

## Piranesi's Rejection of the Critical History of Architecture

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In 1765 Giovanni Battista Piranesi wrote the *Parere su l'architettura*, an imagined dialogue pitting a student named Protopiro, an opponent of architectural adornment, against Didascalò, the straight-talking teacher who argues that decoration instills architecture with its potential for innovation. Rational historical inquiry comes at the expense of invention according to the proponent of adornment. Didascalò asserts Piranesi's own position by making the case that ornament should furnish architecture with its aesthetic dimensions without which the profession would become "a vile trade where all would be imitation."<sup>1</sup> At stake for Didascalò along with Piranesi is architectural history as a method of inquiry, since the eighteenth-century engraver challenged the position that a coherent view of the past sanctioned the continued vitality of building as an art. For Piranesi, historians seeking precepts and theoreticians deriving principles from antiquity caused a perilous lapse into copying that devalued the sublime feats of the architect's imagination. To be sure, Piranesi celebrated the Roman past and the hypothesized ingenuity of Etruscan architects. Yet, as I shall argue, Piranesi challenged the theoretical underpinnings of history when he divorced ancient architecture from a coherent view of its origins while decontextualizing precedents from a synthetic picture of the past; this has shaped the discipline of architecture ever since. By examining Piranesi's engravings and his own treatises, I propose that the eighteenth-century architect polemically sought to terminate the prominence of historical rigor as the theoretical basis for architectural production. In the place of methodical history, Piranesi asserted the architect's freedom to invent, ironically in his case through deploying forms from the past. While Piranesi uprooted the architectural establishment from its grounding in a coherent historical framework, his engravings

implicitly point toward techniques with which to refurbish historical strategies since the images depict decay and urban overlay that are now worthy of reconsideration.

Piranesi's antagonistic stance toward a structured historical inquiry developed as a reassertion of Italy's position as the preeminent land of architectural precedents after French and German authors had advocated the primacy of Greek architecture.<sup>2</sup> A highly personal view of the past governed Piranesi's claim that Greek-inspired rules constrained architects to producing designs without invention when he lampooned architectural rigor derived from ancient Greece. "You are monotonous, yes, your architecture is always the same,"<sup>3</sup> he wrote, implicitly condemning Pierre Jean Mariette, an advocate of architectural purity. In the *Thoughts on Architecture (Parere su l'architettura)*, the dispute between Didascalò and Protopiro repositioned the terms of debate that traditionally juxtaposed classical purity against the challenge of baroque opponents. Piranesi's *Parere* instead situated the Greek ideal as the enemy of inventive genius, since he argued that the strictures of historical order reduced the art of building to a set of instructions for bricklayers. As a result of the Grecian approach, Piranesi stated, "[t]he architectural trade would cease to exist because whoever will want to build will not make the mistake of asking an architect to do what a bricklayer will do for less."<sup>4</sup> Piranesi felt the creative genius of the architect, while inspired by the grand creations of the ancients, should not be constrained by rules borrowed from the past that streamlined buildings at the expense of creativity; architects, he implied, should have full reign to assert their individuality.

