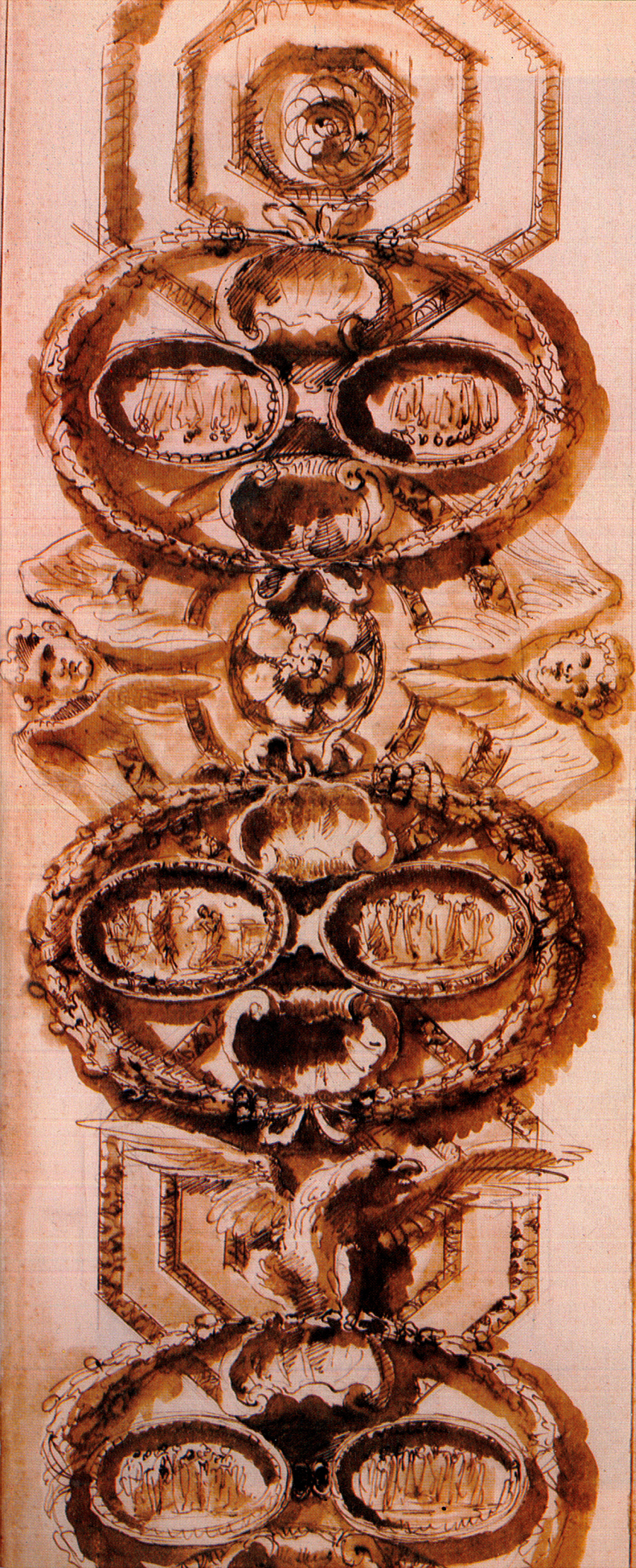


# HARVARD Magazine

January-February 1978  
\$2.50



The epochal achievement  
of Giovanni Battista Piranesi  
page 27



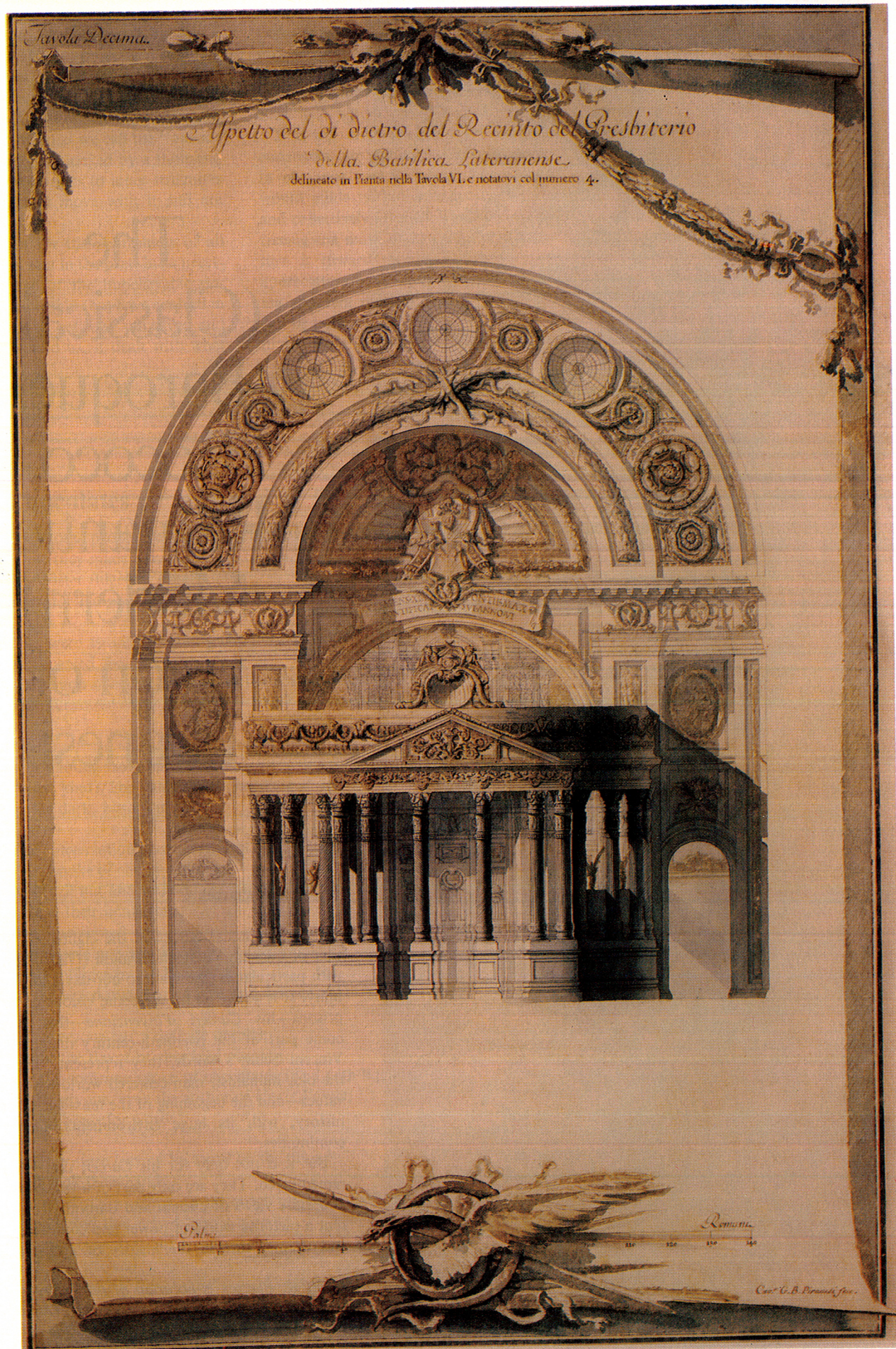
# The (Classical, Baroque, Rococo, Romantic, Modern) vision of Piranesi

by Adolf K. Placzek

Among the stellar names of the eighteenth century, that of Giovanni Battista Piranesi (1720-1778) shines with particular brightness into our day and our sensibility. It is above all his awesome visions of fantastic prisons—his *Carceri d'invenzione*—that have become part of the twentieth-century imagination. In Vincent Scully's words, they represent "the end of the old, humanist, man-centered world with its fixed values—and the beginning of the mass age of modern history, with its huge environments and rushing continuities."

But it is not only for his *Carceri* that Piranesi is remembered. They are only part of a vast *oeuvre*. His grandiose views of ancient and Baroque Rome represent a pictorial world of power and contrast, subtlety and drama, rare in the history of art. Classicism,

*Adolf K. Placzek is librarian of the Avery Architectural Library at Columbia University. This article is adapted from his introduction to the exhibition catalogue, Piranesi Drawings and Etchings.*



Baroque, Rococo, Romanticism, and, indeed, the modern vision seem to fuse into one style.

