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INTRODUCTION

John Soane (1753–1837) was appointed to the prestigious post of Professor of Architecture at the Royal Academy on 28 March 1806. The duties of the Professor were: "to read annually six public Lectures, calculated to form the taste of the Students, to instruct them in the beauties or faults of celebrated productions, to fit them for an unprejudiced study of books, and for a critical examination of structures; his salary shall be thirty pounds a year; and he shall continue in office during the King's pleasure."[1] Soane had long been connected with two of the founding members of the Academy, the architects Sir William Chambers and George Dance. Chambers was a Francophile who had himself been trained by Jacques-François Blondel, a future professor at the Académie Royale d'Architecture in Paris which he and Dance took as their model in founding the Royal Academy. England had been one of the last European powers to adopt the academies of arts, which, beginning in the Italian Renaissance, had been given a new lease of life by Louis XIV as part of his centralised control of art and production.

The Royal Academy, with a royal charter granted by George III who took a close personal interest in it, "sought to establish a new artistic hierarchy through the formation of an elite of forty like-minded academicians elected for life."[2] Soane entered the Royal Academy School of Architecture, where the teaching of architecture was organised by William Chambers, as one of only nine students admitted in 1771. His admission was probably on the suggestion of George Dance, the brilliantly inventive architect in whose office Soane had started his career in 1768. Though the Royal Academy was hardly a serious rival to its opposite number in Paris, Soane was, nonetheless, profoundly influenced by the illustrated lectures on architecture by the first Professor of Architecture at the Academy, Thomas Sandby, who stressed the importance of appropriate character in archi-

[1] Instrument of Foundation of the Royal Academy, 1768.

[2] Pierre de la Ruffinière du Prey, *John Soane, The Making of an Architect,* Chicago and London 1982, p. 56.

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tecture. In 1776 Soane won the Gold Medal of the Academy for his visionary design for a Triumphal Bridge, and was awarded the King's Travelling Scholarship in 1778. He claimed that he owed the success of his career to this award, for it enabled him to make a Grand Tour in 1778–1780 which he would never have been able to make without financial assistance, having been humbly born as the son of a Reading bricklayer. The Tour was not only important for opening his eyes to the great buildings of antiquity and of the Renaissance, but also for enabling him to meet a succession of English noblemen and landowners of cultivated sensibility who became, or introduced him to, his architectural patrons.

Developing the ideas of Sandby, Soane was anxious from the start of his career to find the appropriate character for every commission. In his book, *Plans, Elevations and Sections of Buildings erected in the Counties of Norfolk, Suffolk . . . &c* (1788), in which he illustrated his own early works, Soane urged that ornaments should always be "characteristic of their situations." Thus, only those should be used "as tend to show the destination of the edifice, as assist in determining its character, and for the choice of which the architect can assign satisfactory reasons."[3] A no less significant indicator of his early belief in appropriate symbolism was his statement that,

> The ancients with great propriety decorated their temples and altars with the sculls of victims, rams heads and other ornaments peculiar to their religious ceremonies; but when the same ornaments are introduced in the decoration of English houses, they become puerile and disgusting.[4]

The preoccupation with character, which was to feature strongly in his Royal Academy lectures, bore fruit in his own architecture, ranging from the purist linearity of his entrance gateway at Tyringham, to the Corinthian splendour of his Lothbury Arch at the Bank of England of 1800, probably the first permanent triumphal arch erected in London. He chose to echo the arch in the façade of his own country house, Pitzhanger Manor, Ealing, which he conceived as a self-portrait.

By the time Soane was appointed a Professor in 1806, he was thus well known as an architect who had designed or worked at over eighty austerely elegant country houses, such as Letton Hall and Shotesham Park, Norfolk, Tendring Hall, Suffolk, and Bentley Priory, Middlesex. From 1788, he had also held the important post of surveyor of the Bank of England, thanks to the patronage of William Pitt. By 1800, in interiors, such as the Stock Office at the Bank of England, the Yellow Drawing Room at Wimpole Hall, Cambridgeshire, and the vestibule at Tyringham Hall, Buckinghamshire, he had established a personal

[3] John Soane, *Plans . . . of Buildings erected in the Counties of Norfolk, Suffolk . . &c.*, 1788, p. 9.
[4] *Ibid.*

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style characterised by vaulted, top-lit interiors filled with the "lumière mystérieuse" which was recommended by Nicolas Le Camus de Mézières in a book frequently studied by Soane, *Le génie de l'architecture; ou, l'analogie de cet art avec nos sensations* (1780). It was in the course of the extraordinary voyage of intellectual discovery on which Soane embarked in the process of preparing his lectures that he discovered authors as little known in this country as Le Camus de Mézières. It will be part of the purpose of this book to set out again with Soane on that fascinating journey.

