

# The Paradoxes of Piranesi

by Gail Leggio

The Roman views of Giovanni Battista Piranesi (1720–78) have lost none of their power over the last two centuries. Their longevity derives from the formidable artistic skills lavishly displayed in Piranesi's thousands of etchings, bolstered by his architectural training and informed appetite for archaeological detail. In part, too, as David Watkin remarks in his recent study *The Roman Forum*, Piranesi benefits from fortunate timing. Because he was depicting the city before the widespread excavations and reconstructions that began in the nineteenth century, "any ancient building he shows we can take as genuinely ancient."<sup>1</sup> The images of half-buried monuments, integrated with churches and street life and picturesque rural incursions, are compelling documents of a great city in an era when the study of antiquity was fueling the contradictory aesthetic revolutions of neoclassicism and Romanticism. At the same time, they transcend their immediate circumstances to become definitive expressions of the "grandeur that was Rome." Exhibitions such as "The World of Piranesi," a recent collaborative project between faculty and students at the University of Notre Dame's Snite Museum of Art, continue to promote discussion about Rome's architectural heritage and imaginative legacy.

In fact, Rome's master printmaker and principal visual rhetorician described himself as an "architetto veneziano," and Piranesi first visited the city as a draftsman in the entourage of the Venetian ambassador to the papal court. He learned a good deal from Venetian artists, including Giovanni Antonio Canaletto (1697–1768), prince of the vedutisti or view painters, whose images of La Serenissima were prized souvenirs of the Grand Tour. Canaletto depicted, with uncanny verisimilitude, the piazzas and palazzi, churches and canals, establishing the instantly recognizable iconography of Venice. He also publicized Venetian light—limpid, sparkling, a glamour born of the interplay between sky and water. Venetian light made the city a magnet for colorists such as J.M.W. Turner and John Singer Sargent, but it also inspired the evocative, low-key paintings and engravings of James McNeill Whistler. Piranesi worked exclusively in black-and-white, but he is a master of the effects of light, in his masses of deep shadow and bold areas of full sun, in the unobtrusive yet deftly sketched movement of clouds in his skies. The light gives his Roman vedute an élan that makes academic architectural renderings look dry and chilly.

Piranesi could build on the work of two other Venetians, on Giovanni Battista Tiepolo's (1696–1770) *Capricci* and on the set designs of Ferdinando Galli Bibiena (1656–1743). *Capricci* are picturesque jumbles of architectural and sculptural elements; the tombs and urns, pillars and pyramids can be decorated with inscriptions and peopled by mythological beings and symbolic animals. Tiepolo's *capricci* are airy and playful. Piranesi's are denser and more



Giovanni Battista Piranesi, *Via Appia and Via Ardeatina*, from *Le Antichità Romane*, 1756

learned, manifestations of scholarly horror vacui. In one of the frontispieces in the four-volume *Le Antichità Romane* (1756), Piranesi reimagines the intersection of the Via Appia and the Via Ardeatina as a sort of attic-jungle, piled high with mausoleums and capitals and marble body parts, busts and gravestones and a stone she-wolf suckling Romulus and Remus. Piranesi was also influenced by Ferdinando Galli Bibiena (1656–1743), a master of Baroque scenography and founder of a dynasty of architects and theater designers. Bibiena broke the staid symmetry, based on single-point perspective, of the formal set presented frontally to the audience. His *scena par angolo* was laid out on a diagonal, a far more dynamic strategy for stage composition. This cornering, using multiple-point perspective, allowed for the illusion of deep distance. Bibiena also exaggerated the scale of architectural elements, so that buildings appeared cropped by the proscenium arch.

