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RESEARCH ARTICLE

# Reading Words and Images in the *Description(s)* of Sir John Soane's Museum

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In the 18th and early 19th centuries, London was a city filled with cabinets of curiosity, *lusus naturae*, and burgeoning public museums. Most of these institutions publicized their holdings through newspaper advertisements, leaflets, and self-published, descriptive catalogs that were available for purchase on-site and through booksellers. Using Soane's Museum as a case study, this paper will move beyond historiographical analysis of individual objects in collections catalogs to probe how the museum-produced guidebooks depicted spatial arrangements. Citing examples from the 19th to twenty-first centuries, this paper will examine how the curator-produced descriptions of Soane's Museum manipulated text and graphics to guide visitors through a constructed narrative, recreated the ephemeral experiences of the museum, and advertise the site's unparalleled union of painting, sculpture, and architecture to audiences abroad. Soane's *Description of the House and Museum, on the North Side of Lincoln's Inn-Fields, the Residence of Sir John Soane* (privately printed 1830, 1832; revised 1835) paired spatial narratives with the architectural language of orthographic projection and perspective engravings. His *Description* set forth an agenda about the museum's arrangement and established a compositional strategy for subsequent editions of the guidebook, renamed the *General Description* in the editions printed between 1840 and 1930 then rebranded as the *New Description* by Summerson in 1955. Through the study of the changing written and visual language published in the guides by the curators of Soane's Museum, this article will examine the changing character of the visitor experience at the museum and question the form of future editions.

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## Architectural Narration

Two years after Sir John Soane's death in 1837, Edgar Allan Poe's short story 'The Fall of the House of Usher' appeared. As the main character enters the House of Usher, he encounters an atmosphere and spatial sequence that would be familiar to an early 19th-century visitor to Soane's Museum:

A valet, of stealthy step, thence conducted me, in silence, through many dark and intricate passages in my progress to the studio of his master. Much that I encountered on the way contributed, I know not how, to heighten the vague sentiments of which I have already spoken. While the objects around me — while the carvings of the ceilings, the sombre tapestries of the walls, the ebon blackness of the floors, and the phantasmagoric armorial trophies which rattled as I strode . . . feeble gleams of encrimsoned light made their way through the trelliced panes, and served to render sufficiently

distinct the more prominent objects around; the eye, however, struggled in vain to reach the remoter angles of the chamber, or the recesses of the vaulted and fretted ceiling. (Poe 1839: 146)

Known for referencing familiar landscapes and sites in his short stories, Poe may have been recollecting explorations of or tales from Soane's Museum. After the loss of his parents, an adolescent Poe took up residence with a surrogate family, the Allans, and spent five years in London living at 39 Southampton Row, just a few blocks northwest of Soane's Museum (Rubin 1989: 127; Meyers 1992:10–12).<sup>1</sup> In the late 1810s, Soane's townhome had entirely remodeled No. 13 Lincoln's Inn Fields. He then steadily built an architectural academy in his residence that, in terms of its collections, could rival the Royal Academy and the British Museum, and his spatial experiments within the walls of the amalgamated townhomes of No. 12 and No. 13 were unprecedented. The protruding façade, as well as the notoriety of that façade as a construction site, would have been conspicuous to a frequent neighborhood passerby (Hyde 2005; Richardson 1999).

In an attempt to capture the imaginative and unparalleled union of painting, sculpture, and architecture at the home, Soane first experimented with the creation of a dramatic narrative for his house-museum in the summer

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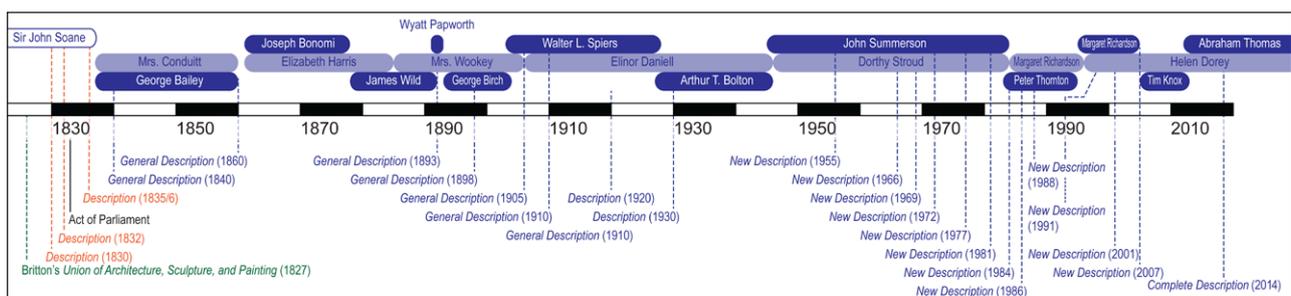
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of 1812, in the form of a fanciful and curious manuscript entitled 'Crude Hints Towards an History of My House'. Here, he adopted the voice of an archaeologist who was attempting to decipher the ruins of the townhouse at Lincoln's Inn Fields and speculated that the site was a prison or even a necropolis (Sir John Soane's Museum 1999). In the first publication of the manuscript, coordinated with the *Visions of Ruin* exhibition in 1999, the longtime Inspectress (a role defined by Soane in an Act of Parliament in 1833) of Soane's Museum, Helen Dorey, wrote that Soane's text had been composed in a 'manic' state, drafted in three weeks during the suspension of Soane's Royal Academy lectures and in parallel with the litigation over the protrusion of the façade of No. 13 Lincoln's Inn Fields (Sir John Soane's Museum 1999: 54, 56). The manuscript, therefore, served as creative output for his architectural frustrations. He employed no one to create renderings for the manuscript, though it is not difficult to imagine an evocative watercolor by Soane's favored architectural illustrator, Joseph Michael Gandy, depicting the house museum in a state of deconstruction, similar to Gandy's renderings of the Bank of England in the 1830s.

After his initial experiments in capturing the museum and its effects through possessed prose, Soane waited over a decade before he attempted to fully depict his museum through text and image. Initially, he did not embark on the endeavor independently but, instead, assigned the task to John Britton, who produced *The Union of Architecture, Sculpture, and Painting: Exemplified by a Series of Illustrations, with Descriptive Accounts of the House and Galleries of John Soane* in 1827. Gillian Darley notes that despite the rich lithographs in Britton's work, and despite Soane's substantial investment, Soane was utterly disappointed with the product, which was both 'expensive and unsellable'; he therefore created his own publication (Darley 1999: 286). In 1830, he had 150 copies of his *Description of the House and Museum, on the North Side of Lincoln's Inn Fields, the Residence of Sir John Soane* privately printed in London. Another run of the book, with two lithographs added, was privately printed in 1832. As will be demonstrated in the following pages, these first editions of the *Description* served as elaborate advertisements for the museum, shared with friends abroad and used to elicit local interest and support for the preservation of the museum. With failing eyesight and

no reasonable heir to take charge of the museum, Soane advocated a pioneering piece of legislation, the Soane's Museum Bill, passed on April 1, 1833, and entered as an Act of Parliament on April 20, 1833.<sup>2</sup> This legislation preserved the house-museum; a key provision stated that the objects within could not be moved to another museum. The records of Parliamentary Debates reveal a proposal to transfer the collections to the nearby British Museum; however, this was rejected because the collections could not be divorced from their innovative, custom-designed, architectural armature (An Act for Settling and Preserving Sir John Soane's Museum). This inextricable union was also underscored in Soane's editions of the *Description*, which functioned as guidebook and rudimentary index for the home and its collections.

Assured of the museum's preservation, Soane issued a much revised and embellished version of the *Description* in 1835 that contained different images and a new textual format. Soane's text led visitors through a sequence of spaces and provided insight into the origins and significance of selected items within the collection. The addition of a new voice, that of friend and admirer Barbara Hofland, in conversation with Soane's narration, consequently enlivened the reader's understanding of a visitor's experience through the museum. Soane differentiated Hofland's voice from his own through its use of first person, its excessive use of complimentary language, especially on the 'effect of space', and its placement on the page, indented and employing smaller typography. The 1835 edition also contained a French translation of the text, a copy of the act preserving the museum for posterity, and notes on his being awarded the Gold Medal of the Royal Academy. Through these editions of the *Description*, Soane presented himself as architect and collector as well as narrator and educator, essentially crafting an architectural autobiography centered on the ultimate object of his creative entrepreneurialism: his house-museum. Lithographs and engravings were carefully woven into the composition, facing relevant textual passages, thereby illuminating the configuration and intricacies of the museum where words alone failed. Through his prose and a variety of drawing types, Soane's editions of the *Description* codified a means of both presentation and representation for the museum that subsequent curators referenced in the twenty-one editions of the *Description* published between 1840 and 2014 (Fig. 1).



**Figure 1:** Timeline of the curators and inspectresses of Soane's Museum, showing how their tenure corresponds to the various editions of the *Description*. The dark purple text boxes represent curators and the light purple represent inspectresses; the vertical, dashed lines connect an edition of the *Description* to its respective author/editor. Diagram by the author.

This essay presents the first cohesive chronology of the various editions of the *Description*, and the analysis of text and images within the various editions of the *Description* reveals several previously unexplored, or little addressed, aspects of Soane's Museum. The changing relationship between text and image in the editions of the *Description* exemplifies how the physical experience of the museum was expressed in print and curated by those most intimately familiar with the site. It also shows how photography has manipulated spatial perception and replaced Soane's original graphics, and how the physical form of the *Description* reflected shifts in both the taste and demographics of the museum's audience from the Victorian period to the interwar years to the contemporary tourist. Through these changes to the text and images, the editions of the *Description* also serve as documents of graphic, architectural archaeology that trace alterations to the fabric of the museum itself, despite the seemingly unwavering stipulations stated within the Act of Parliament that preserves the site as a national museum. Although much has been written on Soane, an in-depth discussion of the *Description* has not yet been executed. For example, within her thorough analysis of Soane's personal, social and professional networks, Darley does not explore how the *Description*, although very much an autobiographical treatise on the theories and goals behind the museum, serves as an essential document that identifies the various figures and spheres of influence that shaped the museum. The artwork of the Cosways, John Flaxman, Thomas Banks, and J.M.W. Turner, as well as the collections from Egypt, India, Greece, and Italy, all expressed human industry and perseverance, serving as critical precedents for Soane's own experimentation with light, movement, and decoration in architecture (Soane 1832: 9). Furján, too, only briefly addresses Soane's *Description*, noting that the text was intended to illustrate the 'glorious visions' of the home (Furján 2002: 12; Furján 2011: 5). While Furján observes that between the 1830 edition and the 1835 one Soane's text was altered to consciously acknowledge the picturesque 'vistas' of the home, her assessment does not extend to the modern editions of the *Description* and how the editorial work of subsequent curators – Wild, Birch, Spiers, and even Bolton – severely altered Soane's intended narration of the museum (Furján 1997: 74). It is understandable that the vast majority of Soanian scholars have focused their attentions on specific rooms or elements of the house-museum's collections and its evolution. However, a full reading of the *Descriptions* provides another layer to the narrative of the museum. Although certain objects and spaces within the museum have not changed since Soane's time, this museum and its interpretation have been far from frozen in the last two centuries.

### The Genesis of the *Description*

Although *wunderkammer* and *studiolo* were established in the Renaissance as part of the architectural language of the collector, the concept of a museum as a curated and empirical endeavor flourished during the Enlightenment

and fueled the establishment of public museums. There were four common types of museums in Europe during the late 18th and early 19th centuries: subscription-based institutions, income-driven tourist destinations, public institutions, and house-museums. At the turn of the 19th century, London was filled with house-museums, such as Thomas Hope's Duchess Street Mansion and the sites for John Nash's architectural collection and John Hunter's anatomical collection. Soane's Museum was not unique in its program, but it was exceptional in terms of its design and arrangement. By illuminating the collections with natural light and providing opportunities for different perspectives and framed views, Soane's house-museum offered a distinctive experience that combined art, science, and structural innovation. During Soane's lifetime, his house-museum underwent cycles of construction and deconstruction as the architect expanded his collections and spatial experiments. In both the scope of the collections and the configuration of the spaces within the house-museum, Soane's Museum became an unprecedented exercise in exhibition design. As outlined in the *Description*, his thoughtful alignments and juxtapositions of collected objects and framing armatures contradict the common assessment that Soane's Museum was just another cabinet of curiosity, albeit an extraordinarily eccentric one. His collections were placed within inventive compositions of built fabric and, after forty years of development, from the purchase of No.12 Lincoln's Inn Fields in June 1792 until Soane's death in January 1837, the architecture of Soane's Museum arguably became the most important artifact of all.