A GUIDE TO THE CONTENTS OF THE LECTURES

Soane's lectures are important because they show the mind of a great architect wrestling with a topic of colossal scale, namely the history of world architecture, and the lessons we should draw from it. The lectures are sometimes confused and frequently repetitive, so in approaching them we should recall Soane's own statement in his first lecture that, "the main object of the lectures . . . is to trace architecture from its most early periods." He also argued that, "By referring to first principles and causes, the uncertainties of genius will be fixed, and the artist enabled to feel the beauty and appreciate the value of ancient works, and thereby seize the spirit that directed the minds of those who produced them . . . We shall thereby become artists not mere copyists."

It was thus Soane's aim not only to describe and illustrate the architectural masterpieces of antiquity and of subsequent periods, but to point out what he believed were the universal principles on which they were based. In accordance with the Enlightenment theorists of the eighteenth century whose work he studied in preparing the lectures, these principles were, he believed, in accordance with reason and nature. Close study of the greatest buildings of the past would enable the student to "thereby seize the spirit that directed the mind of those who produced" them, a process in which they must "be intimately acquainted with not only what the ancients *have* done, but endeavour to learn from their works what they *would* have done." The importance of this distinction to Soane was that, "We shall thereby become artists not mere copyists; we shall avoid servile imitation and, what is equally dangerous, improper application. We shall not then be led astray by fashion, and prejudice, in a foolish and vain pursuit after novelty."

Nature and the origins of architecture were thus the key themes of Soane's first lecture in which he began his grand historical survey of architecture with a reference to the cave, the tent, and the hut. These types of shelter were interpreted as the homes, respectively, of hunters and fishermen, shepherds, and husbandmen in India, China, Egypt, and Greece. The cave was thus the origin of the massive stone architecture of the Egyptians, the tent of the light architecture of the Chinese, and the hut of the trabeated temples of the Greeks. Derived from Quatremère de Quincy's study of the origin of Egyptian architecture and its

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relation with Greek architecture,[5] this account was grafted on to the evocations of the primitive hut which Soane had imbibed from Marc-Antoine Laugier, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Thomas Sandby, and William Chambers.

In his second lecture Soane continued the outline of the classical architecture of the ancient world with which his first lecture had concluded. In giving extensive consideration to the details of the orders, he stressed that, "We must be careful to distinguish those parts which are essential and have an immediate analogy with the primitive objects of imitation, from those which are introduced by necessity, by fancy, or by caprice." In our enthusiasm for Soane's frequently minimalist architectural style, as expressed in buildings like his Chelsea Hospital stables, we should not forget that in the hierarchy of building types which meant so much to him, buildings in the lavish Corinthian order occupied the highest place: as he put it in this lecture, "Art cannot go beyond the Corinthian order." Although the modern mind may respond sympathetically to the constructional diagrams in which Soane showed the bare brick and stone of his Bank interiors, Soane himself did not regard them as complete until the construction had been concealed beneath a plaster skin of poetic ornament.

At the end of the second lecture, Soane returned to his cherished belief that the adoption of appropriate character in architecture was akin to the choice of appropriate clothes. He drew on hints in the writings of the ancient Roman poet Horace, of Laugier, and of his masters at the Royal Academy, Thomas Sandby and William Chambers, to develop a theory of what he called "the costume of architecture," a process in which key attention was paid to the role of mouldings.

In the third lecture Soane continued his analysis of the orders and their application, beginning with the Tuscan and the Composite. With its astonishingly wide range of historical reference, Lecture IV, by contrast, must have had a powerful effect on its audience, especially those who could see the illustrations which had now risen to seventy, compared with fifty-five in Lecture III. This was the lecture in which, when first delivered on 29 January 1810, Soane's criticism of a work by a living architect, Smirke's Covent Garden Theatre, caused such an outcry within the Royal Academy that he suspended the course for two years. The ostensible subject of the lecture was the completion of his survey of the uses of the orders, though he also ventured into related fields such as balustrades, obelisks, and pyramids.

