

Heather Hyde Minor, *Piranesi's Lost Words*, University Park, PA: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2015, 264 pp., 130 duotone illus., \$ 79.95, Cloth, ISBN 9780271065496

Alexis H. Cohen

Volume 41, Number 2, 2016

The Nature of Naturalism : A Trans-Historical Examination
La nature du naturalisme : un examen transhistorique

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1038067ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/1038067ar>

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

UAAC-AAUC (University Art Association of Canada | Association d'art des universités du Canada)

ISSN

0315-9906 (print)

1918-4778 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this review

Cohen, A. H. (2016). Review of [Heather Hyde Minor, *Piranesi's Lost Words*, University Park, PA: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2015, 264 pp., 130 duotone illus., \$ 79.95, Cloth, ISBN 9780271065496]. *RACAR : Revue d'art canadienne / Canadian Art Review*, 41(2), 123–125.
<https://doi.org/10.7202/1038067ar>

limitations and possibilities” (288), because “difference is real, dynamic and boundless” (289).

Potvin reiterates that the goal of the text is to uncover “the narratives of design, domesticity and how gender and sexuality altered and were affected by these narratives” (289). In particular, he makes the provocative case that shame is key: “Shame and design make uneasy bedfellows and yet they comprise the politics of aesthetics of the modern interior” (288). Shame has an effect on the material components of interior design as well as the configuration of spaces. Shame, Potvin tells us “erects walls” while “materializing phobia and panic” (288). Shame resists but also motivates. It “builds things of beauty” (288). While Potvin makes the case that shame is an integral part of queer identity, his conception of the aesthetics of shame is applicable to the domestic interiors of other times, places, and identities.

Potvin asserts that “domestic spaces materialize the building of lives, as much as they are sites of ideological struggle, tension and resistance, the material stuff of identity. They form the landscape wherein ... gender and sexual difference are coded, performed and circumscribed” (288). In doing so, he sets the agenda for continuing the important work modelled by this essential study. ¶

Erin J. Campbell is associate professor of early modern European art in the Department of Art History & Visual Studies of the University of Victoria.
—erinjc@uvic.ca

1. Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space* (Boston, 1994), 4, 6.

2. Mary Douglas, “The Idea of a Home: A Kind of Space,” *Social Research* 58, 1 (Spring 1991): 290.

Heather Hyde Minor

Piranesi's Lost Words

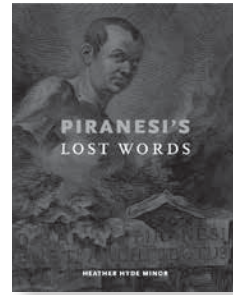
University Park, PA: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2015.

264 pp. 130 duotone illus.
\$79.95 Cloth ISBN 9780271065496

Alexis H. Cohen

GIOVANNI BATTISTA PIRANESI—an inspired interpreter of classical antiquity whose prolific artistic output and outsized personality made him a fixture of the Republic of Letters—remains one of the most famous and well-studied figures of the eighteenth century. Known primarily as an engraver and printmaker, Piranesi has also been celebrated and studied as an architect, designer, collector, archaeologist, and antiquarian. In her most recent book, *Piranesi's Lost Words*, Heather Hyde Minor uses a wealth of eighteenth-century archival sources, many unpublished, to argue that Piranesi's most significant appellation is as *author* and that his books “were his most powerfully creative art” (209).

Through this beautifully illustrated book, Minor guides her reader through four major works in Piranesi's published oeuvre, showing how text and image are intertwined in a composite art-form manufactured through complex material, social, and intellectual processes. Divided into two parts, broadly organized around the concepts of “reading” and the “how” of making, the book begins with an examination of Piranesi's earliest folio, the *Antichità romane* (*Roman Antiquities*, 1756, 4 vols.). Through an anatomical dissection of the book, Chapter 1 guides the twenty-first-century reader through its constituent elements—frontispiece, imprimatur, texts, etchings, paper, ink, etc.—highlighting conventions of eighteenth-century book-making while also placing Piranesi's celebrated plates in their original bibliographic context. Minor



establishes connections between her material engagement with the *Antichità romane* and Piranesi's experimentation with the expressive potential of print and its ability to investigate the antique past through its modes and methods of representation. Chapter 2 continues this exploration of the *Antichità* but from an eighteenth-century perspective, bringing to life Piranesi's contemporary readers and the spaces in which they would have encountered his works, be they libraries, book auctions, or Bouchard & Gravier's shop in Rome. By animating Piranesi's milieu, his relationship to various audiences, and the circulation of his books, the chapter also illuminates eighteenth-century perspectives on the collaborative nature of the study of antiquity.

