A drawing or painted or engraved composition combining features of imaginary and/or real architecture, ruined or intact, in a picturesque setting. In its fantasy element it is the opposite of the Veduta. It reached its apogee as a popular genre during the era of the Grand Tour of Europe, which produced a heavy demand for pictorial souvenirs. Italy, in particular, offered real landscapes with Classical ruins; all that was required to elaborate and combine existing remains within a picturesque setting was a degree of poetic licence. Architectural fantasy in paintings, drawings and engravings had also a creative function, as an outlet for artists’ and architects’ imaginative expression or experiments, uninhibited by the prescriptive terms of commissions or by practical needs. The capriccio fulfilled in addition a decorative role, ranging from large-scale painted images within room decoration to miniature painted scenes on furnishings and ceramics.

Emerging as a mature art form during the early 18th-century Rococo period, the capriccio eventually declined during the early part of the next century in the face of the greater depth and imaginative range of Romantic painting as well as the demands by the academies for more ‘serious’ subject-matter. However, as a vehicle for creative licence, the architectural fantasy has never completely died out and continues to thrive on a minor level, either as a lighthearted decoration or serving the need for extreme visual experiment in architectural design.

The term ‘capriccio’, which derives from the Italian for the unpredictable jumping of a young goat, covers also a rarer form of subject-matter, defined by the 17th-century theorist Filippo Baldinucci as expressing an ‘idea of invention’ or the product of an unfettered imagination. Such an application of the term is pre-eminently represented by the etched, dreamlike figure compositions in the print series of Giambattista Tiepolo (I Capricci; Venice, c. 1750) and Goya (Los Caprichos; Madrid, 1796/8–1803).
1. Early manifestations.

Some of the earliest imaginative compositions of architecture appear in surviving wall paintings from Herculaneum and Pompeii, where they served both to amplify restricted spaces and to enliven large areas of wall surface in top-lit urban buildings. Painted fantasy architecture was also incorporated into the decorative schemes of Roman Imperial dwellings, as in the remains of Nero’s Domus Aurea, the rediscovery of which, near the Roman Colosseum during the late 15th century, had far-reaching artistic consequences. Significantly, in the late quattrocento a conscious revival of fantastic architectural compositions occurred, particularly in the work of Andrea Mantegna and his contemporaries in northern and central Italy. While imaginary architectural compositions had occurred throughout medieval and early Renaissance paintings, Mantegna’s works display a new preoccupation with reconstructing ancient Rome; in them, ancient buildings and ruins are fantastically juxtaposed in the background (e.g. St Sebastian, c. 1460; Vienna, Ksthst. Mus.). At the end of the century this concern is found among the esoteric woodcuts illustrating Francesco Colonna’s dream-bound novella, the Hypnerotomachia Poliphili (Venice, 1499).

Predictably, Mannerist artists and decorators developed the scope for architectural fantasy; but the emergence of this subject-matter as a genre in its own right is closely bound up with Baroque stage design. This reached unprecedented heights of expression in the late 17th century in the complex perspectival compositions of the Galli-Bibiena family (chiefly disseminated through their engraved works) and continued well into the early 18th century with designers such as Filippo Juvarra and Luigi Vanvitelli. An early pioneer of the capriccio within this theatrical context was François de Nomé. His highly distinctive style, characterized by febrile figures set against architecture undergoing cataclysmic decomposition, was to make a strong impression on 20th-century Surrealists such as Dalí.

2. The 18th century.

It was in early 18th-century Venice, where topographical art developed alongside the experimental world of the theatre, that the architectural capriccio emerged as an independent art form under Marco Ricci. The small etchings of Classical ruins published posthumously in Carlo Orsolini’s Varia Marci Ricci experimenta (1730) combined the poetic essence of Giorgione’s idylls with keenly observed Roman monuments. The apotheosis of this formula was achieved in a series of ambitious canvases of allegorical tombs, commissioned in the early 1720s by the impresario Owen McSwiny; it was to involve, among others, Marco Ricci and his uncle Sebastiano Ricci, together with Canaletto, Giambattista Pittoni and Giovanni Battista Piazzetta. Eventually 10 of the projected 24 paintings were acquired by Charles Lennox, 2nd Duke of Richmond,
to decorate the dining-room at Goodwood House, W. Sussex. The Venetians were particularly swift to adopt the genre. Among the foremost was Canaletto, who etched and painted several ambitious fantasies, such as the *Capriccio Palladiano* (Bergamo, priv. col.), a painting of Palladio’s unexecuted Rialto Bridge across the Grand Canal, juxtaposed to his Vicentine Basilica. Other outstanding capriccio painters were Antonio Visentini and, pre-eminently, Francesco Guardi, whose vibrant painterly techniques produced a range of works in the genre with atmospheric nuances of mood that have never been rivalled.