Lecture V, the penultimate one in the first course, was devoted to a history of architecture from Constantine the Great and the fall of the Roman Empire to the Italian Renaissance, followed by a survey of British architects from Inigo Jones to William Chambers. The sixth and last lecture of Soane's first course was one of the most ill-structured of

[5] Antoine-Chrysostôme de Quincy, *De l'architecture égyptienne considérée dans son origine, ses principes et son goût, et comparées sous le mêmes rapports à l'architecture grecque,* Paris 1803.

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all. Indeed, no lecture indicated more painfully his lack of ability, despite constant rewriting, to organise and present coherently the vast mass of information he had so diligently acquired from his extensive and frequently arcane reading. Nonetheless, this lecture is of special interest for two reasons: (1) its obsession with the theory of symbolical ornament, particularly as illuminated by the theories of the eighteenth-century antiquarian known as Baron d'Hancarville; and (2) its startling confession that his course of reading had led him to condemn one of his own interiors at the Bank of England as betraying ignorance of "original causes and first principles."

Soane delivered his seventh lecture, the first of his second course of six, on 16 February 1815. He claimed that in this new series, "The great points or objects now to be considered might be classed, and separately treated of, under the heads of Distribution, Construction, and Decoration." For this tripartite division he was indebted to the classic French doctrine established by Augustin-Charles d'Aviler in his *Cours d'architecture* (1691–93). This remained a standard work for architects throughout the eighteenth century, inspiring the emphasis on Decoration, Distribution, and Construction, in Blondel's celebrated *Cours d'architecture* (1771–77), which was also a profound influence on Soane.

In Lecture VIII, less controversial than many others in the course, Soane was primarily concerned with the distribution of rooms and staircases. Despite its characteristically disparate contents, Lecture IX, like the preceding one, must have been helpful to the architectural student in providing many useful exemplars, both good and bad, for day-to-day matters such as the design of windows, doors, pilasters, roofs, and chimneyshafts.

The characteristically heterogeneous contents of Lecture X included an attractive opening section on landscape gardening and garden buildings, though curiously this was illustrated with very few drawings. By the time of the delivery of the lecture in 1815, the landscape tradition that Soane described had come to an end. Though Humphry Repton lived until 1818, his career was virtually over by 1810, and Soane's pupils were unlikely to be confronted with commissions for creating great landscaped parks dotted with follies, ruins, and temples. As is often the case, Soane's teaching was, albeit understandably, rooted in fundamentally eighteenth-century conceptions which many members of his audience did not share.

Soane opened his penultimate, eleventh, lecture with his customary lament that London, in painful contrast with the cities of the ancient world and, more humiliatingly, with those of modern continental Europe, was lacking in great royal and public buildings, churches, and palaces. Emphasising the important role of monumental public buildings as expressions of the might of Britain as a country which had recently defeated Napoleonic France, he showed little interest in modern functional and industrial architecture.

Lecture XII was, for the most part, sane and sensible, with Soane content, for once, to be an architect drawing on his own wide practical experience to talk about his craft. He thus turned to the topic of construction which, like Blondel in his *Cours,* he put at the end

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of his course. Buried in the halting academic prose in which Soane thought it proper to address his audience, was a rage against the shallow standards and constructional methods of the modern world into which, seemingly reluctantly, he had survived. Towards the end of the lecture, he returned to a favourite theme, the superiority of the monuments of the ancient world to those of modern times. For example, he contrasted modern lighthouses such as those at Cordouan in France, and Eddystone in England, unfavourably with Ptolemy's celebrated lighthouse on the island of Pharos at Alexandria. One of the most memorable aspects of the lectures was the enormous body of illustrative material which Soane prepared to accompany them. To this we should now address our attention.

