Piranesi's Imitation of the Classics

James M. Nemiroff

Iowa State University, nemiroff@iastate.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://lib.dr.iastate.edu/language_pubs

Part of the Ancient History, Greek and Roman through Late Antiquity Commons, Classical Literature and Philology Commons, Fine Arts Commons, and the French and Francophone Literature Commons

The complete bibliographic information for this item can be found at https://lib.dr.iastate.edu/language_pubs/163. For information on how to cite this item, please visit http://lib.dr.iastate.edu/howtocite.html.
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
CLASS
SICISMS

EDITED BY Larry F. Norman and Anne Leonard

SMART MUSEUM OF ART
THE UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO
## CONTENTS

Director’s Foreword  9  
Preface and Acknowledgments  10  

### INTRODUCTION

**Multiple Classicisms**  Larry F. Norman  13  

### ESSAYS

* Bourdon, Bosse, and the Rules of Classicism  Richard T.-Neer  31  
* Rococo Classicisms: Mapping Corporeality  Susanna Caviglia  43  
* Classicism and Mystery  Andrei Pop  57  
* Mercury as a Messenger of Renaissance Classicisms  Frederick A. de Armas  71  
* Harmony and Dissonance  Benjamin Morgan  81  
* Monument in the Garden: On the Facelessness of Avant-Garde Classicism  Jennifer Wild  95  
* Classicism, Conflict, and the White Body  Rebecca Zorach  111  

### AFTERWORD

**Classicism, Modernism, Postclassicism**  Glenn W. Most  127  

### CAMEOS

* Venus Rising  Rainbow Porthe  139  
* Raphael Refigured  Ji Gao  147  
* Pleasures of the Enchanted Isle  Esther Van Dyke  151  
* Classicism and Fireworks  Caitlin Hoff  157  
* Claude’s Ruins  Rebecca Crisafulli  161  
* Piranesi’s Imitation of the Classics  James Nemirollo  165  

Checklist of the Exhibition  170  
Selected Bibliography  181
James Nemiroff

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.” For Poussin, the “most deplorable” example of this kind of copying is printmaking, considered here as the unthinking production of the original. 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. 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.” In other words, Piranesi needed printmaking to “make ideas of Rome through pictures,” reconstructing Rome as the ideal locus classicus. 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.

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
Aeneas conquered as he was establishing Rome. 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 forstold to Augustus the birth of Jesus and Constantine’s conversion to Christianity. 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**

2. Ibid., 308.

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.

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: 22¼ x 28¼ in. (56.2 x 71.8 cm); sheet: 24¼ x 31¼ in. (62.2 x 79.4 cm)  
Purchase, Paul and Miriam Kirkley Fund for Acquisitions, 2015.58

3  
ABRAHAM BOSSE  
French, 1602-1676  
Moyen universel de pratiquer la perspective sur les tableaux ou surfaces irrégulières, ensemble quelques particularités concernant cet art et celui de la graveure en taille-douce (Paris: Self-published, 1653)  
Printed book  
6¼ x 4¼ in. (17.5 x 11.1 cm)  
Special Collections Research Center, University of Chicago Library

4  
EDMÈ 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  
19¼ x 15½ in. (48.7 x 39 cm)  
The Horvitz Collection, Boston (Inv. no. D-F-625)

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

6  
SÉBASTIEN BOURDON  
French, 1616-1671  
Christ Receiving the Children, c. 1655  
Oil on canvas  
39⅜ x 53¼ in. (100.3 x 135.3 cm)  
The Art Institute of Chicago, Gift of Mrs. Eugene A. Davidson, 1959.57

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 11¼ in. (22.2 x 29.8 cm)  
Gift of Mrs. Leo M. Zimmerman in memory of Dr. Leo Zimmerman, 1984.138