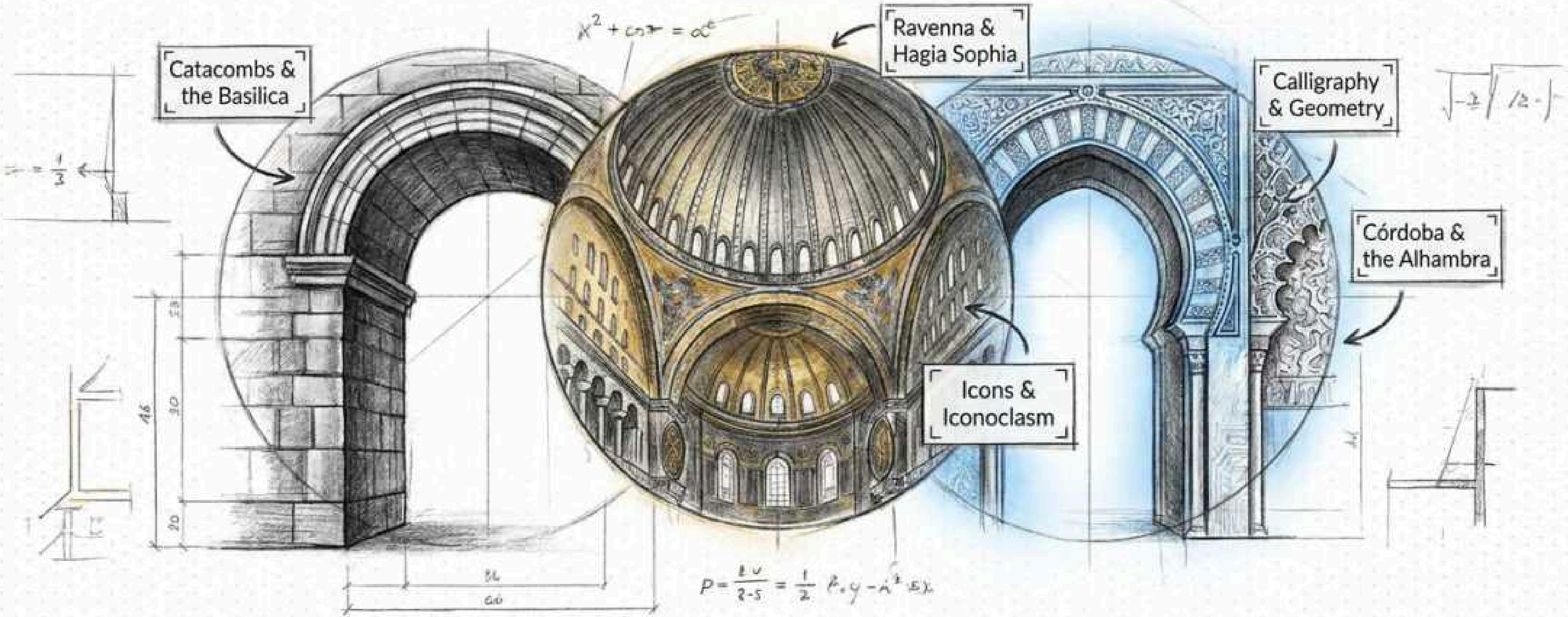
Faith in Gold and Geometry

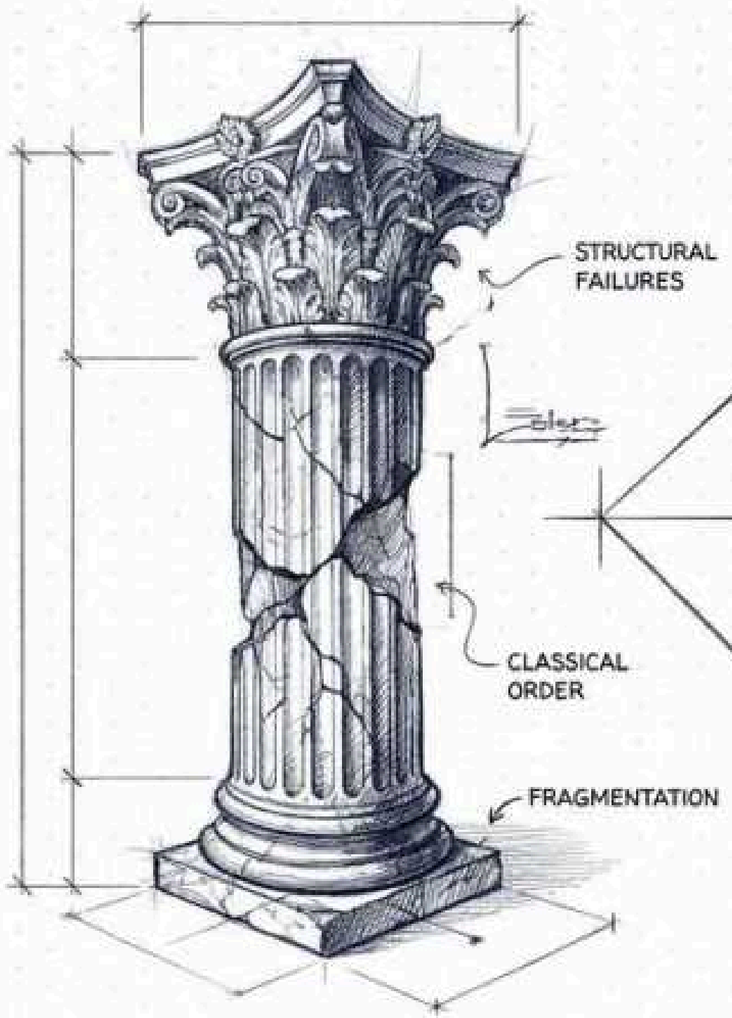
Early Christian, Byzantine, and Islamic Art — Lecture 5

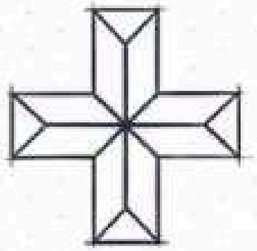


Gemini Notebook

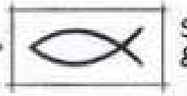
The Roman world transforms into three distinct paths.

¶ 5.2

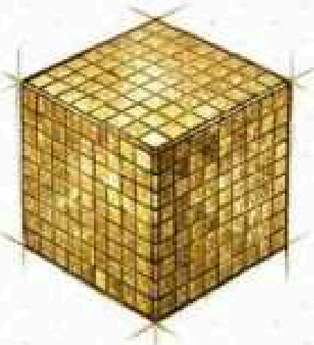




Early Christian Art



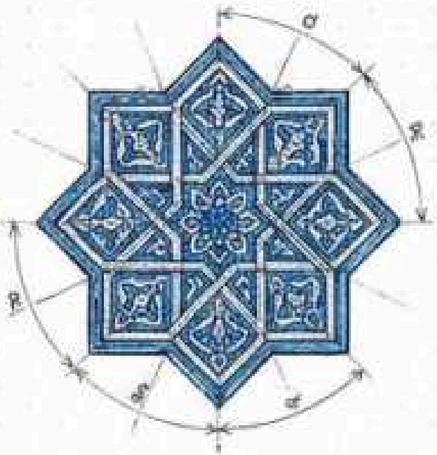
SYMBOLISM & SIMPLICITY



Byzantine Art



IMPERIAL GOLD & DIVINE LIGHT



Islamic Art



GEOMETRY & ANICONISM

ARCHITECT'S

Old Forms + New Faith = New Meaning

Gemini Notebook

From hidden catacombs to open congregations.

¶ 5.3

Pre-313 CE: The Catacombs

Underground cemeteries during persecution.

