

# Giovanni Battista Piranesi

*Revolutionary printmaker, illustrious architectural historian*

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## Introduction

The Leiden Print Room (Leiden University Libraries, Special Collections) is treasuring a great number of prints by the eighteenth-century Italian printmaker Giovanni Battista Piranesi (1720-1778). Almost all of these prints are part of his series of etchings known as the *Vedute di Roma* or *Views of Rome*, a collection of large format prints, representing ancient and modern buildings, and areas in Rome and Tivoli. Piranesi began making his large vedute of the city around 1745, and the production continued to the very end of his career. It turned out to be the collection most sought after by grand tourists, print lovers, and collectors. In addition, this series of prints is shedding light on Piranesi's connection with the archaeological and antiquarian activities in Rome at that time. In the eighteenth century, the preservation of new archaeological findings gave a strong impetus to the production of etched *vedute*. Piranesi's addition of informative captions to these prints underscores his role as an architectural historian and links the series of *vedute* to his theoretical publications on archaeology. He transformed the conventional engraved view into an image combining powerful and dramatic imagery with a wealth of technical and archaeological information.

A research course dedicated to Piranesi, and supervised by prof.dr. Caroline van Eck and dr. Sigrid de Jong, has been a recurring part of the Art History master at the Leiden University for three years. Students are given the unique opportunity to consult the large holdings of Piranesi etchings, kept in the Leiden Print Room for research purposes. The papers that have been written for this course, each dedicated to a different print from Piranesi's *Vedute di Roma*, form the basis of this online exhibition. The outcome of these studies provides an image of Piranesi not only as one of the most revolutionary artists in the history of etching and the vedute genre, but also as an illustrious architectural historian.



# *Catalogue*



**1** | Veduta di Piazza di Spagna. — Etching and engraving, 455 x 585 mm (plate). Signed at lower right: Piranesi Architetto fec.; lettered at lower centre: Veduta di Piazza di Spagna; at lower right: Presso 'Autore a Strada Felice nel palazzo Tomati vicino alla Trinità de' monti. [PK-P-144.883]

Piranesi's view of the Piazza di Spagna gives the impression that we are looking at an accurate representation of the square. On closer examination one discovers the use of several artificial and optical effects. The viewpoints that Piranesi used to depict the square vary significantly. Several elements of the print are represented from a private and isolated viewpoint. Although this does some violence to the actual situation, it simultaneously increases the clarity and surveyability of the different components of the composition. The artist has mainly used straight etched lines in this print. By increasing or decreasing the distance between these lines, he has applied differences in the tones of black. Piranesi's characteristic use of lines spaced apart to achieve a lighter shading, forms a dynamic contrast with the overlapping darker lines clearly visible in the fountain.

Piranesi is not the only artist in his time that has made a print of the Piazza di Spagna. Because of the eighteenth-century tourism related to the Grand Tour, many prints of Roman sites were produced, and brought back home as a souvenir. However, where his colleague Giuseppe Vasi is treating the different views of the square in different clear-cut prints, Piranesi's placement of the various components in a diagonal composition is providing an exciting result without losing the characteristic of the square. The difference in their approach had once led Vasi to tell his young student Piranesi: 'You are too much a painter, my friend, to be an engraver.'

Heleen van Boeckel



**2 | Teatro di Marcello.** – Etching and engraving, 406 x 553 mm (plate); 412 x 562 mm (sheet). – Signed at lower right: Presso l’Autore a Strada Felice nel Palazzo Tomati vicino alla Trinità de’ monti. Piranesi Architetto fec.| lettered below image: Questo fu fabricato da Augusto, e dedicato a Marcello suo Nipote. | 1. Palazzo Orsini restaurato da Baldassare da Siena Architetto | **TEATRO DI MARCELLO** | 2. Cupola di S. maria in Campitelli. [PK-P-144.315]

In the *Vedute di Roma* Piranesi gives an imaginative exploration of architecture: effects of lights, the perception of scale, innovative modes of composition in order to achieve a new way of seeing architecture and urban space.

The history of the theatre of Marcellus is a narrative of construction and destruction. Over the years the theatre had different functions and therefore underwent various changes. This process stopped at the advent of Fascism. Where various generations alerted the theatre to their contemporary needs, fascist leader Benito Mussolini stripped the whole structure down. As part of Mussolini's cultural program ancient monuments were 'liberated' from their disorderly environment. They functioned as a kind of 'rediscovered heritage' to emphasize fascist lineage of the Roman Empire. For those reasons the theatre and its environment were restored to its former glory.

An interesting thought is that both men, Piranesi and Mussolini, created space around the theatre: Piranesi in his *veduta*, adjusting the environment and measurements of the theatre in the composition of his print, Mussolini did the same by demolishing all its surroundings. Though both men were intending to glorify the monument in its contemporary city, their purpose was different. Where Piranesi in his *vedute* was stressing the glory of the city of Rome, Mussolini had the ambition to glorify his new state and his own persona in the form of prestigious restorations.