No wonder, then, that we find ourselves in the midst of what can be called a veritable Piranesi revival. A series of fine Piranesi exhibitions and the public response to them are the best evidence. There were, in quick succession, the exhibition mounted by Smith College (1961), followed by exhibitions in Turin (1961-1962), the Bibliothèque Nationale in Paris (1962), Bologna (1963), Rome (1967-1968), the British Museum (1968), Princeton University (1971), and finally Columbia University's exhibition of March-April 1972, now traveling and at Harvard's Fogg Art Museum from February 1 through March 19. All of the drawings and etchings at the Fogg, and on these pages, are part of the Arthur M. Sackler Collection at Columbia University's Avery Architectural Library.

Giovanni Battista Piranesi was born near Mestre, on the Italian mainland opposite Venice, in 1720. He was definitely a Venetian in spirit—like Giorgione, like Titian, like Tintoretto, and above all, like his somewhat older contemporary, Giovanni Battista Tiepolo (1696-1770), in whose atelier he is said to have worked for a short time. We know little about Piranesi's early years. He went to Rome in 1740, where he soon began the study of ancient Roman architecture; it was to the antiquities of Rome, not of Greece, that his partisanship, his enthusiasm, and his love belonged. His early expectations of becoming a successful architect were disappointed, however, and he turned his full passion to drawing and etching. At 23, in 1743, he published his first effort, the *Prima parte di architetture e prospettive*. It did not prove a success. Penniless, he had to go back to Venice.

In 1745 Piranesi managed to return to the center of his world, Rome, where he spent the rest of his life. It was sometime during this period that he conceived and executed the fourteen etchings of his *Carceri* (see page 31), the famous masterpieces of colossal spaces, overwhelming volume, complex perspective, and unspoken horror

and defiance. He later—around 1760—produced two more plates and reworked the original fourteen, adding not only significant details such as torture instruments, but also deepening the shadows and making compositional rearrangements. These changes of mood, composition, and even technique are of course of the highest interest, particularly when seen juxtaposed with the original etchings, as they are in the exhibition. The changes were made on the original copperplates, and therefore no more prints of the first state could be produced. Thus the Sackler Collection's first-state prints of the *Carceri* are quite rare.

Piranesi next started on several publications, among them the four-volume work of the *Antichità romane*, but above all the great series of Roman views, the *Vedute di Roma* (see pages 32 and 33), on which he was to work his entire life. There were finally 135 views in all, an almost inexhaustible font of archaeological knowledge and pure aesthetic delight. Noteworthy is the ever-increasing technical mastery through thirty years of consistent effort; also a gradual darkening, descending towards a tragic world view. The progress of this work is recorded in Piranesi's periodically published *Cataloghi*—really advertisements for his available prints—of which one in the Sackler Collection records 63 plates. The artist was amazingly productive; according to A. Hyatt Mayor, author of *Giovanni Battista Piranesi* (New York, 1952), he created no fewer than 991 copperplates.

When Piranesi died, in 1778, he was at the height of his fame. His son Francesco (1758-1810) carried on his work. He and his younger brother Pietro not only completed some of their father's unfinished projects, but also continually reissued the older works from the plates in their possession. Much of this was done from Paris, where they had moved their print shop and the plates in 1799 and where the plates remained until 1839, when they were returned to Rome. Sets continued to be printed until the twentieth century; eventually Europe seemed flooded with Piranesi prints (this of course is no longer the case). In Hyatt Mayor's words, "the nineteenth century tired of seeing his great, emphatic etch-

Opposite and on page 27: Two of Piranesi's presentation drawings for a major (but unrealized) architectural project—the expansion of the choir of San Giovanni in Laterano.

The drawing opposite, an elevation looking east, shows the colonnade separating the ambulatory from the presbytery. Number 10 of a series of 25, it is a tour de force of draftsmanship, exhibiting exquisite precision and a consummate pictorial quality in the variations of its washes. Pen and ink over ruled pencil guidelines. 34 1/2 by 22 3/8 inches.

The detail on page 27 is from the nineteenth drawing in the presentation series and shows a panel of vaulting coffers. It is an enlargement of part of drawing number 9. Pen and brown ink over pencil, with brown washes. The part of the original shown in this detail, which omits nothing but ruled borders and typographic headings, is 30 13/16 by 12 3/16 inches.

ings everywhere; today, however, his volcanic obsessions... are cherished for the grandeur of their intensely personal vision."