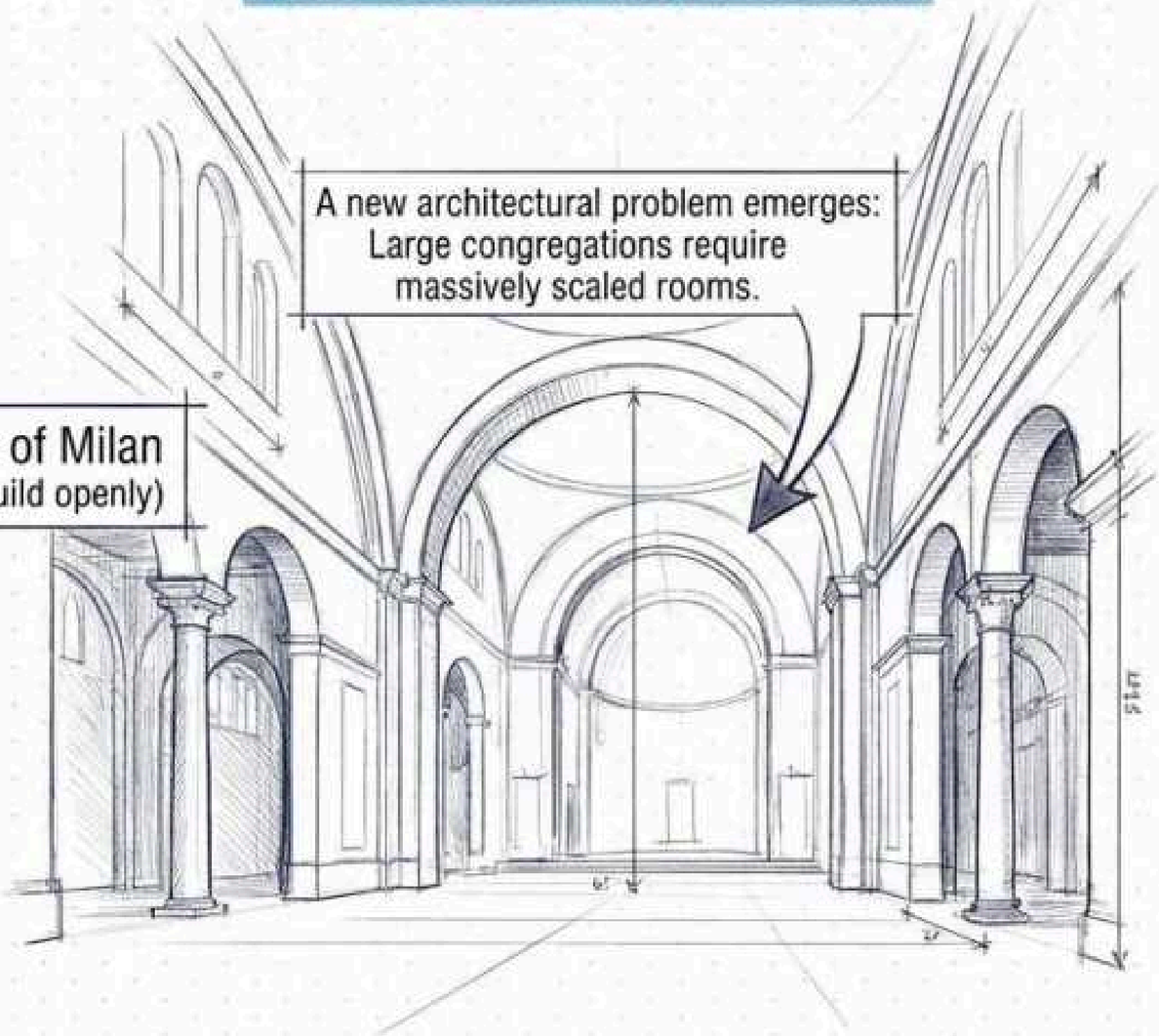


Roman style carrying new meaning:
Shepherd = Lamb; Fish; Vine.

313 CE: Edict of Milan
(Christians can build openly)

Post-313 CE: Above Ground

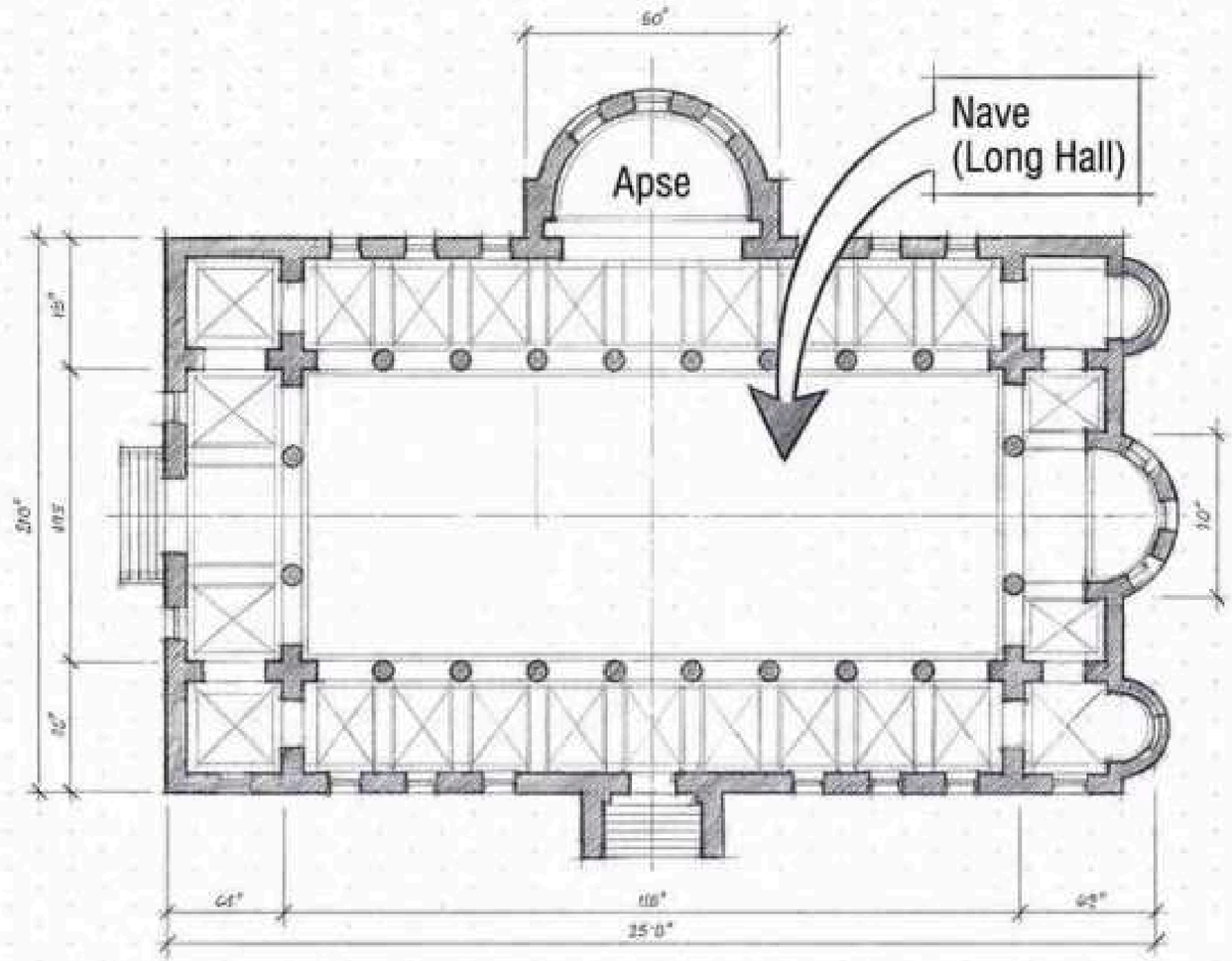
A new architectural problem emerges:
Large congregations require
massively scaled rooms.



