

Introductory Text

Printmaker, architect and antiquarian Giovanni Battista Piranesi (1720-1778) once declared that if someone were to commission the design for an entirely new universe from him, he would gladly accept the challenge. From the stairways of fantastical prisons to courtyards filled with invented obelisks, Piranesi's etchings reveal the architecture of his ambitious imagination. In his representation of architecture, Piranesi evoked its spectacular sublimity, creating an affective experience that inspired admiration from the intellectuals of Europe. Piranesi did not draw only from the caprices of his imagination, however, but often manipulated real landscapes or represented unreal structures based on existing architecture.

The prints from Piranesi's first major publication, the *Prima Parte di Architettura, e Prospettive* (Part One of Architecture and Perspectives), are fantastical visions of Rome at the height of its power, while in eighteenth-century Rome the city's ancient ruins had fallen into disrepair. Piranesi saw the *Prima Parte's* imaginative structures as a way to restore Rome to its former glory and argue for its superiority over all other architectural eras. Together, these selected works demonstrate the ways in which Piranesi drew from his imagination in order to elicit awe in, and ultimately, a shared passion for the architectural traditions of Rome.



Giovanni Battista Piranesi
Italian, 1720-1778
Interior of a Prison
Plate II, Part One of *Architecture and Perspectives*. Rome, Fratelli
Pagliari, 1743.
Etching on paper
18 x 13 7/8 in.
Gift of Peter Morse
1965.72.1

Piranesi represents the interior of an imaginary prison as a strange subterranean darkness of winding stairways and halls. The space's soaring theatricality is heightened by Piranesi's addition of tiny figures who are dwarfed by its scale. It has been suggested that Piranesi chose the subject of prisons because they are free from decorative elements, thus allowing him greater freedom in the expressive manipulation of his architectural fantasies. Piranesi's surreal visions of prisons would later influence a diverse range of writers and artists, from nineteenth-century Romantics such as Edgar Allen Poe, to twentieth-century surrealists like M.C. Escher.



Giovanni Battista Piranesi
Italian, 1720-1778
Remains of ancient buildings among which stands the sepulchral urn of Marcus Agrippa made entirely of porphyry, which serves today as the Tomb of Clement XII...
Part One of Architecture and Perspectives. Rome, Fratelli Pagliari, 1743.
Etching on paper
18 x 13 7/8 in.
Gift of Peter Morse
1965.72.5

In the dedication of Part One, Piranesi criticized contemporary Roman architecture and claimed that he was instead inspired by the evocative qualities of the “speaking ruins” of ancient Rome. In this etching, Piranesi represents ancient ruins of an imagined tomb much like those he encountered in Rome that he felt “spoke” to him about their former grandeur. While his representation of the tomb of Marcus Agrippa is imaginary, he drew from an existing Roman sarcophagus of the muses for its relief sculpture, today housed in the Louvre.



Giovanni Battista Piranesi
Italian, 1720-1778
Imaginary appearance of the ancient Capitol
Plate VII, Part One of Architecture and Perspectives. Rome, Fratelli Pagliari, 1743.
Etching on paper
13 5/8 x 17 3/4 in.
Gift of Peter Morse
1965.72.2

Piranesi represents the approach to an ancient Capitol building in the distance by a monumental staircase, populated with fanciful imaginative obelisks. At the time that Piranesi executed his Part One, he had only been recently introduced to Rome, and was barely making a living as a printmaker in the city. These early inventive visions of Rome at its most spectacular indicate the impact that the city’s ancient ruins had on the young Piranesi, who envisioned the sublime vastness of the architectural complexes in which the ruins were once situated, despite their deteriorated condition.



Giovanni Battista Piranesi
Italian, 1720-1778
Magnificent architectural space
Plate VIII, Part One of *Architecture and Perspectives*. Rome, Fratelli
Pagliari, 1743.
Etching on paper
13 7/8 x 17 3/4 in.
Gift of Peter Morse
1965.72.4

Piranesi renders an ambiguously Roman space of endless arches and columns, which according to its inscription, leads to “various levels and especially to a rotunda which serves for theatrical performances.” The proposed theatrical function of Piranesi’s theoretical rotunda corresponds with the artist’s experience in set design, which served as a source for many of his visions of unreal architecture. This etching demonstrates Piranesi’s ability to manipulate such evocatively theatrical spaces to awe-inspiring effect.

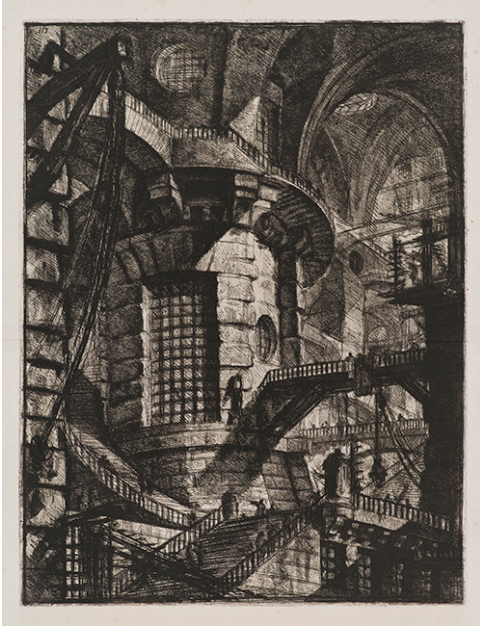
Giovanni Battista Piranesi
Italian, 1720-1778
Ancient tomb with obelisks surrounded by sepulchral urns
Plate III, Part One of *Architecture and Perspectives*. Rome, Fratelli
Pagliari, 1743.
Etching on paper
13 5/8 x 17 5/8 in.
Gift of Peter Morse
1965.72.8

In this etching, Piranesi presents a fantastical ancient mausoleum, adorned with sculptures and sepulchral urns, that dwarfs the tiny eighteenth-century figures at its base in its colossal size. Piranesi enhances the illusion of the structure’s actuality by carefully articulating the transition from light to dark across its facade and over the obelisks in the foreground. Here Piranesi has even envisioned the tomb’s theoretical occupant, noting in the inscription that the mausoleum held the “ashes of a Roman Emperor,” which could account for the grandeur of its appearance.



