



The Grotto Chair was modeled by hand by Juan Carlos Andrés Arias over a period of one year. During this time many subtle design issues were resolved as the details were formed, discussed and refined

An atemporal approach to Piranesi and his designs

Adam Lowe

As you arrive on San Giorgio Maggiore you are confronted by Palladio's beautiful and majestic church of San Giorgio. This Venetian landmark was built from Palladio's designs but not completed until 1610, 30 years after his death. At the time there was nothing unusual about this. It has taken several centuries of museum culture to turn rich and varied "subjects" into discrete "objects" located in a specific time and attributed to a specific hand. In the eighteenth century Piranesi resisted this emerging tendency. In thousands of images and throughout his controversial texts, he asserted the importance of looking in depth into the complex and revealing biographies of cultural artefacts. His way of engaging with things was anachronistic and the knowledge he derived from physical objects informed his thoughts on antiquity, the Renaissance and the Rome he inhabited.

The creation of a group of objects for the exhibition "Le Arti di Piranesi. Architetto, incisore, antiquario, vedutista, designer", shown originally in 2010 at the Fondazione Giorgio Cini and in 2012 at the Fundación "la Caixa", was suggested by Michele De Lucchi but inspired by Piranesi's approach. The eight objects made from his designs celebrate the importance of treating our cultural heritage as a living and dynamic source book. They are not copies of existing artefacts but interpretations of his designs performed for the first time. These objects, made by Factum Arte, were selected to show the full range of Piranesi's genius as a designer. The starting point in the selection was De Lucchi's conviction that Piranesi "should probably have been born 300 years later", since "he would make full use of the huge potential offered by modern technology".²

The selection focuses equally on Piranesi's designs and his re-interpretations of the antique. Four objects were chosen from *Diverse Maniere* (Rome, 1769), Piranesi's catalogue of designs for fireplaces, furniture and objects published in three languages to ensure it reached the widest possible audience; a chair, a coffee pot, a tripod and a chimney-piece with its fire grate. The other objects are from *Vasi,*

candelabri, cippi (Rome, 1778): a tripod based closely on the antique, an altar based on fragments found in the Villa Adriana, a candelabrum and a giant vase. In these designs after the antique it was common practice for Piranesi to use his connoisseurship to reconstruct complete objects from fragments. The resulting objects celebrate his prolific creative energy as an architect/designer. His forensic approach to objects as a reliable source of information has had a profound influence on subsequent generations of artists, architects, designers, decorators and film-makers. The greatness of this pre-modern figure lies in his ability to read objects, to move beyond issues of national or cultural identity, beyond the "tyranny of theory", in order to fuse a wealth of influences that made Rome the extraordinarily fertile place it was, both in antiquity and inside Piranesi's mind.

Looking at the finished silver-patinated bronze *Isis* tripod in Madrid is a viscerally strange experience. It addresses something fundamental about making, and the complex and messy language of *things*. My only experience of this object, reputedly found in Pompeii, is through an image etched by Piranesi. This image is the fulcrum with the tripod from antiquity on one side and the contemporary realisation on the other. When making an object from a design done more than two centuries ago the issues are essentially the same as if the design was done last week. There are many levels of mediation and many transformations that enter the equation; the fact that we are making the object using a range of technologies that did not exist in the eighteenth century simply adds a new dimension.

If Piranesi was standing beside me now, would he be effusive and "perfettissimo matto in tutto"³ or would he be shocked by the idea of modelling in a digital space? Would he share my wonder that in its early gestation (while the endless conversations and transformations were going on) the tripod only existed as a virtual form in a computer memory displayed ephemerally on a screen? It was not until these digital data were used to control a laser that gradually

moved and hardened the form within a tank full of resin that this object assumed anything resembling a physical presence.⁴ Once it emerged from the tank, the various parts were then subjected to more physical transformations for it to become what it is: from resin to silicon encapsulation and into wax; from wax to plaster encapsulation and into bronze. Once in bronze it starts to assume the physical properties it now has. But more transformations still await it: silver patination and heat, chemical reactions and abrasion, dragon's blood⁵ and airbrush sprays, complex manual activity aided by nineteenth century recipe books. All these mediations produce a surface that wants to tarnish to black. How to hold those physical properties in a stable form is another issue, another skill and yet more conversations and mediations. The same is true for all the objects we have made, even if the details differ. Some once existed as remnants of antiquity, others never existed except in Piranesi's fertile imagination. Our privilege at Factum Arte has been to spend time thinking about these things.

Piranesi was dependent on a group of craftsmen, many with the same skills required today. Factum Arte is also dependent on a group of artisans, both digital and physical, backed up by software writers skilled in the arts of visual language, who have naturally migrated to Spain as a result of the free flow of information that the internet has made possible:

English, Japanese, Spanish, French, Argentine, Brazilian, Russian and some of less discrete cultural origins. All share a common interest: to make things articulate and to enjoy the possibilities that emerge when the biography or "social life" of an object is given more weight than conventional assumptions about authenticity and originality. The originality of an object belongs in the conversations that happen as it is being made, and in the way these conversations condition the character of the finished object. If you can read back and grasp those conversations, the object becomes articulate. But before an object speaks to us, we need to ask it the right questions.

Piranesi was a complex character and his images trigger thoughts that move through and across time. This is one of his main subjects and the objects he suggested in etched lines on paper have proved remarkably eloquent. He was capricious and celebrated the fact. I feel privileged to have spent six months in his shadow and to have been able to listen to his voice in these prints. I can see some of his limitations, but I admire the way he fought the revisionist reading of antiquity and the Renaissance projected by aesthetically motivated scholars in the second half of the eighteenth century. I celebrate the extraordinary generosity with which he shared his ideas and passions. Hopefully, the objects we have made in Madrid will keep this dialogue alive and active.

Stereolithographic prints of a sphinx/harpy and the crown from the top of the *Isis* tripod. Both elements were modelled in ZBrush and printed by Materialise in Lueven.





Detail of the silver patinated bronze Isis tripod with a top of alabaster from Fuentes de Ebro.

Isis tripod, silver-patinated bronze with alabaster top

From *Vasi, candelabri, cippi, sarcofagi, tripodi, lucerne, ed ornamenti antichi disegnati ed incisi dal cavalier Giovanni Battista Piranesi* (Rome, 1778)
Wilton-Ely 929

Digitally modelled using ZBrush by Adam Lowe with Voxelstudios, Madrid
3D realisation using a stereo-lithographic printer at Materialise, Leuven
Patination by Elena Arias and Adam Lowe
Alabaster from Fuentes de Ebro, Zaragoza

Edition of 12 copies
90 cm high (32 cm diameter at top)
2010

Piranesi's etching is based on a tripod from the first or second century AD. It has been claimed that it was discovered in the Temple of Isis in Pompeii in the 1760s. His model, however, was not the tripod itself (now in the Museo Archeologico Nazionale in Naples) but rather a drawing from Vincenzo Brenna's 1770 survey of Roman relics. Brenna's conception of antiquity was a theatrical one, and this tripod is a clear example of the Roman aesthetic of appropriating influences. Piranesi's design differs in several subtle but significant ways from the Classical tripod: his proportions emphasise the vertical, the position of the sphinx/harpy is altered, the three legs are not joined by a central bar, the pedestal appears to be composed of two intersecting arcs and the frieze of skulls and garlands has been "improved". His approach to antiquity was more imaginative than the forensic recording and restrained (objective) restoration we aspire to today. In *Diverse Maniere*⁶ Piranesi urged the modern designer to emulate what he saw as the creative fertility of Roman antiquity by freely combining motifs from the past to produce works of striking originality, advocating connoisseurship and "improvement" over slavish imitation of an original.

The starting point for interpreting Piranesi's print as a three-dimensional object was to understand his approach to design and making. A central theme in his writing is to assert the importance of a speculative

and unfettered imagination to defy the "tyranny of theory". It was of paramount importance for him to give free rein to his inquisitive mind and his fertile imagination, both in responding to antiquity and in designing new objects.

The "tyranny of theory" refers to a particular conception of the Graeco-Roman debate, which used Platonic ideas to support the supremacy of Greek sculpture and architecture as the embodiment of a single, pure, abstracted truth. For Piranesi this reductive approach was anathema, and he vigorously asserted that its over-simplification of the creative process misrepresented the achievements of the Romans and, by extension, the creative urge itself. Guercino's famous phrase "Col sporcar si trova" can be translated as: "By messing about, one discovers". Messing about suggests excess, or undirected play; but it is also an acceptance of the tolerance required for any system to work. Disorder, serendipity and noise are intrinsic to the process of Piranesi's imaginative interpretation. These elements are all inherent in physical touch and the act of making. By messing, Piranesi did more than assemble ideas: he took ideas, gave them form and defied the emerging tyranny of the aesthetic theory of Greek purity.

Piranesi was a Venetian shaped by contemporary Rome and by his knowledge of the "antique", which equally embraced Egyptian, Etruscan, Greek and Roman remains. Many of these remains were being discovered in the mid eighteenth century on the Italian Peninsula. He was fascinated by how the past and the present merge when you engage with an object. He developed a "connoisseur's eye" that could see beyond surface appearances. He was widely respected for his knowledge and understanding of the Classical world, but he was also criticised for his manic and effusive passions. His influence has been enduring and he made a significant contribution to the new Enlightenment thinking that was transforming European taste, political opinion and perceptions of the Classical world.

Dedication

The dedication on the print is to “Signor Cavaliere Roberto Smyth, a lover of the Fine Arts”. Sir Robert Smyth (1744-1802) of Berechurch, Essex, went on the Grand Tour with his wife in the 1770s. After visiting Milan and Naples they arrived in Rome on 25 March 1777, where they met Piranesi. They left Rome in September 1778, shortly before Piranesi’s death on the 9th November. Presumably the dedication relates to the fact that the Smyths had seen the tripod exhibited in the Royal Collection at Portici. The collection belonged to the King of the Two Sicilies, Ferdinand IV (1751-1825), who came to power in 1759 as an eight-year-old boy when his father ascended the Spanish throne as Charles III. He wanted to retain control over his son for as long as possible and deliberately neglected his education, encouraging him to live a frivolous life. In 1768 the 17-year-old Ferdinand married Maria Carolina, elder sister of Marie Antoinette, by proxy. Beautiful and smart, her ambition was to raise the kingdom of Naples to the position of a great power; she soon came to exercise complete sway over her weak and inept husband. Her attention was drawn to the archaeological site of Pompeii by the excavations that had taken place in the Theatre, the Triangular Forum and the Temple of Isis between 1764 and 1766. With her support and encouragement the excavations gained pace.

