
H. Duncan Crilly
Veit Stoss, _Annunciatuon_, detail. In Taubert, pl. xv.

The work is interesting because we frequently find evidence of the two contrasting aspects of his character. As an architect and draftsman, with a keen knowledge of archaeology, he was motivated to extreme accuracy in the drawings he made of ancient ruins, and yet, in these _veduti_ we also find an imaginative romanticism—due perhaps to his exposure to the Italian ‘rococo’ during his stay in Venice. On the other hand, his celebrated _Carreri_ series presented with a convincing validity are, of course, completely imaginary in concept.

Even the casual reader may sense something of this ambivalence as he thumbs through the pages of Felice Stampl’s _Giovanni Battista Piranesi: Drawings in the Pierpont Morgan Library_. But this is not all. It is as though he had been invited into an artist’s studio and now finds himself involved vicariously in the creation of a work of art. Here is something of the glamour of looking through a Beethoven ‘sketch book’. He will feel much closer contact with the artist as he sees the inevitable ink stains, the mistakes, the scribbled notes, the sketch on the back of a letter—and, although Piranesi bought his printing paper free of tax, he was practical enough to make use of the reverse sides of spoiled sheets.

How surprised (and probably shocked) this perfectionist would have been had he known that these personal memoranda would one day be published; to him they would only have been a means to an end—the finished picture. He would not have realized that present-day taste inclines towards the impressionistic, and that we are more in sympathy with the rapidly executed calligraphy of a preliminary sketch, which we see as closer to the artist’s original intention. The strength of these exploratory drawings is mentioned by Miss Stampl who notes that the sketch for a prison includes some figures which are ‘brushed in with an authority and suggestiveness akin to Rembrandt.’

These sketches afford us an insight into Piranesi’s character and ability as an artist—we have never questioned his draftsmanship. Even in the preliminary work for the _veduti_ it is easy to detect the influence of the Italian ‘North.’ For all the sober classical tone of the pic-

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*FELICE STAMPLE Giovanni Battista Piranesi: Drawings in the Pierpont Morgan Library*.

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ture the incidental figures in the Temple of Isis at Pompeii are extremely Tiepolesque. Other examples, such as the attractive Gondola, probably executed in Venice, are very much in tune with the Italian 'rococo' both in concept and execution.

It might be supposed that Piranesi, who is mainly remembered for his vedute and his Careeri series, was not concerned with other subjects. It may therefore come as a surprise to learn of his interest in decoration and ornament. This is evidenced by the many sketches presumably intended for his book: I Cammini e Vasi, Candelabri, Cippi, Sarcofagi, Tripodi, Lucerne ed Ornamenti Antichi. These comprise the largest group in the collection, and are possibly, except for the specialist, the least interesting. This is not the only example of his departure from the highly structured architectural drawings which we usually associate with his name, and we could wish that there were more of this diversification in his finished work. For example, there is an Assassination Scene (σ. 9) in which a powerfully drawn, sprawling mass of people is 'welded' into an impressionistic composition of great strength. One may wonder what form the finished drawing would have taken, and whether he could have sustained the feeling of spontaneity which we perceive in the sketch during the various stages it would go through in the process of engraving. Unfortunately Miss Stampfle makes no comment on this particular reproduction in her essay on Piranesi, which in other respects is most informative. It is unlikely that anyone will be able to resist the temptation to look at the reproductions before reading the text, but there is no doubt that her lucid style adds much to the appreciation of the book. It is to be hoped that if the group of early Piranesi drawings of 'beggars' and 'still life,' once in the collection of Senator Abondio Rezzonico, is eventually traced, it will receive the same careful attention.

Piranesi's work is essentially linear, and drawings of this type are liable to undergo subtle changes in character in the process of photographic enlargement or reduction. Obviously, to be reproduced in a format acceptable by modern standards, reduction in certain instances is inevitable - especially as we are told that one of the original sketches folds out to approximately five feet! However, the reader may be assured that there is no enlargement, and in most cases the reproduction is actual size; in this connection it may be noted that the dimensions shown are not in metric but in good old-fashioned English inches.

The arrangement of the material for a presentation such as this must always be a matter for careful consideration. However it is to be organized - chronologically, or grouped according to genre - there are always the limitations imposed by the size of the page on which the exhibits must be displayed in a pleasing manner. Except for the rather long sequence of cammini, etc., which has already been mentioned, the layout is successful, and the reader (no matter how academic his purpose) will find his interest is sustained throughout.

The drawings are so ordered that the 'plums' do not all fall together, but are nicely distributed through the book. Moreover, the exotic cover design (which is based on one of the drawings) is far from being the only spectacular work in the collection; in the hideous jargon of commercial advertising, there is all this, and much, much more.

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At a time when realism is enjoying a renewed vogue among North American painters and sculptors, a book on American realism seems especially timely. The present work, published in 1978, is not, however, to be confused with Mahouri Sharp Young's American Realists: Homer to Hopper (New York, Watson-Guptill, 1977). A large, lavishly illustrated book of the non-portable, coffee-table genre, American Realism is practically synonymous with a survey history of American painting. It does not attempt to break any new ground, though, nor does it offer any new revisions of earlier scholarship on the subject. What it does do is present American painting from a slightly novel European viewpoint with the text and the illustrations having been furnished by François Mathey, Chief Curator of the Musee des Arts Decoratifs in Paris.

Beginning with the portrait-linters of Colonial New England and continuing through to the photo-realists of the early seventies, M. Mathey declares that 'From the documents bequeathed to him by a civilization, dispersed in museums or recovered by chance in the course of archaeological excavations, the art historian, who is also something of an anthropologist, reconstructs the sentient, affective, aesthetic fabric of past societies' (p. 7). The present task, he says, is 'From the documentary evidence provided by art, to define, or more precisely, to refurbish the image given to us by America' (p. 8).

What M. Mathey means by 'sentient' and by 'affective' is unclear, but his concept of an aesthetic fabric seems clear enough and one idea to which we can address ourselves. A fabric is a series of interwoven threads or fibres, and the idea of an aesthetic fabric would presume, therefore, that all of the aesthetic ideas or arts are interwoven. This is a useful idea and one of great significance in certain cases like those of Periclean Athens or of Medicinal Florence. An example of the apparent momentary existence of a genuine aesthetic fabric in American art was demonstrated recently at the Brooklyn Museum exhibition entitled The American Renaissance. In this exhibit strong affinities were shown to have existed between architecture, painting, and sculpture in Boston, New York, and Philadelphia during the last decades of the nineteenth century.

It is well to remember, nevertheless, that authors, artists, architects, and composers do not always talk together, and that this fact is particularly true of American art where regional and individual differences are often pronounced and characteristic. The idea of an aesthetic fabric is, accordingly, probably truer of France than of America.

M. Mathey's other purpose in preparing this volume, that of using American paintings to refurbish America's image, deserves comment. The author's image of