

## Topic Page: [Pantheon \(Rome, Italy\)](#)

Definition: **pantheon** from *Philip's Encyclopedia*

Ancient Greek and Roman temple for the worship of all the gods. The most famous is the Pantheon in Rome, originally built by Agrippa (27 BC), rebuilt by Hadrian (c.AD 120), and converted into the church of Santa Maria ad Martyres in the 7th century. The term was later extended to apply to a building honouring illustrious public figures.

Summary Article: **Pantheon**

From *The Classical Tradition*

Constructed during the reign of the emperor Hadrian between 118 and 125 ce in the Campus Martius district of ancient Rome, the imposing Pantheon still dominates its surroundings today. Ammianus Marcellinus, writing in the mid-4th century, likened the building to "a self-contained district." Dio Cassius (early 3rd cent.) reports that the temple was dedicated to many gods and attributes its name to the way in which its soaring dome resembles the heavens. Although he appears to have confused the Hadrianic Pantheon with an older temple on the same site constructed by Marcus Agrippa, whose name is recorded by an inscription on the facade, Dio's description remains apt.

The Pantheon is composed of two principal elements—a columnar porch supporting a pediment, and a domed rotunda—joined by a rectangular transitional block. Structurally it represents a brilliant integration of the trabeated systems of the Hellenistic tradition with the space-molding forms of arch and vault perfected by the Romans. In scale and structural audacity the Pantheon commands respect; at 142 feet (43 meters), the span of its dome has never been surpassed in masonry. The proportions of the rotunda, generated by the basic geometry of circle and square, contribute to the cosmic associations noted by Dio. The interaction of architecture and nature, particularly evident in the view of the celestial vault framed by its oculus and the constantly changing effects of illumination, suggests a potent linkage between empire and cosmos, between the human and the divine.

The Pantheon's excellent state of preservation is due to its transformation into a church (Sancta Maria ad Martyres) early in the 7th century. The Byzantine Emperor Constans II removed its gilded roof tiles in 663, but the building's structural fabric was maintained in its essentials throughout the Middle Ages. Stamps on the lead sheathing of the dome record the intervention of Pope Nicholas V (1447-1455) and his successors. The most noteworthy alterations to the fabric took place under Pope Urban VIII (1623-1644): the removal of bronze from the trusses of the portico and the addition of two bell towers, which were eventually removed in the 1880s. Within the rotunda, the attic zone was altered following designs of Paolo Posi in 1756-1757.

Over the past five centuries the Pantheon's reception has been characterized by both praise and criticism. Raphael admired the spatial qualities of the interior, and Michelangelo described its design as "angelic, not human." Gian Lorenzo Bernini resisted the efforts of Alexander VII to alter the attic, claiming that he lacked the talent to improve on the original scheme. Ironically, the ideal proportions of the Pantheon caused the building's anomalies and imperfections to stand out. Francesco di Giorgio Martini, perceiving a discordant relationship between the coffering of the dome and the attic pilasters, sought to correct this defect in his drawings. Another anomaly, the double pediment, prompted Andrea Palladio's imaginative solution for the facade of the Redentore in Venice.

Variations on the theme of Hadrian's Pantheon have repeatedly enriched the history of Western architecture. The stepped exterior profile of the Pantheon's dome was echoed by Bramante in his design for a new St. Peter's, by Borromini in Sant'Ivo alla Sapienza, and by John Russell Pope in the National Gallery of Art in Washington. The paradigmatic image of a domed rotunda rising behind a temple front has proven remarkably flexible through the ages, recognizable in Palladio's Villa Rotonda, Jefferson's library rotunda at the University of Virginia, and a host of other examples. The Pantheon's legacy, together with its distinguished progeny, reveals the enduring vitality of its artistic potential.

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J. Pi.

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