

# Piranesi's arguments in the Carceri

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## Abstract

Giovanni Battista Piranesi (1720-1778) is an important Italian architect with his seminal theses in the debates on the 'origins of architecture' and 'aesthetics'. He is numbered foremost among the founders of modern archaeology. But Piranesi was misinterpreted both in his day and posthumously. One of the most important vectors of approach yielding misinterpretation of Piranesi derived from the phenomenon comprising the early nineteenth-century Romanticist reception of Piranesi's character and work. Therefore, the present study firstly demonstrates that such observations derive not from an investigation of the work itself, nor from an appraisal of the historical context, but owe to the long-standing view in western culture that identifies the creator's ethos with the work and interprets the work so as to cohere with that pre-constructed ethos. Thus the paper aims at offering a new perspective to be adopted while examining Piranesi's works. This perspective lies within the very scope of understanding the reasons of the misinterpretations, the post-Romanticist perception of the 'artist', and Piranesi's main arguments on the aesthetics, origins of architecture, and law.

## Keywords

Carceri series, Eighteenth century discussions, Giovanni Battista Piranesi, Post-romanticist interpretation, Romanticist perception.



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## 1. Introduction

In the architectural, historical, and archaeological context of the eighteenth century, Italian architect Giovanni Battista Piranesi (1720-1778) played an important role. He posited crucial theses in the debates on the 'origins of architecture' and 'aesthetics'. He is numbered foremost among the founders of modern architecture and archaeology. But Piranesi was misinterpreted both in his day and posthumously. The vectors of approach yielding misinterpretation of Piranesi derived mainly from the phenomenon comprising the early nineteenth-century Romanticist reception of Piranesi's character and work. This kind of interpretation derived from Piranesi's position on aesthetics and origins of architecture, and served the identification of him as 'unclassifiable'.

In this context, the *Carceri* series bear primary importance because they have been accepted as transparent works particularly reflecting Piranesi's so-called darkness, obscurity and madness.<sup>1</sup> He was labelled with this kind of adjectives; furthermore, his arguments on architecture and history were almost imprisoned between the walls of the *Carceri*. Thus the present study aims at offering a new perspective to be adopted while examining Piranesi's works. This perspective lies within the very scope of understanding the reasons of the misinterpretations, the post-Romanticist perception of the 'artist', and Piranesi's main arguments on the aesthetics, origins of architecture, and law.

## 2. Le style c'est l'homme même

As the heading of the study implies, this reading largely disagrees with current interpretations of Piranesi's work. Thus, contemporary scholarship has taken Piranesi's work as representing a style of architecture described as 'obscure', 'excessive', 'irrational', and the like.<sup>2</sup> Therefore, the present study firstly demonstrates that such observations derive not from an investigation of the work itself, nor from an appraisal of the historical context, but owe to the long-standing view in western culture that identifies the creator's ethos with the work and interprets the work so as to cohere with that pre-constructed

ethos. In fact, the pervasive description of Piranesi's work as cited above goes hand in hand with the description of the biographical character as 'obscure' and 'perverse'.<sup>3</sup> For Piranesi's *Vasi, Candelabri, Cippi, Sarcophagi, Tripodi, Lucerne ed Ornamenti Antichi Disegn* (Vases, Candelabra, Low Pillars, Sarcophagi, Tripods, Lanterns and Antique Design Ornaments; 1778), a work depicting Piranesi's designs of objects including vases and candelabra (Piranesi, 1778; 1836), 'it is all done with obsessional, with almost morbid precision,' claims Joseph Rykwert, 'the morbidity is characteristic, since the whole of Piranesi's overwhelming output is the celebration of his necrophiliac passion for the glory of ancient Rome' (Rykwert, 1980, p. 370). Manfredo Tafuri agrees, presenting Piranesi as a "wicked architect," who, in the monstrousness of his contaminations, reveals the cracks guiltily repressed by a deviant rigor' (Tafuri, 1978, p. 47).

These are astounding words as far as descriptive terms go where architectural historians as eminent as Rykwert and Tafuri are concerned. Far from any architectural or design consideration, unabashedly they target a psychological being. Contemporary Piranesi criticism participates in an understanding which we may summarize by Georges-Louis Leclerc's (1707-1788) proverbial *Le style c'est l'homme même*: the style is the man himself. Leclerc's identification dates to 1753, which makes him Piranesi's contemporary (Leclerc, 1872; 1896). Despite the fact that we shall argue that there is a direct line between Tafuri and Rykwert's assessment and Leclerc's statement, Leclerc had not necessarily meant the remark in a negative sense. Piranesi, however, may very well have been the first whose work was evaluated by Leclerc's statement, already in his own lifetime, and, as we are going to see, with negative effect in the long-run.