Scenographic presentation is eminently suited to the inherent theatricality of Rome's public spaces, and Piranesi makes evocative stage pictures from Roman locales, both modest and iconic, in two etchings featured in the Snite Museum show. His *Internal View of the Atrium of the Portico of Octavia* (1760) shows the remnants of the ancient temple complex that had been used as a fish market since the middle ages. Piranesi encloses the space on three sides. On the left, an arch flanked by handsome, half-broken pilasters is cropped, at courtyard level, by a low wall; the pile of rough stone surmounting the arch rises out of frame. On the right, in much steeper perspective, runs a trio of columns. The back wall holds another arch, interrupted by a makeshift awning. An alley



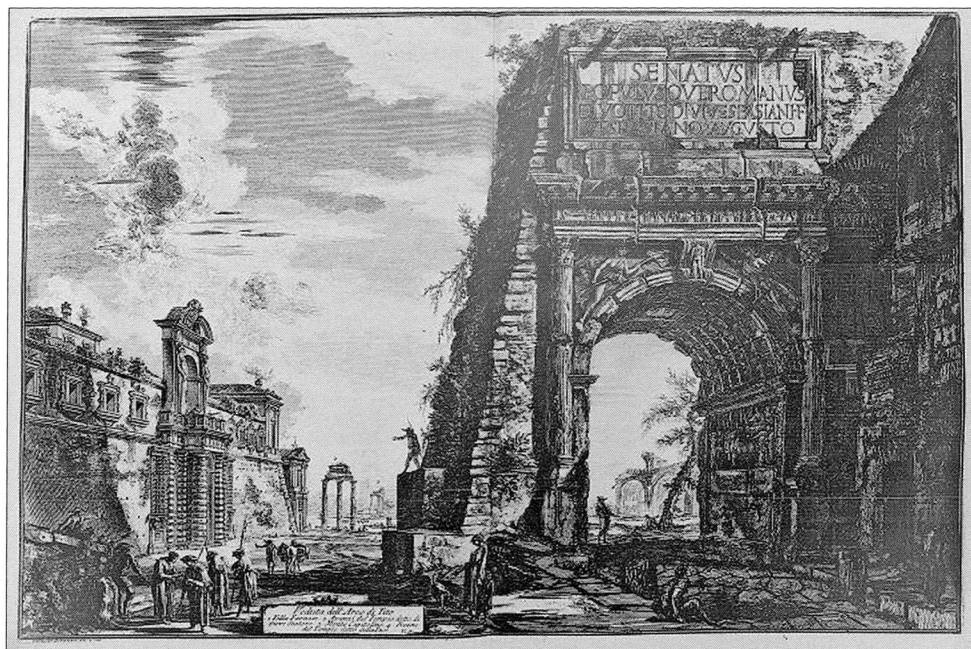
through that arch disappears, at an angle, into the distance. Tiny figures go about their daily business amid the monumental detritus. Sun and shadow carve out spaces and pick out textures built up over centuries.

The Portico of Octavia, in Rome's Ghetto, seems absorbed into its neighborhood. The grandeur of the Arch of Titus is unmistakable, as is its freight of history. One of the principal monuments of the Forum, the Arch of Titus was erected by the Emperor Domitian in 81 A.D. to honor the victories of Titus and Vespasian in the Judean War. In his *View of the Arch of Titus* (1760), Piranesi places the arch on the left, angling it sharply so that the top rises out of frame, emphasizing its sheer bulk. That angle also offers a good interior view of the famous bas-relief of the sacking of Jerusalem and, in dramatic shadow, the coffered ceiling. Hard sunlight reveals the ruined surfaces, which would be rebuilt and restored by Giuseppe Valadier in 1821, when the warren of modern buildings and shacks that had attached themselves to the arch like barnacles would also be removed. Again, Piranesi creates a stage picture by placing a dark wall on the right, including picturesque trees and showing a side road dissolving in sunlight as it runs off at an angle, in an etcher's version of atmospheric perspective.