Janneke van Golen



**3 |** Piramide di C. Cestio. – Etching and engraving, 399 x 543 mm (plate); 405 x 551 mm (sheet). – Signed at lower right: Presso l'autore Piranesi F.; lettered within: Piramide di C. Cestio | 1. Terreno sgombato d'intorno alla Piramide sotto il | Pontificato d'Alessandro VII. 2. Porta aperta di quel | tempo nella Piramide. 3. Colonne ritrovate nella sgombro e riposte nell'antica positura. 4. Mura | di Roma. | Torri della Porta di S. Paolo. [PK-P-144.310]

Piranesi's *Views of Rome* were often associated with the sublime, a concept studied by the ancient Greek rhetorician Longinus and brought into prominence in the eighteenth century. In 1771, Horace Walpole encouraged his fellow compatriots to study the sublime dreams of Piranesi. The fact that Piranesi's *Views of Rome* – among them his *Pyramid of Caius Cestius* print – were perceived by contemporary viewers as being sublime, is shedding new light on his artistic reception and is strengthening the argument that indeed he came in contact with the sublime and that he represented it. It is not unlikely that Piranesi was familiar with treatises on the Longinian idea of the sublime through his complex system of relationships that ranged from learned librarians, to the French pensioners.

The sublimity of size and shape, the transition between light and darkness, the distorted perspective, and the devastating effect that time has on all things are exemplified in the rugged landscape and the broken surface of the pyramid. The sublime goes beyond simple human persuasion by producing a powerful emotional impact on its listeners, readers, or viewers. More importantly, as Longinus stresses, it is designed to awaken the beholder to something superior by appealing to their higher natures. Piranesi's *print Pyramid of Caius Cestius* undoubtedly fulfils this role in supplying the viewer with a sublime experience by depicting an intellectual and artistic quality of magnitude.

Bogdan Cornea



**4** | Veduta del Campidoglio di fianco. – Etching and engraving, 400 x 685 mm (plate). – Signed at lower right within image: Piranesi F.; lettered at lower center: Veduta del Campidoglio di fianco. [PK-P-144.777]

The Piazza del Campidoglio, part of the Capitoline Hill, the ancient Capitolium in Rome, has been a symbol of Roman power since antiquity. The Hill was the site of Rome's humiliating defeat by the barbarians, but also of the greatest military parades after yet another victory. The Capitolium housed Rome's most important temple, dedicated to Jupiter Optimus Maximus. In addition to this temple, the hill was filled with a wealth of other temples, triumphal arches, columns, military trophies, and statues that all glorified the greatness of Rome and its exemplary citizens. No wonder that in later ages both popes and civic leaders were keen to affiliate themselves with this sacred and ancient Roman ground, saturated with success and power. Through diverse actions, they appropriated the hill, its ruins, and history. It became a place where they remembered Roman successes and history, and tried to associate themselves with the successes from antiquity, in an attempt to raise them to the same level of antique greatness. However, the Capitol not only became a place to express political self-consciousness. Since Michelangelo designed around 1540 a new appearance for the piazza and its buildings, the Campidoglio also stands for self-confident artistic mastery that builds on classical forebears, but is an original in its own.

In 1761, Giovanni Battista Piranesi added with his *Veduta del Campidoglio di fianco* his own version to all these appropriations of Roman success and power. In his print, with the triumphal sculpture highlighted on the foreground, he celebrates Rome's military and political successes. However, this celebration goes beyond politics. Piranesi's *veduta* is, above all, his celebration of Rome's artistic power and an overwhelming and thrilling statement of the vedutist on Rome's absolute dominating position in the history of art.

Martin Lok



**5 |** Veduta di Tempio di Bacco. – Etching and engraving, 400 x 610 mm (plate). – Signed at lower right: Gio. Batt. Piranesi Arch.F.; at lower center: Presso l'Autore a Strada Felice nel palazzo Tomati, vicino alla Trinità de' monti A paoli due e mezzo; lettered at lower left below image: Veduta del Tempio di Bacco, in oggi Chiesa di S. Urbano and descriptions of historical details. [PK-P-144.766]

Piranesi's charming view of this dilapidated temple-turned-church, executed around 1758, sports all the characteristic ingredients of the artist's Roman *vedute*: exaggerated dimensions, sharp contrasts, dramatized signs of decay, and a variety of small figures going about their particular business. Most of these figures are recurring motifs in Piranesi's views, like the group of well-dressed men in the foreground, the dark scarecrow-like man behind the tree-stump on the right, and the figure searching the debris on the left of the building. Unique for this plate are the crouching man in the foreground, the man in rags standing by the door, and the figure whose head and shoulders are sticking out of the ground. These three appear to be a conscious reference to a fresco by Luca Signorelli at Orvieto cathedral, *The Resurrection of the Flesh* (1499–1502): they mirror the poses of some figures in Signorelli's work. The reference is particularly well chosen with regard to the location of the temple, on the Via Appia; an area filled with early Christian catacombs and pagan sepulchral monuments from the same period. The result is a highly evocative play on the theme of decay and resurrection, presenting a coherent and dynamic narrative to the informed viewer.