When we trace the conception identifying ethos and style, we find that it has ancient roots. Already rhetorical philosophers such as Aristotle (384 BC-322 BC) and Longinus (first century AD), identified style and the creator's (orator's or writer's) character and described style as the direct ex-

<sup>1</sup>For an implication of 'darkness' and 'madness' in the *Carceri* see Tafuri, 1978, pp. 26, 32-34, 40; Wilton-Ely, 1978, pp. 81, 89; Wilton-Ely, 1993, pp. 46-48.

<sup>2</sup>The work is further perceived as 'exaggerated', 'extravagant', 'paradoxical', 'absurd', 'hermetic', 'frenetic', or 'ludicrous'. For the evaluation of 'obscure', 'extravagant', and 'excessive', see Rykwert, 1980, pp. 364, 370; for 'excessive', 'paradoxical', 'absurd', 'hermetic', and 'irrational', see Tafuri, 1978, p. 27 et passim.; for 'frenetic', 'ludicrous', 'extravagant', see Penny, 1978, pp. 7, 10, 30; for 'frenetic', 'extravagant', see Wilton-Ely, 1993, pp. 12, 18; for similar evaluations see Wilton-Ely, 2002, pp. 16, 27.

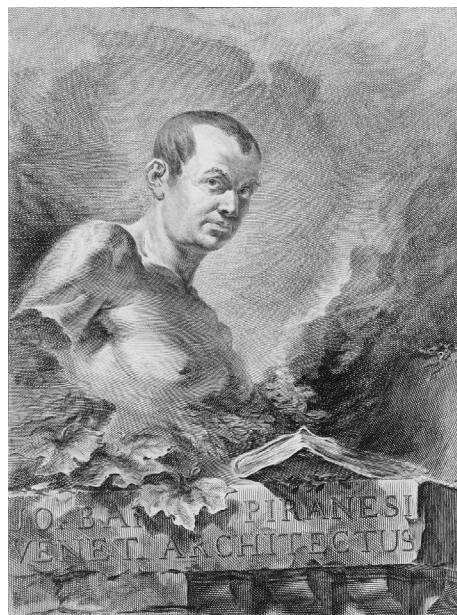


Figure 1. Felice Polanzani, portrait of Piranesi, *Opere varie*, 1750.

<sup>3</sup>For this evaluation of Piranesi's character, see Tafuri, 1978, pp. 41, 47; Rykwert, 1980, p. 389; Penny, 1978, pp. 29, 80. 'Obsessive', 'chaotic', 'absurd', and 'frenetic' are other familiar adjectives that have been found fit to describe Piranesi's character, as has been the diagnosis of 'suicidal mania'. For the description of 'obsessive', 'chaotic', and 'absurd', see Tafuri, 1978, pp. 36, 49; for 'obsessive', see Rykwert, 1980, p. 370; for 'frenetic', see Penny, 1978, p. 30, and Wilton-Ely, 1993, p. 12; and for 'suicidal mania', see Jamieson, 1956, p. 106.

<sup>4</sup>For the continuity of the identification of ethos and style from Antiquity to the eighteenth century, see Şengel, 1996, pp. 52-104.

<sup>5</sup>For eighteenth-century descriptions of the characteristics of sublimity see Kant, 1960, esp. pp. 47-50; and Burke, 1757; 1937, esp. pp. 41, 45-51, 62-69, 101-102.

pression of the psycho-ethical nature of the 'man'. While speaking of propriety (*decorum*), with the intention of determining that 'the style reflects the man himself', 'Words are like men', wrote Aristotle in the *Rhetoric* (Aristotle, 1994, 1404b 8-12) and, as James A. Coulter has argued, proceeded to map out the ways in which linguistic and human ethos were analogous (Coulter, 1976, p. 18). According to Coulter, Aristotle's phrase of 'Words are like men' implied that the canons of behavioural propriety were applicable to compositional style: the style of a man was his dress (Aristotle, 1994, 1405a 10-14). Similarly in the *Poetics*, Aristotle identified genre with author's character: 'Poetry, then, was divided according to the innate ethics [of the poet]: for those who were more solemn imitated decent doings and the doings of decent persons, while those who were meaner imitated those of foul persons, at first making satires just as the others [at first] made hymns and eulogies' (Aristotle, 1982, 1448b). 'When tragedy and comedy appeared, those incited [by these kinds] were drawn according to their innate nature toward one or the other [of the kinds] of poetry. Some became makers of comedies instead of lampoons, others of tragedies instead of epics' (Aristotle, 1982, 1449a).<sup>4</sup> Aristotle explicitly found that a creator chose genre and style according to his

innate character. Aristotle's identification proved seminal. As we are going to see, the depictions of Piranesi in his own lifetime attributed a lofty character to him in conjunction with his work in the design of monumental and sublime architecture. Misreading the eighteenth-century code for *sublime monumentality*, later critics were going to identify it with *dark perversity*.