Giovanni Battista Piranesi, *Internal View of the Atrium of the Portico of Octavia*, from *Vedute di Roma*, 1760





Giovanni Battista Piranesi, *View of the Arch of Titus*, from *Vedute di Roma*, c. 1770

Piranesi's 1760 *Arch of Titus* print suggests some of the artist's stylistic complexity, in the way he combines a classicist's fervent admiration for ancient architecture with Baroque stagecraft and proto-Romantic sensibility. In another print, *View of the Arch of Titus* (c. 1770), Piranesi places the arch on the right, straight on to the viewer, emphasizing the inscription above the arch itself and clearing away the surrounding structures. On the left is a panorama of the Forum which includes, improbably from this angle, the Temple of Castor and Pollux. While this view looks more classicist and archaeological, it is, as Malcolm Campbell remarks, a "fictional vista" that Piranesi has "edited and manipulated."<sup>2</sup> The difference between these two versions of the Arch of Titus demonstrates why generalizing about Piranesi's attitude toward Rome is a tricky proposition.

In his view of the Portico of Octavia and 1760 etching of the Arch of Titus, Piranesi reveals an intuitive understanding of the exhilarating spatial dynamics of a city where, as Christian Norberg-Schulz puts it, "the street is an 'urban interior' where life takes place." The piazzas, tiny and expansive, scattered around Rome become anterooms to the great building interiors that Norberg-Schulz claims are "the most important contribution of the ancient Romans to the history of architecture."<sup>3</sup> Piranesi presents the most perfect of Roman enclosed spaces in *Interior View of the Pantheon* (1756), in an unusually symmetrical staging, perhaps in honor of its elegant geometry. Many views of the structure are in vertical format, such as Giovanni Paolo Panini's *Interior of*

*the Pantheon, Rome* (c. 1734, National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.). Panini's painting takes a vantage point near the main altar of the temple-church, looking across the Rotunda to glimpse the sunny piazza, with its fountain and obelisk, outside. The proportions have been subtly squeezed upward to show columns, statuary and marble detailing under an oculus of blue sky. A lively group of visitors are observed well enough to give us an idea of contemporary fashion. Piranesi takes the opposite vantage point and chooses a horizontal format. The thick, angled walls of the porch and a pair of columns frame the interior like a proscenium. The figures crossing the perspective-squared floor are miniscule, like tiny lay people in an architect's model. The swell of the space is slightly flattened to let us experience both the sweep of the ground-level space and the curves of the coffered ceiling, illuminated by a shaft of sunlight from the oculus.

Such subtle distortions are essential to two-dimensional interpretations of three-dimensional structures and spaces, especially when dealing with monumental scale. In his exterior *View of the Flavian Amphitheater, Called the Colosseum* (1757), Piranesi gives us an impossible panorama: the section of ranked arcades nearest the viewer swells like something in a convex mirror, while on both sides the arches run off in vertiginous perspective. In his aerial *View of the Flavian Amphitheatre, Called the Colosseum* (1776), the shape is more regular, and he has arranged the interior as a sort of archaeological cross section. The dense web of tiny lines obsessively records bricks and shadows and crumbling masonry. The rest of the city has fallen away, and the yawning bowl—one of the signature feats of Roman engineering—fills the frame. Piranesi is a superb visual artist, always aware of the pictorial possibilities of working in two dimensions, but his primary subject is architecture, the art of building as theory and practice.

A brief comparison to another famous interpreter of antiquity further illuminates the paradoxes of Piranesi's work. Andrea Palladio (1508–80) was, like Piranesi, from the Veneto. Born in Padua, then part of the Republic of Venice, he is best known for his villas in the Veneto and for his *I Quattro Libri dell' Architettura* (1570), based on the theory of the Roman Vitruvius. In 1554, Palladio published guidebooks to the antiquities and churches of the Eternal City and made detailed drawings, both documentary reports and imaginative reconstructions. Palladio claimed: "I have seen with my own eyes and measured with my own hands the fragments of many ancient buildings...clear and powerful proof of the *virtù* and greatness of the Romans."<sup>4</sup> Palladio learned his lessons from Rome and returned home to build. Piranesi stayed, becoming an archaeologist and antiquarian, compulsively documenting not only buildings but also sculpture and inscriptions. A great admirer of Rome's engineering prowess, he praised the aqueducts and included, in Volume III of *Le Antichità Romane*, handsome illustrations of lifting instruments and drawings showing how blocks of marble were moved. But only one building is credited to him, the small church of Santa Maria del Priorato on the Aventine Hill, which he rebuilt for the Knights of Malta in 1765.



