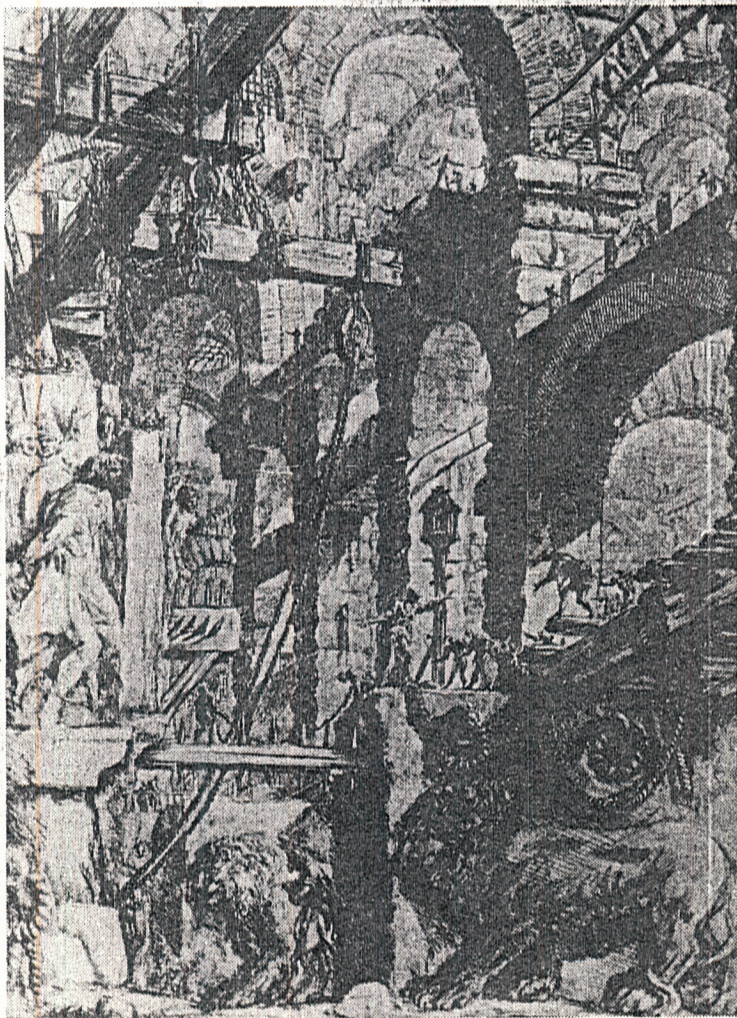
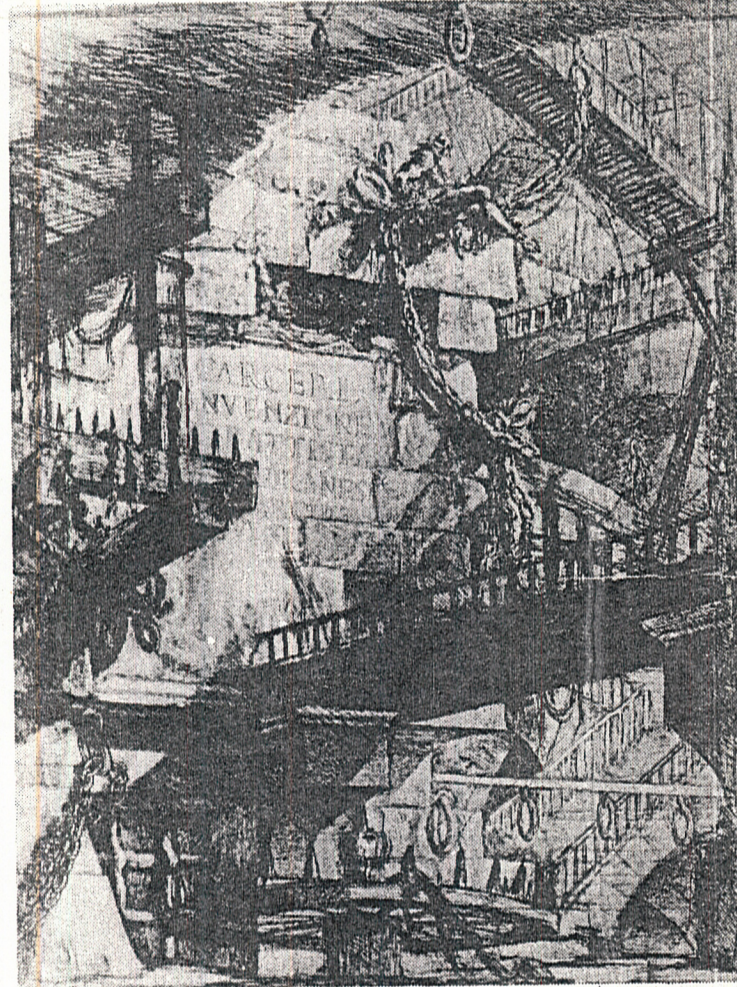


Piranesi's prisons, Roman views at the Palace



The Carceri



The Carceri



The Vedute di Roma

By GERTRUDE GRACE SILL
"Piranesi: Drawings and Etchings" is a superb exhibition of museum quality not to be missed. It is currently on view in the Gallery of Stamford's Palace Theatre.