When compared to contemporary public and house-museum endeavors in London in the late 1700s and early 1800s, Soane's Museum possessed several characteristics that were not shared with other museum counterparts in the city. Unlike the museums of Ashton Lever or William Bullock, Soane did not charge for entry. During the lifetime of the architect, Soane's Museum was independent of institutional or governmental sponsorship, yet his house-museum welcomed more visitors than similar fee-charging endeavors. Although Soane's Museum mirrored Thomas Hope's Regency-style mansion on Portland Place, in that the structure served as an active advertisement for his designed taste, Soane's constant reconfiguration of space and objects was unique among his museum peers.

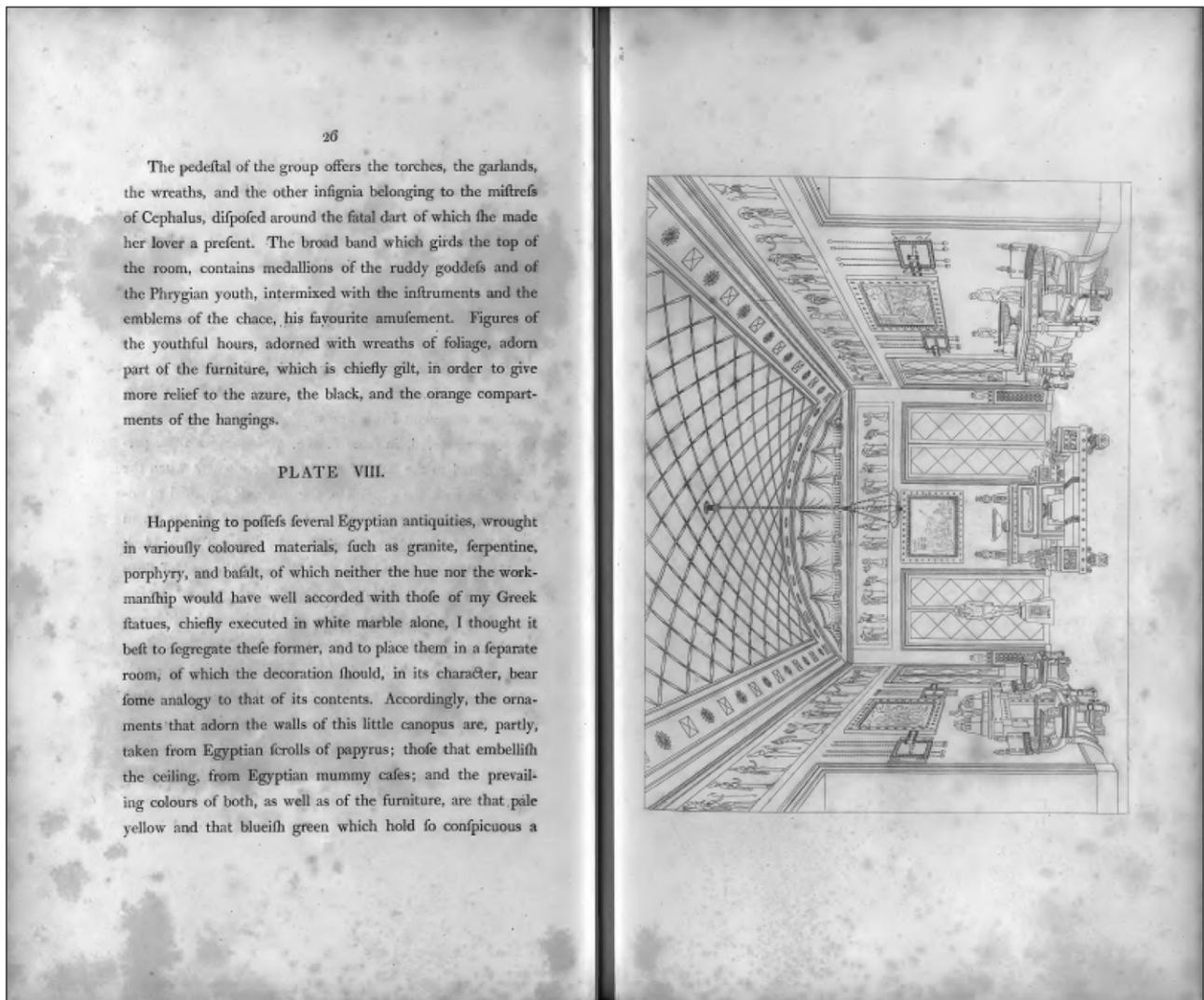
The two most relevant contemporary examples in London that had accompanying guides depicting the physical experience of exploring the collections through the use of text and image were James Parkinson's Leverian Museum, a reconfigured presentation of the collections from Lever's Holophusicon in Leicester Square that Parkinson won in a public lottery, and Hope's Duchess Street Mansion.<sup>3</sup> Although containing completely different collections, both the Leverian Museum and Duchess Street Mansion contained two floors of thematic room that were set within highly organized constructs. The Leverian's *Companion to the Museum* of 1790 (Fig. 2) and Hope's *Household Furniture and Interior Decoration* of 1807 (Fig. 3) were, like the *Description* of Soane's



**Figure 2:** William Skelton, display of the Leverian Museum collection at the Surrey Rotunda: 'A perspective view of the grand saloon & gallery at the Museum, late Sir Ashton Lever's, Surry end of Black Fryer's Bridge.' Engraving after Charles Reuben Ryley (1787–1806). Courtesy the British Museum. <link to [http://www.britishmuseum.org/research/collection\\_online/collection\\_object\\_details.aspx?objectId=3105883&partId=1](http://www.britishmuseum.org/research/collection_online/collection_object_details.aspx?objectId=3105883&partId=1)>

Museum, published by the owners to establish impressions for visitors to both sites. Unlike other guides that reinforce Alberti's theories of 'object-centered

historiography', such as the nearly twenty editions of *The Companion to Bullock's Museum* (1802–19), the printed guides of the Leverian Museum and Duchess



**Figure 3:** A portion of the narrative and a perspective view of the Egyptian Room. From Hope (1807: 26, Plate VIII).

Street Mansion did not present collections isolated from their structural and spatial armatures. Instead, the plates showcased the physical content of the museums, both collected and constructed, through perspectival vignettes, embellished with narrative text about these views (Alberti 2005: 571). In both publications, the plates were illustrative accompaniments to the museums. As perspectival drawings, however, they did little to provide a new reading of the collections or their spatial organization since they ignored the play of light, and unlike an orthographic drawing, the perspectives could not illustrate how certain spaces were situated within the larger arrangement of the museum.

Moving beyond perspectival imagery partnered with explanatory text used by some contemporary museums, Soane's *Description* explains the attribution, provenance, and significance of select objects in the collections and architectural elements and complements these written details with orthogonal projections and perspectives. He thus challenged his readers to develop their architectural and aesthetic literacy. Soane's textual and graphic language was indicative of his training and interests as a professional architect and recognized educator: the museum

and *Description* were didactic compositions intended to spark curiosity, elevate taste, and elicit notions that England's contemporary architecture could be read as the blossoming, technologically refined heir to the principles of beauty, utility, and strength found in the most admired examples of ancient design.

As a professional architect, Soane's collections were principally related to buildings, and this interest was evident in Soane's earliest design drawings for the home's alterations in 1792. On the sketch for a plan is a note that the corridor along the northeastern *parti* wall should be 'ornament'd with plaster casts'.<sup>4</sup> These marginal notes were also the first signs of Soane's desire to develop a working museum in concert with his architectural office. Soane wanted to give both students and clients immediate access to examples of architectural inspiration, demonstrating an interest in didactic display that he further emphasized in his tenth Royal Academy lecture: 'It is from the associations of ideas that Ruins excite in the mind that our feelings are aroused' (Watkin 2000:155).

A lecture at the Royal Academy on January 6, 1812 (Dorey 1999: 150) was the first time Soane told his students they could visit his home. For the next two and a

half decades his residence became an active laboratory for architectural apprentices, Royal Academy students, and friends of the arts who wanted to explore Soane's wide range of fragments and casts from ancient buildings, models, drawings, architectural instruments, sculptures, paintings, gadgetry, and natural history samples. Soane's art collection represented one of the largest private, secular holdings in England and the thematic categories of it were autobiographical reflections on his career and interests. Therefore, as an entire composition, Soane's collections showcase a lifetime of design development: the sites he visited as a young man, the masters who influenced his interests, the buildings he constructed, and the buildings that came to life only in the renderings of Joseph Gandy.

Aside from the privately printed *Descriptions* of the museum that Soane produced in the 1830s the house-museum did not employ narrative guidebooks or object labels. By avoiding organizational systems of chronology, classes, or stylistic categories, Soane placed authentic objects next to casts and examples of classicism next to the vanguard, thereby creating a three-dimensional palimpsest that challenged the imaginative potential presented in even the most ambitious precedents for cabinets of curiosity. The pairing of disparate items next to each other spurred unusual conversations and unexpected parallels, reflecting Soane's own interest in self-driven study and analysis so that, in the museum, visitors were able to independently judge the concepts, forms, and cultures presented. Unlike the arrangement of many modern museums, where collections are presented to visitors as rigidly framed historiographies with tight interpretive constraints that are managed by signage on the walls or audio tours, Soane's concept presented viewers with natural and man-made objects ranging from ancient to modern times all within a single vantage point. From an experiential standpoint, the collections formed collages in three dimensions for visual and intellectual exploration. In the museum, visitors experienced a dynamic, and even disorienting, visual cacophony but within the *Description* Soane used orthogonal drawings to illustrate the intricacies of the museum's configuration, in both plan and section. These drawings flatten complex spaces into abstracted spatial diagrams that, unlike a perspectival image or even the physical experience of standing within the museum, clearly differentiated the architectural fabric of the home from the collections. The section cuts read as bold architectural slices, rendered in poché, through thickened walls and delicate skylights that hover over multistory spaces, while the objects in the museum were presented as simple line drawings, breaking architectural drawing convention through the exclusion of variable line weight to distinguish visual depth. Much like Soane's careful attention in the text to the history of an object in the collections or the origins of an architectural feature, the inclusion of orthogonal drawings provided an additional resource for understanding the composition of the museum.

Unlike some of the catalogs or guides for museums marketed by Soane's contemporaries, the *Description* was not

created in concert with Soane's initial creative endeavors at Lincoln's Inn Fields in the 1790s or early 1810s, nor was it expressly made as a revenue-generating souvenir. It was first composed thirty-eight years after he began his manipulations on the north side of Lincoln's Inn Fields and his editions were privately printed, with copies sent only to specific people, ranging from architectural colleagues and friends, such as Maria Cosway, to London booksellers and international figures, such as the American ambassador in London (Stroud 1996: 113). The *Description* was also developed in direct relation to the challenge Soane faced near the end of his life: with failing eyesight and no direct heir, he needed to ensure the preservation of his life's work at the house-museum and, by extension, his legacy. Sometime in the not too distant future he would have to relinquish his role as the museum's primary guide. With these pressures in mind, it is possible to read the first editions of the *Description* as not only advertisements for the significance of the museum but also comprehensive rationalizations, presented through text and image, on the importance of its intact preservation.

