

Soane—a classical architype

Emfoundry's current hypothesis for the generation of historically inspired type, focuses upon one of our most acclaimed purveyors of applied neoclassicism in Architecture— Sir John Soane 1753-1837; and considers why, it seems, he proposed no definitive ideology for the specification of the 'classical' letterform within architecture?

Soane is most remembered as the architect of the Bank of England, for No.s 10 and 11 Downing Street, for the Dulwich Picture Gallery, and of course for his home at Lincoln's Inn Fields—the museum left to the nation and 'to the study of neo-classicism' by Soane, before his death in 1837.

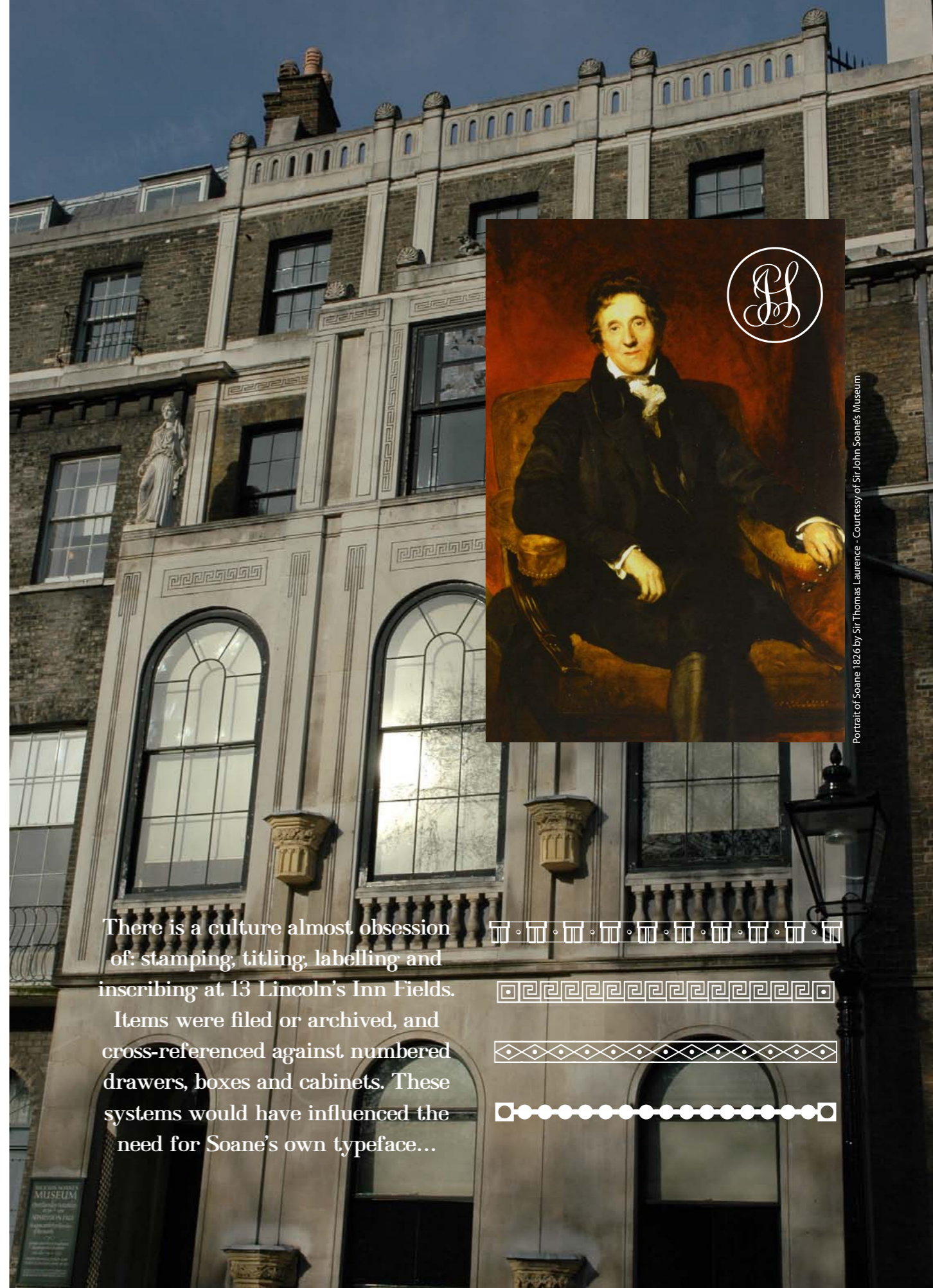
At the height of his practice Soane employed numerous student understudies, clerks of works, and assistants—a few of whom went on to become eminent architectural practitioners in the Victorian age. Given the huge and diverse number of commissions and building projects that consumed Soane within a long, illustrious and highly prolific career, it is difficult to imagine that he had no exacting influence over the letter shapes his carvers employed in the creation of Soane's pediments, friezes and monument inscriptions. However, Soane's rationale for the serif-less 'grot' is understood and visually documented, and it is clear from his drawings that his practice made some considered use of both sans and serif titling on drawings. The form of these letters seems to vary depending upon the draftsmen entrusted to render Soane's initial sketches. Often being merely script titles, but sometimes adopting the form of finely illustrated *tabular ansata*—an architect's title block in the form of 'carved stone' element. Soane greatly appreciated, the vestigial serif forms used in Roman inscription during his time as a youth on the grand tour¹. But how were the full serified letterforms used on Fanny's Tomb memorial, and the bold *didones* or 'moderns' applied to the keystones on the Royal Hospital Chelsea stable yard—discussed, agreed and instigated; because Soane authorised and approved everything?



