

*Laura Piranesi incise**A Woman Printmaker Following in Her Father's Footsteps*

Rita Bernini

Moreover, it is equally useless to ask what might have happened if Mrs Seton and her mother and her mother before her had amassed great wealth and laid it under the foundations of college and library, because, in the first place, to earn money was impossible for them, and in the second, had it been possible, the law denied them the right to possess what money they earned.

Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One's Own*, 1929¹

Even though more than a century and a half separates Laura Piranesi's artistic activity and this chapter's opening epigraph excerpted from Virginia Woolf, these words may well pertain to the artist and printmaker who, despite her talent, was not as well-known as her illustrious father, Giovanni Battista Piranesi.² From childhood onward, the daughter of the great printmaker and architect breathed the fertile and creative atmosphere of a laboratory crowded with assistants. This was the intaglio workshop and studio that Giambattista had opened in Rome's Palazzo Tomati, Strada Felice – 'vicino alla Trinità de' Monti', as it was written at the bottom of the prints he conceived, created, and sold at that address, in the so-called Street of the Artists. Laura's work until now has only been marginally cited in dictionaries and in biographies about her father and to a lesser degree about her older brother Francesco.³ Although the great

I would like to thank Heather Hyde Minor for her careful reading of the manuscript and for her valuable suggestions. I also thank Paola Ferraris of the Archivio di Stato in Rome for making it easier for me to access documents during the pandemic. All translations in this chapter are mine.

¹ V. Woolf, *A Room of One's Own and Three Guineas* (London: Penguin Random House's Vintage Classics Woolf series, 2016), 20.

² There are many variations of Giovanni Battista's name, including Gianbattista and Giovanbattista; all three are shown in original documents.

³ G. K. Nagler, *Neues allgemeines Künstler-Lexicon oder Nachrichten von dem Leben und den Werken der Maler, Bildhauer, Baumeister, Kupferstecher, Formschneider, Lithographen, Zeichner, Medailleure, Elfenbeinarbeiter, etc.*, vol. 11 (Leipzig: Schwarzenberg & Schumann, 1841), 363; U. Thieme and F. Becker, *Allgemeines Lexikon der Bildenden Künstler von der Antike bis zur Gegenwart*, vol. 27 (Leipzig: Engelmann – Seemann, 1907–1950, 1933), 80; E. Bénézit, *Dictionnaire critique et*

celebrity of her father has long eclipsed her etchings, this chapter brings to light for the first time biographical information and important milestones in Laura Piranesi's life based on newly discovered documents in Roman archives. Further, always treated within the context of her father's and brother's production, her prints have yet to be catalogued separately and studied for their own merit. Befitting her inclusion in a volume dedicated to women and print, this chapter endeavours to enhance our knowledge of Laura Piranesi's life and work.

To date, only twenty prints have been ascribed to Laura Piranesi,⁴ and all represent views of Rome, a venture similar to her father's which earned him widespread acclaim. Nevertheless, these prints reveal that she was an accomplished printmaker. In her lifetime, contemporary critics lauded her talent and elegant style:

Allevava altresì i suoi figliuoli per la via delle belle arti a lui tanto obbligate, ed insino una sua figliuola incide elegantemente sulle singolari tracce del padre.⁵

Laura's known *vedute* (cityscapes or vistas) take up some architectural subjects and the perspective of her father's most famous views in a smaller format. On the copperplates after her name, we read *incise* or *sculp*, both meaning 'etched', a clear indication of the fact she made the etching by herself, and above all, that she reinterpreted the paternal views with brighter chiaroscuro and a few changes to the composition signalling that she was the inventor of the design. If we look at her etching style and technique, and especially if we reflect on the idea behind the composition, we understand that there is a certain difference between the two artistic visions. As Mario Bevilacqua and Heather Hyde Minor have pointed out, Giambattista conceived his etchings as illustrations in books, therefore always in a tight dialogue with written texts. In this way he must be considered as the author of books in their entirety, texts and images

documentaire des peintres, sculpteurs, dessinateurs et graveurs, vol. 6. (Paris: Librairie Gründ (1950 ed.), 1960), 703.

⁴ A. M. Hind, 'Laura Piranesi', *The Burlington Magazine for Connoisseurs*, 43(246) (1923): 140. Hind's identification of twenty prints by Laura Piranesi includes eighteen views contained in a volume acquired by the British Museum while he was curator and two other small plates previously known to him.