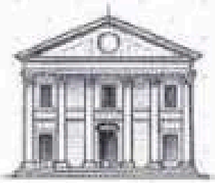
Gemini Notebook

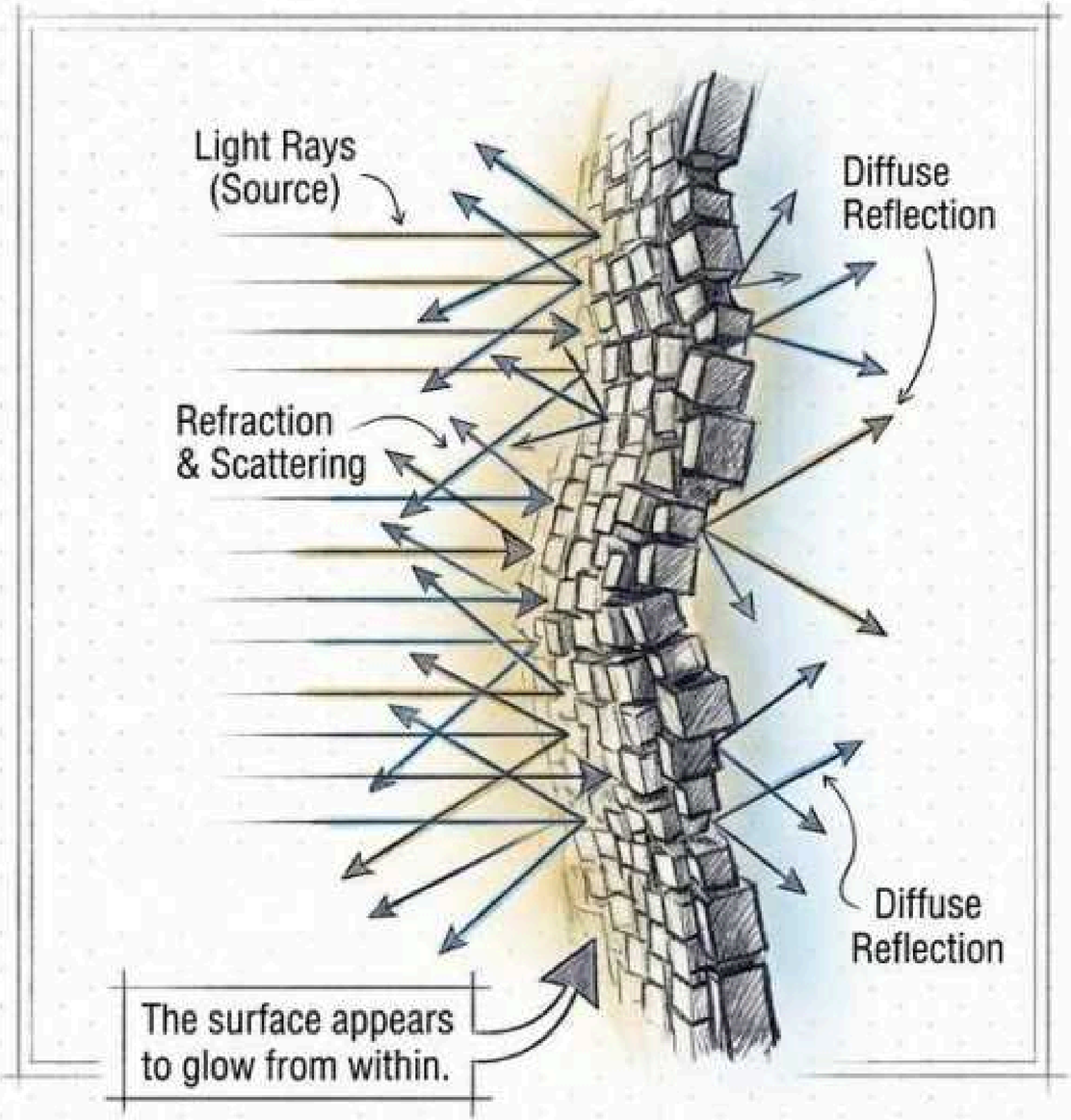
Borrowing the Roman basilica and lining it with light.

¶ 5.4



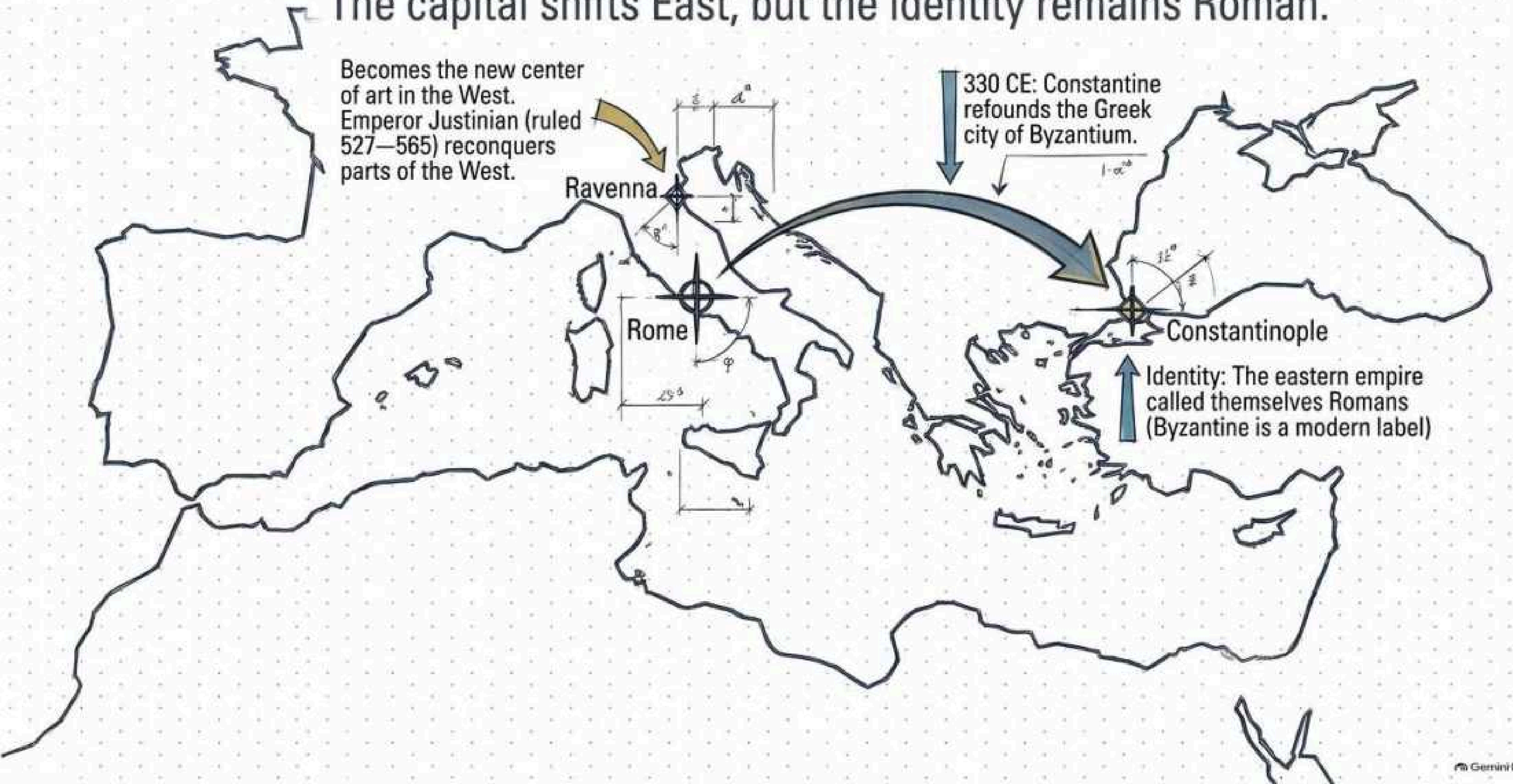
Borrowed directly from Roman public buildings.
Key Example: Santa Maria Maggiore, Rome (430s).





Gemini Notebook

The capital shifts East, but the identity remains Roman.



Gemini Notebook

The Byzantine Style prioritizes spiritual order over street reality.