The Cult of Isis

The Egyptian Goddess Isis is described in the *Amduat* as “the one of magic”. With her magic powers she managed to reunite all the fragments of the body of her husband Osiris. In the process she used his dismembered penis to impregnate herself and conceive Horus. She is often depicted seated with the infant Horus on her lap. Her “immaculate” conception and the iconographic similarities naturally led to an association between Isis and Mary, mother of Christ. The Isis Cult conquered Rome in the first century AD after decades of rejection and outright persecution. Her cult became one of the strongest, surviving until the sixth century.

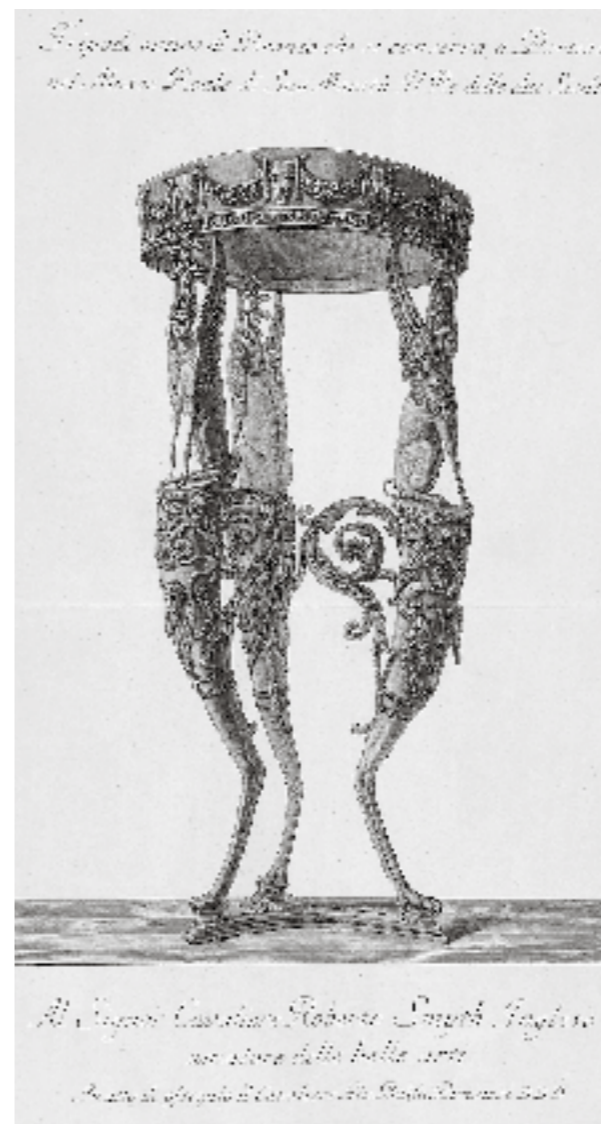
The fascination with Egypt and Egyptianising had a long history in Rome. Eight Egyptian obelisks were brought to the city between the first and third centuries AD and five Roman copies were made in antiquity. But it is clear that the understanding of hieroglyphs did not travel as freely as the artefacts themselves. Many of the obelisks and the *Mensa Isiaca* (*Tabula Bembi*, a bronze inlaid tablet made in Rome in the first century AD, now in the Museo Egizio in Turin) contain nonsensical hieroglyphs and fictional Egyptian rites. Attempts to make sense of the hieroglyphs had to wait for the attention of the great Jesuit thinker Athanasius Kircher (1602-1680). Kircher published *Lingua Aegyptiaca Restituta* in 1643 and four volumes of translations from hieroglyphs (1650-1654).⁷ Kircher was also actively involved in the re-erection of obelisks in Roman squares, sometimes adding fantastic “hieroglyphs” of his own design in the blank areas.

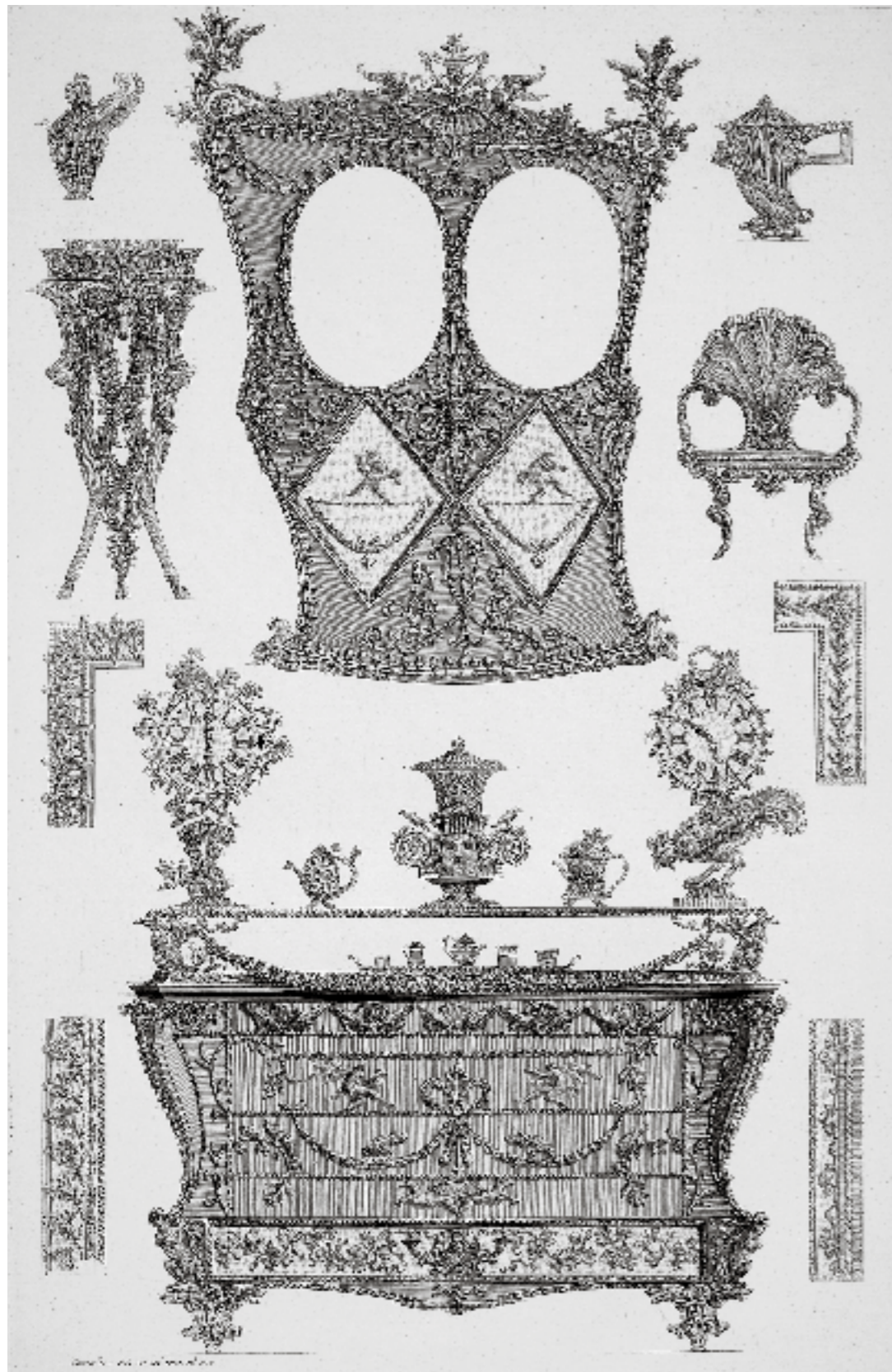


Antique bronze tripod from Pompeii, Naples, Museo Archeologico Nazionale

cat. 247
Antique bronze tripod kept in Portici at the Museo Reale, from Vasi, *candelabri, cippi, sarcofagi, tripodi*, 1778

Bronze tripod made in 2010 by Adam Lowe and the Factum Arte workshop, based on the engraving by Giambattista Piranesi





cat. 215
Miscellaneous examples
of furniture, from *Diverse
Maniere d'adornare i
cammini*, 1769

Helical tripod, gold-plated bronze with alabaster top

From *Diverse Maniere d'adornare i cammini ed ogni altra parte degli edifizii desunte dall'architettura Egizia, Etrusca, e Greca con un Ragionamento Apologetico in difesa dell'Architettura Egizia, e Toscana*, opera del Cavaliere Giambattista Piranesi Architetto (Rome, 1769)
Wilton-Ely 878

Digitally modelled using ZBrush by Adam Lowe with Voxelstudios, Madrid
3D realisation using a stereo-lithographic printer at Materialise, Leuven
Cast in bronze by Fademesa, Madrid
Gold plated by J. Muñoz, Madrid
Alabaster from Fuentes de Ebro, Zaragoza
Patination by Elena Arias and Adam Lowe

Edition of 12 copies
90 cm high (46 cm wide at the top)
2010

Diverse Maniere appeared at the end of the 1760s, the most significant and productive decade in Piranesi's career in terms of theory and practice. It brings together a clear concept of his radical aesthetic and an impressive collection of designs that articulate his taste and interests. Chimney-pieces dominate the first part of the publication, followed by commodes, clocks, vases, side-tables, small candelabra, coffee pots, chairs and a surprisingly large number of doors for sedan chairs and coaches. It is effectively a manifesto of his design ideas with the text published in English, French and Italian, making it accessible to an international audience.

