

## GIOVAN BATTISTA PIRANESI

(Mogliano Veneto 1720–Rome 1778) is an artist, architect and engraver whose influence and fascination has spanned the centuries, and still brings a lively and fascinating inspiration for today's artistic reflection.

His vast production of representations and reinterpretations of the grandeur of ancient Rome, together with his contribution to the expansion of antiquarian culture in the second half of the eighteenth century (including its cultural debate) is unparalleled, and has made him a subject of continuous and deepening study.

In the panorama of his numerous volumes with engravings, a particular place in the history of culture, and not only in the history of art, belongs to these prints dedicated to an invention of places that are both infernal and architectural: places of torture and prisons.

The artistic and editorial history of these surprising sheets is complex, but it can be simplified in order to better understand these masterpieces.

The first editing of the plates dates back to 1747–1750, still in the sign of the Venetian traditional engraving style.

Was instead radical the revision of the branches just before 1761, when the final edition (here on display) appeared. The expansion of the architectural structures (with their amazing inconsistencies), the technical evolution from the engraving point of view (which, together with the reinforcement of the etching technique, shows the use of the burin to accentuate the strength of the black signs), as well as the addition of two new plates (nn. 2 and 5), radically modify and enhance the impact, and give rise to a still unexhausted exegesis, and to numerous modern reinterpretations.

This complete series of the second version of the Carceri d'invenzione exhibited here was made available by a collector from Bergamo, and represents an early edition of the branches (probably between the mid-1760s and the early 1770s), therefore with characteristics of 'freshness' of the plates that offer excellent evidence of the effectiveness of the master's sign in Piranesi's mature phase.

## FANTASY AND SUBLIME OF PIRANESI

Le Carceri d'invenzione

ENGLISH VERSION

2ND OF JULY  
11TH OF SEPTEMBER  
2021

FANTASY  
and SUBLIME  
of PIRANESI

Le Carceri d'invenzione



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# WORKS ON DISPLAY

## PLATE 1 (FRONTISPIECE).

### Prison Interior.

The frontispiece of the second edition of Carceri substantially varies the image of the early edition (1745) through the amplification of the planes, the dynamism of the whole and the structural function of the title in the relation with the architectures from which it is incorporated and which absorb it defining its space.

## PLATE 2.

### Arcades, towers, pediment and, in the foreground, the torture of a condemned man.

Together with the plate 5 is made by Piranesi for the edition of 1761 and belongs to the maturity of the artist.

The infinitely dilatable space is organized around the spectacular intersection of two diagonals that deconstruct the full-empty, interior-exterior relationship. The accumulation of ancient fragments and the out-of-scale effect reinvent the representation of antiquity from memory of the roman memories to visionary view.

## PLATE 3.

### Large arches posed on a pillar with a grated window, on the left a gallows.

The space is put in perpetual rotation around a large circular pillar, heart of the scene.

The engraving technique, in which the metal tip is used as a pen, accentuates the chiaroscuro effects and the feeling of danger and punishment.

## PLATE 4.

### Large arch crossed by ropes, in the background arch with frieze of sculpted figures, braziers and flashlights.

The effects of suggestion and mystery are produced by the fragmentation of the lines and the interaction of the diagonal lines.

The instruments of torture placed at the base of the image make explicit and accentuate the tragic sense of the representation.

## PLATE 5.

### Escape of arches, chains, ropes and a lantern. In the foreground lions and various figures in basrelief.

As plate 2, also this is an addiction for the 1761's edition. In the same way in this table we feel how the artist put in dialogue architectures, details of the antiquities and the small uman figures, connecting the archaeological knowledge, the many ancient testimonies visible in Rome at that time, and the echoes of the studies of perspective and scenography by Piranesi.

## PLATE 6.

### Arches and vaults, in the center figures around a white smoke, on the left a large pulley.

Even if not with a direct reference, the inventive architecture is totally "Roman". The great cloud of white smoke acquires, in comparison with the 1745's edition, its own and autonomous identity.

## PLATE 7.

### Footbridges, drawbridges against the light, spiral stairs, a sentry box, a bundle of ropes hanging from a pulley.

The upward thrust of the composition is dictated by the large central pillar around which the circular staircase winds and connects the intersections of the walkways. The point of maximum tension is the mobile bridge divided in two and suspended in the void by means of large ropes.

## PLATE 8.

### Staircase with trophies at the base within high arches, two paired flags, figures.

Also in this prison the wooden bridge with spikes returns. The composition is strongly polycentric and seems to dilate the concatenation of the architecture to infinity.

## PLATE 9.

### Cyclopean portal, dominated by a large bull's-eye, beyond are sketched beams and smoke.

Despite the few elements displayed, the composition creates an effect of anxiety and astonishment amplified by the juxtaposition of the central architectural the door and the upper opening that seems to attract and absorb the light.

## PLATE 10.

### Large arch, group of condemned men chained to a gallows, chains and lamp. Walkways with figures.

The framing through an archway, common in vedutism of the second half of the 18th century, is an expedient to direct perception towards the central space of the vast room in which the dramatic platforms with the chained figures break out.

## PLATE 11.

### Four sentry boxes at the corners of an archway, beams, ropes.

This copper sheet undergoes the greatest transformations with respect to that of the 1745 edition and defines the passage from spatial ambiguities to the total absence of spatiality ascribable to reality. All the elements contribute to infinitely expanding the spaces and the perception of the whole.

## PLATE 12.

### Stairs, instruments of torture, arches with gratings, monument of darkness.

This panel allows us to appreciate the effects of light obtained by Piranesi with the new technical treatment of the engraving: the radicalization of the light-shadow contrasts makes the whites dazzling, contrasting with the dense matter of the backlight, and accentuates the expressive values of the image.

## PLATE 13.

### Large stone arches joined by beams, chains and gratings. At the top there is a wheel with spines, an oval window with grating, on the left a lamp hanging from a fork.

Protagonist of the composition is the dazzling light coming from the left that marks the exit from the underworld characterized by the instruments of torture and the succession of architectural elements.

## PLATE 14.

### Perspective of vaults, walkways, stairs, pillars.

The engraving presents a possible spatial incongruity in the connections and in the rebound of the architectural elements. On the other hand, the evident pictorialism is unusual in Piranesi's mature manner.

## PLATE 15.

### Central pillar with bas-relief, figures and four lion masks with rings.

The dynamism of space and architecture, together with the chiaroscuro, double the spatial perception and the evocative force of the composition. The grandeur and assertiveness of the architectural structures evoke ancient Rome.

## PLATE 16.

### Footbridge seen from below leaning against a large pillar on the left. In the center is a stele with two heads in a niche and the inscription "Impietati et malis artibus" behind columns with inscriptions.

The composition is a manifesto of the new content at the base of the edition and related to ancient Rome.

Not only the physical space that becomes psychic but the link with the values and themes of the architecture of ancient Rome, make clear Piranesi's resolute position in the contemporary dispute between supporters of Hellenic and Roman superiority.



Exhibition curated by Piervaleriano Angelini and Attilio Pizzigoni with the collaboration of Maria Elisabetta Manca, Francesca Giupponi, Giuseppe Redolfi

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