Pose: Figures stand in rows, front-facing.

Anatomy: Large eyes, elongated bodies.

Lighting: Zero shadows cast.

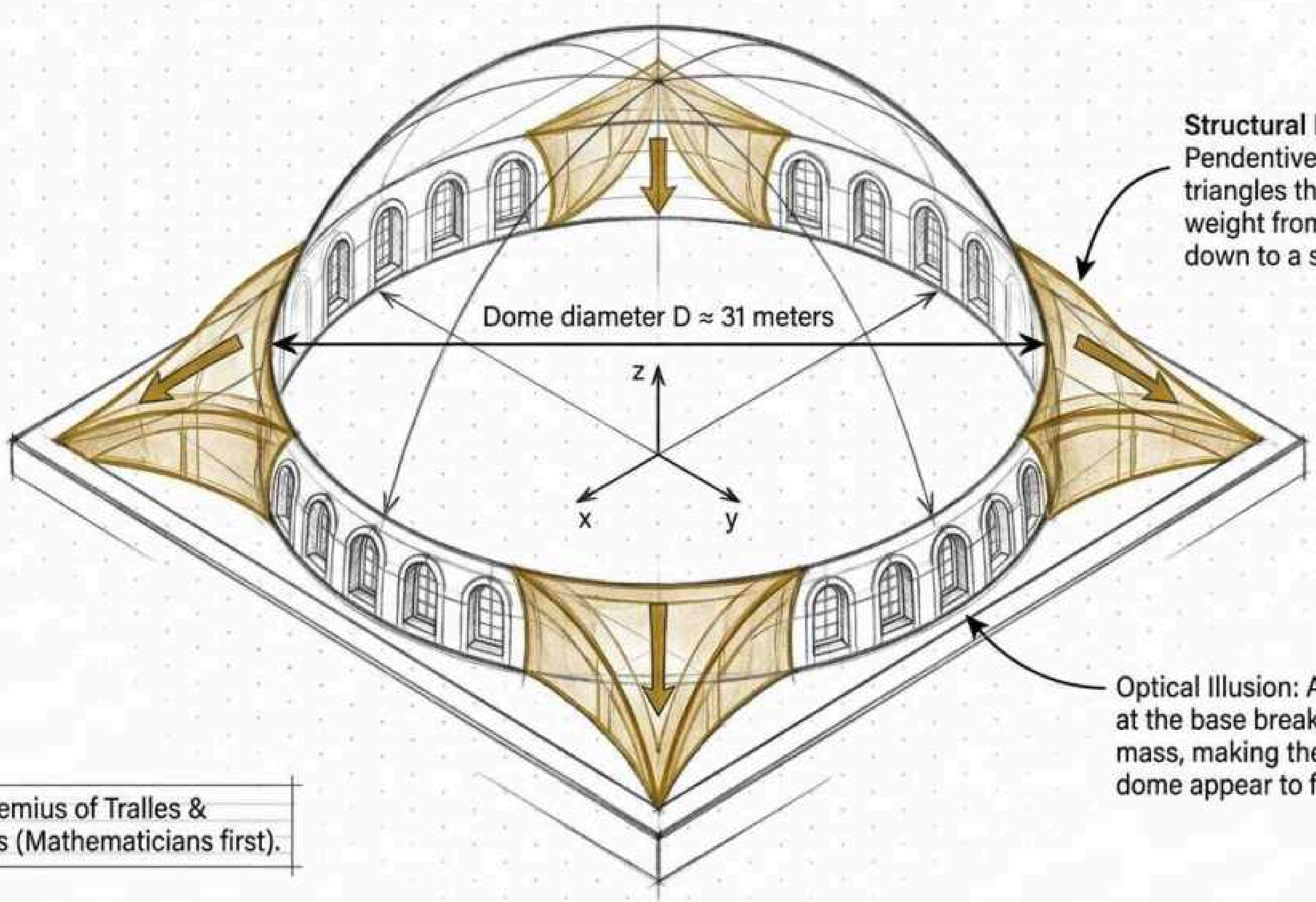
Space: Figures float against a solid gold background.

Subject: Justinian, Theodora, and their courts (Church of San Vitale, Ravenna).

Core Insight: The art is designed to show eternal spiritual hierarchy, not optical, earthly reality.

Gemini Notebook

The mathematics of a floating dome at Hagia Sophia.



Structural Innovation: Pendentives — Curved triangles that transition the weight from a circular dome down to a square base room.

Optical Illusion: A ring of windows at the base breaks the visual mass, making the massive dome appear to float.

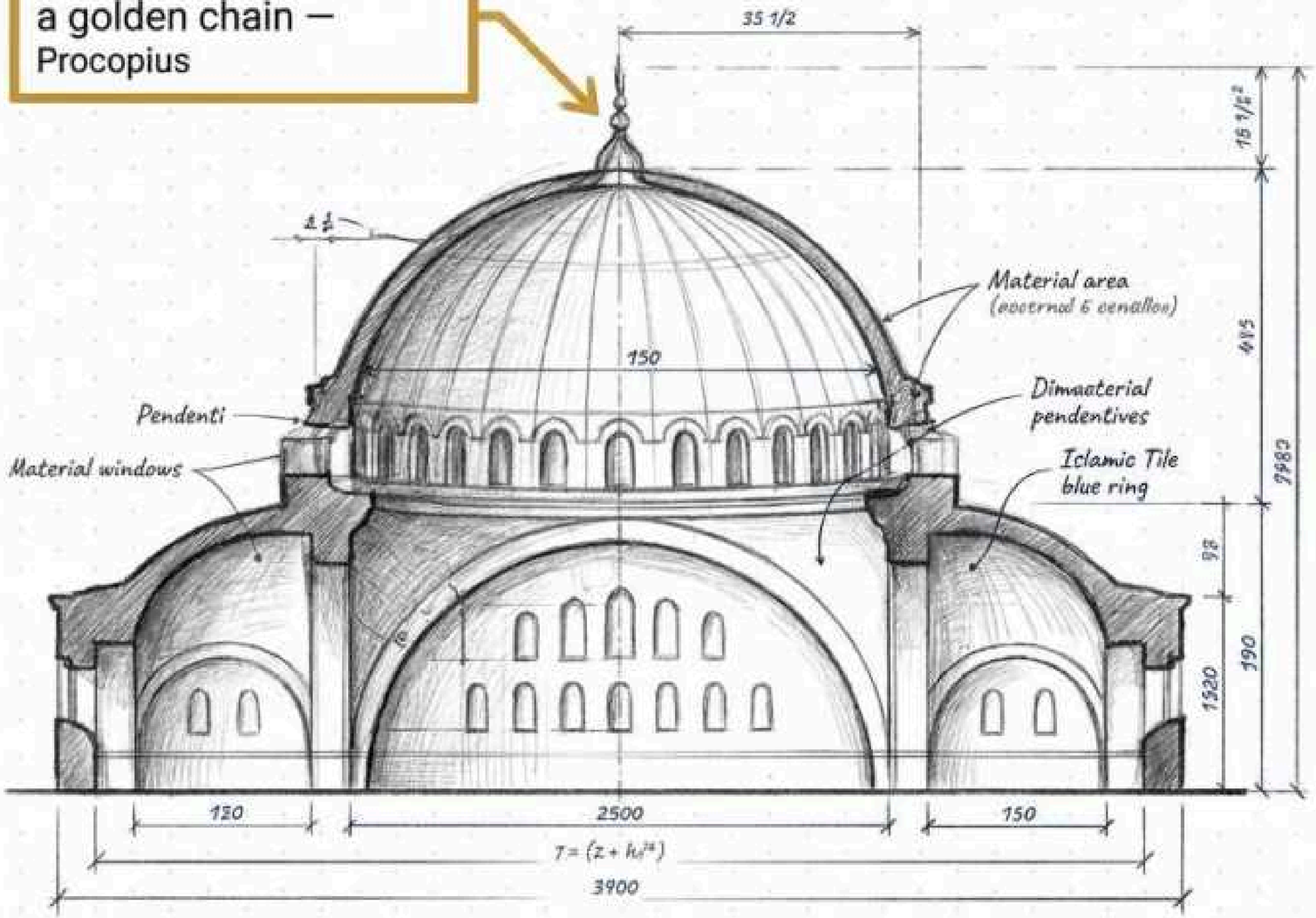
Architects: Anthemius of Tralles & Isidore of Miletus (Mathematicians first).