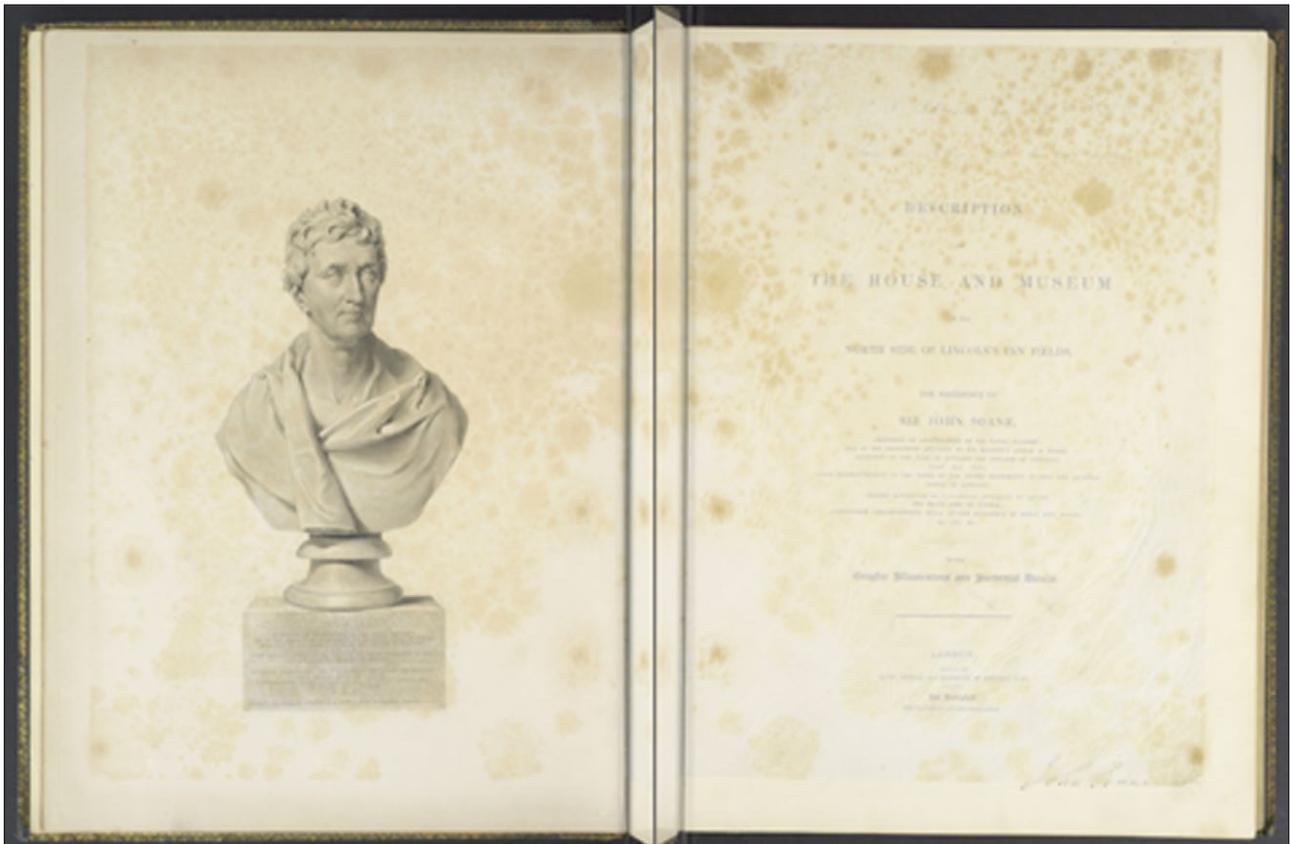
Friends in London and abroad knew of Soane's plans to publish a catalog of the museum as well as his intentions to secure the house-museum and its associated collections intact for perpetuity. For example, late in the summer of 1830, an Anglo-Italian friend, artist, and a former London resident living in Lodi, Italy, Maria Hadfield Cosway (1760–1838), requested that Soane send 'a catalogue of your extraordinary Museum'. To ensure safe delivery, Cosway asked that Soane relay a copy to a mutual friend in London who could then directly deliver the parcel to Cosway during one of his frequent voyages to Italy.<sup>5</sup> Soane, however, had anticipated the request: earlier that summer he was in the process of sending a copy of the *Description* to Cosway.<sup>6</sup> Her letter from February 1831 noted that she 'received, late last night, Your precious book' and she displayed the richly illustrated *Description* within her circle of Italian compatriots, an act that may have been the first dissemination of Soane's work in Italy.<sup>7</sup>

Within both the museum and his *Description*, Soane crafted a literal representation of the 'union of architecture, sculpture, and painting', but neither visitors nor readers were left with questions about Soane's perceived order of the arts. For example, beneath the Museum Dome, Soane placed his own life-sized bust above smaller sculptures of the Renaissance masters Michelangelo and Raphael. Beyond the hierarchy in scale, astute visitors could interpret another aspect of the sculptural composition that further elevated the prominence of architecture within the triumvirate of creative subjects: both the sculptor and painter Soane selected as representatives for their arts were also experienced architects (**Fig. 4**). For readers of the *Description*, the frontispiece featured only a depiction of the bust of Soane. As an object entirely divorced from its surroundings — a rare image type within the *Description* — the image disrupted the union of the arts that Soane presented within his museum: in the frontispiece, Soane is placed alone, shrouded in classical drape (**Fig. 5**).

Throughout the *Description*, Soane privileged the architecturally minded reader, who was conversant in



**Figure 4:** Bust of Sir John Soane above sculptures of Michelangelo and Raphael, inside Soane's Museum. Photo by author, courtesy of the Trustees of Sir John Soane's Museum.



**Figure 5:** Frontispiece, from Soane (1835).

the language of architectural drawing. In its 1835 edition, the only full plan of the house-museum presented to readers was a reflected ceiling plan. This would have been an atypical drawing convention within traditional architectural treatises such as *I Quattro Libri* or *Vitruvius Britannicus*, but reflected ceiling plans were common among the decorative plaster detail drawings by Soane's literal and figurative mentors, William Chambers and Robert Adam (**Fig. 6**). Soane also presented a number of orthogonal projections, often combining perspective views with detail drawings (**Fig. 7**), or orthogonal projections at different scales (**Fig. 8**). Although Soane included a key to rooms in the plan discussed in the text, the way he discussed each room's arrangement and moved visitors along a cardinaly oriented path shows that he clearly expected his readers to have the ability to read plans and understand his *Description* spatially:

In the preceding pages the situation of the several rooms in the House and Museum have been traced by reference to the figures on the several plans, — some of the works of ancient and modern Art have been noticed, — and the connexion between the Fine Arts has been shewn by pictorial, poetic, and graphic illustrations. (Soane 1835: 99)

Just as visitors experienced the museum, Soane also expected the readers of his *Description* to constantly shift their visual field: although presented in a portrait orientation, the book used landscape orientations for selected images as well as unfolded elevations that required

readers to turn their heads, or even the book itself, to fully explore the illustrations (**Fig. 9**). Soane's combination of portrait and landscape orientations within the folio-sized volume underscored that his editions of the *Description*, unlike other 19th-century museum catalogs that were pocket-sized, stitch-bound guides that could be easily folded or held with one hand as a visitor strolled through the museum, were not intended to be used while touring the museum. The *Description* could be seen as a stand-alone representation of the museum and, for select visitors, the on-site narrative would be provided by the architect himself.

Despite the wealth of illustrative material, there were elements that Soane presented only through text within the *Description* and this may relate to Soane's theoretical approach to architectural presentation. For example, the verbalized text of his carefully composed Royal Academy lectures were, in an unprecedented manner, accompanied by vivid, large-scale illustrations created by his students. Soane did not always draw explicit relationships between the dialogue of his lectures and the presented images but, much like his museum, he asked the audience to draw parallels and inferences independently. Within the *Description*, Soane provided textual descriptions for certain objects and artifacts since printed reproductions of artwork were not yet refined enough to capture the details of smaller works. For example, one of Soane's most prized possessions within the museum was a small portrait of a young Napoleon. However, Soane's first edition of the *Description* (1830) did not contain an engraving of the image but only a short explanation of the piece as 'a

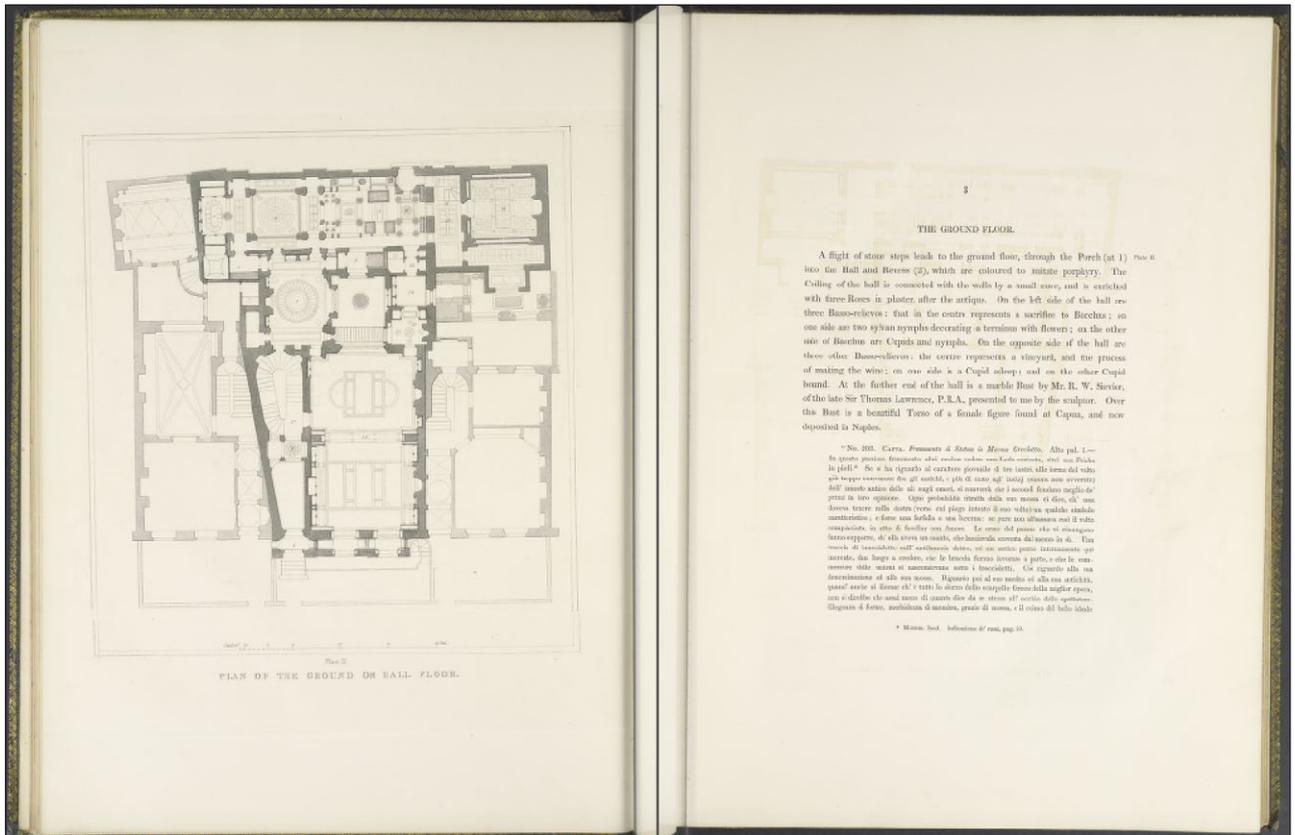


Figure 6: A reflected ceiling plan of the ground floor of the museum. From Soane (1835: Plate II, 3).