Illustrations accompanying the dialogue help us to

flesh out Piranesi's approach to asserting identity through architecture without the constraints of historically based theory. One engraving showcases an imagined building featuring a pastiche of composite caryatids flanking numerous architectural orders with applied friezes and sculptural reliefs [Fig. 1]. Published in the 1767 edition of *Parere*, the engraving received an inscription with a quote taken from Sallust recounting a victorious general's statement after the Jugurthine war, "they despise my novelty, I their cowardice."<sup>5</sup> In the original context, the general Marius used this statement jubilantly after he had gone to battle with a strategy that defied aristocrats who favored the received wisdom codified in old Greek treatises. When the general boldly, and in the end successfully, completed the campaign, Marius deemed the rules as the source of the aristocrats' timidity. The imaginary structure illustrating the *Parere* similarly departs from codified theories by substituting Piranesi's personal invention. In the accompanying text, Piranesi's Didascalio champions an individual approach to style, defined in the dialogue as an innovative architectural order. "How much longer will we refrain from admitting that to vary the ornament is not the same thing as creating a new order? A better way to put this would be to say that there are really three styles that we follow in architecture (style or order, as you please): one composed by columns, one by pilasters, and one composed by the continuous wall."<sup>6</sup> All the elements of the imaginary building Piranesi engraved comprise a radically new architectural order; yet, the composition breaks all the rules of classical propriety, in particular assembling the columns, pilasters, friezes, and walls without any governing system of proportions [Fig. 1]. Moreover, the engraving of the façade celebrates the architect's creative genius to inspire awe by suggesting that amazement is produced by ornament that is both mystic and obscure. Piranesi illustrates eclectic symbolism featuring hieroglyphs in a deliberately puzzling presentation, such as the medallion with Jupiter's bust accompanied by bells, a sphinx, and lions' paws [Fig. 1]. Clearly, the architect's ability to invent a new language by turning to such disciplines as linguistics or the archeology of ancient Egypt allows original inventions to emerge from a direct encounter with remnants from the ancient past. Yet, the origins of history are here shrouded in mystery in order to provoke the most horrifying and thus powerful response, Piranesi implies. Indeed, Piranesi ex-

ploits secrecy to safeguard the temple, suggesting that architecture should remain the exclusive domain of those who have mastered obscure approaches to decoration. In the *Parere*, Didascalio asserts: "When you take away the freedom to vary the ornamentation according to one's talent, you open up the sanctuary of architecture and architecture, now public domain, will be despised by every one!"<sup>7</sup> Piranesi rejected the rationalist approach as a constraint on freedom; yet, his objections also suggested that architectural historians had woefully neglected the emblem traditions of engravers, the archeological investigation of Egyptian hieroglyphs, and the powerful tools of mystification derived from the study of both.

Piranesi did not look to the past for architectural principles. Instead, the artist produced prints that functioned as manifestoes on the imagination's power to invent extravagant and mysterious structures prompted by antiquity, seen in a mythic prison interior from the *Carceri* series of 1761 [Fig. 2]. Archeological investigations of the Mamertine prison at the base of the Capitoline hill in Rome together with readings from Roman authors led Piranesi to the conclusion that the ancient judicial system produced evident horrors, particularly for the prisoners.<sup>8</sup> Piranesi distinguished his revulsion at the rules that harmed the diminutive imprisoned figures from his wonder at the impressive qualities of the architecture. Colossal masonry blocks in the print depicting the fictional prison inspire amazement, perhaps in reference to Piranesi's response to the scale of cut stone blocks at the Etruscan site of Cori near Rome.<sup>9</sup> Breaking up space by peeling away the confines of exterior walls furnishes a sign that Piranesi rejected the historical rules of ancient architecture, as Manfredo Tafuri noted.<sup>10</sup>

Piranesi affirmed that architects should engage with the past by championing the free use of historical precedents in a move that uprooted the physical remnants of the past from fixed positions in a historical chronology. In particular, Piranesi opposed the theories of Johann Joachim Winckelmann, an influential figure in eighteenth-century Rome who established a critical system in which Greek purity stood as a model for art and architecture. In codifying his principles, Winckelmann isolated stylistic concerns from social developments, thereby divorcing forms from considerations regarding function.<sup>11</sup> In addition, an architect's in-

ventions presented problems to this system, since the overarching concern for the "classic" did not allow the integration of novel approaches into the account.<sup>12</sup> For Winckelmann, architecture presented an opportunity to approach a more abstract ideal than sculpture furnished, since a building could not aspire toward the natural form of a figure.<sup>13</sup> As Hans Belting has argued, accounts that divorce idealized concepts of style from content or social concerns have made the history of art and architecture ill prepared for the active and dynamic developments of radically new approaches or changing technologies.<sup>14</sup> For Belting, this does not mean that historians have dug their own graves, but rather that historical methodologies have been too preoccupied with the classical ideal in which the past has been presumed to work toward an end. The obsession with the purpose or end of a historical account is a byproduct of the strategies that have removed the aesthetic object from the rest of life. Piranesi's contribution was to cherish historical artifacts even if he rejected the accounts they had underwritten.

