



ROMA PIRANESIANA

PIRANESI'S PLANS OF ROME

Allan Ceen
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INTRODUCTION

No eighteenth century print-maker has taken a stronger hold upon the modern mind than Piranesi. That individual must be singularly insensitive to whom Piranesi does not appeal. But it is to his masterly three-dimensional views that the greater attention has been given by the numerous exhibitions dedicated to him.

Over the years there have been many exhibitions that featured Piranesi's *Vedute di Roma*, his *Antichità di Roma*, and his *Carceri d'Invenzione* series. This author has been involved with two such exhibits: *Piranesi: Rome Recorded* (Campbell 1989) and *Art in Rome in the Eighteenth Century* (Bowron & Rishel, 2000). This year in Venice an important show sponsored by the Fondazione Giorgio Cini concentrated on Piranesi's ornamental work as well as his views of Rome (*Le Arti di Piranesi*, 2010). Currently in Rome there is a Piranesi exhibit at the Casa di Goethe (*Piranesi, Rembrandt delle Rovine*, 2011).

It would therefore seem superfluous, if not even presumptuous, to present yet another Piranesi exhibition within the limited premises of the Studium Urbis in Rome. But to our knowledge no exhibit on Piranesi has ever concentrated on his plans of the city of Rome. Since the collections of the Studium Urbis contain a fair number of these, and since the studio's research is dedicated to the topography of the city, it was thought that a modest contribution could be made to existing Piranesi studies by displaying and commenting on some of these same plans.

The original prints on display come from the following Piranesi publications:

- *Antichità di Roma*, volume I [first edition: 1756]
- *Il Campo Marzio dell'Antica Roma* [1762]
- *Pianta di Roma e del Campo Marzio* [1774]
- *Trofeo o sia Magnifica Colonna Coelide* [1774-75]

Piranesi's work is closely intertwined with that of his contemporary G.B. Nolli, whose large and small plans of Rome were the base for all of the urban images in this exhibition. Indeed Piranesi worked with Nolli on the small plan. Further, Nolli was responsible for the mounting of the fragments of the early 3rd century fragments of the ancient marble map in the Capitoline museum. Piranesi's intense interest in these fragments are reflected in a number of his prints on exhibition, and helped shape his inventive redrawing of the ancient city in a form for which one can almost hear him say "if ancient Rome did not look like this, it should have!"

G.B. Piranesi's prolific production of prints covers a considerable range of types as well as of sites. His main interest however, seems to have been the antiquities of the city of Rome which he illustrated in a number of differing ways. The scale spread of this interest is remarkable. It ranged from plans of the overall city to perspective views of specific monuments to meticulous examination of small structural details of ancient aqueducts.

PREFAZIONE

AGLI STUDIOSI DELLE ANTICHITÀ ROMANE

[Prefazione, *Le Antichità Romane*, Tomo Primo]

...e vedendo io, che gli avanzi delle antiche fabbriche di Roma, sparsi in gran parte per gli orti ed altri luoghi coltivati, vengono a diminuirsi di giorno in giorno o per l'ingiuria de' tempi, o per l'avarizia de' possessori, che con barbara licenza gi vanno clandestinamente atterrando, per venderne i frantumi all'uso degli edifizj moderni...
[...and myself seeing that the remains of ancient Roman buildings, scattered for the most part in gardens and other cultivated areas, are daily diminished either by the damage of passing years, or by the avarice of their owners who, with barbarous impunity, secretly demolish them so as to sell the fragments for the construction of modern buildings...]

Piranesi's passionate interest in Roman antiquities is revealed by the strong terms of his Prefazione to *Le Antichità Romane* in which he deplors the continuous disappearance of ancient buildings (see quote above). Interestingly he gives part of the blame to contemporary architects attributing it to their lack of interest in these antiquities:

...si debbono veramente imputare di trascuraggine e di stupidità i nostri Architetti nell'averne tralasciate le perquisizioni a fondo, colle quali si sarebbe ristabilita la gravità e la maniera la più soda di fabbricare, che (mi sia lecito il dirlo) peranco si desidera negli odierni edifizj.
[...our Architects have to be truly blamed for their neglect and stupidity in having omitted the in-depth study [of the ruins], that could have served to reestablish the importance and the soundest methods of construction, which (allow me to say) are also desirable in our modern buildings.]

