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For Immediate Release

JOHN SOANE 1753-1837

THE LEGENDARY JOHN SOANE OUTSIDE THE CONFINES OF HIS ECCENTRIC LONDON MUSEUM

Montréal, 15 March 2001 — Described by Henry James as “one of the most curious things in London,” Sir John Soane’s Museum was built as the picturesque and enigmatic home, office, collector’s trove, and personal showplace of one of history’s most brilliantly innovative architects. A crucible of Soane’s mind, and a showcase of architecture that has caught the imagination of generations, the Museum is renowned for its extraordinary objects and for its masterful manipulations of interior space and light.

Now, for the first time since the Museum was established in 1833, more than two hundred objects from the collection are being shown outside its walls. On view at the CCA from **16 May to 3 September 2001**, the exhibition **John Soane 1753-1837** includes Soane’s own sketches and drawings, more than twenty-five original models, a selection of his books and drawing instruments, and paintings by Joseph Michael Gandy together with a selection of important objects from the CCA’s own collections. The CCA is the only North American venue for the exhibition.

John Soane 1753-1837 is the first in a new series at the CCA — *Modern Architecture in the Making* — to be presented from May 2001 through 2004. The exhibition cycle shows the evolution of architecture over the past two hundred years as a series of extraordinary breakthroughs.

Focused on Soane’s astonishing conception of the Bank of England, but also examining a series of critical moments and projects in his career, the exhibition reveals Soane as the first architect of his time to engage in a radical reworking of tradition to respond to new circumstances and

sensibilities. From banking halls to picture galleries, Soane was challenged to invent new types and forms of building to meet the changing social realities of the industrial age. The exhibition invites viewers into the realm of spectacle and illusion with which Soane opened up the spaces of the modern world and brought them into dialogue with history. Organized by Margaret Richardson, director of Sir John Soane's Museum, and by MaryAnne Stevens of the Royal Academy of Arts, London, the exhibition is the first major re-evaluation of Soane's career, as well as a reconsideration of his importance to the history of modern architecture and his continuing relevance for architects today. As Margaret Richardson has remarked, "Soane's ability to continue to engage the attention of architects working at the end of the twentieth century is possibly his greatest legacy."

According to Kurt W. Forster, Director of the CCA, "Through this exhibition new light is shed on Soane's education, his emergence as a mature architect, his debt to his mentor George Dance the Younger, and the impact of the painter Joseph Michael Gandy upon his conception of art. Above all, we can understand more clearly how Soane developed new building forms for a new way of life. In his masterpiece, the Bank of England, he designed the first great public financial institution of the industrial age. In the Dulwich Picture Gallery, he created the first building conceived as a public art museum. In his late public projects, he formulated what has justly been called an architectural language expressive of the modern, global character of the British Empire."

The Bank of England

Central to the exhibition and to Soane's career is the Bank of England (1788-1833). Soane's designs responded to the expansion of the institution itself, which was growing in response to crises that included the loss of the American colonies, civil unrest, and the financing of the Napoleonic wars. A city in itself, the Bank comprised sky-lit, domed interiors modeled upon the baths and mausoleums of ancient Rome, courtyards, gardens, triumphal arches, and fortified walls. Freely mixing classical orders and references, Soane both reworked the past for a new building typology and established his personal architectural language, which was steeped in (but not limited by) earlier traditions. He also emerged as a technological innovator, introducing daring new structural techniques as well as heating and fireproofing systems previously used only in industrial mills.

The exhibition unfolds around the Bank, displaying, among others, original models of the Bank, studies by Soane himself, and a series of monumental paintings by Joseph Michael Gandy, who so brilliantly captured the spirit of Soane's work. Inspired by Piranesi's views of the remains of ancient Rome, Gandy's watercolours synthesized J.M.W. Turner's colour and lighting effects

with Edmund Burke's theories of the sublime, bringing a psychological intensity to Soane's designs.

The Making of an Architect

The exhibition also examines Soane's formation under the tutelage of George Dance the Younger, his education at the newly founded Royal Academy of Arts, and his firsthand experience of classical architecture in Italy. At the Academy, the young Soane was exposed to the thought of the most prominent artists and architects of his day, among them Joshua Reynolds and William Chambers. As winner of the Gold Medal in 1776 for his magnificent drawings for a "Triumphal Bridge," Soane was awarded a three-year trip to Italy. There, he immersed himself in archeological study, as seen through a series of his sketches and drawings made on the site of several ancient monuments. He also saw the works of Bernini and met the elderly Piranesi, whose visionary fantasies were to permeate Soane's architectural representations. No less important were the social connections Soane made on the Grand Tour, including an acquaintance with Thomas Pitt, cousin of future Prime Minister William Pitt the Younger.