The volume, with the subtitle *Ragionamento Apologetico in difesa dell'Architettura Egizia, e Toscana*, opera del Cavaliere Giambattista Piranesi Architetto, is much more than a continuation of Piranesi's controversial defence of the Etruscans, although this clearly plays a part in the spirit of the designs. The work includes a chart of Etruscan inventions and two diagrams showing the influence of shell forms upon their vase designs. The main argument calls for a coherent new system of design, growing from a study of nature combined with all that is excellent in the past, regardless of whether it is Greek or Roman, Etruscan or Egyptian. Piranesi's criteria are essentially visual rather than academic and historical and he

aired some remarkably original ideas about the stylisation of natural forms in antiquity.

It remains uncertain how many of the designs in *Diverse Maniere* were actually executed. Chimney-pieces were made for the Earl of Exeter (Burghley House) and John Hope. Various articles of furniture were made for Monsignor Rezzonico, including a pair of side-tables now in the Minneapolis Institute of Fine Arts and the Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam. Despite the small number of objects that can be clearly identified as being made directly from "Piranesi designs", it is undeniable that this publication exerted a profound influence on the development of taste and style in England, France and Russia at the end of the 1700s which continued to flourish and mutate during the 1800s.

This particular tripod, on a page with a number of other objects, is dramatically different in spirit from the *Isis* Tripod illustrated in *Vasi, candelabri, cippi*. The most obvious difference is the presence of a self-referential double helix cornucopia that occupies the central area between the three legs. The ancient Egyptians repeated characters and added phonetic components to prevent gaps in their hieroglyphic inscriptions. Piranesi shares this tendency, continually adding layers of decoration of diminishing scale, doubtless something he learnt from his close study of nature and shells, mixed with his native Venetian sensibility. Piranesi's notion of beauty and elegance is found not in reductive simplicity but in the mastery of the language of organic decoration and the poetic reverberations it stimulates.

Lightness of touch

When comparing Piranesi's designs with the physical objects that exist, for example the Rezzonico side-table, it is clear that the expectations he had about the fineness and complexity of the decoration have been significantly simplified by the craftsman who made the objects. Possibly only the English carver Grinling Gibbons (1648-1721), who worked alongside Christopher Wren, possessed the fineness

of touch to pull off Piranesi's intended design while avoiding the Greek prettiness Piranesi argued so passionately against.

While many of Piranesi's drawings for the construction of Santa Maria del Priorato are sketchy, he worked with the masons and sculptors to ensure the sculptural elements they produced had the look and feel he wanted. The illustrations in *Diverse Maniere* are designed to be as clear as possible so that they could be taken to England, France or elsewhere and fabricated in his absence. However, they cannot be considered production designs. The drawing of this tripod conspicuously leaves out one of the legs so that the complex detail on the central double helix can be clearly seen. The heads of the satyrs on each leg are cited as an archetype, as is much of the decorative pattern. Piranesi clearly assumed that any skilled artisan would possess the knowledge and ability to improvise around the design in order to produce a harmonious result. Exact details of the fluted dish set into the top and the fixings for the floating barley-twist element in the centre are left open-ended.

Dedication

Piranesi dedicated his book of designs *Diverse Maniere d'adornare i cammini* to Monsignor Giambattista Rezzonico. Giambattista Rezzonico was Grand Prior of the Order of Malta from 1761, and Maggiordomo to his uncle Pope Clement XIII from July 1766, with an apartment designed by Piranesi in the Palazzo Quirinale (at that time the papal residence).

The Rezzonico family were rich Venetians who had bought "patents of nobility" from the Venetian state in the seventeenth century. Giambattista's grandfather Giambattista Rezzonico established the family's importance in Venice and bought a magnificent unfinished palazzo on the Grand Canal. His practical and business mind was able to realise one of the great building projects in Venice. Ca' Rezzonico was originally designed in 1649 by Baldassarre Longhena, but only completed in 1756

when Giambattista commissioned the architect Giorgio Massari to finish the project.

The family's power and cultural influence grew when Giambattista Rezzonico's son Carlo was elected pope in 1758. As an unworldly man from new money, he needed Venetian support that he could trust in the complex political environment of Rome. He appointed his nephews, Giambattista and Abbondio Rezzonico, to positions of influence and through their counsel commissioned Piranesi to design domestic interiors and furnishings for Castel Gandolfo, the Quirinale, and the Campidoglio. With his unlimited ambition, imaginative fertility and original ideas about architecture and design, the Venetian Piranesi was a natural choice. The appointment gave him the opportunities, financial backing and confidence to develop his architectural and design ideas without constraint. In 1764 Pope Clement XIII gave him his first major commission as an architect. He prepared magnificent designs for the reconstruction of the Basilica San Giovanni in Laterano, one of the most important churches in Christendom, the cathedral of Rome. But his designs were not accepted and the commission was eventually abandoned. Pope Clement XIII later gave him a knighthood (the *Speron d'Oro*, 1767) which, according to John Wilton-Ely, may have been to compensate him for his disappointment. His only realised architectural commission was the reconstruction of the church of Santa Maria del Priorato and the surrounding area on the Aventino that served as the home to the Knights of Malta. This work still stands as a testament to Piranesi's ideas and his radical approach to design.

After the death of Pope Clement XIII in 1769, Giambattista Rezzonico acquired the title of Cardinal in September 1770 and went to live with his brother Abbondio in his sumptuous apartment on the Campidoglio transformed with Piranesi's help. The apartment housed the gilt-framed drawings for the Lateran project that stimulated the imagination of Goethe and other visitors.

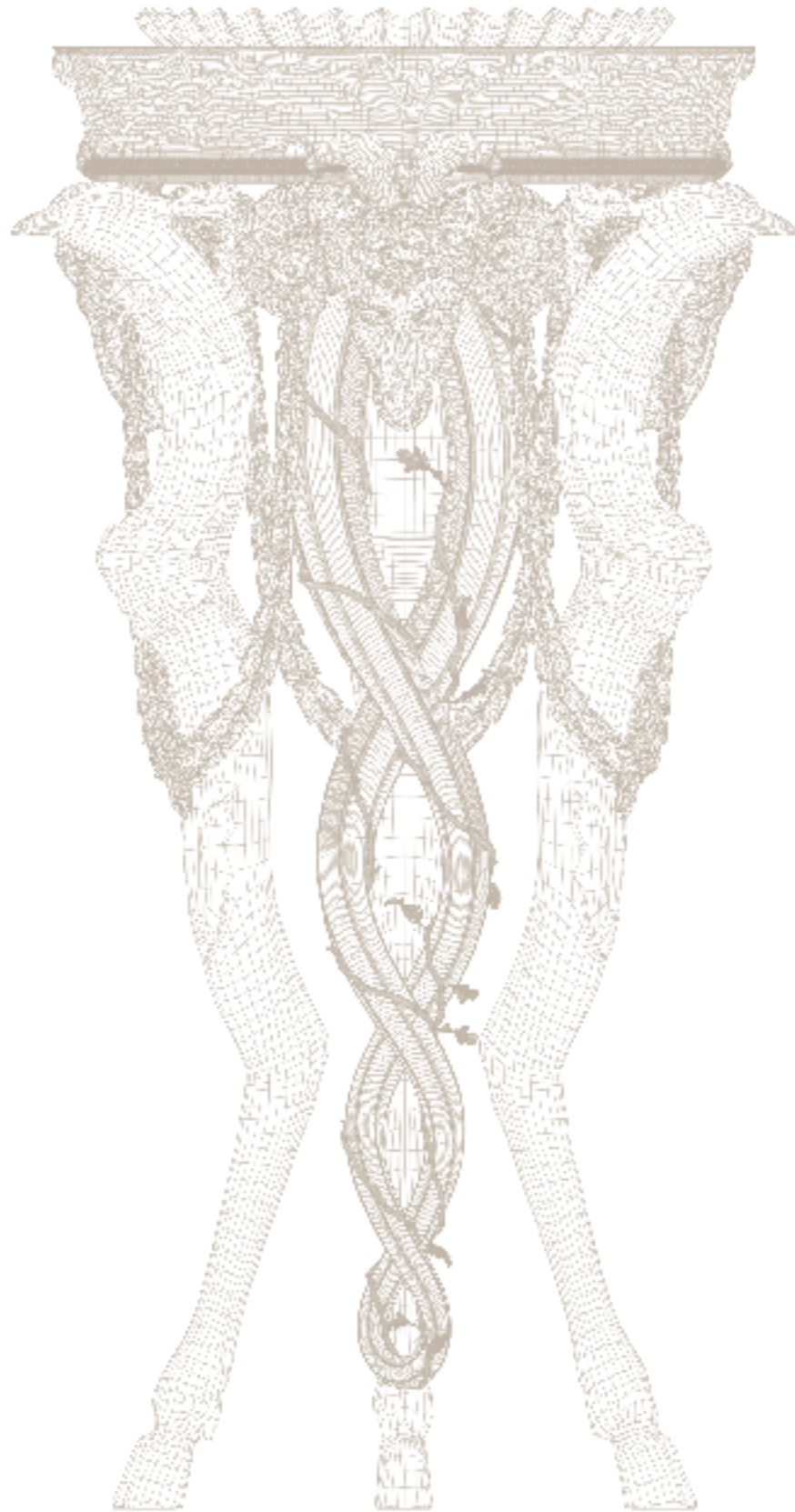
Gold-plated bronze tripod based on the design in *Diverse Maniere d'Adornare i Cammini*, 1769.

