

# Speaking ruins

Technology meets Piranesi's wild imaginings: Rachel Spence visits a masterfully curated exhibition

In the land of the Old Masters, the multimedia technician is increasingly king. Whether digitally remastering Veronese or animating Quattrocento painting, it's as if curators no longer have faith in the original work's power to compel.

As such interventions generally distract from masterpieces rather than enhance them, my inner purist shuddered on hearing of a new exhibition that aimed to interpret Piranesi "using the latest technology".

That I was wrong is partly due to masterful curation by Michele De Lucchi. One of Italy's most thoughtful contemporary architects, De Lucchi believes that Piranesi "should have been born 300 years later... when he would have been capable of exploiting all the technological potential that we have".

This show thoroughly vindicates his conviction. To watch "Imaginary Prisons", Piranesi's chilling cycle of etchings, transformed into a three-dimensional film is to enter a Wagnerian nightmare remade by Polanski. Realised thanks to digital modeling by Adam Lowe's Factum Arte studio, prototypes of tables, candelabra and a coffee pot designed by Piranesi but never made in his lifetime possess a surreal charisma to rival the furniture of Dalí.

Also inspired was the decision to ask Gabriele Basilico to photograph the sites of Rome previously immortalised in etchings by Piranesi. Lauded for the limpid dignity with which he documented the architecture of postwar Beirut, the Milan-based photographer produced 30 shots that, mounted next to their 18th-century inspirations, are an exhibition unto themselves.

Chiefly, however, the triumph belongs to Piranesi himself. Born in 1720 in a small town just outside Venice, he was the son of a master-builder from Istria. Apprenticed to his uncle, an architect and hydraulics engineer in Venice, such a beginning should have seen him the architect of hefty baroque edifices in the white stone of his father's homeland. Yet he defied his breeding to design creations that, in the words of Horace Walpole, "would startle geometry and exhaust the Indies to realise".

By his death in 1778, he was celebrated as a printmaker, designer and antiquarian yet he was responsible for just one actual building – the Church of Santa Maria del Priorato on Rome's Aventine Hill – and that was a restoration. He died embittered by his failure as an architect, unable to foresee that he would inspire artists – from

Goya to De Chirico – for centuries to come.

Piranesi's primary legacy was his oeuvre of more than 1,000 etchings, 300 of which are on show here. All belong to the Cini Foundation which acquired an early 19th-century French edition of 900 Piranesi engravings in the 1970s in order to mount monographic exhibitions marking the 200th anniversary of his death.

Piranesi arrived in Rome in 1740 as part of the retinue of the Venetian embassy. He immediately apprenticed himself to Giuseppe Vasi, a printmaker who specialised in souvenir *vedute* (views). Rapidly, he mastered the etching technique that, allowing as it did both for evocative tonal variations and precisely detailed drawing, was the ideal medium for his hybrid vision of fact and fantasy.

Depicting a fantastic imperial mausoleum encrusted with statues and a forum embraced by porticoes, etchings from his earliest cycle, "The First Part of Architecture and Perspectives" (1743), show that from the outset Piranesi was awed by Rome's ancient remains. He was capable of recreating – albeit with some exaggeration – monuments down to the last detail from the broken masonry he saw around him. This skill was shared by few of his architectural peers; throughout his life, Piranesi railed against the failure of his contemporaries to listen to what he described as "speaking ruins".

In part, he owed his heightened perception to his native Venice. A natural panorama of ever-shifting chiaroscuro, the lagoon city was also home to theatres built according to then-fashionable *trompe l'oeil* perspectives. Painters active during Piranesi's youth included Marco Ricci, master of landscape caprices, and Canaletto, whose urban views, for all their impeccable draughtsmanship, exaggerated the city's architectural drama.

Other crucial influences were the *Capricci and Scherzi di Fantasia* of Tiepolo. These mysterious engraving cycles, peopled with skeletons and crones in faux-Arcadian settings, revealed a sinister underside to the frothy innocence of rococo. The 18th-century maestro's vision may have prompted Piranesi to explore his own inner darkness. In his four-strong series, "Grotteschi" (1750) – on show here – he employs fluttering, Tiepolesque lines to conjure boundless heaps of masonry entwined with foliage, serpents and skeletons that bleed and stutter off the page.

The antithesis of classical symmetry, this intuition of the infinite – which anticipates Burke's theory of the Sublime by just a few years – haunts Piranesi's most famous etching cycle, "Imaginary Prisons". First published in 1749-1750 as "Capricious Inventions of Prisons", what is petrifying about these images is less their tortuous puzzle of ropes, wheels, chains and spikes, than the sense, created by Piranesi's skill at manifesting shifting depths through light and shade, that the shadowy vaults, tunnels and staircases spiral and proliferate into eternity. The experience of swooping through these nightmarish halls in De Lucchi's 3-D projection is thrilling, and the

close-up views of the myriad hatched lines highlight the obsessive perfectionism of Piranesi's etching technique.

It is a measure of this show's excellence that Piranesi's "Prisons" are not the highlight. Although visually less spectacular, the galleries devoted to etchings based on Piranesi's explorations of Roman archaeology testify to his revolutionary approach to the ancient architecture. As Piranesi scholar John Wilton-Ely elucidates in his magnificent catalogue essay, the Venetian was the first to transfer the focus from the inscriptions and surface appearance of ruins to their underlying structure.

From the mammoth foundations that he imagines must underpin the Teatro Marcello to drawings of levers and pulleys that he has invented to explain the construction of the vast mausoleum of Cecilia Metella, a series of etchings from his 250-plate opus "Le Antichità Romane", published in 1756, testify that Piranesi virtually reconstructed ancient Rome. Drawing on his engineering background, he illustrates the city's topography – its bridges, walls, defences, drains and aqueducts – as if he had designed it himself.

In his forties, Piranesi embraced a more inclusive aesthetic that drew not only on Roman and Etruscan styles but also those of ancient Egypt and Greece. This new eclecticism manifested itself powerfully in his interior design. The final section of this show includes not only these furniture prototypes but also his mural designs for the English Coffee House in Rome.

These capricious panoramas, thronged with Egyptian hieroglyphs, sphinxes and pyramids, were not to everyone's taste. The 18th-century painter Thomas Jones described them as "a filthy vaulted room... fitter to adorn the inside of an Egyptian Sepulchre". Yet their presence here underlines the unparalleled creativity of a man who once said: "I believe that if I were commissioned to design a new Universe, I would be mad enough to undertake it." On the strength of this exhibition, no one would beg to differ.

*'The Arts of Piranesi: Architect, Engraver, Antiquarian, View-maker, Designer', Cini Foundation, Venice, until November 21. [www.cini.it](http://www.cini.it)*

