

**Felice Stampfle, *Giovanni Battista Piranesi: Drawings in the Pierpont Morgan Library*. New York, Dover Publications, in association with The Pierpont Morgan Library, 1978. 121 pp., illus.**

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Veit Stoss, *Annunciation*, detail. In Taubert, pl. xv.

rung von Skulpturen' (II, 2) is a position paper, outlining the philosophies and responsibilities of the modern practitioner. While revealing the technical problems of F. Herlin's Rothenburg altarpiece in chapter 4, Taubert urgently advocates full collaboration of specialists under art-historical guidance in order to achieve the optimal restoration of such complex *Gesamtkunstwerk* as the Gothic carved altar. Two further studies (II, 5 and 6) are also devoted to sculpted shrines of Herlin (Rothenburg and Nördlingen). Both are models of precise and systematic documentation which established Taubert's international reputation as conservator and teacher.

In the issue of *Nederlands Kunsthistorisch Jaarboek* dedicated to the memory of Dr. Taubert the editor calls him 'the pioneer of the art-historical interpretation of the scientific examination of paintings' (v. 26, 1975, x). After reading the present volume, one would want to have the statement extended to include sculpture. It deserves to be studied with great attention by all concerned with furthering our still limited knowledge of polychromed sculpture.

The book is meticulously and beautifully produced and almost free of printing errors. The generous number of well-documented illustrations merits special mention. They are of excellent quality

throughout and include many superb details of monuments, photographed at close range in the laboratory.

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FELICE STAMPFLE *Giovanni Battista Piranesi: Drawings in the Pierpont Morgan Library*. New York, Dover Publications, in association with The Pierpont Morgan Library, 1978. 121 pp., illus.

Giovanni Battista Piranesi was born in Mogliano, near Venice, in 1720. By this time Tiepolo, his senior by twenty-four years, had already established his workshop in the northern city, and in the normal course of events the young Piranesi would probably have come under the influence of the older master had he not decided, in 1740, to move to Rome. Part of his early training had included architecture and like many others in the wake of the Herculaneum excavations in 1738, he was intensely interested in archaeology. Whether or not he envisaged a career as architect in which, like Brunelleschi, he could apply ancient Roman building principles to the design of new buildings, this did not materialize. At that time the building programme in Rome was sadly curtailed by lack of funds and only the remodelled Church of Santa Maria del Priorato and a small piazza remain as a monument to his work as an architect.

His early training had also included stage design, and it seems as though development of this more fanciful side of his nature occurred during the period of three years when he returned to the more relaxed atmosphere of Venice in 1740. He spent the remaining thirty-five years of his life in Rome, however, to become one of the few eighteenth-century artists in that city who still enjoys a certain popularity. Even in his own day he became well-known, partly because he published many of his engravings in book form, and these were eagerly sought after by art enthusiasts throughout Europe. In this respect he was more fortunate than many of his fellow artists who used the brush; nevertheless, there was more to his pictures than the happy accident that they could be mass-produced.

His 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 *Carceri* 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 Stampfle'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 Stampfle 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 draftmanship. 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-

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 *veduti* and his *Carceri* 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, Sarcophagi, 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* (A. 3) 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 reproductions are 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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FRANCOIS MATHEY *American Realism: A Pictorial Survey from the Early Eighteenth Century to the 1970s*. New York, Skira/Rizzoli, 1978. 191 pp., 170 illus., \$50.00.

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 Mahonri 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 Musée des Arts Décoratifs in Paris.

Beginning with the portrait-linners 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 Medicean 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