

Piranesi, Fantasy and Excess review: where imagination and reality collide

Giovanni Piranesi's 18th-century gothic visions on a page are made real by 21st-century magic at Sir John Soane's museum

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Three-dimensional representation of Giovanni Piranesi's ideas at Sir John Soane's museum.

The 18th century artist, antiquarian and would-be architect [Giovanni Battista Piranesi](#) (1720-1778) possessed one of the most imaginative minds ever to have brooded on the visual arts.

Piranesi presented himself as an expert on ancient Rome and a designer of practical buildings and objects.

In fact he was a spellbinding fantasist whose exquisitely etched visions of overpowering ruins and monstrous prisons have influenced experimental culture from the [first Gothic novels](#) to the architecture of [Rem Koolhaas](#).

As well as creating architectural images that tease and haunt the mind, Piranesi invented objects to decorate a dreamer's home.

He fabricated such fictions as a gigantic "Roman" vase, the ultimate fake antique for an English stately home, now owned by the British Museum.

Working in Rome when it was the destination of every artist and aristocrat on the Grand Tour, he "restored" ancient remains from sites such as Hadrian's Villa in Tivoli.

Most of Piranesi's ideas for interior design stayed, however, on the printed pages of his ravishing books – until now.

In a delightful exhibition at Sir John Soane's Museum in London, Piranesi's dreamlike prints are shown next to objects that translate his extravagant notions – table legs shaped like goats' limbs with faces on them; a teapot that rests on a tortoise and has a bee for a spout – into the three-dimensional world.

These visionary artefacts have only ever existed as flat designs on paper. Now they have been made real by Factum Arte in Madrid using the miracle of 3D printing.

If you thought 3D printers were only good for making guns, think again. Here is a truly mind-boggling use for digital technology.

As Factum Arte's Adam Lowe explains, digitally scanning the phantasmagoric forms of Piranesi's chairs, tripods and other classical follies takes vast amounts of memory.

The results fit like a Gothic gauntlet into Sir John Soane's Museum where they take up natural places among this Georgian architect's collection of ruins and fragments exhibited in deep wells of shadow and mirror-enhanced vistas.

Soane, as this exhibition makes plain, was profoundly influenced by Piranesi. They met in Rome in 1778 and Piranesi presented his young architectural fan with four prints.

This was to grow into the finest collection of the Italian visionary's graphic works in Britain, amassed by Soane and still kept in the house and museum that is his own masterpiece of bizarre dreamlike architecture and decor.

The prints are at the heart of this show. There's a rare bound volume of the Carceri – "Prisons" – imagining a prison so vast it encompasses the entire world.

Apparently endless vaults, towering staircases and spectacular interactions of light and darkness define spaces that are at once exhilarating and terrible, anticipating the works of de Sade in their fascination with power and cruelty.

Mercifully it is not yet possible to 3D print Piranesi's prisons, but the free rein of fantasy that his Carceri exemplify also ran to ideas for Egyptian-style chimney pieces and unreal views of impossible jumbles of Roman ruins.

The real-world objects that Factum Arte have generated from such images are shown

alongside Piranesi's designs and subtly scattered through the house and museum.

In the Monk's Parlour, an eerie, dark corner of the spooky crypt where Soane arranged medieval fragments to create an atmosphere fit for reading the ghost stories then coming into fashion, sits a grotesque golden chair.

It is – literally – straight out of Piranesi. I want to sit in it and read something frightening. Imagination and reality collide in this exhibition, and imagination wins.