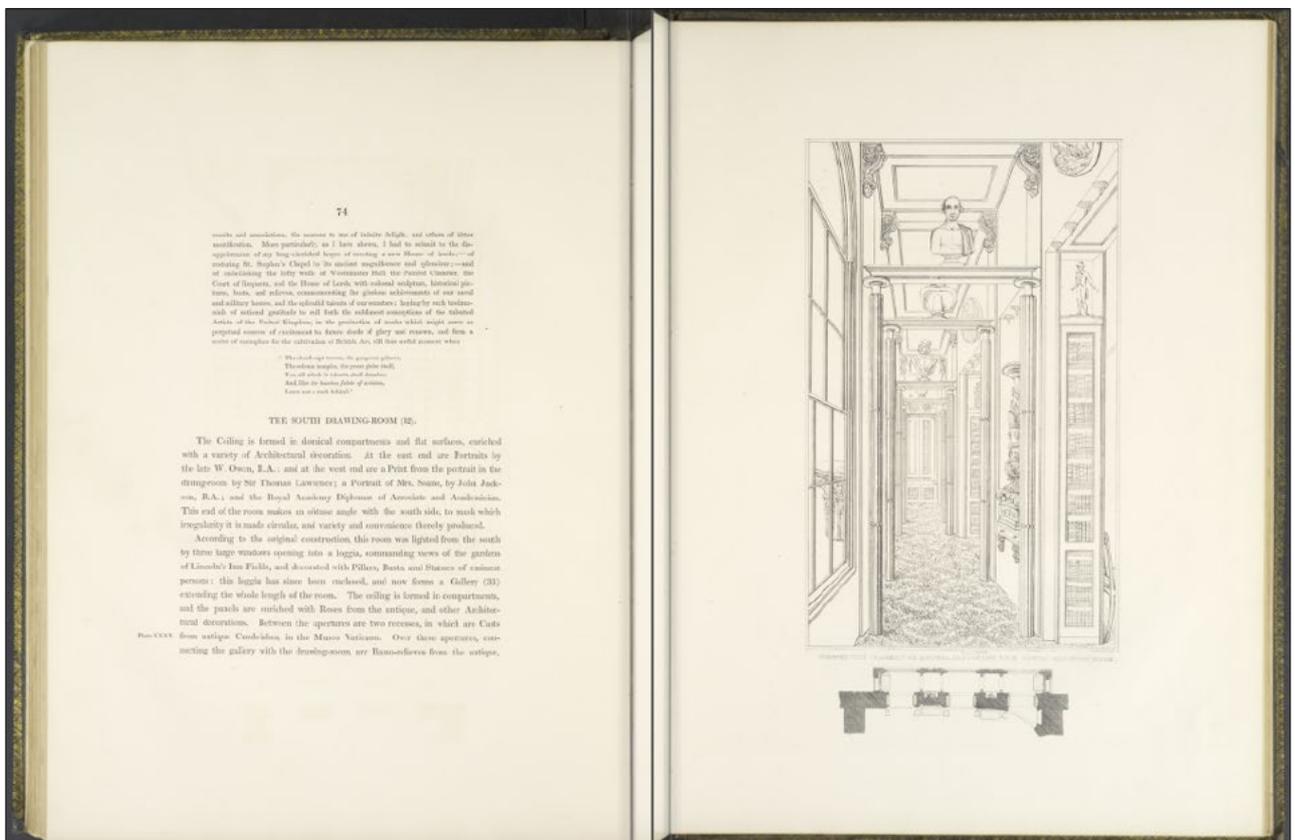
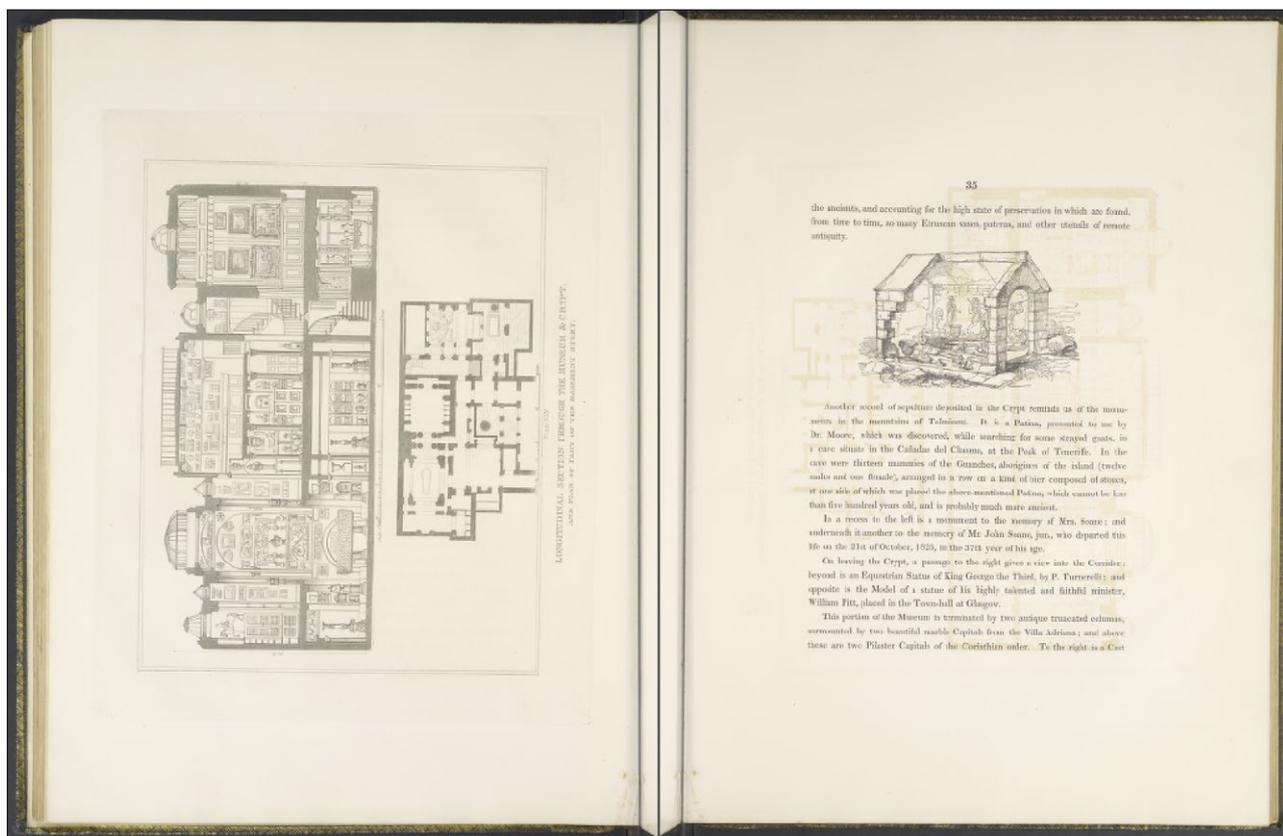
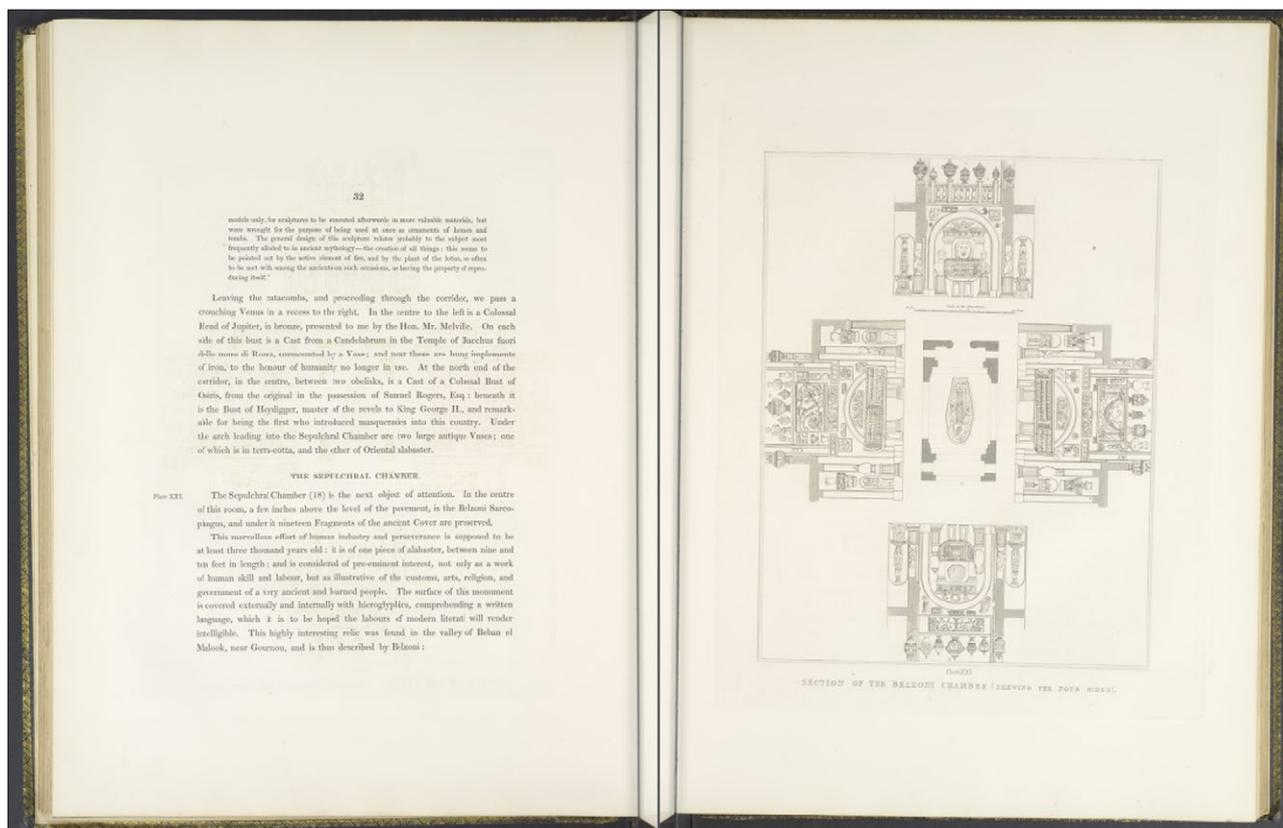


Figure 7: A perspective view of the South Drawing Room looking west with a corresponding plan of the passageway's termination. From Soane (1835: 74, Plate XXXV).



**Figure 8:** On the left, a section through the Museum, Crypt, and Picture Gallery looking north with a cropped plan at a different scale, and on the right, a portion of the narrative about the Crypt featuring a cutaway illustration of a model by Thomas Banks of an ancient tomb. From Soane (1835: Plate XXV, 35).



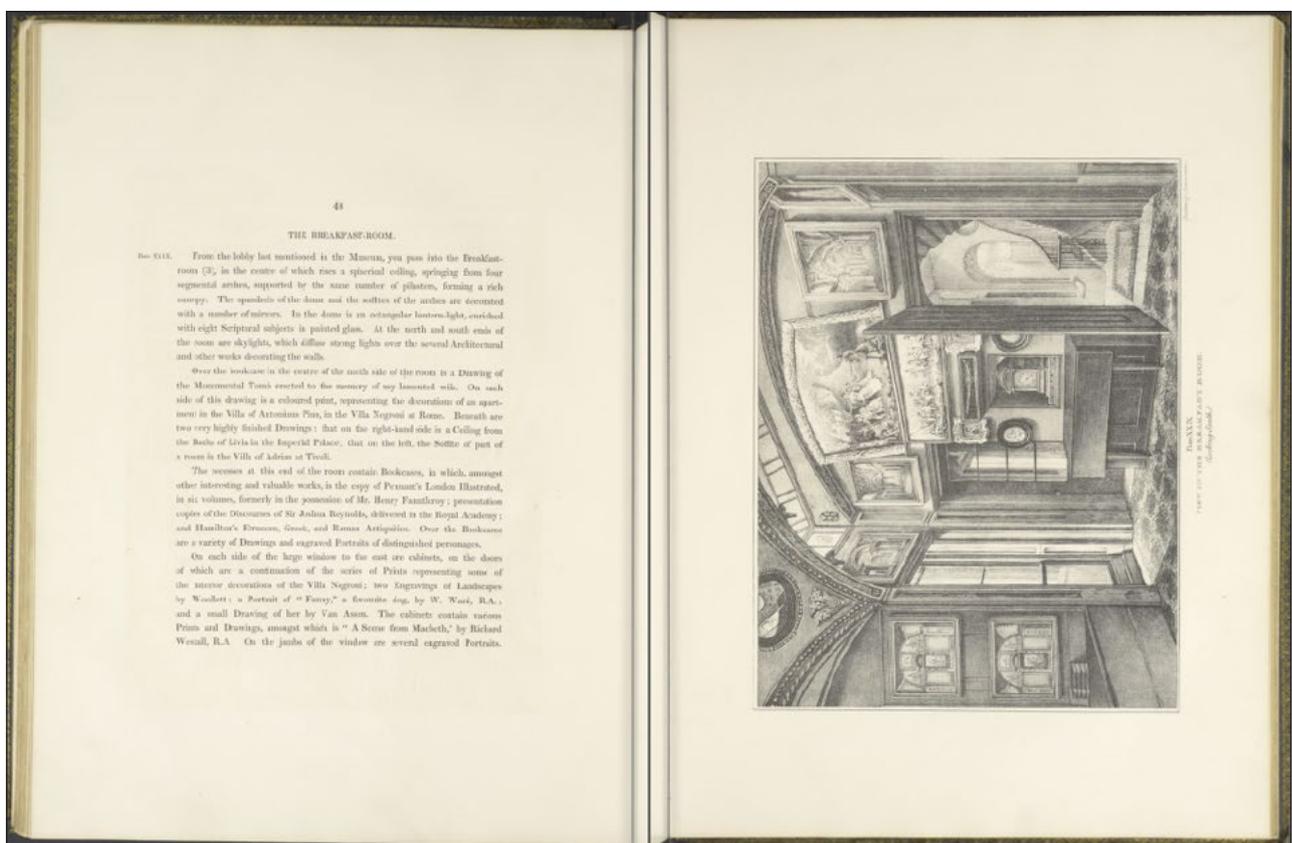
**Figure 9:** A plan of the Crypt around the tomb of Seti I, with unfolded interior elevations. From Soane (1835: 32, Plate XXI).

