Column, Architectural Encyclopedia Article

Column, Architectural

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Early construction methods relied on pillars and beams to support roofs and wall openings, and wood and stone were the most common building materials. As temples and public buildings became more sophisticated in their construction, however, pillars became columns, beams became cornices, and detailed reliefs and paintings embellished buildings. The column grew out of a desire to build higher structures. Stone pillars were extremely heavy and difficult to obtain and maneuver, while the column could be assembled in pieces. Though its segments were not light, moving an 8-ton portion of a column was easier than maneuvering an 88-ton pillar. Adding artistic detail to column segments was also less difficult.

Though columns are found at the Great Pyramid of Zoser in Egypt, built around 2600 B.C., the ancient Greeks were the first to make extensive use of them. The Parthenon at Athens is the best example of a columned Greek structure. Its columns each boast 11 marble segments of about 9 tons (8 tonnes), reaching a total height of 33 ft. (10 m). The Greeks designed three distinct styles of column: Doric, Ionic, and Corinthian.

The Romans, too, relied heavily on columns, in some cases adopting Greek styles with little modification, and in others creating additional styles, specifically Tuscan and Composite. The style of a column can often be identified by its capital, the section at the top that tapers outward. The Corinthian capital features detailed leafwork, while the Ionic column ends in a scroll and the Doric has a flat slab. Some columns feature smooth shafts, while others are channeled.

Columns reappeared on the architectural scene during the Greek revival period in the newly independent United States. Many official buildings in Washington, D.C. mirror the grand constructions of ancient Greece. Southern plantation owners also favored columns, generally constructing them of wood or cement, while columns in government buildings were made of stone, true to the original. Office buildings of the late 1800s and early 1900s often featured ornamental columns on upper stories and facades.