Meanwhile in Rome, Giovanni Paolo Panini developed the range of the capriccio in the form of decorative compositions recording groups of the principal monuments seen on the Grand Tour in order to satisfy the demands of visitors, especially the ‘milordi Inglesi’. Panini, established in Rome by 1717, through his skills as a vedutista and decorator, became a member of the Académie de France in Rome and professor of perspective at its headquarters in the Palazzo Mancini-Salviati. His extensive output was to culminate in two pendant compositions of great virtuosity for Etienne-François, Duc de Choiseul, *Roma antica* and *Roma moderna* (1757; original versions Boston, MA, Mus. F.A., and Stuttgart, Staatsgal.). In these works, painted views of antique and recent Roman architecture are displayed on the walls of vast thermal halls filled with sculpture and populated by admiring connoisseurs with their ciceroni.

During this period Piranesi had been deliberately exploiting the capriccio as an experimental means of arriving at new concepts in architectural design. In his first publication, the *Prima parte di architetture e prospettive* (1743), he used a sequence of capriccio etchings to stimulate the imagination of contemporary architects towards free experiment with antique forms. The first state of his celebrated suite of etched prison scenes (published anonymously, 1749–50) was significantly entitled *Invenzioni capric di carceri*. These plates were reissued in 1761 in a heavily reworked state as the *Carceri d’invenzione*. It was clear from the start that the penal imagery was of less significance to the artist than the opportunities that these stark utilitarian structures provided for spatial experiment. Moreover, Piranesi’s extravagantly fanciful view of the Appian Way, which he used as the frontispiece to volume II of his major archaeological work, *Le antichità romane* (1756), also presented a visual challenge. This bizarre composition, involving a plethora of monuments, was intended to symbolize the Roman genius for funerary architecture, as borne out by the variety of tombs illustrated with technical thoroughness in that volume.

It was above all Piranesi’s transforming vision that ensured the survival of the capriccio into the early phase of Romanticism represented by the work of the Frenchman Hubert Robert, arguably the greatest exponent of the painted capriccio. He endowed Panini’s formulas with a heightened sense of drama, exploiting Piranesi’s lighting, exaggerated scale and perspective and juxtaposing the monumental with scenes of everyday life in order to amplify the
heroic stature of the past. After spending 11 years in Italy, Robert
returned to Paris in 1765 and the following year was accepted by the
Académie Royale as a ‘painter of ruins’, the highest accolade yet
conferred on capriccio painting. Some of his greatest Roman
compositions were produced in the following years: notably his
masterpiece, the Discovery of the Laokoon (1773; Richmond, VA,
Mus. F.A.). In this work he combined the theatrical recession of
Bernini’s Scala Regia in the Vatican palace with the plan of the
Grande Galerie of the Louvre as a cavernous setting for the writhing
Hellenistic group that dwarfs the pullulating humanity surrounding
it.

While the painted capriccio featured in wall schemes of interior
decoration throughout the 17th and 18th centuries, by the 1760s the
revelations at Herculaneum and Pompeii gave a new authority to the
use of large inset ruin scenes with a carefully contrived perspective.
In England, Robert Adam was swift to exploit most effectively the
skills of Antonio Zucchi (1726–95) in ambitious compositions that act
as focal-points in his interiors, notably the Eating Room (c. 1767) of
Osterley Park House, London, and the Music Room (1771) of
Harewood House, W. Yorks. The architectural fantasy as a means of
conveying visionary and impracticable designs was frequently
adopted by the radical designers of Neo-classicism. Some architects
of the French Revolutionary era presented their most radical
conceptions through engravings, as did Claude-Nicolas Ledoux in his
L’Architecture considérée sous le rapport de l’art, des moeurs et de
la legislation (1804). In the case of Etienne-Louis Boulée this was
done through finished drawings with highly emotive lighting effects
and exaggerated scale (e.g. Design for a Cenotaph to Newton, 1784;
Paris, Bib. N.; for illustration see Boulée, Etienne-Louis). Similarly,
Sir John Soane’s frustrated aspirations to produce monumental
public buildings were immortalized through the outstanding skill of
his assistant Joseph Michael Gandy in a series of sublime
panoramas, such as Architectural Visions of Early Fancy and Dreams
(1820; London, Soane Mus.).

3. Later manifestations.

While this experimental role of the capriccio has survived into the
20th century, the decorative use of the architectural fantasy, after a
long period of neglect, achieved an unexpected and tragically brief
revival in the career of Rex Whistler. As part of an awakening
interest in the 18th century during the inter-war years, Whistler,
before his death in action, left behind a small group of exceptional
painted interiors. In these the capriccio, using a range of trompe
l’oeil techniques and based on scholarly research, was extended to
an entire interior scheme. His earliest and best-known work, the
Pursuit of Rare Meats (1926–7) in the Tate Gallery restaurant,
London, was followed by commissions for several country houses,
such as Sir Philip Sassoon’s Port Lympne, Kent (1930–33). Whistler’s
undoubted masterpiece remains the dining-room commissioned by
the 6th Marquess of Anglesey for Plas Newydd, Gwynedd, completed
by June 1937. The main painting in oils on a single canvas 17.68 m
long, which continues on the return walls, features a panoramic harbour scene that echoes the view through the windows opposite over the Menai Strait, with Renaissance townscapes containing buildings of every style and period, bathed in a Claudian light. While there have been several extremely competent imitators since the last war, Whistler’s unique blend of elusive meaning, visual wit and nostalgia for a lost Classical world—the essence of the capriccio—is unlikely ever to be repeated.

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