Piranesi (Giovanni Battista)
Mogliano Veneto 1720 – 1778 Rome


[Rome, Giovanni Bouchard? circa 1750]


PROVENANCE anonymous consignor, ‘Estampes des XVIIe au XXe siècle par ou d’après F. Breughel… Exceptionnel et rare ensemble de suites de J.B. Piranèse; Carceri, vues de Rome; importante réunion de lithographies d’H. Daumier en très belles impressions de Charivari; pièces relatives aux Ballons; collection d’estampes révolutionnaires’, auction conducted by Ader Picard Tajan, with the expertise of Denise Rousseau, Hôtel Drouot, Paris, 13 October 1989, lot 20 (FF 190,000 + premium) — Thos. Agnew and Sons Ltd., exhibited at the London Original Print Fair, Royal Academy, 11-14 January 1991 — Private collection, Dublin


THE FOUR Grotteschi are among the most important and inventive of Piranesi’s prints, combining elements of human, cultural, and architectural decay in contexts of deliberate ambiguity, both as to the nature of the objects in each image and their spatial relationships. The prints belong to a long and complex visual tradition devised to appeal to the erudite connoisseur, but never before had capricci suggested any intentional coherence of meaning, never before had they been endowed with such profundity, and been susceptible to so many romantic and psychological interpretations.¹

The etchings were made by Piranesi in Rome and first published there circa 1747-1749 as an independent work. About 1750, Piranesi began to revise the plates, adding or darkening or evening the shadows of the objects in the foreground, and otherwise increasing the distinctness of the forms, and the sense of depth in the prints. For ten years, until 1761, he worked only on three plates, making no change whatsoever to ‘The Triumphal Arch’. The first issue of the revised, second edition of the Grotteschi was printed on a distinctive paper, not that used for either the previous first edition or any later issue of the second edition.

¹
Around 1761 there was a second issue of the second edition, where the ‘The Tomb of Nero’ is revised again. Almost simultaneously the prints were issued a third time, with the print of ‘The Triumphal Arch’ finally revised (in all previous issues from circa 1747/1749 to 1761, that print had remained in its first state).

The copperplates continued to be printed for over a century and a half after Piranesi’s death, however the matrices were neglected, often badly cleaned or poorly inked, and each succeeding generation of impressions lost a degree of quality and subtlety. The late impressions lack the tonal balance Piranesi gave to his own impressions and can scarcely be compared with early ones. As only a single set of matching impressions in the first state appears to have survived, the earliest impressions a collector can reasonably hope to acquire are those in the second state. Our matching impressions of the second state were presented by Agnews in 1991 as ‘undoubtedly one of the finest and earliest sets remaining in private hands’.

2 For reproductions of the copper matrices, see Giovanna Scaloni, ‘Grotteschi’ in Giambattista Piranesi: matrici incise, 1743-1753, published on the occasion of the 22nd International Advisory Committee of Keepers of Public Collections of Graphic Art, Rome, 7-10 June 2010 (Milan 2010), pp.45-51, 132-133 nos. 20-23.


Although the principal features in each grottesco are ancient Roman antiquities, the spirit of the prints is determined rather by the typically Venetian Rococo decorative elements. In ‘The Skeletons’ real Roman antiquities, the Wheel of the Zodiac, and enormous boulders are combined with Rococo decoration of shells and palm leaves. In ‘The Tomb of Nero’ Piranesi depicts a Roman subject, a sepulchral monument just outside Rome on the antique via Cassia, known in his day as the Tomb of Nero, but now recognized as the second-century tomb of P. Vibius Maranus, against a background of clouds, and rests the scene on a bed of volutes.

In ‘The Triumphal Arch’ ancient sculptures are ambiguously combined with human figures; it is impossible to determine whether the background figures are Piranesi’s contemporaries, or a procession of ancient Romans climbing anachronistically over the fragments surviving in the 18th century of their own ancient civilization. The ‘Monumental Tablet’ is both the most typically Venetian and most ambiguous of the four Grotteschi: it displays an hourglass, skull, other images of death, antique religion, and antique objects, on a classic Venetian support – a partially unrolled sheet of paper.

Though he was never, as was once believed, a pupil of Giovanni Battista Tiepolo (1696-1770), Piranesi certainly absorbed in Venice Tiepolo’s graphic techniques, especially his fluency of expression, his way of suggesting rather than defining forms, and use of substantial areas of blank paper to enhance the luminosity of the image. From Tiepolo’s series of Scherzi etchings, produced over a number of years beginning in the 1730s, Piranesi borrowed specific motifs, such as the laughing herm in ‘The Skeletons’ which can be connected to Tiepolo’s ‘Scherzo: Six figures watching serpents’. The motif of the serpents in the same scherzo appears in ‘The Tomb of Nero’ while the River God in ‘The Triumphal Arch’ can be recognized in Tiepolo’s ‘Scherzo: Satyr family with an obelisk’. Some scholars speculate that Piranesi’s Grotteschi prints were provoked by Tiepolo’s series of Capricci etchings, however it is doubtful the Capricci were etched before 1749, and there are no formal connections between the two series. Other influences on the Grotteschi are certain prints of Giovanni Benedetto Castiglione (1610-1664) and Salvator Rosa (1615-1673). Another instance of borrowing is the upper part of the Farnese Hercules and fragment of an antique draped male torso in ‘The Skeletons’, taken from Jan de Bisschop’s Signorum veterum icones of 1668-1669.