

**Paul Stock**

## Diverse maniere: Piranesi, fantasy and excess

### Website entry

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## Fine Art Reviews



### Diverse Maniere: Piranesi, Fantasy and Excess

Location: Sir John Soane's Museum, London

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Reviewed By: Paul Stock, International History Department, London School of Economics and Political Science

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Review:

*Diverse Maniere*, an exhibition at Sir John Soane's Museum in London, explores three inter-related topics, all concerned with the interpretation, adaptation and realisation of the past. Firstly, it displays printed architectural and interior designs by Giovanni Battista Piranesi (1720-78), a large collection of which resides in the museum. These designs focus particularly on Piranesi's view of the classical world and his attempts to adapt its precepts for use in modern design contexts. Secondly, the exhibition investigates Piranesi's influence on Sir John Soane himself (1753-1837), both in terms of the latter's teaching and architectural practice, and the physical construction and guiding principles of the museum itself. Lastly, and most strikingly, the exhibition includes several objects newly realised from Piranesi's designs by the Spanish technology and conservation company Factum Arte. Using digital modelling and 3-D printing, combined with eighteenth-century techniques such as gilding and bronze casting, Factum Arte have given physical form to previously immaterial objects: monumental vases and coffeepots, candelabras and chimneypieces. What unites these different strands is a shared concern for how the past and the present inform and reflect one another. Piranesi, Soane, and Factum Arte are all interested in how modern designs can engage with past ideas and practices, but also in how the objects and spaces of the past can be re-presented and even 'improved' by modern insights. In this way, the exhibition reflects productively on the practical and interpretative relationship between different periods – not only the ancient world and the Enlightenment, but also the eighteenth and the twenty-first centuries.

*Diverse Maniere* contains a number of Piranesi prints, gathered mainly from the Soane Museum's own library, but also from the British Museum and the Fondazione Giorgio Cini collection. A key theme of these images is Piranesi's imaginative engagement with the classical past. His image of the *Via Appia* (1756), for example, emphasises the dramatic monumentality of the ancients' achievements: according to the exhibition display caption, the travellers in the image – just like the viewers of the print – are overwhelmed by the 'superhuman scale of classical architecture and the awe which it engendered'. Naturally, this is not a realistic depiction of this famous

location, but neither is Piranesi merely indulging in flights of fancy. Instead, he is constructing what might be called a 'real-and-imagined' landscape: his Appian Way is a rhetorical construct which argues for, and symbolically represents, the material significance of the ancients' legacy. Piranesi is re-imagining past landscapes in terms of what they might mean to observers in the present; his print shows how the classical past and neoclassical modernity can inform one another.

A similar process occurs in Piranesi's interior designs: he wants to design objects which draw upon antiquity, but which also adapt or improve classical ideas to benefit modern 'manners and customs'. The results are drawings of altars, chairs and tripods which freely interpret classical themes and combine them with, for example, Egyptian iconography, shapes and images from the natural world, and contemporary requirements. How could one design a neoclassical chimneypiece for modern homes when ancient Greek and Roman houses had no need for such items and therefore no precedents exist? Piranesi's solution is to effect a sort of collaboration between the observable features of extant classical objects (medals, coins, statues) and the new demands of modern living. The result is a simulated classical design which assembles ancient ideas into a modern shape and purpose. This fantasy-object cannot be adequately described as 'genuine' or 'fake': to choose either term would be to misunderstand the efficacy of the designs, and the reciprocity of past and present in Piranesi's overall purpose. All of this is important because, through this method, Piranesi is proposing an approach to the past not bound by ideas of 'recovery' or 'restoration'. This may encourage us to reinterpret eighteenth-century neoclassicism, not as an attempt to reproduce the past and impose it on an inferior modernity, but rather as a project to engage imaginatively with the ancients, allowing the perspectives and practices of past and present to illuminate one another. For Piranesi, neoclassicism is not about slavish imitation or illusions of restitution; it is a source of modern inspiration and is itself a facet of modernity.