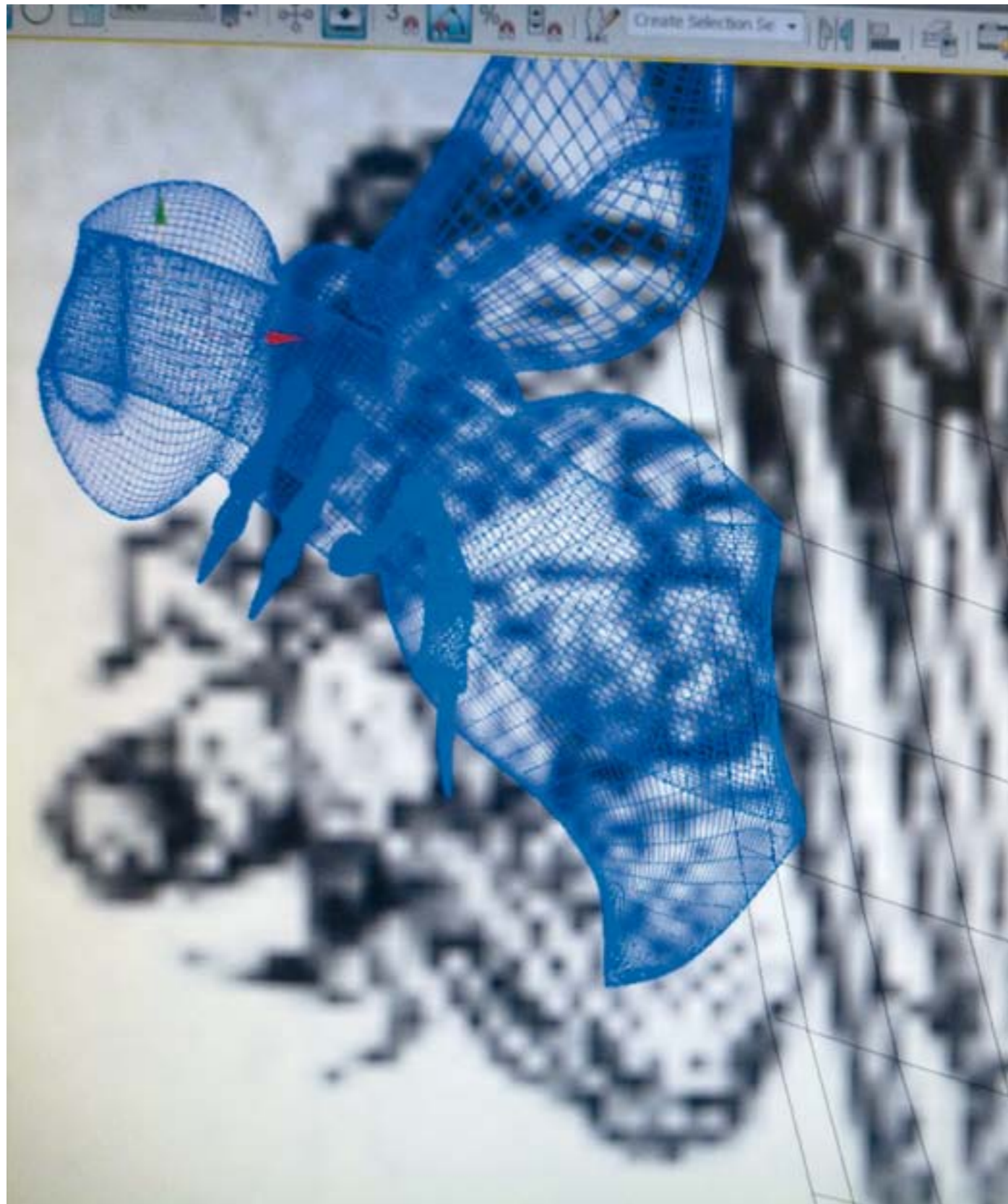


Detail of the vine that wraps around the double helix form in the centre of the tripod, modelled in ZBrush

A wire frame drawing of the complete tripod. The digital modelling process produces a wide variety of images as the process gains complexity

An assortment of stereo-lithographically printed elements compared to the printed diagrams that were used during the assembly of the final gold-plated bronze object. Due to the fine details capable in digital modelling the leaves were made individually and cast in silver





A wire frame model of the spout in the form of a bee. While the aim was to stay as close to Piranesi's designs as possible it was occasionally necessary to improve or correct some details, in this case the angle of Piranesi's spout which prevented the object performing its proper function.

Miscellaneous examples of furniture, from Diverse Maniere d'adornare i cammini, 1769, detail of the coffee pot

The finished coffee pot cast in silver from digitally modelled elements.

Coffee pot, sterling silver cast

From *Diverse Maniere d'adornare i cammini ed ogni altra parte degli edifizii desunte dall'architettura Egizia, Etrusca, e Greca con un Ragionamento Apologetico in difesa dell'Architettura Egizia, e Toscana, opera del Cavaliere Giambattista Piranesi Architetto* (Rome, 1769)

Wilton-Ely 878

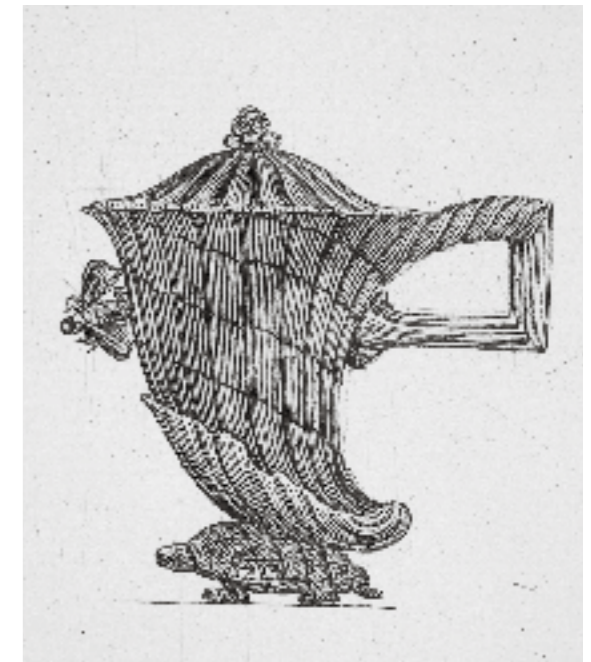
Digitally modelled using Z Brush by Adam Lowe with Voxelstudios, Madrid
3D realisation using a stereo-lithographic printer at Materialise, Leuven
Made in cast silver by J. Muñoz, Madrid

Edition of 12 copies
25 cm high
2010

Diverse Maniere opens with two pages of drawings of shells from the Gualtieri Collection intended to show how a deep understanding of the growth of natural form conditioned the Etruscan sense of design. Piranesi's ambition was to understand nature in order to revitalise design, make it relevant and, above all, demonstrate the deeply interconnected relationship between the things people live with and their quality of life. He sought the principles of design that made natural things beautiful and was dismissive of the illustrative and decorative use of nature as an ornament, a fault he attributed to the Greeks:

The Greeks, by concentrating on ornamentation, on the subdivision of parts, and on carvings have perhaps been too successful in achieving a kind of vain prettiness, at the expense of gravity. It could truthfully be said that no shrub nor tree exists from which they have not borrowed little stems or fronds to embellish their architecture; there are no apples, flowers, or animal figurines that they have not imported into their friezes; no animal skins or mouldings or caprices of any kind that have not been carved by them on pedestals or architraves. But, though all these are taken from nature, and formed as nature makes them, I still think it necessary to consider whether placing such things on cornices, friezes, or architraves is any more natural than, for example (as Horace says), painting a cypress tree in the midst of the sea when depicting a shipwreck.⁸

An inspection of the language of design in Piranesi's coffee pot reveals a close study of how natural forms evolve. The depiction of the tortoise is simple and



stylised and could be open to the same accusations of illustration he levelled against the Greeks. The movement in the body of the pot from a natural shell to a stylised ridging is a movement from a direct quotation of natural form to a high level of abstraction based on closely observing the way a shell develops. The subtle movement from this language into a simplified treatment in the handle almost prefigures Art Deco design and the roots of Modernism (with small simplifications the handle could belong to a design by Christopher Dresser [1834-1904]). The fact that it sits comfortably on an object designed before 1769 is testament to Piranesi's taste and skill as a designer. When making the coffee pot some liberties have been taken with the bee in order to produce a working spout and a modification has been made to the lid so that it stays in place when being used.

Gualtieri Collection of Shells

Niccolò Gualtieri (1688-1744), medical doctor, malacologist and professor at the University of Pisa, had assembled a major shell collection. He devised a system of classification that was admired by later zoologists, including Jean-Baptiste Lamarck (1744-1829). Part of his collection still exists in the Museo di Storia Naturale e del Territorio in Calci, operated under the auspices of the University of Pisa. Gualtieri co-founded the first European botany society, the Botanical Society of Florence, in 1716. For anyone with a fertile imagination cabinets of curiosities provided an important source of inspiration. The collection of Ulisse Aldrovandi (1522-1605), described as the eighth wonder of the world, established natural history and the stories associated with it as an important field of study with its roots in the Classical world. He was described both as the "Bolognese Aristotle" and the "second Pliny". For Piranesi the wonders of nature were not enough: they needed to be filtered through human perception. If he lived now he would surely respond to the shrinking divide between human and non-human and perhaps find even greater meaning in the inspiration offered by nature and natural resources.

Coffee houses

The Turks took Constantinople in 1453 and coffee drinking became widespread in the Ottoman Empire. In Rome, Pope Clement VIII (1536-1605) was asked to ban coffee as an infidel threat also associated with sodomy, but on tasting it he declared that it was too delicious to be left to the unbelievers. All over Europe coffee drinking became fashionable, its coffee houses part of the rise of a new kind of civic sphere nurturing non-conformist behaviour. Venice boasts the longest running coffee house in Italy, Caffè Florian, which opened in 1720 in Piazza San Marco. In Rome, Caffè Greco opened in 1760 and now lists Piranesi, Goethe, Stendhal, Byron and Keats among its visitors. Caffè degli Inglesi opened a few years later with wall paintings designed by Piranesi, at the foot of the Spanish Steps in Piazza di Spagna on the corner of Via delle Carrozze. By the mid 1760s it was notorious for its interior decor and frequented by many of Piranesi's circle and clients.

Piranesi's two designs for the Caffè degli Inglesi in *Diverse Maniere* are the only record of the paintings that remain. They are presented alongside a series of designs for elaborate Egyptian-style fireplaces. Piranesi's "new aesthetic" of excessive and cross-cultural references was intended as a clear refutation of increasingly dominant but austere theories about Greek purity. He was showing them in the most important meeting place in Rome for international "grand tourists". His Egyptian designs appear long before Napoleon and Denon's discoveries in Egypt, which triggered the nineteenth century design fantasies of the Egyptian Revival.

