

# The Wonder that is the Pantheon

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## Introduction and History

The Pantheon in Rome is widely regarded as one of the most important buildings in history. Indeed, “the Pantheon represents the highest achievement of Roman architecture, both formally and structurally. It combines boldness, scale, and mastery of every architectural art” (Trachtenberg and Hymen 142). Its impressive architecture left a legacy: it was widely imitated in Roman tombs and temples. Its influence is also found in many other places:

[t]he greatest influence of the Pantheon, however, was to occur during the later European revivals of antiquity: at the Romanesque Baptistry in Florence; in Michelangelo’s project for St. Peter’s in Rome; in countless creations by Palladio and his followers; and numerous Baroque and Neoclassical buildings, down to Thomas Jefferson’s University of Virginia campus, and beyond. (Robertson 142)

Erected by Emperor Hadrian between 118 and 128 A.D., it was built on the site of an earlier Pantheon, which was erected by Agrippa (Smith 139). According to Leland Roth, “Since the Romans imagined the earth as a disk covered by a heavenly dome, the new building undertaken by Hadrian was to symbolize that universe of earth and the gods. Who designed it is not known, though Hadrian may have played a part in devising the conceptual scheme” (Robertson 224). Hadrian’s reputation as a practical administrator and scholar adds further evidence to support the belief that he was instrumental in the construction of a temple of this magnitude (Smith 145).

The building's two inscriptions have, in the past, led to historical confusion. Robertson succinctly sums this situation up:

The history of this temple is obscure in many respects, but the date of the main block is scarcely doubtful. Despite two inscriptions, one on the frieze of its columnar porch, which asserts that Augustus' minister Agrippa built it in 27 B.C., and another added below, recording a restoration by Septimius Severus and Caracalla in A.D. 202, it is practically certain from the stamps on the bricks that at least everything except this columnar porch is substantially the work of Hadrian in the first quarter of the second century A.D. (246-247)

#### Exterior

The architecture of the Pantheon is just as interesting as, if not more so than, its history. There are three parts of the building, "an immense, domed cella; a deep, octastyle Corinthian porch; and a block-like intermediate structure" (Trachtenberg and Hymen 139). When viewing a photograph of the exterior of the Pantheon, the most noticeable thing about the exterior, as well as the most distinctly Classical, are the columns. It is these columns, built in the Corinthian order, which let the viewer know, beyond any doubt, that the building is Greco-Roman. The use of the highly ornate Corinthian style on the outside of a building signifies a Roman origin, as the Greeks considered excessive and exterior use of the Corinthian order a sign of extravagance.

The porch itself is in impressive scale, with a height of eighty-five feet. The doorway has dimensions of twenty feet by forty feet, which leads to the interior and "Above a cylindrical base 142 feet in diameter rises a hemispherical dome, reaching a point 142 feet above the pavement" (Trachtenberg and Hymen 139). Clearly, the Romans had an excellent sense of proportion when designing this structure:

The long, attenuated temple space was totally filled by the masterful spread of the façade, so designed that originally it gave no hint of what lay behind it. Beneath the deep porch, space is channeled in three wide bays, where, in the middle, the overarched reveals and, at either side, half-domed niches introduced the transition to curved form. Within the momentary contraction of the doorway, space opened and swelled to a new dimension. (Brown 35)

#### Interior

The exterior is not the only place where Corinthian columns can be found. They are also on the interior, this “new dimension,” in a ring around the base. Behind these were the niches for the statues of the gods, as well as the barrel vaulting (20 feet thick) and eight piers which held up the massive weight of the concrete dome above, “thus the enormous weight seems to come down to a wall broken up into shadowy recesses”(Roth 224-226).

And yes, indeed, the interior was shadowy. Even so, “with its superbly coffered dome, [it] is one of man’s rare masterpieces” (Wheeler 13). Roth states, “The exterior seems always to have been rather plain, but the interior was filled by colored marble. The walls and floor were covered with a veneer of marble, granite, and porphyry brought from the corners of the Roman world” (226-227). According to Wheeler, “[The Pantheon] was dedicated to the seven planetary deities and was in effect an architectural simulacrum of the all-containing cosmos” (104-105). In the shadows below, among the columns, were the niches for each of these deities. The columns themselves, as stated above, were of the Corinthian order, reflecting the splendor with which the Romans had desired to infuse the place.

## The Summit of the Achievement

The dome, of course, is the focal point of the entire interior. Meant to serve as a symbol and reminder of the all-containing cosmos, it is perfectly circular. The indentations of the dome's coffers create an interesting interplay of light and shadow on the ceiling. As one source states:

The coffers are fundamental sources of the interior effects of the Pantheon. There are one hundred forty [coffers] in five horizontal rows of twenty-eight coffers each. Those of the first four horizontal rows are composed of four recesses of consecutively diminishing size. (MacDonald 104)

The Romans displayed their well-advanced building knowledge in the construction techniques of the dome:

The dome was built by pouring successive rings of concrete against a hemispherical dome of wood upon which the huge wooden forms for the coffers were first positioned. As the concrete was poured a grid of ribs was gradually built up between the coffer forms, strengthening the dome by virtue of their thickness. (MacDonald 110)

The only light within was provided by the domed oculus high above, a perpetually open circle through which the viewer could glimpse a glimmer of daylight. However, this benefit was a double-edged sword, for there was nothing to prevent downpours from entering this glorious architectural wonder. The area of the oculus is 62.80 square meters (MacDonald 110) and encircled in bronze.

## Conclusion

Rome's Pantheon remains today a noble tribute to both the genius of the ancient Romans and the devotion they had to their many deities. Though it remains uncertain who designed the

Pantheon, the most widely accepted belief is that it is the work of Hadrian in the early first century A.D. The building is an architectural wonder, complete with Corinthian columns, perfect dimensions, barrel vaulting, and a highly decorated interior. High above, it is graced with a magnificent concrete coffered dome, and above that, an oculus for the building to be open to the sky. The Pantheon is more than a building; it is and will remain a lasting work of art.

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