⁵ 'He also brought up his children in the path of the fine arts so obliged to him, and even one of his daughters elegantly engraves following the original footsteps of her father'. 'Elogio storico del cavaliere Giovanni Battista Piranesi, Celebre antiquario ed incisore di Roma', *Opere del consigliere Gian Lodovico Bianconi bolognese, ministro della corte di Sassonia presso la Santa Sede*, 2, Milano nella tipografia de' Classici italiani, 1802, 127–140. First published in *Antologia Romana*, 1779, 34, 35, 36.

intertwined.⁶ While her father maintains a somewhat scientific and archaeological approach, filling the composition with reference numbers and notes, and a crowded under-title legend specifying historical details with long descriptions, Laura's plates are easier to enjoy. They convey a fresh and peaceful view of landscape, monuments, and archaeological ruins; her graceful scenes are animated by characters engaged in daily gestures, contributing to a representation of the life of the Eternal City.

A Family Business

Laura Maria Gertrude Piranesi was born in Rome in the late summer of 1754. While we do not know the exact date of her birth, we do know that she was baptized in the church of San Francesco ai Monti on 17 September.⁷ Her godfather was Monsignor Guido Bottari, brother of the more famous Giovanni Gaetano (Florence 1689 – Rome 1775), scholar, theologian, philologist, archaeologist, and librarian, and protector of Giovanni Battista Piranesi in the Eternal City since the early years of his residence, in the 1740s. Laura was the eldest daughter of Giovanni Battista, who identifies himself as 'architetto Veneziano' and of Angela (or Angelica in some documents) Pasquini, daughter of Domenico, gardener of the Corsini princes, who lived in the palace of the Florentine nobles across the Tiber on Via della Lungara. Giovanni Battista had married Angela the previous year in Santa Maria (Trastevere), the parish to which Angela belonged, and this marriage brought him a dowry of 300 scudi which he put towards a supply of huge copperplates, allowing him to establish and sustain his independent career as a *vedute* maker.⁸

It is, in fact, thanks to Angela's personal assets that Piranesi's early years were a period of professional growth and investment for his activities as a printmaker in Rome. Prior to their marriage, Piranesi had already etched a

⁶ M. Bevilacqua, 'Piranesi 1778. Ricerche interrotte, opere perdute', in V. Cazzato, S. Roberto, and M. Bevilacqua, eds., *Il teatro delle arti. Saggi in onore di Marcello Fagiolo per 50 anni di studi*, II (Rome, Gangemi) 2014, 766–771; H. Hyde Minor, *Piranesi's Lost Words*, University Park, PA: Penn State University Press, 2015.

⁷ Archivio Storico del Vicariato di Roma (ASVR), S. Francesco ai Monti, battesimi, vol. 5, 1750–1760, fol. 250.

⁸ G. Erouart and G.-M. Moser, 'À propos de la "Notice Historique sur la vie et les ouvrages de J.-B. Piranesi": Origine et Fortune d'une biographie', in G. Brunel, ed., *Proceedings of Piranèse et les Français*, 12–14 May 1976 (Villa Medici, Rome: Edizioni dell'Elefante, 1978), 213–252. The cost of the raw copper material was indeed considerable, and we should add the beating of the plate by the coppersmith. Piranesi chose to invest the money provided by Angela's family as dowry in his own business, etching and selling prints. Angela's name sometimes appears as Angelica in the archive documents.

certain number of plates of the *Views of Rome*, intended for individual publication or in series of varying numbers, and had published thirty-four of these with Jean (Giovanni) Bouchard, a French publisher and bookseller originally from the Provençal Alps near Briançon, who arrived in Rome in the early 1740s.⁹

The French bookseller published many of Piranesi's works starting with the first edition of the *Invenzioni capricciose di carceri*, and then the *Opere varie di architettura* and the *Magnificenze*. Only in 1761 did Piranesi stop his collaboration with Bouchard and move his residence and his chalcography laboratory to Palazzo Tomati in Strada Felice (via Sistina, 48), where he started printing on his own. Laura, who was about seven years old at the time of the move grew up between her home and the studio-workshop. The name Laura is the name of Giovanni Battista's mother, chosen following a family tradition that tells us of his attachment to his Venetian homeland. Two other siblings were born: Francesco (c. 1759) and Faustina Clementina Ludovica, baptized on 3 January 1761 in Sant'Andrea delle Fratte, but who died prematurely. Angelo (1763), Anna Maria (1766), and Pietro (1768) followed. The first biographers – Giovanni Ludovico Bianconi and Giovanni Gori Gandellini – report that the two eldest sons continued the family business and Bianconi affirms that all the children were 'raised in the way of the fine arts'.¹⁰

Consequently, it appears that Laura was educated to follow in her father's footsteps. While Francesco was trained by the best masters according to Giovanni Battista, who clearly directed him towards the archaeological survey, Laura had been directed by her father towards the *veduta*, a genre much appreciated by foreign tourists, and perhaps a trendy and fashionable theme for the English culture that Piranesi knew well. It seems probable that Piranesi's father thought of organizing his business by diversifying the artistic abilities of his children, to entrust each of them with a branch of the family business; Laura probably would have been responsible for the production of small-size views, which were easy-to-sell souvenirs.