Piranesi thought that he had solved the tension between imitation and originality while sidestepping the issues raised by the decontextualized approach to aesthetics by proposing that Italy overshadowed Greece as the original source for architectural ideas. In fact, Piranesi worked as if a salesman for Rome, extending invitations to foreigners on the Grand Tour who would visit his studio and purchase his engravings. At the same time, Piranesi was characteristically impassioned in his claim that Etruscan remains, available in the territory surrounding Rome, could inspire originality. Furthermore, the physical remnants of the ancient past in Italian soil conferred on Piranesi impressions that diverged from what Vitruvius had codified. In observing this, Piranesi further isolated the decorative arts from their historical contexts, because his account segmented off architectural ornament as inspiration that in his polemical obsessions had to be cast apart from a critical history.

Piranesi arrived at his rejection of historical methods applied to architecture as a result of a curious chain of events; after all, Piranesi had composed treatises and documented excavations of antiquities as if he were a humanist. Despite his antiquarian credentials, Piranesi had a radical change of heart, which he admits in the *Parere* when Di-

ascalò cries out, "try to compare the spirit of the book with what I have said so far and you will see that Piranesi, who held one position yesterday, holds a different one today."<sup>15</sup> Piranesi's implied quibbles with Winckelmann led him to object openly to Julien-David Le Roy, whose investigation of Greek architecture in Athens had positioned a set of historical observations that functioned to advance the ideals of simplicity advocated by Marc-Antoine Laugier.<sup>16</sup> Piranesi eventually rejected his initial position that nature provided an instructive approach to organizing ornament.

In 1761, four years prior to publishing the *Parere*, Piranesi had published *On the Magnificence and the Architecture of Rome* with thirty-eight plates together with a treatise hinting that nature provided a lens through which to understand the greatness of Rome's architecture.<sup>17</sup> In the exhaustive and erudite text on *Magnificence*, Piranesi identifies the architectural stimuli for the capricious intellect. In this 1761 polemical work, Piranesi matches nature with the developments of Roman urbanism as two key sources for creating ornament, a view that he jettisoned by the time he wrote his *Parere* four years later.<sup>18</sup> In the earlier tract, Piranesi demonstrates a concern with nature's role in the formation of architectural theory. "All arts should aspire to assimilate the truth. . . . [A]ll the arts imitate nature, since those who adhere most closely to [nature] are those who produce the best artifice."<sup>19</sup> The truth of nature, Piranesi claimed in his published text, remained the truth of a creative genius. The inconsistencies of Piranesi's treatise aside, the *Magnificenza* text propose that feats of the imagination were byproducts of an encounter with architecture that dialogued with nature. Specifically, the inventive architect could tap into the organic impulses of the fabled Etruscans by looking at Roman grandeur.

In the nuanced illustrations accompanying the *Magnificenza* tract, Piranesi articulates another truth of nature: the simultaneity of growth and decay. The second frontispiece of the *Magnificenza* publication imaginatively reconceived the tombs lining the Via Appia outside of Rome, with Piranesi redoubling their effects as if the antiquities had taken root to grow along with the trees that dwarf passers-by [Fig. 3]. Piranesi positioned the ancient cityscape as an example of the built environment's coalescence with trees. The parallel between organic growth and that of the antiqui-

ties suggests a model for perceiving the past. Indeed, the detritus of decay scattered on the paving stones of the Via Appia does not diminish the scene; instead, the coexistence of different moments in a single cityscape collapses time without diminishing its effects. In this version of the past, Piranesi subscribes to a theory that architectural lessons are to be learned from the accumulation of both decaying and pristine buildings in one city.

