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Piranesi's Imitation of the Classics

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Piranesi's Imitation of the Classics

Abstract

SCHOLARS HAVE sometimes defined classicism as a debate between copying and representation. Speaking of the French artist Nicolas Poussin, art historian Richard T. Neer claimed: "Copying is the death of art, because a Copy is not really a picture in Poussin's understanding of the term: lacking idealization or elevation, it is just the replication of Nature."¹ For Poussin, the "most deplorable" example of this kind of copying is printmaking, considered here as the unthinking production of the original. ² Poussin contrasts this to painting, which he claims has a literary and intellectual quality.

Disciplines

Ancient History, Greek and Roman through Late Antiquity | Classical Literature and Philology | Fine Arts | French and Francophone Literature

Comments

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CLASSE

SICISMS

EDITED BY Larry F. Norman and Anne Leonard

SMART MUSEUM OF ART
THE UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO

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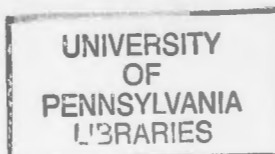
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2

Piranesi's Imitation of the Classics

SCHOLARS HAVE sometimes defined classicism as a debate between copying and representation. Speaking of the French artist Nicolas Poussin, art historian Richard T. Neer claimed: "Copying is the death of art, because a Copy is not really a picture in Poussin's understanding of the term: lacking idealization or elevation, it is just the replication of Nature."¹ For Poussin, the "most deplorable" example of this kind of copying is printmaking, considered here as the unthinking production of the original.² Poussin contrasts this to painting, which he claims has a literary and intellectual quality.

While these critiques may have been valid in the context of seventeenth-century France, we can observe how Italian architect and printmaker Giovanni Battista Piranesi added a representational quality to his etchings. Through his prints, Piranesi debated with intellectuals and artists in France and England about the origins of Roman art itself and the limits of classicism. For example, instead of claiming that Roman art's status was due to its Greek predecessors, Piranesi instead emphasized the influence of the Etruscans, the first inhabitants of Italy before the Romans arrived.³ More specifically, drawing on ideas posited by his mentor Matteo Lucchesi (1705–1776), Piranesi argued that Doric columns were actually invented by the Etruscans and only later renamed the Doric style by the Greeks.

Even though one of the goals of Piranesi's prints was to emphasize the uniquely Roman quality of its architecture, the Rome that the public

encountered in the eighteenth century was a city in ruins. Piranesi wrote: "When I saw in Rome how most of the remains of the ancient buildings lay scattered through gardens and ploughed fields . . . I resolved to preserve them by means of engravings. I have therefore drawn these ruins with all possible exquisiteness."⁴ In other words, Piranesi needed printmaking to "make ideas of Rome through pictures," reconstructing Rome as the ideal *locus classicus*.⁵ To achieve this goal, he argued for the right of the artist to draw on diverse classical sources, excavating as much knowledge as possible about a subject and then infusing that knowledge into his representations. In this archaeological sense, Piranesi transforms printmaking into an imitative and representational art form, relaying meaning through a dialogue with previous intellectual traditions.

Taking this view of classicism as his point of departure, Piranesi began perhaps his most famous collection of etchings of Roman architecture, the *Views of Rome*, in 1747 and continued work on it until his death in 1778. As distinct from his previous print projects, designed for an elite public in order to garner prestige for the artist, these etchings constituted a more commercial effort to sell the grandeur of Rome through a series of souvenir images.⁶

Temple of the Sibyl, Tivoli (fig. 105) is one of Piranesi's *Views of Rome*. Formerly known as Tibur, Tivoli was an appropriate location to emphasize the Etruscan roots of Roman architecture, since Tibur was one of the five great cities of Latium that



Veduta del tempio della Sibilla in Tivoli

Aeneas conquered as he was establishing Rome.⁷ By emphasizing the interconnectedness between Rome and Tivoli, Piranesi also reinforced the degree to which Roman art and architecture imitates its Latin predecessors. By the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, Tivoli was recognized as one of Rome's foundational cities and was a favorite site for Piranesi to depict.

