**Piranesi, Giovanni Battista, 1720-1778**

**Definition:** *Piranesi, Giovanni Battista* from *Philip’s Encyclopedia*

Italian engraver and architect. He lived in Rome where he became famous for his *Vedute*, 137 etchings of the ancient and modern city (1745). The one existing building that he designed is the Church of Santa Maria del Priorato, Rome (1764-65).

**Summary Article: ** *Piranesi, Giovanni Battista*

From *The Classical Tradition*

A Venetian architect, designer, and graphic artist, 1720-1778, Piranesi remains among the greatest interpreters of Roman antiquity through an output of well over 1,000 etchings, ranging from souvenir views to technical illustrations and architectural fantasies, which he disseminated by means of the European Grand Tour. As an architect, he extended the range of archaeological investigation as a source of inspiration and played a leading role in the debate in the second half of the 18th century over the comparative virtues of Greek versus Roman styles of architecture. Through a series of polemical publications he advocated a highly original style of composition in architecture and the decorative arts, one based on a wideranging study of the classical past, which had a considerable influence on Neoclassical designers such as the Adam brothers, Bélanger, Ledoux, and Soane.

Architecture was to be the controlling discipline of Piranesi’s multifaceted career. Born at Mogliano, near Venice, the son of a master builder, he trained under Lucchesi and Scalfurotto, architects and hydraulic engineers in the service of the Venetian Republic. He was influenced by the radical ideas of the architectural theorist Carlo Lodoli, who challenged the conventional authority of Vitruvian design, particularly with reference to Etruscan civilization. In 1740 Piranesi achieved his aspirations when he arrived in Rome as a draftsman in Marco Foscarini’s embassy. Frustrated by a lack of professional opportunities, he acquired skills as an engraver of souvenir views (*vedute*) for visiting Grand Tourists while sublimating his architectural ideas in composing elaborate fantasy designs.

Shortly after publishing a collection of these epic compositions as a stimulus for contemporary architects in 1743, he visited the recently discovered site at Hercula-neum, where he became convinced of the critical need for more effective archaeological illustrations. After further stays in Venice beginning ca. 1744, his final return to Rome was marked by the issue in 1750 of 14 prints of imaginary prisons (*Carceri*), a highly experimental series of architectural compositions, laced with Venetian fantasy, on the theme of the vaulted Roman interior. Meanwhile, he began to transform the conventional engraved view into a vehicle for combining powerful emotive imagery with a wealth of technical information, as exemplified by the 135 prints in his magisterial *Vedute di Roma*, issued individually from about 1748 onwards. This influential series heightenened his contemporaries’ awareness of the engineering achievements of classical antiquity (exemplified by an aerial view of the Colosseum’s structural system) and of how classical antiquity had powerfully conditioned the development of the modern city of Rome and its environs.

Topography rapidly developed into archaeological enquiry. A modest publication on tomb chambers (ca. 1751-57) was followed by an even more ambitious undertaking, the *Vedute di Roma*. First published in 1924 for the Società degli Amici della Scienza Romana, the first edition of this prodigious work was completed in 1752 and consisted of 135 plates, each accompanied by Piranesi’s numerous commentaries on the antique sites of Rome. This massive undertaking was extended in 1764-65 with an issue of the *Vedute dei Tempio* and a second edition of the *Vedute di Roma*. It is clear from the large number of engravings and illustrations produced by Piranesi that he had a strong interest in the history of architecture and that his work was a major influence on the development of Neoclassicism in the 18th century.
1750) and a folio on the Trophies of Marius on the Capitol (1753) were followed by a four-volume comprehensive survey of ancient Rome (Le Antichità Romane, 1756), which was to prove a landmark in the history of classical archaeology, not only for its innovative illustrative techniques (comparable to Leonardo's revolution in anatomical drawing) but also for revealing applications that combined a specialized understanding of architecture and engineering with reconstructive faculties of the highest order. The work's 250 plates fulfilled a crucial and coordinated role: the 315 monuments they depicted were cross-indexed and related to surviving inscriptions and to the known fragments of the Severan Marble Plan (a huge map of Rome incised in marble, 203-211 CE), which had been gradually accumulating since the first rediscoveries in the 16th century. As never before, their full significance was conveyed through the topographical context of a master plan that showed the complex integration of the aqueduct and defensive systems. In addition to his concentration on the ornamental riches of surviving funerary monuments, his exaggerated emphasis on the scale and complexity of the Roman past reflected Piranesi's initial response to the provocative claims made by the protagonists of Greek originality, such as Julien-David Le Roy and Marc-Antoine Laugier, in the emerging debate over Greek or Roman ascendancy in style and architecture.