In the *Magnificenza* treatise of 1761 Piranesi embraces architecture that manifests individual genius. Italian antiquities, he maintained, inspired both capricious approaches to architecture and wildly inventive designs, since nature combined with antiquity to spark the individual genius. Piranesi wrote that one's personality could be manifest in architecture, much as Roman patrons had immortalized fame in the tomb monuments of the Via Appia engraving [Fig. 3]. Piranesi published a letter addressing the original patron of the *Magnificenza* tract to explain the architectural expression of greatness. "[The] plate . . . that

treats the ancient sepulchers represents the Appian Way near Rome . . . Cicero states that here the Romans' magnificence and their wish to transfer their names to the future made them erect these giant sepulchers, and that some of them recalled temples or palaces, rather than places consecrated to death. The author [Piranesi] wanted to give an idea of this confusion that, as Cicero tells us, became universal."<sup>20</sup> Perhaps through an uncharacteristic lapse into modesty, Piranesi does not take credit for an architectural theory at this juncture. Indeed, he credits Cicero as the source for what he deems as a pervasive Roman practice. Yet, Piranesi here proposes that timeless architecture must transmit personalities from the past to subsequent generations. Piranesi's theory of architecture that "combines an in-depth study of nature with an equally profound one of ancient monuments"<sup>21</sup> depends upon the organic for a strategy to render the simultaneity of the past and the present that even allows the former to be subject to decay. The juxtaposition of monuments from different periods permits what Pira-

