

“In Piranesi’s time Rome was crumbling and overgrown with creepers and wild flowers.”



Above: ‘View of the Arch of Beneventum in the Kingdom of Naples’ (*Veduta del L’Arco di Venevento nel Regno di Napoli*), in Volume 2 of *Vedute di Roma*. (Library no. 558208)

Opposite: One of Piranesi’s imagined views of ancient Rome: ‘Magnificent bridge with loggias, and arches erected by a Roman Emperor’ (*Ponte magnifico con Loggo, ed Archi eretto da un Imperatore Romano...*). Plate 8 in *Prima Parte Architetture e Prospettive...* (‘Part One of Architecture and Perspectives’) the first of three sections in the combination volume of prints, *Opere Varie di Architetture*. While Piranesi’s original illustration was first made in 1743, this volume’s Tessier binder’s ticket dates this volume to c. 1804-1807. (Library no. 523222)

Piranesi Engravings

at the University Library

*The University of Melbourne Library is fortunate to hold a large collection of engravings by the Italian baroque architect-artist Giovanni Battista Piranesi. Here, **Monica Syrette** describes the work she undertook to identify the volumes that hold this important collection.*



Each year, students take up a select number of placements in the University of Melbourne Library's Special Collections. I received an email about a research project that involved identifying the Library's editions of each individual volume in a very rare set of Piranesi engravings in contemporary bindings. The Piranesi volumes are of value scholastically for students of fine art and those studying the history of Renaissance Italy.

This collection of 24 Piranesi volumes was believed to be from a 27-volume set and was purchased in 1974 and 1975 using funds provided by the Ivy May Pendlebury Bequest. The Library has used the bequest to purchase many of the rare books in the Library's collection, such as

the beautiful fine plate books, which are significant both for their subject matter, such as natural history, topography and architecture, as well as the techniques used in their production.

I first discovered the work of Giovanni Battista Piranesi while studying for a Bachelor of Arts degree many years ago and was immediately captivated by the dark decay of his imaginary prison series, *Carceri d'Invenzione*. When looking at these etchings you can almost feel the oppressive atmosphere in the cavernous rooms. The stone walls look cold and damp, pulleys and chains hang from the ceiling and walls and heavy wooden beams hold up

'View of St. Peter's Basilica and Piazza in the Vatican' (*Veduta della Basilica Piazza di S. Pietro in Vaticano*) in Volume 1 of *Vedute di Roma*. The Egyptian obelisk, in the centre of the piazza, came originally from Heliopolis and was moved to Rome in 37 A.D. The print's extraordinary Baroque coaches are a feature of a number of Piranesi's views of Rome. (Library no. 558207)



staircases and platforms that disappear into hidden corners or end abruptly for no reason. The vast yet stifling spaces seen in the *Carceri* series have inspired artists and writers for centuries, including Thomas De Quincey, who compared them to his fevered dreams in *Confessions of an English Opium-Eater*.

Giovanni Battista Piranesi

Piranesi was born near Venice, Italy, in 1720, the son of a stonemason and master builder, and died in Rome in 1778. It is known that he studied architecture with his uncle Matteo Lucchesi while his brother Angelo inspired him with stories of Roman history. It is said that he went on to study stage design and set painting under Ferdinando Bibiena and perspective and stage design with the Valeriani family. When he first visited Rome in 1740 he briefly worked for Giuseppe Vasi, one of the leading etchers of city views popular as Grand Tour souvenirs. The combination of architecture, art, history and theatre remained a strong influence throughout his career. Piranesi imbued his accurate observations of ancient ruins with a monumental atmosphere, through the use of exaggerated or distorted perspective, strong contrasts of light and shade and the reduction in scale of both human figures and the natural landscape. The theatricality he brought to his work gave the etchings a great vitality that endures.

The ruins of the ancient city fascinated Piranesi and he sketched them obsessively, leading to his first etched work, *Prima Parte di Architetture e Prospettive*, published in 1743. Due to financial hardship he went back to Venice, where it is said he briefly studied in the studio of Tiepolo. Upon Piranesi's return to Rome in 1747 he began work on the *Vedute di Roma*, a labour of love that he returned to for the rest of his life. This series of 135 individually-produced plates were highly influential on the European idea of classical antiquity. The knowledge of ancient building methods that he brought to his archaeological prints led to his election to the Society of Antiquarians of London in 1757.

