

An engraver who etched his genius into art and architecture history

VENICE

From epic Roman ruins to fine fireplace designs, Piranesi had broad range

BY RODERICK CONWAY MORRIS

Giuseppe Vasi, while teaching Giambattista Piranesi engraving, told his young student: “You are too much a painter, my friend, to be an engraver.” Vasi’s remark represented both an acute assessment of the Venetian’s talents and a failure to imagine that they could be applied with such astonishing results to the art of engraving.

Piranesi pushed etching and engraving to unsurpassed limits, transforming them from what had been predominantly tools of illustration and reproduction into expressive art forms on a par with painting and sculpture. This was achieved not least because Piranesi did a great deal of his work directly onto the plates, using his etcher’s needle and engraver’s burin as a painter uses a brush

or a sculptor a chisel, adding further nuances and subtleties by his handling of inks during the printing process.

Indeed, Piranesi employed engraving as the primary means of expression in all his endeavors as an architect, designer, archeologist, topographical artist and polemicist, as is compellingly demonstrated by “The Arts of Piranesi” at the Cini Foundation here.

Along with more than 300 prints from the Cini’s own collection — the Foundation has an almost complete set of the Firmin Didot edition printed in Paris after Francesco Piranesi moved the family business there following his father’s death in 1778 — are seven objects taken from Piranesi’s designs, illustrated in his prints but never before realized. The latter pieces — two tripods, a vase, a candelabrum, a coffee pot, an altar and a fireplace — have been made by Factum Arte in Madrid. Founded by Adam Lowe, the company specializes in constructing facsimiles of fragile art works for conservation purposes using computer imaging techniques combined with traditional craft skills. These exotic Piranesi artifacts



