

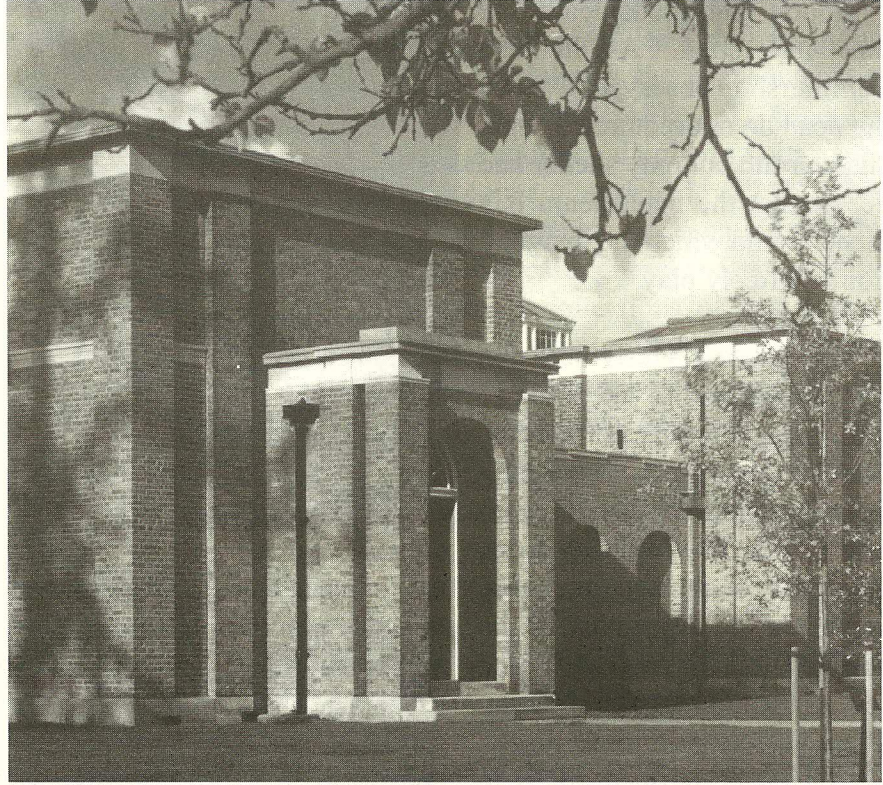
# MMT NEWS

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## The Proximity of Art and Death: Dulwich Picture Gallery and its Mausoleum

The lugubrious collections assembled by Sir John Soane in his house in Lincoln's Inn Fields demonstrate his fascination with the funerary architecture of antiquity. The Egyptian sarcophagus and the displays of altars and cinerary urns attest to his enthusiasm for dramatic funereal scenography. Soane's obsession with the architecture of death can be traced throughout his *oeuvre* – especially in the crypt-like apartments of the Bank of England – but it is most forcefully expressed in the singular ensemble of picture gallery, almshouse and mausoleum he built at Dulwich between 1811-14.

In 1811 Dulwich College was bequeathed a magnificent collection of old master paintings by Sir Francis Bourgeois, a wealthy painter and a friend of Soane. The collection had been assembled by the *marchand-amateur* Noel Desenfans for Stanislas Augustus, King of Poland, who abdicated in 1795 leaving his agent with the pictures on his hands. Desenfans had left the collection to



*Dulwich Picture Gallery*

Bourgeois with instructions that he should bestow the pictures upon an institution which would preserve and exhibit them to the public.

Bourgeois left £2,000 to fit up a gallery in the existing buildings of the college and for the erection of a small mausoleum adjacent to the chapel. He hoped that Soane might be employed to carry out the work. The architect recommended an entirely new building and persuaded Desenfans' widow to contribute an additional £6,000 towards the cost of a gallery for the pictures and a receptacle for the bodies of Bourgeois and Desenfans. The College agreed to match this

sum, but stipulated that the building should also provide accommodation for the bedeswomen it supported under the terms of its foundation.

Dulwich College was a venerable but modest institution which Soane thought could be enhanced by adopting a traditional collegiate plan. His precedent was the typical institutional quadrangle, where almshouses flanked a chapel containing the tomb of its founder. At Dulwich there was, however, the novel addition of an art gallery. Here the whole composition was turned inside out so that the gallery, rather than the chapel, formed the cen-

tral feature of the courtyard. Of all the disparate functions Soane was asked to accommodate in the new building, he undoubtedly found the mausoleum the most interesting. As Sir John Summerson observed, "since the dead do not require air, light and warmth but only shelter and veneration, the mausoleum is a theme round which the imagination can freely play."

Bourgeois had prescribed that any alterations to the college buildings should be in the 'Gothic' taste, and accordingly Soane's first proposals were clad in a starved Jacobean dress. Classical elements inevitably crept into the decoration of the building, but in the end Soane settled upon an austere primitivist-classical character defined by strip pilasters, simple cornices and arched recesses. This fugitive style of architecture was incomprehensible to contemporary critics such as the Rev. T. F. Dibdin who exclaimed "what a creature it is! A Maeso-Gothic, Semi-Arabic, Moro-Spanish, Anglico-Norman, a what-you-will production!"