Linda Bleijenberg



**6 |** Veduta del Tempio di Antonino e Faustina in Campo Vaccino. – Etching and engraving, 401 x 550 mm (plate); 418 x 560 mm (sheet). – Signed at lower left: Piranesi Architetto fecit. Presso l'Autore a Strada Felice nel Palazzo Temati vicino alla Trinità de' Monti; lettered below image: Veduta del Tempio di Antonino e Faustina in Campo Vaccino | S. Lorenzo in Miranda de' Speciali. | 19. [PK-P-144.314]

The building we see in this *veduta* occupies a prominent place on the Forum Romanum, and stands out thanks to its unusual yet well-preserved exterior. The structure combines an ancient Roman temple that was built around 141 AD with the church of San Lorenzo in Miranda, which already stood amidst the temple ruins in the Middle Ages and was rebuilt several times in subsequent centuries.

It is particularly interesting that Piranesi deliberately chose to use the name of the former Roman temple of Antoninus and Faustina as the main title of the print. A small note in the lower right corner reminds the viewer of the modern religious function and designation of the building. This action creates the presumption that, in its essence, the etching takes as its subject the Roman temple, and not (or to a lesser extent) the church of San Lorenzo in Miranda. This would make the cityscape not just a *veduta*, but also a reflection of Piranesi's conception of what it is that makes the building important. It is interesting in this regard that another etching of the building by Piranesi, published in *Le antichità Romane*, provides even more didactical information. Here the artist solely presents descriptions that relate to the ancient Roman construction, whilst leaving the church literally and figuratively out of view. Although the visual reality of the scene is maintained, Piranesi is creating a hidden narrative by ignoring the church.

The vision that underlies this print, and many other depictions and descriptions of Christianized and transformed temples from the point of view of architects and archaeologists, is that the Roman architecture constitutes the most (or even only) relevant aspect of the building. For the last two centuries this vision also formed the basis of the one-sided manner in which the surrounding Roman Forum has been dealt with.