⁹ Piranesi began publishing the *Views of Rome* in 1747 and continued to publish additional views until his death in 1778, ultimately producing a total of 138 plates. They are the most famous of the series etched by Piranesi, in which the artist vividly portrayed not just the monuments of the Eternal City and its environs with precision and splendour, but the quotidian life of eighteenth-century Rome and its often-decaying grandeur. The *Views* were immensely popular in his lifetime and have continued to win admirers.

¹⁰ G. Gori Gandellini, *Notizie degli intagliatori con osservazioni critiche raccolte da vari scrittori ed aggiunte a Francesco Gori Gandellini dall'abate Luigi de Angelis*, vol. 13 (Siena: dai torchi d'Onorato Porri, 1814), 125–126.

Although there is little documentation about Laura's early experience in the studio and her training in the techniques of etching, it is likely that Laura learned by watching the activities in the busy studio, and that she practised copying smaller versions of her father's large views of Rome. The artistic education of a young woman in eighteenth-century Italy followed established protocols based on family wealth and class. Perhaps Laura's artistic education was similar to that of Angelika Kauffmann (1741 Chur – Rome 1807), the Swiss painter who was thirteen years older than she was. Kauffmann's precocious talent was nurtured by the study of plaster models and prints owned by her father and enhanced by trips to Parma, Modena, and Bologna to see the Carraccis, Guido Reni, and Guercino, and finally to Rome, where Pompeo Batoni made nude drawings available for her to copy. Furthermore, Giovanni Battista Piranesi himself seems to have given her lessons in perspective.¹¹ While we are not aware of any other female artists who worked in his workshop, we can speculate on what Laura may have learned in her father's studio based on what is known about other eighteenth-century women artists and especially Giovanni's contributions to their training and knowledge of their published work. If Laura's father in the mid-1760s gave architectural drawing lessons to the young Kauffmann who was active above all in the field of portraiture and eager to tackle history painting, it is possible that he also found it natural to teach his own daughter perspective rules in view of her contribution to the family business. Likewise, Maddalena, the daughter of Piranesi's first publisher-bookseller Jean Bouchard, who was three years older than Laura, engraved illustrations for volumes of botany that were sold in the paternal workshop on the ground floor of Palazzo Mellini, opposite San Marcello, in via del Corso.¹²

Giovanni Battista was the undisputed head of the entire organization, and at his death (in 1778), in the absence of a will, according to the statutory law of Rome (in the sense of a local authority of the Papal State), it was the eldest son who should inherit the entire paternal estate.¹³

¹¹ P. Walch, 'An Early Neoclassical Sketchbook by Angelika Kauffman', *The Burlington Magazine*, 119(887) (1977): 105.

¹² L. Mancini, 'La libreria Bouchard e Gravier di Roma. Profilo storico documentario', *La Bibliofilia*, 11(2) (2013): 295, 298.

¹³ According to the Roman statutory rule, in fact, the inheritance ab intestato could not in any case go to the wife, but belonged to the firstborn son, in order to avoid financial dispersions. The local Roman Statute was based on the almost universal Italian customs, which to a certain extent exclude women and brother-in-law in favour of male agnates in the succession order ab intestato (M. Squillaci, 'La successione ab intestato delle donne: il fantasma della legge Voconia tra XX tavole e Costituzione di papa Innocenzo XI', *Rivista di Storia della Chiesa in Italia*, 70(2) (July–September

According to Jacques Guillaume Legrand's biography, no decision was made regarding the succession as Francesco, due to his young age, was feared unfit to manage the family business.¹⁴ The entire worth of the business was 60,000 scudi.¹⁵ We learn from the documents that as soon as their father had died, Francesco wanted to liquidate Laura's dowry and get her married immediately in order to get rid of her and thus take over the business. He had no other 'rivals' among the rest of the family as Anna Maria was a nun and both Angelo and Pietro were too young. The dowry agreed upon for Laura was a rather meagre sum: 800 scudi established by

2016): 447–488. The law was the subject of frequent family disputes, and so it will be in the case of the Piranesi family. See H. Hyde Minor and J. Pinto, "Marcher sur les traces de son père": The Piranesi Enterprise between Rome and Paris', in F. Nevola, ed., *Giovanni Battista Piranesi predecessori, contemporanei e successori. Studi in onore di John Wilton-Ely*, vol. 32, Studi sul Settecento Romano (Rome: Quasar Edizioni, 2016), 268, n.33.