Piranesi was passionate about restoring the architecture of Rome to its former glory. As a volatile and tempestuous character, one whose career was peppered with arguments and feuds, he entered the debate over the relative merits of Greek and Roman architecture with fiery enthusiasm, producing works such as *Della Magnificenza ed Architettura de' Romani* (1761) to illustrate his theories.

Piranesi married Angela Pasquini in 1752 and they had five children, Laura, Francesco, Angela, Pietro and Anna. By the late 1760s his printing business had grown substantially and a number of assistants worked in the studio. Piranesi trained his sons from an early age and they were involved in the family business by the mid-1770s.



‘View of the Piazza della Rotonda (*Veduta della Piazza della Rotonda*) in Volume 1 of *Vedute di Roma*. Note the market stalls crowding the piazza. (Library no. 558207)

Piranesi also became a successful antique restorer and dealer. He worked with entrepreneurs like Gavin Hamilton, setting up a showroom in his workshop for visiting British aristocrats and wealthy gentleman tourists. At this time he issued individual plates featuring notable antiques that he had sold or were already in collections, collected into the two-volume set *Vasi, Candelabri, Cippi, Sarcofagi, Tripodi, Lucerne, ed Ornamenti ...*

Piranesi continued to travel and sketch in his later years. In 1770, he made his first visits to Pompeii and Herculaneum. In 1778 he went with Francesco to Naples to study the ruins of the three Greek temples of Paestum. Piranesi returned from this trip very unwell and in constant pain. But he refused to rest; he continued to work on his drawings and plates right up to his death in November.

After his father’s death, Francesco successfully published some of Piranesi’s unfinished works, completed new volumes of his own works and reprinted earlier volumes with additional plates of his own. Francesco and Pietro were both heavily involved in revolutionary politics so when Rome fell to the Neapolitan and British forces the Piranesi family left Italy for Paris, under official protection.

A year later, in 1800, with nearly all the plates from Piranesi’s studio in their possession, the two sons set up a

printing firm, the *Chalcographie des Frères Piranesi*, in Paris and produced a 25-volume set of prints that came to be known as the First Paris Edition.

By 1809 Francesco Piranesi was deeply in debt and when he died in 1810 the French government impounded the copper plates. Further editions were produced up to 1835 when the firm of Firmin-Didot acquired the plates. They continued to issue impressions until 1839 when the plates were bought by the Camera Apostolica in Rome. The plates are now housed in the *Calcografie Nazionale* in Rome.

My search begins

I began my project by examining the four-volume set *Antichita Romane*, which features the urban structure of ancient Rome, the tombs and funerary monuments and examples of monumental Roman engineering. I was struck most by the detail in the prints and how much can be lost in reproduction.

As I made my way through one volume after another I felt very privileged to be able to see the etchings in the format chosen by Piranesi himself. The two-volume *Vedute di Roma*, in particular, began to surpass my infatuation with the *Carceri* series. Handling the large format books necessitated a very slow pace and, as my eyes wandered over the pages, I began to see Piranesi’s

love for the city, not only in the recognisable architectural icons, but also in the life he depicted there. People lean out of windows and sit on chairs in the Piazza, a man stands on a soapbox addressing half a dozen listeners and another calls to a dog swimming in the Trevi fountain. On that scale, you feel that you can almost walk right into the scene and down the roads, listening to the coachmen gossiping as the lords and ladies go sightseeing.

In Piranesi's time Rome was crumbling and overgrown with creepers and wild flowers. The ancient ruins were home to all manner of small businesses: a cattle market in the Roman Forum, a fish market in the Portico of Octavia. The tomb of Emperor Augustus contained a vineyard and then a bullring, and corn was stored in the Baths of Caracalla. Piranesi both glorified the city and revelled in its decay.

During the project the accession records for the Library's Piranesi collection were located on microfilm but I couldn't read them until a suitable microfilm reading machine was unearthed. In the meantime I found in the Library the two-volume *Giovanni Battista Piranesi: the complete etchings* edited by John Wilton-Ely, which became indispensable over the next few months.