Jo'anne van Ooijen

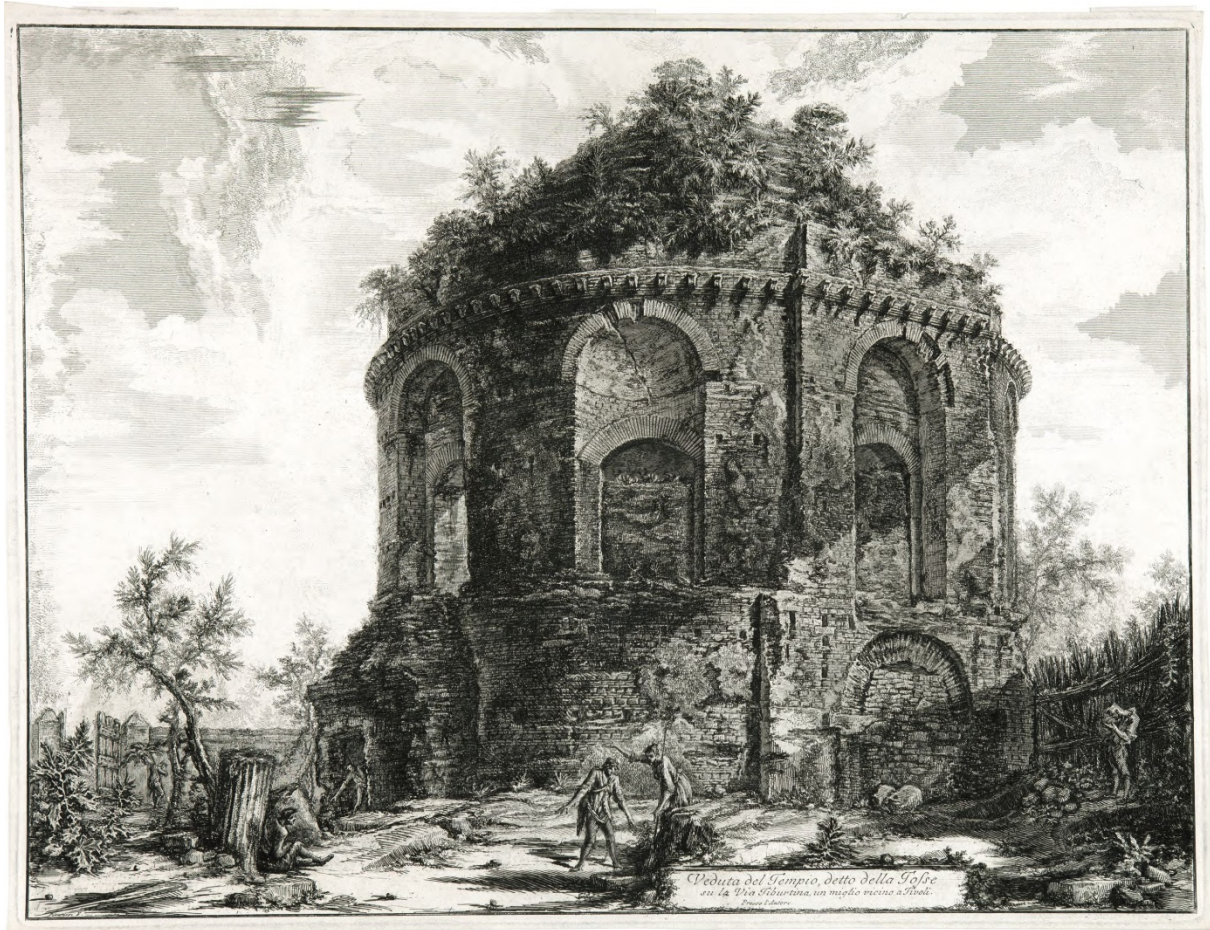


7 | Obelisco Egizio. – Etching and engraving. [PK-P-144.332]

This print shows the obelisk of Pharaohs Thutmosis III and IV on the Piazza di San Giovanni in Laterano in Rome. Piranesi made other vedute with obelisks, but they are usually situated in views of an entire square, together with other architectural structures. This print is not a veduta of the Lateran Square, but it zooms in on the obelisk at an angle that differs from any other known prints of the Piazza. Though the location is identified in the caption, Piranesi gave this print the title *Egyptian Obelisk* rather than Lateran Obelisk. In his view this obelisk is representing the power of the Roman emperors, the men who had brought the obelisks to Rome, and not that of the Popes.

The obelisk is seen from a low vantage point in the west, though the hieroglyphs in the print do not match those of the west face, but those of the east face. Moreover, most of the shadows seem to indicate that the sun is shining in the north sky. Piranesi probably drew the entire obelisk, including its hieroglyphs and its shadows, from the east, with the sun in the south sky, probably because he preferred good lighting. He may even have used a camera obscura for his prints. He must have subsequently walked to the opposite side and drawn the obelisk's surroundings as faced from the west. He then ensured that the shadows across the entire print were more or less consistent, placing the sun in the north. This *veduta* of an Egyptian obelisk is unrelated to Piranesi's Egyptomania with its bizarre in the late sixties of the eighteenth century. This print is simply meant as a view of the obelisk as it looked ca. 1759 – although the east face is shown in the west.

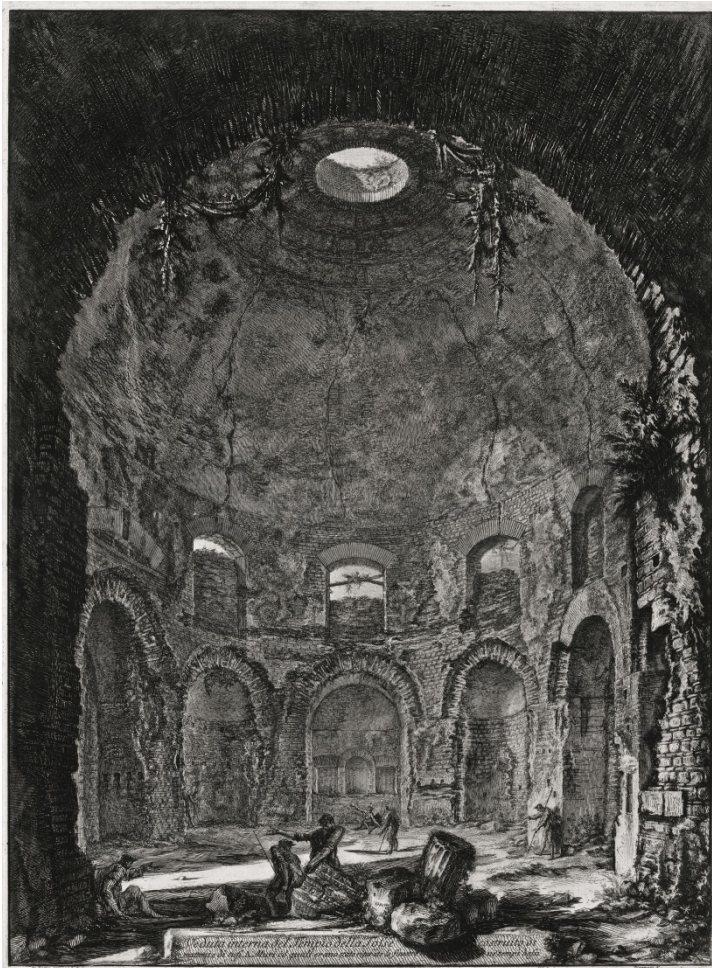
Jeannette van Arentshals



**8** | Veduta del Tempio, detto della Tosse su la Via Tiburtina, un miglio vicino a Tivoli - Interior view of the so called Tempio della Tosse. – Etchings and engravings. [PK-P-144.334 - PK-P-144.787]

