

NATIONAL GALLERY OF ART

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EARLY ARCHITECTURAL FANTASIES OF G. B. PIRANESI

TO BE SHOWN AT GALLERY'S EAST BUILDING OPENING

WASHINGTON, D. C. March 10, 1978. Piranesi: The Early Architectural Fantasies, the first exhibition to represent the full range of the early architectural fantasies of the eighteenth-century graphic artist Giovanni Battista Piranesi (1720-1778), will go on view at the National Gallery of Art on June 1, concurrently with the opening of the Gallery's new East Building. In addition to celebrating the East Building's opening, the exhibition marks the 200th anniversary of Piranesi's death.

Concentrating on subjects begun during the first decade of Piranesi's career--from around 1740 to 1750--the exhibition will include approximately 125 of his prints and drawings from several of the best-known series, including the Prima Parte di Architetture e Prospettive, the Grotteschi and the Carceri. Some of Piranesi's original copper plates will also be shown, as well as prints and drawings by Tiepolo, Castiglione and other artists whose works influenced Piranesi. The Gallery's recently acquired copies of the first issue of the Prima Parte and the first issue of the Carceri will both be on view, in addition to a great number of major prints and drawings from museums, libraries and private collections in the United States and Europe.

The exhibition has been organized by Andrew Robison, the Gallery's

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Curator of Graphic Arts. A fully illustrated catalogue raisonné by Mr. Robison, covering the entire body of Piranesi's early architectural prints and related drawings, will be published in conjunction with the exhibition. A scholarly work discussing the examples on view, in addition to many others in the exhibition's context, this catalogue will be useful in determining Piranesi's artistic background and the specific influences on his work, as well as such technical matters as different states of plates and watermarks.

Of all Piranesi's work, his architectural prints and drawings have become the most highly appreciated in the twentieth century. Their design relates to modern abstraction. Along with his views of Rome, they were also extremely popular during the late eighteenth century and the romantic period of the early nineteenth century, attracting many tourists from northern Europe and England to see the antique buildings and ruins for themselves.

The exhibition will be divided into five sections, the first of which will offer examples of the earliest published works from the Prima Parte di Architetture e Prospettive, first published in Rome in 1743. The etchings in the first edition of Prima Parte, which form the core of subsequent editions, illustrate projects for antique palaces, town squares and other structures which Piranesi, who wanted to be an architect, would have liked to build. Prints from other editions of the Prima Parte, two copper plates, preparatory and preliminary drawings for the etchings, and works of Ricci, Ferdinando and Giuseppe Bibiena, Juvarra, Castiglione and others whose influences are evident, will also be in this section.

The second section will be devoted to Piranesi's Grotteschi, a series

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of fanciful rococo etchings depicting tombs and crumbling ruins. The four prints in the series, done around 1745, after Piranesi had returned to Venice for a short time, reflect the artist's fascination with Roman ruins as ruins rather than as architecture. The only complete copy of the first edition of this series, which was discovered during research for the exhibition, is being lent by the Trustees of the Chatsworth Settlement, England. Further impressions of the series, related drawings and copper plates by Piranesi and works by Rosa, Bisschop and Tiepolo will also be included.

Single etchings, such as those of Piranesi's magnificent imaginary Roman ports, and related drawings will form the third section of the exhibition.

Piranesi's Carceri series, begun in the late 1740s, will be presented in the remaining two sections of the exhibition. Multiple impressions from several editions of the prints, related and preparatory drawings and three copper plates depict massive interior spaces with sweeping and spiraling stairways, tiers of bridges spanning vast reaches, huge balconies and terraces dwarfed by the space they look out on, gigantic chains, pulleys and curious pieces of machinery, and human figures made small by the immensity of their surroundings. Illustrating the progression in the artist's work, the prints in their early states are light and airy, but in subsequent states they become darker and more congested, with the sky obliterated by soaring arches and bridges.

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