

H. H. RUMBLER



GIOVANNI BATTISTA PIRANESI
(Venice 1720 - 1778)

The Staircase with Trophies

Two sheets, etching and engraving

54.4 x 39.9 cm (21 ³/₈ x 15 ³/₄ inches)

Watermark: Lily in a circle (Robison Wz. 5) / without recognizable watermark

ca. 1749 / ca. 1761

An especially instructive juxtaposition of two highly divergent printing states:

First a superb early impression from the rare 1st edition of the “*Carceri d’Invenzione*,” still marvelously transparent in relation to the wildly executed texture, which in places condenses to form seemingly impenetrable linear webs, thereby setting highly effective, dark accents within the almost surreal, light-flooded setting

With delicate plate tone, but still prior to the ‘ink dabbing’ on the wall along the right-hand edge that is characteristic of later exemplars, i.e. those printed during the late 1750s.

In contrast, and secondly, the fuliginous, deep black proof of the version that was fundamentally reworked for the new edition of 1761 demonstrates the degree to which the artist has subjected the diffuse elements, the sketch-like, spontaneous construction principle of his composition to a logical process of metamorphosis. Now, details are strongly accentuated for the sake of heightened spatial complexity. The lighting is intensified, while at the same time, shadows are positioned arbitrarily. Piranesi has also added completely new elements such as the masonry pillars and the bollard with chain along the left-hand edge.

With paper margins that are ca. 7–11 cm and ca. 4–10 cm in width respectively. In each case with the usual horizontal central fold. Both impeccably fresh.

It appears that Piranesi – now at the apex of his artistic career, and operating his own recently established publishing house – strives now to fathom his capacities for the invention of complex spatial system and lighting effects, while attempting – as a consequence, to arrive finally at the limits of

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the human spatial imagination.

While the first edition of the “Carceri” encountered little resonance among the public, things were different with the far-reaching dramatic revisions of the second edition. We will probably never really know why the artist chose to refer to these irrational spatial fantasies as “Prisons.” There is little doubt that Piranesi was intensively preoccupied with 18th-century theater decoration, specifically prison or dungeon backdrops. With a delight in experimentation found only in younger artists, Piranesi’s drew on his powers of imagination to extract from his subjects dreamlike scenarios and fantastical versions of grandiose palace complexes in an imaginary Rome.

Praised by Gradmann as an *tremendous monolog of architecture, timeless yet always modern*, these may be regarded as ‘capricious’ inventions of the artists sense of fantasy that reflect his primary interest in emotionally charged forms, expansive structures, and the mastery of space.