

THE WALL STREET JOURNAL.

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ART REVIEW

Review of 'Piranesi and the Temples of Paestum: Drawings From Sir John Soane's Museum' at the Morgan Library & Museum

Majestic in scale, these valedictory works were created at the very end of Giovanni Battista Piranesi's life.



'View of the Interior of the Basilica, Looking East' (Study for Plate IX of 'Différentes vues de Pesto') (1777-78) by Giovanni Battista Piranesi. PHOTO: COURTESY OF THE TRUSTEES OF SIR JOHN SOANE

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March 24, 2015 5:20 p.m. ET

New York

Sir John Soane's Museum in London, residence of the architect (1753-1837), comprises three adjoining 18th-century houses whose sober, contiguous exteriors belie fantastical interiors, notably the basement chambers crowded with archaeological relics and illuminated by rooftop skylights. Soane's revolutionary multistory spaces with dramatic plays of light and shadow reflect the influence of the Italian artist, architect and antiquarian Giovanni Battista Piranesi (1720-78).

Piranesi's etchings of architecture and imaginary architectural *capricci* are among the best-known works of 18th-century Italy, some initially produced to bolster his architectural ambitions to create a modern Rome that reflected a unified, harmonious tribute to historical glory. Ultimately thwarted as an architect, Piranesi concentrated on etching to satisfy the lucrative market for engraved antiquary subjects while simultaneously disseminating his revolutionary, profoundly well-informed theories about architecture, archaeology and dramatic pictorial design. The young Soane met Piranesi in Rome while taking his grand tour in 1778. Not only did Soane eventually own a comprehensive set of the etchings, but in 1817 he acquired 15 of the artist's magnificent ink-and-wash drawings of the three ruined temples at Paestum (Pesto in Italian), a former Greek colony on the Gulf of Salerno south of Naples.

The desolate site had generally been ignored until the mid-18th-century excavations of Herculaneum and Pompeii rekindled interest in the area. The three temples—two sacred to Hera and the third to Athena—are among the best-preserved examples of their kind. In Piranesi's day, two were given Roman attributions—to Neptune and Ceres, respectively. The earliest was thought to be a basilica, a civic structure, before the discovery of Greek inscriptions identifying its consecration to Hera.

In failing health, Piranesi journeyed to Paestum in 1777 and made the drawings in preparation for what proved to be his posthumous etched series, "Différentes vues de Pesto," completed and published by his son in 1778. Majestic in scale, these valedictory works are more highly finished than most Piranesi drawings and therefore occupy a singular position in the artist's oeuvre. Recently restored by the Soane Museum, they form the Morgan Library & Museum's current exhibition "Piranesi and the Temples of Paestum," mounted by Per Rumberg, associate curator of drawings and prints at the Morgan, in collaboration with the Soane Museum staff.

Apart from their generous size, they captivate the eye with their dramatic sense of depth. Piranesi achieved this by departing from traditional principles of landscape composition, organized around a central vanishing point, in favor of off-center vanishing points, an illusionary technique he had learned as a young stage designer. In “View of the Interior of the Basilica, Looking North” (study for Plate V of the “Différentes vues”), the original lines laying out this perspective are partly visible as two converging strokes of black chalk in the lower-right quadrant of the drawing, the vanishing point itself indicated with an “x” near the right-hand margin.

During most of his career, Piranesi had championed Roman classicism, immersed as he was in the city’s ancient ruins. But the Paestum drawings document Piranesi’s embrace of early Greek classicism late in life. Paestum’s temples, dating from c. 550 B.C. to c. 450 B.C., represent the Doric order, popular in Classical-era Greece and exemplified by the Parthenon in Athens. Piranesi vividly captures the austerity of these buildings, their massive columns relatively short and thick compared with Roman ones, not to mention Greek Ionic and Corinthian ones. Characteristic of Doric architecture, the fluted shafts stand directly on the temple floor, or stylobate, with no intervening base. They taper upward to the simple, ponderous capital, composed of a dishlike echinus beneath a block-form abacus supporting the horizontal beams (architraves).

The temples dominate the landscape near the Bay of Salerno, and in “View of the Temple of Neptune and the Basilica, Looking Southwest” (study for Plate IV), the broad colonnades frame the distant water like a stage set. This drawing in particular presents a relatively low viewpoint, emphasizing the expanse of sky as well as the bay. The distance to the water is underscored by the massive corner of the Temple of Neptune pediment looming in the right foreground. Foreshortening and compression of the Neptune columns add further architectural density, emphasizing the contrasting plein-air spaciousness of sea and sky.

In “View of the Interior of the Basilica, Looking East” (study for Plate IX), the architecture is rendered with particular refinement—profiles of the column shafts, suggestions of the fluting and of the seams between the column sections are all indicated with very fine lines and strokes of black chalk. The delicate application of light gray wash on the architecture and in the cloud-figured sky lends the composition an appealingly sunny luminosity. As with the other drawings, strokes of wash applied with consummate powers of observation convey the weathered stone and the delicate textures of lush overgrowth, all in keeping with the sense of the picturesque that characterized the late-18th-century convergence of Neoclassicism and burgeoning Romanticism.

Figures at their daily chores—fishermen mending nets, shepherds and goatherds tending flocks—further enliven this coastal architecture and were added later by Piranesi and possibly studio assistants. Certainly the heavy strokes of brown ink delineating the foreground figures in “Interior of the Basilica, Looking East” suggest a fairly broad or worn quill pen strikingly different from the fine pen used on the buildings. At the same time, the highlights and shadows on the fishermen seem to interrupt a passage of background wash along the ground behind them, suggesting that certain wash passages were applied even later than the figures.

Also exhibited are two of the published etchings. We can thus compare the drawing of the “View of the Interior of the Basilica, Looking West” with its finished state in Plate VI, and examine how the subtleties of shadows and sky figuration initially rendered in translucent tones of gray wash were translated into printable form with countless minute strokes of an etching needle and thick intaglio printing ink.

John Wilton-Ely, whose beautiful volume on the drawings, produced for the Soane Museum, is available at the Morgan, quotes the observation by Piranesi's first biographer, J.G. Legrand, that “a rough study in chalk, reworked with pen or brush and even then only in parts [was] sufficient” for him to etch a finely detailed plate. Hence, one wishes that the Morgan had included one or two Piranesi drawings from its own collection to illustrate just how far the finish of these Paestum drawings exceeds that of Piranesi's usual sketches. Sensing his mortality, he had adopted this meticulous refinement in order to leave his 19-year-old son, Francesco, with the most accurate possible preparation for the task of etching them. Technical questions still remain about how these drawings were used to create the related prints. Yet despite these mysteries, we can only be grateful for the opportunity to examine Piranesi's own hand during this glorious twilight of his life.

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