable loss.


25 For Rousseau’s tomb at Ermenonville see ibid., p. 100.

26 The first drawing to show this is SM 63/7/29, dated 12 March 1816.

27 SNB 19 February 1816 ‘... Pd for addt. Land at Pancras 37.16.o.’


30 Summerson (1990), p. 137.


37 A suggestion by Ptolemy Dean; oral communication.

38 Its first appearance was in the 3% Consols Office of 1798.

39 The church was destroyed by enemy action in 1940. Soane’s designs for monuments are catalogued in Giles Waterfield, Soane and Death (1996).

40 George Withers, A Collection of Emblemes, Ancient and Modern (1635), fols 102 & 157.
1. Tim Mowl, *John Wood* (Bath, 1988), pp. 56–58. Wood incorporated several ouroboroi in the frieze above the ground-floor windows of the King’s Circus, Bath, designed in 1754. It is also to be seen in the 1732 monument to William Lytton Strode in the church at Knebworth, Hertfordshire: the serpent becomes a bowling hoop for a cherub.

2. See Waterfield (1996), p. 85. The column was erected by James Evelyn to honour his parents and in the 1920s was moved to Lemmington Hall, Northumberland. Soane also used this device to ornament the lantern in an unexecuted design for a new church at Tyringham, Buckinghamshire (1800). It would have served as a funerary chapel for the family of William Praed.


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44. Published in *The European Magazine*, lxxi (January-June 1817), p. 8.


46. SNB 1 December 1816.


48. George wrote to Soane on 5 December 1827 to ‘request permission to lay your Grandchild by the side of her Grandmother, and her Uncle. . .’

49. A typical instance is Joseph Farington’s record of Henry Fuseli’s remark, made in 1808, on ‘Soane’s peevish and little mind expressed in a manner which might only have been expected from a Footman’. See David Weinglass (ed.), *The Collected English Letters of Henry Fuseli* (1982), p. 364.


51. George Dance (d. 1825) was buried in St Paul’s Cathedral in recognition of his long service as Surveyor to the City Corporation (Dorothy Stroud, *George Dance* (1971), pp. 18–20). Hawkesmoor is buried at Shenley, Hertfordshire (Kerry Downes, *Nicholas Hawksmoor* (1979), pp. 6–7). Holland (d. 1806) shared the tomb he designed for his parents in All Saints’, Fulham (Dorothy Stroud, *Henry Holland* (1966), p. 152). Wilkins chose the chapel of Corpus Christi College, Cambridge (R. W. Liscombe, *William Wilkins* (Cambridge, 1980), p. 232). John Nash is the churchyard of East Cowes, Isle of Wight (Summerson, *John Nash* (1980), pp. 188–89) and it was rumoured that he was buried at night to escape angry creditors who were keen to arrest his corpse.


54. Ibid., p. 77.


57. Dorey and Thornton (1992), p. 94. The Trustees’ Minutes of 27 February 1837 record the description of the installation by Maria Denman, sister-in-law of John Flaxman and donor of the statuette: ‘The original Italian Plaster Cast of an antique Victory, brought from Rome by J. Flaxman and fixed on the Bookcase in front of the Drawing of Mrs Soane’s Tomb under the immediate direction of Sir John Soane on January 10th 1837’.

58. Reply recorded in SM Trustees’ Minutes, 25 July 1870.