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## Title of Object

Pier Table

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## Photo of Object (optional)



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## Object Information

**Artist:** Giovanni Battista Piranesi

**Culture:** Italy 18<sup>th</sup> century

**Date of Object:** c. 1768

**Country:** Italy

**Accession Number:** 64.70

**File Created:** 10/30/2016

**Material/Medium:** Oak, limewood, marble, gilt/Furniture

**Author of File:** Joan Gilmore

**Department:** Decorative Arts, Textiles and Sculpture

**Reviewer of File:** Kara ZumBahlen

**Last Updated/Reviewed:** 8/30/2017

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## Tour Topics

Symbols in Art: The Obvious and the Implied, Animals/Birds, Architecture, Artist/Patron, Cultural encounters/exchanges, Identity, Mythology, Power/Status, Symbolism, Neoclassicism, Rococo, Romanticism, symbolism-art, symbolism-in-art, group 6 tour, highlights 1600 to 1850, chimeras, Roman, Greek

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## Questions and Activities (list 3 to 4 sample questions here):

How would you describe form versus function in relation to this table?

What may be a possible function of this table?

Do you think form or function is more important in this table? Why?

Do you have any furniture in your house that has a form more important than its function?

Do you have any furniture that is made completely for function, with no regard for form?

What fantastical creatures do we have on our cars, clothes, caps, or belongings?

(Explain what a capriccio is.) Can you think of any instance of capriccios in our clothing or furniture styles?

**Questions inspired by Antoine Picon lecture (see below):**

Who is producing this ornamentation?

For whom is this ornamentation meant?

What is the relationship between the producer of the ornamentation and those it is meant for?

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**Key Points (Form: subject matter, medium and techniques of manufacture, style, etc.)**

A mélange of mythical creatures conspire in this fantastical creation, made of gilded wood, to recall the mythical Roman motifs of garlanded winged chimeras, ox skulls and floral frippery. Mia owns two marble tops for this table. The weight of the marble top on display puts too much pressure on the cabriole-shaped legs for stand-alone stability. Mia has constructed an underlying support system, so this table is actually supported by a cantilevered arm attached to the wall behind it.

The wood is gilded. The gilding has been prone to flaking off, and new gold leaf was applied to it three times in its history. The other companion table to Mia's is in the collection of The Rijksmuseum.

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**Key Points (Context: use, history, cultural information, artist bio, etc.)**

**Use:**

This table is one of a pair made for the Roman state apartments of a nephew of Pope Clement XIII. These kinds of tables would have been set against a wall and were often placed beneath a mirror. You wouldn't eat at this table, or play cards, or much of anything really. You put things on it as a showcase, perhaps potpourri (a bowl with aromatic scents), a candlestick, a vase, a flashy box, or a precious bronze sculpture. (artsmia.org)

**Definitions:**

*Pier* - a portion of wall between doors, windows, etc. [before 1150; Middle English *pere* < Anglo-Latin *pera*, *pēra* pier of a bridge, of obscure orig.] <http://www.thefreedictionary.com/pier>

vedute - views

veduta ideate - realistically drawn though completely imaginary scenes

Capriccios – plural for capriccio – unstructured musical form or work of art representing a fantasy or mixture of real and fantastical creatures.

**Artist Biography:**

Giovanni Battista Piranesi (1720–1778) was born in Mogliano Veneto, Italy. He worked most of his life in Rome.

Giovanni Battista means John the Baptist. This was a common given name of the time.

Born near Venice, Piranesi was trained as an architect by his uncle, Matteo Lucchesi. He went to Rome in 1740 to work as a draftsman in the papal court. He studied **architecture**, etching, **engineering**, and stage design, then returned to Venice in 1744 where he worked in Tiepolo's studio. He returned to Rome in 1745. Piranesi saw Rome, the Eternal City, as the center of his inspiration.

After his arrival in Rome in 1740, he apprenticed himself briefly to Giuseppe Vasi, the foremost producer of the etched views of Rome that supplied pilgrims, scholars, artists, and tourists with a lasting souvenir of their visit. Quickly mastering the medium of etching, Piranesi found in it an outlet for all his interests, from designing fantastic complexes of buildings that could exist only in dreams, to reconstructing in painstaking detail the aqueduct system of the ancient Romans.

Stylistically, Piranesi is noted for dramatic perspectives and picturesque foreground details. He is known for fantastical perspectives and moody ambience, created with details reproduced with scrupulous accuracy. He created nearly one thousand etchings, including four volumes of etchings of Roman ruins. Piranesi's views of Rome and were sought after by English whilst on their Grand Tours.

His best known series, *Carceri d'Invenzion* (Prisons), consisted of 16 plates depicting stage prisons that he described as "capricious inventions." The spatial and architectural ambiguities, as well as the dramatic use of light and form, are characteristic of this series. In these, Piranesi convincingly depicts chaos, something that still repelled his contemporaries but would soon become attractive to the Romantics - artists and naturalists.

