From Darkness to Light
Writers in Museums 1798-1898

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From Darkness to Light explores from a variety of angles the subject of museum lighting in exhibition spaces in America, Japan, and Western Europe throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Written by an array of international experts, these collected essays gather perspectives from a diverse range of cultural sensibilities. From sensitive discussions of Tintoretto's unique approach to the play of light and darkness as exhibited in the Scuola Grande di San Rocco in Venice, to the development of museum lighting as part of Japanese artistic self-fashioning, via the story of an epic American painting on tour, museum illumination in the work of Henry James, and lighting alterations at Chatsworth, this book is a treasure trove of illuminating contributions.

The collection is at once a refreshing insight for the enthusiastic museum-goer, who is brought to awareness of the exhibit in its immediate environment, and a wide-ranging scholarly compendium for the professional who seeks to proceed in their academic or curatorial work with a more enlightened sense of the lighted space.

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Cover image: Jacopo Tintoretto, The Adoration of the Magi, Scuola Grande di San Rocco, Venice (graphic elaboration by Pier Giovanni Possamai, The University of Venice, Ca' Foscari)
When the architect Sir John Soane died in January 1837 he left his house at 13 Lincoln’s Inn Fields in London, which was also his private museum, library and architectural office, to the nation. He achieved this by means of a private Act of Parliament (passed in 1833, the year of his 80th birthday) which stipulated that it must be preserved ‘as nearly as possible’ as it was left at the time of his death: this requirement is still in force today.

Most of Soane’s Museum has remained largely unchanged for the last 180 years, including iconic interiors such as the Roman inspired Library-Dining Room, brilliantly inventive Picture Room (with its ingenious ‘moveable planes’), mock-medieval Monk’s Parlour and Monk’s Yard and also Soane’s architectural office. At the heart of the building is the ‘Museum’ — what Soane called the ‘Dome’ — an area piled high with a Piranesian arrangement of fragments and casts, presided over by Francis Chantrey’s bust of Sir John Soane himself.

Soane was his own architect, demolishing the previous building on the site and constructing No. 13 in 1812–13, continuing to modify its design and add ever more items to his collections until his death in 1837. He was always seeking to enhance the poetic and picturesque qualities of his interiors as the setting for arrangements of works of art that he intended should embody ‘the union of Architecture, Painting and Sculpture’. Soane was Professor of Architecture at the Royal Academy, and at his very first lecture in 1809 he issued a public invitation to his Academy students to visit his house the day before and the day after
each of his lectures. From 1812 the house was referred to publicly as an ‘academy of architecture’, but it was also a museum and Soane’s home and architectural office as well.

Soane was an architect of light. One of the great characteristics of his buildings is that they are designed to maximise natural light, usually through top lighting via skylights of varying forms and sizes, often used in combination to light a single interior. While earlier architects had used top-lighting, in his complex, intricate use of skylights in the domestic interior Soane was an innovator.

Soane was inspired by seminal early experiences of buildings in Italy on his grand tour during 1778–80, when he wandered through the ruins of Rome, open to the sky, and explored the top-lit subterranean passages of the Villa Adriana at Tivoli. The Pantheon provided direct inspiration as can be seen in Soane’s later Rotunda at the Bank of England, which features natural light pouring in not just through the drum in the centre of the dome but also through a series of large Diocletian windows. There is no sign of any fixed lighting — nor does any appear in the many other surviving watercolour perspectives of the interiors of the Bank, which show clerks at work serving customers in brilliant natural daylight. Of course the Bank of England was not normally open at night but presumably oil lamps were used on the desks on dark afternoons.

Soane’s bravura manipulation of natural light is equally beautifully demonstrated by his Law Courts at Westminster, constructed on such a constricted site that most of them had no windows. His Court of Chancery featured a spectacular cut-away oculus over the central space and numerous skylights and windows at the upper levels to allow light to penetrate to even the darkest corners of the court. One Soane building that we know was used at night was the Freemason’s Hall, of which Joseph Gandy painted a spectacular night-time watercolour showing it

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2 Drawing SM 1/8/7 is a night time view of the troops of the Bank of England Volunteer Corps having dinner in the Consols Dividend Office; the sketch for it (SM Vol.69/34) is dated 10 September 1799. This shows candles around the walls on small sconces and also arranged on two levels of the iron stove in the centre of the room. However, these were probably temporarily put out for the occasion — no fixtures are shown in any other views of this interior.
3 Late-nineteenth and early-twentieth-century photographs show lamps placed on the desks in the Bank offices.
lit by argand oil lamps (each one with four burners) hanging from the corners of the canopy at the centre of the ceiling.

