PRINTS CHARMING

Nexus The works of an 18th-century Italian printmaker inspired artists of the antipodes, writes James Bennett.

The Pyramid of Caius Cestius (8 B.C.-2 B.C.), top, was part of a craze for all things Egyptian; the View Inside the Pantheon, above, reveals the best preserved of all classical Roman buildings. 

The clue lies in the title: Piranesi's Grandest Tour: From Europe to Australia. The foreword to this celebration of the exquisitely wrought works of Giovanni Battista Piranesi,maker and colourless genius of the 18th-century master printmaker has captivated and inspired audiences over the centuries. But it is his connection to the antipodes, where we see Piranesi’s legacy in the development of significant public and private collections of his work, and in the inspiration it continues to give to artists, that seems most remarkable.

"Even though we are unaware of it," writes author and historian Colin Holden, who has curated the accompanying exhibition at the State Library of Victoria, "just below the surface of much Australian art are the visions of earlier artists that greet us. "One of these is the 18th-century Italian Giovanni Battista Piranesi." He was born on October 4, 1720, in Magliano in the Veneto region of Italy. Family connections guaranteed a practical understanding of architecture; life in Venice galvanised an interest in water and engineering. It was as an "architecto", rather than printmaker and publisher, that he originally described himself.

In 1740, as a draughtsman, he joined the entourage of the Venetian ambassador to Pope Benedetto XIV in Rome, where he would publish his extraordinary architectural views (Vedute di Roma) and study printmaking under the gifted Giuseppe Vasi. Here he would create a grand series of etchings of "real and imaginary buildings -- Roman ruins, baroque churches, ..." The book shimmered with his engravings: the twisted serpents of Nero’s tomb; the almost surrealistic Carceri d’Invenzione (a series of imaginary, labyrinthine prisons); the familiar Colosseum; the odd pyramidal tomb of the emperor Caius Cestius.

They were much sought-after. Holden introduces us to the rich mercantile world of the master printmaker and publisher, of the clientele of his Roman home and printshop, and the Grand Tourists of the 18th century, especially the English, who patronised him with passion.

And then, onward to Australia and New Zealand. "Piranesi’s artistic genius ensured that less than a century after his death (in 1778) his works would travel beyond the boundaries of the Empire to become part of major collections in the New Worlds -- the Americas, and most distant of all, Pacific Australasia."

Australia would not be colonised until 180 years after Piranesi’s death, yet it was here in libraries and private collections, often among architects, that many an important Piranesi collection, or just a single work (perhaps from the Vedute), would find an appreciative home. The State Library of Victoria and University of Melbourne’s Baillieu Library hold some of the largest, most significant collections.

The final two chapters of Piranesi’s Grand Tour deal with the impact of his work, via such imports on Australian architects and artists -- Hardy Wilson’s Old Colonial Architecture, Melbourne etcher-painter Jessie Traill, Russell Drysdale’s "dignified and venerable" Hill End, the post-war art of Rick Amor, Ron McBurnie, Angela Cavallari and Marco Lucic.

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Piranesi's work, rich in detail and local flavour, was highly popular with the Grand Tourists of the time. clockwise from left: Trajan's Column; the View of the Colosseum; Prisoners on a Platform, from Imaginary Prisons; and the Arch of Trajan at Ancona. 

Go to iPad and afr.com to see more works of Piranesi.