Piranesi's vedute were part of a business enterprise that included dealing in antiquities and publishing what we might call pattern books, including *Vasi, candelabri, cippi, sarcophagi* (1778), an artifact catalogue, and *Diverse Maniere d'adornare i cammini* (1769), decorative schemes based on pastiches of antique styles. These works had widespread influence on eighteenth-century design and point to another aspect of Piranesi's career, his friendship with the Scottish architect and interior decorator Robert Adam (1728–92). Adam spent five years in Rome studying with Piranesi; the two collaborated on a large plan of the Campo Marzio for *Il Campo Marzio dell'Antica Roma* (1762). Piranesi dedicated the volume to Adam: on the title page, the full title appears chiseled on a cracked marble slab, with the dedication on a plaque wrapped around a half column, prominent amid a pile of broken capitals. This title page is, in itself, a beautiful homage to antiquity, a fine drawing rich in chiaroscuro.<sup>5</sup> Another monument to Adam appears in Volume II of Piranesi's *Antichità Romane* (1756). Adam went on to become a principal exponent of international neoclassicism, best known for his cool, airy interiors—very different in spirit from Piranesi's denser, weightier designs—with delicate ornamental moldings and furniture that would be popularized as Hepplewhite. Yet the power of Rome stayed strong in Adam's imagination. He used the Arch of Constantine as a model for his south front of Kedleston Hall (1761) in Derbyshire.

The triple-portaled Arch of Constantine was erected in 315 A.D. in honor of Constantine's victory over the rival emperor Maxentius at the Milvian Bridge. Many of the fine reliefs decorating the structure were taken from earlier monuments, a prime example of the Roman mania for appropriating and repurposing art from previous eras. Piranesi made several views of this imposing structure, including *The Arch of Constantine* (1771), which shows a pastoral group with goats in front of the very solid arch, still partially covered, since the ground level had risen significantly since antiquity. Piranesi gets a striking amount of bas-relief detail without losing the overall impact of the architectural form, angled to emphasize its heavy mass. The angle is even more pronounced in his etching of the Basilica of Maxentius, the ruins of the law courts begun by Maxentius around 306–07 A.D. and completed by Constantine c. 313 A.D. The eight-and-a-half-foot-high head of Constantine in the courtyard of the Palazzo dei Conservatori on the Capitoline was taken from a monumental statue installed in the basilica. The building, which stood almost intact until damaged by a thirteenth-century earthquake, was a prime example of Roman architectural might, and Piranesi captures the scale of the three colossal coffered arches through dramatic patterns of light and shade. As usual, the tiny figures underline the gargantuan scope of the building, an exaggeration that celebrates an engineering marvel.

Piranesi was a polemicist as well as an artist and scholar, arguing for Roman sovereignty in ancient architecture. Works such as *Della magnificenza ed architettura de' Romani* (1761) presented his case in words and pictures, in opposition

to a rising tide of Grecophilia. Bent on demonstrating the aesthetic superiority of Greek art, the German archaeologist and art historian Johann Joachim Winckelmann (1717–68) energetically propagated that view through his books and through his official positions, first, as librarian to a cardinal in Rome and, later, as superintendent of Roman antiquities. Winckelmann never visited Greece, although he examined the remains in Pompeii, Herculaneum and Paestum, and he based his criticism on Hellenistic works and Roman copies. But he was enormously influential, and Piranesi vigorously defended the Roman achievement. As Malcolm Campbell remarks, Piranesi “advocated creative license over what he perceived to be the narrowly circumscribed functionalism of idealized Greek austerity slavishly endorsed by... Winckelmann.”<sup>6</sup>