This coffee pot, which appears in *Diverse Maniere*, is a coherent example of Piranesi's aesthetic. Coffee seemed to offer him the perfect vehicle to address the complicated issue of taste.

cat. 180
Vases and shells,
from *Diverse Maniere*
d'adornare i cammini,
1769





Detail of the swan's neck arms of the Grotto chair. Modelled by Juan Carlos Andrés Arias, cast in a synthetic wood resin. The finished object was then water-gilded using traditional techniques by Eva María Segovia

Grotto Chair, water gilded resin

From *Diverse Maniere d'adornare i cammini ed ogni altra parte degli edifizii desunte dall'architettura Egizia, Etrusca, e Greca con un Ragionamento Apologetico in difesa dell'Architettura Egizia, e Toscana, opera del Cavaliere Giambattista Piranesi Architetto* (Rome, 1769)

Wilton-Ely 878

Modelled, moulded and casted in synthetic wood epoxy resin by Juan Carlos Andrés Arias, Factum Arte, Madrid
Water gilded by Eva María Segovia, Factum Arte, Madrid

Edition of 12 copies

115 x 85 x 80 cm

2011

This elaborate grotto chair is depicted on the same page of *Diverse Maniere* as the coffee pot and the helix tripod. All three objects are examples of Piranesi's Venetian Rococo taste in which caprice collides with imperial splendour. The chair has a scallop back trimmed with small shells. Two swan's necks emerge from the base of the scallop, twisting in a corkscrewed "line of beauty" as they grasp the hair of two fauns positioned on the front corners of the chair. The legs are heavily stylised, articulated at the knee with faces and finished with goat's hooves. Typical of the language of grotto chairs, two stylised dolphins occupy the space under the seat. The eclectic references merged in this chair are representative of his celebration of excessive, opulent and extravagant elements. Chairs of this type can be found in natural wood but they are usually gilded in silver or gold. They first appeared in the late Renaissance and became popular again in the 1900s.

Unlike the other objects here that were made by groups of craftsmen, this chair was completely modelled by hand by Juan Carlos Andrés Arias, over the course of many months. The final result, cast in a resin used to restore wooden furniture, was gesso coated and water gilded. The chair, made in Madrid in the twenty-first century, was clearly conceived in Piranesi's workshop in Rome. The twist of the swan's necks, eloquent and gentle from one angle, aggressive and attacking from another, could be interpreted as representing competing facets of Piranesi's own character. While gilding the object

it was decided to leave the chair looking "new" and avoid distressing the gold. Most grotto chairs that can be found now are heavily aged. This is partly due to the damp conditions that exist in grottos and partly to the fact that since the Renaissance, the idea of grotto furniture refers back to an illusion of a Golden Age of Classical antiquity. Ageing and distressing have an important role to play in Piranesi's work but the designs in *Diverse Maniere* are his own creations. They are an assertion that he could produce designs that are equal to the achievements of antiquity; to artificially age the gold seemed to undermine Piranesi's achievement.

Originality

Our age is obsessed with originality; the eighteenth century had its own particular version of this obsession. Now, as then, the original and the authentic are connected in a complex ways. Paradoxically, this obsession to pinpoint the source of originality increases proportionally as more and more copies of increasingly better quality become available and accessible. Piranesi was not interested in slavishly recording and making copies; he wanted to understand artefacts, reflect upon them, understand them and celebrate their relevance. His ambition was to exceed, in terms of quality, the extraordinary ones that were being discovered all over the Italian peninsula.

Piranesi's clearest and most direct summary of his approach to architecture and design, *Osservazioni sopra la Lettre de M. Mariette*, stresses the importance of the creative imagination in conditioning both the past and present. He strives to explain what can happen when we understand how to mediate and transform our environment.

The target of this public letter was Pierre-Jean Mariette (1697-1774), a collector and dealer of old master prints from a family of engravers. He had great respect for Piranesi as a connoisseur and printmaker, but could not accept his claim that the magnificence of Roman Art was derived from its Etruscan roots rather than its Greek borrowings. Mariette followed the "less is more" argument about Greek art. He promoted the ideas of German art historian and

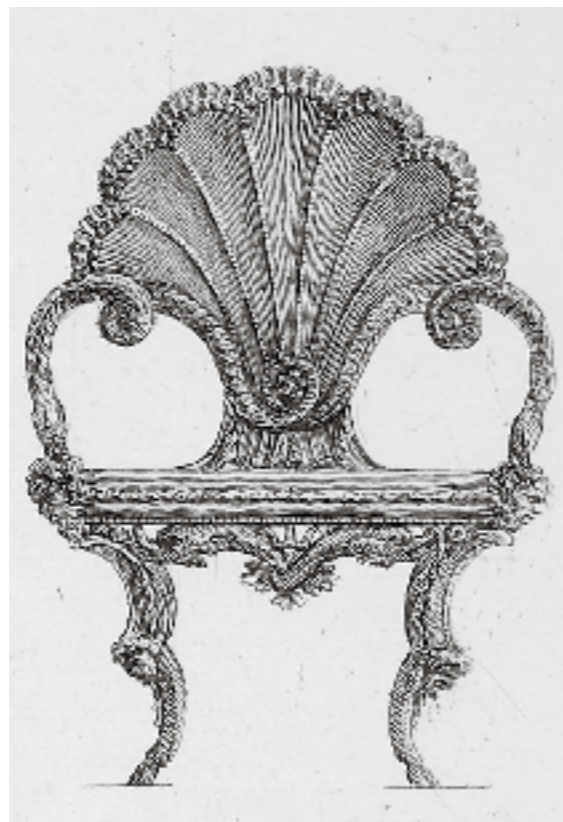
archaeologist Johann Joachim Winckelmann (1717–1768), who argued for the refined simplicity of Greek style over the Romans’ excessive decoration and decadent corruption of Greek purity, an argument that has characterised all subsequent accounts of Classical art and the Renaissance. Piranesi’s writing style was direct and he relished an open confrontation with Mariette. Both would have been fully aware of Winckelmann’s assertion, in *Gedanken über die Nachahmung der griechischen Werke in Malerei und Bildhauerkunst* (*Thoughts on the Imitation of Greek Works in Painting and Sculpture*, 1755), that “The one way for us to become great, perhaps inimitable, is by imitating the ancients”.

This statement was a provocation to Piranesi. He steadfastly championed artistic freedom in both art and architecture:

Let us imagine the impossible: let us imagine that the world—sickened though it is by everything that does not change from day to day—were gracefully to accept your monotony; what would architecture then become? A low trade, in which one would do nothing but copy.⁹

Piranesi’s ideas brimmed with imaginative *capricci* but they were gradually marginalised as the theories of Winckelmann and the followers of Greek taste gained acceptance. Another Venetian, Antonio Canova, born in 1757, the year before Piranesi’s son Francesco, found favour and emerged as the epitome of Neo-Classical style. His delicate renderings of flesh in marble were much more in keeping with the new taste than Piranesi’s extravagances and cross-cultural references.

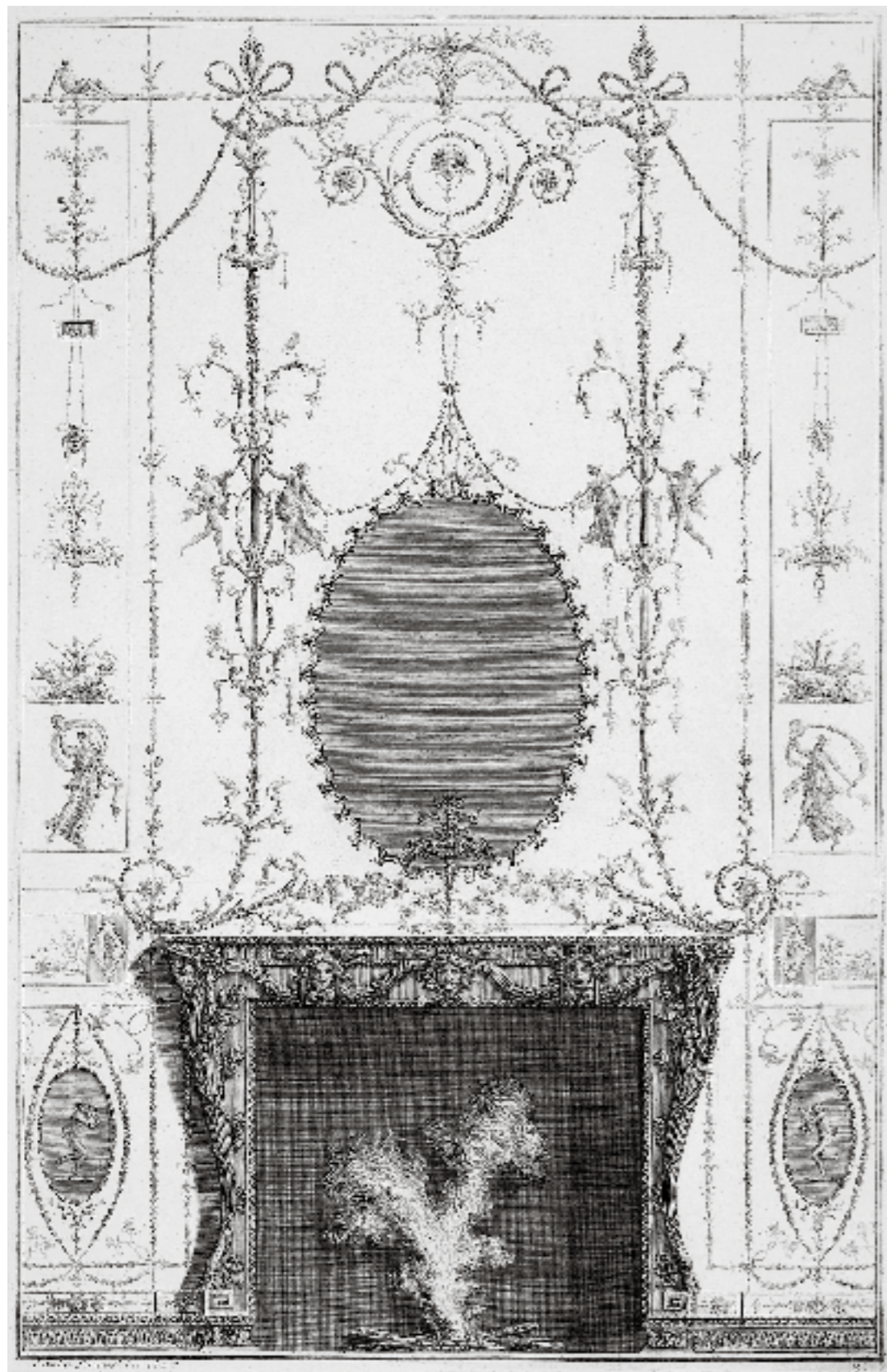
Piranesi’s riposte to Mariette at times adopts a proto-Ruskinian tone about the integrity of manual labour and hints at the intellectual bankruptcy of a privileged and aesthetic class for whom culture is a tasteful endgame of refinement and indulgence. I cannot help feeling that Piranesi smiled as he conceived this grotto chair, realising that its decadence, flair and excess would have seduced Winckelmann’s aesthetic sensibility. Sadly Winckelmann was murdered a year before *Diverse Maniere* was published.