The view identifying the creator's ethical character with the work continued in the eighteenth century as above all Leclerc's statement evinced. In fact, the placement of Piranesi's work and character to the darker side of the human may be traced back to the modern re-emergence, with new vigour, of the classical idea around 1750. Piranesi's 1750 depiction by the Venetian Felice Polanzani (1700-1783), published in the former's *Opere varie di architettura* (Miscellaneous works in architecture; 1750), may be read in this context [Figure 1] (Piranesi, 1750; 1836). The facial expression is far from demure and humble. Piranesi's character stands heightened, with a broken arm as in the relics of Antiquity which the burgeoning field of archaeology was uncovering. The Antiquity here ascribed to Piranesi derives from the eighteenth-century theory of sublime architecture to which Piranesi contributed very substantially both in design and in writing. Ancientness and monumentality, a heightened stance and darkened surroundings were essential characteristics of the sublime.<sup>5</sup> The clouds and the play of light and shadow surrounding the architect's bust, the book symbolizing his vast learning and intellectual authority signified to the eighteenth-century mind the nature of both Piranesi's character and his work. But Polanzani's portraiture of Piranesi is not negative at all. It is an example for identifying ethos with work; in this case an acknowledgement of Piranesi's contribution to monumental and sublime architecture as in his *Le antichità romane* (Roman antiquities; Piranesi, 1756), *Il Campo Marzio dell'antica Roma* (The Campus Martius of ancient Rome; Piranesi, 1762), and the two *Carceri* series—*Invenzioni capricci di carceri* (Capricious inventions of prisons; Piranesi, 1745) and *Carceri*

*d'invenzione* (Prisons of the Invention; Piranesi, 1760). Similarly, Joseph Nolleken's bust of the architect, made in the late 1760s, comprises a study in character [Figure 2]. Clearly in the heroic genre, this bust too, signifies the authority of the architect-intellectual and would have equally represented, to Leclerc's century, the nature of Piranesi's work as belonging to the higher genres of architecture.

There is no proof, however, in that sculpted face full of attention, containing a keenness of vision from which nothing would escape, of 'Piranesi's volatile and irascible character' (Wilton-Ely, 1993, p. 35). John Wilton-Ely's reading of the bust may be said to derive from a post-Romanticist, dark ethos constructed for Piranesi. By the late 1760s, the mere fact of representation in a bust implied high seriousness and significant contribution in art and science.<sup>6</sup> Thus Nolleken's bust is rather indicative of Piranesi's artistic and scientific contribution in areas—aside from architecture *per se*—such as technical drawing, ichnographic drawing, and particularly the measured drawing of archaeological structures—a burgeoning field in the eighteenth century.<sup>7</sup>

Instead of appraising the work by considering the creator's character alone, not only his work, but the milieu of the spectator or reader of these works and the historical as well as wider textual context of eighteenth-century architectural thought ought to be taken into consideration. We need, in other words, a more holistic historical approach. But the modern mainstays of western interpretations of the history of architecture remain reductive. Yet another example is the all-influential Meyer Howard Abrams who summarizes extant models in modern criticism, and in doing so becomes himself a major spokesman of reductionism.<sup>8</sup> Abrams draws a table in which he constructs a scheme of four categories: work, artist, universe, and audience. He claims that every approach or critical method privileges one of artist, audience or universe in relation to the work, by which the work becomes transparent and a starting point for accessing artist, audience or the conception of universe. Abrams' table demon-

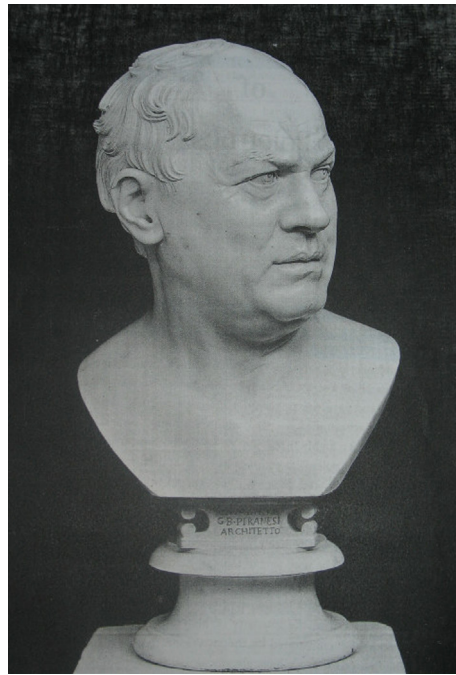


Figure 2. Joseph Nolleken, portrait bust of Piranesi, late 1760s.

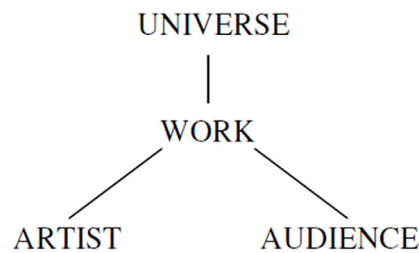


Figure 3. Abrams' construction demonstrating the co-ordinates of art criticism.

strating these relations is given in the table in Figure 3.