The small town of Tivoli, situated 18 miles northeast from Rome, was a much-frequented site for eighteenth-century artists and for wealthy travellers during their Grand Tour. Ancient Roman structures, such as the circular Temple of Vesta and Hadrian's Villa, were leisure destinations as well as sites of archaeological activity. Piranesi himself was involved in the excavation of the latter site and acquired a great number of antique fragments, which he later incorporated in newly invented decorative pastiches.

In his *veduta* of the Tempio della Tosse, a Roman rotunda situated in Tivoli, he pays attention to one of the more obscure Roman structures near Rome. Just like the Pantheon in Rome, the most famous Roman rotunda, the solid structure of the building as well as its later Christianization have protected it from crumbling



down. In the eighteenth-century little was known about the Roman rotunda, a building that is circular or oval in plan and covered with a dome. Many antiquarians and artists, including Piranesi, believed that the Tempio della Tosse originally was a temple or a tomb. This assumption was later proved wrong by twentieth-century scholars, who thought it must have been a vestibule to a villa. Nevertheless, this print is expressing Piranesi's admiration for Italy's more obscure Roman heritage. In his publications, he used examples of less known Roman ruins to legitimize the diversity and grandeur of ancient Roman architecture: 'Before anyone accuses me of falsehood... he should examine the ancient villas of Latium, that of Hadrian in Tivoli, the baths, the tombs and other Roman ruins, especially outside the Porta Capena [i.e. on the Appian Way], and he will find that the ancients transgressed the strict rules of architecture just as much as the moderns.'

Frederik Knegtel



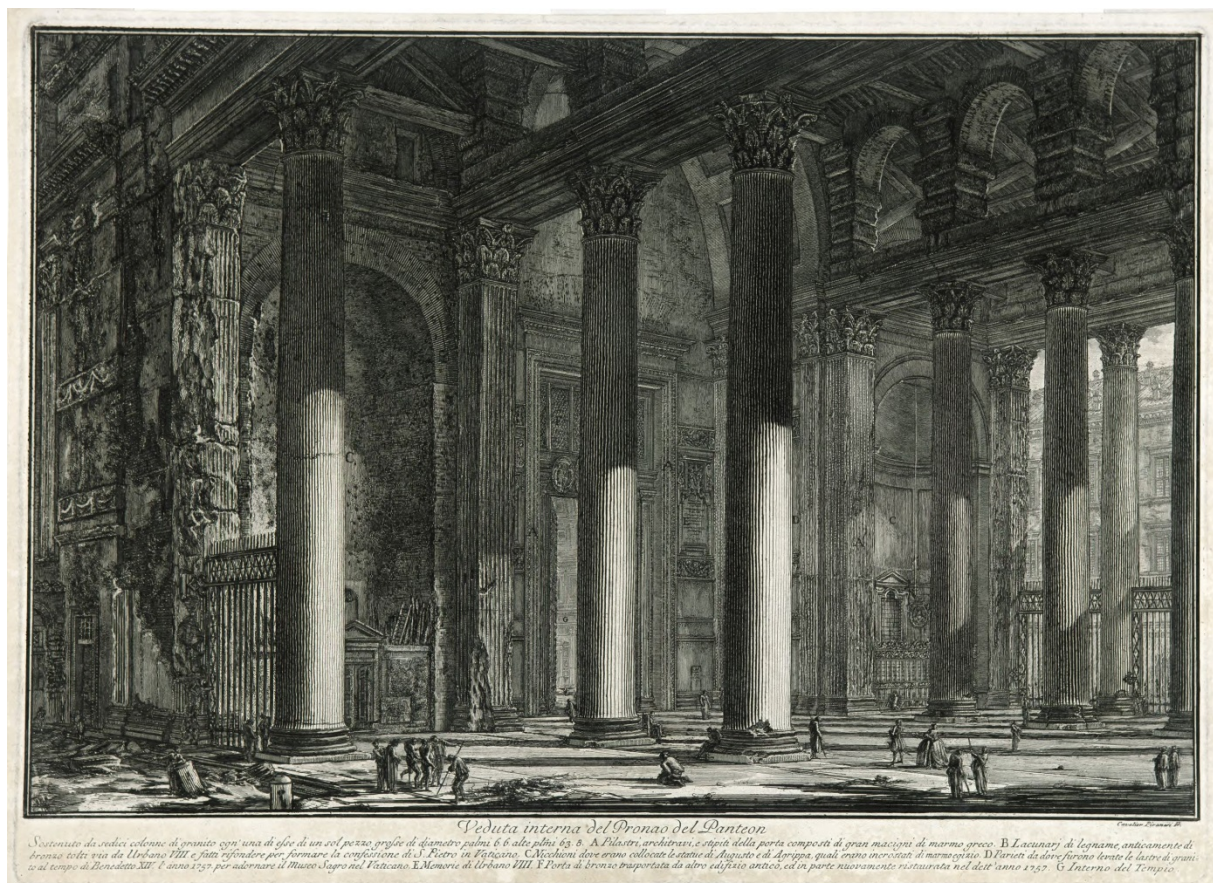
**9 |** Veduta interna dell'antico Tempio di Bacco...ad una stanza sotterranea. – Etching and engraving, 427 x 620 mm (plate); 438 x 630 mm (sheet). – Signed at lower right: Cavalier Piranesi diseg. ed incise  
lettered below image: Veduta interna dell'antico Tempio di Bacco...ad una stanza sotterranea. [PK-P-144.308]

