

The Classical Ideal and Gothic Nationalism

John Soane and the Architectural Patriotism of the Early 19th Century

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Abstract—The article is a study of the views of John Soane, one of the key figures in the English architectural tradition, the last Neo-Classical architect and keeper of classicist architectural artefacts. Being at the crossroads of the topical trends of European architecture, his works were in the focus of numerous diverse architectural battles of the 18th century, including the conflict between the classical ideal and the birth of Gothic Revival as the national, state style.

Keywords—John Soane; antiquities; architecture; Age of Enlightenment; Gothic Nationalism; Gothic Revival; neo-Classicism; museum

I. INTRODUCTION

By the mid-19th century, in many European countries Gothic had been declared to be the national style (by the way, Russian Revival may also be regarded as Gothic, because it evoked Russian national antiquities). The once united European cultural identity, based on a classical ideal previously shared by all European nations, had fractured into numerous national cultures. This stylistic “autonomization” (Hans Sedlmayr) reached its apotheosis with the World’s Fairs – the fairs of national vanities, beauty pageants of national pavilions. International neo-Classicism was replaced by local Gothic styles.

This process of searching for a national identity was not the first nor would it be the last.¹ It has traditionally been assumed [2, pp.19-80] that the birth of architectural nationalism in the early 19th century was linked to the political situation in Europe during the French Revolution. On one hand, the revolution proclaimed the creation of a new national state – first a nation-state, and then, under Napoleon, a nation as an empire. On the other hand, the Napoleonic Wars and the struggle against Bonapartism led to the resurgence of the sense of national identity. In both cases, a new (or born anew) nation required a specific, idiosyncratic national representation.

No less a role was played by the Industrial Revolution, which created a new type of society. Classical architecture no longer seemed “modern,” it did not meet the principle of modernity in an era when a nation prided itself not only on

victories in the Napoleonic Wars, but also on technological achievements.

Finally, yet another driving force of Gothic nationalism was Christian Revivalism, which was a reaction to the atheism of the Age of Enlightenment. The Gothic style as the sole possible style for church buildings and as true Christian architecture was addressed in the writings of John Carter, Goethe, Chateaubriand and, of course, Augustus Pugin in his *An Apology for the Revival of Christian Architecture in England* (1843).

Resistance to cultural nationalism has never been easy: even such a classical architect as Friedrich Gilly, who designed Parthenon- and Acropolis-style structures in Prussia, acknowledged that the study of local antiquities had “great antiquarian and patriotic significance.”² But perhaps the most consistent anti-Goth was John Soane – the last architect of the Age of Enlightenment.

II. ARCHITECT – RAGPICKER – POET

John Soane’s landmark oeuvre is the museum of architecture housed in his own home in Lincoln’s Inn Fields in London.³ It was a type of home-academy: a professor of the Royal Academy, Soane allowed his students to visit his house to become acquainted with the drawings and marble statues. However, conceived as “an assemblage of antique fragments in a domestic setting,” the museum soon turned into the *Museo Curiosissimo*:⁴ among the tens of thousands of items included in the collection were not only antiquities, casts, architectural drawings and models, paintings and sculptures, but also countless objects of curiosity – from mummified cats and shark teeth, to a pistol, which, according

² A fragment of the description of the Marienburg Castle, 1796; quoted from Gilly, Friedrich [3, p. 105]. Friedrich Gilly came to Marienburg with his father, David Gilly, who had been sent there by Frederick the Great on a mission to examine the ruins. David Gilly concluded that the castle’s ruins, used at the time as soldiers’ barracks, should be demolished. However, when Gilly’s son’s drawings of the ruins were published in 1804, it was decided to preserve the castle as a historical landmark; Karl Friedrich Schinkel was one of the participants in the renovation project [3, pp. 25-26].

³ Soane bought the house in 1792; its remodelling continued until the architect’s death in 1837.

⁴ The name was given to the museum by Soane’s student George Wightwick in 1853 [4, p. 109].

¹ For an overview of nationalism in contemporary art of, e.g., Eastern Europe, see Groys, Boris [1].

to legend, belonged to Napoleon, who had received it as a gift from Alexander I when the Treaties of Tilsit were concluded.