Gemini Notebook

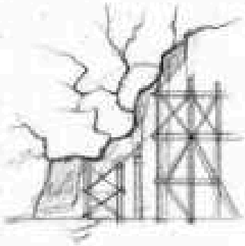
A monument that shaped empires and outlasted them.

¶ 5.8

Hung from heaven on a golden chain — Procopius



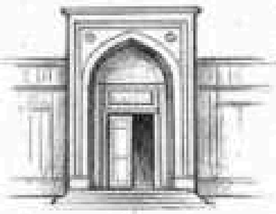
558 CE: Earthquake. Part of the dome falls; it is rebuilt higher.



1453 CE: Ottoman conquest. Converted to a Mosque — Shapes the design of all future Ottoman mosques.



1935 CE: Converted to a Museum.



2020 CE: Returns to a Mosque.



Gemini Notebook

¶ 5.9

Icons as doorways for prayer, not mere pictures.

Definition: Painted panels of Christ, the Virgin, and the saints.



Stern (representing the Divine Judge).

Gentle (representing the Human Savior).

Theological Function: Believers engaged with these images not as artwork to be looked at, but as portals to pray through.

Gemini Notebook

Iconoclasm: The crisis of image-breaking

Wave 1 (726–787) | Wave 2 (815–843)

The Emperors

FRACTURE ZONE

THEOLOGICAL CONFLICT

The Defenders
(Leader: John of Damascus)

Note structural images for a force field

EMPEROR'S EDICT

INCARNATION PRINCIPLE

Action: **Ban** and destroy religious images.

Notes snot of religious images.



Argument:
Images equal **Idolatry**.

There an ov in the revered



Argument:
The **Incarnation** — God took human form in Christ, therefore God can be **visually shown**.

Gemini Notebook

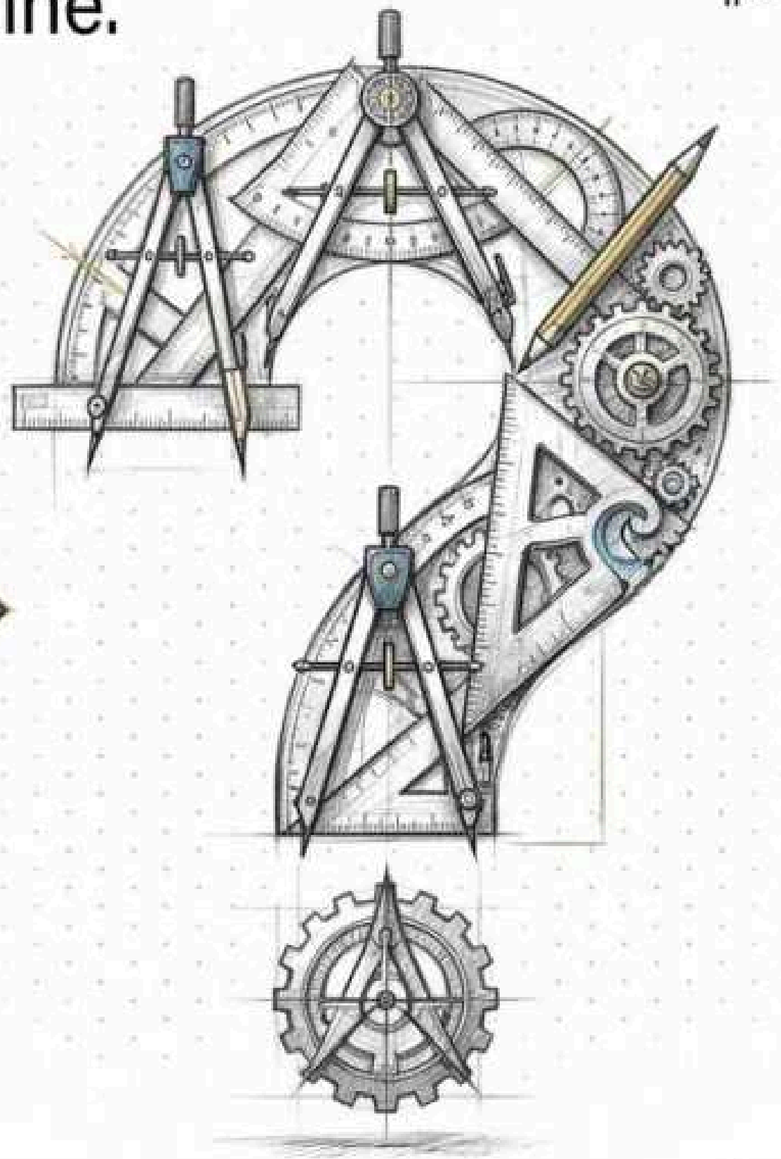
The enduring controversy of visualizing the divine.



The Pivot Question:

How should we picture the sacred?

The Core Lesson:
Art has always been fundamentally controversial.



Resolution: 843 CE — Images restored
(Still celebrated in the Orthodox church today).

Preview: Different faiths demand entirely different answers.
The next tradition makes a radically different choice.