Another resource I consulted was Arthur M. Hind's *Piranesi: a critical study* from 1922. Hind had become interested in the work of Piranesi after seeing the *Carceri* series at the British Museum in 1910. Hind listed the works held in Rome's Regia Calcografia and I found this an excellent reference when determining which volumes were missing from the University of Melbourne Library's collection. I also found it strangely comforting to read Hind's description of the painstaking work of comparing different impressions:

*The mere bulk of the volumes of Piranesi's work has made the necessary comparisons, extending over many years and in a variety of collections, a laborious business, and one that I should long ago have thrown up were it not for a natural aversion from being baffled even where the end to be achieved is small.*¹

This sentiment was echoed by Piranesi expert Andrew Robison, the Andrew W. Mellon Senior Curator of Prints and Drawings at the National Gallery of Art in Washington D.C. He wrote in *Piranesi: early architectural fantasies, a catalogue raisonne of the etchings* that he believed that, 'Hind was right to warn that in the particular case of Piranesi, detailed cataloguing research requires many years, wide travel, a strong back, and a dogged refusal to leave even small puzzles unresolved.'²

Hind and Robison found that researching the chronological sequence of changes that Piranesi made to some plates between printings was essential when dating

volumes, as the dates found on the title and text pages in each volume are not reliable guides. Although the volumes sold relatively well in Piranesi's time, they were expensive to produce and could take years to make a profit. So Piranesi tended to wait until he had collected enough subscriptions or found a patron for the initial grant before publishing. He would, however, print large quantities of the title and text pages so as to have a stockpile to draw on when volumes were put together over subsequent years. Untangling which editions the University Library holds was going to be even more difficult than I had anticipated. Rather than referring to the printed dates I turned my attention instead to the inside front cover of the volumes, some of which contain a binder's ticket for a Paris firm called Tessier, with an address of Rue de la Harpe.



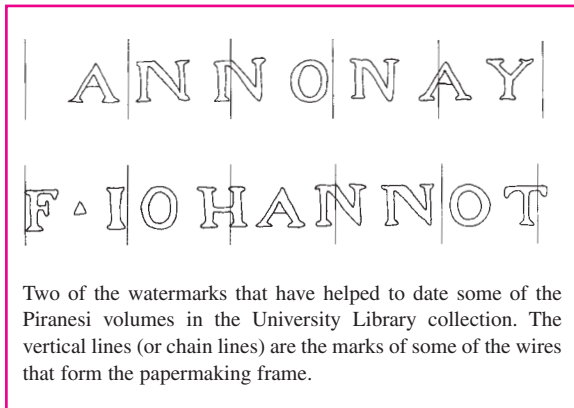
This and other Tessier binder's tickets have been useful in dating some of the University Library's Piranesi volumes (this one is inside the front cover of *Le Antichita Romane*, Volume 2).

Tessier, Paris

I had read about Tessier in a footnote to Robison's 'Dating of Combination Volumes' appendix in Wilton-Ely's *Complete Etchings* book: 'In the Princeton University Library there is a catalogue and prospectus (for the Piranesi brothers' Paris printing company) dated 1804 with ... an address for Tessier as a binder at the Rue de la Harpe, no 26'.³ This is the earliest definite date closely associating Tessier with Francesco and Pietro Piranesi's Chalcographie des Frères Piranesi in Paris. Robison has printed covers in his own collection; dated 1807, they carry an advertisement for Tessier in the Collège des Grassins, rue des Amandiers. Robison goes on to state that it 'appears that while Tessier started as a separate establishment, between 1804 and 1807 the association between Tessier and the Piranesi calcographie [sic] became so close that they moved into the same building, Collège des Grassins'.⁴ Given this information, the volumes in the

University Library collection with the Tessier binder's ticket would be dated between 1804 and 1807, depending on that move.

It now seemed almost too easy: being able to pinpoint the date of some of the University Library's Piranesi volumes to within a mere three years. This was a true 'Eureka!' moment but there was still the sobering matter of the 12 volumes without a Tessier ticket. It was time to tackle watermarks.



Watermarks

In another appendix to the *Complete Etchings*, Robison presents virtually every watermark that he has been able to trace from Piranesi prints, aimed primarily at helping 'connoisseurs and scholars date early impressions.'⁵

European paper mills used watermarks to identify their papers from the 13th century onward. To make paper with a watermark, wire was bent into shapes and sewn on to wire grids in a wooden mould. The grid featured horizontal wires placed closely together and 'chain lines' — more widely spaced vertical wires. When the pulp was pressed into the mould the wire acted as a sieve, retaining the plant fibres as the water drained. The resulting paper, called laid paper, is thinner and more translucent where it lay on the wires. A later method of paper manufacturing utilised a fine wire mesh, which distributed the pulp more easily and produced smoother, thinner sheets. Called wove paper, it was not widely in use until after 1790.