¹⁴ 'Tout son chagrin était de penser que cette collection réunie avec tant de travail et de fatigues pouvait être démembrée à sa mort et ses cuivres dispersés. Il ne pouvait résister à cette cruelle idée et craignait toujours que la jeunesse de son fils ne fût un obstacle à ce qu'il continuât de maintenir l'ordre établi dans ses ateliers où plusieurs dessinateurs et graveurs travaillaient sous sa direction immédiate, et remplissaient chacun la tâche qu'il leur assignait en particulier, mais il se réservait toujours les parties difficiles et l'accord général.' (All his sorrow was to think that his collection formed with so much work and fatigue could be dismembered at his death and his copperplates scattered. He could not dismiss this cruel thought and still feared that his son's youth was an obstacle to the continued order established in his workshops where several draftsmen and engravers worked under his immediate direction, and each fulfilled the task that he assigned them in particular, but he always reserved the difficult parts and the overall composition for himself.) This passage is taken from the Piranesi's biography written by Jacques Guillaume Legrand, manuscript preserved in the Bibliothèque nationale de Paris, transcribed in M. Miraglia, ed., 'La Notice historique by J.G. Legrand', *Grafica grafica*, II(2) (May 1976): 136–162, 154. Francesco and Pietro Piranesi had commissioned Legrand to write the preface for a new Paris edition (1799) of their father's complete works. Legrand was chosen over Ludovico Bianconi who had written a biography (published in episodes on *Antologia Romana* twenty years earlier in 1779) that was judged by Francesco as not very benevolent.

¹⁵ '... parte dei quali utilmente investiti, e parte componevano i capitali di cui la sua officina e il museo si trovavano forniti, con l'intenzione di lasciare alla moglie e ai figli dei mezzi di comoda sussistenza' (... part of which was usefully invested, and part made up the capital with which his workshop and museum were supplied, with the intention of leaving the means of comfortable subsistence to his wife and children'), P. Biagi, *Sull'incisione e sul Piranesi, Venezia 1820, discorso letto alla I. R. Accademia di Belle Arti dall'Avvocato Pietro Biagi il giorno 6 agosto 1820*, Venezia, Giuseppe Picotti 1820. The sentence summarizes a passage in a letter written by Piranesi to his sister on 27 March 1778, a few months before his death, quoted by Biagi, 75 n.11, as found between the documents of Tommaso Temanza, not traced. The amount of Piranesi's inheritance can be understood if we consider that in the second half of the eighteenth century the average monthly expenditure on food for a family of 4 in fair economic conditions was around 10 scudi, and the monthly salary of a professor of the Accademia di San Luca was 24 scudi (D. Strangio, "Il pane controllato". Un nuovo regolamento per l'Annona di Roma', *Mélanges de l'école française de Rome*, 112(2) (2000): 589–613, 592.

her father when he was still alive, and 1,500, which was further raised to 2,650 by Francesco after his father's death.¹⁶

Laura did marry that year. In addition to the biographical details disclosed by Heather Hyde Minor,¹⁷ documents newly discovered while researching the archives for this chapter indicate that she wed Josef Anton Schwerzmann on 8 December 1778. Schwerzmann, of Swiss origin, was born in Rome on 22 March 1754. Laura and her husband relied on her dowry to begin commercial activities in via Frattina. In 1780, Laura and Josef had a daughter, Luisa Clara Maria Gertrude Fortunata Schwerzmann.¹⁸

Laura's Views of Rome

As Heather Hyde Minor and John Pinto observe, Legrand's biography 'emphasises the role played by Piranesi's son, Francesco (1759–1810), in completing a number of projects that were underway at the time of his father's death in 1778';¹⁹ but Legrand and other Piranesi biographers of the nineteenth century remain silent as to Laura's artistic production, simply mentioning her together with her brother Francesco at the bottom of notes about their father. A small yet important exception to this neglect lies in the aforementioned comment by Ludovico Bianconi in *Antologia Romana* (1779) which highlights the remarkable quality of her prints. It should be said that Gori Gandellini also notes her technical abilities, likening her work

¹⁶ For the dowry agreement, see ASR, 30, Notai capitolini, Michelangelo Clementi, vol. 541, fol. 521–522: 'E riconoscendosi benissimo dai suddetti ss.ri Laura Piranesi e Giuseppe Sverzeman futuri coniugi, e su.tti Francesco Piranesi ed Angelica Pasquini costituenti, che la somma sud.a di Sc. 1500 assegnatagli in dote oltrepassa di molto quella che volevasi ad essa si.ra Laura costituire dalla bo. ma Cavaliere Gio. B.a Piranesi comune Padre e Marito rispetto ad altresì esser maggiore di quella potrebbe alla si.ra Laura de iure competere' ('It is very well recognised by the aforementioned Laura Piranesi and Giuseppe [Josef] Sverzeman, future spouses, and Francesco Piranesi and Angelica Pasquini here constituted, that the sum of Sc. 1500 assigned to her as a dowry far exceeds what was set up for Ms Laura by the Cavaliere Gio. B Piranesi common Father and Husband and being larger than that it could by right compete to Ms Laura').