So what did Soane do to light his own house? As in his other buildings the prime source of light was the sun — daylight — brought into the Museum at the back of the house through a series of skylights of different forms. From the beginning the scenography of this lighting — which Soane’s friend, the novelist Barbara Hofland, described as ‘exquisite hues and magical effects’ — was very important to him. A section through the Museum drawn in 1817 by one of Soane’s pupils captures beautifully the effect and atmosphere that he was aiming to create.

By the end of his life Soane’s house and Museum incorporated fifteen windows, five doors, two skylights and one glazed screen containing pieces of historic stained glass — bought at the sale-rooms. A further eleven doors and windows and ten skylights contained coloured glass — combining either light yellow, dark yellow or etched white glass with painted coloured glass borders of various patterns.\(^4\) This manipulation of the light had a profound effect on the appearance of Soane’s collections and on the emotional impact of his arrangements of works of art — as it continues to have to this day. In his use of coloured and stained glass he was inspired by earlier collectors such as William Beckford at Fonthill and Horace Walpole at Strawberry Hill, and by the picturesque movement as well as the effects created in the theatre and for popular entertainments.\(^5\)

Soane was inspired by Sir William Chambers’ description of how an architect should regulate ‘the quantity of light introduced’ into any building ‘so as to excite gay, cheerful, solemn or gloomy sensations in the mind of the spectator according to the nature and purposes for which the structure is intended’.\(^6\) The idea of architecture creating different moods was developed by the French theorist Le Camus de Mézières

\(^4\) The stained and coloured glass in the house at the time of Soane’s death is recorded in the AB Inventory, 1837, SM Archive.

\(^5\) For a more detailed discussion of the influences on this aspect of Soane’s lighting see Helen Dorey ‘“Exquisite Hues and Magical Effects”: Sir John Soane’s Use of Stained Glass at 13 Lincoln’s Inn Fields’ in The Journal of Stained Glass, special issue Sandra Coley (ed.) The Stained Glass Collection of Sir John Soane’s Museum 27 (2004), 7–36.

who emphasised the key role played by light, particularly in making buildings ‘mysterieux ou tristes’ [mysterious or sad]. Soane translated a whole passage from Le Camus when preparing his Royal Academy lectures, as follows: ‘a well lighted and well aired building, when all the rest is well treated becomes agreeable and cheerful. Less open, less sheltered, it offers a serious character: the light still more intercepted, it is mysterious or gloomy’. In his eighth Royal Academy lecture he spoke vigorously in support of the ‘lumière mysterieuse, so successfully practised by the French Artist […] [which] is a most powerful agent in the hands of a man of genius’, adding ‘its power cannot be too fully understood, nor too highly appreciated. It is, however, little attended to in our architecture […] [because] we do not sufficiently feel the importance of character in our buildings, to which the mode of admitting light contributes in no small degree.’

The desire to evoke mood is seen in Soane’s earliest designs for the natural lighting of Lincoln’s Inn Fields. An early design perspective for the central dome area drawn by his pupil James Adams in June 1808 depicts a strong contrast between the well-lit upper part of the Museum with its sunny atmosphere and the gloomy crypt in the basement beneath. The contrast in mood expressed in this early design was put into words many years later, in Soane’s own Description of the Residence of Sir John Soane (published in 1835):

looking downwards […] we behold the catacombs pale and shadowy in their solitary crypt; looking upwards, the beams of golden light fall on […] lovely specimens of art.

Only spaces where good light was essential for working, such as Attic rooms and the kitchens, the province of the servants, contained no coloured glass at all. Two spaces that required excellent daylight — the architectural office and the Picture Room — have skylights filled with clear glass for good natural light, not distorted by colour. Soane took full advantage of their strong lighting by using it to create atmosphere in adjoining or adjacent spaces, by contrast. For example in the Picture

Room clear light through lantern lights is provided for optimum viewing of important pictures. On the south side of the Picture Room great doors or ‘planes’ open to enable visitors to view the spectacle of a statue of a nymph perched above a model of one of the façades of the Bank of England. The effect is like that of opening the doors to a shrine where the goddess stands with offerings at her feet. A half-round skylight above is filled with primrose-yellow glass causing the arrangement to be lit by strong yellow light to create maximum theatrical impact, in contrast with the Picture Room itself.