In architecture Piranesi followed in the tradition of Italian art, whose supreme masters from Giotto through Raphael and Leonardo to Michelangelo so often combined several skills, among them those of practical architecture. But as an architect Piranesi could not reach the mastery nor the success of his etchings. Circumstances combined against him—Rome, in the second half of the eighteenth century, was no longer a center of large-scale architectural activity and Piranesi's growing fame as a graphic artist may have worked against him rather than for him as far as architectural commissions were concerned. Moreover, the proud, hot-headed, and stubborn Piranesi was hardly the person to encourage overbearing clients. His only major work is the basically rather austere and dry rebuilding of Santa Maria del Priorato on the Aventine Hill, which was done at the order of Cardinal Giovanni Battista Rezzonico, fellow Venetian and the nephew of the then pope, Clement XIII.

Piranesi's only other major architectural project was never executed, but some sketches and the presentation drawings for it survive. The sketches have been, for some time, at the Morgan Library in New York, and the presentation drawings are the *pièces de résistance* of the Sackler Collection (see pages 27 and 28). The project to which they relate is the expansion of the choir of San Giovanni in Laterano, one of Rome's five patriarchal churches and among Western Christendom's oldest and most prestigious. Since its founding by the emperor Constantine, it had had an incredible history of destructions, rebuildings, fires, restorations, and alterations. The present form of the nave is largely the work of one of the major masters of the Roman Baroque, Francesco Borromini (1599-1667). It had long been felt, however, that the medieval apse of the great edifice was inadequate for its vast ceremonial requirements, and it was to this need that Piranesi—on Clement XIII's instructions

in 1764—addressed himself. But the grandiose project of a new choir and sanctuary was never realized. Clement XIII died in 1769 and with the passing from power of the Rezzonico family, Piranesi's architectural patronage was over. The choir of San Giovanni in Laterano remained too small until the late nineteenth century, when it was finally thoroughly rebuilt under Leo XIII, and consecrated in 1885.

The presentation drawings for Piranesi's project had in the meantime disappeared. Indeed, nothing is known of their fate for nearly two centuries, nor do they bear any collectors' marks or stamps. Originally numbered 1 through 25, two, numbers 13 and 24, are now missing. They are not all entirely by Piranesi's hand; in some places it is apparent that the conscientious but dry hand of pupils filled in the details for the impatient master. No fewer than six variants for the choir and sanctuary area are suggested in the plans. Four drawings are proposals for a grand papal altar and baldacchino, in the tradition of Gianlorenzo Bernini's baldacchino for St. Peter's. Piranesi's deep attachment to the Roman Baroque is evident, not only from the style and detailing of the drawings themselves, but also from the scrupulous respect shown in the project for Borromini's existing nave. There is in Piranesi also the powerfully emerging Neo-Classic spirit, looking forward to the end of the eighteenth century and back to Andrea Palladio; this is particularly apparent in some of the hard, almost harsh design elements of the projects. At the same time these drawings display the infinite charm of Piranesi's Venetian heritage, the Tiepolo-like delicacy and playfulness of the decorative frames, the illusionism of its seemingly curling paper on the borders, the Rococo spirit of the vignettes that contain the captions, and the scale.

"Piranesi's genius will long be celebrated," writes Dr. Arthur Sackler in his foreword to the exhibition catalogue. Like "all great artists, Piranesi linked an appreciation of the past, his *Antichità romane*, with his love of his present, the *Vedute di Roma*, and these were linked to his *Carceri*, which projected his vision into the future. His was an epochal achievement." □

*Opposite: Piranesi etched his early masterpiece, Carceri ("The Prisons"), probably in the late 1740s. About 1761 he reworked the original fourteen plates to startling effect. He solidified the structural forms, added strong shadows, and filled these once broadly conceived fantasies with detail. The second-state plate reproduced here shows "An Immense Interior with Numerous Wooden Galleries and a Drawbridge in the Center." 21 1/2 inches by 16 1/16 inches.*

*Pages 32 and 33: The Fontana dell' Acqua Paola, plate number 21 in Piranesi's great series of views of Rome. He worked on Vedute di Roma throughout most of his career, publishing the first plate in the late 1740s; by the time of his death, in 1778, he had completed 135. Etching. 22 1/16 inches by 31 11/16 inches.*