The mode of criticism dominant in the misleading approach to Piranesi may be said to privilege the 'artist' category and find the man in the style of the 'work'. But in fact it would be treating the 'work' like a transparent entity directly and unproblematically representing the creator. In Piranesi's case, the work has been taken like a transparent entity—like glass—through which the Piranesian vision and psyche are at once conveyed to the spectator (of the architectural work) and the reader (of his architectural writings). But if we are able to change this perspective, then it became obvious that Piranesi's drawings, including the *Carceri* series, reflect nothing more than his crucial arguments on the origins of architecture, aesthetics and law *per se*.

<sup>6</sup>In respects of the high seriousness and significant contribution represented in busts, there are very numerous examples to which one may turn. A rather explicit one is offered by William Kent (1685-1748) in his Temple of British Worthies (1734) in Stowe Gardens, Buckinghamshire. Depicted here in bust are the financier Thomas Gresham; architect Inigo Jones; poet John Milton; poet William Shakespeare; philosopher John Locke; mathematician, physicist, astronomer, and chemist Isaac Newton; philosopher and statesman Francis Bacon; king Alfred the Great; Edward the Black Prince; queen Elizabeth I; king William III; poet, writer, and explorer Sir Walter Raleigh; privateer, navigator, politician and civil engineer Francis Drake; politician John Hampden; author Sir John Barnard; and poet Alexander Pope: all major figures who contributed in the arts, science, state or—in one case—finance.

<sup>7</sup>For Piranesi's contribution in the area of drawing, see Oechslin, 1981, pp. 15-35; Girón, 2006, pp. 74-76.



Figure 4. Plate VII (also known with the name of 'The Drawbridge'), *Carceri d'Invenzione*, 1760.

<sup>8</sup>For the following account of the relations between the work-and-creator, work-and-universe (nature), and work-and-spectator, and for the construction demonstrating the co-ordinates of art criticism in the table in Figure 3, see Abrams, 1958, pp. 6-8.

<sup>9</sup>On the disposition for darkness in the age of Romanticism, see Praz, 1978, p. 27.

<sup>10</sup>For an interpretation of the De Quincey passage see Hind, 1911, p. 81.

<sup>11</sup>For a reading of *The Castle of Otranto* as the narrativization of the architectonics of the *Carceri*, see Christadler, 1974, p. 83ff. Also see Piranesi, 1760; Piranesi, 1745; Walpole, 1764, 1996; Beckford, 1786, 1904, 1998.

### 3. The romantic 'guilty' in the *Carceri*

The darker perception of Piranesi and his work most concretely goes back to Romanticism and this movement's conception of the creative character as dark and unique.<sup>9</sup> This conception made room for heightened creativity and a darker, but richer, imagination by use of intoxicating drugs, most ostensibly opium. Thus in his *Confessions of an English Opium-Eater* (1821) Thomas de Quincey (1785-1859) described Piranesi's work:

Many years ago, when I was looking over Piranesi's antiquities of Rome, Mr Coleridge, who was standing by, described to me a set of plates by that artist, called his *Dreams*, and which record the scenery of his visions during the delirium of a fever. Some of them [...] represented vast Gothic halls; on the floor of which stood all sorts of engines and machinery, wheels, cables, pulleys, levers, catapults, etc., etc., expressive of enormous power put forth, and resistance overcome. Creeping along the sides of the walls, you perceived a staircase; and upon it, groping his way upwards, was Piranesi himself; follow the stairs a little further, and you perceive it comes to a sudden, abrupt termination, without any balustrade, and allowing no steps onwards to him who had reached the extremity, except into the depths below. Whatever is to become of poor Piranesi?—you

suppose, at least, that his labours must in some way terminate here. But raise your eyes, and behold a second flight of stairs still higher, on which again Piranesi is perceived, by this time standing on the very brink of the abyss. Again elevate your eyes, and a still more aerial flight of stairs is beheld; and again is poor Piranesi busy on his aspiring labours; and so on, until the unfinished stairs and Piranesi both are lost in the upper gloom of the hall. With the same power of endless growth and self-reproduction did my architecture proceed in my dreams (De Quincey, 1821; 1971, pp. 105-106).<sup>10</sup>

De Quincey was describing the *Carceri* plate in Figure 4, and it is already interesting that Samuel Taylor Coleridge (1772-1834), who apparently introduced De Quincey to the *Carceri*, referred to the work as *Dreams* (Hind, 1911, p. 81; Jamieson, 1956, pp. 105-108). Coleridge himself was addicted to laudanum (opium) already in his twenties, and irreversibly so by 1800-1802 (Engell, Bate, eds., 1983, pp. xlv-xlv, 17n.5), which De Quincey described in "Coleridge and Opium-Eating" (De Quincey, 1845; 2000), V: 179-258).

