



GIOVANNI BATTISTA PIRANESI

*Grandeur and Fantasy:
Visions and View 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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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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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 trained in stage design—an appropriate study in a city of theaters and opera houses. As such he became familiar with the technical innovations of the Venetian Bibiena family, including their revolutionary concept of the *scena per angolo*: the incorporation of multiple diagonal perspectives instead of a traditional center viewpoint to increase the extent of visible space (Wilton-Ely 1993, 2). In 1740 he moved to Rome to begin a career as a draughtsman; however, he arrived in the aftermath of a large-scale building boom that depleted the Roman economy and resulted in a dearth of architectural commissions. Unable to find work in his chosen profession, Piranesi instead entered the studio of the Sicilian engraver Giuseppe Vasi to produce memorabilia for European Grand Tourists. Soon in business for himself, he created numerous series of engraved and etched plates that could be reproduced easily and economically, most depicting celebrated views (*vedute*) of Rome or fantastical combinations of famous Roman ruins. These were later compiled and published as collections, such as the *Prima Parte di Architetture e Prospettive* and *Opere Varie*. Later in his life Piranesi became involved in the archeological investigations that were taking place throughout Rome as ancient ruins and artifacts began to be uncovered and excavated. Over time, Piranesi's personal interest developed into a deeper resolve to “broaden the creative attitude of his contemporaries” (Wilton-Ely 1993, 25). To that end, Piranesi produced the four-volume *Antichità romane* in 1756, which included 500 illustrations of Roman ruins with accompanying documentary information. Piranesi's dedication to explicating the architectural history of ancient Rome cemented his belief in its predominance as “the source of most of what was admirable in the history of European art” (Johns 16). He also fervently defended this conviction when it

was called into question in the mid-1750s as part of the so-called “Greco-Roman controversy.” In his lively polemics on the subject—such as *Della magnificenza 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 135 *Vedute di Roma* was published between 1745 and the artist's death in 1778.

In 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 Christopher M. S. Johns refers to 18th-century Rome as “the *entrepôt* of Europe” (17), 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. *Vedute, grotteschi*, architectural fantasies, archeological remains: Piranesi included each in his *cadre* as 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*; 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