The picture galleries lay behind the mausoleum and almshouses and were originally entered by a discreet door at its southern end. The architect's proposals for a more prominent entrance fell victim to economies. Soane had designed a picture gallery for Fonthill in 1787, and knew C.H. Tatham's innovative galleries at Castle Howard and Brocklesby, but these were comparatively expensive structures;



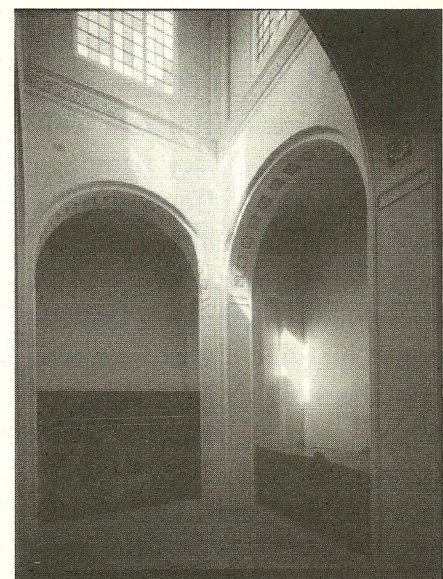
*Enfilade Dulwich Picture Gallery*

the rooms at Dulwich were more like the purpose-built commercial galleries in London – practical top-lit barns for the display of pictures like the Shakespeare Gallery in Pall Mall. Their simple arrangement of interconnecting rooms separated by bold arches, top-lit by means of glazed lanterns let into the roof, were adopted by Soane as a cheap and practical setting for the pictures.

More imposing was the mausoleum: the ornamental character of its architecture underlined the solemn and sacred nature of its employment. It was the focus of the west elevation and was the College's 'show' front. Soane believed that "magnificent buildings in honour of the dead inspire the soul," and made a road before the mausoleum in imitation of the ancient "practice of placing tombs and sepulchral buildings on the sides of our public roads."

The plan of the mausoleum was, at the request of Bourgeois, based upon that of the short-lived classical structure Soane had built in 1807 in the stableyard of the Desenfans house in Charlotte Street, Marylebone. This mausoleum, a temporary resting place for the bodies of Desenfans and later Bourgeois, contained a top-lit catacomb and a circular oratory for viewing the sarcophagi. At Dulwich Soane was able to give this dramatic interior a corresponding external expression.

The exterior of the mausoleum took the form of an antique Roman patrician tomb – Soane was acquainted with the spectacular remains of such structures in the Roman campagna. Its inspiration was possibly the strange sepulchral monument known as *La Conocchia*, a view of which had been engraved by Piranesi. The Dulwich mausoleum was by necessity a smaller and more modest structure but recalled something of the grandeur of its Roman model. The ornamentation is idiosyncratic – the three



*Dulwich Picture Gallery:  
Interior of Mausoleum*

solid 'doors' with tapering jambs which project from the niches may be 'spirit doors' and inspired by Egyptian funerary architecture. The sarcophagi which surmount the cornice declare the purpose of the mausoleum and correspond to those inside: in early designs they were inscribed with the names of the donors. The square lantern bears a roof in the form of a capstone of a Roman altar

between the light-filled picture galleries and the gloom of the mausoleum, which opened directly off them. On one occasion he found the connecting door shut and vigorously remonstrated with the college authorities, complaining that by closing the mausoleum they were 'destroying its relationship to the whole.'

On her death Mrs Desenfans

treasures of the pencil! To increase the enjoyment of this splendid scene we have only to fancy the Gallery brilliantly lighted for the exhibition of this unrivalled assemblage of pictorial art – whilst a dull religious light shows the Mausoleum in the full pride of funereal grandeur, displaying its sarcophagi, enriched with the mortal remains of departed worth, and calling back so powerfully the recollections of past times, that we almost believe that we are conversing with our departed friends who now sleep in their silent tombs."

*Tim Knox*



*External view of Dulwich Mausoleum*

laden with canopic urns.

The stained glass panels of the lantern cast an amber light upon three severe sarcophagi which repose on the shelves below – each painted to resemble imperial porphyry as are the massive Doric columns which describe the sunken, circular chapel beyond. Christian symbols are absent from this burial chamber, although serpents of eternity occupy the spandrels of the tomb recesses and victories decorate the vault. Soane particularly appreciated the contrast

bequeathed her best furniture to the gallery as well as a service of plate to be used for an annual dinner, given on Saint Luke's day to Royal Academicians. These festivities, served by footmen wearing the Desenfans livery, were magnificent occasions. Soane himself, imagining one such banquet in the Picture Gallery, mused upon the startling proximity of death and art in his singular creation:

"How gratifying to the reflective mind must such a repast be, surrounded by some of the richest

#### Concerning the Newsletter A message to our readers

We have been having discussions among ourselves about the best direction for the future of the MMT News. We have kept to the same format for the first 13 issues, but feel that it may be time for a change. For example, one intention is to bring colour into our pages starting with the next issue in the new year. This brings us to the point: we would like to know *your* views on the shape and size of newsletters to come...

Our new year's issue will start with a contribution from Professor James Stevens Curl who will be known to many of you. He is writing about the plight of certain mausolea in Northern Ireland.

*The Editor*