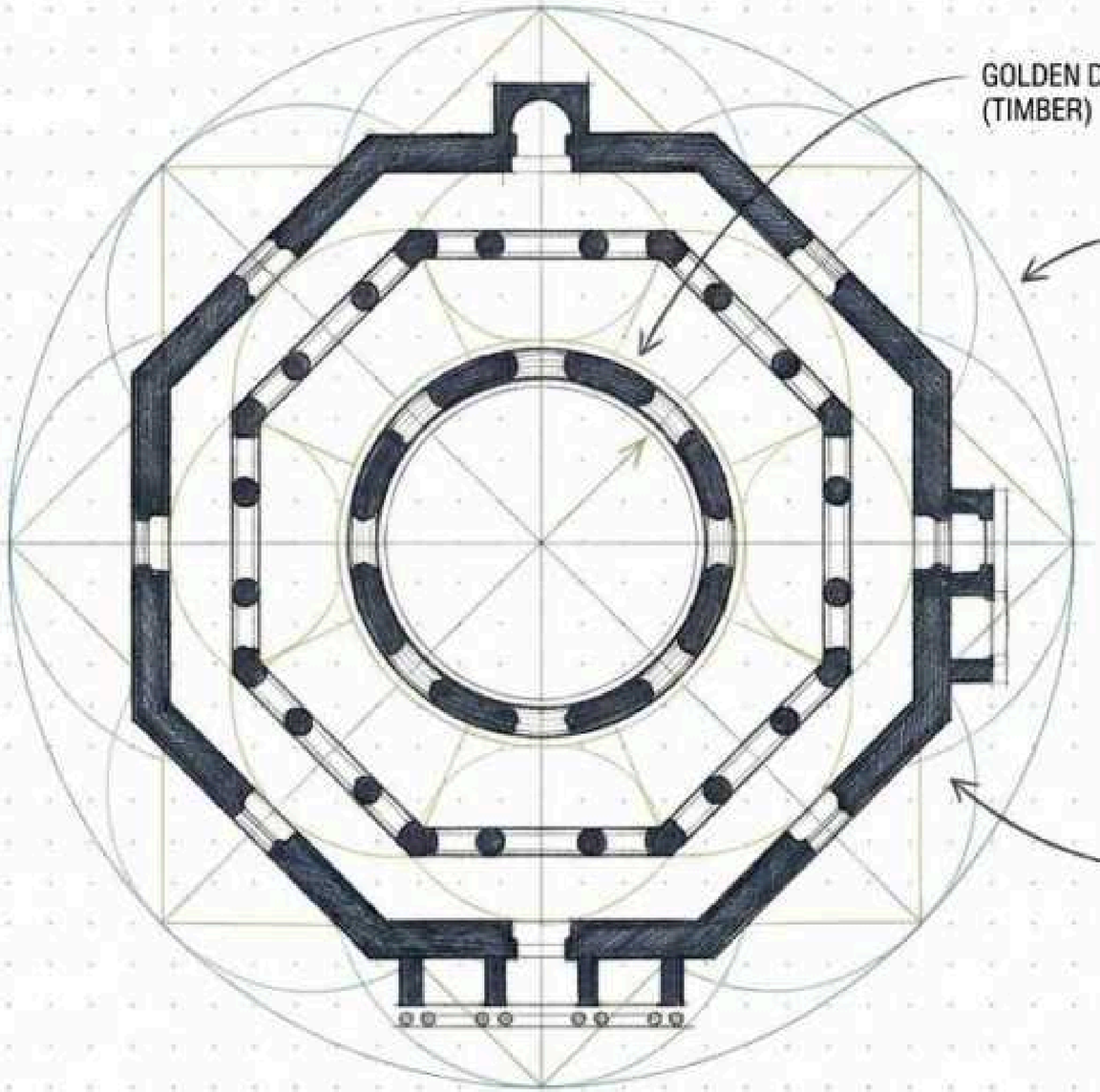
Gemini Notebook

Islam expands rapidly with a new visual vocabulary.

Context: 7th Century Arabia — Rapid spread of a new faith.

The New Rule: General avoidance of images of living beings in religious art.

The Alternatives: Writing, Geometry, Plant forms.



Key Monument: Dome of the Rock, Jerusalem (691–692, Caliph Abd al-Malik).

Features: Perfect eight-sided octagon, golden dome, glittering mosaics filled with vines and inscriptions.

Gemini Notebook

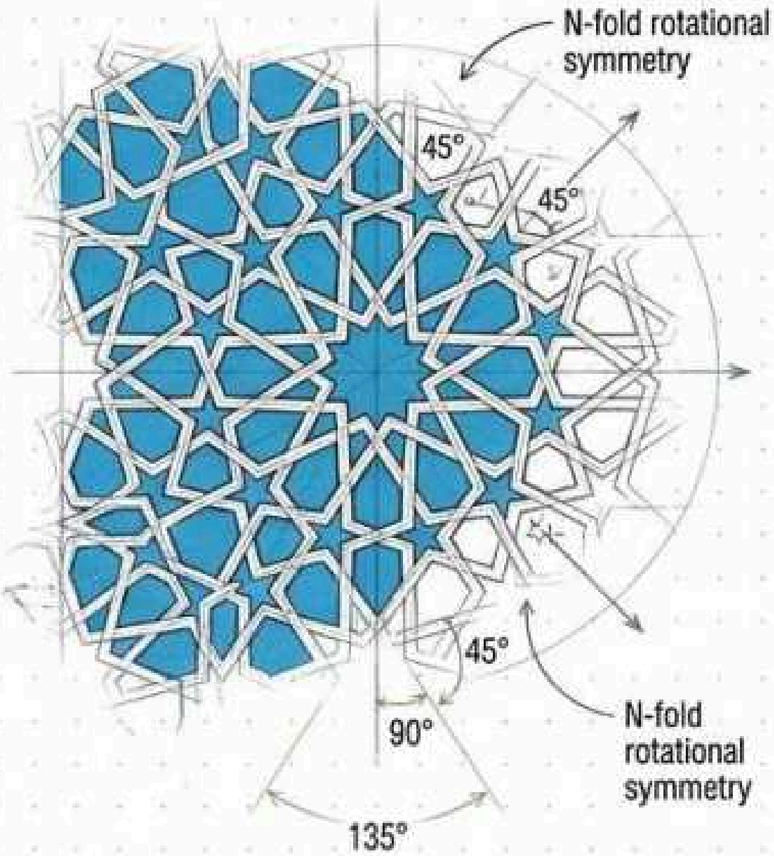
The three pillars of Islamic ornamentation.

Calligraphy
(The Highest Art)



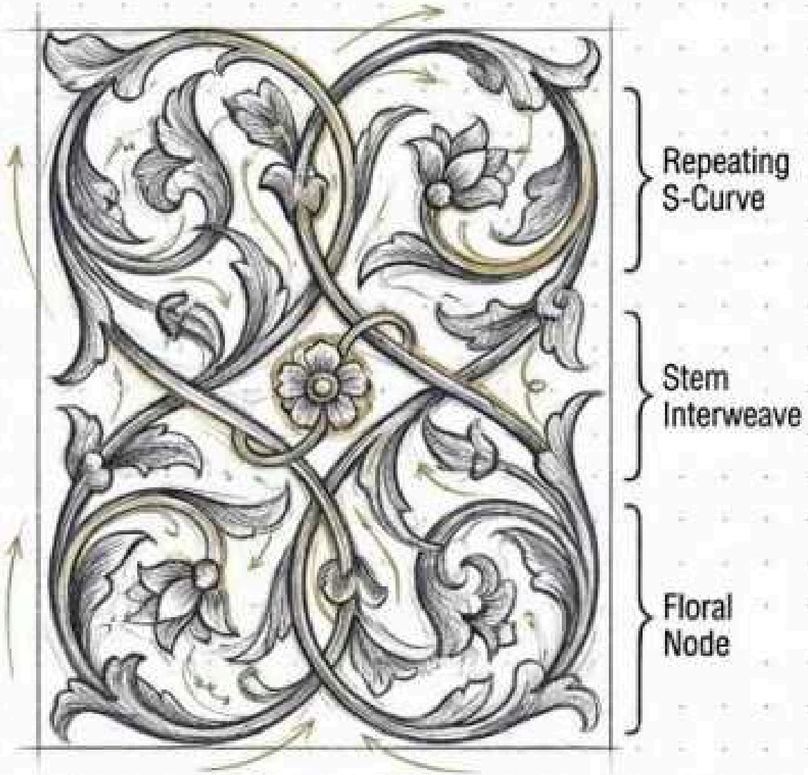
Reason: The Qur'an is regarded as the literal word of God.

Geometry
(The Infinite)



Reason: Stars and polygons repeating without end suggest cosmic infinity.

Arabesque
(The Rhythm)