The last phrase of this quote reveals Piranesi's firm conviction that the construction methods of the ancients could and should be adopted for modern construction. Any number of his prints, some of which are illustrated in this exhibit, indicate that Piranesi put into practice what he was preaching. Not only did he faithfully record the existing remains of many of the city's surviving ancient monuments, but in his maturity he also engaged in trying to fill in the blanks that time and man had left between the imposing ruins of these monuments. Even at an early stage of his career, his *Carceri d'Invenzione*, which follow soon after *Le*

Antichità Romane, are convincingly designed with a clear eye to ancient Roman *firmitas*.

Piranesi's preoccupation with *firmitas*, in its strict meaning of solidity, durability and strength, is nowhere more in evidence than in the large print from volume IV of the *Antichità* entitled: Veduta del sotterraneo Fondamento del Mausoleo, che fu eretto da Elio Adriano Imp. (Fig. 1) Taking up most of the composition is a perspective view of imposing substructures, consisting of massive arches and ponderous buttresses, supporting the mausoleum which is shown as a tiny element at the top of the page. A companion print depicts the buttresses in cross section. But the substructures of Hadrian's mausoleum (Castel S. Angelo) were not visible in Piranesi's day because they had long been buried, at least since Pius IV Medici's addition of the great pentagonal bastions and earthworks to the castle in the 1560s. So what we are witnessing in these two prints is his imaginative reconstruction of the foundations of the mausoleum. This elaborate attempt at imagining the substructures of a major Roman monument prefigures Piranesi's later efforts at reconstructing the buildings in the Campus Martius (Cat. 16), and in the Roman Forum (Cat. 9).

Ho perciò ritratto nei presenti volumi colla squisitezza possibile i predetti avanzi, rappresentandone molti non solo nel loro prospetto, ma anche in pianta...
[I have therefore portrayed the aforementioned ruins as carefully as possible in the present volumes, depicting them not only in elevation but also in plan...]

Piranesi's plans of the three large baths of ancient Rome (Cat. 11) show how serious he was about making careful measured studies of surviving Roman monuments. The print of the Baths of Caracalla is particularly impressive because it includes a cross section of the complex so well drawn that it has yet to be improved upon. These accurate measured plans contrast strangely with the largely invented plans of other ancient ruins in the same volume of the *Antichità*. The plate depicting "il Ninfeo di Nerone" (misnomer for the Sanctuary of Claudius) on the Coelian hill is shown as a complex combination of rectangular and curvilinear structures based entirely and imaginatively on very few surviving ruins (Cat. 12b)]. The same is true about the "Pianta della forma del Castro di Tiberio" where Piranesi reproduces the perimeter wall of the Castro Pretorio accurately, but then juxtaposes an imaginary symmetrical enclosure with three curved sides containing rectilinear, circular and oval structures (Cat. 12a).

Quelche però nel proseguir della impresa ha esatto da me un serio e laborioso studio, è stato non tanto l'aver dovuto dare le denominazioni ai detti avanzi, quanto il situare molte delle antiche fabbriche, le quali (tuttochè non ne rimanga in oggi verun vestigio) ho dovuto rapportare in pianta per necessità dell'impegno...
[However, while the preparation of this work has required serious and laborious research, the difficulty has been not so much in the identification of said ruins, but in the

*localization of many ancient buildings, which (even though no trace of them remains today)
I have had to draw in plan as part of the requirement of this project...]*

Piranesi's propensity for creative invention of ancient structures reaches its climax with the publication of a collection of prints entitled *Campvs Martivs Antiqvae Vrbis* in 1762. In the large *Scenographia Campi Martii* (Cat. 15) we see a view looking north of the *Campus Martivs*, stripped of all post-antique structures. It is the bones of the ancient buildings picked clean or laid bare as it were. The temptation to flesh out those bones proved irresistible to Piranesi who completed the existing ruins in plan and filled in the whole of the area with more plans of invented structures in the striking *Ichnographiam Campi Martii Antiqvae Vrbis*, the largest of all his images of Rome (Cat. 16). Not content with depicting, or better redesigning, the urban layout of *Campus Martius*, Piranesi then produced 3-dimensional views of some of his invented structures, surrounding such established landmarks as the Pantheon and the Theater of Marcellus (Cat. 17).

