

Giovanni Battista Piranesi. *Opere*. Parigi: Da'Torchi de' Fratelli Firmin Didot Libraij, Stampatori dell'Istituto di Francia, 1835-37.

Giovanni Battista Piranesi, the son of a stonemason, was born in Venice in 1720 and was educated as an architect and engineer by an uncle. This technical training familiarized him with the techniques and possibilities of construction and gave him a great skill and understanding of architectural draftsmanship. In 1740 Piranesi left Venice for Rome and briefly studied etching under Giuseppe Vasi, quickly mastering the technique. Impressed by the wealth of architectural beauty in the city, Piranesi began sketching ancient ruins and modern buildings, recording fine details of construction and ornamentation with precision and grace. Unlike the straightforward and standard topographical illustrations that were common at the time, Piranesi's views combined light, shadow, scale and detail to evoke the power and grandeur of the Roman cityscape.

By 1747, Piranesi began a successful career as a printmaker by releasing the first of his *Vedute di Roma* (Views of Rome), a series of 135 etchings that occupied him for the rest of his life. These highly popular prints circulated throughout Europe as souvenirs bought by travelers on the Grand Tour. Piranesi was soon able to support himself on the income he made from his etchings, and their popularity won him international recognition. The large size and bold compositions of the prints continued to affect European perceptions of the majesty and grandeur of Rome long after Piranesi's death, and they exercised great influence on the development of Neoclassicism in art and architecture. Influential as they were, Piranesi's prints sometimes exaggerated the scale or surroundings of particular monuments to create a more powerful composition, and were not always a faithful rendering of how eighteenth-century Rome really looked.

Around 1756, Piranesi published a series of over 200 etchings in four large volumes as *Antichità Romane* (Antiquities of Rome). The etchings illustrate Roman monuments, tombs, decoration styles, and inscriptions in order to document and preserve the surviving structures of the ancient city. With this work, Piranesi demonstrated his lifelong fascination with Roman archaeology, using his training in engineering to investigate the techniques employed in constructing buildings, roads, defense fortifications, and waterworks. The prints' value as archaeological studies led to Piranesi's induction into the London Society of Antiquaries as an Honorary Fellow, and they contributed to the development of modern archaeology.

Piranesi also used his printmaking as an outlet for his architectural creativity. Although he was well qualified to work as an architect, Piranesi did not receive many building commissions, and only one of his constructions survives to the present day. However, Piranesi was able to create on paper what he was never given the opportunity to construct in brick and mortar. At the age of twenty-nine, Piranesi began work on *Invenzioni Capricci di Carceri* (Imagined Caprices of Prisons), and substantially altered the series in 1760, renaming it *Carceri d'Invenzione* (Prisons of the Imagination). This more subtly worded title describes a series of dramatic, sometimes nightmarish interior and exterior views of imaginary dungeons, prisons, and torture chambers. The sublime elements of Piranesi's *Carceri* caught the imagination of later Romantic artists and thinkers, and his

impossible mazes of stairways, towers and tunnels became an inspiration to the twentieth-century Surrealists.

The French publisher Ambroise Firmin-Didot acquired Piranesi's 1,180 original etching plates after his son's death in 1810 and issued prints from the original plates in a 29-volume edition during the 1830s. The plates were printed on oversized paper, and the bound volumes are sizable: over 2 feet wide and nearly three feet long. In 1839, the plates were returned to Rome at the request of Pope Gregory XVI, where they were transferred to the Calcografia Camerale. Impressions continued to be taken from the plates for more than a century. The MU Libraries hold 17 bound volumes of the Firmin-Didot edition, including the *Antichita Romane*, *Carceri d'invenzione*, and *Vedute di Roma*, among others.