

**The Building of a Symbolic Image:
The use of perspective, multiple viewpoints, and scale in
Piranesi's Vedute di Roma juxtaposed with photographs taken in
the present day.**

**The background of the photographic documentary that formed the basis for the
creation of The Piranesi Project, A Stratigraphy of Views of Rome**

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Over the course of the last academic year, while on a Rome Prize Fellowship at the American Academy in Rome, Randolph Langenbach produced a digital documentary photography project that resulted in the production of a slide/video, called the Piranesi Project, A Stratigraphy of Views of Rome. This slide/video, and the documentary photography that was done for it, was inspired principally by the work of Giambattista Piranesi's Vedute di Roma. The underlying purpose of the project was to document the changes that have occurred in the presentation of the historical and archeological sites within the city over the centuries from the time that Rome began to be appreciated throughout Europe for its ruins of the ancient Roman civilization.

The project was simple in concept – it was to take photographs from the same viewpoints as that used by Piranesi, and other 18th and 19th century artists. This kind of project has been undertaken by others a number of times before, but the digital medium, and the use of computer programs enabled a different approach – an approach that gradually evolved as the first couple of experiments turned into a large project. Overall, this digital photographic project provided a remarkable opportunity to explore the compositional methodologies as practiced by artists who have used the landscape of Rome as a source of inspiration in the years before photography.

The project was first inspired by Piranesi's view of the *Terme Grande* at Hadrian's Villa, which is one of his most powerful images in his series of images of the archeological ruins. When a copy of his masterpiece is taken to the actual site, one discovers that the architectural subject in his view has survived the additional quarter of a millennium essentially the same as he saw it, except that the romantic layers of debris and vegetation have been removed. It is also apparent

though, that the view that he documented cannot be photographed as he drew it. His view encompassed a full 180 degree sweep of vision which captures very well the drama of the fragmentary remains that one experiences while standing there, but no flat-field lens can capture this view within a single photograph. Piranesi's compression of such a wide field of vision into the frame of the etched image is so subtle and convincing that the viewer is unaware of any distortion. His *vedute* takes an environmental experience that surrounds the viewer and compresses it onto a flat rectangular sheet of paper while still preserving the sense of the encompassing image.

In order to cover all of the view that Piranesi captured, six photographs were necessary, each taken with a very wide 19mm lens.¹ While that provided the raw data, the construction of the single photographic image was not a simple task. (*see attached illustration*) Each of the images had to be rectified, so that the vertical lines of the subject would be parallel, yet that was not enough, because Piranesi modified the wide angle view by compressing the extreme edges of the scene so that they would not look distorted in the print. That had to be done in the "building" of the single photographic image from the six raw photographs. This would not have been possible in a darkroom, but after a number of tries, it became possible on the computer.²

The companion photographs for each subsequent Piranesi image for which the original viewpoints could be located required at least some degree of similar composite construction, but each Piranesi etching had its own individual way of interpreting the scene. Some, like the Augustinian Firewall, were composed of images from more than one viewpoint, yet the results conveyed a sense of the reality of the place that the raw photographs failed to convey. (*see attached illustration*) What is significant, is that the composite photograph also captured the essence of the place, despite the fact that to experience the site itself requires walking along a path of over 100 meters.

Over the years, Piranesi's work has lead to disappointment when visitors to Rome would find that his grand views were not so grand or captivating when visited. Over the course of the work on this project, people repeatedly commented that they believed or had been told that Piranesi had made up much of what he had drawn in his *Vedute di Roma* series. Goethe, in his *Italian Journey* stated "*the actual appearance of the ruined baths of...Caracalla, of which Piranesi has given us so many a rich imaginary impression, could hardly satisfy even our artistically trained eye.*"³ Even some of the photographers who have attempted to follow in his footsteps would not disagree with this opinion. Their attempts at capturing the Piranesi views with a camera were frustrated not only by the modern changes to the landscape, but more profoundly by the inability of the camera to encompass the subject that Piranesi mastered in his compositions.

However, Piranesi was not creating a tourist brochure or museum exhibition. Instead his single images were designed to capture the entirety of complex environments of architectural ruins. He mastered an ability to produce images of environmental artifacts that could become symbolic of those artifacts – not just of one view of the artifact, but the artifact in its entirety. Thus he sometimes combined views from more than one viewpoint in a single plate.

¹ 35mm equivalent.

² The principle software used was Adobe Photoshop.

³ Goethe, *Italian Journey*, trans. Heitner, New York, Suhrkamp, 1989, 363.

In addition, as the visible archeology of Rome moved Piranesi to be “*determined to preserve [the ruins] through my engravings*” against “*greedy owners who sell them as materials for modern buildings*” his images must be seen as didactic. Because of their widespread influence in drawing attention to the ruins of ancient Rome throughout Europe, attracting many visitors to the city and thus helping to stop the systematic pillaging of the monuments, they are one of the most successful examples of preservation activism advanced by the creation and publication of images in the history of Europe.

Now the digital medium has enabled the creation of overlay images that do match Piranesi’s compositions. Before digital imaging software, this could not easily be done with photographs. The question then is, are these composite photographs false? What is “truth” in representational art? With the advent of photography, what is perceived as “truth” has shifted because the camera’s lens imprints the three-dimensional scene onto the film with an optical geometric accuracy. This, however, rarely has been the objective of the artist. A more important goal for the artist than optical accuracy is to capture the spirit of the place – to capture its symbolic image so that the meaning that the artist has found in the subject is conveyed through the art to the viewer. Piranesi touched upon this when he wrote:

“These ruins have filled my spirit with images that accurate [architectural] drawings...could never have succeeded in conveying. ...Therefore, having the idea of presenting to the world some of these images, but have little hope that an architect of these times could effectively execute some of them...there seems to be no recourse than for me...to explain [my] ideas through [my] drawings and so to take away from sculpture and painting the advantage...they now have over architecture.”⁴

The question of what is “truth” in artistic documentation is one of the most interesting issues to emerge in this project. The experience of working with the multiple photographs to “build” single images itself raises the question of whether the resulting images that are constructed atop the Piranesi views of the same scene are “false.” The act of disassembling and reassembling the digital photographs, however, taught me a new lesson that went beyond the manipulations that were possible in a darkroom. What emerged at the end of the work to combine the photographs was often an image that captured special qualities of the place as experienced at the site more than was possible capture in any single photograph. The compression of the perspective of the extreme sides of the views that was necessary to bring the composite image into register with the 18th century art proved in the end to be a correction of what otherwise would be a distortion if the image were presented with only a single vanishing point.

⁴ From: Piranesi’s *Prima Parte*, translated in a Columbia University Exhibition Catalogue.



The *Terme Grande*, by Piranesi, together with the six individual photographs taken with a 19 mm lens (35mm equivalent) and the composite image constructed from them by Randolph Langenbach.



The Augustinian Firewall, by Piranesi, together with the three individual photographs taken with a 19 mm lens (35mm equivalent) and the composite image constructed from them by Randolph Langenbach. The photo on the left is taken approximately 100 meters from the one in the center, which is 30 meters from the one on the right. The width of the street was the same in Piranesi's time as now.