¹⁷ H. Hyde Minor, *Piranesi's Lost Words* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2015), and Hyde Minor and Pinto, 'Marcher sur les traces de son père', 263.

¹⁸ See baptism act ASVR, S. Lorenzo in Lucina, v. 35, 19r. On the 1810 death of her uncle Francesco, Luisa Clara Maria Gertrude Fortunata Schwerzmann, with her aunt Anna Maria, last surviving direct heir of Piranesi heritage, claimed a part of the inheritance on behalf of her mother Laura. From the researches made by Noack in the Roman archives, we are able to say that Luisa Clara (from now on Clara or Chiara, as it appears on the official documents), was living with her father in vicolo dei Granari in 1791 and until 1794; then we find her in 1808 living with her uncle Pietro Piranesi in via del Babuino 57, and finally her death is registered in 1824, in via del Gambero 30, where she is said to be the wife of Pietro Fumaroli.

¹⁹ H. Hyde Minor and J. Pinto, 'Marcher sur les traces de son père', 263.

to her brother Francesco's (but incorrectly giving her birth date as 1850!),²⁰ while Nagler and Thieme-Becker note that she produced small Roman views which she etched in the manner of, or after, her father's designs.²¹ Laura has her own entry in a 1799 German handbook for art lovers and collectors that states that she excelled in the art of engraving no less than her brother Francesco, and an English Biographical Dictionary of 1806 notes that Laura 'engraved a set of views in the manner of her father with great success' (the entry gives an incorrect date for her death).²²

A first biography, albeit short, dedicated to her, independent from her father and brother, appears in Michael Bryan's *Dictionary of Painters and Engravers*.²³ It was only in 1923 that A. M. Hind, art historian and curator of the Prints Department of the British Museum, published a note in which he reported the acquisition by that museum of a volume containing over sixty views of Rome, eighteen of which bear the signature of Laura Piranesi.²⁴ These are etchings with dimensions of about 130 (height) by 200 (width) mm, reproducing various views of the city with ancient and modern monuments. Another collective volume, which contains twenty views signed by Laura together with forty-eight others from the *Antichità Romane* by her father Giovanni Battista, is kept at the Vatican Library

²⁰ Notizie degli'incisori in rame, vol. 13, Biagi 1820, 79: 'Laura nata nel 1850 non si distinse meno del fratello nell'incidere all'acquaforte e bulino: le stampe di lei sono molto graziose.' ('Laura, born in 1850, distinguished herself no less than her brother in etching and burin engraving: her prints are very beautiful.')

²¹ Nagler (1841), vol. 11, 363: 'Laura radierte in einer gefälligen Manier Ansichten römischer Monumente, wie jene des Capitols, des Friedenstemples, des Triumphbogens des Sept. Severus, der Ponte Salaro etc' (Laura etched, in a pleasing manner, views of Roman monuments such as those of the Capitol, the Temple of Peace, the Arch of Sept. Severus, the Ponte Salaro etc'); Thieme Becker (1933), v. 27, 80: 'Laura . . . hat sich durch eine Folge von 12 kleinen staström. Veduten in der art ihres Vaters bekannt gemacht, die nur in wenigen Drucken auf uns gekommen sind.' ('Laura . . . made herself known through a series of 12 small Roman vedutas in the manner of her father, which have come down to us in only a few prints.')

²² I am grateful to Cristina S. Martinez for bringing this German Handbook to my attention. M. Huber, *Handbuch für Kunstliebhaber und Sammler über die vornehmsten Kupferstecher* (Zurich: Orell, Füssli und Compagni, 1799), 143; J. Watkins, *A Biographical, Historical and Chronological Dictionary: Containing A Faithful Account of the Lives, Characters and Actions of The Most Eminent Persons of All Ages and All Countries . . .*, 2nd ed. (London: Printed for Richard Phillips, 1806), 770.

²³ M. Bryan, *A Biographical and Critical Dictionary of Painters and Engravers, From the Revival of the Art under Cimabue, and the Alleged Discovery of Engraving by Finiguerra, To the Present Time . . .* (London: Carpenter and Son; J. Booker; and Whittingham and Arliss, 1816), 208: 'PIRANESI, LAURA: This lady was the daughter of Giovanni Batista Piranesi, born at Rome in 1750. She has engraved some views of the remarkable buildings in Rome, which are executed with taste and delicacy. We have, among others, the following views by her: The Capitol. The Ponte Salario. The Temple of Peace. The Arch of Septimus Severus.'