cat. 215
Miscellaneous examples
of furniture, from *Diverse
Maniere d'adornare i
cammini*, 1769, detail of
the chair

The finished gilded Grotto
chair based on the design
by Piranesi





cat. 183
Chimney-piece with a
frieze decorated with
three heads joined by
cornucopias, from *Diverse
Maniere d'adornare i
cammini*, 1769

Chimney-piece made in *scagliola* with Thassos marble top and cast iron fire grate

From *Diverse Maniere d'adornare i cammini ed ogni altra parte degli edifizii desunte dall'architettura Egizia, Etrusca, e Greca con un Ragionamento Apologetico in difesa dell'Architettura Egizia, e Toscana*, opera del Cavaliere Giambattista Piranesi Architetto (Rome, 1769)
Wilton-Ely 824 and 842

Digitally modelled using ZBrush by Adam Lowe with Voxelstudios, Madrid
3D realisation using a stereo-lithographic printer by Materialise, Leuven
Cast in a white *scagliola* with gypsum crystals by Sebastián Beyró and polished and finished by hand by Sebastián Beyró and Eduardo Corrales, Factum Arte, Madrid

All the sculptural elements modelled by Lauren Canales, Factum Arte
The bed of the grate was developed by Pedro Miró, Factum Arte, Madrid, and water-jet cut from a sheet of steel by Arm Waterjet, Guadalajara
Cast in iron by Fademesa, Madrid

160 x 214 x 30 cm
2010

In *Diverse Maniere* Piranesi gave particular prominence to chimney-pieces, an interior feature with no precedent in antiquity. As there was little design history to respect and no function to fulfil other than providing a mantelpiece and embellishing a fire opening, the chimney-piece demonstrated the imaginative application of the past to a strictly contemporary requirement. Moreover, as Piranesi astutely observed in the inscription on one of the plates (Wilton-Ely 867), the chimney-piece was a particularly significant focus for ornamentation in England and the English were an important market for Piranesi. Of the designs featured in *Diverse Maniere*, 61 are designs for fireplaces, 11 in a flamboyant Egyptian style. Emulating what he identified as the Roman approach, he merged Egyptian and Etruscan elements with Roman antiquity and the Renaissance. In his virtuoso Rococo designs, the language of the chimney-piece found its first great master, but only two of them are known to exist, one for the Earl of Exeter (now in Burghley House) and the other for John Hope.¹⁰

Although he was an astute businessman and a respected connoisseur of the Classical world, responses to his work were sharply divided. The academic painter James Barry (1741-1806) was a fierce critic,

objecting to capitals carved “in so fantastic a manner with so little of the true forms remaining, that they serve indifferently for all kinds of things, and are with ease converted into candelabra, chimney-pieces, and what not. Examples of this kind of trash may be seen in abundance in the collections of Piranesi”.¹¹

But Horace Walpole, ever the Romantic, enthused:

This delicate redundance of ornament growing into our architecture might perhaps be checked, if our artists would study the sublime dreams of Piranesi, who seems to have conceived visions of Rome beyond what it boasted even in the meridian of its splendour. Savage as Salvator Rosa, fierce as Michelangelo, and as exuberant as Rubens, he has imagined scenes that would startle geometry, and exhaust the Indies to realise. He piles palaces on bridges, and temples on palaces, and scales Heaven with mountains of edifices. Yet what taste in his boldness! What grandeur in his wildness! What labour and thought both in his rashness and details!¹²

John Martin (1789-1854), Gustave Doré (1832-1883) and the nineteenth century imagination built upon Piranesi's sublime dexterity and freedom. In the twentieth century he was embraced by film-makers and set designers (as well as the architects who built the early cinemas). Hollywood plundered the source material he offered and achieved the sense of scale and awe he could only imagine. Piranesi never comments directly on Assyrian art, but the designs for D. W. Griffith's film masterpiece *Intolerance* (1916) capture the scale and potent virility Piranesi associated with the Classical world. Now, in a digital world that dissolves the boundaries between disciplines, his preoccupations with knowledge, imagination and appropriation are more relevant than ever.

In each of the interpretations of the objects, we have attempted to follow Piranesi's lead and maintain a playful incorporation of references to develop a new visual language that uses the full technological palette of tools at our disposal. The faces of the angels at the top of the fireplace are based on 3D scans of Iberian, Roman and Greek ideals, while the two Medusa heads at the bottom are based on 3D scans of real faces used in their raw form, complete

with all the “artefacts” of the scanning process. The Cornucopias incorporate a mix of organic computer modelling and 3D scans of actual fruit. The sheep’s heads at each corner were modelled on the basis of their similarity to the Border Leicester breed with its characteristic arched nose. The horns of a number of breeds were closely studied and a hybrid stylised horn was derived to match Piranesi’s print. Throughout, the idealised is merged with the real. Two cameos in the centre of the fireplace, indicated in Piranesi’s print by a few sketchy lines, have been replaced with a 3D scan of a coin minted for Reformation propaganda purposes; this topsy-turvy pope/devil head makes an oblique reference to the role of coins in bridging the conceptual gulf between sculpture and printmaking.

Though Piranesi specified the material as white marble, the complexity of the forms, the undercuts and the fragile garlands of leaves meant that carving in marble was impractical if not impossible. We concluded that the best option was to make the mantelpiece from marble and the chimney-piece from *scagliola*, an “imitation” marble that can be cast as well as carved, and which had been used extensively in Piranesi’s time (*scagliola* columns, walls and objects fill many of the great Neo-Classical houses of the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries). While *scagliola* looks like marble, its warmth to the touch reveals that it is a different material.

Piranesi’s print shows this fireplace design set against a wall covered with a Pompeian-style decoration similar to, but more cluttered than, the Etruscan dressing room at Osterley Park built in 1775 to a design by Robert Adam. As in many of the designs, the fire is shown without a grate, made directly on the floor, with a beautifully observed depiction of smoke staying within the frame of the fireplace. For practical purposes and to complement the fireplace, a suitably understated set of fire furniture was selected from the many examples in the *Diverse Maniere* (Wilton-Ely 842).



Detail of a stereo-lithographic print of the chimney-piece showing a face based on the greek ideal

The chimney piece has been made in *scagliola* with a Thassos marble top. The fire grate is made in cast iron blackened with oil and heat. The bed of the grate is a waterjet cut steel sheet.





Detail of the pomegranate that forms the handle of the lid of the large vase. This was partially modelled in ZBrush from a scan of the seeds of a pomegranate

Detail of the fluting on the neck of the vase



Vase with three griffin heads

From *Vasi, candelabri, cippi, sarcofagi, tripodi, lucerne, ed ornamenti antichi disegnati ed incisi dal cavalier Giovanni Battista Piranesi* (Rome, 1778)
Wilton-Ely 951

Digitally modelled using ZBrush by Adam Lowe with Voxelstudios, Madrid
3D realisation using a stereo-lithographic printer by Materialise, Leuven
Cast in plaster (Alamo 70) by Ángel Jorquera, Javier Barreno and Juan Carlos Andrés Arias, Factum Arte, Madrid
The size of this vase is based on another large marble vase reproduced in *Vasi, candelabri, cippi* now in front of the church of Santa Cecilia in Trastevere (Wilton-Ely 922)

220 x 160 x 160 cm
2010

In Rome in the late eighteenth century there was a thriving trade in restoring and selling Classical antiquities to visiting foreigners. Piranesi was increasingly making and selling work from the 1760s onwards. When he started losing the patronage of the Rezzonico family, especially after the death of Pope Clement XIII in 1769, he was more reliant on this work to supplement his business selling prints. He worked in close collaboration with entrepreneurs such as Thomas Jenkins, James Byers and Gavin Hamilton. Piranesi was recognised and valued by these British dealers for his expertise, and in 1757 he had been made an honorary member of the newly formed London Society of Antiquaries.

The protocols that governed “restoration” were very flexible. Piranesi, deeply engaged in the process of learning from and understanding the antique creative mind, viewed originality as a process rather than a state of being. The extent to which he was interested in improving and reconstructing the fragments that were being discovered is clearly revealed in Sir William Hamilton’s remark about the Warwick vase:

I was obliged to cut a block of marble at Carrara to repair it, which has been hollowed out & the fragments fixed on it, by which means the vase is as firm & entire as the day it was made.¹³

Piranesi’s business was carried out from Palazzo Tomati in Via Sistina, conveniently near the British Quarter of the Piazza di Spagna. He worked

with a network of talented sculptors including Antoine-Guillaume Grandjacquet, Francesco Antonio Franzoni and Lorenzo Cardelli, who could realise his sketchy designs in three dimensions and help reconstruct antiquities. Many of the sculptors working with him were highly skilled in patinating new marble to integrate it with antique material,¹⁴ which was necessary to satisfy the aesthetic demands of potential clients.