There are numerous religious buildings in and near Rome whose appearance is revealing their antique origin. The end of the early Middle Ages saw an increase in the Christianization of pagan sites such as Roman temples, many owing their conservation to this practice. The exterior of the relatively obscure church known today as the Sant'Urbano alla Caffarella, located two miles from the Porta San Sebastiano on the Via Appia Pignatelli in Rome, includes several architectural elements dating from its use as a temple during the Roman period.

Piranesi's passionate interest in Roman antiquities is clearly visible in the caption of his interior view of the building, where he stresses the Roman origin and the presence of visible antique ornaments, while downplaying the later Christian frescoes as 'pitture de' tempi bassi' or 'paintings from a time of decline'. Piranesi is referring to the building first and foremost as an antique temple dedicated to Bacchus, the Roman god of wine. As with several others of his – mostly depicting more obscure ancient structures –, his conviction of the name and original dedication of the building has later been proven false. Scholars now agree that the building was originally built as a cenotaphic temple dedicated to the memory of Annia Regilla.

Like Piranesi, there have been several individuals, all with certain antiquarian 'roots', be it as an architect, engraver or a writer of some kind, who have taken interest in the Sant'Urbano. This group consists of relatively few people, such as the seventeenth-century engraver and antiquarian Pompilio Totti (c. 1590-?) and the contemporary Jean Baptiste Seroux d'Agincourt (1730-1814), all approaching the Sant'Urbano in different ways. These accounts are not the thoroughly researched historical accounts we are used to see today, but all highly individual and sometimes biased impressions of what for some is a Christian building, and for others definitely antique.

Joost Joustra



**10** | [Veduta interna del Pronao del Panteon. – Etching and engraving. [PK-P-144.336]

Piranesi must have been an avid and frequent visitor of the Pantheon in Rome, for he produced numerous views of the building, published in for example *Le antichità Romane*, and his *Vedute di Roma*. The multiple Pantheon views from his latter series certainly would have been an indispensable addition to the collection of any Grand Tourist. Here, we see a view of the interior of the Pantheon's pronaos, or the inner area of the portico.

Piranesi's view of the pronaos differs greatly from contemporary depictions of the building, which generally show either the interior or the entire exterior. The choice of this particular viewpoint derives from his idea to use several elements of the portico to demonstrate the Pantheon's architectural history and evolution. However, these elements cannot be depicted from a single viewpoint. Therefore, Piranesi employs multiple viewpoints and merges these different views into one single image. Moreover, he dwarfs the figures in his print and is applying a particular perspective technique based on a V-shaped plan, better known as a *scena per angolo*. Piranesi must have read Ferdinando Galli Bibiena's *L'Architettura Civile* from 1711, a handbook on perspective that introduced this technique.

Another unique aspect of his composition is the removal of several columns that otherwise would have blocked the view of the portico's interior. Two columns from the front row and one from the second row are not depicted in the *veduta*, ensuring a clearer overview of the pronaos yet reducing the realism of the print. Piranesi often manipulated the scale, perspective, and appearance of his depicted buildings in order to produce a more organized and clearer view.