Coleridge's perception of Piranesi and the *Carceri*, and De Quincey's transmission of it to posterity proved as seminal as Aristotle's identification of ethos with style. In 1950, Huxley was going to remark that the *Carceri* represent, 'metaphysical [...] guilt' (Huxley, 1950, pp. 207-208). A year before, Huxley had published the *Carceri* with commentary in which he observed that,

All plates in the series are self-evidently variations on a single symbol, whose reference is to things existing in the physical and metaphysical depths of human souls – to acedia and confusion, to nightmare and angst, to incomprehension and a panic bewilderment (Huxley, 1949 p. 21).

Ralph Waldo Emerson, the New England moralist, who had probably seen a few prints of the *Carceri* in 1838 (Christadler, 1974, p. 105n.1), wrote in his journal in 1841 that three authors had opened the gates to 'new modes of existence' for him: Dante, Rabelais and Piranesi (Emerson, 1970, p. 97 as quoted in Christadler, 1974, p. 78). The connection between Piranesi and Dan-

te is perhaps readily evident since early nineteenth-century culture would foreground the *Carceri* and identify it with Dante's *Inferno*. Emerson in fact wrote of 'that infernal architecture of Piranesi' (Emerson, 1970, VIII: 7 as quoted in Christadler, 1974, p. 105n.1). Nor was this perception of the *Carceri* limited to the English speaking world. As Paul F. Jamieson pointed out in his 1956 article, those immensely influenced by this apprehension of Piranesi included not only the British Horace Walpole (1717-1797) and William Beckford (1760-1844) in addition to Coleridge, De Quincey and Huxley, but also the Frenchmen Honoré de Balzac, Théophile Gautier, Charles Baudelaire, Alfred de Musset (Jamieson, 1956, p. 105), and no one less than Victor Hugo himself (Mallion, 1962, pp. 250, 264, 275ff., *et passim*). The steps, stairs and spirals of the *Carceri* in fact fascinated the French Romantics enough to warrant book-length study (Keller, 1966; also see Poulet, 1966, pp. 660-71, 849-62).

Jorgen Andersen rightly argues that Gothic novels such as Walpole's *The Castle of Otranto* (1764) and Beckford's *Vathek* (1786) owe their spatial-architectural inspiration to the *Carceri* (Andersen, 1952, pp. III: 49-59).<sup>11</sup> Walpole, who had travelled on the continent, was familiar with Piranesi works other than the *Carceri* and commented in 1771 that,

This delicate redundancy 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 exuberant as Rubens, he has imagined scenes that would startle geometry, and exhaust the Indies to realize. 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 in his rashness and details! (Walpole, 1771, 1786, p. 398).

And in a discussion of the "Gothic Villain" and "Byronic Hero" in which she describes the cliché of the Romantic hero who is at once 'Satan, Cain,

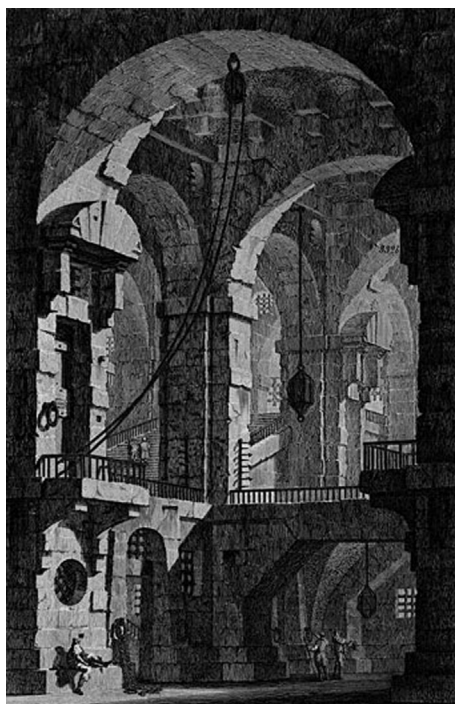
The Wandering Jew and Prometheus', Ingeborg Weber's phrasing of such a hero is reminiscent of the phrasing architectural historians use in describing Piranesi (Weber, 1985, p. 154). All these terms and person names belong to literary figures rather than architectural ones. Yet they are all influential names whose perception of Piranesi played rather lasting role. They seem to have been influential even in the very fact that *architectural* historians of the stature of Rykwert and Tafuri refrain from viewing Piranesi's work architecturally and frame it from the perspective of the Romantic poet and the Gothic novelist.

