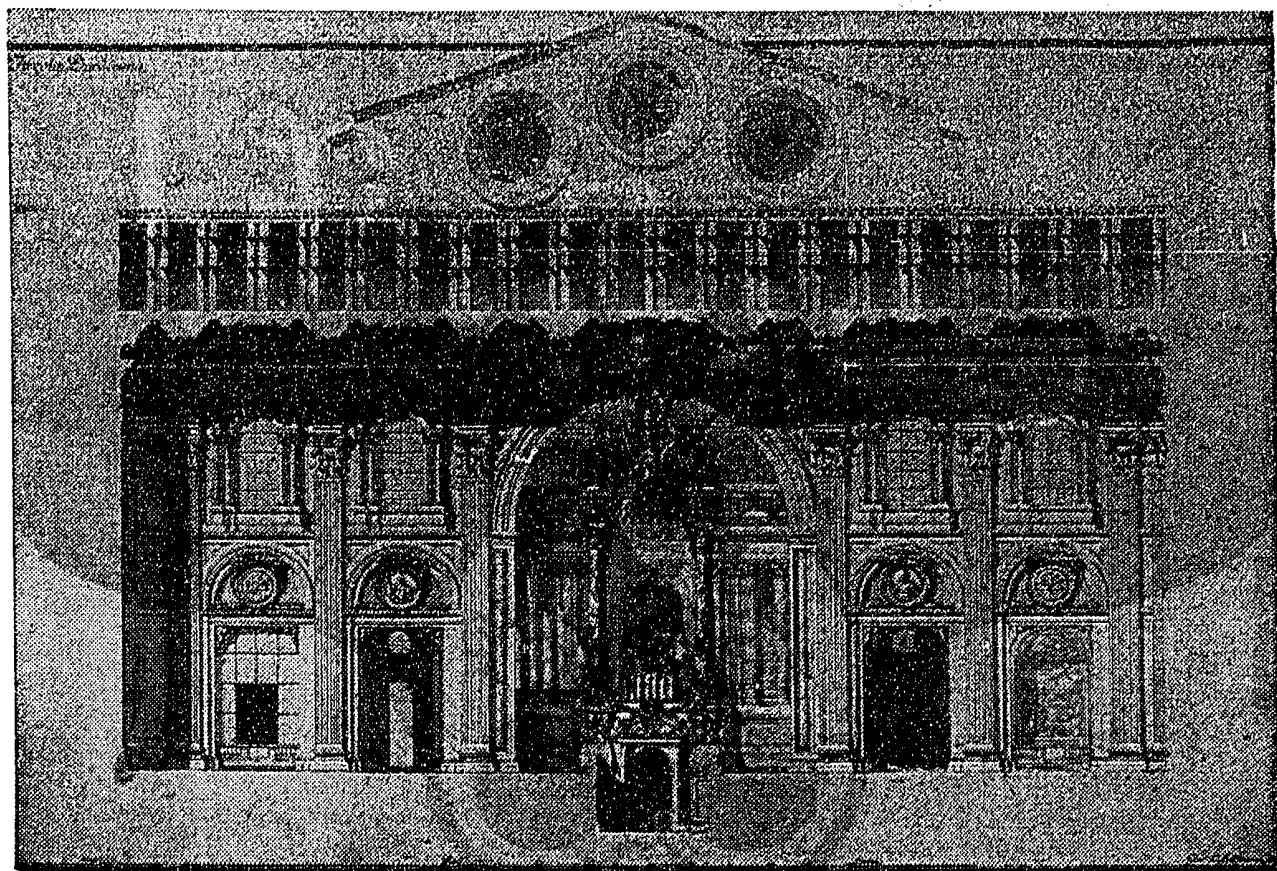


Piranesi's Roman Grandeur on Show

By ADA LOUISE HUXTABLE

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One of 23 drawings by Giovanni Battista Piranesi for the Church of San Giovanni, now shown at Columbia

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There are four Romes of powerful and enduring imagery: ancient Rome, Renaissance Rome, modern Rome and Piranesi's Rome.