Without apparent logic or any system, all these objects were displayed in the rooms of the museum, hiding the walls, reflected in a multitude of mirrors. The exposition and conceptual arrangement of the medley of items embodied the romantic idea of Gesamtkunstwerk or, to use Soane's own definition, "the union of arts." However, the Piranesian-Eisensteinian "technique of shock" (Manfredo Tafuri), which plays one fragment against another that previously belonged to different contexts and arranges them into a new composition, was, not unexpectedly, criticised along the lines of the 19th-century positivism theory. Adolf Michaelis, Professor of Archaeology at the University of Strasbourg, compiling a catalogue of British antiquities, roamed the corridors of the Soane Museum unable to academically systematise the collection: "this labyrinth stuffed full of fragments..." he complained, "has the same kind of perplexing and oppressive effect on the spectator as if the whole large stock of an old-clothes-dealer has been squeezed into a doll's house."⁵

Exasperated by the post-historic chaos of Soane's installations, Michaelis, however, provided the most significant characterisation of the museum, calling it "the stock of an old-clothes-dealer." And the figure of an old-clothes-dealer, a ragpicker, is central to 19th-century culture.⁶ At approximately the same time as the professor from Strasbourg was examining the British collections (starting in 1861), Charles Baudelaire provided what would become the classic description of the ragpicker (*chiffonnier*):

"Here is a man whose task it is to pick up all the rubbish produced on one day in the capital. All that the great city has thrown out, all it has lost, all it has disdained, all it has broken he catalogues and collects. He consults the archives of debauchery, works through the lumber-room of rubbish. He makes a selection, chooses astutely: he picks up, as a miser seizes on treasure..."

On Wine and Hashish, 1851 [8, p. 8].

And Baudelaire goes on to compare the ragpicker with a poet wandering around in search of a rhyme.

This simile drew the attention of Walter Benjamin: "This description is one extended metaphor for the procedure of the poet in Baudelaire's spirit. Ragpicker or poet – the refuse concerns both, and both go about their business in solitude

⁵ Further in the text, Michaelis says he literally became lost in the Soane Museum: "A number of very narrow passages, very dark corners, and the like, impedes a steady investigation equally with the overcrowding of the rooms and the incredibly inconvenient mode in which a great part of the contents are arranged, so that the sculptures are scarcely within reach of the eye. ... So wild a confusion of promiscuous fragments is necessarily bewildering and fatiguing to the visitor, and I am therefore not sure whether I have been fortunate enough to discover the principal examples during my repeated searches through all the rooms." [5, p. 164,473].

⁶ About the figure of the ragpicker in 19th-century culture, see, i.e., Iampolski, Mikhail [6, pp.13-45]. About the ragpicker as a rescuer of ancient architectural landmarks and about the birth of the "dealer" profession in the early 19th century, see Harris, John [7].

when the citizens indulge in sleeping..." [9, p. 80]. In another passage, commenting on Baudelaire's poem "The Ragpickers' Wine" ("One sees a ragpicker knocking against the walls, / Paying no heed to the spies of the cops, his thralls, / But stumbling like a poet lost in dreams..." – 1857; translated by C. F. Macintyre), Benjamin notes: "A ragpicker cannot, of course, be part of the bohème. But from the *littérateur* to the professional conspirator, everyone who belonged to the bohème could recognise a bit of himself in the ragpicker. Each person was in a more or less obscure revolt against society and faced a more or less precarious future." [9, p. 20]

Therefore, according to Baudelaire and Benjamin, the ragpicker is first, a poet and second, in conflict with society.

The ragpicker-poet represents a new type of artist, who, to use Mikhail Iampolski's definition, is no longer a prophet or a clairvoyant, but an actor performing different types of parts. The artist now "plays the role of the key character." And this theatricalisation serves to deconstruct reality – "reality turns into representation intended for contemplation." [6, pp. 18–19]

One such "representation intended for contemplation" is the museum. Baudelaire's description of the activities of the ragpicker, who collects, catalogues, makes a selection, chooses astutely, can equally be applied to the collector. The collector, like the ragpicker, finds things, takes them out of their functional context, that is receives them "numb," and then, placing them in his museum, lends them new value. The collector, writes Benjamin, "makes his concern the transfiguration of things." [10, p. 8].

