Seeing history through Piranesi's eyes

San Diego Museum of Art offers enlightening exhibit on Italian master

By James Chute (/staff/james-chute/) 4 p.m. April 26, 2013

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ART_Design by Giambattista Piranesi (1720-1778), produced by Factum Arte. Vase with Three Griffin Heads, 2010. Marble composite. Marble Fireplace Mantle with Cast Iron Andirons, 2010. White marble and cast iron. Factum Arte.

If you go to Rome and after frequenting the ruins you visit a few souvenir shops, you'll likely find some copies of etchings by Giambattista Piranesi.

You may not be familiar with his name, but you know his work.

Reproductions of the 18th century artist's iconic views of ancient Rome are so ubiquitous and so often imitated that it wouldn't be an exaggeration to say that the way we imagine ancient Rome is largely due to Piranesi's images, which are his own informed imaginings of an architecture that existed centuries earlier.

Now, the San Diego Museum of Art and its partners in Madrid and Venice are doing for Piranesi what Piranesi did for Rome.

The illuminating "Piranesi, Rome, and the Arts of Design," making its only U.S. appearance in San Diego, re-imagines Piranesi in contemporary terms with the assistance of cutting-edge, digital technology. In the process, you uniquely encounter the mind of Piranesi and are left pondering the malleability of history.

"We somehow have a fixed view of antiquity or of the Renaissance that's just not true," said Adam Lowe, the director of Factum Arte, the Madrid-based design firm that brought its technological expertise and traditional craftsmanship to bear on Piranesi. "One of the important things about Piranesi is that he shows us very clearly the past is unsettled."

Much of the exhibition — curated and designed by the famed Italian architect and designer Michele De Lucchi — is devoted to Piranesi's exquisite etchings. Approximately 300 of them are on view from the collection of the Venice-based Fondazione Giorgio Cini, which initiated the exhibition.

But Lowe, working in collaboration with De Lucchi, has taken it a step further. Through the use of Piranesi's drawings and digital technology, Lowe has made the designs real. A detailed rendering of a vase has become vase; a striking drawing of a seemingly impossible chair has become a chair.

"What we wanted to do was conceive an exhibition that treated Piranesi as a great designer and imagine what his designs would have been had he lived in this century," said Lowe, who was visiting San Diego with his colleagues for the exhibition's opening several weeks ago.

"We wanted to try to save Piranesi from being a footnote to 18th century history and establish him as one of the great creative designers, both of that period and of all time."

Architect of Venice

Who was Piranesi?

It’s a more complex question than you might think. He was born just outside Venice in 1720, trained as an architect and engineer under his uncle, Matteo Lucchesi, and went to Rome in 1740 with the Venetian envoy to the Vatican. In Rome, he learned the art of etching with Giuseppe Vasi, but just as importantly, he fell under the trance of a city that would engage his imagination for the rest of his life.

Piranesi is primarily remembered today for his etchings and his images of Rome, explained John Marciari, the San Diego Museum of Art curator of European art. But in his own time, Piranesi considered himself an architect above all.

Even though he only realized a single building — a 1764 restoration of the Santa Maria del Priorato — “Piranesi was proud to sign his works ‘Architetto Veneziano’,” said Alessandro Martoni, the foundation’s curator.

Architecture informed virtually all of Piranesi’s other roles: scholar, antiquarian, archeologist and designer.

“Many of those professions are contemporary professions,” said Pasquale Gagliardi, secretary-general of Fondazione Giorgio Cini in Venice. “And the idea for the exhibition was, we ask somebody doing the same professions to interpret him through his eyes, a modern architect and designer.”

The foundation approached De Lucchi and Lowe, who both agreed the exhibit needed to go beyond showing a run of Piranesi’s etchings.

“How do you get people to look at these prints?” Lowe said. “Now they just look like old historical things. But actually, Piranesi invented Antiquity just as he invented the Renaissance. In the 18th century, they were making the (then unimaginable) things we now take for granted.”

De Lucchi and Lowe decided to model the exhibition on an architect’s studio but also worked toward giving the galleries a perspective that would simulate Piranesi’s work.

“We tried to incorporate the Piranesi style and the perspective — the depth, point of view — into the space,” said Giovanna Latis, who was from De Lucchi’s firm. “And we tried to make recognizable to the public the sequence of his work.”

Creativity and control

The exhibition opens with his youthful work, which already shows an astonishing technique. What seems most remarkable about Piranesi, even as he was still refining his technique, is the seeming contradictions in his art.

He is unsurpassed in his skill at etching, such is the exacting, meticulous quality of his work. At the same time, he’s a little crazy and reveals a highly developed sense of the fantastical. That combination of unbridled imagination and extreme control makes his work particularly intriguing, including his later, most famous piece, the “Carceri” or “Prisons.”

“Somehow they touch on some deep psychological nerve that is all about a world where we are relatively impotent, a small player in a vast structure that is beyond imaging,” Lowe said. “I think that’s an element to this whole show; if you look at the scale of the people in every print, they are tiny protagonists in this vast arena. They are like something from a Cecil B. DeMille movie. This is Hollywood; this is his great influence on visions of antiquity.”

Lowe collaborated with filmmaker Gregoire Dupond on an absorbing, 10-minute, 3D video that goes inside the prisons and follows their impossible passageways. But Lowe’s wondrous objects created from Piranesi’s drawings are even more illuminating of the Italian master’s genius.

As a substantial coda to the exhibition, the foundation commissioned Gabriele Basilico to photograph some of the same scenes and buildings shown in the etchings. The comparisons are both jarring and instructive in their juxtaposition of a “real,” photographically faithful present and a past filtered through Piranesi’s imagination two centuries ago.

You wonder: Which image is more “accurate”? And like Piranesi, are we all engaged in reinventing history?

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