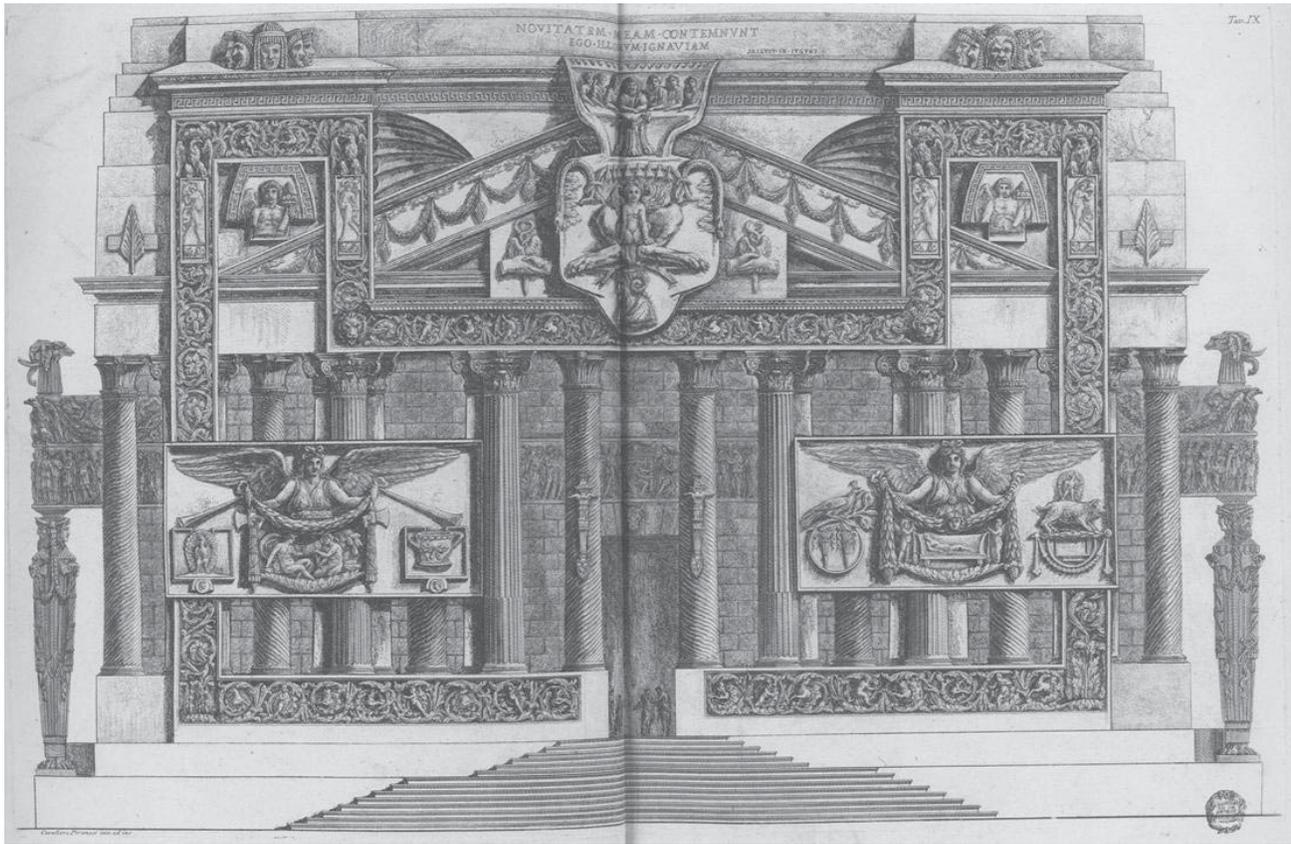


Fig. 2. G.B. Piranesi, imaginary architectural composition added to *Parere su l'architettura* after 1767

nesi considers a universal expression of genius. Piranesi's *Parere* of 1765 rejected the concern for nature and with it he renounced affiliations with historical concerns for an ideal trajectory in history. Reactions to his *Magnificenza* polemic forced him to take this position. A letter by Pierre-Jean Mariette, eventually published, provoked Piranesi to cast aside his theories of nature. Mariette wrote, "There is no composition that is not full of superfluous ornament and absolutely *hors d'oeuvre*. Everything is sacrificed for luxury, and, in the end one is left with a style that quickly becomes ridiculous and barbarous."<sup>22</sup> Seeking to defend decoration above all else, Piranesi rethought his position on nature while maintaining his dedication to complex systems of overlapping ornaments that transmit literary feats of invention to the viewer. Accrued applications of ornament allow a great individual to shine through the layers, since Piranesi proposes that architectural surfaces

serve as the intermediary to the maker's personality.<sup>23</sup> Ornament mediates Piranesi's genius to the viewer in his theoretical framework; clearly, this system articulates that time will not diminish the artist's greatness.

While I have argued that Piranesi was unfriendly toward the axioms of architectural history, his views are nonetheless worthy of reassessment for their conceptual contributions. After all, Piranesi has helped us to see the city's juxtaposition of built forms from varying periods as affirming the persistence of the past. Furthermore, Piranesi utilizes the coexistence of nature and architecture as a productive model for considering decay as a corollary to growth. To complement this approach to decay, Piranesi also embraced richly textured surfaces featuring ornaments resembling the accumulated layers of engravings pasted one on top of the other. In general, the superimposition of