Alongside these materials, the exhibition also illustrates Piranesi's influence upon Soane. The two met in 1778, possibly at the Palazzo Tomati in Rome where Piranesi kept a museum of antiquities. Certainly Soane's own collection represents Piranesi strongly; it contains objects formerly possessed by him, as well as items possibly restored in his workshops or depicted in his publications. Significantly, Jerzy Kierkuć-Bieliński's catalogue essay also argues that Piranesi's designs – especially in his book *Carceri d'Invenzione* (1750) – physically shaped Soane's museum: Soane used 'Piranesian tropes of lights, shadow, volume, mass and fantasy' to organise the rooms and to display his growing collection (pp. 9-10). In this sense, Soane materialises Piranesi's designs: the viewer of the current exhibition can study Piranesi's original prints, and then experience physical spaces shaped according to their principles. Importantly too, Soane made extensive use of casts and reproductions in his teaching collection. The presence of such simulacra might suggest a neoclassical fascination for 'authenticity'; but in the light of Piranesi's experimentation, and Soane's display methods, we need to see neoclassicism as an exercise in adaptation: a conversation with the past, rather than a set of instructions from it.

All of this makes Factum Arte's production of Piranesi-derived objects highly apposite. Typically, the designs are taken from prints and then extrapolated into 3-D digital models. These are then materialised using contemporary techniques, notably stereolithography 3-D printing, and early modern methods – for example, the *scagliola* technique for imitating marble. The exhibition is sensitive to the liminal nature of these objects: one plaster candelabra is based on a 1778 Piranesi print, but its caption professes uncertainty about whether the print shows an 'actual antique' or a product of the designer's 'fertile imagination'. At such moments, the exhibition helpfully questions artificial distinctions between imitation and inspiration. At times, however, it revels in a sense of mystery. The displays show artefacts and a few photographs from the production processes, but they are not very forthcoming about the exact methods used: an exhibition-goer with little idea about how 3-D printing works will not be especially enlightened by the information on offer. Another caption quotes the contemporary architect and designer Michele De Lucchi: 'Piranesi should have been born three hundred years later ... when he would have been capable of exploiting all the technological potential that we have.' This presentism is problematic because it implies that we moderns – with our computers and 3-D printers – have bettered our predecessors, realising what they were only capable of imagining. This is not, I think, what Piranesi was striving at when he designed neoclassical chimneypieces: he was interested in how the living past could inform and shape modernity, and not simply in

promoting the technical superiority of his own age.

In fact, *Diverse Maniere* is a much more subtle exhibition than De Lucchi's statement implies. It is not really a celebration of modern technology; rather it reflects significantly on the mutually-constructive interaction of past and present in both eighteenth-century and contemporary culture. Furthermore, the exhibition interrogates ideas about authorship and temporality. What kinds of objects have Factum Arte produced? Are they ancient objects, eighteenth-century objects, or twenty-first-century objects? Several are displayed outside the main exhibition rooms and are integrated into the rest of the museum; indeed, they harmonise so well with their surroundings that an inattentive viewer could mistake them for part of Soane's collection. There are some complex interactions taking place here across the centuries: Piranesi designed objects to resemble ancient artefacts; Soane constructed a museum both to resemble and to contain Piranesi's designs; and Factum Arte produced objects to execute Piranesi's ideas in the context of Soane's museum. If temporal authenticity is open to question, so too is the idea of authorship. The catalogue reveals dozens of people involved in making these new-old hybrid artefacts, meaning that the exhibition is actually testimony to the innovation and craftsmanship of contemporary practitioners, not just the headline names of Piranesi and Soane. At first glance *Diverse Maniere* seems to be a traditional exhibition, carefully organising fragments in glass cases, but in fact its implications are daring and richly suggestive. Not only does it question the very premises of authorship and period upon which it is seemingly based, but it also foregrounds the complications and innovations necessarily involved in looking at the past.

*Diverse Maniere: Piranesi, Fantasy and Excess is at Sir John Soane's Museum, Lincoln's Inn Fields, London, from 8 March to 31 May 2014.*

*The exhibition is accompanied by the publication Diverse Maniere: Piranesi, Fantasy and Excess, foreword by Abraham Thomas, essay by Jerzy Kierkuć-Bieliński (Factum Arte, 2014).*

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