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**GIOVANNI BATTISTA TIEPOLO'S *SCHERZI DI FANTASIA*:  
REJECTING KNOWLEDGE<sup>1</sup>**

Snakes and owls, decaying skulls and statues come to life, ancient altars and crumbling tombs, thick volumes and burning torches, rods of Asclepius and ancient writings, and amidst it all enigmatic oriental elders – magi perhaps, or rabbis – accompanied by a numinous suite. No other work in all the oeuvre of Tiepolo, an artist with a love of everything enigmatic, exotic and enticing, is so intriguing as his series of 24 etchings known as the *Scherzi di Fantasia* (literally “jokes of the imagination”). Some scholars have seen them as reflecting Venetian witchcraft or theological debates, as a coded message to the select few, almost as propaganda for paganism<sup>2</sup>, although no clear, detailed and consistent interpretation has been offered. Others have thought that the artist merely gave his imagination free play, choosing his subjects at whim according to their colourful nature. Yet the *Scherzi*, unlike the probably somewhat earlier series known as the *Vari Capricci*, are not a selection of unconnected sketches, but a full-scale series of 24 large sheets (there are but ten *Capricci*) united by a common theme, by common motifs, style and manner of execution, all of which seems to suggest they convey a message.

Rather than seeking to analyse and interpret each motif in detail, I wish here to look at one motif found throughout the *Scherzi* that seems to me to provide the key to understanding the whole series: the inscription. Text is the cornerstone of all knowledge, including, and even especially, esoteric knowledge, and its interpretation is of particular importance.

In all eleven instances<sup>3</sup> the “text” depicted is an array of symbols that remain, despite all attempts by modern scholars to seek their meaning<sup>4</sup>, illegible. One example is particularly telling. Carved into the altar at the very

<sup>1</sup> The text is translated by Catherine Phillips.

<sup>2</sup> On the interpretation of the *Scherzi* see: Aldo Rizzi, *The Etchings of the Tiepolos*, London: Phaidon, 1971: 11–14.

<sup>3</sup> ff. 2, 4, 5, 6, 7, 11, 14, 18, 19, 20, 21.

<sup>4</sup> e.g. Rizzi, *Op. cit.*: 42. Rizzi read the date “1737” in the inscription.



Giovanni Battista Tiepolo, Six People watching a Snake. *Scherzi di Fantasia* plate 12. Etching. 1740s. The State Hermitage Museum

centre of the composition on plate 5, *Seated Magician, Boy and Four Figures*<sup>1</sup>, is a quasi-text that ends with the clearly readable (although not immediately obvious) signature of the artist. This detail is notable in that the same sheet bears another signature, much larger, by the lower edge, as on the other prints in the series. By putting his signature beneath it, Tiepolo draws attention to the unreadable inscription, once again demonstrating the importance of the motif and its conscious intention.

Placing his signature under lines of gibberish, Tiepolo on the one hand kindles the viewer's curiosity, seeming to prompt us to try and interpret it, to enter into the game. At the same time, he clearly mocks the idea of secret knowledge by turning it into nonsense. The whole series challenges the viewer to seek out hidden meaning, and yet does not provide the answer. The heroes of these prints too are always in search of something they will never find. It was surely no

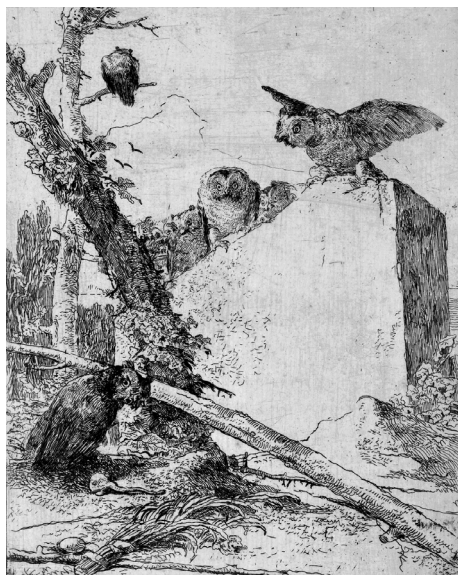
coincidence that after the artist's death the series became known as "Jokes" (*Scherzi*)? That amongst the extremely serious long-bearded elders we also see the burlesque Pulcinella? Is not the series thus a mockery of those with a love of secret knowledge?