Robison notes that the 1800 Piranesi catalogue for the First Paris Edition listed works on wove paper for a higher price (although he has not sighted any).⁶ Hind believed that 'all editions of Piranesi's work until that of Firmin-Didot ... are printed on thick laid paper ... The Firmin-Didot editions, and most modern impressions, are on wove paper.'⁷

I found that the majority of the Piranesi volumes in the University Library collection are made of laid paper and set about trying to find watermarks.

Arthur Hind had been the first to sketch relevant watermarks and in his 1922 book he lists eight found in the *Vedute di Roma* volumes, from the early printings up to the Firmin-Didot editions. In the *Complete Etchings*, Robison presents 81 examples of watermarks he found in collections such as the New York Public Library, the National Gallery of Art in Washington and the Peabody Library, Baltimore. As the watermarks can have very subtle variations, Robison found freehand sketching to be inadequate and subsequently went on to trace them directly. Given the time constraints I was under and the resources at my disposal I chose to simply note when I found watermarks and which Robison ones they most closely corresponded to.

In the stillness and quiet of the Baillieu Library's Rare Book Room I found the hunt for watermarks to be totally absorbing. There were whole volumes where I struggled to find even one, while others contained many pages revealing double-headed eagles or birds teetering on the corners of houses. Some looked almost identical to ones Robison found in First Paris Edition volumes at Washington's National Gallery of Art and the Pierpont Morgan Library. Others were noticeably different, such as an eagle with a heart shape on its breast and wings that curve up rather than down; and a line of text with the letter 'T' sitting on a complete circle above a pedestal shape.

Right when I was starting to feel that the discovery of watermarks was narrowing down the guesswork, along came forensic paper historian and paper analyst Peter Bower. I attended his University of Melbourne lecture 'Fakes and Forgeries: the Art of Deception', presented by the Australian Institute for the Conservation of Cultural Material. Bower specialises in the examination of paper for the purposes of dating, attribution and usage for museums, galleries, police forces, lawyers and private individuals around the world. He has published work on J.M.W. Turner, Michelangelo, William Blake and Thomas Gainsborough and his current major research project is on the papers used by John Constable. I also found him lurking in the pages of Patricia Cornwell's *Portrait of a Killer: case closed*, which I happened to be reading at the time.⁸

The 'Fakes and Forgeries' lecture was a fascinating introduction to some of the investigations Bower has been involved in. These included the German forgery of English bank notes done by prisoners at Sachsenhausen concentration camp in World War 2. After carefully copying the English money it was necessary to age the currency before it entered circulation. Prisoners were put in two long rows and notes were passed up and down. Some scribbled figures in the manner of bank clerks; others simply folded and unfolded the notes. Eventually

'View of the octagonal Temple of Minerva Medica' (*Veduta del Tempio ottangolare di Minerva Medica*) in Volume 2 of *Vedute di Roma*. (Library no. 558208)



the paper money collected enough grime and grease and wear and tear to look genuine. Bower also spoke about Leon Warneke, perhaps the greatest banknote forger ever, and an intriguing character. Although his background was shrouded in mystery, he became a respectable businessman and photographer in London. Behind the scenes, however, he was involved with revolutionaries and anarchists; and expertly forged various eastern European banknotes, particularly Russian roubles. He was never caught and it is believed that he may have faked his own death in 1900.

Narrowing down the search

During the lecture Bower touched on the detective elements of his work, including watermark identification. He revealed that there are over 4,500,000 different watermarks in the world. On hearing this I felt almost giddy and my Piranesi discoveries seemed to disappear before my eyes into a huge sea of watermarks, all slightly different.

Bower followed the lecture with a workshop, 'Reading the Paper', which was attended by Julianne Simpson, the then Deputy Curator of the University Library's Special Collections. Julianne took along three of the Piranesi volumes for examination by the group: *Le Antichita Romane* (Volume 1), *Trofeo o sia Magnifica Colonna* (Volume 14) and *Teatro d'Ercolano* (Volume 19).