THE LECTURE ILLUSTRATIONS

In Soane's lifetime his lectures were perhaps best known for their illustrations, all of which survive in the Soane Museum. Over a thousand of these water-colours were prepared between 1806 and 1820, many of them as much as three or four feet long, each of which took his pupils at least a week's full-time work. Constituting a comparative history of world architecture which was unique in their day, they were the product of a public-spirited gesture for which he received no payment but which was part of his endorsement of the Enlightenment cult of civic virtue. Most of the drawings were produced between 1806 and 1815 at a time when the Napoleonic Wars had drastically reduced the number of architectural commissions which even an architect of Soane's standing could expect to receive. Soane may have felt that the production of these huge, meticulously detailed, coloured drawings at least helped train the young men in his office in the absence of real jobs, or perhaps just kept them out of mischief.

Soane's great architectural library came to life as his pupils pulled folios off the shelves and turned the engravings which they contained into vivid perspectives animated with colour. The sources on which they drew included the illustrated folios of travellers, architects, and archaeologists such as Cornelis de Bruyn, Antoine Desgodetz, Fréart de Chambray, Fischer von Erlach, Colin Campbell, William Kent, Giovanni Battista Piranesi, Frederic Norden, Richard Pococke, Robert Wood, James Stuart, Robert Adam, Julien-David Leroy, M.-G.-A.-F. Choiseul-Gouffier, Victor Louis, Jacques Gondoin, William Wilkins, and Baron Dominique Vivant Denon. Not surprisingly, the drawings in which Soane showed his own buildings, above all the Bank of England, were among the most memorable.

On Soane's last visit to Paris in 1819, he took Henry Parke with him to make a stunning series of drawings of major Parisian monuments and street scenes. Sometimes, he sent his pupils from his office to make perspective views and measured drawings in London. On their numerous site visits they built up a unique visual record of the city as it was in the first two decades of the nineteenth century. It seems that a wave of enthusiasm led

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Soane to make a topographical survey of London in excess of anything that could have been required by the lectures. With Soane as guide, we travel around the city seeing hospitals, almshouses, churches, shops, banks, public houses, the premises of livery companies, private houses, docks, and pumps. Soane's merciless eye was quick to record whatever was mean or pretentious, absurd or inappropriate, banal or inconvenient, as well as, more rarely, whatever was grand, elegant, or fitting.

Soane's comparative approach anticipated by many years the parallel, but less vivid, technique adopted by Banister Fletcher in his *History of Architecture on the Comparative Method* (1896). Soane was something of a pioneer in this approach, which had first been hinted at in Fischer von Erlach's *Entwurff einer historischen Architectur* (1721). Soane also knew Leroy's plates giving the comparative plans, sections, and elevations of the temples and churches of the ancient and modern world in his *Les ruines des plus beaux monuments de la Grèce* (2nd ed., 1770). In addition, Soane owned the great work to which this technique had given rise, J.-N.-L. Durand's *Recueil et parallèle des édifices de tout genre, anciens et modernes* (1799–1801). Apart from these sources, Soane had little guidance in the preparation of drawings such as that made in December 1811 in which he compared the plans of the Pantheon, the Basilica of Constantine, Hagia Sophia, Florence and Milan Cathedrals, St Peter's, and St Paul's.[6]

No less memorable were images such as the superimposed elevations of the great pyramid at Giza and St Paul's Cathedral; the comparisons between the Erechtheum and St Paul's Covent Garden, and between the Colosseum in Rome and the Circus in Bath; and the striking assembly on a single sheet of the Pantheon, St Peter's, the Radcliffe Camera at Oxford, and Soane's own Rotunda at the Bank of England.[7] Such juxtapositions were the more stimulating for being unexpected. His drawings always showed the monuments of the ancient world as larger and more imposing than those of his own day: for example, his Consols Transfer Office at the Bank of England nestles almost ludicrously within the vast spaces of the Baths of Diocletian. Not foreseeing the great scale of nineteenth-century buildings, he was still a child of the ancien régime, with a consciousness of the issues of the Querelle des Anciens et Modernes, and a sense of the superiority of antiquity.

THE INTELLECTUAL BACKGROUND TO THE LECTURES

Thomas Sandby's successor as Professor, appointed in 1798, was George Dance whose unexpected failure to deliver any lectures encouraged the ever ambitious Soane to begin plotting to succeed him as early as 1804. His efforts were rewarded with success in 1806,

[6] SM Drawer 23, Set 2, no. 6.
[7] SM Drawer 23, Set 2, no. 2.