#### 4. Piranesi's role in the story of the *Carceri*

I observe that the Ancients had three sorts of Prisons. The first was that wherein they kept the disorderly and the ignorant, to the intent that every night they might be doctor'd and instructed by learned and able professors of the best arts, in those points which related to good Manners and an honest life. The second was for the confinement of debtors, and the reformation of such as were got into a licentious way of living. The last was for the most wicked, wretched and horrid profligates, unworthy of the light of the sun or the society of mankind, and soon to be delivered over to capital punishment or perpetual imprisonment and misery. If any man is of opinion that this last sort of Prison ought to be made like some subterraneous Cavern, or frightful Sepulchre, he has certainly a greater regard to the punishment of the Criminal than is agreeable either to the design of the law or to humanity, and tho' wicked men do by their crimes deserve the highest punishment, yet the Prince or Commonwealth ought never to forget Mercy in the midst of justice (Leoni, 1726).<sup>12</sup>

By these words (cited from the translation of Giacomo Leoni as a Piranesi's contemporary) describing 'the three sorts of Prisons, their structures, situations and compartitions' in Book V of his work *De re aedificatoria* (*On the art of Building*, 1452) (Leoni, 1726), Leon Battista Alberti (1404-1472) classifies ancients' prisons according to the criminals' crimes. If we adhere to the interpretations of our contemporary

<sup>12</sup>The modern-day translation of the same section is as follows: 'I find that the ancients had three types of prison: one where rough and untutored men might be rounded up to receive night-time training from learned and experienced teachers of the noble arts in matters relating to their moral conduct and way of life; the second in which to confine insolvent debtors and those who require the tedium of prison life to set right their wayward lives; the third where to assign those who have committed abominable crimes, those who are unworthy of the light of day or of contact with society, and who are soon to suffer capital punishment or be given over to darkness and shame. However, anyone who determined that this last category be an underground chamber, like some fearful tomb, would be proposing a penalty for the criminal more severe than what the law itself or human reason should demand. Even if such men (who are beyond redemption) deserve the ultimate of all penalties for their crimes, it would be expected of republic and prince alike that they should not be wanting in compassion'. For this translation see Alberti, 1988, p. 139.



**Figure 5.** *Carcere oscura* (also known with the name of 'The Dark Prison'), *Prima parte di Architettura e Prospettiva*, 1743.

<sup>13</sup>The scenes in the plates of the second edition (*Carceri d'Invenzione*) are even darker than the first edition (*Invenzioni capricci di carceri*). Also see Ficacci, 2005.

<sup>14</sup>Winckelmann defined Grecian architecture as having 'edle Einfalt und stille Grösse' ('noble simplicity and quiet grandeur'): see Winckelmann, 1755, 1992, p. 24. For his further views on the origin of European architecture, also see Winckelmann, 1764, 1880.

<sup>15</sup>For a discussion of Piranesi's integrated argument on the aesthetics and origins of Roman architecture in detail see Ek, 2006, pp. 8-23; Ek, Şengel, 2007, pp. 17-34; and Ek, Şengel, 2008, pp. 27-51.

historians (like Rykwert and Tafuri, and especially latter's description of Piranesi as the 'wicked architect') (Rykwert, 1980, p. 370; Tafuri, 1978, p. 47), the criminals in the third type of prison recall us Piranesi's 'wicked, wretched and horrid profligates' scattered in almost all plates of *Carceri* of which spatial design also reminds a 'subterranean cavern' or 'sepulchre'. But while etching the *Carceri*, Piranesi's aim should be far from etching only those desperate guilties scattered around the obscured spaces described above. Then, what were his main ambition and arguments which are almost imprisoned by many historians and researchers between the walls of the *Carceri*?

Piranesi's *Carceri* adventure began in 1743 with a single plate *Carcere oscura* (The Dark Prison, Figure 5) published in the series of *Prima parte di Architettura e Prospettiva* (Part one of architecture and perspectives; Piranesi, 1743)—and later published in *Opere varie di architettura* of 1750 (Piranesi, 1750, 1836)—continued with *Invenzioni capricci di carceri* of 1745 (Piranesi, 1745) with fourteen plates, and then ended with *Carceri d'Invenzione* of 1760 published as sixteen plates including the secondary phases of pre-

vious fourteen with some additional inscriptions and two more plates (Piranesi, 1760).<sup>13</sup> Though they are famous with the connotation of obscurity, the *Carceri* plates are full of important messages formed by Piranesi's arguments on the origins of architecture and the aesthetics. Firstly, concerning origins, Piranesi developed a history of architecture not based on the East/West division, and supported this by the argument that Roman architecture depended on Etruscans which was rooted in Egypt. Secondly, he distinguished Roman from Grecian architecture identified with 'ingenious beauty'. Thus he placed Romans in another aesthetical category which the eighteenth century called 'the sublime'.

