

Giovanni Battista Piranesi

Church of Santa Maria del Priorato, 1764-1768

The only architectural work that Piranesi actually built was the **Church of Santa Maria del Priorato of the Knights of Malta** (1764-1768); in this Roman project he put into practice the design ideas he had been expressing in his theoretical writings, especially in his *Observations on Architecture*.

His concept refused to acknowledge a single and universal vocabulary of antiquity. Instead he declared that strong stylistic differences had always existed and that the art of the past had evolved via a constant reinvention of models. Moreover he declared **the equal dignity of all historical styles** (so he promoted not just Greek but also Etruscan, Egyptian, and Phoenician art as well). Contrary to adhering to one style only, Piranesi juxtaposes an inventive skill and a shattering of vocabularies whereby antiquity becomes a rich and varied source book for the architect's inspiration; it provides a repertory of forms, models and signs to re-elaborate, re-assemble and contaminate, in the contemporary sense, with the utmost **freedom**.

Exalting **the syncretism of vocabularies rather than the dominion of a single pure language**, Piranesi opposed the rational model of the primitive hut or the repetition of 'universal' schemes since these practices tended to limit the artist's creativity and reduce architecture to a mere brick-laying task. Instead, in his view, architecture required constant variations and needed to 'deform' itself in order to survive.

In the early 1760s, Pope Clement XIII of the Rezzonico family commissioned Piranesi to complete the central nave of the *Basilica of San Giovanni in Laterano* (a project that was later abandoned) as well as to reconstruct the **church and headquarters of the Priory of Malta on the Aventine Hill**.

The latter project comprised **two sets of works**: the creation of a **piazza** in front of the entrance to the Priory and the **renovation of the 16th century church** on the south-western corner of the hill. Through Piranesi's intervention, enlarging the narrow road leading from the hill's north side to the church, the very restricted space became more of a holy precinct than a piazza. Here he inserted an entrance façade along the Priory's bordering wall, aligning it with the avenue of Viale degli allori which gives a splendid view of *Saint Peter's Dome*. Of Palladian inspiration the prospect façade presents a rich cycle of ornamentation with groupings of reliefs, coats of arms and symbols. On the opposite side the open space is bordered by a wall cadenced with commemorative stelae carved with decorative relief and flanked by obelisks, urns and ornamental

culmination spheres. The rich array presents an original fusion of heterogeneous iconographic systems, from the naval and military imagery symbolising the Order of Malta to the Rezzonico coat of arms together with Roman and Etruscan decorative motifs that highlighted Rome's Italic origins.

Piranesi **didn't alter the church's original 16th century structure**, executed in Palladian style, but he did exalt its **chiaroscuro effects** by alternating smooth surfaces with ones that are extremely enlivened by carved decorations. This is a similar treatment to what he drew in his engravings and etchings.

The entrance is divided up by a **complex decorative scheme** that involves every constituent element of the façade. The squared columns' fluting is interrupted by panels portraying the Knights' parade swords; the Ionic capitals present insertions of two sideways sphinx separated by defensive towers; the geometric moulding recalls the Greek style, while the tympanum is occupied by triumph scenes complete with symbols of the Order of Malta and of the Rezzonico family. The decoration is mostly concentrated in the central part of the façade and consists of ecclesiastical vestments and the prospect of an Egyptian sarcophagus. This latter element is pierced by an oculus wrapped in laurel leaves and has two snaking elements attached to the sides, a reference to *mons Serpentarius* (the ancient name for the Aventine Hill). The heterogeneous set of elements that make up the decoration are, however, controlled by an overriding **principle of symmetry and harmony**.

Inside the traditional church Piranesi worked on the spatial layout of the rectangular plan, redesigning the profile of the supports, inserting columns in the apse and brightening the light reverberating in the white-surfaced room. Moreover, in an operation that was typical of Baroque architects, he accentuated the dramatic effect of the apse, which had already been decorated with friezes, by creating a powerful sculpted altar that is back-lit from a small window behind. The altar, too, presents the same principle of assemblage of mixed vocabularies and signs. He goes so far as to mount two sarcophagi of which the back one supports a third from which rises a sphere lifting Saint Basil of Caesarea. The overall effect has a very strong visual impact derived from the contrast of the altar's great mass against the light void of the open seashell as it has been geometrically-defined in the clean and bright stucco ceiling.



Fig. 1, 2 Giovanni Battista Piranesi, *Santa Maria del Priorato di Malta*, 1764-1768. Rome. Façade (left) and detail of the Villa (right).