We find another, even more eloquent, example of this use of text on the title page of the *Scherzi*. During Tiepolo's lifetime the large block of masonry remained empty and the title appeared only after the artist's death in 1775, when the *Scherzi* were reissued, along with other prints, by his son Domenico. Indeed, the author's death is specifically recorded on that title page: *Scherzi di Fantasia no. 24 del celebre Sig. Gio. Batta Tiepolo Veneto Pitore morto in Madrid al Servizio di S.M.C.*

That lack of an original title, and the supposed incomplete state of plate 20 (*The Philosopher*), has led some to conclude that the series was unfinished. Yet there is a significant number of surviving copies of the title page that lack text (in the Hermitage, the British Museum, the Metropolitan Museum, in museums in Dresden and elsewhere) and we know that it was this version of the title page that was in the collections of Tiepolo's closest friends and colleagues – Anton Maria Zanetti, Pierre-Jean Mariette and Consul Joseph Smith<sup>2</sup>, all of them connoisseurs and admirers of prints, those at whom the artist's creations were largely aimed – which surely provides evidence that the series, not originally intended for widespread distribution, was consciously printed with an empty title page.

<sup>1</sup> Titles according to Rizzi's catalogue.

<sup>2</sup> See: Linda Borean, "Stampe e disegni di Giambattista Tiepolo nel collezionismo europeo tra Settecento e Ottocento", *Giambattista Tiepolo tra scherzo e capriccio. Disegni e incisioni di spiritoso e saporitissimo gusto*, Milan: Electa, 2010: 20–25.



To use the terminology of Yuri Lotman, we might describe such a gesture as representing a “significant zero”<sup>1</sup>. Any inscription would inevitably be too specific, narrowing potential interpretations of the series. Its lack, by contrast, enhances the playful ambiguity, the enigmatic nature of the *Scherzi*, forcing the viewer to wonder why the title has disappeared, offering the opportunity to invent our own title in its place, even, literally, to write one in. In other words, the title page also hints at the futility, at the impossibility of resolving, the characters’ search.

It was only in prints that Tiepolo could permit himself the freedom of rejecting a clear subject, since his easel paintings and monumental wall paintings were specific commissions in which he had to meet the wishes of clients who were only rarely sufficiently enlightened to permit an artist full self-expression.

Many of the motifs and images in the *Scherzi* feature in Tiepolo’s paintings, notably in his most famous creation, the ceiling of the Bishop’s Residence in Würzburg. Amidst the hundreds of figures and objects that fill this magnificent fresco we also find a depiction of a mysterious inscription, though given a very different treatment. At the base of the obelisk in the allegory of Asia sits a grey-haired elder holding a torch, before him a vast stone block with 43 mysterious symbols on the outer side. The stress placed on the scene by the artist seems to provide a key: attention is drawn to it by the unusual height of the obelisk and by the way the light falls through the windows, seeming to illuminate this part of the fresco particularly brightly. And it is beneath this mysterious inscription, as in the *Scherzi*, that we find Tiepolo’s signature, the only one in 600 square metres of fresco.

Giovanni Battista Tiepolo, *Seated Magician, Boy and Four Figures. Scherzi di Fantasia* plate 5. Etching. 1740s

Giovanni Battista Tiepolo, Title page to the *Scherzi di Fantasia*. Etching. 1740s. The State Hermitage Museum

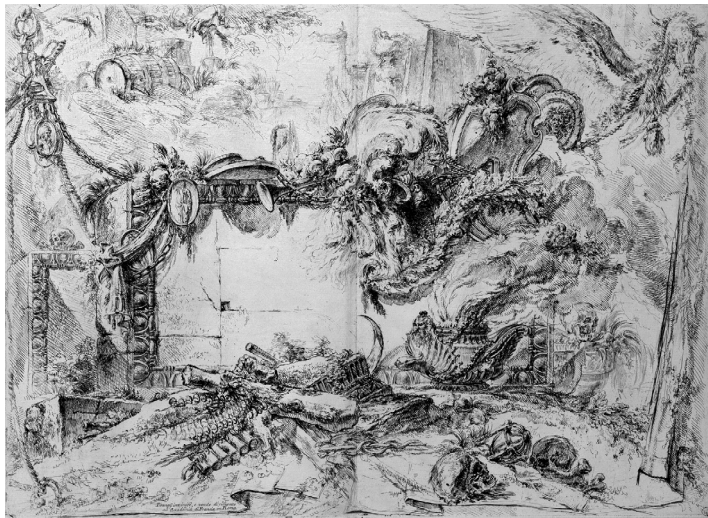
<sup>1</sup> Yuri M. Lotman, *Об искусстве* [On Art], St Petersburg: Iskusstvo, 1998: 506.