In this respect, the *Carceri* plates bear the reflections of sublimity in the Roman architecture with their obscured and deep spaces; complex stairs; dominant and impressive vertical emphasis going beyond the margins of the plates, which seems as expanding throughout the sky without any boundaries; and minute, gesturing human figures scattered under the infinite, great-scale architecture of the Romans [esp. Figures 4, 6, 7, and 8]. Thus stimulating the feelings of admiration, astonishment, awe, or pleasure and pain, or empathy in the observers' minds comprises the aesthetical effect of sublimity in the *Carceri*. Therefore, according to Piranesi, this architecture cannot root in the Greeks and their 'noble simplicity and quiet grandeur' as claimed by Johann Joachim Winckelmann (1717-1768).<sup>14</sup> The mainstays of Piranesi's assumptions on aesthetics, further, echoed both in Edmund Burke's (1729-1797) work *A Philosophical Inquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of The Sublime and Beautiful* (1757), and in Immanuel Kant's (1724-1804) work *Observations on the Feelings of the Beautiful and Sublime* (1764); and the eighteenth-century perception distinguished between 'sublimity' and 'beauty' (Burke, 1757; 1937; Kant, 1764, 1960). In this respect, the discussions of architectural origins in the eighteenth century was formed by the aesthetical discourses interpreting Grecian architecture as 'beautiful' and Roman—and thus Egyptian—as 'sublime'. Piranesi was spokesman of

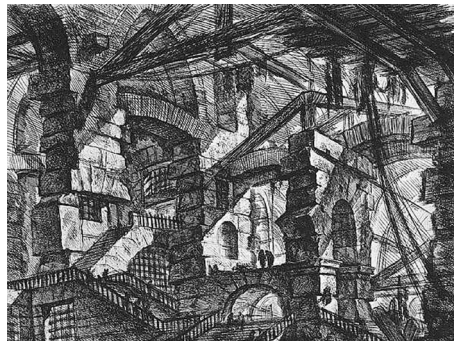
the latter argument, and thus the originality of his argument lies within his undertaking of these two debates as one interrelated topic.<sup>15</sup>

Apart from this main argument, the *Carceri* series also reflect his investigation on the Roman law as well as his general views on law, peace and justice. In this respect, they reflect the characteristics of eighteenth-century Europe which was troubled and directed towards the year 1789 at full speed; and also reflect eighteenth-century Italy which was divided due to the War of the Spanish Succession between the years of 1745 and 1760, when the *Carceri* series were produced. Thus the new governors were disrupting Italy's traditional systems in economics, taxation and guilds. Traditional systems including the penal code collapsed and new criminal laws brought into force. While violence, crisis and upheaval were shaking Italy, Piranesi was drawing his *Carceri* series.<sup>16</sup> In this historical moment, Italian intellectual groups including Piranesi himself were to coalesce in the movement against the penal system, particularly against capital punishment. Thus Italians were exceedingly active in the movements of the humanization of the penal practice and abolishment of capital punishment—which were among the main projects of the Enlightenment.

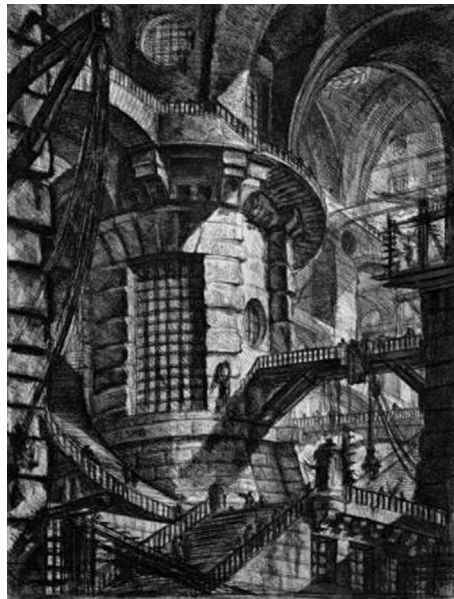
Therefore, it can also be claimed that, as one of the humanist intellectuals of the Enlightenment, the architect Piranesi was after the advocacy of the abolishment of the capital punishment. With the purpose of giving more messages at first glance to the observers of his drawings, he further combined this argument with the ones on aesthetics and origins. While condemning the capital punishment or torturing (which were legalized by the Roman law) in his *Carceri*, he also praised the 'sublime' Roman architecture in a manner reproaching the judicial system of it.

## 5. Epilogue

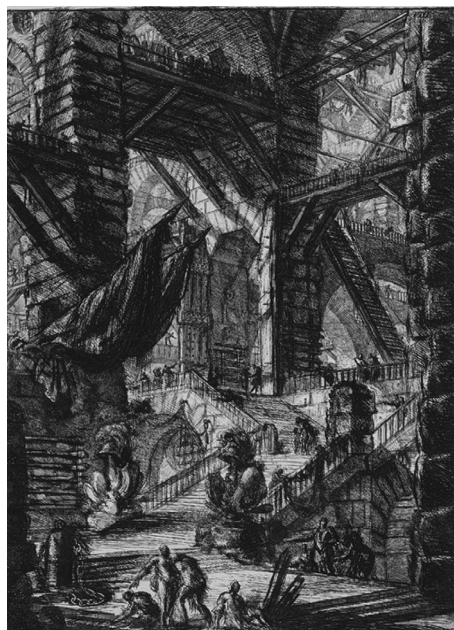
'[...] it is a strange thing that the mad Piranesi [*il Pazzo Piranesi*] dares to be an Architect; I shall only say that it is not a profession for madmen' (as quoted in Pane, 1973, p. 42). These words are from Luigi Vanvitelli's let-



