

PIRANESI, PAESTUM & SOANE



JOHN WILTON-ELY

PIRANESI  
PAESTUM  
& SOANE

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Jacket: Giovanni Battista Piranesi. Study for *Différentes vues de Pesto...* Plate IV. The Basilica from the north with the corner of the Temple of Neptune in the foreground. c. 1777–8. Pen with brown ink and wash over black chalk and graphite with traces of red chalk, 481 x 678 mm. (Sir John Soane's Museum)

Frontispiece: Pietro Labruzzi. *Giovanni Battista Piranesi, 1779*. Oil on canvas, 740 x 720mm. (Museo di Roma)

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# PIRANESI PAESTUM & SOANE

‘... forget not Piranesi, who you may see in my name; he is full of matter, extravagant ’tis true, often absurd, but from his overflowings you may gather much information.’

This highly cautious advice was offered to the young John Soane in a letter given to him by Sir William Chambers (originally written by the latter for an earlier student traveller, Edward Stevens) when about to leave for his momentous Continental tour in 1778.<sup>1</sup>

Already influenced by Piranesi’s potent etchings, Soane duly met the celebrated Venetian architect and engraver in Rome, a few months before the latter’s death in November of that year. From then onwards developed a profound yet complex artistic and intellectual relationship with Piranesi’s concepts and revolutionary theories which covered the rest of Soane’s career and helped to create, as with Robert Adam before him, a radical and highly distinctive style of design. As part of his fund of ideas, Soane not only acquired a remarkable group of Piranesi’s drawings, as featured in this publication, together with a comprehensive set of his vast output of etched works, but also collected a number of his restored classical antiquities. Most significant of all, however, was the way Soane exploited space, light and dramatic juxtapositions to arrange his Museum in the highly eclectic manner of Piranesi’s architectural fantasies, with the same conscious intention to stimulate and inspire the creative imagination. Joseph Gandy’s arresting views painted for Soane were to add further Piranesian dimensions to these arcane settings.

Fig.1 | Giovanni Battista Piranesi. *Bridge of Magnificence*.  
Etching (*Prima Parte*, Plate V, 1743).  
Sir John Soane's Museum



# GIOVANNI BATTISTA PIRANESI

Although Piranesi was one of the supreme exponents of topographical engraving (his corpus comprises over a thousand separate etchings), his lifelong preoccupation with architecture is central to an understanding of his wide-ranging achievements.<sup>2</sup> Born in 1720, the son of a stonemason and master builder, he spent his first 20 years in Venice training in architecture and stage design, with strong influences from the local tradition of topographical art, represented by Canaletto, and the graphic fantasies of Marco Ricci and Tiepolo. Moving in 1740 to Rome, where he spent the rest of his life, a lack of practical architectural commissions led him to develop skills in etching souvenir views for the Grand Tour market.

His main creative energies, meanwhile, were concentrated on developing the architectural fantasy, or *capriccio*, as a vehicle for formal experiment and architectural reform, expressed in the plates of his first publication, *Prima Parte di Architettura e Prospettive* (1743).<sup>3</sup> Among these visionary compositions the *Bridge of Magnificence* or *Ponte Magnifico* [fig.1] was to exert a decisive influence on Soane's prize-winning *Triumphal Bridge* design for the Royal Academy's Gold Medal which, appropriately, was to lead to his travelling scholarship.<sup>4</sup> Moreover, Piranesi's celebrated suite of arcane prison fantasies, *Carceri d'Invenzione* [fig.2], which

first appeared around 1745 and was reissued in a highly influential version in 1761, had a considerable impact on Soane's complex spatial designs, not least within the Museum itself.<sup>5</sup> Piranesi was to exercise a seminal influence on European neoclassicism through his etchings as well as through his personal contact with visiting artists, architects and patrons in Rome over the course of nearly four decades, among them Soane's first master, George Dance the Younger.<sup>6</sup> The impact of his radical ideas was to be particularly critical for Robert Adam who first met the Venetian in Rome during June 1755.<sup>7</sup> Writing back to his family in Scotland shortly after, Adam described the catalytic effect of Piranesi's mode of instruction as follows: 'so amazing and ingenious fancies [as] he has produced in the different plans of the temples, baths and palaces I never saw ... are the greatest fund for inspiring and instilling invention in any lover of architecture that can be imagined... he has told me that whatsoever I want of him he will do for me with pleasure, and is just doing two drawings for me which will be both singular and clever.'<sup>8</sup> He eventually returned to Britain with two fantasy drawings of the kind he describes Piranesi producing for him and which Soane may have acquired along with other works from the Adam collection in 1818 and 1833 respectively [figs 3, 4].<sup>9</sup>

From 1748 onwards Piranesi began his



Fig.2 | Giovanni Battista Piranesi.  
*The Drawbridge*. Etching  
(*Carceri d'Invenzione*, Plate VII, 1761).  
Sir John Soane's Museum

Fig.3 | Giovanni Battista Piranesi.  
Imaginary architectural composition,  
c. late 1740s. Pen and brown ink with  
wash over red chalk, 535 x 750 mm  
(Sir John Soane's Museum, Adam  
vol.26/163).

Fig.4 | Giovanni Battista Piranesi.  
Imaginary architectural composition,  
c. 1755. Red and black chalk, brown  
ink and brown wash, 385 x 530 mm  
(Sir John Soane's Museum, Adam  
vol.56/146).

