

Imaginary Prisons: Giovanni Battista Piranesi Prints

Throughout his career, Giovanni Battista Piranesi (1720–1778) produced carefully prepared views in and around Rome. He derived the principal inspiration for this vast production of etchings from firsthand examinations of classical antiquities as well as from Renaissance and Baroque structures. The artist infused both conventional topographical scenes of wellknown buildings and ideal reconstructions with novel compositional devices, exaggerating scale and manipulating perspective through the use of multiple vanishing points. Piranesi's oeuvre reflects a singular combination of remarkable imagination and a deep understanding of construction, which helped to cultivate an unprecedented appreciation of Roman architecture.

The artist employed the same strategy—representing realistic settings imbued with an innovative creative spirit—in several other works. Chief among them is his highly unusual series of prints called *Imaginary Prisons*. These etchings were issued as a collection of fourteen around 1749–50 and then reissued—after significant reworking—as a set of sixteen in 1761. Populated with indistinguishable figures that emphasize the scale and complexity of the scenes, the final series features greater detail and stronger tonal contrasts, enhancing the works' sinister character. The immensity and ambiguity of these structures reinforces the sense of wonderment that inspired generations of artists, writers, and others to reassess the majesty and grandeur of classical design.

1 Giovanni Battista Piranesi, Italian, 1720–1778

Title Plate, 1761

Etching

plate: 54.8 x 41.5 cm. (21 9/16 x 16 5/16 in.)

sheet: 63.5 x 49.2 cm. (25 x 19 3/8 in.)

Gift of Frank Jewett Mather Jr.

x1938-13 a



2 Giovanni Battista Piranesi, Italian, 1720–1778

The Man on the Rack, 1761

Etching

plate: 56 x 41.5 cm. (22 1/16 x 16 5/16 in.)

sheet: 65 x 49 cm. (25 9/16 x 19 5/16 in.)

Gift of Frank Jewett Mather Jr.

x1938-13 b



3 Giovanni Battista Piranesi, Italian, 1720–1778

The Round Tower, 1761

Etching

plate: 54.5 x 41.4 cm. (21 7/16 x 16 5/16 in.)

sheet: 63.5 x 49.2 cm. (25 x 19 3/8 in.)

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x1938-13 c



4 Giovanni Battista Piranesi, Italian, 1720–1778

The Grand Piazza, 1761

Etching

plate: 54.5 x 41.2 cm. (21 7/16 x 16 1/4 in.) sheet:

63.1 x 49.1 cm. (24 13/16 x 19 5/16 in.)

Gift of Frank Jewett Mather Jr.

x1938-13 d



5 Giovanni Battista Piranesi, Italian, 1720–1778

The Lion Bas-Reliefs, 1761

Etching

plate: 56.5 x 41.2 cm. (22 1/4 x 16 1/4 in.)

sheet: 65.2 x 49.2 cm. (25 11/16 x 19 3/8 in.)

Gift of Frank Jewett Mather Jr.

x1938-13 e



6 Giovanni Battista Piranesi, Italian, 1720–1778

The Smoking Fire, 1761

Etching

plate: 54.1 x 39.9 cm (21 5/16 x 15 11/16 in.)

sheet: 62.8 x 49 cm (24 3/4 x 19 5/16 in.)

Gift of Frank Jewett Mather Jr.

x1938-13 f



7 Giovanni Battista Piranesi, Italian, 1720–1778

The Drawbridge, 1761

Etching

plate: 54.5 x 40.7 cm. (21 7/16 x 16 in.)

sheet: 64 x 49.2 cm. (25 3/16 x 19 3/8 in.)

Gift of Frank Jewett Mather Jr.

x1938-13 g



8 Giovanni Battista Piranesi, Italian, 1720–1778

The Staircase with Trophies, 1761

Etching

plate: 54.2 x 39.6 cm. (21 5/16 x 15 9/16 in.)

sheet: 63.6 x 49.2 cm. (25 1/16 x 19 3/8 in.)

Gift of Frank Jewett Mather Jr.

x1938-13 h



- 9 Giovanni Battista Piranesi, Italian, 1720–1778
The Giant Wheel, 1761
Etching
plate: 54.5 x 40.4 cm. (21 7/16 x 15 7/8 in.) sheet:
64.1 x 49.1 cm. (25 1/4 x 19 5/16 in.)
Gift of Frank Jewett Mather Jr.
x1938-13 i



- 10 Giovanni Battista Piranesi, Italian, 1720–1778
Prisoners on a Projecting Platform, 1761
Etching
plate: 41 x 54 cm. (16 1/8 x 21 1/4 in.)
sheet: 49 x 63.3 cm. (19 5/16 x 24 15/16 in.)
Gift of Frank Jewett Mather Jr.
x1938-13 j



- 11 Giovanni Battista Piranesi, Italian, 1720–1778
The Arch with a Shell Ornament, 1761
Etching
plate: 40.6 x 54.5 cm. (16 x 21 7/16 in.)
sheet: 49.3 x 63.8 cm. (19 7/16 x 25 1/8 in.)
Gift of Frank Jewett Mather Jr.
x1938-13 k



- 12 Giovanni Battista Piranesi, Italian, 1720–1778
The Sawhorse, 1761
Etching
plate: 40.5 x 55.1 cm. (15 15/16 x 21 11/16 in.)
sheet: 49.1 x 64.4 cm. (19 5/16 x 25 3/8 in.)
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x1938-13 l



- 13 Giovanni Battista Piranesi, Italian, 1720–1778
The Well, 1761
Etching
plate: 40.1 x 54.6 cm. (15 13/16 x 21 1/2 in.)
sheet: 48.9 x 63.7 cm. (19 1/4 x 25 1/16 in.)
Gift of Frank Jewett Mather Jr.
x1938-13 m



14 Giovanni Battista Piranesi, Italian, 1720–1778
The Gothic Arch, 1761
Etching
plate: 41.2 x 54.5 cm. (16 1/4 x 21 7/16 in.)
sheet: 48.9 x 63.6 cm. (19 1/4 x 25 1/16 in.)
Gift of Frank Jewett Mather Jr.
x1938-13 n



15 Giovanni Battista Piranesi, Italian, 1720–1778
The Pier with a Lamp, 1761
Etching
plate: 41.2 x 55 cm. (16 1/4 x 21 5/8 in.)
sheet: 49 x 63.9 cm. (19 5/16 x 25 3/16 in.)
Gift of Frank Jewett Mather Jr.
x1938-13 o



16 Giovanni Battista Piranesi, Italian, 1720–1778
The Pier with Chains, 1761
Etching
plate: 40.8 x 54.8 cm. (16 1/16 x 21 9/16 in.)
sheet: 49 x 63.8 cm. (19 5/16 x 25 1/8 in.)
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