

## The Morgan Library & Museum Presents

### ***Sublime Ideas: Drawings by Giovanni Battista Piranesi***



*Fantasy of a Magnificent Forum*, ca. 1765. The Morgan Library & Museum, New York, gift of Janos Scholz; 1974.27. Photograph by Graham S. Haber.

**New York, NY (March 2, 2023) –**

**The Morgan Library & Museum** is pleased to present *Sublime Ideas: Drawings by Giovanni Battista Piranesi*, opening March 10, 2023, and on view through June 4, 2023. The Morgan holds the largest and most important collection of drawings by **Giovanni Battista Piranesi** (Italian, 1720–1778), nearly 150 works that encompass almost every type of study that he made: architectural

fantasies, studies for prints, measured design

drawings, sketches for a range of decorative objects, a variety of figural drawings, and views of Rome and Pompeii. With highlights from the Morgan's collection joined by select works from private collections, this exhibition will be the most comprehensive look at Piranesi's drawings in more than a generation.

This exhibition begins with Piranesi's interest in theoretical architecture, showing works that combine an imaginative and fantastic approach to architectural study with a bookish understanding of ancient buildings and a Romantic appreciation of ruins. This blend of fantasy and theory would eventually give birth to the *Invenzioni caprici di carceri* (*Capricious Inventions of Prisons*), his most famous work. The drawings in the Morgan's collection show how Piranesi's work developed from precise architectural drawings to imaginative fantasies. Later sections of the exhibition document Piranesi's study of the inventive work of Tiepolo in a series of trips to

his native Venice, his turn from architectural theory and fantasy to archaeology, and his work as a practicing architect and as a designer and dealer of classicizing interior decoration.

The exhibition also highlights the role of paper in Piranesi's working practice, showing his use and reuse of earlier drawings in later works. Close study of his surviving sheets makes clear that Piranesi preserved drawings in the

workshop to serve as inspiration for future projects, and many sheets have reworking that can be dated years after the original drawing, a testament to the continual reuse of his archive.

Highlights of the exhibition include *Design for a Ceremonial Gondola* (1745–47), a large and fanciful design for a craft that was surely never set afloat; Piranesi nonetheless reused much of the decorative language in subsequent works. Piranesi's *Fantasy of a Magnificent Forum* (ca. 1765) is one of his most accomplished fantasies, showing a play on ancient Roman architecture in a dramatic sketch that was likely dashed off as a command performance of his skill as a draftsman. The *Proposed Alteration of San Giovanni in Laterano, with Columnar Ambulatory* (ca. 1763-64) is Piranesi's largest architectural drawing, a rendering almost five feet wide with an ambitious plan for the expansion of one of the largest churches in Rome. In addition, this exhibition includes a number of preparatory designs for his etchings, including very rare proof impressions of his printed views of Rome and Tivoli with drawn corrections by the artist. The exhibition ends with a group of large drawings of Pompeii, made in the bold style that Piranesi adopted in the last few years of his life.

The Morgan's Director, Colin B. Bailey, said, "Given the depth of our collection of drawings by Giovanni Battista Piranesi, the Morgan has long been a leading institution in the study of his works. This new exhibition, the most complete showing of our Piranesis since 1989, reflects long study as well as new discoveries, and will bring Piranesi alive to a new generation of visitors."



*Architectural Fantasy with a Colossal Facade*, ca. 1743–45. The Morgan Library & Museum, New York, purchased as the gift of Alice Tully; 1971.4. Photograph by Janny Chiu, 2020.

This exhibition is curated by John Marciari, Charles W. Engelhard Curator, Head of the Department of Drawings and Prints, and Curatorial Chair. Marciari is also the author of the accompanying publication, which reaches beyond the Morgan's collections to offer a complete survey of Piranesi's work as a draftsman.

Marciari explains, "Very few of Piranesi's drawings were carefully finished works made for sale or exhibition, but in looking closely at the hundreds of working drawings that survive, we not only see the artist devising new ideas and working through problems, but also understand how the archive of drawings served his workshop as a constant source of inspiration."

*Sublime Ideas: Drawings by Giovanni Battista Piranesi*  
March 10–June 4, 2023  
The Morgan Library & Museum  
225 Madison Avenue at 36th Street  
New York, NY 10016

## **PUBLIC PROGRAMS**

### **"An Inventive and Creating Genius": Drawings by Giovanni Battista Piranesi** **Friday, March 10, 2023, 6:30 PM**

While Giovanni Battista Piranesi's lasting fame is based above all on his etchings, his work was first developed in vigorous sketches. However, few of his drawings are finished works, and virtually none matches exactly the final print, object, or building for which it was preparatory. Instead, we see in his drawings both the creation of his ideas and their rigorous editing, a process in which Piranesi might start with a view of Rome, an archaeological fragment, or a bit of architectural theory before creating something with a Piranesian stamp all its own. Examining drawings from across Piranesi's career, John Marciari, Charles W. Engelhard Curator, explores the distinctive aspects of Piranesi's graphic style and the use and reuse of drawings in his busy workshop.

The exhibition *Sublime Ideas: Drawings by Giovanni Battista Piranesi* will be open at 5:30 PM for program attendees.

The event will take place in Gilder Lehrman Hall. By entering the museum, you agree to our updated Visitor Guidelines and Policies. Masks are encouraged but not required for attending all public programs.

Tickets: Free; advanced registration required.

## **ORGANIZATION AND SPONSORSHIP**

*Sublime Ideas: Drawings by Giovanni Battista Piranesi* is made possible by the Gilbert & Ildiko Butler Family Foundation; the Lucy Ricciardi Family Exhibition Fund; the Christian Humann

Foundation; the Wolfgang Ratjen Stiftung, Liechtenstein; and Joshua W. Sommer. Generous support is provided by the Berger Collection Education Trust and Alyce Williams Toonk, with additional support from the George Ortiz Collection, Robert Dance, the Gladys Krieble Delmas Foundation, and Russell and Marian Burke.

## **ABOUT THE MORGAN LIBRARY & MUSEUM**

A museum and independent research library located in the heart of New York City, the Morgan Library & Museum began as the personal library of financier, collector, and cultural benefactor Pierpont Morgan. The Morgan offers visitors close encounters with great works of human accomplishment in a setting treasured for its intimate scale and historic significance. Its collection of manuscripts, rare books, music, drawings, and works of art comprises a unique and dynamic record of civilization, as well as an incomparable repository of ideas and of the creative process from 4000 BC to the present.

**The Morgan Library & Museum | 225 Madison Avenue | 212.685.0008 | [themorgan.org](http://themorgan.org)**