



Let Us Begin the Walk

**(Follow the people entering the alley
beside the dome of the Pantheon.)**

Fred Martin: Art and History*
A Figured Dome
1991

Each one of us is the center of our world, and that center that we each are reaches out in all directions as far as we can see to a circular horizon. Thus, each nation when it draws its map puts itself at the center.

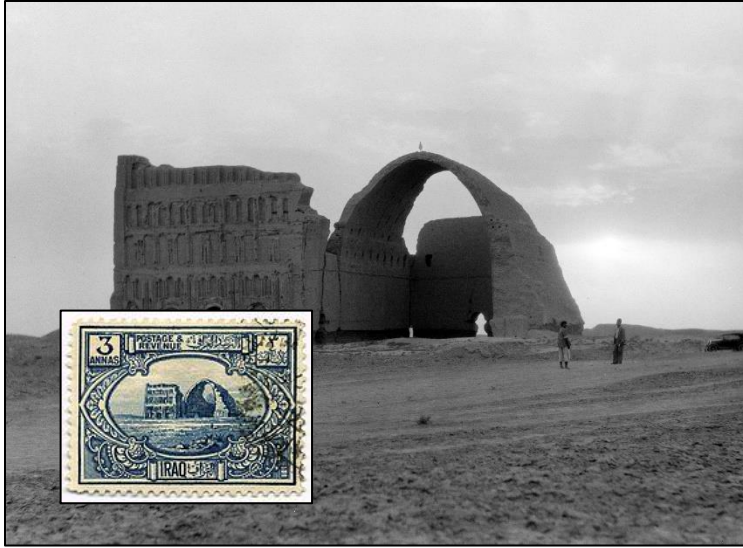


The Pantheon, as completed by Emperor Hadrian ca. 120AD



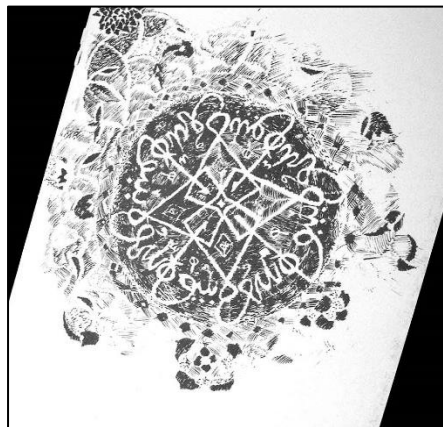
Giovanni Paolo Pannini: Interior of the Pantheon c.1734

In Roman times the Pantheon was a circular building with the world's then largest dome floating as a hemisphere over the interior conceived as a sphere. The walls below the dome contained niches for the statues of a panorama of all the gods. The circular opening to the sky at the top of the dome was the "oculus," and the whole building was the globe of that eye. The "oculus" was the pupil of the eye gazing upward into infinity; the gods in their niches around the walls were the filters to transform the infinite as it reached down from the heights of the sky, poured through the "oculus" and flowed out through the panorama of all the gods into the daily experience of the people crowded on the floor.

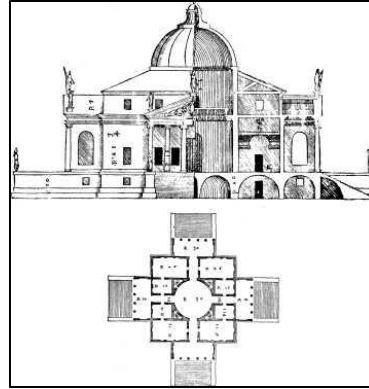


At the center of Iran's world in Sassanian times was Emperor Khosrow I (531-579), famous even today for the great vault at Ctesiphon. But I read once that a circular lake was nearby and fed by invisible springs, covered with by a circular building covered with a single dome decorated in [blue](#) and gold and covered within by depictions of the sun, moon, stars, planets, the [zodiac](#) and kings, including Khosrow I himself. Somehow, the dome

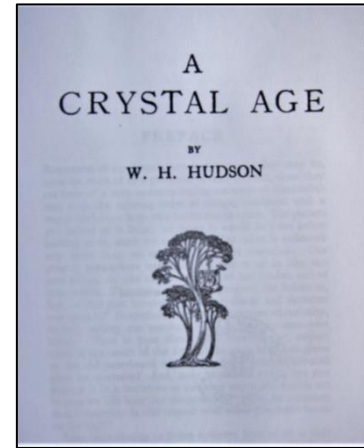
could be rotated with the seasons, and when rain was desired the dome could be rotated with a sound like thunder by means of ropes pulled by horses in a basement. The dome was marked with the signs of the zodiac; the dome was the sky; the dome was heaven and the marks on it were the figures of the cosmos.



There is a *mashhad*, the tomb of an Imam in northeast Iran. It rests in a tiny oasis where a vast desert plain comes up against a high mountain wall of snow peaks. The center of the shrine is marked by a blue, swelling dome, and the blue is marked by a geometric pattern based on the octagon, the two squares in a circle of triangles. It is a pattern which seemed to appear spontaneously everywhere in Islam during the 16th century, and it is a pattern whose infinite extension signifies among other things that out of any point—no, out of every point—the cosmos opens into infinity. Seen from without, the pattern proclaims the universality of Allah in the midst of barren desert and impassable mountains; seen from within, the pattern proclaims the will of Allah in the order of infinity.



The 16th Century Villa Rotunda is one of Palladio's most famous works. It combined the functions of the farm with the functions of domesticity, set in a spatial structure of primary geometrical forms measured by a system of harmonic proportions based on the Golden Section, and with a facade emblematic of the Greek temple. The Palladian villa acted in the landscape as the visual harmonic core that gave both center and wholeness to the place. And, as life follows the forms in which we live it, the Villa Rotunda gave harmony to those who lived there.



Richard Wilson: Croome

I have been reading a book about Capability Brown, the 18th century English landscape architect. The dust jacket has a painting by Richard Wilson of “Croome,” one of Brown's first designs where the ideal, Arcadian landscape of peace and simplicity leads to a Palladian house. Brown had given the landscape a “Panorama Tower.” It reminded me of the house and lands in W. H. Hudson's “A Crystal Age”, the house in the far future where all the tribe gathered in the evening beneath a glass dome deepening through sunset into night, and how some people gathered there played a strange music of long, melodious chords echoing softly but sometimes strongly throughout the hall, while others sang or others spoke poems, as the spirit moved them. The dome was not figured except for the clouds passing above it; it was, thus, the figure of heaven itself with all mankind gathered as a family within its broad horizon.



Capability Brown's Panorama Tower at Croome

I looked at Wilson's idyllic painting of Croome, remembered the Panorama Tower, and remembered Shelley's lines, "Life, like a dome of many colored glass, stains the white radiance of eternity." Then I began to imagine a house and grounds for today, a landscape emblematic of our dreams the way Croome was for Capability Brown's 18th century and "A Crystal Age" was for Hudson's 19th Century Britain. I saw a house with a dome like "A Crystal Age," and us gathered beneath the dome, making our music, our poems and pictures, or resting, or talking quietly, or sleeping. But the dome of glass was unlike Hudson's dome which was the sunset sky itself; this dome was figured with emblems of all our races, our world society of all times and nations. And I saw around the base of the dome Shelley's words, and I saw shining here and there and especially clustered near the top, those clear glass globes, crystals and lenses that were so popular as gleaming accents in late 19th century stained glass for domestic use, and I knew how all we races of man are everywhere in the world, and I saw how the white radiance of eternity shines everywhere through us.

*Adapted from one of my Art and History essays published in ARTWEEK in 1991

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