Palazzo Tomati still exists but nothing remains of any significance in the interiors where Piranesi had his printing business and “museum”. The visitors were a roll-call of leading patrons on the Grand Tour from 1761 onwards, including Sir William Hamilton, Sir Roger Newdigate and Charles Townley. On Piranesi’s death a complete room-by-room inventory of the palace was compiled, but the list is not sufficiently detailed to identify all the restored antiquities. However, as John Wilton-Ely observes, “when Gustav III of Sweden made a belated Grand Tour in 1783 he visited Palazzo Tomati and purchased from Francesco, Piranesi’s son, a large part of the remaining antiquities, especially those works which were too fanciful or bizarre for earlier clients and these are now in Stockholm”.¹⁵

The scale of many of these objects is still surprising: a two-metre-high candelabrum, and vases with no function other than to inspire awe. Piranesi embraced the theatricality of the Classical imagination from the start of his career. His early work *Prima Parte di Architetture, e Prospettive*, influenced by Bibiena’s theatrical designs, contains prints depicting small figures wandering in a stage set where everything is on a vast scale: buildings, fountains, monuments and vases dwarf the individual in an awe-inspiring fictional representation of the Classical ideal.

Mythical creatures

Sphinxes, harpies, fauns, griffins and other mythical creatures abound in Piranesi’s imagination. The imagery of Classical narrative, filtered through various Renaissance appropriations, gave him a vast reserve of raw material. The griffin is reputed to have

the head and wings of an eagle and the body of a lion. Sometimes it is represented with a long snake for a tail. Usually the female has wings, while the males have dragon-like spiked backs. The griffin was praised for its loyalty and nobility, but equally famed for its capricious and vengeful nature.

Dedication

Piranesi records this vase with three griffin heads as being in the Dalton Collection. Nothing is known about the vase and its whereabouts are not known. Richard Dalton (1713?-1791) was an artist, antiquarian and dealer who originated from Darlington, County Durham. He began his career as a painter but later became a significant antiquarian and dealer, partly through his activities as George III's Librarian and later as Surveyor of the King's Pictures. He acquired works for the king and also for Lord Grosvenor and Lord Bute, as well as advising eminent scholars such as Thomas Hollis. He is known to have built up a personal collection of antiquities, although not much is known about individual works in the collection. On his death in 1791 these were sold at Christie's. Many of them may have been acquired from Piranesi and at least one other is included in *Vasi, candelabri, cippi* (Wilton-Ely 967).

The print is dedicated to Lord Fortrose (1744-1781) of Seaforth, a member of the Society of Dilettanti. He made three Grand Tours to Italy in 1752, 1763-1764 and 1768-1771. As a British aristocrat who spent a great deal of time in Italy, he was considered "un gran pezzo" (a big fish) and Piranesi was aware of the kudos associated with his name. The prints in *Vasi, candelabri, cippi* were issued individually over several years, partly to advertise his restoration business. They were only collected together in a two-volume publication in 1778. Some plates in *Vasi, candelabri, cippi* depict objects owned by specific patrons. Piranesi frequently dedicated prints to other people, with the financial incentive that multiple copies of the print could be acquired by owner and dedicatee as well as their travelling companions and friends.



cat. 256
Antique marble vase as seen in England in the home of Sir Dalton, from *Vasi, candelabri, cippi, sarcofagi, tripodi*, 1778

Large vase with three griffons heads cast in plaster from stereolithographically printed and routed elements





Scagliola tests to make the white marble for the chimney piece and the porphyry used for the basin of the altar

Altar, silver-patinated bronze with porphyric scagliola basin

From *Vasi, candelabri, cippi, sarcofagi, tripodi, lucerne, ed ornamenti antichi disegnati ed incisi dal cavalier Giovanni Battista Piranesi* (Rome, 1778)
Wilton-Ely 916 and 917

Legs, column and base modelled by Juan Carlos Andrés Arias, Ángel Jorquera and Tahiche Díaz, Factum Arte, Madrid
Cast in bronze by Fademesa, Madrid
Various patinas by Elena Arias and Adam Lowe

Porphyric scagliola basin:
Digitally modelled using ZBrush by Adam Lowe with Voxelstudios, Madrid
3D realisation using a stereo-lithographic printer by Materialise, Leuven
Cast both in veined black and porphyric scagliola by Sebastián Beyró and polished and finished by hand by Sebastián Beyró and Silvia Rosende, Factum Arte, Madrid

Edition of 12 copies
90 x 75 x 55 cm
2011

Piranesi's altar with two legs is based on fragments of a tripod, now in the museum of the Villa Adriana, found in a pond in the Pantanello of the Villa Adriana in Tivoli by Gavin Hamilton. It is believed to have come from the Piazza d'Oro, the most opulent area of the villa. Only fragments of the tripod remain. They have been reassembled and set into plaster in a twentieth century restoration language; a simple central column, a part of one foot, sections on the leg and chest and parts of the basin showing both the details of the wings and the fluted pattern are set into the plaster, which roughly creates the shape but does not make any attempt to integrate or enhance the original elements.

Piranesi produced two etchings of the altar in *Vasi, candelabri, cippi*. Both of them present a complete and coherent object in perfect condition with a high degree of decorative finish. One print, dedicated to Thomas Barrett, shows the altar standing on a monument from Palazzo Barberini. The other, dedicated to Eliza Upton, is more elaborate. The altar is depicted from slightly above and from an oblique angle standing on six heads that emerge from the intricate floral carving on a decorated shield, flanked by two bronze lamps and a smaller carved stone container. The inscription clearly states that the altar is from the Pantanello of the Villa Adriana. Piranesi formed business partnerships

with both Gavin Hamilton (1723-1798) and Thomas Jenkins (1722-1798) and in 1769 acquired many ancient fragments found at the Pantanello. These were incorporated into works he both published as prints and sold as objects. Due to the fact that the original fragments of this altar are in the museum at the Villa Adriana it is unlikely that he ever owned these particular pieces but the "Piranesi Vase" in the British Museum is a good example of his approach to remaking the antique. His description of this vase, written either side of the three etchings in *Vasi, candelabri, cippi* (Wilton-Ely 942, 943 and 944) give its provenance as the Villa Adriana without mentioning that only two of the bull's heads on the base, sections of the lion's legs and parts of the relief depicting satyrs picking grapes are antique. The rest was created by Piranesi, informed by his knowledge and understanding but essentially based on his speculation about Roman design based on "reading" the fragments that were all around him. He was not dependent on texts but relied on the objects themselves and sources of information. Through both his meticulous etchings and his physical reconstructions he communicated his personal insights into ancient art and architecture.⁶ In his designs for the altar there are significant differences both in detail and in the overall form; most significantly he repositioned the griffons, removing one and placing them either side of the central column. When making the altar we stayed as close as possible to his design but used different materials for the simple reason that the altar was modelled and cast rather than carved in marble. The basin was made in scagliola with the appearance of porphyry. The legs, column and base were cast in bronze and patinated in different ways. Both materials are dependent on centuries of development by skilled artisans and both were available in Piranesi's Rome. Scagliola is a composite material made from gypsum (plaster of Paris), animal glue and pigment. The mix is made into a dough that can be worked to produce a wide range of veined and marble-like surfaces. There are reports that scagliola was used in antiquity but it became fashionable in Italy in the seventeenth century. In the nineteenth century it was also used extensively by Italian craftsmen to make the interiors of Neo-Classical buildings all over Europe.



cat. 237
Ancient marble altar
found among the rubble
in Villa Adriana, from
Vasi, candelabri, cippi,
sarcofagi, tripodi, 1778

Silver-patinated bronze
altar with scagliola basin
made from both hand
modelled and digitally
modelled elements.





Cast elements of the candelabrum in Factum Arte's workshop. The elements were modelled in clay, cast in plaster and then carved to produce the fine detail

Plaster candelabrum with lion's and bull's heads

From *Vasi, candelabri, cippi, sarcofagi, tripodi, lucerne, ed ornamenti antichi disegnati ed incisi dal cavalier Giovanni Battista Piranesi* (Rome, 1778)
Wilton-Ely 912

Modelled and cast in plaster (Alamo 70) by Ángel Jorquera, Factum Arte, Madrid

220 x 75 x 75 cm
2010

Towards the close of the essay in *Diverse Maniere*, Piranesi makes a final plea for a new system of design, unconstrained by doctrinaire theory, but sanctioned by usage from the past and inspired by nature.

Must the genius of our artists be so basely enslaved to the Grecian manners, as not to dare to take what is beautiful elsewhere, if it be not of Grecian origin? But let us shake off this shameful yoke, and if the Egyptians, and Tuscans present to us, in their monuments, beauty, grace and elegance, let us borrow from their stock, not servilely copying from others, for this would reduce architecture and the noble arts to a pitiful mechanism, and would deserve blame instead of praise from the public, who seek for novelty, and who would not form the most advantageous idea of an artist, as was perhaps the opinion some years ago, for a good design, if it was only the copy of some ancient work. No, an artist, who would do himself honour, and acquire a name, must not content himself with copying faithfully the ancients, but studying their works he ought to show himself of an inventive, and, I had almost said, of a creating Genius; And by prudently combining the Grecian, the Tuscan, and the Egyptian together, he ought to open himself a road to the finding out of new ornaments and new manners.¹⁷

The debate that dominated design and architecture in Rome in the 1760s is surprisingly like the Modernist discourse that dominated the twentieth century. Piranesi directly tackled cries of “less is more” and calls for a reductive simplicity and purity. He argued for an inspirational response to the accumulation of cultural sources, resulting in a dynamic sense of design to reflect the needs and capabilities of the time. For him, culture is not a dead academic subject but a living and constantly revitalised force. This is

evident in the way he responded to the fragments of antiquity he was excavating and reconstructing. He was happy to develop images, like the *Vedute di Roma*, that stimulated the Romantic interest in decay. But his deep respect and interrogation of the remains of antiquity led to his desire to restore, re-interpret and re-present those objects.