Portrait of Buonaparte in his twenty-ninth year, painted by a Venetian artist, and esteemed an admirable likeness' (xiii). Subsequent editions of the *Description*, however, included a lengthy description of the painting and a transcription of a letter from the artist, relaying the harried story of his travels with Napoleon's camp during his commission. The details of the portrait occupy the first three pages of the *Description* and it is the first illustration embedded in the text, directly following the list of plates and artists included within the volume. Although, once again, no image accompanied the text, no other single item or architectural space in the museum received such extensive attention. Perhaps the lack of an illustrative accompaniment to the prose was intended to entice visitors to the museum, or perhaps Soane felt that the reproduction techniques available would have been too basic to do the image justice. He included engravings of architectural drawings in his *Description* but reproductions of prized artworks, such as those by Canaletto and Hogarth, were only first included in the early 20th-century editions of the *Description*. Within the 1835 edition, Soane made no efforts to reproduce works of art within the museum and displayed, instead, simple line drawings and tonal perspective renderings of rooms, their works of art appearing almost like diagrams featuring almost diagrammatic renditions of hanging works of art. Here, readers carefully following Soane's narrative and the plan of the home could find a very small cartoon of the Napoleon image within the section of the guide on the Breakfast Room: in the center of the image is a clock with a Soanian dome, and in

the oval frame to the left of this object featured is a very small depiction of the Napoleon painting (**Fig. 10**).

For some objects, words concealed the absence of images and stood alone for the interpretation of the reader. For select spatial conditions, such as the Breakfast Room, where a domical ceiling was flanked by trapezoidal skylights and complex adjacencies to the Museum Dome and stair passage, Soane used sections, reflected ceiling plans, or wide-angle perspectival images in the place of verbose passages of text (**Figs. 6, 8, 10**). Arguably one of the most influential rooms of the 19th century, Soane dedicated only four lines in the *Description* to the architectural configuration of the Breakfast Room. Although the illumination of some elements of the museum privileged text over image, or vice versa, some of the most extraordinary aspects of the house-museum, such as the Pasticcio of the Monument Court, were largely excluded from both the text and images of Soane's *Description*. The three courtyards of the home (New Court of No. 12, Monument Court of No. 13, and Monk's Yard of No. 14) were evident in the ground floor plan presented in Plate II, but Soane did not label these essential, exterior 'rooms' within the plan's key and he made little mention of the architectural *capriccio* that he constructed in the Monument Court, the literal core of the home.

Visible from fourteen rooms on four different levels, the Monument Court has an extraordinary spatial impact in the house-museum: the north-south axis is aligned, on-center, with the large tripartite window of the Dining Room, and on the east-west axis, it serves as a visual



**Figure 10:** The Breakfast-Room. From Soane (1835: 48, Plate XXIX).

and spatial divider between the shared family space of the No. 13 Breakfast Room and the private, reflective space of Soane's Dressing Room and Study. Therefore, the Monument Court was designed as a space to frame views between the inside and outside and to serve as an essential exterior 'room', providing light and air to the central block of the house-museum. Unlike the New Court or Monk's Yard, zones best understood from within the courtyards, the entire composition of the Monument Court is only visible from vantage points in the higher, more private, levels of the home. Views experienced within the Monument Court are often disorienting due to its compressed verticality and the placement of the towering Pasticcio. Yet, despite its visual prominence in the house-museum, the Pasticcio was not illustrated in any of Soane's three editions of the *Description* and Soane's written depiction of the Monument Court and its centerpiece was concise: 'decorated with fragments of ancient and modern art[...] advantageously seen from the rooms on the ground floor' (Soane 1832: 8). Britton's *Union of Architecture, Sculpture, and Painting* also lacked visual representations of the Pasticcio and the text only briefly addressed its arrangement: 'a kind of trophy composed of a capital of an Hindoo column and of other architectural fragments' (Britton 1827: 27). Soane's students, however, frequently drew the monument, representing its tightly enclosed environs through wide-angle perspectives. Several images of the Pasticcio, recently reconstructed and reinstated at the museum after a period of absence from 1896 to 2004, now occupy the pages of the *New Description* and articles have been published on this piece as a significant object within the museum that was absent from the visitor experience, from physical and printed standpoints, for over a century (Dorey 2003). Unlike the small painting of Napoleon that was explained in the *Description's* text but negated in its imagery, necessitating on-site visitor investigation, the absence of textual or visual imagery of the Pasticcio in the *Description* illustrated Soane's sustained penchant for architectural folly. The Pasticcio is an embellished columnar creation that rarely appeared in the descriptions of published texts or in circulated images, yet it served two important functions within the house-museum. First, the Pasticcio was used as a challenging, on-site teaching tool for students to expand their knowledge of precedent while exercising their ability to execute precise architectural renderings within an impossibly confined space. The composition also served as an unexpected, sublime surprise for Soane's clients who visited the home, and by placing his designs directly adjacent to ancient precedents, he advertised his talents as an architect.

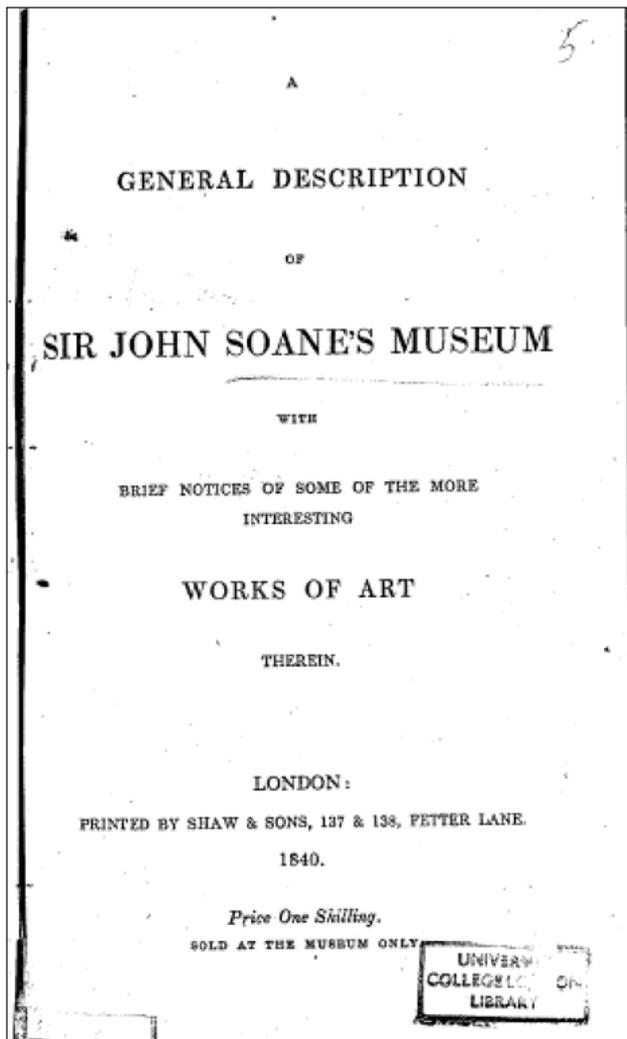
As discussed in the preceding examples, a reading of Soane's *Description* would be compelling without a visit to the museum and, conversely, an astute visitor would be captivated and able to draw inspiration from the museum without reading the *Description*; however, when the physical experience of the museum was partnered with a reading of the *Description*, it was possible to achieve an unparalleled, enriched understanding of the house-museum. Through the preservation of the

museum in 1833 and the publication of a comprehensive *Description* in 1835, Soane set forth an experiential construct for future visitors to his house-museum: the physical spaces could remain devoid of labels and signs, as he wished, but each visitor could experience a conversation with the architect about his intentions and inventiveness through the insights presented in text and images in the *Description*.

### The General Description(s)

The first edition of the *Description* published after Soane's death was edited by his former student and hand-selected curator-successor, George Bailey (1792–1860). Bailey had entered Soane's office in 1806 and spent more than three decades with his mentor, witnessing the substantial changes made to the home and its collections. To distinguish his edited version of the *Description* from the curatorial narratives crafted by Soane, Bailey issued the text, which came out in 1840, with an altered name: *A General Description of Sir John Soane's Museum with Brief Notices of Some of the More Interesting Works of Art Therein*. As a decidedly laconic guidebook, Bailey's edition reduced Soane's original text from the *Description* to an almost elemental list of artifacts, substantially reducing the architectural narrative of the original guide. Bailey did, however, add a series of prefaces to his edition: a brief history of the museum, an overview of the Act of Parliament preserving the museum, and a curator's note acknowledging that the 'small work now produced is little more than an abridgement' of Soane's *Description* (Bailey 1840: 8). The only graphic in Bailey's edition, a pointing finger calling readers' attention to the instruction that 'The Servants are strictly charged not to accept any Money from Visitors' (Fig. 12), also pointed to a key change at the museum: it had transformed from a personal, professional, and educational enterprise into a business of cultural tourism in the Victorian Age. Within this context, the *Description*, too, had transformed. Once a large and precious two-part folio printed on laid paper and filled with rich illustrations, the *General Description* of 1840 was a greatly abbreviated duodecimo, printed in mass and sold at the museum. The title page (Fig. 11) says the guide was only available for purchase at the museum, inaugurating the museum's on-site capital endeavors, but the 'Mode of Admission & c.' outlined the days the museum was open to domestic and foreign visitors as well as how to apply for admission, implying that the owners of the guide would eventually circulate the document, thereby attracting other visitors. Although Bailey's *General Description* lacked the rich illustrative material of Soane's earlier versions, it set a number of important precedents for future publications: it was intended to accompany the visitor during their explorations of the museum, serving as a guidebook and manual for museum etiquette, and the duodecimo format, a departure from Soane's large folio, was eventually converted to into a standardized A5 book for the modern editions called the *New Description*, beginning in 1955.

Bailey issued another edition of the *General Description* in 1860, making only minor adjustments to his curatorial introduction and changing the names of the trustees, as



**Figure 11:** Foreword, from Bailey (1840).

needed. The revised edition did, however, contain three prints from the 1830 *Description*, in line with the text: 'pictorial vases in the collection', a cutaway axonometric of an 'ancient tomb' (shown on the right side of **Figure 8**), and 'sundry bronzes, etc. in the collection' (**Figs. 13, 14, 15**). Although the insertion of visual imagery is significant, Bailey's selection of prints oddly isolated elements of the collections from their dynamic architectural enclosure. Without the orthogonal drawings of Soane's versions of the *Description*, Bailey left visitors with no way to orient themselves within the museum or share their experience, visually, with people beyond the walls of the museum. In the *General Description*, neither the text nor the images presented the museum as an inventive cabinet of curiosities with an integral architectural armature but, instead, the text and images reverted to an object-centric focus, presenting the museum as simply a container for collections. As an artifact, the *General Description's* itemization of significant objects was akin to the catalogs from Sotheby's and Christie's that Soane used to acquire his collections.

Although visitor numbers dramatically declined in the later part of the 19th century, new technology helped revive the *General Description*, edited by curator Walter L. Spiers, in 1905 and 1910. Reflecting a change in the

behavior of visitors, Spiers added additional items to the 'rules of the museum': no dogs, no drinking inside, and vandalism was subject to criminal punishment. In addition to the newly enforced standards of behavior, Spiers introduced photographs to the *General Description*: the south façade of the museum once rendered as an engraving was now presented as a photograph, captured through the gates of Lincoln's Inn Fields (**Fig. 16**). Advancements in lens apertures, light metering, and focal length as well as the halftone reproduction technique allowed for the inclusion of interior photographs of the museum (**Figs. 17, 18**). Lacking these advances in the 1800s, photography had been compromised by the chiaroscuro of the museum, caused by the recesses of the museum's tight corridors casting deep, unreadable shadows despite the occasional flood of light from the skylights. As visual accompaniments to the museum's narrative, these photographs, however, were not woven into the text the way Soane had done with the illustrations in his editions of the *Description*, but instead, the photographs appeared as a visual appendix to the guide. Due to their placement in the guide, it is possible to assert that the photographs were not used as replacements of Soane's lithographs but rather provided a modern lens on the museum – irrefutable pieces of evidence ('*procès-verbaux irrécusables*', in the words of Le Duc's *Dictionnaire* of 1866) of the museum, used for their 'rapidity of notation and accuracy of representation' (Pare 1982: 7). Other photographs of Soane's work were not prevalent until the publication of H. Rooksby Steele's *The Old Bank of England, London* of 1930 that featured Francis Rowland Yerbury's series of photographs from 1925 of the Bank of England before and during demolition. Therefore, Spiers's commissioning of an unnamed photographer to capture the museum is notable. The first photographs within the *General Description* of 1905 underscore that the museum was consciously keeping pace with contemporary documentation methods, by which the Photographic Record and Survey Movement was fastidiously capturing archeological, geological, and ethnographic subjects. The National Photographic Record Association (NPRO) was also capturing national landmarks and sites of cultural heritage in danger, ranging from vernacular residences to church interiors to architectural icons, such as Newgate Prison, that had been much admired by architects like Soane but were in peril due to modern development. Much like the work of photographers within the NPRO, such as Sir Benjamin Stone or George Scamell, the photographer commissioned by Spiers used the platinum printing process. The photographs of the house-museum featured a deep focus and situated the home within its urban context, thereby making a distinction between the practices of architectural photography and the pictorialism that was prolific in the work of London's social activists-cum-photographers (Swafford 2006).

