The architectural fantasies by Giovanni Battista Piranesi

Giovanni Battista (also Giambattista) Piranesi (4 October 1720 - 9 November 1778) was an Italian artist famous for his etchings of Rome and of fictitious and atmospheric “prisons” (Carceri d’Invenzione). (…)

The Prisons (Carceri)
The Prisons (Carceri d’invenzione or ‘Imaginary Prisons’), is a series of 16 prints produced in first and second states that show enormous subterranean vaults with stairs and mighty machines. These in turn influenced Romanticism and Surrealism. While the Vedutisti (or “view makers”) such as Canaletto and Bellotto, more often reveled in the beauty of the sunlit place, in Piranesi this vision takes on a Kafkaesque, Escher-like distortion, seemingly erecting fantastic labyrinthian structures, epic in volume, but empty of purpose. They are cappricci - whimsical aggregates of monumental architecture and ruin.

“(During an exhibition in 1972 in London) Piranesi was placed among his contemporaries not only as a graphic artist of brilliance but as a highly influential figure in the fields of architecture and the applied arts, of topographical and archaeological illustration, of theoretical writing and the restoration of antiquities.”

(…) In the 1760s Piranesi inevitably became caught up in the Graeco-Roman controversy (…). The resulting artistic tensions which arose from Piranesi’s increasing isolation from the world of philhellenic Neo-classicism are reflected in the dramatically refashioned plates of the Carceri d’invenzione (…).
VII Prison with various wooden galleries and spiral staircase
The Carceri

In the heat of controversy, Piranesi was to issue a powerfully refashioned version of a set of plates, produced in Rome some fifteen years earlier after his brief return to Venice. (…) The Carceri, or Prisons, are his most celebrated work today, exerting an influence and a fascination out of all proportion to their modest position within the artist’s immense œuvre. The first appearance of the Carceri around 1745 and their reissue in the early 1760s occurred at two critical periods in Piranesi’s intellectual and creative development and point to the central role of the architectural fantasy in his career.

(…) These works, part Venetian part Roman, moreover, constituted an experimental field of composition involving a sequence of brilliant improvisations on a limited set of themes. Quite contrary to modern
interpretations based on De Quincey’s celebrated description in the Opium Eater, the *Carceri* were not the products of a drug-hallucinated imagination. Careful study reveals a highly controlled discipline at work, exploiting the mechanics of baroque illusionism through perspective and lighting to explore new dimensions of architectural expression. Indeed, bearing in mind Piranesi’s recent criticism in the dedication to the *Prima Pane*, these compositions represented an act of defiance to the mediocre patrons and architects of contemporary Rome, unworthy of their inheritance.

**Term:** *Dark prison*

**Term:** *The architectural fantasy*

The potent appeal of the early Careen comes from the manner in which the eye of the spectator is forced on a restless journey through the plate. This is achieved by a series of conflicting illusions and pictorial techniques involving a mesh of interweaving lines and contradictory hatching. No sooner are expectations aroused but they are abruptly thwarted by visual paradoxes. Largely contributing to this mood but barely detachable from the setting are muffled figures, huddled in groups or disturbingly isolated. In this situation, each plate represents a powerful architectural experience itself whereby the entire Renaissance system of pictorial space is questioned with a degree of daring unparalleled before Cubism. (…)

These arresting images not only reflected the artist’s new preoccupations but were to capture the imagination of a new generation. This fresh version contained a major degree of intensive reworking with heightened tonal contrasts and more specific definition of form. Structural immensity and spatial ambiguity were amplified by the addition of further staircases, galleries, and roof structures receding into infinity. The macabre and the sinister were emphasized by the inclusion of chains, cables, gallows, and instruments of torture.