Piranesi never aimed for a pure, idealized, harmonious classicism. While ancient Roman urban planners brought the rational grid to cities across the empire, the city of Rome remains a quirky assemblage of spaces, shaped by the topographical destiny of its seven hills and built over through millennia. Beneath Piranesi’s command of the pragmatic and aesthetic glory of Roman building lies a feeling for the city’s earthiness and lurking irrationality. This side of Piranesi reaches its apotheosis in his *Carceri d’invenzione*, or imaginary prisons, which appeared in two editions, c. 1749–50 and c. 1761. The spaces of the *Carceri*, simultaneously vast and claustrophobic, are clearly based on the vaults and baths of antiquity, but the parts have been jumbled: stairs and drawbridges go nowhere, arches pile up to form inescapable labyrinths, heavy chains are swagged across gulfs of space. There are small figures of prisoners and their tormentors, but Piranesi seems less interested in their plight—which is not nearly as explicit as that of Goya’s victims—than in a macabre fantasy of space.

Supposedly based on a malarial fever-dream, the *Carceri* suggest a descent into the subconscious, an extraordinarily detailed nightmare. The particulars are drawn from the vocabulary of ancient Rome; the emotional atmosphere speaks to universal anxieties. The Victorian Jesuit poet Gerard Manley Hopkins records a similar experience in one of his sonnets:

O the mind, mind has mountains, cliffs of fall  
Frightful, sheer, no-man-fathomed. Hold them cheap  
May who ne’er hung there....<sup>7</sup>

This is the Piranesi of the dark imagination that appealed to the fantasies of the Romantics and the psychology preoccupations of the moderns: Thomas De Quincy, in *Confessions of an English Opium Eater*; Edgar Allen Poe, in *The Pit and the Pendulum*; Marguerite Yourcenar, in *The Dark Brain of Piranesi*. The optical-architectural puzzles of M.C. Escher are obvious descendants. In *Piranesi’s Dream: A Novel*, Gerhard Kopf gives the artist a speech in which he defines architecture as “a sublime symbol for the tension between what you want to do

in your own mind and what you are able to do in reality.”<sup>8</sup> Piranesi’s style is full of paradoxes, refracting antiquity through a prism that encompasses Baroque, neoclassical and Romantic. All of his images are, in a sense, flights of imagination—not flights that float free of the earth but flights like monumental stairs, firmly rooted in the specific ground of Rome.

#### NOTES

1. David Watkin, *The Roman Forum* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2009), p. 34.
2. *Art in Rome in the Eighteenth Century*, ed. by Edgar Peters Bowron and Joseph T. Rishel (Philadelphia Museum of Art; London: Merrell, 2000), p. 584.
3. Christian Norberg-Schulz, “The Genius Loci of Rome,” *Roma interrotta* (Rome: Incontri internazionali d’arte, 1979), issued in conjunction with an exhibition at the Cooper-Hewitt Museum, New York City, pp. 14, 19.
4. Cited, *Palladio’s Rome*, ed. and trans. by Vaughn Hart and Peter Hicks (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2006), pp. xxxvii–xxxviii.
5. Luigi Ficacci, *Giovanni Battista Piranesi: Selected Etchings* (Köln, et al.: Taschen, 2001), p. 94.
6. *Art in Rome*, p. 568.
7. *The Poems of Gerard Manley Hopkins*, ed. by W.H. Gardner and N.H. MacKenzie, fourth edition (London, Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press, 1970), p. 100.
8. Gerhard Kopf, *Piranesi’s Dream: A Novel*, trans. by Leslie Wilson (New York: George Braziller, 2000).

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