In the second half of the 18th Century the serifless letter was proposed as the most appropriate when referencing historical antiquity. No real academic foundation for this can be established. But its use was ultimately adopted by the educated as a defined typographic mannerism². Sir John Soane was amongst the first to propose serifless forms within his inscriptions, perhaps for municipal or civic buildings. Seen clearly in the design proposals for the Norwich Gaol of 1788/9. This typographic form was later adopted by the Ordnance Survey for their first series maps of 1816 to denote sites of historical ruins or Roman remains³. Many of Soane's subsequent drawings feature this sans mannerism in proposals for inscriptions—almost always with centre bullet points between the words. But also as the titling on drawings, even on accompanying schedules to contractors, and it appears it becomes one of Soane's architectural 'house styles'. This practice of utilising title block lettering to express an architectural ideology, becomes embedded later in the 19th century as architects' 'hand' or 'skeletal'.

Other, later Soane drawings such as the proposed new Villa in Chelsea for Colonel Gordon (a joining Chelsea Barracks) of 1807—have a *didone* form inscription indicated on the porch. However, he returns to the serifless form again within an (isolated) inscriptional proposal for the Dulwich Picture Gallery in 1811. This may indicate a preference for the 'grot' for public (facing) buildings, but also the appropriate application of a Roman letter for private residential dwellings. Greater study of the Soane's many buildings, residences and monuments may well reveal that a rationale existed.

¹ Darley G. (1999) John Soane—An Accidental Romantic. Yale University Press.
² & ³ Mosely J. (1999) The Nymph and the Grot. St Brides Printing Library.



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Portrait of Soane 1826 by Sir Thomas Lawrence - Courtesy of Sir John Soane's Museum



Classic Soane

refined by emfoundry©



Practice based research however, can often be equally revealing. And it is possible to apply Sir John Soane's well-documented ideology and distinctive architectural vocabulary to the design of letterforms that take their contextual 'cue' from the late regency period.

There is a culture almost obsession of: stamping, titling, labelling and inscribing at 13 Lincoln's Inn Fields. There is an abnormal amount of (mini) signage throughout Soane's Museum—some of it Victorian, but much of it contemporary with Soane⁴. Items were filed or archived, and cross-referenced against numbered drawers, boxes and cabinets. These systems would have influenced the need for Soane's own typeface at the time. But (if a type had been produced) it would be Soane's aesthetics that would have ultimately been imbedded within any classical form—of a modern 19th century roman display type.

Sir John Soane the Typeface is created in homage to the architect and his refined classical vernacular. Acting as if employed by Sir John himself, emfoundry becomes one of his favoured contractors, charged with the application of 'Soane' sensibility upon a definitive roman display face. Or perhaps as one of his assistants or students (known as 'improvers'), distracted from architecture for a moment, attempting to discover the pure essence of *soanean* teachings through the design of classical letters.

Sir John Soane probably had little 'every day' interest in the final letterforms applied within 'his' architectural drawings by his assistants, but surely he expressed a preference for the final inscribed form on his masonry. He utilised a preferred and select number of contractors in whom he trusted their judgement, but he also seems to have accepted current typographic printed-page convention within tomb stone and monument inscriptions. It is also clear, that he had exacting views on the appropriate use of serifless letters within his classical structures. This grotesque form was seen to reflect antiquity and possibly the context of a civic order. Its purity reflected Soane's belief in the primitive and its evolution into the architectural tuscan and doric orders. He saw it as the rational form that respected the material of stone, with the underlying geometry of a definitive or supreme classicism.

⁴ Dorey H. (2008) Furniture History, Vol. XLIV. Haywards Heath & Fulham.

