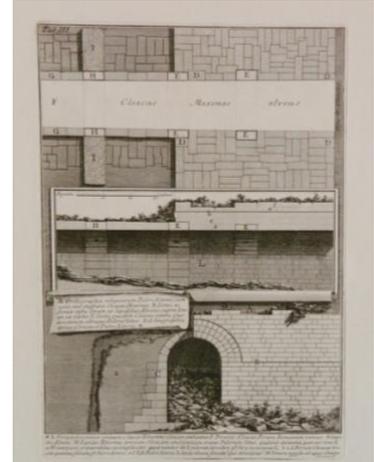


LEARNING FROM PIRANESI: Architectural Representation and Tectonics

An Exhibition Marking the 300th Anniversary of Giovanni Battista Piranesi's Birth

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October 04, 2020, marked the 300th birth anniversary of Giovanni Battista Piranesi (1720-78), the celebrated Venetian-born Roman architect, delineator, and theorist. During his brief but productive life Piranesi created (with the assistance of his sons and others) over 1,000 copper plates from which he may have produced as many as 4 million impressions – etchings almost exclusively of the world he saw every day, albeit not always precisely as he saw it. For much of his career he sold them from his shop, either as single sheets, or as a dozen bound volumes.

Those conversant with the architecture and history of Rome are familiar with his *vedute* (views) of ancient, Renaissance, and Baroque Rome. His etching technique – still a standard against which others are judged—was influenced by Jacques Callot (1592-1635), Salvator Rosa (1615 – 1673), Giuseppe Vasi (1710-1782), whose works are included in the exhibition. Moreover, Piranesi influenced generations of architects and artists – Robert Adam, George Dance, Sir John Soane, Hubert Robert, Étienne-Louis Boullée, Sergei Eisenstein and early 20th-century film theory. In the late 20th-century it enjoyed yet another revival: Daniel Libeskind (*Choral Works* and *Mircomegas*), Zaha Hadid (The Hong Kong Peak Competition), and OMA/Rem Koolhaas (Parc de la Villette Competition). Both explored Piranesi's *Carceri d'Invenzione* as *Prisons of Invention* – propellants for re- envisioning a spatial and formal network that echoed the work of Kazimir Malevich and the Russian Suprematists.

The core of the exhibit strays from the better-known *Carceri d'Invenzione* and the majestic *Vedute di Roma*, to Piranesi's studies of ancient Roman construction techniques published in several of his major collected works, including *Della Magnificenza ed Architettura de Romani* (1758-61). These analytique-like compositions are remarkable because of what they document, depict, and demonstrate. Often lost in discussions of Piranesi's work is the extraordinary degree to which he felt compelled to document, both newly excavated remains and longstanding insults to ancient monuments which, although protected by Papal Bull (1462), suffered continued assault well into the 20th century.

Piranesi's unparalleled mastery of the most avant-garde representational techniques – physically and in terms of image production – continues to distinguish his work from predecessors and followers alike. In this exhibition however, it is the content of his depictions – the demonstration of Roman construction and engineering techniques (distinct from ancient Greece), that is central.

The exhibit is organized around this central core of etchings. Accreted to this core are contemporaneous works of well- established and accomplished architects, landscape architects, and designers, along with the work of future architects who have worked in a seminar/workshop using Piranesi's demonstrations as springboards for digitally-based excursions. The architects and designers are all former Fellows or Affiliated Fellows of the American Academy in Rome (AAR), invited to submit work which, in their view, is marked by their study of Piranesi and an appreciation of the material presence of ancient Roman construction apprehended during their sojourn at the AAR. Together, the exhibition's contemporaneous components demonstrate Piranesi's continuing capacity to incite private reveries for public consumption and colloquy.