

SOANE'S ARK: BUILDING WITH SYMBOLS

The reconstruction of Soane's Ark of the Masonic Covenant offers a 21st-century understanding of Soane's masonic history

On 3 May 1883, a fire broke out at the Masonic Hall in Great Queen Street that destroyed the last evidence of Sir John Soane's built work for the freemasons: the Ark of the Masonic Covenant. The Ark was a piece of ritual furniture designed by Soane in 1813 to hold the document that concluded the union of the 'Antient' and 'Modern' Grand Lodges, two rival organisations of freemasonry that emerged in the course of the 18th century. Coinciding with the tercentenary of the establishment of freemasonry in London in 1717, the Ark has now been reconstructed in mahogany from the handful of designs and other images in which it appeared, evidence that represents the last remaining record of what was a singularly important object in the history of freemasonry, as well as Soane's career.

As may be seen from Soane's great collaborator Joseph Michael Gandy's watercolour 'Interior of an Edifice Devoted Exclusively to Freemasonry', the Ark once stood proudly at the centre of Soane's newly designed temple at Freemasons' Hall. That is, presumably, until some time before the process began that had by 1865 completely demolished what was arguably one of the celebrated architect's greatest interiors. A piece of this building remains in an unlikely place: in the form of a model of the dome, decorated with the signs of the zodiac, that is embedded in the ceiling of Soane's Dressing Room. Freemasonry is, therefore, quite literally a part of the fabric of Soane's Museum, though as a subject it is obscured by the shadows of these two lost works of art: a temple and an ark.

The fate of Soane's Ark of the Masonic Covenant and his masonic temple intriguingly resonate with the history of the precedents that ultimately give them meaning: the biblical Ark of the Covenant and the series of structures, from the mobile tent of the Tabernacle to Solomon's Temple, which housed it. The latter, in particular, was the source of centuries of inspiration for artists who sought to recover its form through the imagination; an endeavour that was all the more tantalising as its dimensions were recorded in the Bible, but no image survived. For many 18th-century architects, Solomon's Temple held a quasi-mythical status as the perfect archetype of all buildings and much speculative ink had been spilt over its visualisation. This aspect of its historical legacy is reflected upon wryly by Soane himself in his Royal Academy lecture series. But the 18th century had also seen the absorption of the Temple of Solomon in another context, in an institution that blended new forms of liberal social interaction with a seemingly endless appetite for the arcana of ancient history: freemasonry.

In the 18th-century masonic tradition, the idea of the Temple of Solomon operated at a number of levels: in specific terms it featured as the context to the legendary narrative of the death and resurrection of its principal architect, Hiram Abiff, in the third degree which conferred the status of master mason. In a broader sense, however, it loomed as the guiding symbol of the masonic enterprise in general, in which the language of architecture and the tools of the stonemason were employed as symbols for the moral or spiritual development of the initiate. In addition, the community formed by this group of individuals, the masonic lodge, was fashioned after the model of a temple – one in which each mason played the role of a building component, symbolically comprising an idealised form of society.

What Soane made of this aspect of the masonic tradition is hard to say. The aim of the exhibition is by no means to argue for the complete reappraisal of his architectural legacy based on his becoming – at the advanced age of 60 – a freemason. As James Campbell points out in his article ‘Sir John Soane and the Freemasons: The New Temple and the Lost Ark’, included in the publication that accompanies the exhibition, there is scant evidence of Soane’s attendance at lodge meetings in the years that followed his initiation. Considering the proximity of Lincoln’s Inn Fields to Great Queen Street, difficulty of access can hardly be claimed as an excuse. Yet, like any other institution, freemasonry can be seen as composed of an idea and a reality and Soane’s collection of masonic books, a number of which are on display, at least points towards some intellectual engagement. John Jackson’s portrait of Soane in masonic regalia, hung in the Picture Room at Soane’s Museum, likewise indicates his happiness to be publicly identifiable as a freemason.

Temperamentally speaking, the more mystical aspects of freemasonry seem better suited to JM Gandy, whose monumental watercolours ‘Comparative Characteristics of Thirteen Selected Styles of Architecture’ and ‘Comparative Architecture Continued, an Emblematic Sketch’ are also displayed. These works were the visual accompaniment to his attempt to write a universal history of architectural symbolism, ‘The Art, Philosophy and Science of Architecture’. Unfortunately, there are no records of a Gandy in lodge membership lists, except that of his younger brother John Peter. Yet, the fact that JM Gandy’s ‘Comparative Architecture ... An Emblematic Sketch’ strikingly uses the same visual language as the frontispiece to one of Soane’s French masonic works, certainly would appear to indicate the likelihood of his familiarity with freemasonry as a body of thought.

The question may reasonably be asked: what meaning do the antiquarian preoccupations of 18th-century freemasons hold in the 21st century? To answer it, we may think about the reconstruction of Soane’s Ark of the Masonic Covenant against the backdrop of Factum Foundation’s other projects, which develop and apply digital technologies to record and recreate cultural artefacts. Unusually, in the case of the Ark, traditional means were favoured over digital and master joiners and woodcarvers at Houghtons of York carried out the construction. As a Factum exhibition, however, the link goes beyond the process of construction and circulates around the series of issues that we engage with: of how historical artefacts should be conserved and transmitted to future generations, the role of the historical imagination in accurately piecing together lost artworks and the idea that all artworks, whether through the hand of a conservator or through the loss of the context in which they were created, are in a sense lost. In light of this, Soane’s Ark of the Masonic Covenant and the antiquarian concerns that constitute its background have an important message for us: that history is ultimately a process of translation and whether through interpretation or copying we keep the past alive.

The reconstruction of the Ark of the Masonic Covenant was generously supported by the United Grand Lodge of England in celebration of the tercentenary of the establishment of freemasonry in London in 1717. Following the exhibition, the Ark will return to Great Queen Street, where it will be reinstated in the current incarnation of Freemasons’ Hall. The Foyle Space, Sir John Soane’s Museum, until 21 January 2018