John Soane's concern like the ragpicker's and the poet's was also "the refuse." Only he dealt not with the refuse left by the capital, but with fragments left by history. And wandering in search of a rhyme, he arranged these fragments of history to produce "those fanciful effects that constitute the poetry of Architecture." [11, p. 54]. To transform architecture into poetry, Soane deconstructed, "transfigured" reality – he created see-through installations, hung curve mirrors distorting perspective, "inconveniently" arranged the exhibits, misguiding viewers historically and culturally, and used dramatic contrasts of light and shade.

In search of specimens on which to model his light and shade contrasts, Soane turned his eyes to the Gothic.

III. PADRE GIOVANNI

One of the roles played by the architect-ragpicker-poet Soane was Padre Giovanni ("Giovanni" is of course the Italianised version of "John") – a fictitious character, a hermit who once (in the Middle Ages?) inhabited this house. Padre Giovanni's rooms are three spaces of the museum: the Monk's Cell with adjacent Oratory; the Monk's Parloir (or Parlour of Padre Giovanni), and the Monk's Yard (or the Monk's Cemetery, or the Ruins of a Monastery), where he is buried.

The monk's story, included in Soane's Description of the House and Museum (1835), is a tale of a monk who

abandoned the world “not from satiety or disgust, but from motives of piety,” and also because his wife and daughter died and his son abandoned him; the reader learns that all the pieces adorning the walls in the parlour come from different countries about which the monk could have meditated, and they were produced in different periods, which the monk studied; the reader learns that the monk was “the last representative of an order to whom, after all, we are much indebted”: “for whilst Learning and the Arts... were hidden in the cells of the monks, surely they were its preservers,” [11, p.28] etc., etc.

The Gothic rooms were constructed according to the principle of assembling disparate items, as was the entire museum. Padre Giovanni’s parlour, in particular, features stained glass taken from a Flemish monastery during the French Revolution, replicas of masks and architectural details of Gothic cathedrals, a Dutch engraving of “an exact draught” of one of the thirty pieces of silver, etchings, drawings, books, terra cotta statues, as well as (for some reason) Mexican vases.⁷ While this room does not have Gothic elements as such (vaulted archways, etc.), the light – the “*lumière mystérieuse*” (as Soane termed it) that passes through the stained-glass window creates in the parlour the desired “Gothic” atmosphere.

The ruins of the monastery were authentic – Soane (a ragpicker!) brought into the house fragments of old streetlamps (which he turned into obelisks), as well as fragments of the Gothic Westminster Palace, which had been destroyed by fire and was the renovation project he was working on then; and for the monk’s tomb Soane used the old tombstone from Bosanquet’s grave in Leytonstone Cemetery (he took it when he completed a new tombstone commissioned by the Bosanquet family). However, he did not restore these authentic fragments with architectural accuracy, instead he arranged them into a picturesque assemblage. Thus, an authentic piece of a ruin deposited into Soane’s museum turned into a false piece of a ruin; it became a simulacrum.

The image of Padre Giovanni and the design of his rooms in Soane’s museum, of course, belong to the tradition of Gothic Revival that flourished in the 18th century, when many English and European parks began to feature Gothic pavilions alongside the ruins of ancient temples, Chinese pagodas, and Egyptian obelisks; and landowners began to set up in their residences “a monk’s garden,” “a monk’s kitchen” or “a cardinal’s parlour” (as William Beckford called a salon in his Fonthill Abbey). Soane had addressed this subject 20 years before the birth of the museum, in his Pitzhanger Manor House, in Ealing, where he designed a

⁷ Soane’s academic lectures provide a possible explanation of the fact that Mexican vases suddenly turn up in a Gothic context: “The Gothic Architecture, however happily adapted to religious purposes, is little calculated for the common habits of life. Its thick walls and small windows (admitting light as it were by stealth) are more suitable to Montezuma’s house of affliction. The features and general character of this mode of building are not expressive of cheerfulness or comfort.” This passage has a footnote: “In the City of Mexico, there was a Palace termed ‘the House of Affliction,’ where Montezuma retired upon losing any of his friends, or upon any public calamity.” [12, p.82].

