



## PIRANESI AND THE KNIGHTS OF MALTA

■ BY LUCY GORDAN

In the circle, a portrait of the Italian artist and architect Piranesi. Below, *Piazza Cavalieri di Malta* and, on the side, the famous keyhole with the view of St. Peter's Dome a mile away



At the top of Rome's Aventine Hill is the ornately-walled square, the *Piazza dei Cavalieri di Malta*. Commissioned by the Venetian Cardinal Giovanni Battista Rezzonico, nephew of Pope Clement XIII (1758-69) to spruce up the area, it was designed by his fellow Venetian classical archeologist, architect, and engraver Giovanni Battista Piranesi (1720-1778) in 1765. Picturesque, it's decorated with alternating obelisks and *stelae*, made of marble and stucco. The *stelae*'s decorations feature shields and swords from the Rezzonico family's coat-of-arms, and lyres, cameos, cornucopias, serpents, bird wings, and Pan pipes, based on Piranesi's favorite archeological symbols. For Piranesi liked to think of himself as an architect, but he was also a most distinguished archeologist of many ancient Mediterranean cultures: Egypt, Greek, Etruscan, and Roman.

Off the beaten track, on one side of the square is Rome's international Benedictine seminary and Church of Sant'Anselmo, where the monks sing Mass in Gregorian chant on Sundays starting at 9:30 AM. Across is a massive, mysterious wooden door with peeling green paint set in a monumental entrance, also by Piranesi, with additional classical decorations. Its large bronze keyhole is one of Rome's intriguing

tourist sights. When you look through it, in the distance you see a unique miniature view of St. Peter's dome framed by a cypress-lined avenue.

Behind the door, almost always shut, in a magnificent manicured garden of clipped hedges and rose bushes is the *Villa del Priorato di Malta* with a distinctive tower. The site, which overlooks the Tiber, was already a fortified Benedictine monastery in the 10th century. Later it belonged to the Templars, descendants of the Crusaders, but after Pope Clement V disbanded their Order in 1312, its ownership passed to the Knights Hospitallers, the predecessors of the Sovereign Military Order of Malta (SMOM), its owners since the 14th century.

Today the villa is one of the two institutional seats of the Government of the Sovereign Military Order of Malta. The other is located at *Via Condotti 68* near *Piazza di Spagna*. Along with the Magistral Palace, Italy granted the villa extraterritorial rights in 1869. It hosts the Grand Priory of Rome and the embassy of the Sovereign Order of Malta to Italy.

The Order's motto is *Tuitio fidei et obsequium pauperum* ("defense of the faith and assistance to the poor"). Venerating the Virgin Mary as its patroness and St. John the Baptist as its



Left and right, the Church of St. Mary of the Priory, Piranesi's only architectural work.

The interior of the church contains a statue of Piranesi above his tomb.

Below, Piranesi's splendid engraving of the Temple of Antoninus and Faustina



patron, the Order's role is focused on providing humanitarian assistance internationally. For this reason it has had observer status at the United Nations General Assembly since 1994.

Founded in Jerusalem in 1113 by merchants from Amalfi to care for pilgrims of any religious faith or race, the Order transferred its seat to Cyprus in 1291, to Rhodes in 1310, to Malta in 1530, and finally to Rome in 1834. Today the Order is a Catholic religious lay order. The oldest surviving Chivalric order, it counts 13,500 Knights, Dames, and auxiliary members, all of whom must be Roman Catholic, and a few dozen (c. 50) of whom are professed religious. Membership is by invitation and some (30%) are women. The Order, led by a Prince and Grand Master elected for life (always a professed religious), is an apolitical worldwide relief corps, with an annual budget of some 1.5 billion euros, which is largely funded by European governments, the European Union, the UN, foundations, and private donations. It employs some 40,000 doctors, nurses, auxiliaries, and paramedics, who are assisted by 80,000 volunteers in some 1,500 hospitals in more than 120 countries, mostly in Europe and Africa. It intervenes in war zones and after natural disasters: earthquakes, typhoons, floods, famines and epidemics, including the COVID pandemic. Without ethnic or religious discrimination it distributes more than 5,000,000 meals a year, accompanies the sick on pilgrimages especially to Lourdes (COVID permitting), cares for children, the homeless, the handicapped, the elderly and terminally ill, refugees, the socially discriminated, ethnic minorities, and lepers around the world.