**Figure 6.** Plate XIV (also known with the name of 'The Gothic Arch'), *Invenzioni capricci di carceri*, 1745.



**Figure 7.** Plate III (also known with the name of 'The Round Tower'), *Carceri d'Invenzione*, 1760.



**Figure 8.** Plate VIII (The Staircase with Trophies), *Carceri d'Invenzione*, 1760.

<sup>16</sup>Perhaps the most important historicist of the eighteenth-century Italy was still Franco Venturi. See Venturi, 1972.

<sup>17</sup>Also see Piranesi, 'Parere su l'architettura', in Wilton-Ely, 2002, pp. 140-41.

<sup>18</sup>Sallust's original words in his *Bellum Iugurthinum* are as follows: 'Nunc vos existimate facta an dicta pluris sint. Contemnunt novitatem meam, ego illorum ignaviam; mihi fortuna, illis probra obiectantur' [Think now yourselves whether words or deeds are worth more. They scorn my humble birth, I their worthlessness; I am taunted with my lot in life, they with their infamies]. Piranesi found Sallust's words in 'The War with Jugurtha', 1980, pp. 85. 14. Piranesi's inscription in Figure 10 is translated by Rykwert as, 'They despise my humble birth [or: my originality] and I their cowardice' in Rykwert, 1978, p. 380; by Wittkower as, 'They despise my novelty, I their timidity' in Wittkower, 1938-39, p. 155n.81. Also see Piranesi, 'Parere su l'architettura', in Wilton-Ely, 2002, pp. 78n.99, 153.

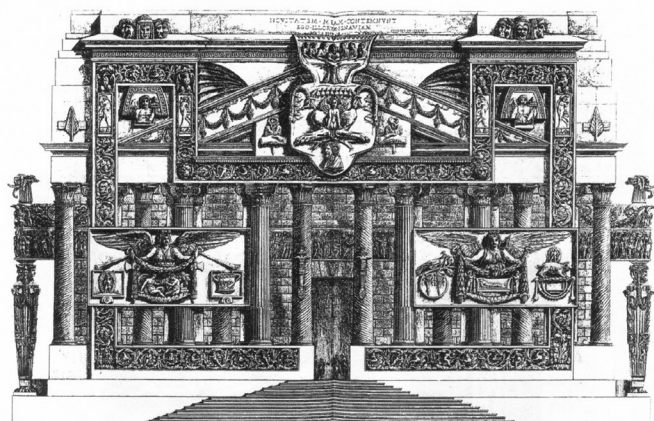


Figure 9. Plate IX, Parere, 1765.

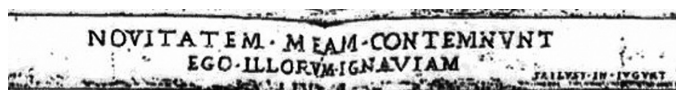


Figure 10. Plate IX, detail, Parere, 1765.

ter (1700-1773) to his brother written in the 1760s. Piranesi apparently was aware of some of his contemporaries' opinion of him. In various places in his work both written and visual, he responded to, or rather, commented on, this perception. His comments indicate that he had a specific explanation for the misguided perception. Piranesi never changed his manner, however, and never waived in the face of hard critique. Perhaps as a reply to all of them, in 1765 he drew Plate IX of the *Parere su l'architettura* [Figure 9] (Piranesi, 1765).<sup>17</sup> In the superscript of this magnificently innovative construction which is at once decorative design, engineered mechanism and visual historiography, he inscribed words from the Roman Sallust: 'Novitatem meam contemnunt, ego illorum ignaviam': 'They despise my novelty, I their timidity' [Figure 10].<sup>18</sup>

The *Carceri* series do not reflect Piranesi's psychological character, but his arguments on architecture and history; and Piranesi, of course, could not respond to the posthumous Romanticist appropriation of his *Carceri*. That remains for us to do in further studies. However, there is larger difficulty involved in understanding and interpreting an enlightened architect and writer by considering him in his own time and in his own context, rather than reading him as if he lived, worked and thought in an environment no different

from ours. The research to be done is immense and Piranesi's *oeuvre* is complex. The failure of his major interpreters may be attributed to these factors and the very complex character of the eighteenth century. There is equally the necessity to work one's way through the mediation of the Romantics' perception which, as we have seen, twentieth-century critics tended to take for granted.

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