“monk’s dining room” in a basement and where the imagined monk himself used to stroll amidst the ruins (classical ruins, though, not Gothic ones). “Picturesque” Gothic was characterised not by iconographic precision, but by irregularity (Horace Walpole applied to it the pseudo-Chinese term “Sharawaggi”)⁸ and an overall “medieval” atmosphere – at the end of his life Walpole admitted that “every true Goth must perceive that [the rooms in his villa Strawberry Hill] are more the works of fancy than of imitation.”⁹ The imaginary nature of these structures was enhanced by their literary history: Walpole’s and Beckford’s Gothic pavilions became models for their Gothic novels (or on the contrary, was it in their novels that Gothic writers realized their literary fantasies?).

However, Soane in his *Description of the House and Museum* sustain neither the drama and macabre appeal of Gothic novels nor the “charming” (to use Walpole’s word) sentimentality of Gothic Revival, but slips into irony and sarcasm. Talking about Padre Giovanni’s parlour, he takes notice of the excessive luxury of the décor (for instance, chairs with silk cushions), which is not wholly in keeping with the “simplicity and voluntary poverty” of monastic life. Describing the Ruins of a Monastery, Soane explains that “the pavement [is] composed of the tops and bottoms of broken bottles, and pebbles [presumably] found amongst the gravel dug out for the foundation of the monastery,” but suddenly asks “But where did the good monk get so many bottles...?” And in the end, he reveals that the monk’s grave in fact contains the remains of Mrs. Soane’s favourite dog, Fanny [11, pp. 26–28].

Thus, the performance played by Soane in the role of Padre Giovanni turns out to be, if not a comedy or a parody of Gothic Revival, then its satirical representation – precisely like Pavel Fedotov’s *Inquest into the Death of Fidelka*. And the events that accompanied Soane’s work on his Gothic project confirm this.

Soane, of course, loved the Gothic. But Gothic for him was truly medieval buildings, “light and elegant,” and not “those barbarous jumbles of undefined forms [that we find] in modern imitations of Gothic architecture.” [14, p. 9] If true Gothic style should be studied – not from the viewpoint of taste but from the viewpoint of influence exercised by the mass and details [12, p. 82] – imitation of Gothic engenders “absurdities:” “We are covering the surfaces with Gothic Churches and Gothic Houses — Gothic Castles, which are in fact anything but Gothic, unless the terms Gothic and Barbarianism mean the same.”¹⁰ Defining the “Gothic order” of architects, Soane wrote: “This class professes to be animated by good feeling and zeal to improve the national taste: it is, therefore, reasonable to expect from their labours

⁸ Walpole’s letter to Horace Mann, 25 February 1750. Here and below Walpole’s letters are quoted from the Yale edition of *his correspondence*. See: <http://images.library.yale.edu/hwcorrespondence/>. As for the origin of the term *Sharawaggi*, which was first used in William Temple’s book *Upon the Gardens of Epicurus* (1685), see Pevsner, Nikolaus and Lang, Susi [13, pp. 102-107].

⁹ Letter to Mary Berry, 17 October 1794.

¹⁰ From Soane’s *Notebook* (1818): see MS, Soane’s Museum, Soane case 175, p. 177.

the revival of Gothic Architecture from its present degraded state: — as yet little has been done. The Architects of this class sometimes mistake the shadow for the substance.” [15, p. 11]¹¹ “I should as soon think of going back to the primitive hut, or the wigwam of the Indians — as to the Gothic,” he exclaimed.¹²

In 1822, Soane was commissioned to design a new Court of Justice in Westminster, to be situated between Westminster Hall and the Palladian structure built in the mid-18th century by John Vardy. Soane believed that a Gothic structure would not be able to compete with Westminster Hall and proposed the Palladian project. It was approved, and the construction began. But in a special session in March 1824, members of the House of Commons criticised Soane’s design, saying it was “so ugly that it ought to be immediately razed to the ground.” [16, p. 108] The work was suspended, and a special commission (“the commission of taste”!) demanded that the architect undertake a new – Gothic – project. According to one of the members of the commission, for English people Westminster was a place as sacred as “the place of birth or residences of our first kings and princes.” [17, p. 35]