Hannah Thijs



**11** | Veduta interna della Basilica di S. Giovanni Laterano. – Etching and engraving, 430 x 675 mm (plate). – Signed at lower right: Cavaliere Piranesi inc.; lettered at lower left on scroll: Veduta interna della Basilica | di S. Giovanni Laterano 2 IV. [PK-P-144.775]

Piranesi chose a particular way of depicting the interior of the San Giovanni in his etching. This specific viewpoint invokes questions, because it does not pay direct tribute to the liturgical content of the church, which is most prominent in the so-called nave clementina. However, it does focus on the for Piranesi significant aspects of the church: the apse, its lightness, and the passage towards it. Piranesi even is strengthening this image by carefully adjusting the perspective of the etching. The slight manipulations of the width and height of the pilasters, the rendering of the church through the entire centre of the nave and the placing of the viewpoint above the eye-level of the nave all seem to be contrived in order for the viewer to be drawn towards the apse. Not coincidentally, Piranesi was at the time involved in a renovation project for the apse of the same church. It was one of the two architectural commissions he received, and maybe the most important one of the time.

In his vedute Piranesi tried to exemplify the illustrious history of Rome, and to support his theories on architectural innovation. He was fully aware of the fact that both his fantastical license and his urge to create needed back up from acknowledged sources. For him, those sources were archaeological: as the ancients applied variation and searched for improvement, so could the moderns. In his architectural practice, Piranesi consciously applied his knowledge of history to improve his architecture. In the projects for both the Santa Maria del Priorato and the San Giovanni in Laterano, he inserted historical references, combined iconographical sources, and established an intriguing all-embracing, but utterly subjective design scheme.

Taeke Harkema



**12 |** Veduta della Villa dell'Emo Sign. Card. Alesandro Albani fuori di Porta Salaria. – Etching and engraving, 438 x 691 mm (plate). – Signed at lower left: Cavalier Piranesi inc.; lettered at lower right on scroll: Veduta della Villa dell'Emo Sign. Card. | Alesandro Albani fuori di Porta Salaria. [PK-P-144.785]

Piranesi's view of the Villa Albani, designed by architect Carlo Marchionni for Cardinal Alesandro Albani, is strongly defined by the exaggerated perspective. A small analysis of the perspective lines used in the print, shows that Piranesi has used multiple vanishing points for his view of the villa. Piranesi was aware of angle perspective or *scena per angolo*, the technique of using two or more vanishing points brought to fruition by the Venetian Galli-Bibiena family in their early eighteenth-century set designs.

Just as in many of the Bibiena designs, the gaze of the beholder is sent in two directions. Piranesi's print provides both a view of the villa and a view of the landscape. This approach differs from the manner in which Piranesi's older colleagues Vasi and Pannini constructed their compositions. In their prints, the eye of the viewer is primarily directed towards the architecture and the viewer is hardly given the opportunity to let his gaze wander. In Piranesi's etching the architecture functions – just like Bramante's Cortile del Belvedere – as a series of arcades which limits a theatre and where the baldachin, seen to the right in the background, functions as a focal point for the viewer.

In 1743, in the dedication to his patron Nicola Giobbe in the publication of his *Prima Parte di Architetture, e Prospettive inventate*, Piranesi wrote the following about the use of perspective: 'Perspective as the great master of architecture Vitruvius has said with much justice, is necessary to the architect. And in truth I think I can add that anyone who does not see the use and value of it in architecture, does not yet know the source of its greatest and most important beauty.'

Lauran Schijvens



**13** | Avanzi del Tempio del Dio Canopo nella Villa Adriana in Tivoli. –  
Etching and engraving. [PK-P-144.338]

In his search for the uniqueness of ancient Roman architecture, Piranesi was fascinated by the imperial 2nd century Villa Hadriana in Tivoli, near Rome. He studied many aspects of this small imperial city, made drawings of the ruins, drew ground plans of buildings and a remarkably accurate map of the, at that time, accessible excavation-site. In the accompanying commentaries, Piranesi gave his interpretations of the original appearances, functions, and meanings of the ruins such as the Canopus. According to Piranesi the Canopus was a huge hall with niches for statues of several gods, probably a temple dedicated to the god Neptune, with fountains and water-basins annex swimming pools for the recreation of the emperor and his guests.

Contrary to the often-exaggerated proportional effects in other etchings of his series, Piranesi made relatively accurate prints of the Hadrian Villa. He made about three etchings of the Canopus, seen from different angles. The front view of the Canopus is shown here. Piranesi depicted the monumentality of the hall, the constructive elements, stucco-details, and remains of mosaics. These aspects are also described in the lettering at the lower margin of the etching. The reason for Piranesi's true to life approach was probably his ambition to use his Villa Hadriana-studies as scientific proof in his defence of the supremacy of ancient Roman architecture over ancient Greek architecture, subject matter for heavy debates among architects and scholars those days. Another reason is that the drawings of the Villa were a great source of inspiration for Piranesi's own architectural and decorative designs, as can be seen for example in the Santa Maria del Priorato church in Rome.

