



Piranesi (Giovanni Battista)

Mogliano Veneto 1720 – 1778 Rome

Grotteschi: ‘The Skeletons’, ‘The Triumphal Arch’, ‘The Tomb of Nero’, ‘The Monumental Tablet’

[Rome, Giovanni Bouchard? *circa* 1750]

¹ The extensive literature on the prints includes Myra Nan Rosenfeld, ‘Picturesque to Sublime: Piranesi’s stylistic and technical development from 1740 to 1761’ in *Memoirs of the American Academy in Rome* [Supplementary Volumes, 4:] *The Serpent and the Stylus: Essays on G.B. Piranesi* (Rome 2006), pp.55-91; Bent Sorensen, ‘Some Sources for Piranesi’s early architectural fantasies’ in

SET OF FOUR PRINTS in etching, engraving, drypoint, scratching, burnishing. Matching impressions from the second edition, first issue. ■ ‘The Skeletons’. Plate 395 × 555 mm, state 2 of five (Robison 21). ■ ‘The Triumphal Arch’. Plate 394 × 553 mm, state 1 of five (Robison 22). ■ ‘The Tomb of Nero’. Plate 392 × 554 mm, state 2 of six (Robison 23). ■ ‘The Monumental Tablet’. Plate 396 × 547 mm, state 2 of four (Robison 24). Sheet size of all prints 527 × 765 mm.

In a set of gilt frames by Paul Levi (each 50 × 80 cm).

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

REFERENCES Arthur M. Hind, *Giovanni Battista Piranesi: a critical study, with a list of his published works and detailed catalogues of the prisons and the views of Rome* (London 1922), pp.80-81 nos. 24-27; John Wilton-Ely, *The Mind and Art of Giovanni Battista Piranesi* (London 1978), pp.18-20; Dario Succi, *Da Carlevarij ai Tiepolo: incisori veneti e friulani del Settecento*, catalogue of an exhibition held at Palazzo Attems, Gorizia, and Museo Correr, Venice, in 1983 (Venice 1983), pp.294-297 nos. 359-362 (impressions of Robison state IV, *circa* 1790); Andrew Robison, *Early Architectural Fantasies: A Catalogue Raisonné of the etchings* (Chicago & London 1986), pp.115-122 nos. 21-24

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.

The Burlington Magazine 142 (2000), pp.82-89; Peter Tomory, ‘Piranesi’s Grotteschi: “All is vanity...”’ in *Storia dell’arte* 88 (1996), pp.334-340; Maurizio Calvesi, ‘Nota ai “grotteschi” o capricci di Piranesi’ in *Piranesi e la cultura antiquaria: gli antecedenti e il contesto: atti del convegno, 14-17 novembre 1979*, edited by Anna Lo Bianco (Rome 1983), pp.135-140.



The Skeletons. Plate 395 × 555 mm, second state of five (Robison)

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.² 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

² For reproductions of the copper matrices, see Giovanna Scalonì, '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.

³ Formerly at Chatsworth (sale by Christie's, 'Old master prints from Chatsworth', London, 5 December 1985, lot 166, as 'the complete set of first states apparently unique'), now National Gallery

of Art, Washington, DC, Ailsa Mellon Bruce Fund, 1986.8.1-4. Exhibited as 'the only known complete set from the first edition' in *The Glory of Venice: Art in the Eighteenth Century*, catalogue of an exhibition held at the Royal Academy of Art, London, 15 September-14 December 1994, and at the National Gallery of Art, Washington, DC, 29 January-23 April 1995 (New Haven & London 1994), pp.385, 387, 483, nos. 269-272 (entry by Olimpia Theodoli).



The Triumphal Arch. Plate 394 × 553 mm, first state of five (Robison)

⁴ Cf. Thos. Agnew and Sons Ltd., *Agnew's, 1982-1992* (London 1992), pp.196, 206 and pl. 187.



The Tomb of Nero. Plate 392 × 554 mm, second state of six (Robison)

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.



The Monumental Tablet. Plate 396 × 547 mm, second state of four (Robison)