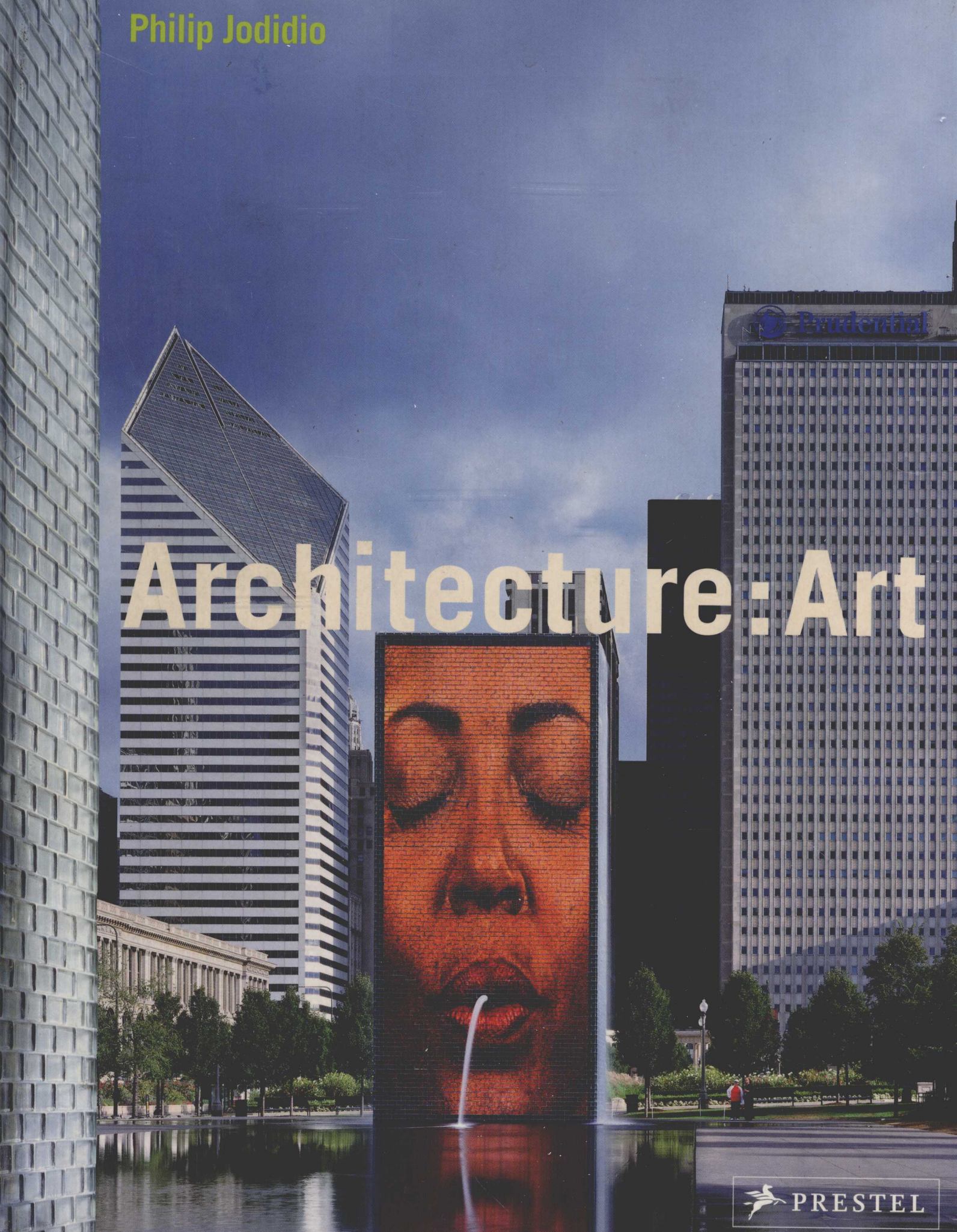


Philip Jodidio

Architecture: Art



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The World That is Already There

