Exhibitions

Piranesi as Designer
Cooper-Hewitt National Design Museum, New York

The Teylers Museum, the Netherlands
9 February–18 May 2008

Piranesi is, inevitably, a prime subject for an exhibition. His prints and drawings cannot fail to intrigue. There are so many, however, that hard choices have to be made. The Cooper-Hewitt Museum is none too well arranged for large exhibitions, so the problem is compounded. Sarah Lawrence, who first conceived the exhibition, thought to present Piranesi as a designer, a very idiosyncratic designer perhaps, but one whose activity in this respect has scarcely been explored. The subject was altogether appropriate for a design museum. She was abetted by John Wilton-Ely and others, enthusiasts all. The exhibition that has emerged, however, is marked by a degree of disjunction.

Piranesi’s activity as a designer is explored with some panache in the main exhibition room. It opens with both Francesco Polanzani’s etching of Piranesi (1750) and Pietro Labruzzi’s portrait (1779), painted just after Piranesi’s death, in which he holds a drawing or print of one of his designs. The title in Italian rather than the French emphasis has scarcely been explored. The handling of the space of the basilica and the considered relationship between his decorative detail and that of Borromini is overlooked; the large and thus rarely seen section in the Morgan Library showing the full length of the nave—meticulously drawn, culminating in Piranesi’s proposed apse, sketched entirely in his own hand—is, sadly, not included. There is, however, another drawing from the Morgan Library of a colonnaded apse and an exuberant fantastic space from the Biblioteca Comunale dell’Archiginnasio in Bologna.

The drawings in the third area of the exhibition record the design of Santa Maria del Priorato: five from the Morgan Library, one from the Kunsthistorisches Museum in Vienna, and one from the Kunsthistorische Staatliche Kunstmuseen in Berlin, together with an alternate design for the altar by Carlo Marchionni from the Cooper-Hewitt’s own collection. The emphasis is, as before, on decorative detail.

The conservatory of the Cooper-Hewitt follows, in which no prints or drawings can be displayed. It was to have been decked out with full-scale enlargements of Piranesi’s etchings of the Caffè degli Inglesi. Unfortunately, the idea fell victim to fire regulations. The main room ensues, and here Piranesi’s decorative designs and their influence are surveyed. There are drawings of sedan chairs and gondolas, decorative panels and over-doors, chimneypieces, candelabra, tripod, and side tables and chairs, clocks and vases, no less than eighteen of the drawings from the Morgan Library, three from Sven Gahlin’s collection, three from the British Museum, and one each from the Victoria and Albert Museum and the Soane Museum in London and the Kunstbibliothek in Berlin. This last drawing is a vibrant sketch of the full panoply for a chimneypiece of the sort that was soon to be adopted by architects in England.

One drawing of a door surround by Marchionni, from the Cooper-Hewitt collection, was included by way of contrast. This rich array of drawings was reinforced by prints as well as by objects made to Piranesi’s designs—a second of the Minneapolis Institute of Art’s wine coolers, the Doncaster race cup from Lotherton Hall (near Leeds), and a chimneypiece made for John Hope and now in the Soane Museum in London and the Kunstbibliothek in Berlin, together with an alternate design for the altar by Carlo Marchionni from the Cooper-Hewitt’s own collection. The emphasis is, as before, on decorative detail.
seum in Amsterdam. A print of Piranesi’s even more bizarre design for the adornment of the side table was set nicely alongside. Unfortunately, none of the great candelabra composed by Piranesi could be borrowed.

At the other end of the room Piranesi’s influence as a designer was equally spectacularly but far less certainly surveyed. Robert Adam’s allegiance was represented by one of the plates from his Works in Architecture—a wall of the entrance hall to Syon House, commissioned from Piranesi—two drawings for chairs in the Etruscan room at Osterley Park (one of the drawings more convincingly dating from the 1920s than from the 1770s), and a painted pine candle stand from the eating room of 20 St. James’s Square, now in the Victoria and Albert Museum. Adam’s early and rather naive response to Piranesi’s exuberances in the form of sketches for cities of towers might well have been included here. Thomas Hope’s attachment was recalled by a plate from his Household Furniture illustrating his Egyptian room in Duchess Street, London, together with one of the surviving settees from that room, borrowed from the Powerhouse Museum in Sydney, and a clock in the Egyptian mode (likewise made for Hope) from the Royal Pavilion in Brighton. Laurent Pécheux’s painting of the Marchesa Boccapaduli, including furniture in the Egyptian style thought to have been designed by Piranesi, would have been an appropriate addition here, as also would one of George Dance’s drawings for a chimneypiece in the Egyptian style for the gallery of Lansdowne House, probably the first of its kind in England. Although a plate from Charles Percier and Pierre-François-Léonard Fontaine’s Recueil des décorations intérieures was on view elsewhere, it scarcely served to demonstrate their vigorous response to Piranesi’s work. Not one of Percier’s great compositions was on display.