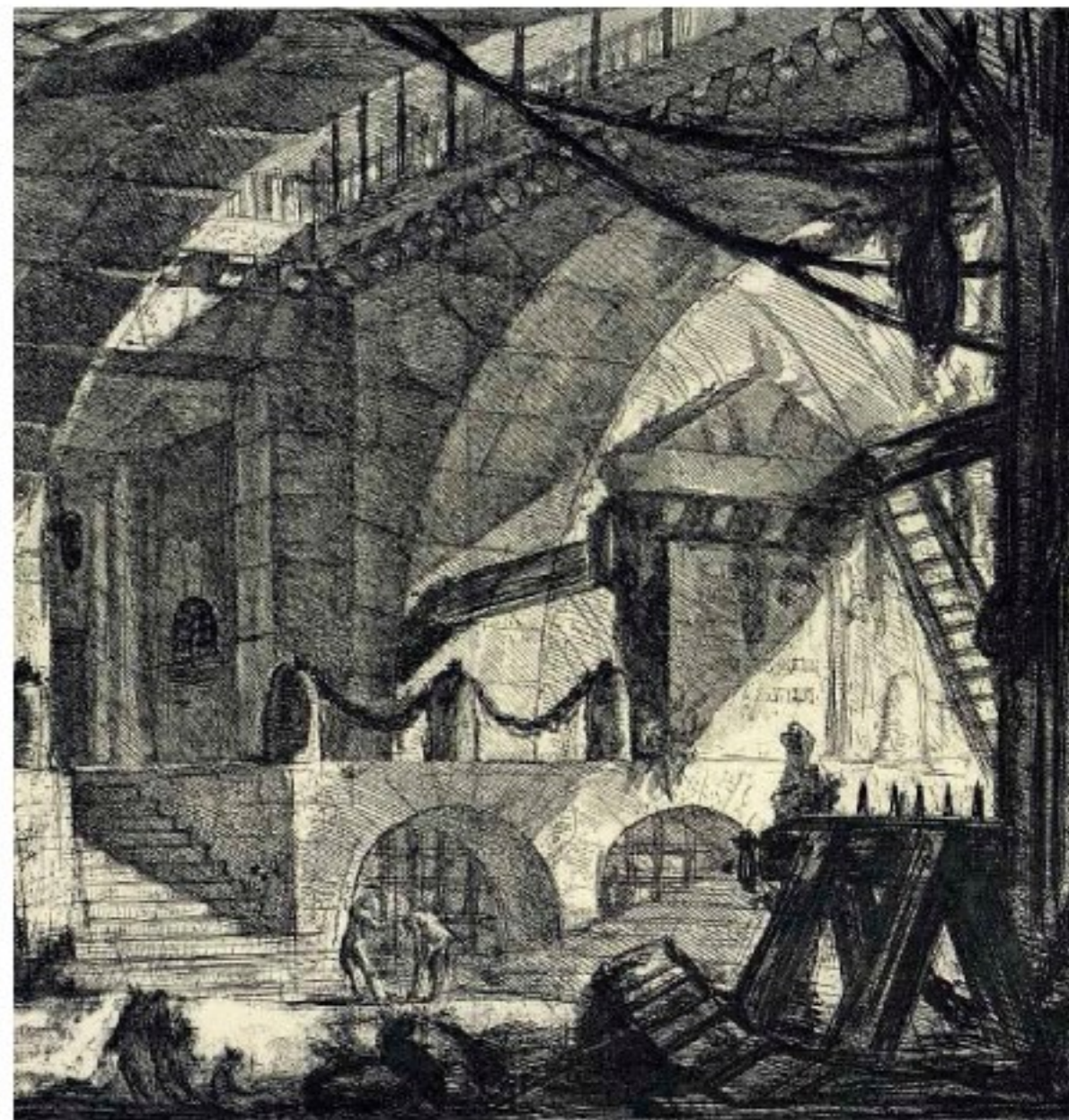
ART REVIEW

will later be available for purchase in limited editions.

Giambattista Piranesi was born in the Veneto in 1720. His early training in Venice was in architecture, engineering and stage design. His apprenticeships also coincided with the golden age of the Venetian “vedutisti,” or topographical artists, and the rise of Canaletto as the supreme master of the genre. This was also the heyday of the “capriccio,” or architectural and landscape fantasy, established by Marco Ricci and developed by Canaletto and Tiepolo.

Piranesi’s precocious accomplishments as a draftsman secured him a place in the entourage of Marco Foscarini, the Venetian ambassador to Rome, when the artist was only 20. He was to spend the rest of his life there, but for a couple of sojourns in Venice and excursions to Naples.

Two resident vedutisti, the painter Giovanni Paolo Panini and the engraver Giuseppe Vasi, were already *PIRANESI, PAGE 10*



FONDAZIONE CINI; FACTUM ARTE, MADRID (LEFT)

Giambattista Piranesi’s “Prisons of Invention” show imaginary hells of torture and pain. His interests extended beyond two-dimensional art. At left, a coffee pot based on designs by Piranesi.

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PIRANESI, FROM PAGE 9

supplying the increasing number of Grand Tour visitors with views of Rome, and it was inevitable that an artist of Piranesi's skills and background would become involved in this burgeoning market. But Piranesi soon revealed himself to be an artist like no other with his visionary views of ancient Roman architecture and ruins which, although closely observed, owed as much to his fantastic imagination. Seen through his eyes, Roman architecture took on an awe-inspiring complexity and superhuman proportions, emphasized by his pigmy-like figures dwarfed by its overwhelming grandeur.

But at the same time Piranesi was making a major contribution to the foundation of scientific archeology, meticulously recording and measuring ancient buildings and uncovering the secrets of Roman materials, construction and engineering techniques. The demands of both a high level of detail and a panoramic breadth of vision encouraged him to experiment with bigger plates in the 1740s, and by the mid-1750s he routinely employed large formats.

The 1760s saw him enter the arena as an academic polemicist in the ever-more heated debate on the virtues of Greek and Roman architecture. Those arguing for the primacy of the Greeks were led by Marc-Antoine Laugier and Julien-David Le Roy from France and Johann Joachim Winckelmann, a German who maintained that Roman architecture was an inferior derivative of the Greek.

Piranesi vigorously championed the superiority of Roman building, both in terms of engineering and richness of ornament, tracing its origins not to the Greeks but the Etruscans. As usual, Piranesi's principal weapon was the print, and his commitment to supporting his case and his prodigious energy gave rise to a further series of majestic works covering a wide range of topics. With these, Piranesi's work constituted an encyclopedic visual record of Roman architecture, engineering and town planning, to which he constantly added until his death.

At the end of the 1740s, he produced the first version of his most enigmatic and personal work, the "Carceri" ("Prisons") series of 14 plates. Venice and Rome, the Gothic and the Baroque, theatrical scene painting and colossal Roman ruins all played a part in their creation. These visions of a man-made Hades are terrifyingly timeless, the interiors conjured in them at once limitless and infinitely confining.