Philip Jodidio



The World That is Already There

Art and architecture have been linked since the dawn of time. Representations of nature and man, invocations of fertility and life after death, are bound together not only by history, but by essence. Beyond its primordial connotation as sanctuary, architecture, as much as art, symbolizes life and destiny. As Rudolf Arnheim has written, "All works of art worth their name are symbolic, and works of architecture are no exception. By symbolism, I mean that these works, in addition to their physical functions, such as that of sheltering, protecting and facilitating the activities of their users, convey through their visible appearance the spiritual and philosophical meaning of their functions.... This symbolic meaning is not simply an attribution applied to the building by some thinker 'from the outside' as a kind of added interpretation, but it is of the very nature and essence of the design itself."¹ Analogies abound in architectural form, from the column-tree to the dome-sky-skull, but might it not be that even the simplest of shapes also carry in them — beyond the literal representation — the explanation of why art and architecture are forever linked? In his essential work *Art and Visual Perception*, first published in 1954, Arnheim defines the significance of the circle as the most fundamental of shapes. "It has been maintained that the child receives the inspiration for his earliest shapes from various round objects observed in the environment. The Freudian psychologist derives them from the mother's breasts, the Jungian from the *mandala*; others point to the sun and the moon. These speculations are based on the conviction that every form quality of pictures must somehow be derived from observations in the physical world. Actually, the fundamental tendency toward simplest shape in motor and visual behavior is quite sufficient to explain the priority of circular shapes. The circle is the simplest shape available in the pictorial medium because it is centrally symmetrical in all directions."² The earliest known prehistoric habitation was round, and the circle inhabits art and architecture of all ages.

Superimposed on the simple geometry of the circle, a great variety of symbolic meanings emerged as each civilization, each period, created its own interpretation. In the East, the *mandala*, but also the *stupa* or *enso*, assume this most basic form, while the halo graces the sacred personages of many times and places. One of the most visually arresting and significant artistic representations of the circle might be Leonardo da Vinci's study of the proportions of the human body (1485–90), his *Vitruvian Man*, or man as the origin of form. This drawing and its name are, of course, derived from Vitruvius's *De architectura libri decem*, in which the author states that architecture was the "first of the arts or sciences to emerge and hence has a *prima facie* claim to primacy among the arts."³ The idea that this body inscribed by da Vinci in a circle is the origin of all things has been frequently explored. As Joseph Rykwert has written, "In the east of the Mediterranean basin ... in various Indo-European texts in Persia and in India, the creation of the universe as primal man, or even the creation of the universe *out of* his body, was also repeatedly sung and meditated. Inevitably, such scriptures are mirrored in rituals, such as those ancient ones concerned with the simplest fire altar, the elemental sacrificial ground. The best known of these, the ninetieth hymn of the *Rig-Veda*, suggests the creation of the cosmos and of society through a sacrificial dismembering of Purusa, the first man."⁴ In his work *Le nombre d'or*, Matila Ghyka points to the significance of the circular form as related to the human body by Vitruvius in deriving the basic north-south axis that was essential to the orientation of ancient architecture.⁵ From there, the subdivision of the circle by the inscription of a pentagon or, for example, a decagon was the basis of the proportions of much of ancient architecture, from Egyptian temples to the Pantheon in Rome, or again in the Renaissance with Donato Bramante's Tempietto.

If symbolism comes to reside in a form, be it architectural or artistic, is this not so because it is intimately related to perception? Such discourse is applicable not only to the distant past, but is very much an idea of the present, as exemplified in the influence of phenomenology on contemporary artists such as James Turrell. The French philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty, who greatly influenced Turrell, wrote: "... I create an exploratory body dedicated to things and to the world, of such sensitivity that it invests me to the most

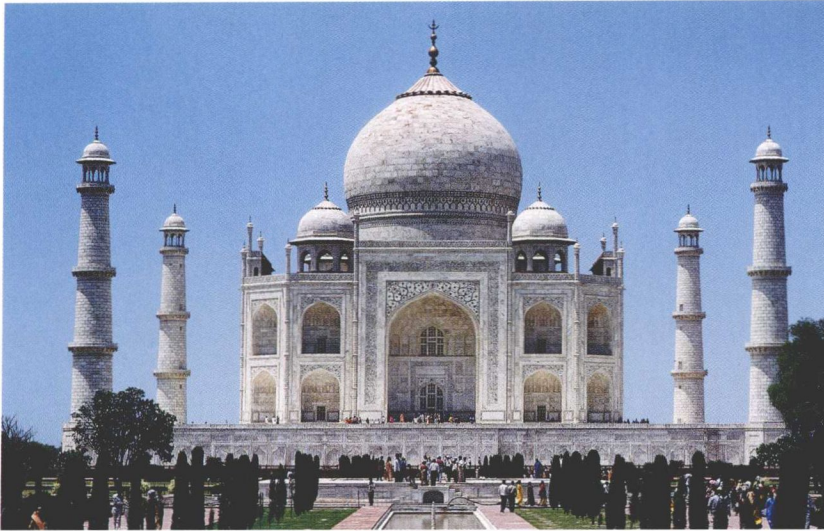


Alhambra, Granada, ca. 1350

profound recesses of myself and draws me immediately to the quality of space, from space to the object, and from the object to the horizon of all things, which is to say a world that is already there.”⁶ In the “world that is already there” art and architecture have always been one.

