



Jerzy Kierkuć-Bieliński (below) is exhibitions curator at Sir John Soane's Museum (p. 60), responsible for researching and preparing the temporary exhibits that take place there. He is involved in 'Opening Up the Soane', a major restoration programme that is returning Soane's house to its original condition at the time of his death in 1837.

Interview by Jo Caird



this anywhere and I'm not talking just about the British Isles. The collections are so broad, so diverse. There are so many different ways you can interpret them in the context of the museum.

## Do you have a favourite object in the museum's collection?

I have a couple of favourite objects. The sarcophagus of Sety I [an ancient Egyptian pharaoh who lived around 1300 BC] is definitely one of them. It's an exceptional work of art. It's carved in Egyptian alabaster, and because of the nature of the material, it's semi-translucent. It changes over the course of the day and seasons with different lighting effects. It's absolutely astounding.

## What other museum would you recommend to visitors?

The British Museum is a must. It's such an inspirational collection; the breadth of it. Also the beauty of the building itself, particularly the Great Court. And the Courtauld [gallery], which has an outstanding collection of impressionist paintings in a fabulous historical setting (both p. 49).

## Do you have a favourite modern icon?

The Gherkin is so dramatic on the skyline. I can see it from my living room window and it always gives me a sense of being in the city. Its shape is wonderful, the detailing of the building is absolutely great. I admire it tremendously.

## What is your favourite area of London?

Greenwich Park is amazing. It gives you the entire history of London within one small area. Soho is definitely one of my favourite areas as well. Although it has changed quite considerably, you still get a feel for what it must have been like in the 1950s and '60s. You get the buzz of being right in the city and the feeling of the scale of London as well. It's not surrounded by tall buildings so you get the impression of what London must have been like for most of the 18th century.

## What makes the museum so special, in your opinion?

It's an absolutely inspiring place in that so much of the museum is about engaging with the contemporary, with what was new in Soane's day. You can approach it as a sort of house museum, looking at it from the perspective of the Regency period, but Soane was engaging with very modern ideas, so much of the house is very experimental. It looks forward to modernist and postmodernist architectural practice. He was very interested in collecting and supporting contemporary British artists. You can make ties between what Soane was doing in the first quarter of the 19th century and the modern metropolis, the modern art scene and modern architecture that surrounds us in London now.

## What does a typical work day entail for you?

I work on the temporary exhibitions, so I'm looking at a range of objects from different periods, sometimes from the museum's collection, sometimes from external collections, and researching them and writing about them. The visual component is also extremely important for exhibitions, so I'm constantly thinking about how objects go together, how they look together, how they relate.

## Tell us about the 'Opening Up the Soane' project.

You're going to see the house as close as possible to its original state in January 1837, as Soane intended it to be seen. When he set up the act of parliament in 1833, which left the house to the British nation as the smallest national museum, there was a clause which stipulated that the house shouldn't change from the moment of his death. In Soane's own lifetime, when the museum was open to the public, even quite private parts of the museum, such as his bedroom and bathroom, were considered part of the museum. You could go and visit them, there were works of art on display. Following Soane's death, certain parts of the museum were altered and over the course of the 19th century works were displaced. *Opening Up the Soane* will allow these works to be seen by the public for the first time since the 1830s.

A new visitor entrance, cloakroom, shop and large gallery will also allow visitors to get a better experience of the museum.

## What is the most important object in the collection?

I think it's the collection as a totality. It's an incredibly rare and precious thing. There isn't a townhouse collection as well preserved as

"THERE ISN'T A TOWNHOUSE COLLECTION AS WELL PRESERVED ANYWHERE".