



# GIOVANNI BATTISTA PIRANESI

*Grandeur and Fantasy:  
Visions and View of Rome*

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## Grandeur and Fantasy: Visions and Views of Rome

Curated by students in the Exhibition Seminar, Department of Art, Grinnell College  
Under the direction of Associate Professor of Art Timothy Chasson

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Falconer Gallery  
Bucksbaum Center for the Arts  
Grinnell College

Exhibition seminar participants Fall 2006:

Thomas Agran '09  
Judith Barrett '07  
Tamrah Collins '07  
Eszter Csicsai '07  
Max Hackmann '07  
Marie Liska '07  
Jonathan Patkowski '09  
Diana Phung-Vuong '07  
Niki Reiner '08  
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# Contents

Preface . . . . .	6.
Judith Barrett	
Acknowledgments . . . . .	7.
Marie Liska	
Introduction . . . . .	9.
Judith Barrett	
Reappraising 18th-Century Rome . . . . .	11
Nicole Reiner	
Piranesi's Prints: An Introduction to Intaglio . . . . .	15
Thomas Agran & Marie Liska	
Piranesi and the Graeco-Roman Controversy . . . . .	19
Jonathan Patkowski	
Recreating the Splendor of Ancient Rome: Piranesi's Architectural Fantasies . . . . .	25
Tamrah Collins	
From the Pristine to the Tortured: Piranesi's Transition from Classic to Roman Campidoglio's Invenzione . . . . .	29
Max Hackmann	
"The Nightmare of Incarceration:" Justice and Punishment in Piranesi's Carceri . . . . .	35
Judith Barrett	
Piranesi's Decorative Legacy: Beyond a "Fear of Ornament" . . . . .	39
Eszter Csicsai	
Selected Bibliography . . . . .	43
Diana Phung-Vuong	
Checklist of the Exhibition . . . . .	45
Diana Phung-Vuong	

# Introduction

In 18th-century Rome, the practice and production of art was a lively and profitable enterprise, capitalizing on the city's recent elevation to a fashionable tourist destination among the European cultural élite. The city's distinctive character and history informed the work of Roman artists throughout the 18th century: these are perhaps expressed nowhere so elegantly and so grandly as through the works of Giovanni Battista Piranesi.

Piranesi was born in 1720, the son of a prosperous Venetian stonemason. He was apprenticed at an early age to a number of leading architects and was also active in stage design—an appropriate study in a city of theaters and opera houses. He became familiar with the technical innovations of the Venetian Bibiena family, including their revolutionary concept of the *scenaria per angolo*, the incorporation of multiple diagonal perspectives instead of a traditional center view.

was called into question in the mid-1750s as part of the so-called “Greco-Roman controversy.” In his lively polemics on the subject—*Della magni cenza ed architettura dei romani* and the *Parere su l'Architettura*—Piranesi held his own against scholars arguing for the inherent superiority of classical Greek, as opposed to Roman, architecture. The artist's devotion to his adopted city of Rome was thus stated textually as well as visually. The city itself continued to provide the basis of Piranesi's

work until the end of his life: a series of *Vedute di Roma* was published between 1745 and the artist's death in 1778.

As such, during Piranesi's lifetime, Rome was a vibrant city, the artistic and cultural center of Europe. Its position as a prestigious travel destination for Grand Tourists seeking intellectual enlightenment attests to its reputation and renown. The art historian CD 289 p. 81 C. S. Johnson refers to 18th-century Rome as “the capital of Europe” (1993, 3) that is a repository of Western culture. The site of a venerable civilization, replete with ancient ruins and artifacts that spoke to a history long past, Rome was a city of infinite possibilities. Piranesi embraced all of these in his countless depictions of the city that came to define him as an artist, faithfully recording what he saw around him and using his imagination to glorify what he did not see. His architectural fantasies, archeological remains: Piranesi included each in a means of providing the fullest depiction of Rome and its history.

The students of Professor Chasson's 2006 exhibition seminar sought to address these broad and varied approaches to the historical and creative record in a series of essays explicating some of the pertinent issues that informed Piranesi's work: the 18th-century context and the Grand Tour; the practice of printmaking; the Greco-Roman debate; the role of the architectural fantasy; proto Romantic aspects of the Carceri and judicial reform; and the contentious role of architectural ornament in Piranesi's time and beyond. The exhibition itself is centered on Rome, in the way that the European cultural movement was grounded in the Rome of the 18th century. As Piranesi paid tribute to the city and its history in all of his many works, so we would hope to celebrate the achievements of the artist himself especially in the context of Rome: the city where the artist began.

—Judith Barrett