

John A. Pinto, *Speaking Ruins: Piranesi, Architects and Antiquity in Eighteenth-Century Rome. Thomas Spencer Jerome lectures.* Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2012. Pp. xxiii, 304. ISBN 9780472118212. \$65.00.

**Reviewed by Eric M. Moormann, Radboud Universiteit Nijmegen
(e.moormann@let.ru.nl)**

John Pinto is a distinguished architectural historian who has worked extensively on the dialogue between Roman architecture and the arts in Western Europe from the Renaissance onwards.¹ It is therefore with high expectations that the reader interested in this matter opens the newest monograph on one of the most fascinating artists moving between the realms of antiquity and modernity, Giambattista Piranesi (Venice 1720-Rome 1778). Although rather poorly known as a person, this is a figure whose masterly art of engraving rapidly gained success in Rome. His artistic basis was rococo Venice, and his appreciation for its love for ornament and façade architecture never left him. Pinto's book does not analyze Piranesi's progress from an *architecte manqué* toward becoming a free artist of drawing and etching and a pioneer in documenting and reconstructing antiquity. For Pinto, all Piranesi's activities start in Rome through his contact with Filippo Juvarra and other local architects and draughtsmen.²

A sovereign principle in Piranesi's artistic work was the fragment. In this respect he contrasted with the general tendency in his era to reconstruct monuments as fully as possible in order to envision more or less complete objects. In practice, sculpture was the branch of art that most commonly underwent restoration or reconstruction, while architectural ruins could be virtually reconfigured on paper. Piranesi entered into a positivistic Roman circle of architects who tended to reconstruct monuments on the basis of coins, architectural principles taken from Vitruvius and architectural skills. In their publications and drawings they did not present the fragmented state of a building but suggested complete structures, although on the basis of precise measurement-taking *in situ*. Next to this tendency the attention paid to the study of details was a normal rule. Pinto briefly discusses advocates of this line like Domenico Fontana, Antoine Desgodetz, and Juvarra. More theoretically mediated approaches were made by Francesco Bianchini and Johann Bernard Fischer von Erlach. Their principles formed the basis of the quest Piranesi made after his arrival as a young man in 1740.

Pinto returns to 'his' Trevi Fountain, a monument he had studied thoroughly in a previous book and one that is of paramount importance for the development of architecture in the eighteenth century. Like the façade of San Giovanni in Laterano, it displays a proper use of antique elements and is an example of *antico gusto*, which was *buon gusto* or *gusto romano*. The architectural ornaments were copied from or inspired by elements of Roman architecture such as triumphal arches or (imaginary) theatrical façades (p. 57). Nevertheless, this style was not purely ancient Roman, since it included Renaissance and baroque elements as well. Piranesi positioned himself within this atmosphere and would always 'defend' this specific Roman-ness against the growing purist quest for Greekness. In this respect he entered into polemical discussions with the architect Julien-David Le Roy concerning which was better, Greek or Roman.³ Other debates involved a restoration of the Pantheon's *attico* and, in 1765,

the superiority of Greek or Roman architecture with Pierre-Jean Mariette. Piranesi wrote a dialogue between Protopiro (representing a Greek point of view) and Didascalio who, like himself, advocated a greater freedom, or, as Pinto says it, “creative license” for the modern architect (p. 98).

Piranesi’s *Diverse maniere* shows his free development of ornaments from these principles. He collects architectural fragments from the Villa Hadriana as study material and gradually becomes a sort of researcher of ancient architecture.

The fascination of Piranesi’s drawings and prints is based on various productive strategies: standpoint (either very close or very distant), spatial enhancement (p. 111), details of architecture, materiality, display of materials and so on. Pinto is a master in casting light upon these things we all unconsciously experience when looking at the plates. He takes the reader by the hand and leads him or her through the labyrinth of Piranesi’s mind and the great number of publications. Often Piranesi’s scale is bewildering, but we have to take into account the format of the copper plates. Piranesi experimented with large formats in order to accomplish his ambitious plates.

One of Piranesi’s very few architectural projects is that of S. Giovanni del Priorato on the Aventine, known more from the ‘chimney piece’ on the small square than from the church itself. By contrast, Piranesi’s proposal for a new management of the cathedral of S. Giovanni in Laterano did not meet with good fortune. Pinto briefly discusses these projects with a special attention for the use of antique architectural and ornamental forms.

