

Giovanni Battista Piranesi

“Piranesi and the Temples of Paestum: Drawings from Sir John Soane’s Museum,” at the Morgan Library & Museum in New York City, presents the final achievement of an extraordinarily influential graphic artist and antiquarian. Giovanni Battista Piranesi visited the archaeological site of Paestum, south of Naples, in 1777 and made magnificent drawings of the three Doric temples. Etchings based on the drawings were finished by his son, Francesco, and published after Giovanni Battista’s death, in *Différentes vues de Pesto* (1778). Piranesi’s books of etchings documented—in painstaking detail and with dramatic flair—the rediscovery of some important physical remnants of antiquity. His images promoted the work of archeologists and spurred the classical revival among architects and artists. Sir John Soane knew Piranesi and visited Paestum twice. He used the Doric order for his masterpiece, the Bank of England (1804). He purchased the Piranesi Paestum drawings in 1817, installed them in his house museum in London and frequently used them as teaching aids. The drawings have been recently restored. The exhibition represents their first appearance in the United States.

Usually, Piranesi (who created over 1,000 views of Rome) worked out much of the composition for his etchings directly on the copper plate, although he also used preparatory sketches. The Paestum drawings show a great deal of finished detail, more than usual, bringing to life the architecture, the topography and the spirit of the place—the melancholy grandeur of time-worn monuments. In *Interior of the Temple of Neptune, Looking South-East* (Study for plate XVII), a bit of rustic *staffage*, a herdsman leaning on a cane and two cows, add a note of picturesque desolation, while the majestic, double-tiered columns march into the distance. Piranesi employs deep shadows in the foreground



Giovanni Battista Piranesi, *View of the Temple of Neptune and the Basilica, Looking South-West* (Study for plate IV)



Giovanni Battista Piranesi, *View of the Temple of Neptune, Looking South-West* (Study for plate X)

and lighter washes in the background, suggesting an infinite procession into the mists of the past. Pencil, brown and grey washes, and pen and ink create a richly toned palette. He is a master of chiaroscuro.

Piranesi employs light and dark shrewdly, to convey both open space and monumental substance. In *View of the Temple of Neptune and the Basilica, Looking South-West* (Study for plate IV), the cropped mass of the temple fills the right foreground, dark and imposing, yet in the roofless interior, columns shimmer with light. The basilica, to the left, stretches out, in soft, muted tones, under a vast, streaky sky. Piranesi typically approaches his subject at an angle, off-kilter, rather than head-on. A central vanishing point tends to schematize and flatten; diagonals make for a more dynamic composition. He picked up this strategy, the *scena per angolo*, from the theater designer Ferdinando Bibiena. In *View of the Temple of Neptune, Looking South-West* (Study for plate X), Piranesi displays the full building, yet by angling it, he seems to exaggerate the row of columns on the right, suggesting the forced perspectives of the Mannerist architect Borromini. The right-hand corner rises dramatically: the broken cornice is topped by weeds. There are dozens of human and animal figures littering the spaces around this magnificent edifice, dwarfed by the glory that was Greece, reduced to the status of aesthetically appealing texture dots.

The tightly focused exhibition captures a crucial moment in the history of taste. When Paestum was rediscovered in 1746, the temple complex had been largely unknown since it was abandoned in the ninth century AD. One of the

triumphs of Magna Graecia, it was established by Greek colonists in the late seventh century BC as Poseidonia and renamed Paestum by the Romans. The eighteenth-century rediscovery of the temples—among the best-preserved examples of ancient architecture in the world—was a sensation. The unearthing of the buried Roman cities of Pompeii and Herculaneum, at about the same time, was another event that opened the ancient world in a previously unexpected way.

Piranesi's propagation of Greek and Roman architecture played a pivotal role in the classical revival. What these drawings, in particular, have to offer, beyond cultural resonance, is evidence of his artistry. The drawings have great physical presence, due in part of his choice of a rough paper that mimics the eroded texture of the travertine that the Greek used as their building material. In the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, in a transitional era when classicists and Romantics were often at odds, Piranesi spoke to both camps. His superbly detailed views go beyond academic clarity to fire the imaginations of classicists, Romantics and moderns, who find common ground in their passion for antiquity. Those interested in exploring the background to the exhibition should read John Wilton-Ely's *Piranesi, Paestum and Soane* (Prestel, 2013). "Piranesi and the Temples of Paestum: Drawings from Sir John Soane's Museum" is on view January 23–May 17, 2015, at the Morgan Library & Museum, 225 Madison Avenue, New York, New York 10016. Telephone (212) 685-0008. themorgan.org

—Gail Leggio