Soane very often augmented his beautifully nuanced natural lighting effects with mirrors, as in the Library-Dining Room and Breakfast Room where convex and flat mirrors are combined with coloured glass and stained glass. The convex mirrors augment the effect of mirror glass lining the backs of niches containing plaster busts (as a student Soane sketched mirror glass lining niches in which statues were displayed in the salone at the Villa Albani in Rome\(^9\)). In the Breakfast Room mirrors are inserted into the ceiling and doors in a manner probably inspired by his early experience of their use at the Villa Palagonia in Sicily.\(^{11}\) Similar effects are found in the recently restored private apartments on the second floor\(^\text{12}\) where convex mirrors are installed in doors leading into the Model Room, creating unusual views of the room that alter depending on the angle of the door.

The mirrors had the added benefit of not just amplifying the effects of natural light but of enhancing the impact of candles. Soane would have used white wax candles such as those glimpsed in a watercolour view of his Library-Dining Room on the ground floor. Two candlesticks in the form of reclining female figures, each with

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\(^{10}\) Soane’s sketch is in the Victoria and Albert Museum, V&A 3436.189.

\(^{11}\) Soane never forgot the spectacular effects he had seen in the palace at Bagheria where mirror glass is set into vaulted ceilings and is also used in smaller panes in doors producing the effect of multiplying mirrors. In the appendices to his 1830 *Description of his house* he refers to the ‘wonderful performances of the Prince of Palagonia in the decoration and furniture of his palace’ (*Description of the Residence of John Soane, Architect*, limited edition published privately, 1830, p. 53).

\(^{12}\) The restored apartments opened in 2015 and feature numerous windows and doors filled with ancient panels of stained glass purchased by Soane and installed in combination with coloured or etched glass borders.
one small candle-arm, are visible on the mantelpiece to the left as are two pots containing spills for lighting candles. By the time Soane died the same candlesticks were in the private apartments on his bathroom mantelpiece. A pair of smart ormolu vases that Soane had on the mantelpiece in the Breakfast Room has lids in the form of flames that invert to become candle-holders. A pair of brass ‘chamber’ (bedroom) candlesticks was in the Model Room at the time of Soane’s death. Two tall wooden candlesticks in the Monk’s Parlour contain timber candles, painted in imitation of wax, which are recorded as present in the earliest inventories of Soane’s collection and were presumably therefore always ornamental and considered part of the collection of works of art. Only three candlesticks remain that do not appear in the early inventories — they are probably the remnants of those everyday ones that were kept down in the domestic offices and brought out when required.

Soane also had large candle chandeliers in his two drawing rooms on the first floor, regularly used for evening events. The one surviving original chandelier is now converted to electricity.

Apart from the watercolour of his Library-Dining room mentioned previously, the only other image from Soane’s lifetime showing a candle in use is the frontispiece for John Britton’s guide book to Soane’s house, *The Union of Architecture, Sculpture and Painting*, published in 1827, clearly staged. It shows a burned down candle on the desk in the Monk’s Parlour in the basement. We still use candles in the Museum at times today for special events and on very dark winter afternoons: however, they are in heavy glass jars, bedded in sand, rather than in the domestic fittings of Sir John Soane’s time.

The main source of artificial light at night in Soane’s day was colza oil lamps, kept in a lamp closet in the basement and brought up into the various rooms as required. Two views that were drawn by Joseph Michael Gandy in 1811 show night-time effects in the Museum. The lighting effects Gandy shows in these evocative watercolours may have

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13 SM BR20 and BR24 see www.soane.org/collections
14 SM MP280 and MP282.
15 SM X155, X128 and X129.
16 Plan SM 32/2C/1 shows a Lamp Closet on the east side of the basement staircase hall. This plan is one of a set that was drawn just after Soane’s death in 1837.
been achieved with the use of reflectors, perhaps themselves mirrored. Just such a reflector is illustrated in a later watercolour showing a group of Soane’s built works in an imaginary Soanean interior. It illustrates beautifully the powerful effect created by a lamp behind a reflector, which seems to be on an elaborate stand (incidentally, with Soane’s coat-of-arms on it). Sadly it is not clear whether this stand actually existed or if it was a figment of Gandy’s imagination.

We know very little about where Soane placed lamps routinely in the Museum. We do know that there were only two fixed lamps inside the house at the time of his death — both oil lamps — one in the Monk’s Parlour in the basement and one on a bracket at the curve of the stairs at second floor level, where the bedrooms were. Unfortunately neither is shown in surviving views of the house. However, one fascinating clue we do have about Soane’s use of candles and lamps at night relates to the celebrations he held to mark the acquisition of his greatest treasure, the ancient Egyptian sarcophagus of Pharaoh Seti I, which he placed at the heart of his basement in the ‘Sepulchral Chamber’ in May 1824. Ten months later, in March 1825, he invited 1,000 people over three nights to view the sarcophagus ‘by lamplight’.