With Pinto’s third chapter, “Speaking Ruins”, we come closer to Piranesi’s graphic engagement with Antiquity. His views are from a lowered or enhanced standpoint, which creates a larger spatiality. His interest in this technique corresponds with attention to the same topic in Diderot’s and D’Alembert’s *Encyclopédie*. Another innovation is the view into the ruins’ interiors, which seems to correspond with Piranesi’s experience with theater decors (e.g. figs 73-74): the interiors are very deep and, if necessary, have a framing like that on modern photographs. Piranesi creates a tension between ruins as part of a cityscape and as isolated buildings. He displays a good sense for “Rome’s layered topography” (p. 113) and strips the monuments from their environment (figs 79, 82), which seems appropriate, but with the consequence that none of these buildings ever looked as Piranesi depicted them. After thus singling them out he wraps them, as it were, again into their original surroundings. All this leads to sets of astonishing maps in his *ichnographia* or “mapping.” The word might be translated as “description of traces” (Greek *íchnos*, track), but means the ground plan of a building in accordance with Vitruvius’ use of it in *De architectura* 1.2.2.⁴

Pinto describes various projects Piranesi carried out, mainly with his son Francesco, who would use the sketches made by his father in his own publications which were mainly published in Napoleonic Paris and included the *Antiquités de la Grande Grèce* of 1804. These field surveys included Pompeii, Paestum, and the water conduct system near Lago Fucino in Abruzzo which was eternized in amazing plans and drawings (figs. 112-116).⁵ As to Pompeii, Pinto compares Piranesi’s work with that of Louis-Jean Desprez, who worked there at the same time and published many of these sketches in achieved form. He overlooks the very dry and matter-of-fact illustrations made simultaneously by James Basire for Sir William Hamilton’s 1777 essay on Pompeii. These resemble photographs and, in my opinion, cannot explain the enthusiasm of travelers to Pompeii, since the ruins seem to sit within a desolate

landscape with some vines and small huts rather than in the dramatized landscapes Piranesi and Desprez create around the walls of ancient Pompeii.⁶

The last chapter provides a comparative outlook towards other architectural drawings and publications in the same era. Pinto highlights the work of Woods and Dawkins in Baalbek and Palmyra, that of Stuart and Revett in Athens, and Robert Adam's enormous monograph on the Palace of Diocletian in Split-Spalato (in his work called Spalatro). The authors of these venerable works stressed their own reliability in showing nothing but the truth.

Reconstructions were fine, but should be based on the documented facts. Stuart and Revett even conducted small excavations around the Tower of the Winds in Athens. Their illustrations show a meticulous documentation in which shading serves not to romanticize or dramatize the architectural forms, but to make the octagonal shape of this monument clear. The influence of these complexes on contemporary architecture was great and the praise of the projects was mostly greater than the criticism.⁷ In contrast, Adam's work was more interested in effect and aesthetic representation than in exactitude and aimed to showcase Adam's own skills as a learned architect. Only here Pinto observes strong correspondences with Piranesi. Pinto's overarching conclusion is that Piranesi's pioneering publications formed the basis of these and other innovative projects. Moreover, Piranesi developed the notion of importance of rendering ancient monuments in their proper conditions and showing their qualities without giving way to a high degree of fantasy in reconstructions. In conclusion, Pinto has erected a fine monument for Piranesi and his architectural and artistic colleagues – one that makes fully comprehensible the reason that their work was so well received. It came just in time!

Notes:

- ^{1.} E.g. William MacDonald and John A. Pinto, *Hadrian's Villa and Its Legacy*, New Haven; London 1995. Throughout the book we recognize Pinto's specific penchant for this complex which clearly matched Piranesi's baroque gusto.
- ^{2.} A good introduction is given by John Wilton-Ely: Design through fantasy. Piranesi as designer, in S.E. Lawrence (ed.), *Piranesi as Designer*, New York 2007 (exhibition catalog New York and Haarlem), pp. 10-91.
- ^{3.} Wilton-Ely (cit. p. 25) points to Piranesi's irascible character and constant polemics.
- ^{4.} Cf. Ph. Fleury, *Vitruve, De l'architecture livre I*, Paris 1990, p. 109 for an explanation and parallels. Pinto does not explain the word.
- ^{5.} On Paestum and the interest in these temples in the 18th century, see also Sigrid D. de Jong, *Rediscovering Architecture. Paestum in Eighteenth Century Architectural Thought*, PhD thesis Leiden 2010, which will be published by Yale University Press in 2014.
- ^{6.} W. Hamilton, Account of the Discoveries at Pompeii, *Archaeologia: or Miscellaneous Tracts Relating to Antiquity* 4, 1777, 160-175. Pinto lists the paper in his bibliography with an erroneous year of publication (1786). Laurentino García y García calls these illustrations "mediocre" in his *Nova bibliotheca pompeiana. 250 anni di bibliografia archeologica*, Rome 1998, 604, ad cat. 6548.
- ^{7.} A good example of this eclectic taste is St. Pancras in London which has Erechtheions' main door, ornaments and korai porches at the sides as well as an adaptation of the Tower of the Winds.