In the second half of the eighteenth century, the cultural and political map of Europe was very different from today. The *ancien régime* of empire was slowly giving way to the emergence of European nation states. The Italian Peninsula was split between 11 different kingdoms, duchies, minor republics, Austrian-controlled areas and, of course, the Papacy. By the 1760s European power bases were being dramatically renegotiated, fashioning the idea of nation as a powerful imagined community. Antiquity was reappraised along similar ideological lines. Nationalistic preoccupations recreated the Classical world in their own image: there were claims that the Etruscans were originally Greek, that Egyptian culture was corrupted by Roman influence, and Rome was simply a commercial power absorbing immigrant influences. Piranesi sidestepped such assumptions. He was more interested in the flow of ideas and less concerned with narrow subjective assertions about cultural origins.

Candelabra: an archetype adopted by Piranesi

It is unknown to what extent this candelabrum is a design by Piranesi or a copy after the antique. From similar candelabra, like the one in the collection of King Gustav III of Sweden (Wilton-Ely 995), the Newdigate Candelabra in the Ashmolean Museum in Oxford (Wilton-Ely 910 and 992) or the marble candelabrum from the Jenkins collection, now in the Vatican (Wilton-Ely 935), it is safe to assume that significant interventions have been made to “perfect the object for a connoisseur's taste”. Piranesi was fascinated by the way monumental candelabra could be used as a source book for design. He made one for his own funerary monument, composed of antique fragments mixed

with modern additions, which is now in the Musée du Louvre (Wilton-Ely 1002).

In his original designs Piranesi loved to experiment, venturing beyond the bounds of conventional taste, and in his treatment of antique fragments he was unable to control his desire to improve and restore. The fireplace gave him a “facade” to decorate, but the candelabrum gave him a fully three-dimensional form, essentially offering four facets with infinite room for variation. He played with repetitive elements while introducing novel ways to break the symmetry of the form. On this complex three-dimensional “canvas” he could introduce references to poetry and the arts, while also dealing with the passing of time and the transitory nature of human life.

While Piranesi was working on the Lateran designs at the height of his career he would have regularly passed the red granite obelisk of Tuthmosis III, the largest standing ancient Egyptian obelisk in the world, in the Piazza di San Giovanni in Laterano. The obelisk is reported to have fallen during an earthquake. It was found in three pieces in 1587, restored by Pope Sixtus V and erected in the piazza a year later in place of the equestrian statue of Marcus Aurelius, which was moved to the Campidoglio. While simpler in form, this obelisk (and other obelisks in Rome) may have triggered Piranesi’s interest in vertical objects decorated with a complex narrative on each face.



cat. 233
Antique marble
candelabrum as seen
in the collection of
the artist, from Vasi,
candelabri, cippi,
sarcofagi, tripodi, 1778

Plaster (Alamo 70) cast
of the candelabrum
modelled and cast using
traditional methods



Conclusion

Since his death in 1778, Piranesi has been presented as a Romantic figure, an eccentric alone in a strange world, excessive, aloof and with an anti-social temperament. Writing one year after his death Bianconi relates the story of his marriage as evidence. “One day while sketching in the Forum, he saw the daughter of a gardener and immediately asked her to marry him. When she consented, he laid down portfolio and pencil, and this strange marriage was consummated there and then, under the trees!”¹⁸ In certain sections of society it may have been unusual for an ambitious Venetian from a good family living in Rome not to seek to marry for advantage. Bianconi’s story certainly suggests a passionate character and fits the Romantic stereotype of an impulsive artist. But to think of him as an anachronistic figure who found himself in the wrong place at the wrong time undermines his whole message. He was anachronistic in a positive sense and celebrated the temporal collisions that are both inherent in and triggered by man-made objects. Piranesi had a great deal to say about many subjects. In both writing and drawing he articulated his thoughts with great passion and timeless clarity. Writing in 1949 about the *Carceri* etchings, Aldous Huxley observes:

These extraordinary etchings have continued, through two centuries, to seem completely relevant and not modern merely in their formal aspects, but also as expressions of obscure psychological truths. To use a once popular religious phrase, they *spoke to the condition* of Coleridge and De Quincey at the height of the Romantic reaction; and they speak no less eloquently to the condition of twentieth century men and women brought up on the literature, imaginative or descriptive, of deep psychology. That which Piranesi represents is not subject to historical change.¹⁹

Piranesi began the *Carceri d’invenzione* in 1745 when he was 25 years old. The etchings were produced before 1750. If you spend some time looking at either the first edition or the re-worked one published by Piranesi in 1761, the speed of the drawing and the notational freedom is breathtaking.

With this love of improvisation and speed, went a complete disregard for social convention.²⁰

In another part of *Factum Arte* in Madrid, while the objects were being made, Grégoire Dupond was working to transform the illogical and contradictory spaces of the *Carceri* into a virtual environment. This transformation from one mediated form to another, from two to three (or four) dimensions, from the virtual to the physical (and vice-versa), has led to a deep practical engagement with Piranesi’s way of thinking. Piranesi lost the debate with Winckelmann and the Greek purists, not because he was wrong but because he did not have the academic backup. He was too busy “making” while they had all the time in the world to think and hone their aesthetic refinement surrounded by luxury. Manual skills tend to be valued less than intellectual or political ones. It is rare that someone comes as close to bridging the divide as Piranesi did at a time when intellectual thought and applied craft were being pushed further apart than ever before. A comparison between the portrait of Winckelmann in luxurious undress by Anton von Maron (1768) and the etching of Piranesi as an antique sculpture by Felice Polanzani (1750) expresses their different positions better than words.

¹ “Le Arti di Piranesi. Architetto, incisore, antiquario, vedutista, designer”, Fondazione Giorgio Cini, San Giorgio Maggiore, Venice, 28th August 2010 to 21st November 2010 (touring in 2012 and 2013). Conceived by Michele De Lucchi and organised by the Fondazione Giorgio Cini and Factum Arte.

² M. De Lucchi, “Giambattista Piranesi’s Trades”, pp. 25-27 in this volume.

³ “A perfect madman in everything”, quoted from a letter by the architect Carlo Vanvitelli (1739-1821), cited in B. Sørensen, “Two Overlooked Drawings by Piranesi for S. Giovanni in Laterano in Rome”, in *The Burlington Magazine*, CXLIII (2001), pp. 430-433.

⁴ In stereo-lithographic printing, the digital file divides the shape into very thin slices; a laser then draws the outline of a “slice” on a thin layer of light-cured liquid polymer; the polymer hardens where it is hit by the laser; then a new thin layer of polymer washes over the surface, the laser outlines the next slice, and so on.

⁵ A red resin that bleeds from a tree found on the Canary Islands.

⁶ *Diverse maniere d’adornare i cammini ed ogni altra parte degli*

edifici desunte dall’architettura Egizia, Etrusca, e Greca con un Ragionamento Apologetico in difesa dell’Architettura Egizia, e Toscana, opera del Cavaliere Giambattista Piranesi Architetto, Rome, 1769, and *Vasi, candelabri, cippi, sarcofagi, tripodi, lucerne, ed ornamenti antichi disegnati ed incisi dal cavalier Giovanni Battista Piranesi*, Rome, 1778.

⁷ Athanasius Kircher, Jesuit scholar and the decipherer of hieroglyphs, argued that Coptic preserved the last development of ancient Egyptian and recognized a relationship between hieratic and hieroglyphic scripts. His translations were the most complete until Jean-François Champollion (1790-1832) published the first translation of the Rosetta Stone in 1822 and demonstrated that hieroglyphs were a combination of phonetic and ideographic signs.

⁸ G. B. Piranesi, *Observations on the Letter of Monsieur Mariette, Opinions on Architecture, and Preface to a New Treatise on the Introduction and Progress of the Fine Arts in Europe in Ancient Times*, introduction by J. Wilton-Ely, translation by C. Beamish and D. Britt, The Getty Research Institute, Los Angeles, 2002.

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ There is a chimney-piece from Stowe House, now in the Santander headquarters of Banco Santander, that has been suggested as a Piranesi design incorporating elements from antiquity.

¹¹ From a letter by Barry to Edmund Burke, written 22 May 1768 in Rome, collected in E. Fryer, *The Works of James Barry*, pp. 123-134.

¹² Writing about the designs of Robert Adam in his *Anecdotes on Painting* (1780 edition).

¹³ A. Morrison, *The Hamilton and Nelson Papers, 1893-1894*, no. 53, noted by Nancy H. Ramage in “Sir William Hamilton as Collector, Exporter, and Dealer: The Acquisition and Dispersal of His Collections”, in *American Journal of Archaeology*, 94.3 (July 1990), pp. 469-480.

¹⁴ While there are now commercial products to age marble, in *Factum Arte* we prefer the traditional method. Coat the marble in a mixture of animal faeces (we tend to use goat) and yogurt. Bury it or leave it for a while until the living yogurt has acted upon the surface.

¹⁵ E-mail correspondence with the author. Gustav III was introduced to Francesco Piranesi by José Nicolás de Azara, a Spanish diplomat (later ambassador in Rome). Azara’s collection of antique sculptures is now in the Royal Palace at Aranjuez.

¹⁶ J. A. Pinto, *Speaking Ruins. Piranesi, Architects and Antiquity in Eighteenth-Century Rome*, University of Michigan Press, Ann Arbor, 2012.

¹⁷ *Ragionamento Apologetico*, in *Diverse Maniere*.

¹⁸ G. L. Bianconi, “Elogio storico del cavaliere Giambattista Piranesi celebre antiquario, ed incisore di Roma”, in *Antologia Romana*, 34-36 (1779).

¹⁹ A. Huxley, *Prisons. With the ‘Carceri’ Etchings by G. B. Piranesi. Critical Study by Jean Adhémar*, translation by C. F. Mac Intyre, D. Sutton and S. Fawcus, Trianon Press, London and Zeitlin and Ver Brugge, Los Angeles, c. 1949.

²⁰ Jean Adhémar in A. Huxley, *Prisons. With the ‘Carceri’...*, *op. cit.*

