



ENTERTAINING MRS SOANE

Could it be that even a stickler for Neoclassicism like Sir John Soane was willing, on occasion, to defer to his wife in matters of décor? In one of their rooms at Pitzhanger Manor, the rural retreat originally built by his mentor, hung a fashionable chinoiserie wallpaper so uncharacteristic of his style that guests as good as gasped. After a painstaking restoration, modern-day visitors may well do the same, says Emile de Bruijn. Photography: Fritz von der Schulenburg

In his re-creation of the lost Chinese wallpaper at Pitzhanger, decorative artist Alasdair Peebles has captured the balance between elegant stylisation and exquisite detail seen in early 19th-century originals. The scenery is convincing but also full of symbolism



This page, clockwise from top: the delicate Neoclassical ceiling was designed by Soane's mentor, George Dance. Its original colours, recreated by Rosie Shaw of Hare & Humphreys, harmonise well with the exotic wallpaper below; the Chinese painters often added mica powder to the background of papers, to ramp up their glamour, a practice Alasdair Peebles (seen here) replicated; Walpole Park, once Pitzhanger's landscape garden, is visible through the window. Opposite: Alasdair has skillfully echoed the elegant rhythms and subtle colour combinations at which Chinese painters excelled

JOHN SOANE was an established architect by the time he acquired Pitzhanger, a manor house in then-rural Ealing. The son of a bricklayer, he had worked his way up the profession through apprenticeships, scholarships, the help of friends and his own sheer brilliance. By 1800 he had a prestigious position as architect to the Bank of England, had married an heiress and had upgraded his surname (from Soan to a more upmarket Soane). Having established his office at his house in Lincoln's Inn Fields, he wanted a country seat too, one where he could entertain friends and clients in style and create 'a picture, a sort of portrait' of himself, as he later put it, as a sophisticated architect and gentleman collector. (He bought Hogarth's *Rake's Progress* expressly for the purpose.) But Soane had another, more sentimental reason for alighting on Pitzhanger: it had been built by his mentor, George Dance, and Soane himself had worked on the project as a 15-year-old trainee. While he demolished most of the house, rebuilding it in his signature pared-down Neoclassical style, he left one wing more or less as Dance had built it, praising its decoration as a 'profusion of ornaments, exquisite in taste, and admirable in execution'.

It was in Pitzhanger's Dance wing, in the large upper drawing room, that a sumptuous chinoiserie wallpaper was installed at some time in the early 19th century. It didn't survive to the present day (apart from two snippets found under later wallpapers), but it was recorded in a pair of watercolours made in 1832 by Soane's assistant, Charles James Richardson. It's the only known example of such a paper in a Soane interior. His designs were extremely inventive, even radical, but always within the Neoclassical idiom. To visitors, the upper drawing room must have come as a surprise: a virtual Chinese garden with profusely flowering trees and exotic, colourfully plumaged birds – although it may also have reminded them of the real hothouse plants grown in the conservatory on the west front of the house.

So how to explain this exuberant floral paper? It certainly wasn't there when Soane bought Pitzhanger Manor; it is shown covering the walls from floor to ceiling, so it couldn't have been hung in Dance's time, when there was a dado rail. And although Richardson's watercolours were painted some time after Soane had sold the house in 1810, the very fact that Soane himself commissioned them would seem to suggest that they record the room as it was during his tenure. Chinese wallpaper, in vogue since the middle of the 18th century, was often hung in rooms used by women. So could the upper drawing room have been the particular domain of Soane's wife, Eliza?

Over the past few years Pitzhanger has been the scene of a major project aiming to restore many of Soane's features that had been lost or obscured. It was decided to bring back the decorative scheme in the upper drawing room as recorded in the 1832 watercolours. Caroline Wilson of Julian Harrap Architects, tasked with researching the Chinese wallpaper and how it could be recreated, eventually commissioned the virtuoso decorative artist Alasdair Peebles (Wol March 2016) to take on the challenge.



My own research into Chinese wallpapers of that period for the National Trust had shown that, although they were hand-painted, they often share similarities, as the artists recycled certain motifs again and again. It can be like a game of snap trying to spot identical imagery in different historic papers. At the same time, the painters might change the colourway by varying the background hues, which can be in a range of blues, greens and pinks as well as off-whites. Or they might add features seen in Chinese gardens of the period, such as jardinières on decorative stands, or birdcages and baskets of flowers hung in the trees.

At the planning stage, after Alasdair and I swapped notes over coffee at the V&A, he went to see examples in their native countryside habitat. He went to Penrhyn Castle in north Wales to study the richly diverse white-ground bird-and-flower wallpaper in the State Bedroom. He travelled to Rose Castle, a former seat of the bishops of Carlisle, to inspect the drawing room's stunning paper, also on a white ground. At Weston Park in Shropshire he found another beautiful example, this time with a pinkish lilac ground. And at Kelmars Hall in Northamptonshire he again encountered a paper with some of the same motifs – purchased and hung there as an antique by Nancy Lancaster in the late 1920s – but painted in a slightly different manner and with a band of human figures along the bottom.

In the end Alasdair decided that the Rose Castle paper would make the best model for the Pitzhanger project. As yet not much is known about the paints in historic Chinese wallpapers, so he used modern materials, such as an off-white casein distemper for the background, mixed with mica powder to replicate the shimmer seen in them. For the birds, flowers and rocks he used gouaches by the Lascaux company and acrylics, which are suitably matt and opaque and resistant to fading. But Alasdair did follow the example of traditional Chinese painting workshops in engaging two assistants, the artists Nicola Pasterfield and Rachel Tweddell, to help him with the sheer volume of painting. They each specialised in certain types of motifs, as the Chinese themselves are thought to have done: Nicola and Rachel focused on the foliage, while Alasdair created the birds.

Working on the wallpaper intensively for a period of six months, Alasdair, Nicola and Rachel marvelled at (and occasionally cursed) the profusion and variety of the scenery and the subtle – or sometimes bold – combinations of colours and tones. They took care to replicate the various painting styles used for different features: calligraphic brushwork for the rocks, casual sketchiness for the butterflies and meticulous attention to detail in the case of the pheasant, peacock and other large birds.

Now the wallpaper is finished. The fact that it looks totally at home at Pitzhanger only goes to prove that present-day British artists can capture the spirit of their early 19th-century Chinese counterparts. And that even Soane was not above making concessions to the fashionable Chinese taste – or, perhaps, to his wife ■ *Pitzhanger Manor and Gallery reopens to the public in spring 2019. For details, ring 020 8825 9808, or visit pitzhanger.org.uk*



This page: Pitzhanger's entrance, redolent of a Roman triumphal arch, expresses Soane's image of himself as one of the starchitects of his day. Opposite: in Chinese art and design the pheasant symbolises beauty, while eroded rocks and banana plants are considered elegant accoutrements