Piranesi's Rome is the least and most real of all. It is a Rome of "magnificenza," of phantasmagoric romanticism, of enormous, overscaled buildings and vast panoramas, of heroic, ancient spaces inhabited by dwarfed and tattered humans, of gnarled, giant trees sprouting from ruins, of huge classical monuments and shadowed cisterns, an epic cross between accurate archeology and surrealist vision, of eternal grandeur and decay.

It may be a Rome that never was, according to A. Hyatt Mayor, who calls the artist's 18th-century *Vedute di Roma* "the most obsessive illusion ever dreamed of any city to cast a spell on man." But the world has seen Rome through Giovanni Battista Piranesi's eyes ever since.

So great was his spell that architects tried to build that vision in other cities for the next 150 years. It is therefore quite fitting that a Piranesi exhibition that is also a distinguished art event should be held in one of the last of that architectural line, the marbled and colonnaded Rotunda of McKim, Mead & White's Low Memorial Library at Columbia University.

This ornate space in which grandeur and uselessness have finally fought it out to a standoff is the setting for a show of Piranesi drawings and etchings that opened yesterday and that includes the display of 23 superb drawings seen for the first time in two centuries.

These drawings, studies for the completion of the church of San Giovanni in Laterano, are the newly acquired property of the Avery Architectural Library at Columbia, from which all of the exhibition's 101 items are taken. In contrast to Piranesi's profligate production of etchings, his drawings are extremely scarce.

The exhibition is co-sponsored by the Avery Library and the department of art history and archeology and dedicated to the late Rudolf Wittkower, one of the university's most distinguished art scholars. It can be seen Monday through Friday, 10 A.M. to 4 P.M., through April 17.

The design for the sanctuary to complete the Borromini church was never carried out. The drawings disappeared after their presentation to Cardinal Rezzonico in 1767. Nothing is known of them from that date to the 20th century. They were found through a passing scholarly reference to their presence in a European family collection in 1968.

The rediscovered drawings have been purchased for the Avery Library by Dr. and Mrs. Arthur M. Sackler, who had previously donated a rare first-impression set of Piranesi's 14 *Carceri* etchings, also in the show, those strange, troubling prisons so progressively darkened and

distorted as Piranesi re-worked the plates that they have been called landscapes of the mind.

There is a beautiful accompanying catalogue with text by Dorothea Nyberg and reproductions of the 23 important "new" drawings, including three full-color creamy wonders in the melting gray washes and warm brown inks that combine freedom and precision with characteristic brilliance.

To speak for a moment of the Avery Library, headed by Adolf K. Placzek, this is one of the finest architectural collections and reference sources in the world and one of New York's and Columbia's closest-kept secrets. Guardian of the very best that a university is supposed to represent, it languishes for simple maintenance and basic needs while Columbia raises extraordinarily ugly and ex-

pensive structures around it. Someone's priorities are woefully out of whack.

Back to the drawings, which are plans, elevations and sections for five projects for the church sanctuary. Done in ink and wash, they are either totally in Piranesi's hand or executed by the master in their major parts.

Most spectacular are four designs for a papal altar and baldachino of Borrominesque splendor. Freehand details have a breathtaking immediacy of touch and eye. There are suggestions of Venetian lightness and *trompe l'oeil* and the sheer beauty of drawing that made Venice, and the drawing as an end in itself, central to the 18th-century art scene.

There is a passionate intent to build in these wonderfully detailed and richly ornamented designs in the scenographic northern tradi-

tion of Palladio and Longhena. But except for Piranesi's remodeling of the Aventine church of Santa Maria del Priorato in 1764-65, the "architetto veneziano," as he consistently signed himself, was an architect *manqué*.

Those who have looked through the famous keyhole of the garden door of the Aventine church to see St. Peter's framed beyond — a tourist staple — have looked right past Piranesi's single architectural achievement.

The rest is at Columbia, in those "sublime dreams," as Horace Walpole called them, "as savage as Salvator Rosa, fierce as Michael Angelo and exuberant as Rubens, scenes that would startle geometries and exhaust the Indies to realize." They are today, as A. Hyatt Mayor reminds us, "a part of the lens of every cultivated eye."