The first two contain some good examples of watermarks. In the case of *Le Antichita Romane* they show

a great likeness to ones that Robison identified in Piranesi volumes at the National Gallery of Art, Washington. In *Trofeo o sia Magnifica Colonna*, a First Paris Edition according to the Tessier binder's ticket, the watermarks are substantially different to those identified by Robison. Although Robison's list of watermarks found amongst collections of Piranesi prints is thorough, Bower was not surprised that the University volumes contain new examples.

Volume 19 (*Teatro d'Ercolano*), one of Francesco Piranesi's works, has an Italian binder's ticket that I have been unable to identify. The text pages are on smaller, thicker paper than the plates. When Bower examined the volume he was able to identify the end papers as French and the text paper as Italian. He explained that French watermarks generally follow chain lines while Italian ones go against them. Bower also mentioned that he had found that the Firmin-Didot mill was producing wove paper around 1804–1805, which is decades earlier than Hind had noted.

Other possible clues to the publication date can be found in the size and format of the volumes. Three of the volumes held by the University Library, all unnumbered, are so large as to require two people to safely handle them. Robison found that all Firmin-Didot editions were printed and bound in this large elephant folio size. He also provides a helpful description of Volume 8 of the First Paris Edition, the *Opere Varie*:

'All copies I remember having seen in their original bindings had very thin, laid interleaves over the



Later state print of one of Piranesi's series of imaginary prisons, *Carceri d'invenzione*, in the second section of the combination volume *Opere Varie di Architetture*. (Library no. 523222)

*etched surfaces of the prints, and were bound in similar red, blue, brown or green marbled or spotted paper boards with leather spines, and frequently with one of the various binder's tickets by Tessier.*⁹

The *Opere Varie* held by the University Library has the thin interleaves, red boards, leather spine and Tessier label.

Meanwhile, a reading machine for the microfilm was finally located and with much anticipation I rolled the Library's Piranesi accession records onto the screen. The records revealed that the volumes were acquired in three stages, between April 1974 and December 1975. The first purchase was for 21 volumes, with a note stating that the set follows the numbering of the Firmin-Didot edition published in Paris, 1836–1839. The second purchase was for Volume 8, the *Opere Varie*, undated. The final purchase was the *Vedute di Roma* (Volumes 16 and 17), with a tentative 'Roma, 1778?' in brackets next to the title. The supplier was listed as Tom Hazell, a former employee at the University of Melbourne. Mr Hazell sold the volumes to the University in 1974 and 1975, having acquired them by descent from his family who had purchased them second-hand in Rome in the 1850s. Dr Orde Poynton, the University Library benefactor, who donated over 2500 old master prints, had seen the volumes and believed them to be early editions rather than later re-issues.

My research found that the volume dates did not accurately match the dates given on the accession records. The *Vedute di Roma* for example, was found to be part of the First Paris Edition rather than an original Italian publication. On the other hand, nine of the 21 volumes

believed to be from the Firmin-Didot editions were published decades earlier, also in the First Paris Edition. In fact, of the 25 volumes in that First Paris Edition, the University of Melbourne holds at least 12. The three unnumbered volumes appear to be from the Firmin-Didot edition, circa 1835. As research into the work of Piranesi continues, the ability to accurately date individual prints and volumes will become more refined. In the case of the University Library collection, more detailed investigation of watermarks may help determine the dates of the other volumes.

Continuing exploration

The goals of my work placement were intended to extend to locating and identifying individual Piranesi prints scattered throughout the Special Collections, but I found that identifying and dating the bound volumes consumed all my available time. However, University of Melbourne Masters student Nicole Neville has located many Piranesi prints during her research of the Library's Print Collection. Nicole has been conducting an inventory of prints and recording accession details into the cataloguing database 'EMu' (Electronic Museum) as part of her Art Curatorship internship. To date Nicole has identified prints from both the *Vedute di Roma* and *Le Antichita Romane* series. Some prints show signs of having been previously bound in volumes and are yet to be dated.

The research into the Piranesi collection led recently to the purchase by the University Library of the Piranesi

'View of the Capitoline hill with the steps of the Church of S. Maria in Aracoeli: architecture of Michelangelo Bonarotti' (*Veduta del Romano Campodoglio con Scalinata che va alla Chiefa d'Araceli: architettura di Michelangelo Bonaroti*) in Volume 2 of *Vedute di Roma*. This illustration shows the Baroque city of Piranesi's day pushing into the ancient fabric of Rome. (Library no. 558208)



catalogue, the *Catalogo Delle Opere Date Finora Alla Luce da Giov. Battista Piranesi*, published about 1779. There was no known copy in existence when Hind wrote his critical study in 1922. Instead he consulted both the 1792 catalogue, which he believed to be a reprint, and one printed in 1800, which aided identifying the arrangement of prints in the First Paris Edition.