Oddly, given the nature of the exhibition, an attempt was made to represent some of the influence of Piranesi’s sublime through a view of a colonnaded hall by Etienne-Louis Boullée and two of Joseph Gandy’s watercolors of John Soane’s banking halls. Welcome though the sight of these might be, they can scarcely be thought to owe too much to Piranesi. Soane was indeed in thrall to Piranesi—he owned fifteen of his great drawings of the temples of Paestum and numerous editions of his etchings—but he was cautious always in responding too openly to him. Soane’s sublime, like Boullée’s, had literary roots. If something of Piranesi’s direct influence on Soane was required, how much better might it have been to demonstrate it in the form of an elevation of his library wall, which is a knowing reference to one of those for the Caffè degli Inglesi, including the crocodile? Alternatively, Gandy’s perspective of the Court of Chancery, of about 1823, could have been compared to plate X of the Carceri; the composition derives directly from it, with the Lord Chancellor and his attendants replacing Piranesi’s tied up prisoners. But such carping is, of course, churlish. With so many good things on view, some sharpness of focus must be excused.

The exhibition ends with an instant updating of Piranesi’s impact in the form of recordings by six contemporary architects—Peter Eisenman, Michael Graves, Daniel Libeskind, Denise Scott-Brown and Robert Venturi, and Robert Stern—mulling over their notions as to how Piranesi may have inflected their work. As might be expected, they respond to his prints and are happy to say so. But whatever they say, it is all too evident that Piranesi’s impact has been tangential, at best. Not one of them is interested in Piranesi’s design repertoire. The spur to their interest is, no doubt, Manfredo Tafuri’s tendentious (not to say ludicrous) article “G. B. Piranesi: l’architettura come ‘utopia negativa’,” published in Angelus Novus in 1971—and soon after, in one form or another, in about a dozen of the most admired architectural magazines. This became a trope for modernism. Architects respond to Piranesi’s fractured spaces, whether in the Carceri or in the Campus Martius. After Tafuri they referred to Piranesi with the same knowing familiarity as to Walter Bem-
jamin. The mismatch that becomes evident in the finale of the Cooper-Hewitt exhibition is the inevitable result of a failure to explore Piranesi’s handling of space and form—though there are indeed two plates from the *Carceri* on display.

The publication accompanying the exhibition, *Piranesi as Designer*, is filled with good reproductions of all the works on display—and a great many more that were not—but it cannot be considered a catalog. It is made up, essentially, of nine essays, the first and longest an outline of Piranesi’s career by Wilton-Ely, quite familiar, followed by an exploration of Piranesi’s eclecticism by Lawrence, Peter Miller on the antiquarian imagination, then David Rosand ruminating yet again on the significance of a spiral implanted, quite flat, over an Egyptian lion in one of Piranesi’s *Grotteschi* (the spiral is something of a red herring, as Richard Brilliant has remarked, being an ancient Near Eastern symbol for the sun, altogether appropriate on a lion, a sun god to the Egyptians) and also the relationship between the spiral and Piranesi’s serpentine line (culled perhaps from William Hogarth). The spiral and the serpentine line are, of course, quite distinct.

Bent Sorensen next offers a meticulous, dead-pan analysis of Piranesi’s proposals for the apse of San Giovanni in Laterano. This essay is a rebuttal, it would seem, to a suggestion of my own, and also of Fabio Barry, that Piranesi’s planning was conditioned by a need for processional routes, in particular from the sacristy to the baptistery at the rear of the church;1 “to my knowledge,” Sorensen notes, “such a route is not mentioned in any eighteenth century source” (348). Maybe so. But robes and instruments are, as he must know, kept in the sacristy; celebrants prepare there for services, from the simplest to the largest of assemblies, before proceeding to an altar, whether in the church or the baptistery. The issue is access. Piranesi, to judge by the doorways marked on his plans, was well aware of this need. A plan can be read as well as a text.