Monique Stommel



**14 |** Rovine d'una Galleria di Statue nella Villa Adriana a Tivoli. – Etching and engraving, 455 x 585 mm (plate). – Signed at lower left: Cavalier Piranesi del e inc.; lettered at lower centre within image: Rovine d'una Galleria | di Statue nella Villa Adri=|ana aTivoli |A. Avanzi di pitture a grottesco. [PK-P-144.884]

In the year Piranesi made this etching he had already lived and worked in Rome for almost twenty years. During those years, and with increasing intensity from 1760, he also did research on Villa Adriana (built 126-134) near Tivoli. Nonetheless, he did not produce etchings of the ruins of the Villa until the years 1768 to 1770. Those ten etchings are part of the 135 etchings of the *Vedute di Roma*.

According to the title of this etching the subject of the picture is a statue gallery. However, it is now widely believed that the depicted building was the Central Hall of the Larger Baths. The question arises as to what Piranesi could have known about the function of this building and what he has done with that knowledge. Comparing the actual situation of the ruins to the print shows that Piranesi did not want to document what he really saw. The etching was created from an impossible viewpoint and what is displayed is not visible at one glance. In order to strengthen the impact of the architecture Piranesi has combined several angles and added and omitted in an imaginative way architectural elements. Furthermore, it seems that he wanted to evoke a certain state of mind by strong light-dark contrasts, a dramatic treatment of the vegetation and the addition of ghostly characters.

Anne Marie van der Torren



**15 |** Veduta degli avanzi appartenenti alla Casa Aurea di Nerone detti volgoramente il Tempio della Pace. – Etching and engraving, 480 x 706 mm (plate). – Signed at lower left: Cavalier Piranesi F.; lettered at lower left within image: 19.II; at lower right within image: Veduta degli avanzi appartenenti alla Casa Aurea di Nerone detti volgoramente il Tempio della Pace Muro da A.B. fatto pr.ma del restante della Fa. [PK-P-144.749]

This dramatic view shows the enormous remaining northern side aisle of the Basilica of Maxentius, towering over the antique structures on the Roman Forum. Its massive coffered barrel vaults project long shadows on the ground, where groups of men with horses, and a goatherd with his flock are sheltering from the heat. Most elements in this view of the Basilica of Maxentius are based on the actual contemporary appearance of the building. However, Piranesi seems to have deliberately changed the position of the houses running alongside the Basilica, so they would all be facing the Basilica. Furthermore, the position of the sun and the juggled perspective are also manipulated. Finally, the drastic cut-off of the left vault, the stretched out width of the building and the dramatic chiaroscuro all create a dazzling effect.

In the caption, Piranesi erroneously is referring to the structure as the so-called Tempio della Pace or Temple of Peace. Would Piranesi have depicted the ruins differently, if he had known they once had formed the Basilica of Maxentius? Probably not, for he seems mainly interested in its modern use, in the signs of decay. There is no indication that the artist is putting more emphasis on the ruins as a study of a palace or a Roman temple. As in a genre print, Piranesi is showing the ruins as they were used in the eighteenth century.

Joyce Zelen



**16 |** Veduta degli avanzi superiori delle Terme di Diocleziano a S. Maria degli Angeli. – Etching and engraving, 468 x 705 mm (plate). – Signed at lower left: Cavalier Piranesi F.; lettered at lower left on masonry: Veduta degli avanzi superiori | delle Terme di Diocleziano | a S. Maria degli Angeli. [PK-P-144.774]

In July 1561, the new pope Pius IV commissioned Michelangelo to transform the remaining structure of the Baths of Diocletian into the church of Santa Maria degli Angeli e dei Martiri. The church would mark a new period of construction following the Counter-Reformation. During this period, it became important to leave a Christian mark on the city, especially at the locations where the Church could appropriate the glory of the Roman Empire.

In 1774, Piranesi depicts one of the ancient Roman walls of the former baths, as part of his *Vedute di Roma*. Although the wall did exist in Piranesi's time and still exists today, it is interesting that he never could have seen the entire structure because of the cloister that was built on this site during the sixteenth-century. In this respect the combination of the old Roman wall and the adjacent plot of land we see in Piranesi's etching is not an accurate rendition.

Thus, what Piranesi shows the viewer is a reconstruction of the Roman fragment in its dilapidated pre-1563 state. In his admiration of ancient Roman architecture, he enhances the magnificence of the reconstruction by extending the wall considerably and by adding shadows to his composition. This practice is also applied in many other prints in *Vedute di Roma*. Piranesi must have been intrigued by the contrast between the original structure and the sixteenth-century transformation, for he also made another etching of the building for his series of views, which shows the interior of the Santa Maria degli Angeli.

Anouk Sweringa

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## *Colophon*

‘Giovanni Battista Piranesi. Revolutionary printmaker, illustrious architectural historian’ was published as an online exhibition (.xml) in the image database of Leiden University Libraries in 2012.

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