For Piranesi, Imagination Trumps Classical Boundaries

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Poor Piranesi. His dark, brooding fantasies of classical ruins have haunted the architectural imagination for centuries. Yet aside from a minor church renovation in Rome, he never fulfilled his ambitions as an architect and is still known mainly as an engraver. And in recent decades his art has been unjustly associated with postmodernism’s tired obsession with classical motifs.

So “Piranesi as Designer,” a lovely new show at the Cooper-Hewitt National Design Museum, could not have come soon enough. By introducing us to the full sweep of this Venetian artist’s career, from the early etchings of antiquities to his eccentric furniture designs to the haunting “Carceri d’Invenzione,” or “Prisons of the Imagination,” the show liberates him from clichés.

What emerges is a portrait of a radical intellectual figure as well as a masterly artist who refused to bow to the conventions of his time. His eclectic imagination and distrust of authority speak directly to contemporary architectural concerns. They remind us that an architecture of the imagination can resonate through the centuries with as much force as a monument chiseled in stone.

The bare outline of Piranesi’s story is well known. The son of a stone mason who dreamed of becoming a builder of cities; a flight to Rome and a growing obsession with its ancient ruins; a fall into poverty; and, finally, the climb to fame as the world’s most celebrated engraver of antiquity.

In his early days Piranesi hawked souvenirs to the wealthy young aristocrats and merchants making the obligatory tour of the classical world. In later years he designed elaborate mantelpieces with Egyptian, Etruscan, Greek and Roman imagery that adorned the drawing rooms of wealthy patrons across Europe.

Some of these objects are stupefyingly beautiful. One of the show’s great discoveries, for
example, is a stunning marble table balanced on five gilded legs decorated with winged lions’ heads. Why more than four? The fifth leg is an excuse to pile on more ornament.

Too much gold for your taste? Then step this way and sample a marble mantelpiece that rests on the heads of two seated Egyptian figures. The mantel is topped by a triangular slab decorated with hieroglyphics, a scarab, winged figures.

With Piranesi, more is always more.

Yet this artist was never easily classified; his imagination was too restless. In one of the many remarkable early drawings here, on loan from the Morgan Library & Museum, he creates a pastiche of ancient temples. A gargantuan structure with rows of Corinthian columns, ornate pediments and arched gateways looms over a vast piazza punctuated by obelisks and columns with sculptures of dolphins projecting from them.

Not even ancient Rome was this grand; nor was it ever infused, in architectural terms, with such a stench of decay. Yet the scale of the tiny figures, huddled together at the foot of these monuments, powerfully evokes the crushing foot of imperial authority.

Piranesi’s obsession with classical antiquity drew him into one of the great debates of his era, between French architects and academics who sought a return to Greek models, and Italian nationalists like Piranesi who argued for the superiority of Roman architecture. Rooted in Enlightenment ideals, it was less a question of decorative style than of a cultural and historical ideal.

Piranesi’s breakthrough was to recognize such idealization as a trap. Greek architecture was “infected at its roots,” he argued; there is no architectural Eden to return to. We are free to interpret history on our own terms. The freedom of the subjective imagination trumps obsolete notions of classical harmony.

By liberating his creative impulses, he ranged into seemingly endless new, creative territory. In a 1749 preparatory drawing for the “Carceri d’Invenzione,” staircases lead to nowhere amid an infinite maze of chambers under sweeping arches, evoking the scary, unexplored recesses of the mind.

By the time he executes “The Drawbridge” more than a decade later, the entire space seems to be under immense strain. Staircases and bridges vanish in far more directions, conveying a sense of endless space. Ropes and pulleys extend from the ceilings to the bridges. The contrast between light and shadow has become more extreme.

To draw the viewer into his composition, Piranesi frames one side with an arched vault. Tiny, forlorn figures are trapped here and there on the stairs and bridges, the very picture of modern alienation.

None of this could exist in the real world, of course. Scrutinizing the etchings, you realize that Piranesi’s structures would never have stood up. Walls don’t connect to solid ground, stairs end in midair, bridges lead nowhere.

But the etchings help forge a broader philosophical argument. Piranesi’s eccentric fantasies were intended as a challenge to the inflexible formal and social hierarchies embraced by most architects of his time. In his world the irrational and the arbitrary triumph over rational order. Architecture becomes a tool for visualizing a world filled with contradictions, not for resolving them.
That vision is summed up in his “Campo Marzio dell'Antica Roma,” a series of plates in which he creates an imaginary map of Rome. The map is a virtual catalog of architectural styles and forms. There is no logic to it over all, only a collection of seemingly unrelated fragments. The imagination is unleashed on the city with terrifying force, with the few real temples, like the Pantheon and Colosseum, swallowed up in the anarchic disorder.

For the architectural historian Manfredo Tafuri these engravings offer a “painful journey into the labyrinth of history.” Generations of architects followed Piranesi on that trip. While Sir John Soane, for one, may have warned his colleagues about the dangers of Piranesian excesses, his 1800 drawing of the vaulted chambers of his Bank of England building — heavy, somber, serious — owes much to Piranesi’s influence.

The show ends with videos of architectural talking heads, all of them extolling Piranesi’s virtues. Robert A. M. Stern, Michael Graves, Daniel Libeskind, Peter Eisenman, Robert Venturi and Denise Scott Brown come off as a bit self-serving, especially when they try to relate his genius to their own work. But there are a few nuggets of insight.

The best is Mr. Eisenman, because his perspective seems the freshest and his reading of Piranesi is less literal. Rather than dwell on history, he snaps Piranesi into the present by focusing on his desire to break down the classical notion that the architectural parts must somehow add up to a cohesive whole. Some 250 years after Piranesi’s engravings and sketches, it’s remarkable how close his sensibility seems to that of Mr. Eisenman’s contemporaries, who also struggled to break free of orthodoxies — in their case, Modernism and postmodernist classicism.

Today many architects seem trapped in another cage: the pull of international fame, wealthy clients and ever bigger commissions. Piranesi shows us that fantasy can have a more lasting impact than a concrete monument to the ego.

“Piranesi as Designer” continues through Jan. 20 at the Cooper-Hewitt National Design Museum, 2 East 91st Street, Manhattan; (212)849-8400, cooperhewitt.org.