It is of note that the photographs included in the 1905 and 1910 editions of the *General Description* were not woven into the textual and illustrative body of the book but instead were used as preface images, facing the frontispiece, and as an appendix of plates. The 1905 edition

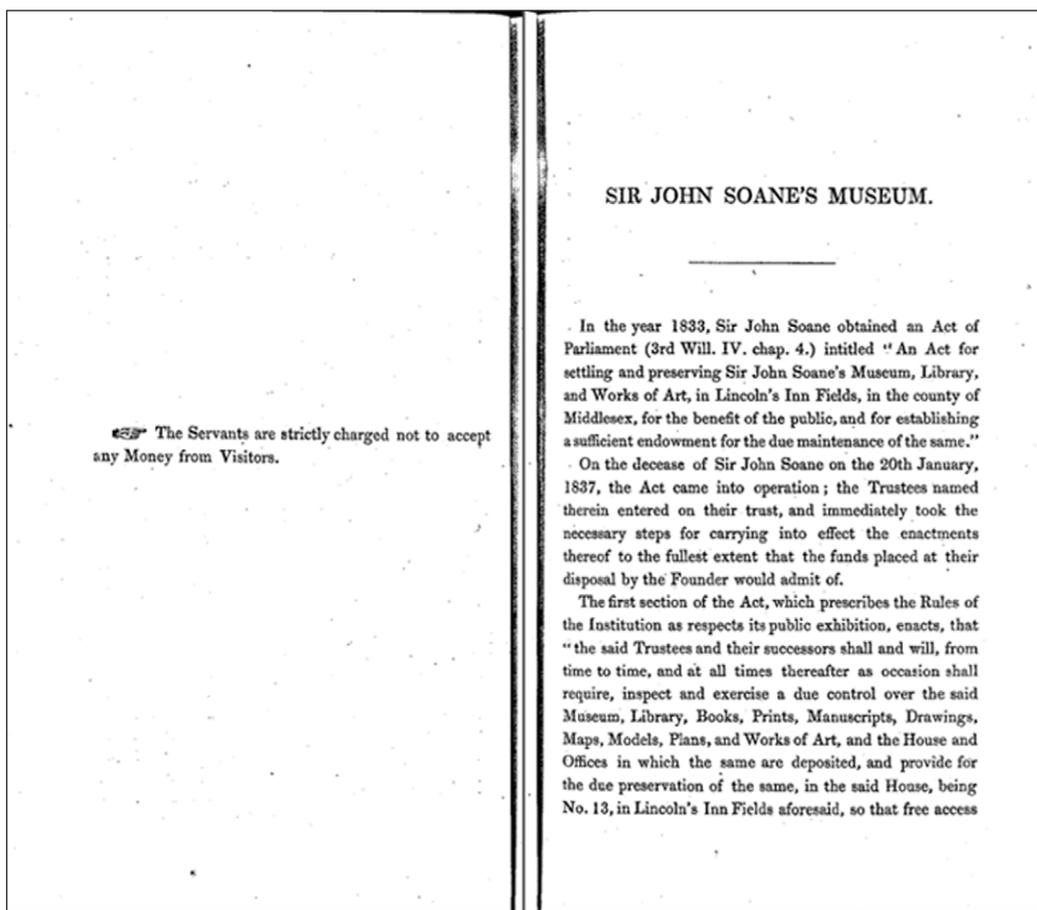


Figure 12: Title page, from Bailey (1840).

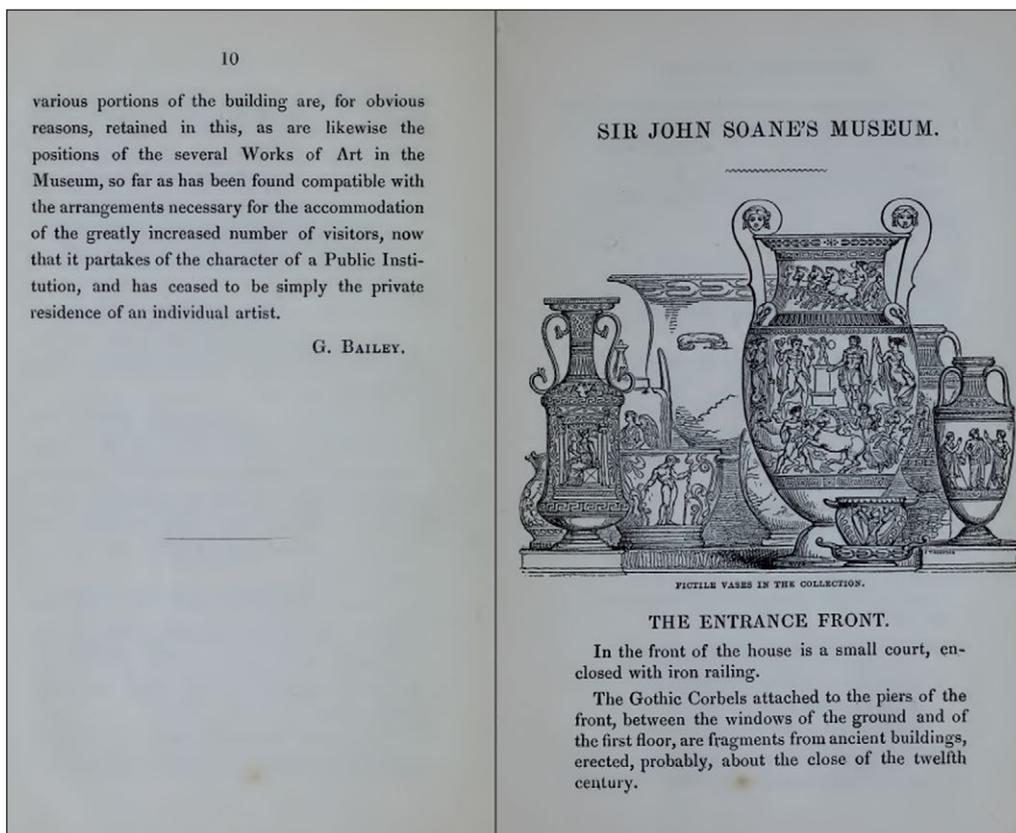
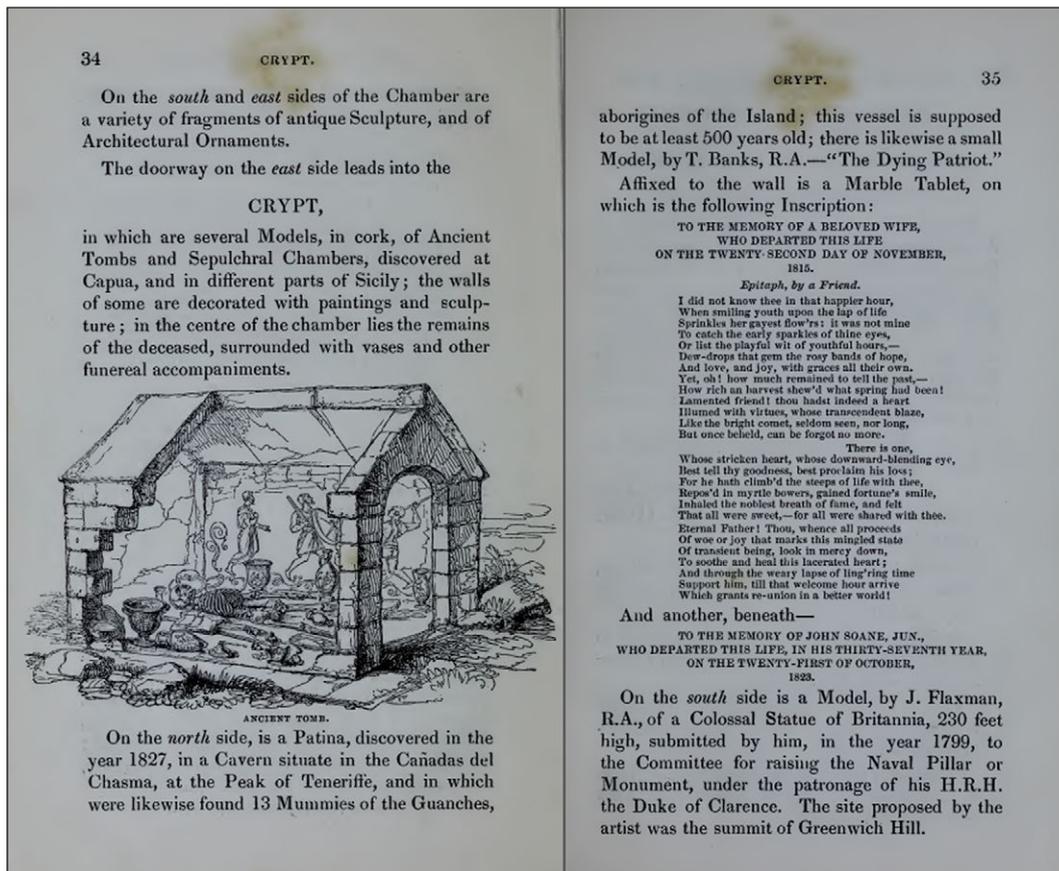
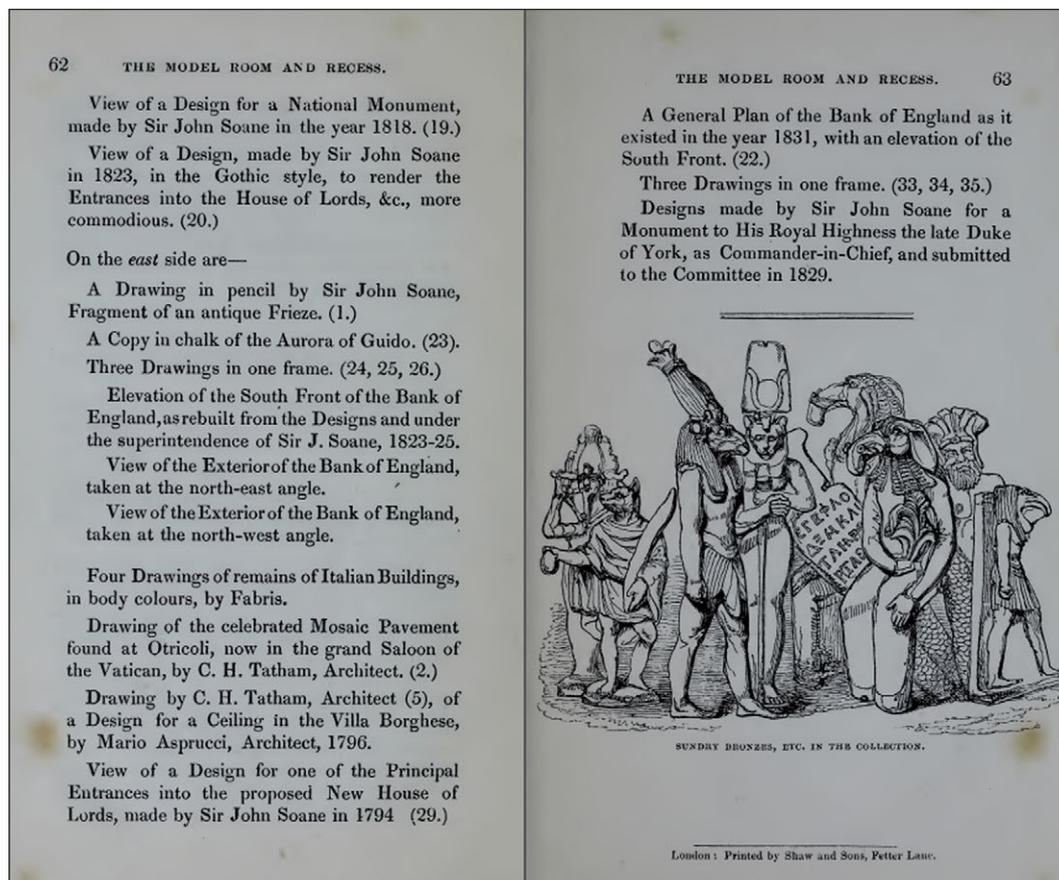


Figure 13: The conclusion of Bailey's curatorial introduction and the beginning of the narrative guide, and 'pictile vases in the collection.' From Bailey (1860: 10–11).