²⁴ A. M. Hind, 'Laura Piranesi', 140.

(Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana; BAV).²⁵ Also, several loose sheets signed by Laura are preserved in various public collections around the world: twenty loose print-views are kept in the Quirinale collection, almost all representing the same subjects as the British Museum volume. The following is a list of subjects of Laura's views traced in Italian and foreign public collections:

1. *Veduta di San Giovanni in Laterano*, 140 × 208 mm, 'Laura Piranesi inc.', Rome, Palazzo del Quirinale
2. *Veduta della Piramide di Caio Cestio*, 140 × 208 mm, 'Laura Piranesi sculp.', Rome, Palazzo del Quirinale
3. *Veduta del Campidoglio*, 142 × 209 mm, 'Laura Piranesi incise', Rome, Palazzo del Quirinale
4. *Veduta del Tempio della Concordia*, 138 × 205 mm, 'Laura Piranesi inc.', London, British Museum (1923,0612.11.21)
5. *Veduta del Tempio di Antonino, oggi Dogana di Terra*, 140 × 206 mm (specimen in Quirinale collection signed 'Laura Piranesi incise', the one in the British Museum erased, 1923,0612.11.8)
6. *Veduta del Tempio di Cibele nella piazza della Bocca della Verità*, 132 × 197 mm, 'Lavora Piranesi incise', Rome, Palazzo del Quirinale
7. *Tempio di Giano*, 139 × 229 mm, 'Laura Piranesi inc.', Rome, Palazzo del Quirinale
8. *Veduta del Portico di Ottavia*, 99 × 132 mm, attribution to Laura Piranesi, London, British Museum (1922.1113.2)
9. *Veduta dell'Arco di Settimio Severo*, 130 × 196 mm, 'Lavora Piranesi inc.', Rome, Palazzo del Quirinale
10. *Veduta del Tempio di Bacco oggi detto S. Urbano*, 139 × 220 mm, 'Laura Piranesi inc.', Rome, Istituto centrale per la grafica
11. *Veduta degli avanzi del Tempio della Pace*, 138 × 207 mm, 'Laura Piranesi inc.', Rome, Istituto centrale per la grafica
12. *Veduta del Ponte Salaro*, 144 × 206 mm, 'Lavora Piranesi incise', Rome, Palazzo del Quirinale
13. *Veduta dell'Arco di Tito*, 139 × 206 mm, 'Lavora Piranesi inc.', London, British Museum (1923,0612.11.39)
14. *Veduta della Rotonda*, 139 × 200 mm, 'Laura Piranesi inc.' Fine Arts Museums San Francisco, 140 × 230 mm, London, British Museum (1923,0612.11.3)

²⁵ B. Jatta, 'I "fondi Piranesi" della Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana', in B. Jatta and G. Morello, eds., *Piranesi e l'Aventino*, exhibition catalogue (Santa Maria del Priorato, Rome, 1998), 105–121.



Figure 8.1 Laura Piranesi, *Veduta della Basilica di Santa Maria Maggiore*, 14.1 × 20.9 cm. Rome Istituto centrale per la grafica. Courtesy of Ministry of Culture.

15. *Veduta della Fontana di Termini*, 131 × 190 mm, unsigned, London, British Museum (1922,1113.3)
16. *Veduta della Basilica di Santa Maria Maggiore*, 141 × 209 mm, 'Laura Piranesi incisit', Rome, Istituto centrale per la grafica (Figure 8.1)
17. *Veduta di Ponte Molle*, 140 × 230 mm, British Museum unsigned (1923,0612.11.10), Quirinale signed 'Laura Piranesi inc.'
18. *Veduta dell'Anfiteatro Flavio d.o il Colosseo*, 141 × 208 mm, 'Laura Piranesi sculp.', Rome, Palazzo del Quirinale
19. *Veduta del tempio della Sibilla in Tivoli*, 131 × 195 mm, 'Lavora Piranesi inc.', Rome, Palazzo del Quirinale
20. *Sepolcro di Cecilia Metella or detto Capo di Bove*, 140 × 207 mm, 'Lavora Piranesi inc.', Rome, Istituto centrale per la grafica
21. *Veduta del Castello Sant'Angelo*, 140 × 200 mm, 'Laura Piranesi sculp.', Rome, Palazzo del Quirinale

