

Etchings Reflect Varied Interests Of Piranesi

Popular Graphic Artist Of 1700s Subject Of Display

By Jacqueline Hall
Dispatch Special Writer

Giovanni Battista Piranesi (1720-1776) was one of the most prominent graphic artists of the 18th century, and 23 of his drawings and 80 of his etchings are on display at the Columbus Gallery of Fine Arts through Aug. 29.

An architect by training, an engraver by profession, an archeologist and polemist by avocation, he was an illustrator and publisher by necessity, the recorder of Roman antiquities by excellence, and one of the most influential artists of his time. Through his friendship with the English architect-designer Robert Adam (1728-1792), he helped to shape the Neo-Classical style; he influenced sculptors, and painters and, through his sons, inspired a school of engraving in France.

A VENETIAN BY birth, Piranesi spent most of his adult life in Rome, where he quickly achieved an international reputation. His intellectual fantasy produced terrifying visions of

fantastic prisons — the *Carceri d'invenzione* series — and original renderings of the crumbling ruins of Antiquity — *Antichita Romane* — and of the grandiose views of a more modern Baroque and Rococo Rome — *Vedute di Roma*.

Carceri d'invenzione — or Imaginary Prisons — are usually considered Piranesi's most romantic masterpieces. Using his boundless imagination and inspired by the theatrical decors popular in Italy in the 18th century, he produced fourteen plates where awesome visions of enormous halls, fearsome engines and machinery swallow viewers into shocking worlds of loneliness, torures, and never-ending misery.

Manipulating his etching needle and acid with perfect control, Piranesi suggested limitless varieties of texture and tone. Playing with chiaroscuro effects in a stale-mate game, between sun rays and deep shadows, he emphasized the boldness of his compositions and the daring of his perspectives. The intricacy of his designs created architectural forms which prompted Aldous

Huxley, in 1950, to describe the *Carceri* as the nearest 18th century approach to a pure abstract art.

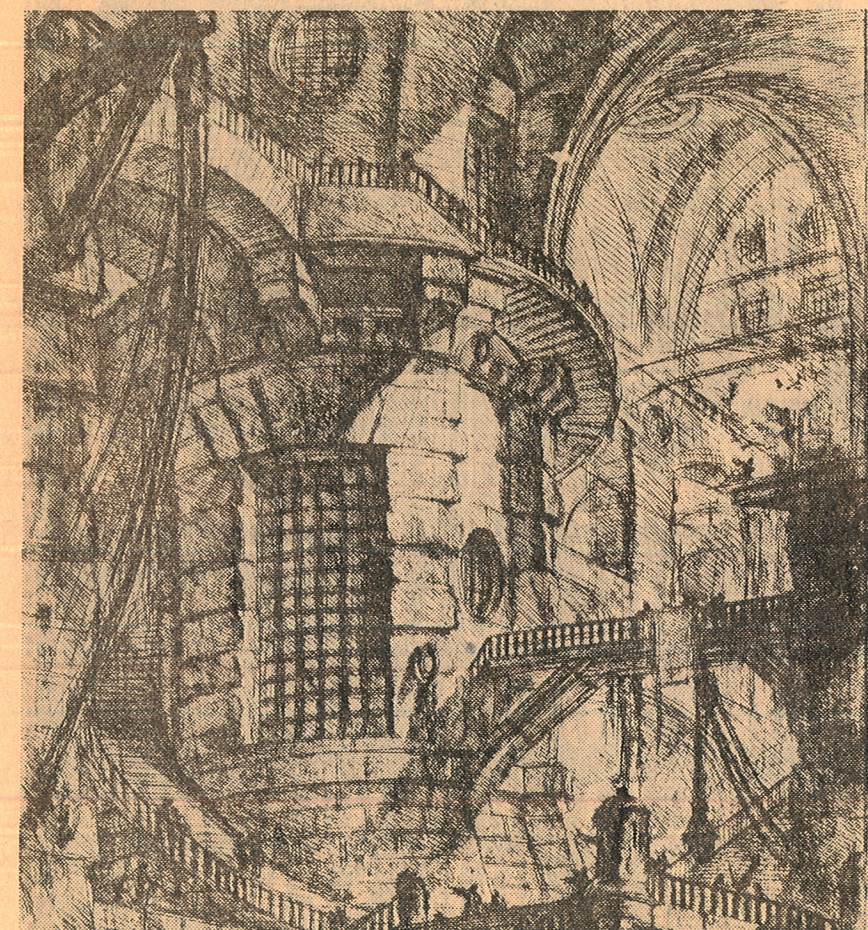
THE 135 ETCHINGS of the *Vedute di Roma* — or Views of Rome —

published from the later 1740s onward, are probably Piranesi's most famous plates. They are the complex works of the architect, the archeologist, and the polemist, the latter claiming the supremacy of Roman

buildings over Greek architecture.

They reveal Piranesi's individuality and originality. Capturing old and new buildings of Rome in dramatic diagonal perspectives and under unexpected angles, they deftly combine techni-

cal quality and imagination. They transform the mechanical regularity of architectural drawings into poetical visions challenging geometry, logic, and accuracy to the greater visual pleasure of viewers of all time.



PIRANESI ETCHING — "The Carceri (The Prisons)" — An etching on paper by Giovanni Battista Piranesi, part of the Arthur M. Sackler

Collection on exhibit at the Columbus Gallery of Fine Arts through Aug. 29.