Palace of the Sky, Palace of the Earth

The number of examples that could be chosen to illustrate the intimate links between art and architecture throughout history is almost limitless. Indeed, there may be as many ways to define this relationship as there are cases in point. The union of art and architecture obviously reaches great heights in places of worship and palaces, where both forms of expression are placed at the service of an ideal, a belief, or an expression of power, and the role of the individual is subsumed in a collective purpose. The powerful connection between the *Elgin Marbles* and the Parthenon, one that endures over time despite physical separation, is a sufficient evocation of the breadth of this history to prove a point. Born of the most fundamental physiological and emotional needs, art and architecture, “from space to the object, and from the object to the horizon of all things,” are, like mind and body, inseparable. Beginning in the early Renaissance, with the rise of humanism, a different balance emerges, where art may represent architecture, and architecture, even in the service of church and state, begins to assume the aura of individual creativity. In his work *De re aedificatoria*, Leon Battista Alberti wrote in 1452 that “a building is a *kind of body*, consisting of lines and materials, in which the lines are produced by mind, the material obtained from nature.”⁷ It would take centuries before the “impression” of an artist alone would be judged sufficient to create a work of art, but it is no exaggeration to say that the flow of inspiration from three dimensions to two and back again is at the very heart of the history of both art and architecture.



Taj Mahal,
Agra, India, 1643

Such concepts of the fundamental unity and importance of the relationship between art and architecture are not reserved to Western or, indeed, Christian thinking. One of the great monuments of Islamic architecture was the fruit of the gradual retreat of the Moors from Spain, under the growing pressure of the *Reconquista*. The Alhambra was begun in 1238 by Muhammad ibn al-Ahmar, who, when King Ferdinand of Aragon laid siege to Granada, rode to his opponent's tent and humbly offered to become the king's vassal in return for peace. On which side of the dividing line between Christian and Muslim did civilization lie in Al Andalus in 1238? With its exquisite decorations and gardens, the Alhambra was nothing less than a vision of paradise on earth. Indeed, its forms are closely linked to verses from the *Qur'an*: "Unto those who do right shall be given an excellent reward in this world; but the dwelling of the next life shall be better; and happy shall be the dwelling of the pious! Namely, gardens of eternal abode, into which they shall enter; rivers shall flow beneath the same; therein shall they enjoy whatever they wish. Thus will God recompense the pious." (*Qur'an*, Surah 9:9–72)

The Taj Majal was the last and greatest architectural and artistic achievement of the Mughal period in Agra, before its builder, Shah Jehan (1592–1658), shifted his capital to what is now called Delhi. History has concentrated on the idea that the Taj Majal is a monument to love, since it began to be erected in 1630 in honor of Shah Jehan's wife, Arjmand Banu, yet the monument and its gardens carry a clear evocation of paradise as defined in the *Qur'an* and Islamic symbolism. Indeed, verses from the *Qur'an* inlaid in stone adorn both the gates and the Taj Majal itself. According to Islam, there are four rivers in paradise, a concept at the origin of the Persian *Charbagh* style of garden planning. Having passed through the main gate, itself an evocation of the entrance to paradise, the visitor to the Taj Majal discovers two marble canals that cross in the center of the garden, dividing it into four equal squares. The Taj Majal itself is elevated on a 95.5-meter-square plinth. The majestic dome that dominates the structure is placed in the center of this square and forms a perfect circle. It has frequently been written that in the symbolism of Islam, a square represents man, and a circle the divine. Da Vinci's *Vitruvian Man* is, of course, inscribed in a circle and a square, giving a humanist interpretation to shapes used by the Mughals to other ends, and yet years and continents apart, art and architecture fuse around the same essential forms. The fact that different religions and civilizations produce such similarities of symbolism and form is more than coincidence; it is proof of how deeply rooted the ties are between various other forms of artistic expression and architecture.

If the Taj Majal was, indeed, a representation of paradise on earth, it made reference to the *Qur'an* and to Islam. Buried beneath its faultless dome, Shah Jehan and his wife were surely that much closer to heaven. At the same moment, and half a world away, another vision of perfection was taking form near Kyoto, but this was a more worldly apparition, based on the art and literature of Japan. Prince Toshihito, the creator of Katsura, was born in 1579. Younger brother of Emperor Goyozai, Toshihito showed interest from an early age in literature, particularly *The Tale of the Genji*.