Soane was humbled and the “Gothicised” law court was built in 1827 (demolished in 1883). But he continued to write. In his *A Brief Statement Concerning the Law Courts at Westminster*, later included in his book *Designs for Public and Private Building* (1828), Soane spoke about “our blind attachment to Modern Gothic Structures which we dignify with the pompous title of the National Architecture of England.” [18, p. 106]

And it was then, in 1824, in the days of his “Gothic crisis,” that Soane set up in his house *Padre Giovanni’s* parlour and the ruins of the monastery – it was the reaction of a poet in a state “of obscure revolt against society” to the layman’s tastes.

From National Antiquities to a National Style.

In 1828, when *Padre Giovanni* was already taking a stroll amidst the ruins of the monastery, yet another educational museum was set up in London – the architect and renovator Lewis Nockalls Cottingham opened a Museum of Medieval Art in his home near the Waterloo Bridge. The museum did not have picturesqueness, nor Piranesian assemblages, nor “the poetry of architecture,” but Adolf Michaelis would probably have approved of the layout of the exposition: everything in the museum was systematised – models, replicas, and authentic fragments were chronologically arranged (perhaps it was the first instance when the principle of “period rooms” was employed), showing off different stages in the development of the Gothic. And each exhibit was supplied with a label indicating its provenance.

¹¹ Soane identified five “orders” of architects: The Heaven-Born Architect (or The Pictorial Architect, or The Architect A-la-Mode), The Chinese Architect, The Architect of the Middle Ages, The Delittante Architect, and The Classical Architect.

¹² From Soane’s notebook (1815), see MS, Soane’s Museum, Extracts 1815 A*, p. 141.

The didactic concept of the Cottingham Museum reflected a new, historical and archaeological, view of Gothic. The opening of the museum was preceded by the release of a number of publications devoted to Gothic archaeology, whose authors systematised and periodised the history of medieval architecture: John Carter’s *The Ancient Architecture of England* (1795-1814) and six volumes of *Views of Ancient Buildings in England* (1786-1793); four volumes of John Britton’s *The Architectural Antiquities of Great Britain* (1807-1814); Thomas Rickman’s *An attempt to Discriminate the Styles of English Architecture* (1817; Rickman pioneered such categories of styles as the Early English, Decorated English, and Perpendicular English), and many others.

Gothic archaeology, which discovered old national treasures, naturally contained elements of patriotism. Even Walpole, despite all his playful attitude toward Gothic, did not forget about its national character: “the true rust of the Barons’ wars,”¹³ which he saw in edifices built by Sanderson Miller, is the authenticity not of history in general, but of national history. William Chambers, who never built a Gothic structure, however, urged instead of “importing the gleanings of Greece,” to take measurements and “undertake a correct elegant publication of our own cathedrals, and other buildings called Gothick, before they totally fall to ruin” – the display of “the splendour of [England’s] ancient structures” would “publish to the world the riches of Britain.” [19, p. 24]

But the greatest success in Gothic nationalism was achieved by John Carter, and not so much in his treatises, as in *Gentleman’s Magazine*, for which he wrote more than 200 essay-manifestos. His pronouncements, aggressive and caustic, speak for themselves.

“Why have the minds of Englishmen, for these two centuries, been deluded to imitate the Roman and Grecian styles? What features have their boasted remains that we cannot parallel? For the extensiveness of their edifices, their grandeur, their elegance, their enrichments, view our cathedrals, and other attendant buildings. Is any one excellence that architecture boasts to be sought for in vain in our country? No, we may here find them all! (1798) [20, pp. 315-319]

Or this:

“The admiration that has been conjured up in support of [the Roman and Grecian] styles has necessarily turned the genius of Englishmen from their national architecture to toil in an inglorious and servile pursuit to imitate a foreign manner” (1799).