Up to now, Laura's views have never been analysed as complete and autonomous works. Instead, they have always been treated only in relation to the work of her father and brother and known as sheets inserted in collective works. As noted in the prints, she appears as 'Laura' or 'Lavora',

probably a distortion of her name made by those who added etched titles and texts on the plates, and identifies herself as the etcher. Laura engraved the plates – and invented part of the design or composition – and if we compare the etching technique, we notice many characteristics that unequivocally identify Laura's style. First of all, the quality of the lines is very different from that of her father. Giovanni Battista's compositions are magnificent, impeccable, full of details: his etching lines are extremely precise. Those that delineate the architecture are thin and regular. Highly stylized parallel lines and cross hatching produce skillful tonal effects that define and order the space. The slow process of multiple etchings using a mordant of strong vinegar, copper sulphate, and ammonia salts rather than the nitric acid used by his contemporaries, bites sharper lines while repeated acid baths achieve a wide range of tones, from silvery greys to intense and velvety blacks. Conversely, Laura's etching is very free. Her use of the etching needle to gently expose the metal plate beneath the protective ground to the bite of the acid produces a line that appears as if drawn with a stylus: her lines are soft and sometimes repeated like the pentimenti of a sketch, thereby creating very vivid compositions. Laura does not use a scribe, her scenes are drawn freehand, while her father makes use of various precision tools to draw the architectural reliefs on the metallic surface. Moreover, it seems that she prefers to dip the plate only once into the acid bath; in this way the longer the exposure, the deeper and wider will be the recesses created by the acid. These recesses will retain more or less ink during the printing process, resulting in a greater or lesser presence of blacks in the composition. Unique biting gives the prints a spontaneous and pleasing effect.

We can generally observe a formal balance between blacks and whites in Laura's compositions, and a skilfully judged amount of etching, such as to make the subtle lines of the perspective backgrounds and the skies very clear, with the close-ups, the shaded areas, and the figures being very dark. Skies are not stormy and clouded as are her father's; the views are more intimate, and figures, although sketched and elongated in a way very similar to Giovanni Battista's, never assume the same attitudes and positions inside the scene. It is undoubtedly a studied and sought-after result, which suits perfectly the small format of her views, giving a picturesque effect. The twenty known subjects represent views of ancient and modern Roman monuments, and the views and perspective cuts of the compositions are the same as her father's, while the atmosphere is pleasantly easy and not solemn. Laura creates views of Roman ruins and monuments as independent images rather than illustrations for books as her father did.

In two cases (*Veduta del Tempio di Antonino* and *Veduta del Ponte Molle*), the prints kept in Palazzo del Quirinale seem to have been printed before the British Museum specimens: the former include a signature, whereas it appears to be abraded in the two subjects in the British Museum (for the *Ponte Molle* see also the BAV; for the *Veduta del Tempio di Antonino*, see the National Gallery of Art, Washington, both unsigned). Hind records that eighteen of these compositions (the series kept in British Museum) are miniature reproductions of her father's greatest *Vedute Romane*, including a new version of the *Temple of the Sibyl at Tivoli*. Laura's etchings are almost always present in collective volumes along with views signed by her father and her brother. The known volumes are uneven in the number of plates (sometimes sixty, sometimes sixty-one, sometimes sixty-two; the album of the Fondo Cicognara in the BAV contains sixty-eight plates). Many of these albums are difficult to trace because when they entered public collections they were disassembled for conservation reasons. When they are located in private collections, we can only register their passage to auction houses for sale. Therefore, in examining Laura's views contained in different volumes, we can note that the signature on etchings associated with her vary in completeness or absence.²⁶

Thus, we have at least two known states of Laura's prints: a first state where her name is highlighted, a second without the indication of the etcher, or with the sole indication 'Piranesi'; it can be assumed that these plates were published after the artist's death under the surname of her famous father. It is not possible to determine the dating of these small views by Laura because they are not dated on the plates, and particularly because they are not traceable among the more than a thousand copper-plates of the Piranesi chalcography recovered to Paris by Francesco and purchased by the Calcografia Camerale at the behest of Pope Gregory XVI, thus returning to Rome in 1839.

It's not disclosed in past biographies if Laura was in possession of and authorised to sell the small views of Rome that she had made and signed with her name when her father was still alive. As just mentioned, it was not

²⁶ In June 2017, Bonham's London auctioned an album containing thirty etched views of Rome and one engraved plan, some plates randomly numbered with Roman numerals, two of them signed Laura Piranesi and one Francesco Piranesi, letterpress title: 'Collection of the most beautiful ancient views of Rome, designed and engraved by Cavalier Gio: Batista Piranesi, famous architect', dated Rome 1802. This album contains two views attributed to Laura but inscribed only with the surname 'Piranesi', while the impressions of these same prints preserved at the British Museum and at Istituto centrale per la grafica include her given name as well.