In Part 2, which begins with Chapter 3, Minor turns to the *Campus Martius antiquae urbis* (*The Field of Mars of Ancient Rome*, 1762), paying particular attention to Piranesi's use of fragmentary textual and material remains to both reconstruct and interpret ancient Rome. Chapter 4 studies *Della magnificenza ed architettura de' Romani* (*On the Magnificence and Architecture of the Romans*, 1761), a work in which Piranesi engages the contemporary Greco-Roman controversy, famously arguing for the relative superiority of the ancient Romans over the Greeks. Minor shows how Piranesi expanded his methodological repertoire by drawing not just on ancient sources, but also on modern interpretations of ancient objects published by peers like Julien-David Le Roy who believed,

instead, that the Greek was the superior culture.

Chapter 5 argues that the contributions of *Diverse maniere d'adornare i cammini ed ogni altra parte degli edifizii desunte dall'architettura Egizia, Etrusca e Greca* (*Different Ways of Ornamenting Chimneys and All Other Parts of Buildings Taken from Egyptian, Tuscan, and Greek Architecture*, 1769) are its engagement with Enlightenment practices of cataloguing and classifying, and Piranesi's rejection of this epistemological framework for recovering lost knowledge. For Piranesi, interpretation is the only means of knowing the material remains of past cultures.

Chapters 6 and 7 serve as Minor's conclusion. They show how Piranesi's *corpo* was "dismembered" after his death—through family disputes and the dispersal of his copperplates—and then "found" again in the present day. This story of loss and recovery carries the book's focus on reading and the *how* of making (Minor's examination of Piranesi's *corpo* through its materiality) into a discussion of the state of Piranesi studies and the scholarly practices and disciplinary divisions that "decoupled" Piranesi's words and images. As a result of increased specialization in nineteenth- and twentieth-century scholarship, no one discipline could credibly claim to study the range of topics and sources that Piranesi did, nor could available scholarly tools capture the complexity of his work and the interconnection between his texts and their accompanying plates. In the emergent discipline of art history, for example, its early tools, namely monographic studies and the catalogue raisonné, inadvertently fashioned Piranesi into an artist. Minor argues that Albert Giesecke's list of Piranesi's published prints (*Giovanni Battista Piranesi*, 1911) and Henri Focillon's *Giovanni Battista Piranesi: Essai de catalogue raisonné de son oeuvre* (1918) compounded the problem as they became modern foundations for further research. This

legacy continues to this day, but was perhaps most tellingly evident in the museum exhibitions and accompanying catalogues of 1978, which marked the bicentenary of Piranesi's death by celebrating his engravings, displaying them as individual plates on gallery walls.

Even as Piranesi's texts came to be studied in the mid-twentieth century by an expanded field of scholars, in particular by architectural historians in search of the origins of Modernism, Minor argues that Piranesi was still too narrowly understood. Without grasping Piranesi's complete *oeuvre* and the materials and processes that led to its creation, scholars will remain blind to his true achievements.

This historiographic discussion reinforces a methodological argument that accompanies Minor's central claim. She redefines Piranesi's status as a pre-eminent interpreter of antiquity through the lens of his work as an author connecting the myriad processes that produced his publications to the approaches needed to understand them. "Although no art historian," she writes, "claimed to seek methodological inspiration from Piranesi, these ideas can all be found in the pages of his books" (208).

Through her own book, Minor captures these processes of knowing and making, turning them both into an object of study and a powerful and compelling methodology. This approach allows her to make several contributions to Piranesi studies as well as art and architectural history. First and foremost, Minor's complex treatment of Piranesi *as author* and her study of his books in their entirety, is pioneering. Even as the Piranesi literature continues to expand, including considerations of him not just as an artist but as a designer (see, for example, *Piranesi as Designer* edited by Sarah E. Lawrence, with John Wilton-Ely, published in 2008 in association with a series of exhibitions), Minor's object of study still sets her book apart from recent scholarship. The influence of this approach will be

manifold. For example, it allows Minor to implicitly challenge the gloss of most monographs as she shows how the products of "genius" come into being in more complicated ways than are often acknowledged. Minor's recovery of Piranesi's lost words demonstrates that new scholarly terrain is often in plain sight, obscured not by a missing theoretical lens, but by a failure to begin research by seeking to understand objects through their own terms.

Piranesi's Lost Words can also be situated in the context of the proliferation of *materiality* as a topos in the study of art and architectural history, history, English, and other disciplines in the humanities. Broadly speaking, materials and the material quality of art and other objects of human production has, since the late 1990s, been used by many scholars as a topic of investigation—opposed, for example, to formal investigations—as a way to uncover new meanings. This approach has also illuminated the conditions surrounding the production of these objects, bringing studies and concepts of making and the experiences of an embodied viewer (or researcher, in Minor's case) to shape historical inquiry.