It's a sovereign entity of international law and maintains diplomatic relations with many countries. It has its own national anthem (*Ave Crux Alba* or "Hail, Thou White Cross"), flag (red with an eight-pointed cross), coat of arms, currency called the *scudo*, and stamps, but only three male citizens: the

Grand Master, the Lieutenant Grand Master, and the Chancellor.

In the USA with offices in New York (since 1927), Washington D.C. (since 1973), and San Francisco (since 1952), the Order counts some 3,000 members who make home visits to the sick and organize shelter for single mothers and women who have suffered domestic violence. They also run food banks and soup kitchens for the poor and homeless and have programs for street children and convicts.

To return to Rome, the Order's capital, besides the Grand Priory, the garden also houses the Church of St. Mary of the Priory. In the same year he designed the square outside, Rezzonico commissioned Piranesi to restore the small Church of St. Mary of the Priory. It is Piranesi's only architectural work.

The first church, which gets its name from an icon of the Madonna found on the site, dates to 969 AD. Over the centuries the church had undergone very few renovations before Piranesi's. Like its outer walls and entrance way Piranesi's renovations represent the glories of the Order (serpents, the symbol of Asclepius, the god of medicine, to commemorate the Order's welfare and hospitaller tradition as well as the eight-pointed cross, emblem of the eight beatitudes)

and those of the Rezzonico family: towers and double-headed eagles from their coat of arms. Flanked by two sphinxes, his façade of glistening white marble with fluted pilasters implies an ancient Greek temple façade.

Piranesi's interior, a single nave with four pairs of niches, is also totally white. His decoration for the ceiling vault again is a wealth of ancient and Christian symbols, which celebrate the Order's naval and military feats together with the accomplishments of his patrons. A bas-relief depicts St. John the Baptist with the *Agnus Dei*: in its center is a Greek cross supported by *putti*; at its top are the tunic of humility worn by the





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Knights of Malta, the papal tiara and crossed keys. The altar depicts the *Apotheosis* of St. Basil with Seraphim and Cherubim raising him to heaven. In the foreground is the Virgin and in the lower part a burial niche connected to the crypt below, which contains the coffins of the 20th-century Grand Masters.

A word about Piranesi: his tomb is in the second niche on the right of the nave. A statue by little-known Giuseppe Angelini (1735-1811) shows Piranesi wearing a toga. A roll under his arm bears the plan of the Temple of Poseidon in Paestum, Piranesi's final archeological campaign because on his journey back from Paestum to Rome he died of malaria.

It cannot be overlooked that this versatile artist also designed chimneypieces and furniture, and restored ancient works of art. However, he is certainly best known for using his architectural skills and knowledge of archeology to create from 1748-1774 numerous detailed engravings of Rome's (and elsewhere's) ancient monuments and views of the Eternal City with some personal imaginative variations. In addition are his 16 prints called *Carceri d'invenzione* or "*Imaginative Prisons*" of enormous subterranean vaults with stairs and mighty machines (1745-61). For Piranesi's complete story: J. Wilton-Ely's detailed biography (1978): *The Mind and Art of Giovanni Battista Piranesi*, London, Thames & Hudson, is an irreplaceable source.

Between 2015-2018 the church underwent another extensive restoration. Members of the foreign press were invited last year to admire this recent accomplishment and celebrate Piranesi's 300th birthday, but our visit had to be postponed until June 23, 2021, appropriately the feast day of St. John, because of COVID. To visit the gardens and church (the Grand Priory is not open to the public): contact the Order's Rome office at 011-39-06 675811 or [info@orderofmalta.int](mailto:info@orderofmalta.int) or the guide Valérie Guillot at [v.guillot@orderofmalta.int](mailto:v.guillot@orderofmalta.int). Guided tours usually take place on Friday mornings from 9:30 AM to 12:30 PM and twice a month on Saturday mornings from September 15th to June 15th. Lasting approximately one hour, each tour should have a minimum of 10 participants and a maximum of 20. The entrance fee is 5 euros per person; children under 12 don't pay, and students over age 12 pay 3 euros. The guide is compulsory. An Italian-speaking guide costs 80 euros; instead, English-, German-, French- and Spanish-speaking guides cost 100 euros. If the group is under 10 people the entrance fee is 50 euros for the whole group plus 100 euros for an English-speaking guide. If a person comes alone or as a couple and there is room, it's possible to join an already-organized tour. The entrance and guide fees are paid in cash on the day of the visit. 