Piranesi returned to the plates, reissuing them with two additional ones in 1761 with the ambiguous title "Carceri d'invenzione," which could mean either "Invented Prisons" or "Prisons of Invention." The new version represented a radical reworking. Spectral human figures, arches, staircases, bridges, ladders, beams, pillars, scaffolds, iron rings, spikes, hooks, winches, hanging ropes, chains, extinguished lamps and

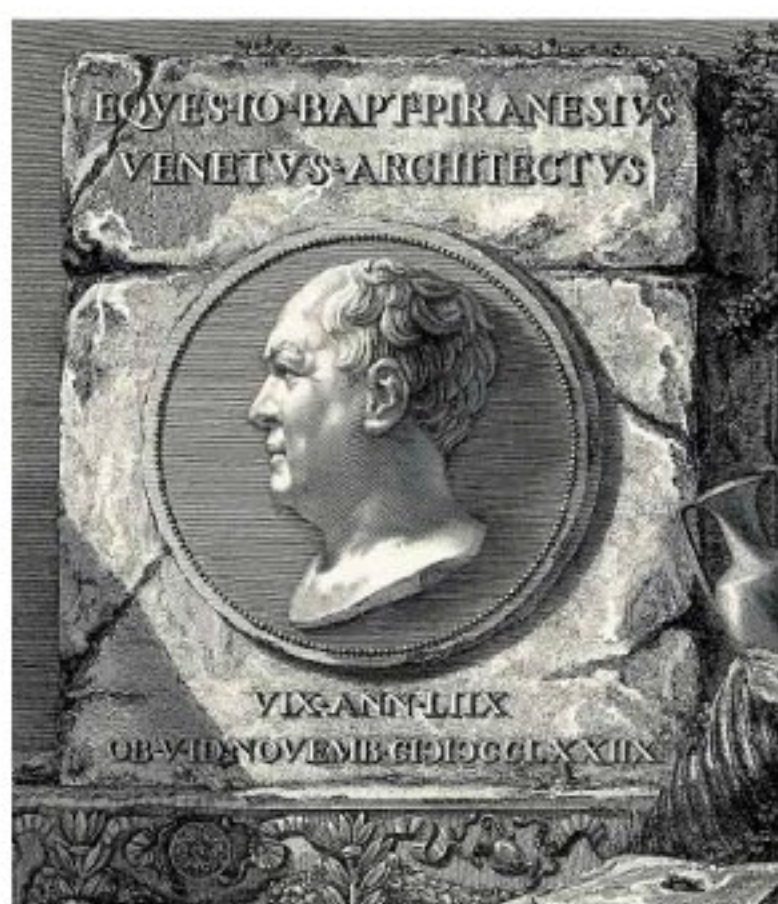
huge, mysterious instruments of torture, palpably thickening the inky gloom pierced by feeble shafts of light to intensify the sepulchral chiaroscuro, all were added, bringing the "Carceri" to the state of perfection that was to guarantee their survival.

All 16 prints are on display and a video screen shows the first-state versions of several prints (now at the Accademia di San Luca in Rome), then the second-state ones from the Cini collection side by side, before superimposing the former on the latter, gradually allowing Piranesi's additions to come through, enabling the visitor almost to witness the artist's hand reworking the plate.

Piranesi's ambitions to make his mark on the Eternal City as an architect never came to fruition, mainly because there was so little new building at this time. His only completed work was the remodeling of the modest church and headquarters of the Knights of St. John on the Aventine Hill. Yet he found architectural followers, notably Etienne-Louis Boullé and Claude-Nicolas Ledoux of France and John Soane of England.

The interiors and furniture designed for the residences of the Venetian pope Benedict XIII are now almost entirely lost. But his published compendiums of designs for fireplaces, vases, candelabras and other objects had a major impact on the decorative arts.

And the powerful influence of Piranesi's visionary images on literature can be traced through the work of English Romantics like Horace Walpole,



FONDAZIONE CINI

A portrait of the artist Giambattista Piranesi by his son, Francesco Piranesi.

William Beckford, Samuel Taylor Coleridge and Thomas de Quincey as well as on French writers like Honoré de Balzac, Victor Hugo, Charles Baudelaire and Stéphane Mallarmé, and in America, on Edgar Allen Poe. Those influences continued to spread to the Expressionist filmmakers and their successors right up to the present day.

The Arts of Piranesi. Cini Foundation, Isola di San Giorgio, Venice. *Through Nov. 21.*