Through this approach, Minor's book shares in Piranesi's joy of research and in so doing, animates her own interpretive and creative scholarly pursuit. In addition to its contributions to Piranesi studies, *Piranesi's Lost Words* is a compelling pedagogical text that conveys the delights of academic research to its readers. Examples fill the book, which opens with a description of the author's experience receiving the four volumes of *Antichità romane* in the library reading room. By evoking the physicality of the volumes, she brings her readers with her into the library. Similarly, the author's photographs of Piranesi's folios sprawling on library tables provide readers with insight into the research process. In a particularly striking moment in the book, Minor locates herself as a

researcher in space, standing at the Trevi Fountain and noting that nearby, below ground—unbeknownst to many—Piranesi's once "lost" copper plates are stored in the Istituto Nazionale per la Grafica.

By situating Piranesi's most important *oeuvre* in the bookshops and libraries, milieu and marketplaces where they originated, Minor uncovers the histories and context needed to understand not only Piranesi's profound creativity but also the delirious complexity of his artistic methods. ¶

Alexis H. Cohen recently received her PhD in architectural history from Princeton University, and is now working as an historian at ERA Architects, a Toronto-based firm specializing in heritage conservation.
—AlexisC@eraarch.ca

Joan Coutu

Then and Now: Collecting and Classicism in Eighteenth-Century England

Montreal & Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2015

340 pp. 16 col. + 80 b/w illus.

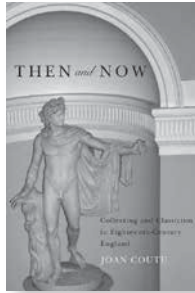
\$77 Cloth & eBook ISBN 9780773545434

Ersy Contogouris

IN THIS BOOK JOAN COUTU foregrounds an important and unstudied period of transition in the practices of collecting and displaying classical sculpture in England in the eighteenth century. Her focus is on four mid-century collections, which she analyzes in relation to the politics of their owners—three members of the landed aristocracy and one newly rich bourgeois, all Whigs—and to their country's shifting political and cultural landscape. The opening and closing chapters provide a historical frame for these four case studies by giving an overview of collecting practices earlier and later in the century, so that we follow a shift from a practice that favoured the collecting

of plaster casts and reproductions of well-known classical statuary to a preference for authentic antique pieces, and one that went from displaying classical statuary throughout the home to cloistering it in dedicated gallery-like spaces.

Coutu's focus is on acquisition and display. She demonstrates that although the works themselves were not political, they were "activated politically" within their owners' Whig agendas (6). She rightly insists from the outset that statuary was used differently by each owner, and that "each collection is as much about the collector as it is about the objects within it" (3). Ultimately, though, patterns emerge, revealing how these sculptures came to define the classical canon that was being integrated into contemporary art and aesthetic discourse, most notably in Britain with



Sir Joshua Reynolds's Grand Manner. This volume takes us seamlessly from the minute analysis of individual objects to the broader view of Britain's changing place in the world, offering the reader a wide range of new insights into a formative period of British art and society.

In the first chapter, Coutu presents the decorative programs of the vast Palladian villas that were erected in post-Restoration England of the first half of the eighteenth century. In these villas, classical statuary was interspersed with sculpted busts and painted portraits of the owner and his family so that "entering into a room," Coutu writes, "meant becoming involved in a pre-existing

conversation among characters of different times and places" (18). Classical statuary and other pieces of *virtù* had to be exhibited in a way that was tasteful and that served as an *exemplum*, in order to highlight perceived qualities that the natural aristocracy wanted to put forward, such as their balanced nature and their inherent right to lead.

Each of the central four chapters is then devoted to the practices of one collector from the next generation. The first examines the collection of Charles Watson-Wentworth, 2nd Marquess of Rockingham (1730–82). It begins with Rockingham on his Grand Tour, during which he bought vast quantities of casts of classical statuary on behalf of his father. These acquisitions are contemporaneous with the publication of J.J. Winckelmann's *Reflections on the Painting and Sculpture of the Greeks* (1755), and we see in Rockingham's choices the same preference for the graceful and the beautiful, the same distaste for extreme emotion as displayed, for instance, on Laocoon's face. When he acceded to his peerage Rockingham became increasingly involved in the affairs of state, and was appointed Prime Minister in 1765. But when the Whigs were sidelined by George III, Rockingham retreated to Wentworth Woodhouse in Yorkshire, his political power base, and the estate became the centre of his political strategizing. Analyzing the different pieces of statuary and their placement, Coutu demonstrates that Rockingham's collection at Wentworth Woodhouse was at once shaped by his particular Whig agenda and gave voice to it, and that it should be read both as a claim to power on behalf of his class and as an inspiration to virtue.

The second study is dedicated to the sculpture gallery in Whitehall of Charles Lennox, the 3rd Duke of Richmond (1735–1806), which Richmond created in 1758 and made available to young aspiring British artists for the purposes of training. It was established in the midst of calls, by William