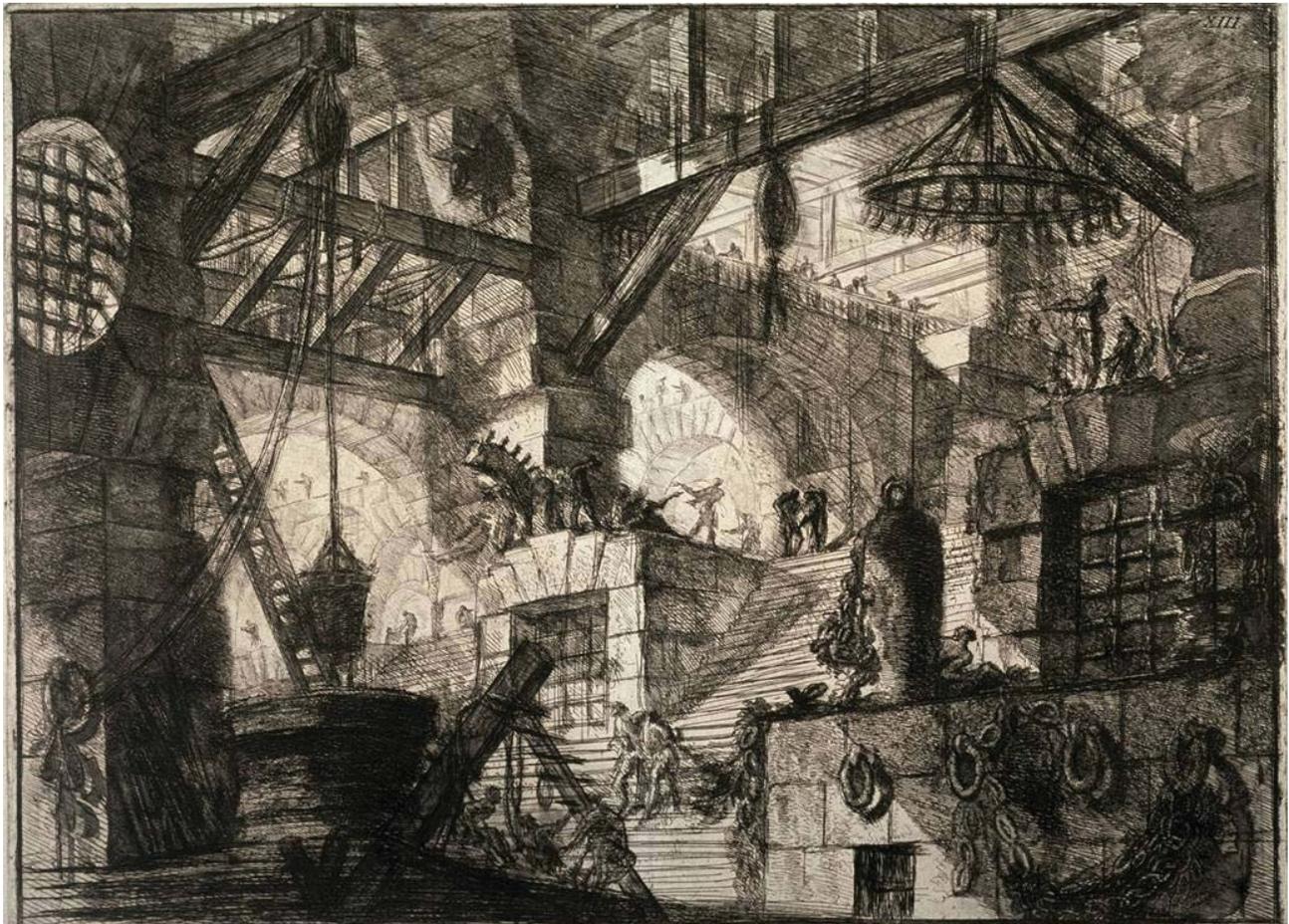


Fig. 1. G.B. Piranesi, "The Well, Carceri, 1761 edition, pl. XIII



Fig. 3. G.B. Piranesi, *Fantasy of the Via Appia*, frontispiece added to *Della Magnificenza ed architettura de' Romani*, 1761

these strata is as complex as the individuals who invented the compositions, since Piranesi envisioned ornament as that which mediates personality. Through his artistic strategies, Piranesi saw the past as that which was subject to decay, but which could nonetheless shine resplendent when an individual personality pokes through the accumulated layers. The current debates about the role of history in the architecture curriculum present opportunities for rethinking the methodologies of architectural history. To be sure, Piranesi worked to dethrone architectural concepts rooted in the past as the basis for current design. Yet, in rejecting the theoretical heritage of Vitruvius, Piranesi has championed the architectural past as providing the basis for individual expression. Certainly, Piranesi's model is distinctly personalized and self-aggrandizing. Nonetheless, his strategies in which the architectural past both mediates and is mediated by individual expression suggests a poetic scheme that allows us today to recapture the personal investment in the past as an impetus for creativity. For teachers and scholars, Piranesi

furnishes a method for grasping that the textured overlay that thrusts the past into the present can offer an evocative vehicle through which an individual articulates subjectivity.

