

**300th anniversary of
Piranesi's birth marked by
exhibition of his work as a
draughtsman**

Piranesi drawings: visions of antiquity

20 February – 9 August 2020
Room 90, Free

Press images: <https://bit.ly/3bvUQ8N>

Supported by the Tavolozza Foundation

Virtuosic and turbulent, Giovanni Battista Piranesi (1720 – 1778) was a visionary printmaker, architect, antiquarian and dealer. These varied aspects of his career were based on his practice of drawing, which has received comparatively little attention. The British Museum will mark **the 300th anniversary of Piranesi's birth** through a new exhibition focusing on his work as a draughtsman. ***Piranesi drawings: visions of antiquity*** will examine his draughtsmanship through the quality and impact of his pen and chalk studies, as well as examining how the Venetian artist's style developed throughout his career. This exhibition is the British Museum's **first to focus on Piranesi as a draughtsman** and celebrates the extraordinary richness of its collections of his drawings, which is one of the largest groups in the world.

Through over 50 works, *Piranesi drawings* looks at his practice broadly chronologically with sections focusing on four different themes which preoccupied him throughout his career: Venice and Rome, The *Carceri*, The Glory of Rome, and Architect & Antiquarian. The exhibition also allows visitors to see the way in which his style and interests as a draughtsman evolved over time. The works on display will range from the scene designs and Venetian fantasies of his youth to the prison scenes and dramatic views of Rome that he produced in his artistic maturity. **Additionally, the British Museum's first Piranesi figure drawing will be on display for the first time, a new acquisition from 2019 collected especially for this exhibition.**

The exhibition begins with one of the most impressive drawings by Piranesi in the British Museum's collection, *Fantastical façade of an antique building with columns, heads and sphinxes*, c. 1765-69. The drawing dates from later in Piranesi's career and is not only visually appealing but captures many of the themes explored throughout this exhibition, from his antiquarian flair to his interest in archaeology and his fantastical, extravagant spirit. Piranesi's melange of architectural elements from Roman, Egyptian, and Etruscan cultures, exemplifies his belief in combining motifs into new and visionary creations.

A notable work featured in the section on The Glory of Rome, *The meeting of the Via Appia and the Via Ardeatina, seen at the second milestone outside the Porta Capena*,

c. 1750-56, is a magnificent preparatory drawing for one of the secondary frontispieces of the *Antichità Romane*, published in 1756. Piranesi depicts the junction of two great antique roads, the Via Appia and the Via Ardeatina, outside Rome, but forgoes archaeological exactitude in favour of an elaborate fantasy of Roman sculptures and monuments.

A striking and unusual drawing is, *A frontispiece design with two skeletons, in front of a tomb*, c. 1746-47. Made during a visit to his native Venice, this highlights Piranesi's skill in using pen and wash to create airy and playful visions of light and tone.

Piranesi's drawings are given context by a selection of related prints along with a pair of fragmentary Roman sculptures from the museum's collection, purchased by Charles Townley from Piranesi in the 18th century. Visitors are encouraged to explore his influence beyond the gallery by visiting the British Museum's permanent collection, where the Piranesi Vase and the Trentham Laver can be found in the centre of The Enlightenment Gallery (Room 1).

Piranesi drawings: visions of antiquity offers a **rare opportunity to celebrate Piranesi's influence as a draughtsman**. His drawings demonstrate how he brought together his various passions to create magnificent imaginary buildings throughout his life as the architect of a fantastical, imaginary world.

Sarah Vowles, the Smirnov Family Curator of Italian and French Prints and Drawings at The British Museum said: "Many people will be familiar with Piranesi's evocative prints, but his brilliant and powerful drawings are less well known. He drew compulsively throughout his life, using his sketches and studies as a way to explore, innovate and invent. The British Museum's collection of Piranesi drawings is one of the richest in the world, including drawings from throughout his career, and giving us insights into all aspects of his varied activity. By presenting the group in its entirety in this focused exhibition, we hope visitors will gain a holistic sense of Piranesi, not only for his influential views of ancient Rome, or his thrillingly gloomy '*Carceri*' prints, but also appreciating his work as antiquarian, architect and relentlessly creative visionary."

Hugo Chapman, The Simon Sainsbury Keeper of Prints & Drawings at The British Museum said: "Piranesi's etchings of Rome and of fantastical architecture are well known, but far less familiar is the scintillating brilliance of his drawings in which he rehearsed and honed his graphic talents. This exhibition is the first to concentrate on the British Museum's remarkable collection of over fifty drawings by Piranesi that map the course of his career in Rome as he established his name internationally as one of the great graphic artists of his age. The drawings are remarkable for their dashing speed of execution as Piranesi's pen strained to keep pace with the tumbling rush of his ideas. They register the dynamic force of his imagination as he transformed the ruins and shattered artefacts of Ancient Rome into buildings and works of epic scale and magnificence. Through drawing, Piranesi

shaped and perfected his vision, giving us a sense of his transformative imagination. Such is the power of his singular vision that it continues to excite and inspire architects, filmmakers, video game designers and other creative minds to this day.”

Notes to Editors

Piranesi drawings: visions of antiquity will run from 20 February – 9 August 2020 in Room 90 at the British Museum. Admission is free.

Open Saturday – Thursday 10.00 – 17.30, Friday 10.00 – 20.30. Last entry 80 mins before closing.

britishmuseum.org

Publication

To coincide with the exhibition, a richly-illustrated accompanying book of the same name has been published by Thames & Hudson in collaboration with the British Museum, written by Sarah Vowles and including a preface by Hugo Chapman. Softback, £20.

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The Department of Prints and Drawings

The Department of Prints and Drawings at the British Museum contains the national collection of Western prints and drawings, in the same way as the National Gallery and Tate hold the national collection of paintings. It is one of the top three collections of its kind in the world. There are approximately 50,000 drawings and over two million prints dating from the beginning of the fifteenth century up to the present day.

The collection is available to the public through the Study Room and through a programme of temporary displays, touring exhibitions and loans.



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Further information

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