Written just after 1000 AD, *The Tale of the Genji*, which chronicles the life of an ideal courtier, is considered by some to be the first novel. Little is known about its author, Murasaki Shikibu, except that she was the daughter of a provincial governor who lived roughly between 973 and 1025. She could hardly have imag-

ined that six centuries later her words would be at the origin of one of Japan's great works of art and architecture, the Imperial Villa of Katsura. In the chapter of her work entitled "The Wind in the Pines," Murasaki wrote: "Far away, in the country village of Katsura, the reflection of the moon upon the water is clear and tranquil." As circumstances would have it, land south of the Katsura River, near Kyoto, came into the possession of Toshihito, who surely was aware of its literary significance. This area had also been the site of a residence modeled on the villa of the Tang-era poet Po Chu-I (772–846). Po Chu-I's poem *The Song of Everlasting Regret* (806) figures prominently in *The Tale of the Genji*. Little more than a melon patch when Toshihito began to transform the area, it was described in the records of Shokoku-ji Temple in 1631 as a "palace" used for moon-viewing parties based on *The Tale of the Genji*.

Toshihito died in 1629, but by 1642 his son Prince Toshitada began to renovate and expand the original structures. Toshitada expressed his desire to transform Katsura into an ideal place for the tea ceremony and he built several additional teahouses on the grounds. He also explicitly mentioned his wish to make the garden similar to the one in *The Tale of the Genji*. Although some sources credit the design of Katsura to the tea ceremony master and architect Kobori Enshu, it was also the product of the active interest of the princes who developed it progressively. As early as the 14th century, the cultivated nobility of Japan had rejected ornate architecture in favor of a search for harmony with nature, and Katsura represents an apogee of this esthetic sensibility called the *sukiya* style. But Katsura is more than the expression of a single style. Toshihito also used the so-called *shoin* style, which is more formal and orthogonal than *sukiya*. In 1658, Toshitada

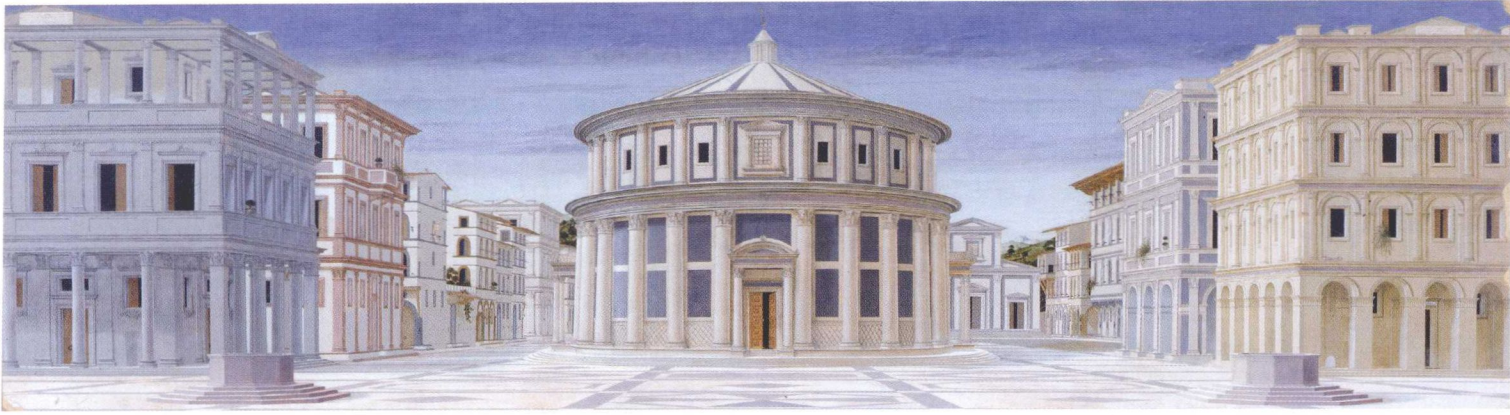
built the New Shoin at Katsura on the occasion of a visit of former Emperor Gomino-o.

Toshitada died in 1662 and his successors did not live long enough to continue work on the Imperial Villa, although Prince Yakahito (1703–67) did repair the structures without changing the fundamental composition of Katsura. When the family line died out in 1883, Katsura became a domain of the Emperor, but for historical reasons it fell into disrepair. Like many historical buildings in other countries, Katsura was not fully appreciated until much later, in Katsura's case not by the Japanese until the architect Bruno Taut arrived in Japan in 1933 at the invitation of the Japanese Association for International Architecture. Such was its state of neglect that on November 4, 1935, Taut wrote, "I can claim to be the 'discoverer' of Katsura." Taut and then Le Corbusier and Gropius were fascinated by Katsura's "modernity." They saw its undecorated orthogonal and modular spaces as parallels to contemporary Modernism, going so far as to identify Katsura as a "historical" example of modernity. The Modernists saw what they wanted to see in Katsura — the Mondrian-like simplicity of certain designs — while looking less at its rustic side, or at the "complexity and contradiction" that lies in almost every aspect of the buildings and gardens.