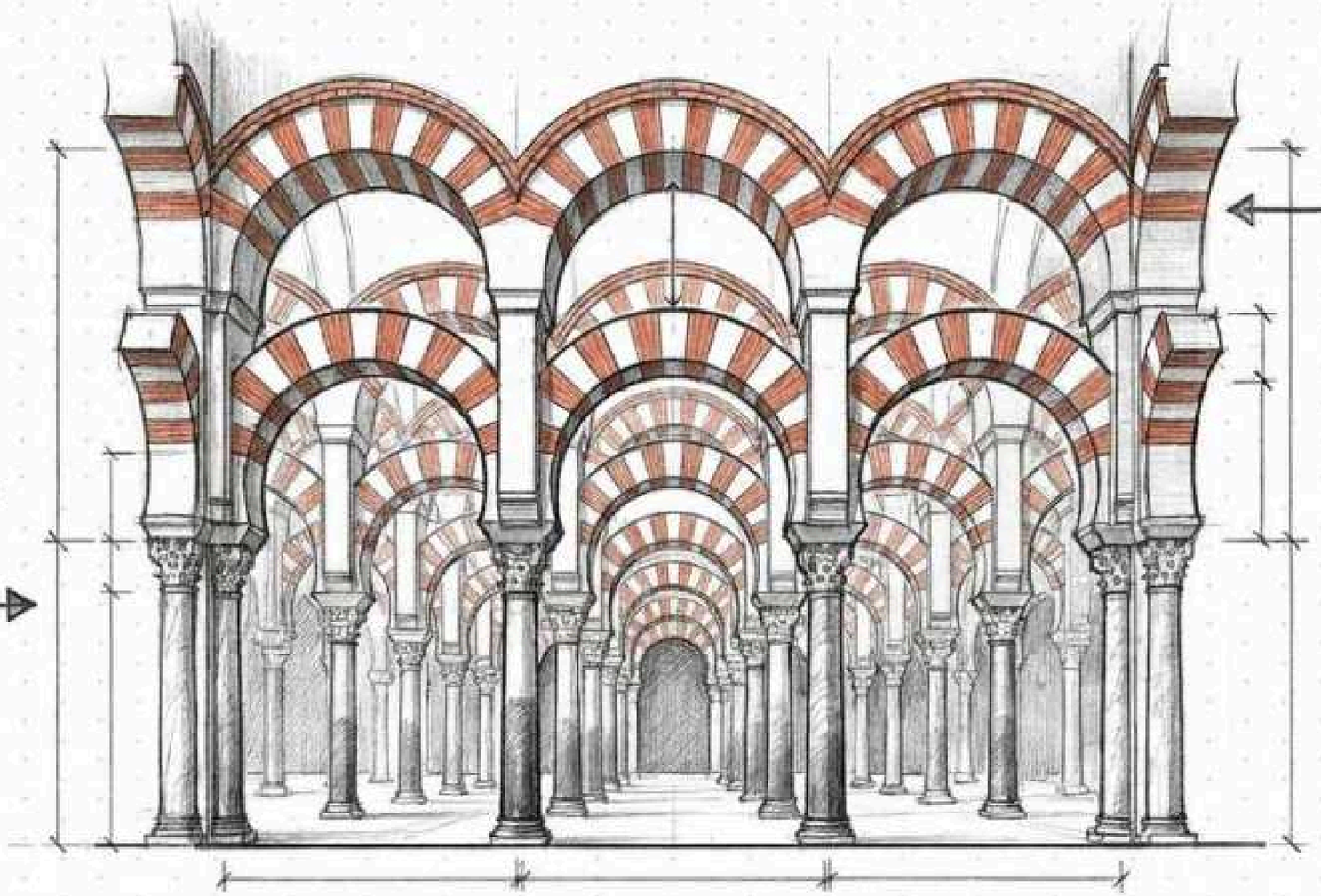


Reason: Plant curves filling surfaces create visual rhythm.

Gemini Notebook

A forest of columns at the edge of the Islamic world.

Monument: Great Mosque of Córdoba, Spain (begun ~785 (begun ~785 under Abd al-Rahman I).

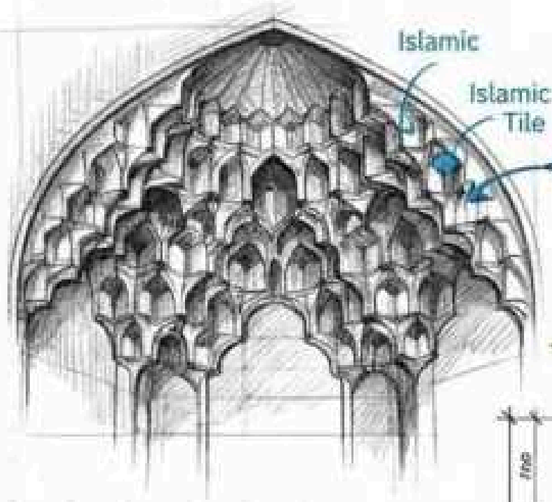


Structural Design: A massive prayer hall utilizing double arches to increase roof height.
Materials: Alternating red brick and white stone.

Historical Layering: Enlarged over two centuries. Following the 1236 Christian conquest, a Renaissance cathedral nave was built directly inside the mosque structure.

Gemini Notebook

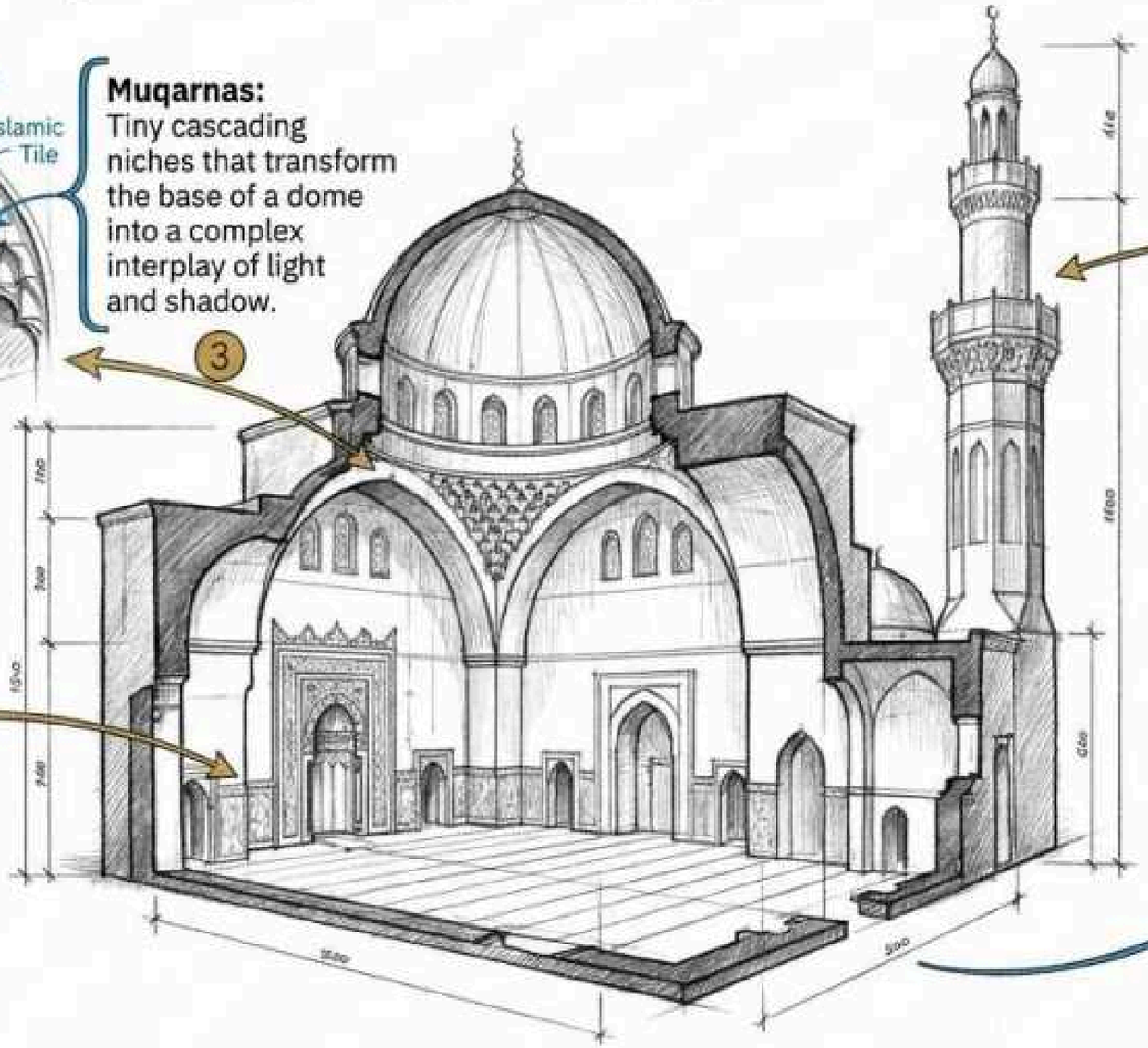
Anatomy of a Mosque: A space for prayer, not a house for a statue.