Giovanni Battista Piranesi (1720-1778) was one of the most original, dramatic and prolific graphic artists in the history of printmaking. In addition to the 50-odd large-scale etchings, the exhibit includes 10 architectural drawings, including four rare examples entirely in Piranesi's hand. This show will be of special interest to graphic designers, printmakers, artists, and anyone interested in etchings by one of the greatest masters of the medium.

Born about 1720 in Mestre, near Venice, Piranesi studied architecture, engineering and stage design before his first visit to Rome in 1740. There he hoped to gain architectural commissions inspired by his study of the great Roman antiquities. There were few opportunities. Penniless, he returned home. But the great ruins of Rome continued to haunt him, and he was able to return two years later, and spent the rest of his life in the splendid city.

The exhibition begins with a group of large architectural drawings, part of a renovation project for the ancient Roman Basilica of Saint

etching. The thousands of tiny inked scratches on the copper plates produce images of a density in which the viewer can be lost.

He reworked the original "Carceri" plates in the 1760s, adding more precise architectural details. There are examples of both print states in the Palace Gallery exhibition. The prisons with their overpowering sense of nightmare reality are among the most compelling images in the history of art. Freud would have delighted in analyzing these bizarre prisons of the mind; in fact, they would have been suitable decoration in his Vienna office among his beloved collection of antiquities.

Twenty-three views of Rome constitute the final section. "The Vedute di Roma" comprised 137 etchings of ancient and 18th century Rome published by Piranesi beginning in 1745, 23 of which are included here. His precise technique contrasts dramatically with the romantic decay of the classical ruins he loved and the great architectural monuments of baroque Rome. Here a traveler can recognize St. Peter's, the Column of Trajan, and The Baths of Diocletian much as they are today. These Roman views had a great vogue among the British visitors in the 18th century and were important for their influence on the Romantic movement. Sir Walter

'...study the sublime dreams of Piranesi, who seems to have conceived visions of Rome beyond what is boasted even in the meridian of its splendour, savage as Salvator Rosa, fierce as Michelangelo and exuberant as Rubens ... He piles palaces on bridges, and temples on palaces, and scales heaven with mountains of edifices.'

— Horace Walpole

Giovanni in Laterano to be presented to Pope Clement XIII. The project was never realized, and Piranesi presented the large, highly detailed ink and wash renderings to the Pope. They disappeared, and only surfaced in the 20th century when 23 of the original 25 were purchased by Dr. Arthur M. Sackler and donated to the great repository of art historical and architectural literature, the Avery Library of Columbia University, in the 1970s.

The first four drawings, including an elegant title page, are entirely in Piranesi's hand. The huge baroque scale, the precision of detail, the enormous energy of imagination and execution make these masterpieces of drawing.

Following the drawings are 30 impressions of the "Carceri," etchings of huge imaginary prisons for which he is best known. Since there were so few opportunities for the grand architectural commissions he sought, Piranesi decided "to make my ideas known through pictures." So in the late 1740s he began the 14 etchings — partly derived from an earlier project for opera settings — of his fantastic imaginary prisons.

These images are overwhelming in their precise rendering of colossal architectural spaces. Enormous rusticated vaults, draped with ominous ropes, pulleys and chains, recede into deep perspective, dwarfing the few humans working like ants within the great, surrealistic spaces. In his dramatic use of light and shade, his control of perspective for romantic, ominous effects, Piranesi is one of the great masters of

Scott owned a complete set of the "Vedute." (A limited number of folios of the "Vedute" and the Sackler collection catalog are available at the Palace Gallery. Framed in a simple black molding, these Roman views can make a hovel look like a palace.) An original volume of the views is also on display in the center case for close examination.

The visitor leaves the exhibit with a haunting cacophony of monochromatic images echoing in the mind. The empty urban streetscape of downtown Stamford, the ever growing, ever more impersonal mirrored office buildings along the thruway make a vivid contrast to Piranesi's Roman views and prisons. As Professor Vincent Scully, architectural historian at Yale, comments, "They (the Piranesi views and prisons) 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."

The exhibition is made possible through the Avery Architectural and Fine Arts Library, Columbia University, New York; the Arthur M. Sackler Foundation, New York; and the Arts East Foundation, Stamford, Ct. The Gallery is open Wednesday, Thursday, and Friday from noon to 5 p.m., at the Palace Theatre, 61 Atlantic St., Stamford. Gallery talks by Martha Scott, curator, will take place on May 23 and June 13 at 12:30 p.m. The exhibition closes June 30 at 5 p.m.

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