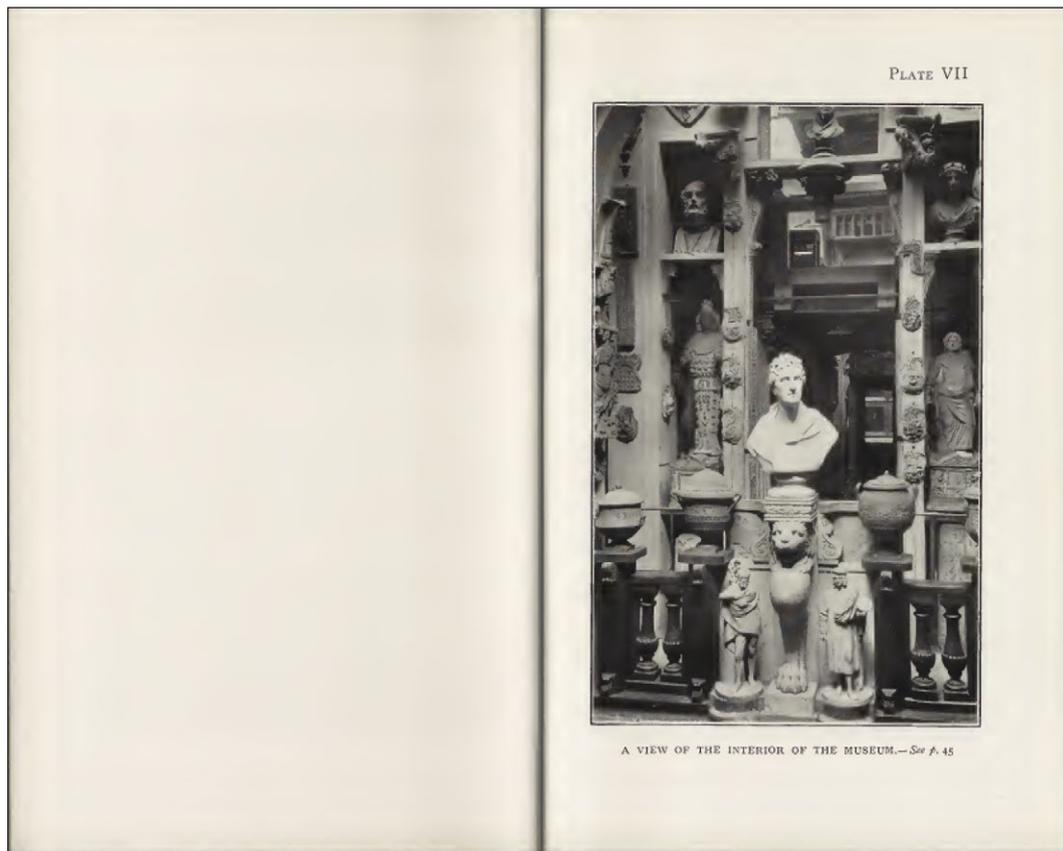
**Figure 14:** The narrative of the Crypt featuring a cutaway illustration of a model by Thomas Banks of an ancient tomb. From Bailey (1860: 34–35).



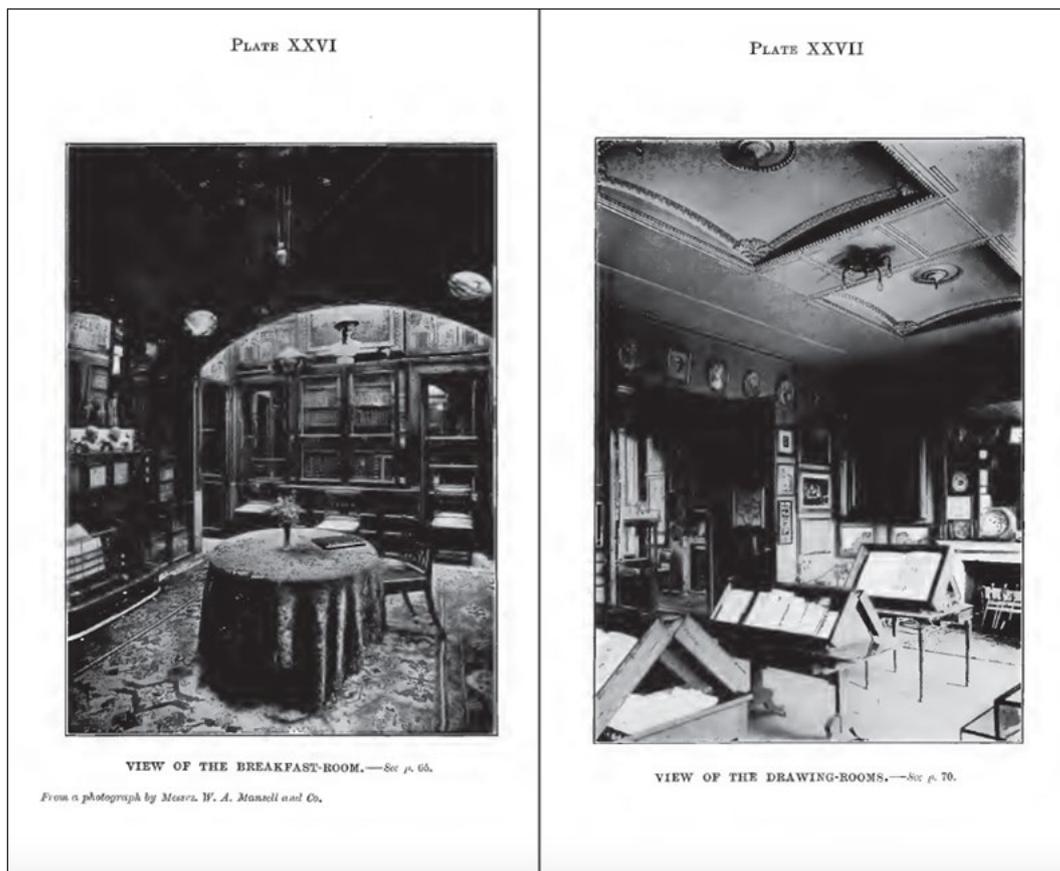
**Figure 15:** The narrative of the Model Room and Recess featuring an illustration of 'sundry bronzes' in the collection, shown as a collage rather than in situ. From Bailey (1860: 62–63).



**Figure 16:** A photograph of Sir John Soane's Museum as seen from within the gates of Lincoln's Inn Fields. From Spiers (1905: Plate I).



**Figure 17:** A photograph of the museum's interior from beneath the Museum Dome, looking east at the bust of Sir John Soane. From Spiers (1905: Plate VII).

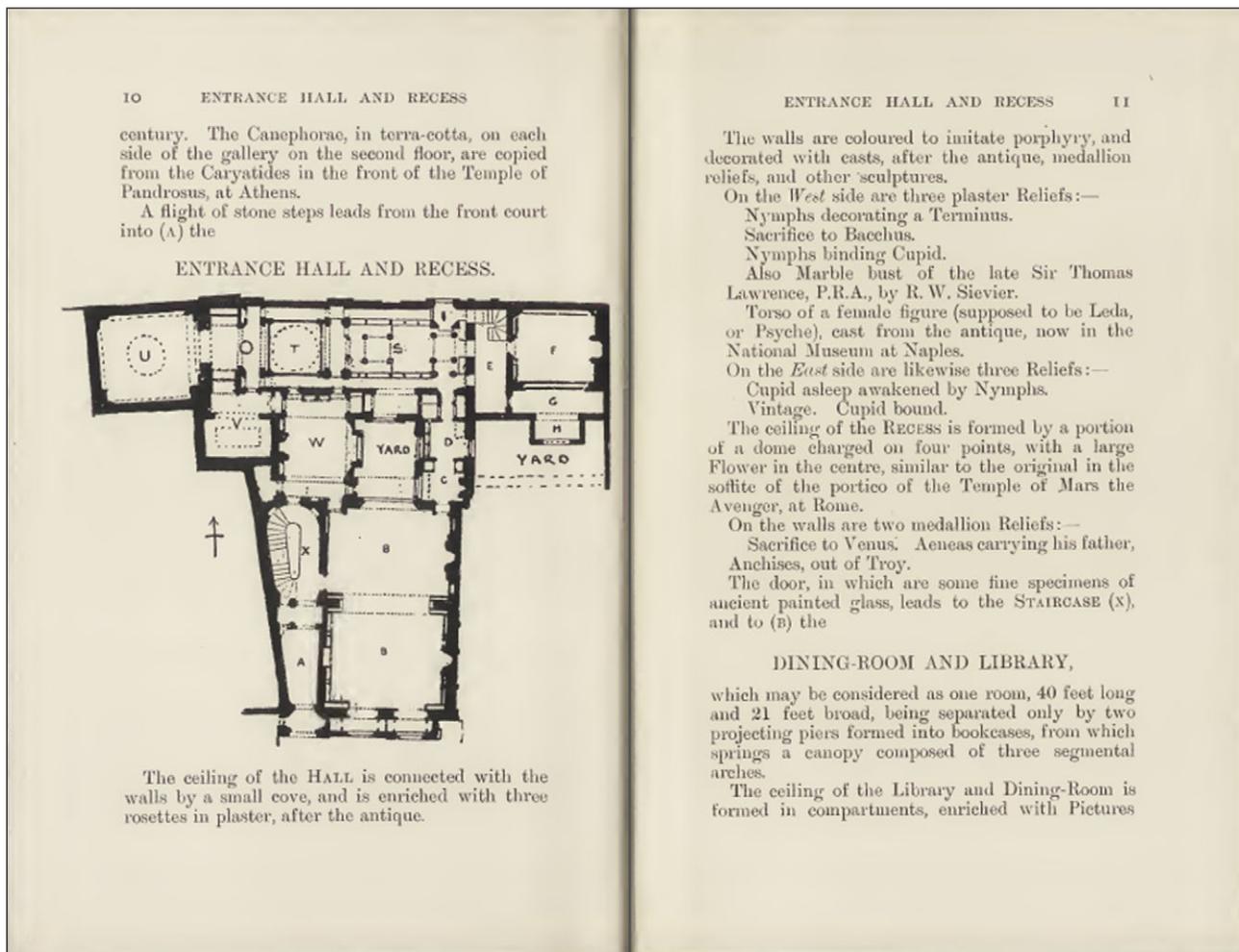


**Figure 18:** A photograph of the Breakfast Room looking north (left) and a photograph of the Drawing Room looking northeast. From Spiers (1910: 10–11).