Later, Japanese critics and architects, at first strongly influenced by Taut, took up their own analysis of Katsura. Kenzo Tange felt that the villa was the result of a synthesis of two ancient Japanese cultures — the Yayoi and the Jomon, or the traditions of sophistication and a more rural, energetic spirit. As he wrote: "It was in the period when the

Katsura Rikyu, Shōkintei,
Kyoto, ca. 1660





Luciano Laurana (originally attributed to Piero della Francesca), *The Ideal City*, ca. 1420–79. Tempera on wood, 67.5 x 239.5 cm. Palazzo Ducale, Urbino

Katsura Palace was built that the two traditions, Jomon and Yayoi, first actually collided. When they did, the cultural formalism of the upper class encountered the vital energy of the lower classes. From their dynamic union emerged the creativity seen in Katsura.” More recently, Arata Isozaki has written about the fundamental ambiguity of the Palace: “I have not been able to see the Katsura in the same light as the Modernists once did. They selected what they wanted from the Katsura, its transparency, its functionally designed space. I have viewed it rather as a great mixture, as deeply ambiguous. I have taken its evolution as resulting from accidents and a certain opacity of design.” Clearly, Katsura is a secular masterpiece, an alliance of architecture and the arts of the garden or of décor. Like most great works, it can be read or understood by different visitors in different ways, and it remains a fundamental expression of Japan, or rather of universal culture. It did not evolve from the symbolic and religious vocabulary that informed the Alhambra or the Taj Majal, but from a sense of beauty and harmony that is the quintessence of an ancient culture. Where modernity sought the *gesamtkunstwerk*, the total work of art, the Japanese found it in Katsura almost four centuries ago. Though animist currents run deep in Japanese culture, Katsura was a triumph of humanist vision, an ideal of beauty as expressed and designed for this world and not for the hereafter.

The ways in which Christian churches have combined art and architecture over the centuries have been amply studied. In its turn, Christian architecture has provided powerful inspiration to painting, for different reasons depending on the period concerned. An enigmatic fragment of an architectural painting attributed to the Flemish painter Jan van Eyck — the *Retable de la Chartreuse de Champmol* (1443) representing architecture — might symbolize many of these efforts. In 1363, Jean le Bon, King of France, named his son Philippe le Hardi Duke of Burgundy. The Duke created the Chartreuse de Champmol, a Carthusian monastery, near Dijon in 1384. Philippe le Hardi had formed close ties with Flanders on June 19, 1369, when he married Marguerite, sole heir of Louis de Male, Count of Flanders. Beginning in September 1377, and until 1410, some of the greatest artists and artisans of the time, from Burgundy, Flanders and other areas, worked on the Chartreuse de Champmol, destined to become the place of burial of the Dukes of Burgundy. The work was directed at first by Drouet de Dammartin, an assistant to Raymond du Temple, architect of the Louvre under Charles V, and brother of Guy de Dammartin, the architect of the Duke of Berry. The sculptors Jean de Marville and Claus Sluter from Holland worked on the project, as did the painter Melchior Broederlam, the wood-carver Jean de Liege and Robert de Cambrai, who created the stained-glass windows. The Chartreuse de Champmol did not survive the Revolution, its works of art were sold on April 30, 1791, and its church and other structures razed in 1792, and yet through texts and surviving pieces it remains one of the most remarkable historic examples of collaboration between the greatest artists and architects of a period.

Even after the completion of the Chartreuse, the successors of Philippe le Hardi continued to enrich its works of art. On May 19, 1425 Jan van Eyck entered the service of Duke Philippe le Bon, and certainly painted an *Annunciation* for the Chartreuse. Van Eyck is considered to be the founder of Renaissance painting in Flanders and the Netherlands. He was influenced by the realism of the Limbourg brothers and the use of light in the work of Robert Campin, also called the “Master of Flémalle.” The presumed fragment (from the Paris Decorative Arts Museum) of an altarpiece representing rather fantastic religious architecture shows the painter’s mastery of architectural form, even if he is indulging here in pure invention. It is speculated that Van Eyck’s vision is not of any particular church, but indeed of a paradisiacal ideal that may have been