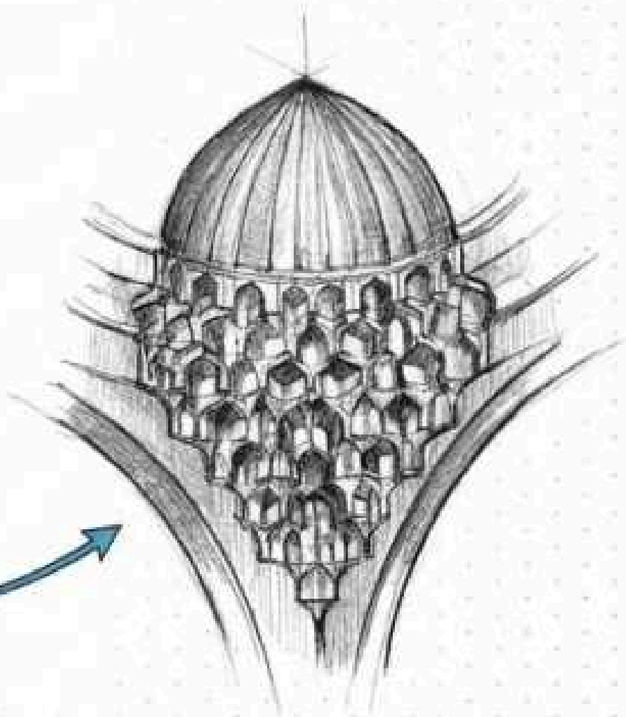


Muqarnas:
Tiny cascading niches that transform the base of a dome into a complex interplay of light and shadow.

Mihrab:
A dedicated niche in the wall indicating the exact direction of Mecca.

Minaret:
The exterior tower utilized for the call to prayer.





Gemini Notebook

Sensory design in the palace, and figures in the secular page.

¶ 5.16

The Alhambra (Granada, 13th–14th c., Nasrid dynasty): A sprawling palace-fortress.

Sensory Elements: Stucco carved like lace, poems carved directly into stone, flowing water running through courtyards.

Important Caveat: Islamic art was not entirely without figures. Secular books of history and poetry in Persia, Turkey, and India frequently featured illustrations of living beings.



Gemini Notebook

Crossing Borders: Styles are rarely pure.

¶ 5.17

Case Study:
Great Mosque of Damascus
(706–715)

Input A (Byzantine Craft)

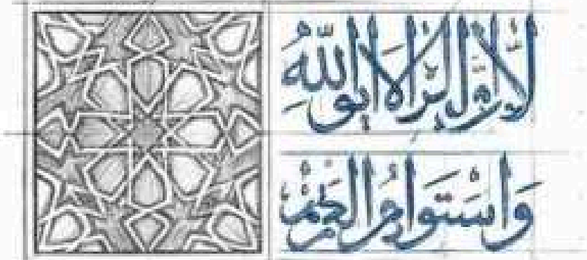
Emperor sends mosaic craftsmen.
(Technique: Gold backgrounds, trees, rivers, buildings)





Input B (Islamic Constraints)

The Caliph's commission rules.
(Rule: Absolutely no living beings)

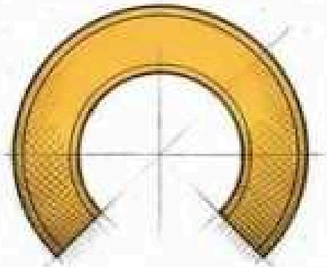


Fusion the lalvony techniques ot mmethed. (Meniobately to livne figures or some figures).

The Output:
Artists borrowing from neighbors to create an entirely new hybrid style.

Gemini Notebook

The Lecture Question: How should a culture show the sacred?

 **The Byzantine Choice**	 **The Islamic Choice**
• Approach: Holy figures rendered in gold. • Meaning: The divine is personal, relatable, yet ordered by spiritual hierarchy. • What is Gained: A human face for prayer (rooted in the Incarnation). • What is Lost: The risk of literalism and idolatry.	• Approach: Writing, geometry, and infinite pattern. • Meaning: The divine is rhythmic, infinite, and beyond human form. • What is Gained: A profound sense of cosmic infinity and absolute monotheism. • What is Lost: The relatable, human scale of the divine.

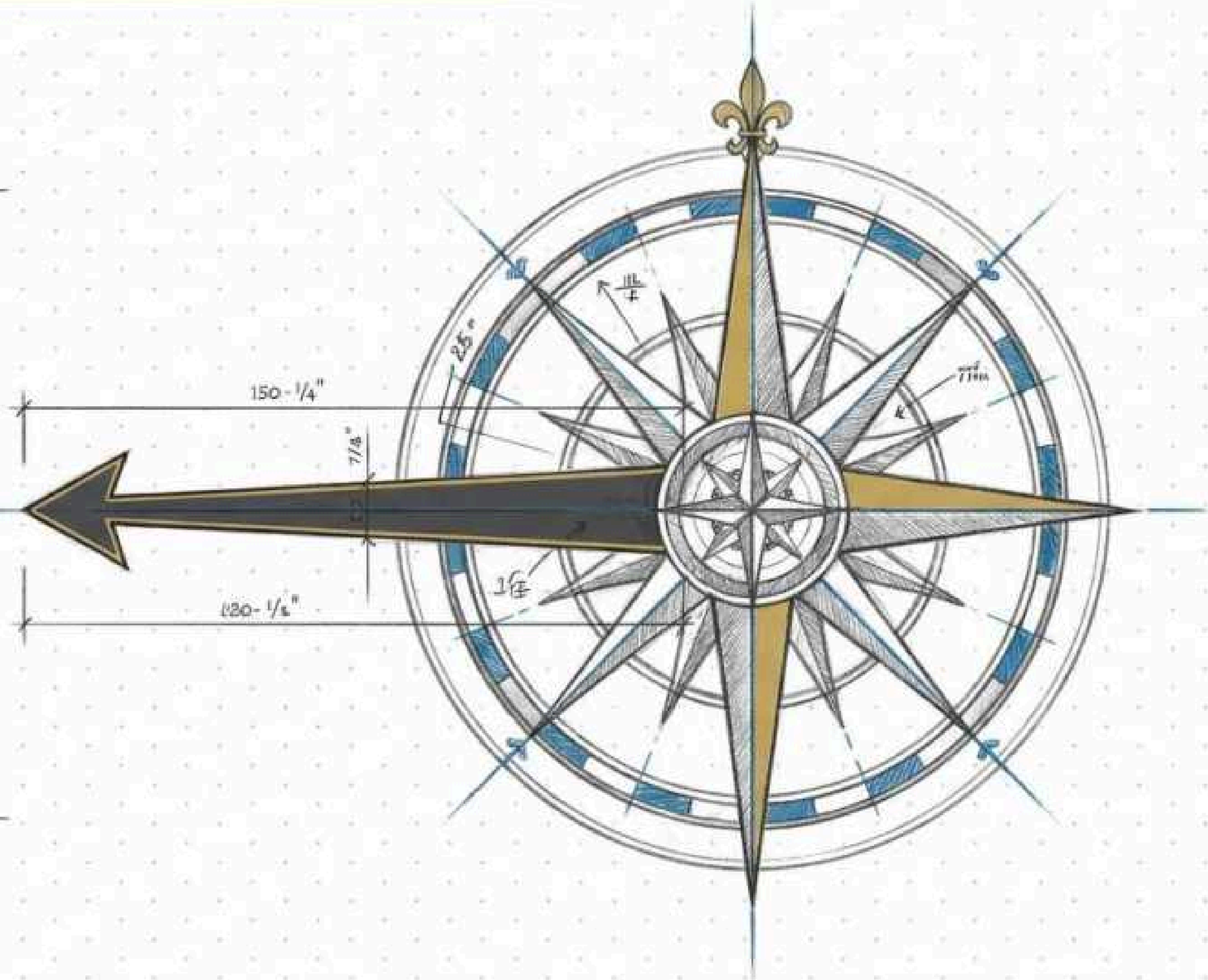
Gemini Notebook

Looking Ahead: Crossing to Western Europe.

¶ 5.19

Next on Lecture 6:

- Illuminated manuscripts.
- Romanesque churches.
- Gothic cathedrals (architectures filled with light).



Gemini Notebook