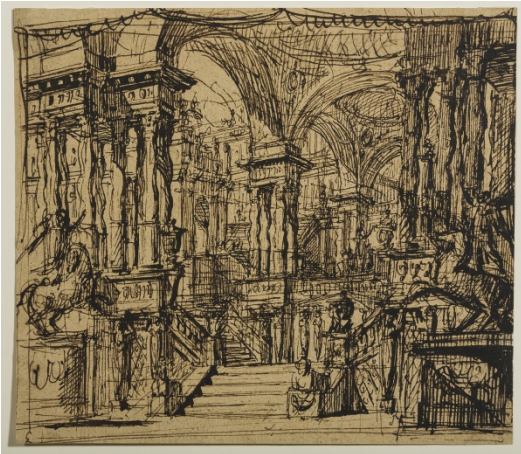
Giovanni Battista Piranesi
Italian, 1720-1778
Courtyard surrounded by porticoes
Plate IX, Part One of *Architecture and Perspectives*. Rome, Fratelli
Pagliari, 1743.
Etching on paper
13 1/8 x 17 in.
Gift of Peter Morse.
1965.72.6

For his visionary architectural scenes, Piranesi often drew from contemporary models and specific existing monuments. For this etching, he included the spiraled towers of Francesco Borromini’s 1660 church of Sant’ Ivo della Sapienza visible in the distance behind the central loggia. Although Piranesi was often critical of eighteenth-century architecture, his addition of Borromini’s unusual corkscrew lanterns indicates that he admired select contemporary architectural monuments.



Giovanni Battista Piranesi
Italian, 1720-1778
The Round Tower
Plate III, Imaginary Prisons. Rome, Bouchard, 1749-50; Piranesi, 1761.
Etching on paper, later state
30 3/8 x 21 3/8 in.
Gift of Ala Story in Honor of Wright Ludington
1965.29

The Round Tower is one of Piranesi's fourteen plates of Prisons, which were first published together as a series around 1749-50. The architectural forms of their interior spaces, far removed from contemporary prisons, tower over anonymous figures with dreamlike monumentality. For this etching, Piranesi combined the techniques of engraving and etching, scratched harsh lines into the image, while burnishing allowed him to soften the transitions between light and dark. Particularly in this later version, Piranesi's soft lines and shadowy recesses add to the image's suggestive ambiguity.



Giovanni Battista Piranesi
Italian, 1720-1778
Large Fantastic Stairway
n.d.
Pen and ink on tan paper
7 x 8 1/8 in.
Gift of the Rudolf L. Baumfeld Trust
1988.27

This pen and ink drawing allows us to see the role of draftsmanship in Piranesi's artistic process, particularly the ways in which he worked out the composition before proceeding with an etching of an imagined architectural space. Piranesi sketches the stairways, twisting columns and vaulted ceilings of the space with expressive vitality, giving its intricate passageways a sense of dynamic movement. Although the drawing is undated, it was likely produced in preparation for one of the numerous works he executed around the time of his Grotesques and the Prisons etchings of the 1740s.



Giovanni Battista Piranesi
Italian, 1720-1778
View of the Grand Cascade at Tivoli
1766

Views of Rome. Rome, Bouchard, late 1740s-1760; Piranesi, 1760 onwards.

Etching on paper
23 1/8 x 31 7/8 in.
Gift of Oscar Rothchild
2003.110.3

Piranesi played an important role in the formation of the Grand Tour, the travel of British aristocrats to Italy to view its art and architecture as part of their educational training. Piranesi's monumental visions of Rome informed generations of scholars and travelers, even purportedly leading to disappointment among visitors to the original sites after having studied Piranesi's images. Undoubtedly, the vast majesty of Piranesi's view of a waterfall at Tivoli inspired such awe in viewers. Piranesi surpasses the replication of the waterfall's appearance, vibrantly animating the ravine to give the viewer the sense that they are standing in its presence.



Giovanni Paolo Pannini
Italian, c. 1691 – 1765
Saint Paul Preaching Among the Ruins, ca. 1750
Oil on canvas

Gift of William P. Nelson Estate
1948.27.1

Like Piranesi, Giovanni Paolo Pannini worked during the height of the Grand Tour era, where European gentlemen would travel through the European continent finishing their education. Both Piranesi and Pannini elicit awe and admiration for Roman art and architecture by representing sweeping vistas of ancient ruins, including groups of eighteenth-century visitors. Grand Tour travelers collected Piranesi's numerous prints and publications, while they often took one of Pannini's paintings home to remind them of their trip. Together, the work of Piranesi and Pannini demonstrates the eighteenth-century revival of interest in Rome across the arts and scholarship.