Alice Jarrard follows on eighteenth-century stage settings, then Alvar González-Palacios on eighteenth-century furnishings in Rome. As always, González-Palacios is uniquely well informed, though his article needs to be read with his earlier studies to grasp the full impact made on and by Piranesi. Ronald de Leeuw surveys Piranesi’s influence in the Netherlands—his prints were transposed into plaster in the hall of Biljoen Castle at Velp. To end are the musings of the contemporary architects on Piranesi, though not the same musings provided in the recordings of the exhibition.

A related symposium held on 29 September 2007 opened with a paper by Andrew Robison on Piranesi as a designer of books. Yet, while meticulous and thoughtful, Robison’s essay was too determinedly focused on Venetian precedents, avoiding all reference to carto-
Lessons from Bernard Rudofsky
Architekturzentrum Wien, Vienna
9 March–28 May 2007

Canadian Centre for Architecture, Montreal
4 July–30 September 2007

Getty Research Institute, Los Angeles
11 March–8 June 2008

The architect Bernard Rudofsky (Suchdol nad Odrou, Moravia 1905–New York 1988) was at the margins of high modernism but nonetheless shared the obsessions of the age. Like his more famous colleagues, he advocated for a reformed lifestyle suited for modern individuals. Yet, unlike some of his heroic counterparts who embraced industrialization, he shunned the dream of an efficient reengineering of the human environment made possible by the machine. Nor did he wish to follow formalist programs for a new architecture, like that prescribed by the proponents of the International Style. Instead, he relied on the lessons provided by the collective wisdom of generations of form-makers and users, one he saw encapsulated in traditional design.

Rudofsky’s “primitivism” was hardly a novelty in modernist circles. Since the Enlightenment, critics have used premodern or foreign cultures as counterexamples to the shortcomings of their own societies. In the visual arts, the quest for origins was a crucial catalyst for much of the avant-garde, and important architects such as Le Corbusier, Ludwig Mies van der Rohe, and José Luis Sert studied traditional buildings to hone their revolutionary agendas. The indigenous would be an even more crucial motor in Rudofsky’s intellectual enterprise.

Rudofsky relentlessly confronted the familiar and the “other” throughout his life. These contrasting positions underpinned his activities as writer, photographer, designer, and architect alike. They informed his wide-ranging analysis of material culture that covered territories as diverse as clothing and urban form. In apparel design, he wished to replace the extravagance of Western fashion with a more reasoned approach. His designs for shoes and clothing celebrated a body freed from illogical and unhealthy garments produced by a perverse fashion system. He countered his historicist, Beaux-Arts training at the Technische Hochschule Wien, where he had graduated in 1928, by studying vernacular structures of foreign civilizations. Thus he championed indigenous Mediterranean buildings and traditional Japanese houses as models to emulate. Rudofsky’s lifelong commitment to the study of native buildings and their settings culminated in the seminal exhibition that he curated at the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) in 1964, Architecture Without Architects, an immensely popular event that definitively established his reputation as a relentless critic of the vacuity of modern life.

An elegant exhibition organized by the Architekturzentrum Wien and the Getty Research Institute (GRI) in association with the Canadian Centre for Architecture (CCA) outlined Rudofsky’s career and theoretical interests. Its co-curators Monika Platzer, curator of the Archive/Collection at the Architekturzentrum, and Wim de Wit, head of Special Collections and Visual Resources and curator of Architectural Collections at the GRI, masterminded the staging of objects. A lavishly illustrated catalog accompanies the exhibition. It comprises an introduction by Platzer and essays by Maria Welzig, de Wit, Andrea Boccu Guarnieri, and Felicity D. Scott that were presented originally at a 2005 symposium held in Vienna on the occasion of the one hundredth anniversary of Rudofsky’s birth. Documentary sections devoted to Rudofsky’s photographs, the books he authored, and reprints and translations of some of the architect’s articles in domus complete the publication.

Two introductory galleries preceded six main sections at the CCA. The first gallery featured suspended reproductions of some of Rudofsky’s iconic drawings and photographs, a display strategy that mimicked one favored by the architect in his own exhibition designs. Copies of Rudofsky’s principal publications were