#### ENDNOTES

1. G.B. Piranesi quoting Julien-David Le Roy in *Parere su l'architettura* (1765) from G. B. Piranesi, "Thoughts on Architecture," trans. M. Nonis and M. Epstein, in *Oppositions 26* (1984): 21.
2. See the recent contribution of L. Kantor-Kazovsky, "Pierre Jean Mariette and Piranesi: The Controversy Reconsidered," in *The Serpent and the Stylus: Essays on G.B. Piranesi*, *Memoirs of the American Academy in Rome Supplementary Volume 4*, eds. Mario Bevilacqua et al. (Ann Arbor, MI, 2006), 149-168.
3. G.B. Piranesi, *Parere* in *Oppositions 26* (1984): 13.
4. G.B. Piranesi, "Thoughts on Architecture," 21.
5. Sallust, *Bellum Jugurthinum* 85.14: NOVITATEM MEAM CONTEMNUNT, EGO ILLORUM IGNAVIAM, see J. Rykwert, *The First Moderns: The Architects of the Eighteenth Century* (Cambridge, MA, 1980), 380.

6. G.B. Piranesi, *Parere in Oppositions* 26 (1984): 18.
7. G.B. Piranesi, *Parere in Oppositions* 26 (1984): 21.
8. J. Rykwert, *First Moderns*, 374-378.
9. J. Wilton-Ely, *Piranesi as Architect and Designer* (New York and New Haven, 1993), 44.
10. M. Tafuri, "'The Wicked Architect': G.B. Piranesi, Hetertopia, and the Voyage," in *The Sphere and the Labyrinth: Avant-Gardes and Architecture from Piranesi to the 1970s*, trans. P. d'Acerno and R. Connolly (Cambridge, MA, 1987), 26.
11. J.J. Winckelmann, *Monumenti Antichi Inediti Spiegati ed Illustrati* (Rome, 1767).
12. See the account in H. Belting, *The End of the History of Art?* (Chicago, 1987), 12.
13. J. J. Winckelmann, letter to Bianconi, July 1758 in *Johann Joachim Winckelmann: Briefe*, 3 vols., eds. H. Diepolder and W. Rehm (Berlin, 1952-1957), III, no. 673.
14. H. Belting, *The End of the History of Art?* trans. C.S. Wood (Chicago, 1987), 11-24.
15. G.B. Piranesi, *Parere in Oppositions* 26 (1984): 11.
16. M.-A. Laugier published his essay in 1753; *Le Roy's Ruins of the Most Beautiful Monuments of Greece* was issued in 1758.
17. G.B. Piranesi, *Della Magnificenza ed architettura de' Romani* (Rome, 1761) in G.B. Piranesi, *The Polemical Works*, ed. J. Wilton-Ely (Harmondsworth, 1972).
18. R. Wittkower, "Piranesi's Architectural Creed," in *idem, Studies in the Italian Baroque* (London, 1975), 236-247.
19. G. B. Piranesi, *Della Magnificenza in Polemical Works*, xciii: *tutte le arti sono imitazioni della natura, alla quale chi più si uniforma, é tenuto per l'artefice il più eccellente d'ogni altro.*
20. G.B. Piranesi, *Lettere di Giustificazione scritte a Milord Charlemont* (Rome, 1756), ii, n. 3.
21. G.B. Piranesi, *Diverse maniere di adornare I cammini ed ogni altra parte degli edifizii desunti dall'architettura Egizia, Etrusca e Greca* (Rome, 1769), 33.
22. P.-J. Mariette, letter in *Gazette Littéraire de l'Europe* in 1764, as published in *Oppositions* 26 (1984): 5.
23. O. Grabar, *The Mediation of Ornament* (Princeton, 1992), 44-46.

## LIST OF FIGURES

Fig. 1. Giovanni Battista Piranesi (1720-1778), *Imaginary Architectural Composition added to Parere su l'architettura*, pl. IX. © Foto Marburg/ Art Resource, NY

Fig. 2. Giovanni Battista Piranesi (1720-1778) *Prisons*, p. XIII. © Giraudon/ Art Resource, NY

Fig. 3. Giovanni Battista Piranesi (1720-1778) Via Appia, second frontispiece to *Della Magnificenza ed architettura de' Romani*, vol. II. © Foto Marburg/ Art Resource, NY