Soane on the "Primitive"

Soane began his close study of architectural theory as a student at the Royal Academy. Systematically widening his focus to French Enlightenment writers, Soane showed a particularly deep interest in the writings of Jean-Jacques Rousseau and of his architectural counterpart, Abbé Marc Antoine Laugier. Fascinated by the suggestion that the origins of classical architecture lay in the primitive hut, Soane proposed a return to the first principles of architectural composition. After his return to London in 1780, Soane literally applied these principles to several projects, including a fanciful dairy.

Country Houses

A series of modest commissions with tight budgets helped Soane further refine a distinctive architectural language of classicism reduced to essential structural elements, articulating a proto-modernist expression that has fascinated architects of the twentieth century. A group of drawings demonstrate Soane's mastery of the incised line and his inspired handling of traditional building materials — brick, flint, slate — and new ones, including manufactured Coade stone. Among these projects is Tyringham (1792-1800), a country estate comprising an austere villa, a bridge, gateways, and stables.

Urban Projects

His experience of Paris and Rome as a student left Soane with a great desire to transform London into a city of equal stature. Throughout the 1820s, he realized projects at the Palace of Westminster, the House of Lords, and for the new Law Courts, and proposed, in a series of monumental watercolour perspectives, a grand Processional Route for the King. While these public works are among his most significant and compelling projects, Soane found himself caught in the incipient struggle between Neoclassical architecture and the emerging Gothic Revival. The façade of the Law Courts was distorted in the final stages of construction, frustrations foreshadowing the critical disrepute into which his architecture would fall during the Victorian period and — still worse — the demolition in the 1920s of everything but the exterior walls of the Bank of England.

Crypt

Ultimately, Soane's most enduring work was to be his London house and Museum at 12-14 Lincoln's Inn Fields (1792-1835). Encapsulating in miniature his mastery of small spaces and love of the picturesque vista, the house displays his genius for theatrical and spatial effects achieved by the subtle blending of reflection and reality through the use of mirrors. In **John Soane 1753–1837**, paintings and drawings by Gandy and other members of Soane's office show how the architect conceived of his Museum as a ruin — or a partially excavated archeological site — lit by an unearthly *lumière mystérieuse* (as he put it), which penetrates and reverberates through Piranesian layers of building and artifacts. A film by the prize-winning director Murray Grigor explores the interior of the Museum, taking the viewer on a tour through the Breakfast Room with its convex mirrors and lantern, the Picture Room (containing Soane's collection of William Hogarth's *The Rake's Progress*), and the mock-Gothic Monk's Parlour.

Critical Re-evaluation and Contemporary Influence

After his death, Soane was little appreciated as an architect even though he was universally admired for the eccentricity of his Museum. It was not until the 1920s that his reputation as an architect was revived, entering the arena of Modernist polemics for the first time.

Today, Soane's strategies and ideas are recognized as being central to the work of a number of post-war architects, notably Robert Venturi, Philip Johnson, James Stirling, Arata Isozaki, and Rafael Moneo.

Exhibition Tour

First presented at the Royal Academy of Arts, the exhibition has since traveled to the Centro Internazionale di Studi di Architettura Andrea Palladio, Vicenza,

and to the Hôtel de Rohan - Centre Historique des Archives Nationales, Paris. Specially adapted by the CCA, the installation has been designed by the Milanese architect Umberto Riva.

Catalogue

In conjunction with the exhibition, a special issue of the journal *AI (Architecture + Ideas)* will be published. The journal will include essays on John Soane by Robin Middleton and Pierre du Prey, and a series of portfolios on Jacques Rousseau's *Maison Coloniale*, Isaac Julien's "Vagabondia," James Stirling's furniture collection, Herzog & de Meuron's *Imaginary Museum*, and Luigi Ghirri's photographs of Aldo Rossi's studio.

A catalogue titled *John Soane, Architect: Master of Space and Light*, edited by Margaret Richardson and MaryAnne Stevens on the occasion of the presentation of the exhibition at the Royal Academy of Arts in London, is available in English and French from the CCA bookstore.

Public Programs

There will be a series of conferences titled "Reflections on John Soane," as well as documentaries on architects' homes, and a series of films on English country estates. Guided tours of the exhibition will also be available.

John Soane 1753-1837 is an exhibition of the Royal Academy of Arts, London, and Sir John Soane's Museum.

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