The lighting of the Museum for the three evenings was very carefully planned and the bill for the special temporary installation that was created using hired lamps gives an insight into how Soane envisaged his house being lit for an evening function. As well as purchasing eight pounds (weight) of ‘Palace wax lights’ and three pounds of wax candles from Davies’ Candle, Soap and Oil Warehouse, Soane engaged outside contractors to supply additional lighting. John Patrick was paid £24.15s ‘To illuminate the outside of the house with 182 Glass Bucket Lamps and 74 Glass Barrel Lamps, 3 nights @ £8.5s per night’. These must have been placed on all the window sills on the front façade and, perhaps, lined the curb around the front courtyard and flanked the front steps. William Collins, manufacturer of stained glass and dealer in lighting appliances, was engaged to provide (on hire) 108 lamps, chandeliers and

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17 The fitting from which the hanging lamp in the Monk’s Parlour was suspended, in the centre of a beam on the south side, survives. This enabled us to identify its location and install an authentic hanging argand lamp (electrified) there in 2000 (the gift of Mr. Christopher Hodsoll, SM XF321).
18 SM Archives 7/7/46 and 7/8/35-36.
19 SM Archives 7/7/46.
candelabra to be placed or suspended around the ground floor rooms and in the basement. The upstairs rooms do not seem to have been open to the guests. Soane himself must have supervised the placing of all the lamps and Collins’ bill reflects the detailed attention given to this to exploit to the full all the contrasts of light with gloom around the house and to create the maximum romantic atmosphere in which to appreciate the sarcophagus.

The Entrance Hall was well lit with a lantern with two-light burner and two French lamps with pedestals. The Library (the main ground floor reception room) was allocated two large four-light candelabra, two two-light antique lamps, two single-light rich pedestal lamps and two single-light bronze lamps. Additionally, three lamps were placed outside the Dining Room window in the Monument Court, which would have enabled guests to see the sculpture on the parapets above and to view the *Pasticcio* (a dramatic column of architectural fragments) in the centre of the yard. The domed Breakfast Room was lit by two rich five-light candelabra which were probably placed on the two tables, although one may have been on the desk in the window.

In the main Dome Area at the back of the Museum, four three-light lamps were suspended above the sarcophagus. These lamps would have illuminated the sarcophagus very well from above. The large hooks from which they were suspended are almost certainly still *in situ* today. There were also four single-light French lamps (presumably on the balustrades) and two one-light bracket lamps (these were perhaps fixed to two of the dome piers). In the basement Soane had much less light, in keeping with the romantic, funereal atmosphere he wished to create. In the Monk’s Parlour, he placed four two-light pedestal lamps, two single-light French lamps and two single-light bronze lamps but the basement passages and the catacombs were not lit at all.

Around the sarcophagus were placed a two-light pedestal lamp, a single-light pedestal lamp with reflector and seven ‘japanned lamps’. Some of these were actually inside the sarcophagus, which, the *Morning Chronicle* reported, ‘seemed to be of a red colour, owing to the red light of the lamps by which it was illuminated’. The *Chronicle* was under a

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20 This information is based on an analysis of the archive bills for the hire of lights, SM Archives 7/8/35-36.
21 *The Morning Chronicle*, 25 March 1825, p. 3.
misapprehension: the lamps placed in the sarcophagus did not need to be red to turn the coffin crimson — this extraordinary effect occurs as a result of the light passing through the translucent stone. This obviously became a party piece. The celebrated German art historian and museum director Gustav Waagen visited London in the 1830s, and described the access to and lighting of the Museum:

I must say a few words of one of the most celebrated curiosities of London, the museum of the architect Sir John Soane to which in the most praiseworthy manner, he permits persons to have access several times a week [...] the principal part has the appearance of a mine with many veins, in which instead of metallic ores, you find works of art. Thus in most apartments a broken light falls from above, which heightens the feeling of the subterranean and mysterious. This is increased to the highest degree by the most celebrated of all the sarcophagi found in Egypt which adorns the middle [...] The stone is so transparent that when a candle is put into the sarcophagus, it appears of a beautiful red.22

When we cleaned the sarcophagus a few years ago the underside was found to be covered with soot, so it is possible that candles were put under it to create this effect at times. Modern experiments have recreated something like the effect of having lamps in the sarcophagus by using massed candles. The total cost of Collins’ lighting was £80.9s and the lamps consumed ‘36 Gallons of best oil’ over the three evenings.23