possible to trace the small etched plates in the Piranesian corpus managed by the brothers Francesco and Pietro in Paris, and then returned to the Calcografia Camerale in Rome, now preserved at Istituto centrale per la grafica, nor is there any trace of the prints by Laura in sales catalogues of Roman contemporary publishers.²⁷ In 1998 and 2001, two watercolour drawings depicting the pinwheel of fireworks in Castel Sant'Angelo were auctioned. Both drawings bore the inscription 'Laura Piranesi f.' One of the two was titled *Veduta del Ponte e del Castello S. Angelo nel tempo che si spara la Girandola*, the other *Veduta del Castel S. Angelo di Roma, in tempo che spara la Girandola*. Both drawings can be compared to the same subject etched with aquatint by Francesco Piranesi based on a drawing by the French painter Louis Jean Desprez. On 26 January 1781, Francesco Piranesi and Desprez set up a company for the production of watercolour and etched views. Several subjects are specifically mentioned in the agreement: the Pope's Adoration of Holy Sacrament in Paolina Chapel in Vatican, the Illumination of the Cross on Good Friday in St. Peter's, the pinwheel of Castel Sant'Angelo, the temple of Isis in Pompei, the Posillipo grotta, and the temple of Serapis, Pozzuoli.²⁸ The plates were originally etched by Francesco in outline, and were intended as a basis for Desprez to watercolour. After Desprez's departure from Italy in 1784, Piranesi reworked the plates with etching and aquatint, in order to print them without them needing to be coloured. Chracas's *Diario ordinario di Roma* in 1782 records: 'Francesco Piranesi pubblica tre stampe di statue antiche e alcune vedute di Roma e Napoli colorate (fatte con il mons. Despres). Offerte al Pontefice'. 'Francesco Piranesi publishes three prints of ancient statues and some coloured views of Rome and Naples (done with Mons. Despres). Offered to the Pope'.²⁹ The British Museum houses a watercolour drawing depicting the cave of Posillipo attributed to Desprez,³⁰ recognised by Campbell Dogson (curator of the museum's Prints and Drawings department from 1912 to 1932) as preparatory for the etching made by Francesco Piranesi and retouched by hand by Desprez; it is one of

²⁷ B. Maronnie traced two views by Laura, the Pantheon and the Colosseum, in two issues of the 1807 *Athenaeum* magazine, printed in Paris by the Piranesi brothers. The two views do not have the name of the author, and the title is in French (www.piranesimultimediale.it/piranesi/it/capitolo-7/Sulle-singolari-tracce-del-Padre-Laura-Piranesi-incisora/21). Until 1802, the year of the Roman edition of the miscellaneous volumes of views, and more than ten years after Laura's death, we can assume that Laura's plates were still in Rome.

²⁸ ASR 30 Notai Capitolini, Uff. 32, Michelangelo Clementi, vol. 548, fol. 194r–197v.

²⁹ Chracas, *Diario ordinario di Roma* (1782), II, 26 January 1782, exactly one year after the setting up of the society.

³⁰ British Museum, BM 1864, 1210.438.

the prints mentioned in the contract between the two artists. Assuming that the two signed drawings were made by Laura before her father's death, it is interesting to note that the pinwheel of Castel Sant'Angelo, an evidently very popular and publicly requested subject, was designed and perhaps also coloured by Laura Piranesi, probably for an editorial project later carried on by her brother Francesco.

The presence of the prints signed by Laura, or with her surname only, both in miscellaneous volumes printed in Rome in 1802 and as images in a journal edited in Paris a few years later, does not dispel the doubt about what happened to the plates. This is an issue that still needs to be investigated and that promises to open up new lines of research towards a better understanding of the life and work of this neglected female artist.

Through documents newly discovered in the archives, we now know that Laura Piranesi died on 9 March 1790 at 34 years of age.³¹ This premature death left her promising talent largely untapped. Despite her short life, Laura Piranesi's etchings reveal her precise, pure, and elegant touch. Her style, characterised by both a fluid line and the accuracy of technique, is in keeping with her free interpretation of the view genre in tune with the proto-Romantic current of Italian landscape painters. While many questions about her career and production remain unanswered, continued archival research may uncover new prints or documents about her work and its reception. Talent and skill evident in her etchings suggest that, had she lived longer, she might well have moved beyond following in her father's footsteps to create a path of her own.

³¹ ASVR, Liber defunctorum, S. Lorenzo in Damaso, 1790, 22: 'Die 9 marzo 1790 Laura Piranesi Mulier Josephi Sverzman e Par. S. Susanne ad hanc infirma se contulit, in qua sacramenti munita obiit in comm.e S. M. Corpus ad Ecclesiam S. Susanne delatum, humatum fuit.' (ASVR, Book of the Dead, S. Lorenzo in Damaso, 1790, 22: 'On 9 March 1790 Laura Piranesi, Wife of Joseph Sverzman from Par. St. Susanna, already ill, moved to this parish, in which she died protected by the sacrament in the communion of St. M. The body was brought to the Church of St. Susanna, and was buried.)