...un esatto confronto co' detti avanzi, e alla definizione certa de' luoghi, la quale ho potuto ritrarre dalla esattissima Topografia di Roma, da me rapportata in principio per iscorta agli studiosi nel rintracciare i medesimi avanzi.

[...an exact comparison with said remains, and their precise locations, which I have been able to indicate on the accurate Plan of Rome, which I have placed at the beginning [of this volume] for the purpose of allowing scholars to locate these same ruins.]

This quote refers to the second plate in Volume I of the *Antichità*, a plan of the ancient city surrounded by fragments of the 3rd century *Forma Urbis* (Cat. 3). Pride of place given to a map of the city is a clear indication of Piranesi's cartographic concern "for the purpose of allowing scholars to locate these same ruins." Apart from Bufalini in his ground-breaking (but inaccurate) 1551 plan of Rome, and a few other (equally inaccurate) map-makers who succeeded him, Piranesi is the first to try for a systematic cartographic description of the location of the archeological remains of ancient Rome. This he does in a series of maps and plans which constitute the principal subject of the current exhibition at the *Studium Urbis*.

Piranesi dedicates an even larger (double page) map to tracing the complex system of ancient aqueducts which supplied water to the city: *Tavola Topografica di Roma in cui si dimostrano gli andamenti degli antichi aquedotti...*[Cat. 8]. This is the first of his series of plans of the city which extend its area all the way to *Ponte Milvio*, well to the north of *Porta Flaminia/del Popolo* (see Cat. 13, 14, 21). In later publications he includes smaller details of the city for the purpose discussing specific monuments. Thus his criticism of G.B. Nolli's orientation of the Theater of Pompey on the 1748 map appears in the *Campo Marzio* publication of 1762 (plate XVI; Cat. 18). In his 1774-75 publication on the Column of Marcus

Aurelius (Trofeo o sia Magnifica Colonna Coclide) Piranesi includes a detailed plan of the area around Piazza Colonna (Cat. 19).

Both of the latter plans are derived directly from Nolli's accurate Pianta Grande of 1748. Piranesi collaborated with Nolli in the production of the reduced version of the large Nolli plan (Cat. 2). The cartography of this smaller plan is Nolli's while the architectural surround is the work of Piranesi. Perhaps it was this collaboration which justified his publication of an almost exact copy of that map in 1774 (18 years after Nolli's death) in his Pianta di Roma e del Campo Marzo without giving Nolli any credit (Cat. 20)].

His professional relationship with Nolli must have been rather varied because when Nolli was given the task of mounting the surviving fragments of the 3rd century Forma Urbis on the wall of the museum stairway of the Palazzo Nuovo on the Campidoglio, Piranesi seems to have resented not having been given that project. This is apparent from the early pages of the *Antichità* (plates III-VII; Cat. 4-7) in which he carefully reproduces the surviving fragments of the marble map in fine detail, but comments that they have not been set up properly in the museum because some of the pieces that should have been joined, were not. Piranesi's resentment is understandable because while Nolli was so successful in portraying the contemporary city, he was not the antiquarian that Piranesi was. The only mistakes this author has found in the 1748 Pianta Grande were in Nolli's attempts at reconstruction of a few ancient monuments. One of these is noted above as Piranesi's criticism of Nolli's reconstruction of the Theater of Pompey (Cat. 18).

It would be fair to say that Nolli and Piranesi complemented each other in the production of plans of Rome, Nolli representing the contemporary city and Piranesi the ancient one. But Piranesi developed the plans of the ancient city beyond the mere representation of existing remains. This is evident not only in the *Ichnographiam Campi Martii* mentioned above, but also in his earlier *PIANTA del antico Foro Romano* (Cat. 9), as well as in his *Pianta del Monte Capitolino* (Cat. 10). In both of these he uses the existing ruins as a starting point for an elaborate reconstruction of a series of buildings which certainly were not there in antiquity.

Contrary to the imitative classicism that was rapidly taking over in the late 18th century, Piranesi pursued what might be termed transformational classicism. In this he followed a tradition that ranged from Brunelleschi, through Giulio Romano, Michelangelo, Borromini and Fuga. It seems fair to place Piranesi's fictive architecture in that tradition. It is a pity that he has had so few followers.