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but two years earlier he had begun preparing himself for this role by translating the essay on the history of architecture in the second edition of *Les ruines des plus beaux monuments de la Grèce* by J.-D. Leroy, Professor of Architecture at the Académie Royale d'Architecture in Paris.[8] Soane followed his translation from this epoch-making study of Greek architecture by translating between October 1805 and March 1806 much of the introduction to the first volume of J.-F. Blondel's celebrated *Cours d'architecture,* the summary of his teaching, first at the Ecole des Arts in Paris, where Soane's master William Chambers had been his pupil, and later at the Académie Royale d'Architecture.

Such a course of reading set a pattern which he was to follow until the 1820s during which time he provided himself with the education that his humble upbringing had denied him. In this process, he became a belated and lonely English student of Enlightenment thought, more preoccupied than any other British architect with the ideals of the *Encyclopédistes* and the French Enlightenment. At the same time, he studied the sensationalist and associational philosophy of the Picturesque movement in Britain.[9] The eighteenth century was marked by an attempt to escape from the conventional in both verbal and visual languages so as to pursue "unmediated nature."[10] Soane identified with the combination of reason and nature which had led Enlightenment thinkers to believe that truth could be attained by reason, rather than, as the church had taught, by faith, and that problems could be solved by a return to origins. The origins of language were thus sought by Etienne Bonnot de Condillac; of society by Rousseau; of architecture by John Wood and Laugier; of sexual symbolism by d'Hancarville and Richard Payne Knight; of primitive customs, laws, and religion, by Joseph François Lafiteau, Antoine-Yves Goguet, and Quatremère de Quincy; of music by Jean-Philippe Rameau; and even of plant forms by Goethe.

The *Encyclopédie,* which Soane owned in thirty-three stately volumes,[11] was not commonly found in English private libraries at this date.[12] The first volume contained an important engraving of a secular tree of knowledge headed by the three mental faculties, memory, reason, and imagination.[13] These three faculties were related, respectively, to the

[8] SM Al Soane Case 161, fols. 1–155.

[9] In particular, Edmund Burke, *A Philosophical Enquiry into our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* (1757), 1801; Henry Home (Lord Kames), *Elements of Criticism,* 1762; and Richard Payne Knight, *An Analytical Inquiry into the Principles of Taste,* 1805.

[10] Barbara Maria Stafford, *Voyage into Substance: Art, Science, Nature, and the Illustrated Travel Account, 1760–1840,* Cambridge, Mass. 1984, p. 1.

[11] *Encyclopédie ou dictionnaire raisonné des sciences, des arts et des métiers,* 33 vols, Paris and Amsterdam 1751–77.

[12] See also, John Lough, *The* Encyclopédie *in Eighteenth-century England* (1952), Newcastle-upon-Tyne 1970, pp. 1–24.

[13] This large fold-out diagram, described as "notre Arbre encyclopédique" (vol. I, p. xviii), and titled *Système figuré des connoissances humaines,* accompanied the *Discours préliminaire des editeurs, Encyclopédie,* vol. I, 1751, pp. i–xlv.

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three activities of history, philosophy and poetry, which comprised all known arts and sciences. Architecture was included under the heading of imagination, as were poetry, drama, allegory, music, painting, sculpture, and engraving.[14]

Sharing d'Alembert's view that "everything man knew derived from the world around him and the operations of his own mind,"[15] Soane was obsessed by a belief that architecture was an essentially intellectual art. Constantly claiming that architecture "cannot fail of creating sensations in the mind,"[16] Soane referred to the operations of the mind on over one hundred and sixty times in the course of his lectures at the Royal Academy. Moreover, d'Alembert's belief that knowledge came from the senses not from Revelation, helped open the way to the tradition represented by the new confessional literature of Rousseau and Goethe who, like Soane, were preoccupied with analysis of their own feelings. It seems that Soane identified with Rousseau as the victim of organised persecution which, for the latter, came from his former allies such as Diderot.

Along with Soane's belief in public architecture as the expression of civic virtue, a tradition with classical roots in the ethical writings of Aristotle,[17] went the call for architecture to appeal to the spectator, to instruct and move him. This doctrine of architectural eloquence, central to Soane's belief in the expression of appropriate character in architecture, had underlain seventeenth- and eighteenth-century literary theory. Soane was familiar with the origins of this tradition in classical rhetoric and in the writings of Horace and Longinus.