Academic recognition was swift—Piranesi was elected an Honorary Fellow of the Society of Antiquaries of London in 1757—but these scholarly pursuits were soon transformed into intense archaeological polemics represented in a series of elaborate illustrated folios. Della magnificenza ed architettura de' Romani (1761) established the foundations of his defense, based on the Etruscans as the sole founders of Roman civilization; the Acqua Giulia (1761) explored the public water system of Rome, and the Lapides capitolini (1762) featured a lengthy inscription from the Forum Romanum stressing the long and complex history of Rome. A highly technical treatise on the hydraulic mastery of the emissarium, or drainage outlet, to Lake Albano, also followed in 1762, and further publications recorded the antiquities of the Albano and Castelgandolfo area as well as the ancient city of Cori. Most significant of all, the Campo Marzio dell'antica Roma (The Campus Martius of Ancient Rome, 1762), which was dedicated to Robert Adam, countered Winckelmann's accusation of decadence in the Late Roman Empire by tracing the evolution of a densely monumental townscape of unprecedented complexity. The culminating plan (Ichnographia) was an apotheosis of Roman urban design, principally intended as an exhortation to contemporary designers, which provided a veritable anthology of ingenious planning concepts that would be used by architects well into the 19th century.

The reissue of the heavily reworked Carceri prints in 1761 marked the climactic point in Piranesi's career. Through Pope Clement XIII and the Rezzonico family, he finally obtained a series of commissions for decorative interior schemes as well as two architectural works: a new tribune (dais) for the Lateran (unexecuted), and the reconstruction of Santa Maria del Priorato. These were all expressed in terms of a novel system of eclectic design, incorporating a wide range of antique motifs, which were justified theoretically in a fictional debate between opposing architects in his Parere su l'architettura (Opinions on Architecture, 1765). By the close of the decade, the folio volume Diverse maniere d'adornare i cammini ed ogni altra parte degli edifizi... (Diverse Ways of Decorating Chimneypieces and Every Other Part of a Building..., 1769)—his final statement in the Graeco-Roman quarrel—illustrated his new system of design in action. The essay, which introduced etchings of his compositions for interior embellishments and furnishings, reiterated the inventive genius of the Etruscans and also advanced a remarkable pioneering analysis of Egyptian art (featured in several of the etched designs).

After the end of Rezzonico patronage with Clement XIII's death in 1769, Piranesi developed a
prosperous business in the highly imaginative restoration of marble antiquities for the Grand Tour market, including chimneypieces and other works composed of classical fragments. Many of these complex objects found their way into British collections, such as the giant Warwick Vase (Burrell Collection, Glasgow), the two Newdigate Candelabra (Ashmolean Museum, Oxford), and the Piranesi Vase (or Boyd Vase) in the British Museum. Disseminated by a series of striking plates in his *Vasi, candelabri, cippi, sarcofagi* (1778)—*cippi* are short, usually squared signposts or funerary pillars—this application of fantasy to classical forms influenced a new generation of designers in the British Regency and French Empire.

By now, Piranesi’s collaborators included his son Francesco (1758-1810), who helped prepare a folio meticulously depicting the three monumental relief columns in Rome and another on the three Greek Doric temples of Paestum. The latter work, in which Piranesi was won over by the sheer grandeur of these monuments, received the papal imprimatur shortly before his death in November 1778 and was ironically to play a decisive part in promoting the heavyweight aesthetic of the later Greek Revival. Francesco completed and published posthumously several more of his father’s archaeological works, such as the first fully comprehensive plan of Hadrian’s Villa and views of Pompeii, which were later included in a reissue of Piranesi’s works in a 27-volume edition between 1800 and 1807.

As archaeological science developed from the early 19th century onward, Piranesi’s potent images of classical antiquity were superseded by more clinical illustrations, although they still deeply affected topographical perceptions of Rome. The ultimate legacy of his unique vision of the classical world, however, is represented above all by the perennial appeal of the *Carceri* prints—visual metaphors for the endlessly creative inspiration of the classical past, which have continued to inspire writers, poets, and musicians as much as artists, designers, and film directors.

**BIBL.:**


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