In addition to harking back to Rome's Latin past, *Temple of the Sibyl* also accentuates the prophetic aspect of Piranesi's artistic project. This can best be seen if we consider how the sibyls were interpreted prophetically not only by Greco-Roman mythology but also medieval Christendom. According to Roman mythology, the sibyls were oracles who not only protected the local gods of various

Greek and Roman cities but also possessed the gift of divination. Tivoli, in particular, was associated with the Tiburtine Sibyl, who foretold to Augustus the birth of Jesus and Constantine's conversion to Christianity.⁸ While the religious overtones of the prophecy are not immediately apparent in Piranesi's print, one could say that it presents the sibyl's temple as a heavenly altar where viewers can reflect on art's relationship to its sources and the most appropriate means of imitating the classics.

NOTES

1 Richard T. Neer, "Poussin and the Ethics of Imitation," *Memoirs of the American Academy in Rome* 51-52 (2006-07): 307-08.

2 *Ibid.*, 308.

3 Alpheus Hyatt Mayor, *Giovanni Battista Piranesi* (New York: A. Bittner, 1952), 3-4.

4 *Ibid.*, 8.

5 *Ibid.*, 5.

6 *Ibid.*, 14.

7 For example, the city of Tibur and the river that encircles it are featured prominently as one of the boundaries of the new nation of Rome, which Aeneas surveys in book 7 of *The Aeneid*: "And when the next day rose to scan the land / with its first light, they go by separate

ways / to search the city out, its boundaries and / the coastline of that nation. These, they find, / are pools and fountains of Numinicus; / and this, the river, Tiber; here, the home / of sturdy Latins." Virgil, *The Aeneid*, trans. Allen Mandelbaum (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1971), 7.190-96.

8 Enrico Cerulli, "Traditions and Legends in Arabic and Ethiopic Literature on the Churches of Medieval Rome," *East and West* 9, no. 3 (September 1958): 211-12.





CHECKLIST OF THE EXHIBITION

All works are in the collection of the Smart Museum of Art unless otherwise noted. Height precedes width in all measurements unless otherwise indicated.

1

ÉDOUARD-DENIS BALDUS

French, born Germany, 1813–1882

La Maison Carrée, Nîmes, c. 1860s

Albumen print

Sheet/image: 8 x 11 in. (20.3 x 27.9 cm)

Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Kingman Douglass, 1988.70

2

ETIENNE BAUDET

French, 1638–1711

After Nicolas Poussin (French, active in Italy, 1594–1665)

Rape of the Sabines, undated

Engraving on laid paper

Plate: 22½ x 28¼ in. (56.2 x 71.8 cm); sheet: 24½ x 31¼ in. (62.2 x 79.4 cm)

Purchase, Paul and Miriam Kirkley Fund for

Acquisitions, 2015.58

Fig. 8

3

ABRAHAM BOSSE

French, 1602–1676

Moyen universel de pratiquer la perspective sur les tableaux ou surfaces irrégulières, ensemble quelques particularitez concernant cet art et celui de la graveure en taille-douce (Paris: Self-published, 1653)

Printed book

6⅞ x 4⅞ in. (17.5 x 11.1 cm)

Special Collections Research Center, University of Chicago Library

Fig. 14

4

EDMÉ BOUCHARDON

French, 1698–1762

Academy: Seated Male Nude, undated

Red chalk on cream antique laid paper, framing lines in black ink, laid down on cream antique laid paper with blue paper borders adhered to face

19½ x 15⅜ in. (48.7 x 39 cm)

The Horvitz Collection, Boston (Inv. no. D-F-625)

Fig. 20



Édouard-Denis Baldus, *La Maison Carrée, Nîmes*, c. 1860s.

Cat. 1

5

WILLIAM-ADOLPHE BOUGUEREAU

French, 1825–1905

Homer and His Guide, 1874

Oil on canvas

82¼ x 56¼ in. (208.9 x 142.9 cm)

Milwaukee Art Museum; Layton Art Collection,
Gift of Frederick Layton

Fig. 44

6

SÉBASTIEN BOURDON

French, 1616–1671

Christ Receiving the Children, c. 1655

Oil on canvas

39½ x 53¼ in. (100.3 x 135.3 cm)

The Art Institute of Chicago, Gift of Mrs. Eugene A. Davidson, 1959.57

Fig. 13

7

LUCA CAMBIASO

Italian, active in Spain, 1527–1585

Death of Adonis with Three Graces, undated

Woodcut on paper, trimmed at top and bottom with later additions in ink

Sheet: 8¾ x 11¾ in. (22.2 x 29.8 cm)

Gift of Mrs. Leo M. Zimmerman in memory of Dr. Leo Zimmerman, 1984.138

Fig. 94