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QUESTION: Considering the importance of the fragment in John Soane's Museum, can one say that his house is more about the use-value of art (its function as a collectible commodity) than its aesthetic value?

Introduction

Fragments may be construed ... as remnants of achievements and a plenitude that is irrevocably lost, or as elements of a restorative power that can provide symbolic and poetic meaning to newly constituted wholes. (Middleton, 1999, p.35)

Middleton here summarizes what he sees as the two approaches to fragments as exemplified in Sir John Soane's Museum – nostalgia for a past and hope for a future. Neither is exclusive and the viewer is free to use them at will.

In this essay I will begin an investigation of the meaning of Soane's fragments, paying attention to the presentation of their inherent or applied meanings which I will suggest embody his own nostalgia and hopes for them.

Fragments

Fragments occur in two major forms in the House. On the one hand they are evident as the spaces of the house themselves which are connected:

... obliquely and tangentially, to the left and to the right, above and below ... Mirrors create further complications. ... Soane's spaces cannot be apprehended as a whole. (Middleton, 1999, p.30)

However it is in their most ubiquitous form as the objects that fill these fragmented spaces, and which represent the fruits of Soane's zeal as a collector, that I will elaborate on here.

Objects

Soane's house, ... [is] a fabrication of bits and pieces from the past, of flotsam and jetsam. (Middleton, 1999, p.35)

The fragments themselves can be seen to have three major values for Soane. Firstly, an aesthetic value, i.e. for their beauty and craftsmanship; secondly, a historical value, whether real or imagined; and thirdly, a usefulness collectively creating a setting.

The cast of Apollo Belvedere standing in the Dome area conveniently demonstrates these values.

The original of this cast was 'at the time widely considered to be not only the paragon of ancient male beauty, but also a canon to teach oneself how to recognize beauty in the ideal proportions of parts to whole.' (Preziosi, 2002, p.33). Soane point out in his Guide: 'The eye is also attracted to the cast of Apollo Belvedere' (p.57), so he was aware of it's value as a focal point for the space. Indeed, Soane 'set so much value upon it as to take down a large portion of the external wall in order to admit it into its present position' (p.57).

I would suggest that—like the Apollo—the objects in the House combine all three of these values to varying extents, and that Soane was well aware of them when he chose and placed objects.

Aesthetic Value

The whole ... was intended to provoke amazement in the visitor.
(Middleton, 1999, p.30)

As well as this immediate affect on the emotions, Soane wished the fragments to promote knowledge: 'He termed the displays ... his "studies," and they were intended to serve as set-pieces or puzzles to not only intrigue or entertain the visitor or student, but to evoke, challenge, and elicit understanding.' (Preziosi, 2002, p.34)

For the draughtsmen and assistants that Soane took on, the fragments 'served as models or sources of inspiration' (Richardson, 2001, p.18). He describes the Students' Room as 'surrounded with the marble Fragments and Casts, ... and the drawers are filled with architectural drawings and prints, for the instruction of the pupils' (Soane, 1835, p.17).

Historical Value

The fragments are from many eras and sites of significance, and all have some sort of history attached to them. Indeed Soane imagines an antiquarian of the future viewing the house as '... a great assemblage of ancient fragments which must have been placed there for the advancement and knowledge of ancient Art' (Preziosi, 2002, p.30).

The history of the fragments is where they are most particularly susceptible to the vagaries of interpretation and it is here we find demonstrations of Soane's love of the fantastic, which I believe represents a major aspect of their use-value for him.

Use-Value

I would suggest the fragments individual 'uses'—as individualized objects with historical meaning independent of other objects around them—are overshadowed by the role they play—as a group—in the presentation of the house through fictions.

Significantly, there are no informative labels on the items in the Museum. Soane provided his own guidebook to visitors in which he combined factual information with a fantastical interpretation of the fragments' situation, perhaps most evidently through his invention of 'Padre Giovanni' and the creation of the 'monastic' suite comprising the Monk's Cell or Oratory, the Parlour and Monk's Yard. The latter is presented in this way:

The Ruins of a Monastery, arrest the attention. The interest created in the mind of the spectator, on visiting the abode of the monk, will not be weakened by wandering among the ruins of his once noble monastery. The rich Canopy and other decorations of this venerable spot are objects which cannot fail to produce the most powerful sensations in the minds of the admirers of the piety of our forefathers, who raised such structures for the worship of the Almighty Disposer of events. (Soane, 1835, p.36)

Activation

But the 'values' listed above depend on a third party for their 'activation' – their realization as meaningful affects. I believe Soane would have wanted the aesthetic content of the fragments to impress upon visitors the level of sophistication of their host in selecting such fine samples; the historical content to impart the required gravitas on the fragments and hence attest to the host's intellectual credentials; and the use content would excite their senses and inflame their imaginations.

Perhaps predictably, the fragment embodies a complex matrix of use- and aesthetic values. Sir John Soane appears to be aware of many layers of value that could be exploited when the fragments are in place. He appears to have used the fragments to create an environment in which he could live, work and socialize with a view to enhancing his reputation as a man of learning and conviviality. In this he

was also aware that his reputation with future generations rested on his legacy and did his utmost to write his epitaph in fragments.

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