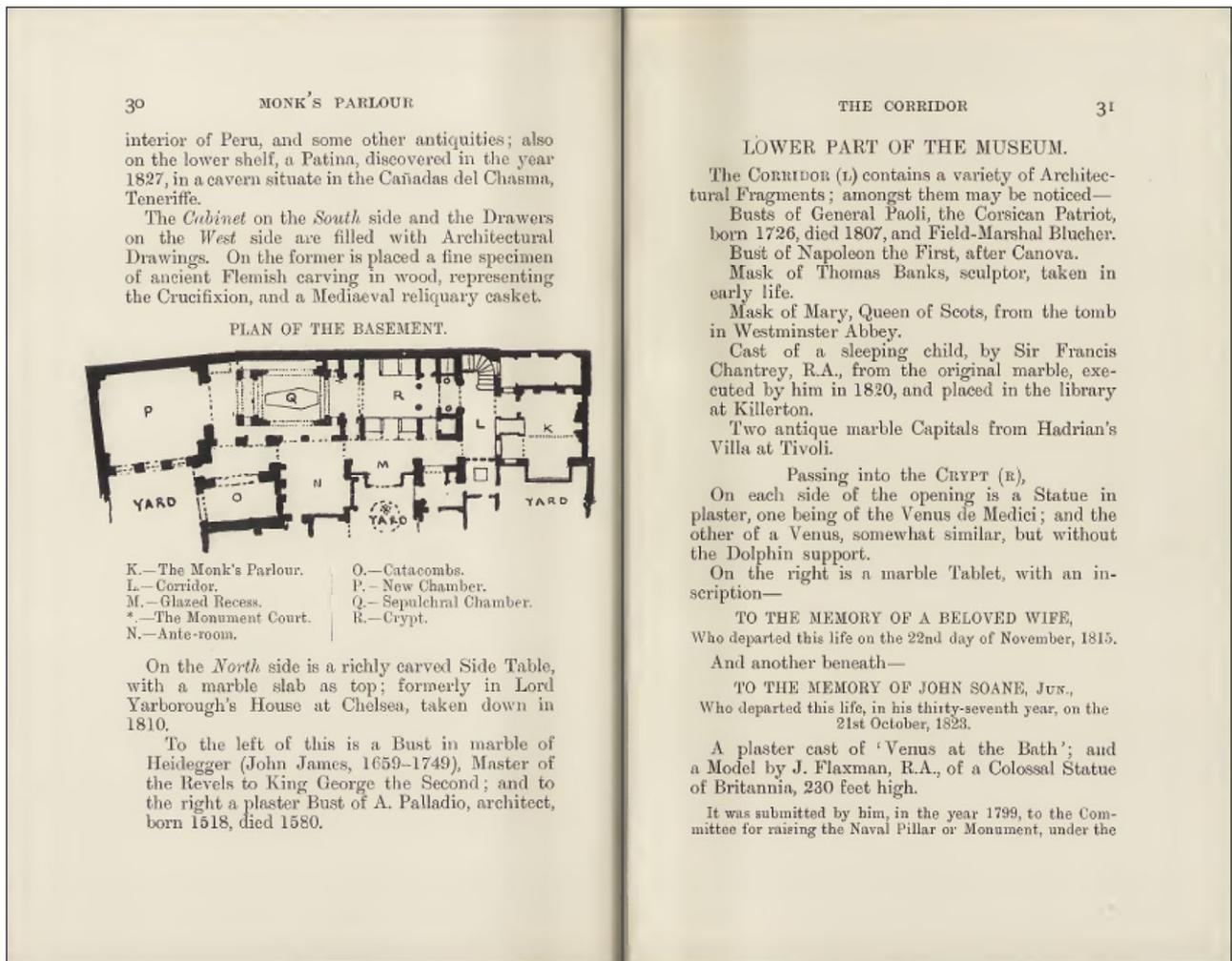
contained only two architectural photographs, one of the façade and one of Soane's sculptural composition on the union of architecture, sculpture, and painting beneath the Museum Dome, but the 1910 edition included images of the Library, the 'Hogarth Room' (the space between the Picture Gallery and the Nymph's Recess), the No. 13 Breakfast Room, the Drawing Room, and even an image of the Tivoli Corner of the Bank of England. As the number of visitors declined, these unprecedented photographs of the museum's interior and of a number of objects and paintings together reframed printed readings of the museum's collections as a modern gallery catalog. Capturing details and lighting effects that eluded the images in previous editions of the *Description*, the first editions of the *General Description* in the 20th century also inaugurated a new era for the museum, moving it further away from the graphic conventions known to Soane, an era in which the curator presented a convincing case, visually, for the sustained intrigue of the museum by using photography to capture the architectural chiaroscuro.

Spiers also introduced a new series of plans (Figs. 19, 20) to the *General Description*. Unlike Soane's fine drawings, the Spiers plans were cropped diagrams, and substituted

Soane's careful delineations that were no longer accurate. James Wild (curator 1878–92) used the museum's extant fabric for experiments with light and structure, substantially altering elements on the north side and inserting an entirely new Picture Gallery at the back of No. 12. To mediate contemporary visitor experience with historical interpretation, Spiers created a new set of delineations for the *General Description* (1905 and 1910). The loosely sketched plans contained new room labels and, unlike Soane's presentation of the museum, cropped elements of the plan. In one plan (Fig. 20), Spiers showed readers only the northern section of the crypt and, consequentially, did not present a full picture of the way Soane mediated the disparate programmatic elements of the house-museum. For example, the cropped plan failed to show how Soane's deliberate creation of three distinct, interior courtyards separated the service areas of the home, such as the kitchen, from the dramatic passages of the crypt. Today's readers of the *New Description* can see the lasting impact of Spiers' attempt at graphically interpreting the evolution of the museum. The present guidebook contains five different plans of the museum, tracing the evolution of the space from Soane's time (1796, 1810, 1822, 1837) to its current configuration.



**Figure 19:** A narrative about the Entrance Hall and Recess with an annotated plan of the museum's ground floor, drawn by Spiers and featuring his changes to the northwest corner of the museum. From Spiers (1905: 10–11).



**Figure 20:** A narrative about the Crypt with an annotated plan of the museum's basement floor, drawn by Spiers. From Spiers (1905: 30–31).

Learning from Wild's problematic alteration of the original fabric of Soane's construction, subsequent curators used the *General Description* (editions from 1840 to 1930), and later the *New Description* (from 1955 to the present), as well as other published texts as a means to less invasively assert their agendas as architects, historians, and stewards of the Georgian museum. With the concept of a 'preservation movement' gaining momentum in museum culture from the 1920s to the 1940s, largely through lectures and language published by curators like Fiske Kimball, house-museum transformations were no longer performed physically in three dimensions, in the museum space, but, instead, championed as transformations in interpretation captured in two dimensions on the printed page. For example, in the early 20th century, several scholars made significant efforts to both rediscover and reattribute the work of Soane, an architect who at the time was deemed passé. Arthur T. Bolton (1864–1945; curator 1917–1945) reasserted the site as a subject of serious scholarly investigation through his work as both a historian and a practicing architect. He played a significant role in the organization, re-presentation of collections, and public advocacy for the preservation of Soane's architecture: his 1930 edition of the *General Description* is a

guide that rivaled the graphic richness of Soane's original editions. Bolton's edition featured sixty-five photographs and seven plans, and prompted visitors to pursue future Soanian investigations by offering a cutout page at the back of the book where they could order any of the fourteen other publications related to Soane and the museum that were now available for purchase. Many of these were by Bolton: *The Works of Sir John Soane* (1924), *Life and Work a Century Ago: An Outline of the Career of Sir John Soane* (1926), and *The Portrait of Sir John Soane* (1927). *The Portrait*, an illustrated epistolary catalog of select holdings in Soane's archives, featured previously unpublished representations of the museum as well as new, contemporary renderings by the architect Percy May that could easily serve as precedents to the illustrations of Edward Gorey. The museum is presented through compelling pen and ink line drawings that dramatically render the museum with pictorial intrigue, setting the stage for a mystery novel or a Gothic tale.

For Soanian scholarship, Bolton's work established a trend for the subsequent publications by curators and inspectresses of Soane's Museum. Since the 1950s, some have focused on in-depth research while the most recent one is more akin to a photographic essay. John Summerson

(curator 1945–84); Peter Thornton (curator 1984–95); Margaret Richardson (inspectress 1984–95, curator 1995–2005); Helen Dorey (inspectress 1995–); and Tim Knox (curator 2005–2013) all contributed content to the record and interpretation of Soane and his architectural legacy (Summerson 1952; Thornton 1992a; Thornton 1992b; Stevens and Richardson 1999; Dorey 2003; Dorey 2004; Dorey 2008; Knox 2009). Also, through their guidance, the *Description* has continued to evolve. Summerson changed the title to *New Description*, beginning with the 1955 edition. The versions of the guide issued in the latter half of the 20th and the early 21st century feature more of Soane's original narrative and offer the reader more refined compositional hierarchies in terms of the insertion of headings, captions, and notes. They also contain extensive indexes of works within the house as well as appendices outlining aspects for additional investigation, such as the location and opening hours of other Soanian projects. Today, the *Description* is no longer a record expressly produced for advertising the museum but instead serves the broader purpose of introducing readers to Soane's architectural ideology and the evolution of a private museum through nearly two centuries of continuous operation.

### Future Possibilities for the *Description*

Soane's editions of the *Description* acted as in-depth guides that could paint an evocative image of the museum's diverse spaces and collections: it was not intended to be an on-site guide but rather a documentary compendium of Soane's theories on the arts and a thoughtful creation of an unparalleled spatial experience in which the artifact and armature of the museum could not be divorced. Similarly, in Soane's era, a visit to the museum and a reading of the *Description* were inextricably linked: a visitor could not fully understand the museum without the insights of the *Description* and the *Description* could not be used as an effective replacement for the physical experience of on-site exploration. Together, the text, image, and experience illuminated a more complete understanding of Soane's work. The later editions of the *Description* were substantially edited, stripped of their rich illustrations and textual references, in favor of a more conventional museum guide that was economical to produce and distribute while serving as an accessible pocket guide for tourists. Transformed from a theoretical and didactic volume, these versions of the *Description* were souvenirs that entirely removed Soane's voice from the visitor narrative and also left out the primary sources he referenced, such as Horace and Shakespeare. With these alterations, a significant facet of the museum's reading was lost: the inextricable relationship between text, image and experience. In the museum, Soane forged a union between painting, sculpture, and architecture, but through the composition of his *Description*, he also posited the home as a literal and figurative example of the poetry of architecture, where the designs of the classicist and modernist seamlessly coexisted. Soane's edition of the *Description* explicitly revealed sources of inspiration

for the home, whether literary, aesthetic, or architectural. Editions of the *Description* published in the late 19th and 20th centuries, however, presented fewer ways of reading the genesis of evolution of the museum. These editions focused on the final 'product' at Lincoln's Inn Fields, despite the fact that the house-museum was an ongoing construction site and repository for ever-growing collections throughout Soane's lifetime, processes truncated by his death and the absence of suitable heirs to carry on his vision. Nonetheless, the early 20th century editions added a new visual typology to the *Description*, photography. The development of these editions signified a new era for the curators of the museum, in which they were not only the stewards of the house-museums but also curators of new ways of seeing and studying the museum, its architect, and the collections, both on-site and off-site. The 21st-century editions of the *Description* have also added a new, analytical lens to the site through the development of a narrative that melds the methods of Soane's editions with discussion of the maintenance and restoration of the house-museum. These richly illustrated *New Descriptions* feature original drawings and watercolors as well as newly commissioned photographs, allowing visitors to explore the museum in more depth through a self-guided tour, while external readers are provided with the breadth of the images and textual resources necessary to understand the museum's development, function, and purview. In an era when many museums are developing interactive apps, it is worth noting that Soane's Museum has not pursued a digital edition of the *Description*. Although earlier editions of the *Description* embraced new technology, such as chromolithography or photography, the museum has been reluctant to embrace smartphones or tablets, stating that they create distractions for visitors in such confined spaces filled with precious objects and that the devices also add detrimental, ambient light to the authentic experience of the museum. Through this seemingly technophobic approach to the 'standards' of modern museum interpretation, the stewards of Soane's Museum are actively supporting an instrumental aspect of Soane's agenda that was first introduced in his *Description*. Away from the museum, it can, and should, be studied, through text and image, but while in the museum, the visitor's eyes and imagination are the best possible guides for exploring and understanding the architectural composition.

### Competing Interests

The author declares that they have no competing interests.

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## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Poe was a pupil at Manor House School in Stoke Newington from 1817 until 1820.
- <sup>2</sup> The act was called, 'An Act for Settling and Preserving Sir John Soane's Museum, Library, and Works of Art, in Lincoln's Inn Fields in the County of Middlesex, for the Benefit of the Public, and for Establishing a Sufficient Endowment for the Due Maintenance of the Same.'
- <sup>3</sup> For an extensive history, see Watkin and Hewat-Jaboor (2008). Bullock's Museum has not been included since nearly twenty editions of the *Companion* (1801–19) presented images of the collections, much like other guides, as vignettes that were isolated from their spatial context.
- <sup>4</sup> See drawings for No. 12 Lincoln's Inn Fields, SJSM 32.2A.6 and 32.2A.12.
- <sup>5</sup> See her letter to John Soane, 19 August 1830. Manuscript. SJSM III.C4, no. 32, Private Correspondence, Archives of Sir John Soane's Museum, London.
- <sup>6</sup> The letter arranging the copy dates 8 June 1830.
- <sup>7</sup> See her letter to John Soane, 19 February 1831. Manuscript. SJSM III.C4, no. 34, Private Correspondence, Archives of Sir John Soane's Museum, London.

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