Giovanni Battista Tiepolo, Ceiling of the staircase in the Bishop's Residence in Würzburg. *Asia*. Fresco. 1752–53. Detail



Giovanni Battista Piranesi. *Masonry Block*. Sheet from the *Grotteschi*. 1747–49. Etching, engraving, drypoint. The State Hermitage Museum



Of all the many possible interpretations, that which seems most credible is a reading of the letters as a twist on the ancient Armenian alphabet, in which case the elder is its inventor, Meshrop Mashtots, credited with taking enlightenment to Asia. The overturned statue of multi-breasted Diana of Ephesus thus symbolises the defeat of paganism. Behind the inscription's apparent mystery lies a clear meaning: this is an ode to reason and learning. In the *Scherzi* a similar idea is expressed through what Lotman called a “negative device”<sup>1</sup>.

In neither case does Tiepolo engage in direct didacticism, concentrating rather on the game played with the viewer, such game-playing being central to his art and indeed to Rococo art in general.

<sup>1</sup> Sometimes translated as “minus-device”.

That this game was understood and accepted by contemporaries seems clear when we look at a work directly influenced by the *Scherzi*, Giovanni Battista Piranesi's series of *Grotteschi*, four prints showing fantastical piles of ruins, skulls, figures, shells, smoking censers and mysterious symbols, that might represent an allegory or a still life or a rebus. Like the *Scherzi* they cannot be clearly interpreted and continue to intrigue scholars<sup>1</sup>. One sheet bears that motif of the enigmatic inscription, a fragmentary phrase composed of almost illegible Italian words jumbled up with words that do not exist at all<sup>2</sup>. It appears on a stele, nearby which there is an indistinct vision as if of hands pouring wine. Below are a smoking censer and something like an altar, and in this context the inscription – as in the work of Tiepolo – seems like some magical incantation. Depicted strictly frontally, its central surface is empty, and the effect is that of a title page deliberately left blank. Both of the motifs we saw in Tiepolo's work, the empty title page and the enigmatic inscription, are here united on a single sheet and, as in the *Scherzi*, they fascinate and intrigue, providing food for the viewer's imagination and emphasizing the playful nature of the image.

In turn the didactic, positivist note of Tiepolo's "jokes" found direct continuation in another far more serious and far less playful series, Francisco Goya's *Los Caprichos*, where Tiepolo's magi and elders have been transformed into witches, goblins and monks who clearly refer to recognisable topical prototypes. One of the central themes of the *Caprichos* is the mocking of superstition and obscurantism, which, as we have sought to demonstrate, is very much in keeping with the *Scherzi*. But in Goya's work Tiepolo's gentle irony becomes caustic, painful denunciation, and the *Scherzi di fantasia* – those jokes of the imagination – become monsters produced by the sleep of reason.



Francisco Goya

*Lo que puede un sastre!*

(What a tailor can do!).

*Los Caprichos* plate

52. Etching, aquatint.

1799. Rijksmuseum,

Amsterdam

<sup>1</sup> On the *Grotteschi* see further: Arkady Ippolitov, Militsa Korshunova, Vasily Uspensky, *Дворцы, руины и темницы. Джованни Баттиста Пиранези и итальянские архитектурные фантазии XVIII века* [Palaces, Ruins and Prisons. Giovanni Battista Piranesi and Italian Eighteenth-century Architectural Fantasies], exh. cat., Hermitage Museum, St Petersburg: Hermitage Museum, 2011: 25–28, 54–57, 140–56.

<sup>2</sup> "otto qatrin foglie a i che stens [or s'tens] allegramente."