All this we know not only from his library but from over twenty manuscript volumes, and thousands of loose sheets, containing Soane's own thoughts on architecture and his notes from other authors from antiquity to his own day. Written between 1804 and 1821, these survive as the record of his search for truth down the complex paths of architectural history and theory. Much of the impetus behind this laborious yet passionate process of self-education, unique in the history of English architecture, and revealed in this material, was provided by Soane's response to two of his favourite authors, Vitruvius and J.-F. Blondel. He was evidently impressed by Vitruvius' insistence that the architect should be a man of great education, well versed in topics such as history, philosophy, and music, as well as in architecture. A pioneer in the education of architects, Blondel founded his own

[14] In the tree as originally published in the *Prospectus,* civil, naval, and military architecture had all been included under the heading of reason. For an explanation of the shift of civil architecture from reason to imagination by the time volume I was published, see Kevin Harrington, *Changing Ideas on Architecture in the* Encyclopédie, *1750–1776,* Ann Arbor 1985, pp. 21–28.

[15] Robert Darnton, *The Business of the Enlightenment: A Publishing History of the* Encyclopédie *1775–1800,* Cambridge, Mass., and London 1979, p. 7.

[16] David Watkin, *Sir John Soane: Enlightenment Thought and the Royal Academy Lectures,* Cambridge 1996, Lecture III, p. 524.

[17] Soane owned and studied the works of Aristotle, his copy of the *Ethics and Politics,* 2 vols, London 1779, bearing occasional underlinings in his hand.

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school of architecture in 1743, thus giving practical expression to the belief in improvement characteristic of the *Encyclopédie* to which he was an important contributor.

Regarding himself as alone, misunderstood, and attacked, even by his own younger son, Soane identified with Rousseau whose *Confessions* and *Rêveries du promeneur solitaire* were among his favourite reading. Rousseau's narrative of his inner life, a turning point in the development of modern consciousness, was essentially the invention of the character, the spiritual and artistic character of "Rousseau." So Soane, by adding the "e" to his original surname, Soan, in 1783, invented a new person. The intense subjectivity and self-preoccupation of Rousseau and Soane meant that they approached culture, with its inherited traditions and values, as something which could not be imposed from outside but which had to be constantly tested in order to be made personally authentic.

This was the solitary process of testing in which Soane indulged, day and night, in his library, recording and querying the theories of writers such as Blondel, Winckelmann, d'Hancarville, Henry Home (Lord Kames), Le Camus de Mézières, Durand, and Claude-Nicolas Ledoux. His constantly growing library was an amalgamation of the collections he had begun forming at his house at no. 12, Lincoln's Inn Fields, and at Pitzhanger Manor. The former, consisting of the Greek and Roman classics, poetry, painting, sculpture, history, music, and architecture, reflected an ultimately Renaissance approach to knowledge. This was the conception that d'Alembert, as we have already noted, had been codified recently under the heading "imagination."

He claimed to have created Pitzhanger with the architectural education of his elder son in mind, but when both sons turned out as disappointments, he sold Pitzhanger in 1810 and united the two collections at no. 13, Lincoln's Inn Fields, in 1814. The library was now to serve as an educational tool in his role as Professor of Architecture at the Royal Academy: indeed, in the year of his appointment as Professor, 1806, he began to rearrange and enlarge the collection, setting his reluctant younger son, George, to prepare a catalogue of it. But there were never enough shelves for the books in Soane's lifetime, so we must imagine him surrounded by confusing piles of books, overflowing from tables onto the floor. It was in this setting that, during many years of study and note-taking, he constructed an intellectual labyrinth in which he constantly wandered alone, vainly seeking an exit. Soane's position was close to that of d'Alembert who, at the start of the *Encyclopédie,* had explained how, "The general system of the sciences and the arts is a kind of labyrinth, a twisting road which the mind enters without really knowing the route it ought to take."[18]

With a worried, questing mind, as though he were some kind of secular priest, Soane found himself in especial sympathy with those actual priests, Jean-Louis de Cordemoy, Laugier, Louis Avril, and Charles-François de Lubersac, whose architectural theories were

[18] *Encyclopédie ou dictionnaire raisonné des sciences, des arts et des métiers,* vol. I, Paris 1751, p. xiv. My translation. D'Alembert had already referred to his concept of a labyrinth on p. vii.

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