Another unusual aspect of lighting preserved in the Museum is a group of four obelisks that originally supported oil lamps in Lincoln’s Inn Fields.24 Soane collected them when they were removed as street lighting and replaced with gas in about 1820, placing one pair outside in his Monk’s Yard and the other in the basement. He seems to have begun to use gas himself from January 1828.25 The earliest receipt from the Gas,

23 Soane Museum Archives 7/8/35-36.
24 SM M441, M445, MY30 and MY31. A number of similar obelisks can still be seen outside buildings in Lincoln’s Inn Fields and elsewhere in London, for example, around the perimeter of the grounds of Westminster Abbey. Their use as oil lamps is illustrated in an imaginary design perspective for the north side of Lincoln’s Inn Fields, 1813, SM 74/4/1.
25 SM Archives 7/11/23 bill from John Archer records 30 January 1828 an item for Gaslight Apparatus furnished and fitted up.
Light & Coke Company for rent is for two quarters due in March 1828 and from then onwards there are regular bills for quarterly rent (and for coke supplied separately by them). A bill from John Archer for work in early 1828 tantalisingly refers to experiments with gas lighting in the ‘Monk’s Wilderness’ — the romantic yard filled with medieval ruins that Soane created for his imaginary monk ‘Padre Giovanni’. The bill records that he was paid to move the lamps to face in a different direction as part of the work and ‘to shew the effect in that situation’. However, the equipment was removed after just a few weeks and plainly the experiment was a failure. Soane’s Note Book for 5 May 1828 records ‘Discontinue Gas in Monk’s Garden’.27

Soane did install two gas lamps permanently, both outside, in the same year. He converted his porch lantern (formerly oil) to gas and installed a gas lamp on the north windowsill in the Monument Court. The men put it up first ‘without lantern’ so Soane could ‘see the effect’. It is shown in views of the Breakfast Room window. Soane never used gas inside in his own residence and this may have been because it would have been extremely noxious smelling.28 However, interestingly, John Britton, in the Union of 1827, refers to a gas installation done by Soane for one of his clients noting that: ‘In a banqueting or ball room, a transparent ceiling, effectively lighted by gas, could not fail to be a very striking piece of decoration. In the house of the Earl of St. Germain, St. James’s Square, Mr. Soane has erected a dining-room which is lighted by gas, concealed in the dome’.29

After Soane’s death, the Museum continued to be lit by a combination of lamps and gas lights. A few gas lighting fixtures were installed inside in the 1850s but only in the basement and in areas where resident staff lived. Unfortunately, complaints that the Museum was dark led to damaging alterations that took place in about 1890 — sadly just a few years before electricity was installed in 1897 (relatively early for a London house).30

26 SM Archives 7/11/23 and duplicate copy 7/11/44.
27 SM Archives Soane Note Book entry for 5 May 1828.
28 It is also interesting to note that the gas pipes were unprotected and uninsulated in his day.
29 Britton, op cit, p. 4.
30 Electricity was introduced at the Houses of Parliament in 1859.
The last thirty years have been spent restoring Soane’s arrangements of works of art and undoing changes to the building that had eroded many of Soane’s original lighting effects, for example the removal of several light shafts. The most modest of these provided a single shaft of light via a glass door in a cupboard in the Picture Room to light a medieval carved wooden crucifixion scene in the Monk’s Cell in the basement. Another much larger aperture in the floor of the ‘Lobby to the Breakfast Room’ has been re-opened to enable light to pour down onto an arrangement of cinerary urns in the reinstated ‘Catacombs’ below, as Soane intended. The most dramatic light shaft, introduced by Soane in the late 1820s, brought natural light into the heart of the second floor. The light was admitted through a skylight on the main roof, below which the timber-panelled shaft punched through the third floor rear attic room to let light down into Soane’s Book Passage. This shaft was dramatically hung with framed watercolours and a portrait of the young Soane himself, all of which could either be viewed from below or from the front attic via a pair of double doors.

In running Sir John Soane’s Museum for the benefit of modern visitors we are determined not to flood the Museum with light. By reintroducing the blinds Soane had on every window and reducing the glare caused in some places by too much light we can keep the levels low and enable Soane’s magical natural daylight effects to be seen and appreciated. We have judiciously introduced electrified argand lamps in some spaces to replicate at least the correct position of the kinds of light Soane was working with without the fittings being intrusive. Professor Foscari’s remarks elsewhere in this volume are very pertinent to the Soane. In order to keep Soane’s museum ‘permanently magical’, as one of his friends called it, we must, at least to some extent, keep it dark.

31 This arrangement was recorded in a drawing of 1839, SM 32/3/19 and reinstated in 1990.
32 This work was carried out in 2015–16.