Neo-Classicism was prompted by the discoveries at Herculaneum and Pompeii. A noted archaeologist, Piranesi adapted from Egyptian, Etruscan, Greek and Tuscan styles. Piranesi collected, restored and sold antique sculpture, collecting pieces from Hadrian's Villa at Tivoli and assembling the pieces into the Piranesi Vase a la the reconstituted architecture of Hearst Castle (c. 1920's California). (See photo below)

1751 - Became Director of the Portici Museum

1757 – Elected to Royal Society of Antiquaries, London

1761 – Set up his own publishing house. Became member of *Accademia di San Luca*.

1767 - Was made a knight of the Golden Spur, a papal knighthood, which enabled him to sign himself "Cav[aliere] Piranesi".

Piranesi's son, Francesco reissued all of Piranesi's etchings. (Wikipedia and Met Museum)

### **Influences:**

Piranesi worked with stage designers Domenico Valeriani and Ferdinando Bibiena. Bibiena's invention, the *scena per angolo*: stage design seen at an acute angle, was a strong influence on the *Carceri* (Prisons) prints.

Friends included Englishmen Sir John Soane and John Adam. Piranesi's brother, a Carthusian monk, imbued Piranesi with enthusiasm for the history and achievements of the ancient Romans.

Vesuvius and Pompeii had been recently discovered. (Wikipedia and Met Museum)

### **Symbols on pier table:**

Floral garlands – Origin: Flora was ancient Italian goddess of flowers. Floralia festival was celebrated with much licentiousness. Flowers are the attribute of Spring personified.

Chimera – The table’s legs form chimeras, winged creatures that are part lion, part goat, and part serpent. Chimera, or chimère, in architecture, is a term loosely used for any grotesque, fantastic, or imaginary beast used in decoration. In Greek mythology, the chimera was a monster (part lion, goat, and dragon), slain by the hero Bellerophon. (artsmia.org and Britannica.com)

Ox skull – Origin: principal draught animal in primitive society. Symbolizes strength and is an attribute of Patience personified. In Classical art, the skulls were often paired with wreaths to represent sacrificial oxen. (artsmia.org)

**Interpretation:**

This piece represents a time when classical Symbology started to make a departure from its original meaning by those it was created by: in this case the Greeks and Romans. Classical symbols in the 1700s started to represent something about the maker or the owner of the piece. In this piece the chimeras, swags, and ox skulls are really just part of the overall impact of the piece. Combined with the fine materials and workmanship, this piece really represents the wealth and education of the owner, becoming a status symbol. The symbolism becomes part of the surface decoration of a piece that implies wealth and prestige, becoming more a statement about the individual owner than any intrinsic meaning of the symbols encrusted onto its surface.

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**Current Mia Label Information (optional)**

This is one of the few pieces of Giovanni Piranesi’s furniture to survive. The versatile Piranesi was a printmaker, archaeologist, architect, and designer. His numerous etchings of Roman ruins contributed greatly to 18th-century Europe’s interest in the ancient world. In 1769 he published *Diverse Manners of Ornamenting Chimneys and All Other Parts of Houses*, a collection of imaginative designs for clocks, vases, chimneypieces, and even coaches.

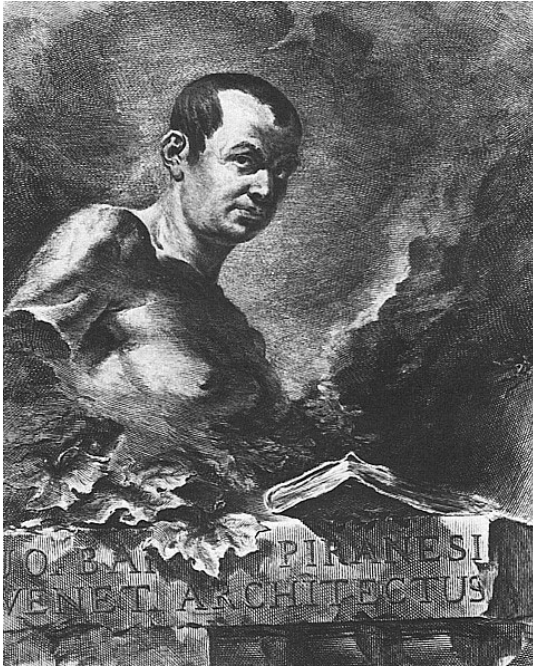
This table is one of a pair made for the Roman state apartments of a nephew of Pope Clement XIII. Piranesi drew from several ancient designs. He modeled the legs—carved like winged chimeras (mythological monsters, part lion, part goat)—after bronze tripods found at the ruined cities of Pompeii and Herculaneum. The ox skulls are based on Roman funerary motifs.