The Grand Tour was also in for some criticism. Whereas 18th-century architects regarded the Grand Tour as a necessary element of education and allowed the travellers, in Chambers words, “to set aside our national prejudices,” [19, p. 15] Carter viewed it as “the keystone of the ‘plan of anti-nationalism’: “Eternal self-reproof may those patrons feel, who send abroad our youth for Architectural Improvement;

¹³ From Walpole’s letter to Richard Bentley, September 1753.

where, sucking in the poison of foreign prejudice, they disgorge their venom on our native architecture at home” (1800).

Carter’s architectural nationalism reached its high point when he lambasted the term “Gothic” itself: this is “a term of reproach, a barbarous appellation, an invidious designation, a vulgar epithet, an ignorant by-word, a low nickname, given to hold up to shame and ignominy our ancient English Architecture.” In his “Plans etc. of Durham Cathedral” (1801) Carter substituted it with “the more appropriate and honourable name” – “English.”

In his desire to nationalise Gothic, Carter was not alone. Josiah Taylor, an architectural publisher commanding much influence in that period, wrote in 1800: “[Gothic] style of architecture may properly be called English architecture, for if it had not its origin in this country, it certainly arrived at maturity here; the science and taste of our forefathers being equally conspicuous with their piety and liberality.” [21, p. iii]

The transformation of “Gothic” into “English” made Gothic not just the national, but the official style of the state. According to the terms of the competition for the design of the Parliament’s new building (the old one had been destroyed by fire in 1834), architects could use only one style – Gothic: “Originality and charm of Gothic architecture, explained the jury, are in its associations: they are admirable for this historicity, patriotism and localness.” [22, p. 67]

(Across the Channel, however, there was disagreement on the Continent. The struggle for Gothic as “our” national style acquired an international character: it was claimed by the French and the Germans. References to “German architecture, our architecture” come up in Goethe’s early essay “On German Architecture” [Von deutscher Baukunst] (1771); Chateaubriand called Gothic “our architecture” in *The Genius of Christianity* [Génie du christianisme] (1802); and Victor Hugo in his article “On the Destruction of Monuments in France” [Sur la destruction des monuments en France] (1825) talked about “love for national architecture.”)

In this situation of architectural nationalism, Soane, as the last exponent of international Neo-Classicism, was, of course, doomed to the loneliness of Padre Giovanni. One may only suppose the possible reaction he would have experienced to the series of pseudonymous essays by Kata Phusin under the general title “Poetry of Architecture” that began to appear in *Architectural Magazine*, in November 1837, 10 months after the architect’s death. Kata Phusin was in fact John Ruskin’s penname. Soane’s favourite term “the poetry of architecture,” which he borrowed from the French theory of architecture, was interpreted by Ruskin absolutely in keeping with the spirit of the times: whereas Soane thought about the arrangement of masses and volumes, and the effects of chiaroscuro, for Ruskin “poetry of architecture” was the “peculiarity of the art which constitutes its nationality.” [23, p. 505]

IV. CONCLUSION

Attempting to escape Gothic nationalism, Soane turned his eyes to Russia. In 1814, he showed his drafts to Alexander I during the latter’s visit to London, and in 1829, sent copies of his two treatises to Nicholas I (including a copy of *Designs for Public and Private Buildings*, the book in which designs for the law courts in Westminster were published).¹⁴ Like Claude-Nicolas Ledoux, who dedicated his treatise to Alexander I, comparing him to Alexander the Great (Ledoux, one might think, viewed himself as Dinocrates?), Soane apparently entertained hopes of realising his classical project in Russia. However, he was too late: Russia was already speaking its own national architectural language.

Ironically, at the time when Soane was searching for support in Russia, Nikolay Ogarev was advising Aleksandr Vitberg to realise his classical project, the Cathedral of Christ the Saviour, in England: “They will spare no money” [24].

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¹⁴The second book was *The Union of Architecture, Sculpture, and Painting* – the first guide to Soane’s museum, written by John Britton (1827). Both treatises are now in the library of the Hermitage Museum. Soane was apprised about Nicholas I’s reaction by the Russian Ambassador Prince Lieven in a letter dated 4 May 1829: “May I pass on to you from my most August Emperor a ring with a diamond as a token of the Most High Approval of your architectural oeuvre” [15, p. 61].

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