The engraved *Catalogo* would have impressed any potential customer. It is beautifully designed, with recognisable Piranesi touches such as the curled paper pinned to the wall. The plates of the *Vedute di Roma* are listed in full while other volumes, such as the *Carceri D'Invenzione* and *Antichita Romane*, have descriptions and prices. It is a valuable addition to the University Library's remarkable collection of Piranesi works.

During my time working on the project, Melbourne hosted the 37th Congress of the International League of Antiquarian Booksellers. Tours of the Special Collections and the Rare Book Room were given to international and national booksellers. As they were introduced to precious items, I found it interesting to see just how many gravitated towards the Piranesi volumes to ask questions and have a closer look at the engravings.

I found working on this project to be both challenging and very rewarding. I hope that my research has shed some light on what I believe are true jewels of the University Library's collection.

Notes

- 1 Arthur Mayger Hind, *Piranesi: a critical study, with a list of his published works and detailed catalogues of the prisons and the views of Rome*, New York, Da Capo Press, 1922, preface.
- 2 Andrew Robison, *Piranesi, Early Architectural Fantasies: a catalogue raisonne of the etchings*, Washington, National Gallery of Art, 1986, p. 6.
- 3 Andrew Robison, 'Dating of Combination Volumes', appendix in *Giovanni Battista Piranesi, the Complete Etchings*, edited by John Wilton-Ely, vol. 2, San Francisco, Alan Wofsy Fine Arts, 1994, p. 1148.
- 4 Robison, *ibid*, pp. 1148–1149.
- 5 Robison, 'Watermarks', appendix in *Giovanni Battista Piranesi, the Complete Etchings*, *op. cit.*, p. 1150.
- 6 Robison, 'Dating of Combination Volumes', *op. cit.*, p. 1146.
- 7 Hind, *op. cit.*, p. 5.
- 8 Cornwell's book suggests that Jack the Ripper was the artist Walter Sickert and Bower was brought in to examine the papers used by both men.
- 9 Robison, 'Dating of Combination Volumes', *op. cit.*, p. 1146.

Monica Syrette is studying for a Postgraduate Diploma in Museum Studies at Deakin University. She examined the University of Melbourne Library's Piranesi holdings as part of her studies. Currently she is working as a Curatorial Assistant at the Grainger Collection and as Archivist at Arts Project Australia.

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Amateur Perfection

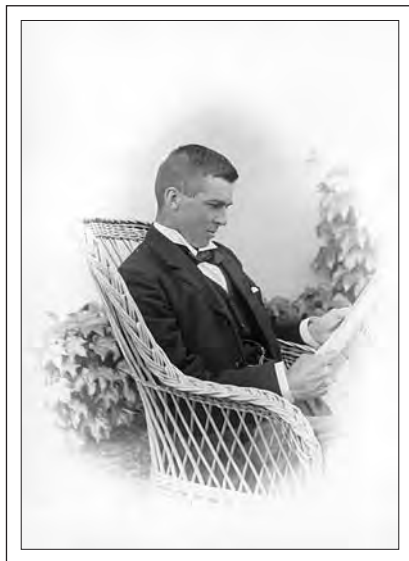
Russell Grimwade's Photographs

The Summe of all Intelligence

English Civil War Pamphlets



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Above: Two photographic portraits taken by enthusiastic amateur photographer, Russell Grimwade. (Alice, Grimwade's sister, and Norton, Grimwade's elder brother, taken on 29 November 1896.) University of Melbourne Archives image UMA/I/3041 and UMA/I/3042

Front Cover: In the four volumes of *Le Antichità Romane*, the 18th century Italian architect Giovanni Battista Piranesi used his architectural and artistic skills to examine archaeologically the physical remains of the Roman Empire. While Volume 2 recorded the remnants of funerary monuments and tombs, its frontispiece, *Antiquvs Bvii Viarum et Ardeatinae Prospectvs ad Lapidem Extra Portam Capenam* (ancient intersection of the Via Appia and Via Ardentina viewed at the second milestone outside the Porta Capena) imagines how the ruins may have looked in their time. (Library no. 508370)

Back Cover: See page 2.