<http://artstories.artsmia.org/#/o/8023>

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## Sources of Information and/or Prop Ideas (photos/videos)

### Piranesi Self-Portrait



### Piranesi Vase



The **Piranesi Vase** or **Boyd Vase** is a reconstructed colossal ancient Roman marble calyx krater. Piranesi constructed it from a large number of Roman fragments from Hadrian's Villa at Tivoli, where Gavin Hamilton was excavating in the 1770s. The vase was sold as a genuine ancient Roman artifact (an acceptable practice at the time). (British Museum)

Artist biography, Wikipedia: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Giovanni\\_Battista\\_Piranesi](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Giovanni_Battista_Piranesi)

Artist biography, Metropolitan Museum: [http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/pira/hd\\_pira.htm](http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/pira/hd_pira.htm)

**Videos and Lectures (annotated by file creator):**

- Lecture by Antoine Picon, Ornament: Architecture, Subjectivity, Politics, April 4, 2012

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KnwSoRUZEto>

Antoine Picon, 2011-2012 Clarkson Chair in Architecture, University at Buffalo School of Architecture and Planning presents "Ornament: Architecture, Subjectivity, Politics" on April 4, 2012.

Picon sees Piranesi as pivotal in creating pervasive ornament – closer to Islamic ornament with its overall patterns and tessellations – as a Western architectural style. Piranesi helped change applied surface ornament in architecture into something that was no longer added, into something that was essential, and therefore changed it into art. "Ornament is the frozen music of architecture." Picon likens ornament to the "paradox of the mask," or make-up, which "conceals who you are also reveals who you really are."

Ornament shows the handiwork of the artist. It also expresses the subjectivity of the designer and can be overdone if not balanced with the needs of those who will be viewing it. Modern building surface treatments are shown to support Picon's theory.

- Video by Luis Camnitzer

<http://artistproject.metmuseum.org/3/luis-camnitzer/>

Camnitzer sees Piranesi as a "failed architect" who managed to take printmaking in a new direction. In the past printmaking had been in the service of reproducing paintings. Piranesi used it to "generate knowledge" and express his prescient ideas (to what would become modernism) of organizing details taxonomically to express order where order does not exist, and thus create new order.

- Contemporary Architecture and the Legacy of Piranesi, Cooper-Hewitt National Design Museum:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NsmfA51xgkx>

**Websites:**

Chimera, Greek Mythology: <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Chimera-Greek-mythology>

Prisons:

<http://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/337725>

<http://artmuseum.princeton.edu/object-package/giovanni-battista-piranesi-imaginary-prisons/3640>

Chimneypiece:

<http://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/365618>

Piranesi Vase & similar laver:

[http://www.britishmuseum.org/research/collection\\_online/collection\\_object\\_details.aspx?objectId=1404179&partId=1](http://www.britishmuseum.org/research/collection_online/collection_object_details.aspx?objectId=1404179&partId=1)

[http://www.britishmuseum.org/research/collection\\_online/collection\\_object\\_details/collection\\_image\\_gallery.aspx?partid=1&assetid=21382001&objectid=1471292](http://www.britishmuseum.org/research/collection_online/collection_object_details/collection_image_gallery.aspx?partid=1&assetid=21382001&objectid=1471292)

### **Books and Book Reviews:**

*Diverse Maniere d'Adornare / Camini ed Ogni Altra Parte degli Edifizi*, 1769.

New International Illustrated Encyclopedia of Art, Volume 16. Greystone Press, 1970. -Piranesi Family.

*Nature and Its Symbols*, Lucia Impelluso. J. Paul Getty Museum, 2004.

*Symbols and Allegories in Art*, Matilde Battistini. . J. Paul Getty Museum, 2005.

*Dictionary of Subjects and Symbols in Art*, James Hall, Westview Press 2008.

*Snoop: What Your Stuff Says About You*, Sam Gosling. Basic Books, Perseus Books Group, 2008.

*Ornament: The Politics of Architecture and Subjectivity*, Antoine Picon, Wiley, 2013.

“..Piranesi also rejected soberness in the name of the unbounded power of imagination. But such exceptions did not invalidate the general rule: rather than a pervasive condition, ornamental décor was conceived as a discrete series of embellishments. Their distribution was not without analogy with the writing of music: discontinuous notes that were nevertheless meant to produce a continuous stream of sensations and affects.”

“Fragmentation, accumulation and collage are the key principles at work in such a composition. In the eyes of Piranesi, design is primarily a matter of invention.”

[Political Symbolology] “This first function of ornament as a display of political power reveals itself inseparable from a second role as a medium carrying politically significant messages. Until the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, as we have seen ornament conveyed philosophical and ideological notions Above all, it constituted an indicator of the relative importance of the institutions and people associated with the construction of a building. Traditional ornament was as much hierarchical as symbolic. Whereas numerous studies have been devoted to its symbolic content, its role as an index of social rank has been less thoroughly investigated.”

*Art History, Eighteenth to Twenty-first Century Art, Volume 6*, Marilyn Stokstad. Pearson, 2014.

*Piranesi as Designer*, Sara E. Lawrence, ed. (Smithsonian Cooper-Hewitt National Design Museum: New York, 2007) <http://www.cooperhewitt.org/publications/piranesi-as-designer/>

### **Exhibition Review (Piranesi as Designer):**

Robin Middleton, Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians:

<http://jsah.ucpress.edu/content/67/2/277>