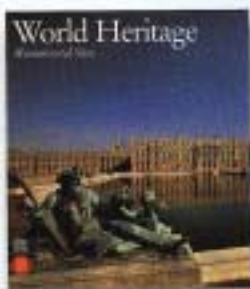


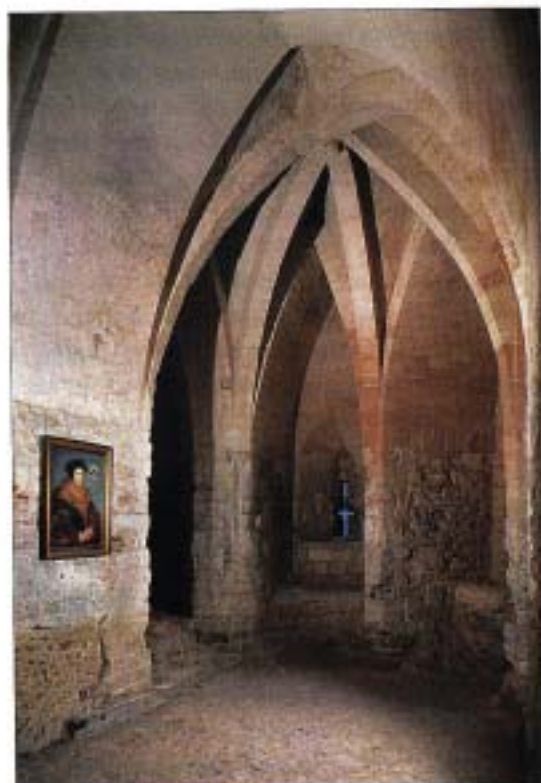
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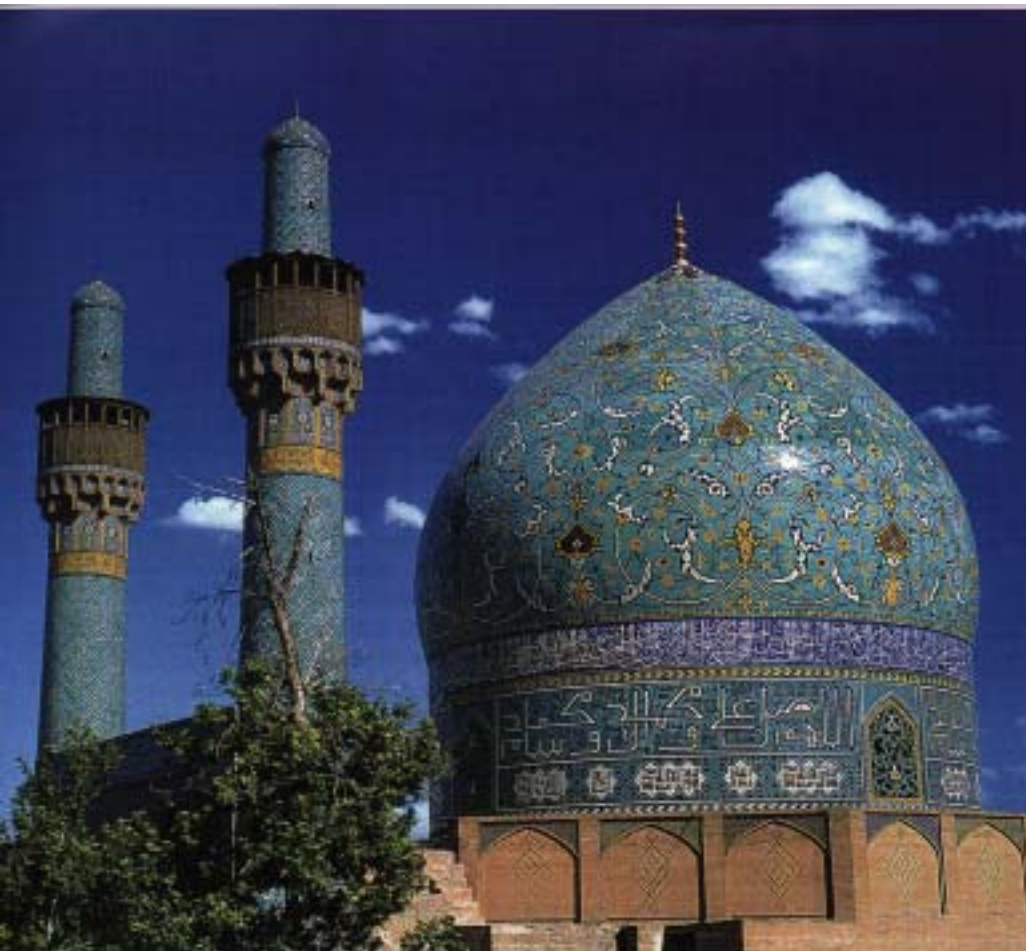
The Treasury of World Culture: Monumental Sites, UNESCO World Heritage. UNESCO Paris and Skira Editore, Milan, £33

THIS is the second volume in a planned series of three on UNESCO-declared World Heritage Sites, and captures the reader's eye from the start. The frontispiece is a beautiful double-page illustration of one of the great wheels of the carriage of the sun, at Konarak, India: the oblique sunlight reveals the intricately and deeply carved stone surfaces. The next photograph is also superb; it contrasts the roughness of the uncut rock at the back of the Sphinx's neck with the polished detail of its face and hair.

Then follows the main course of this visual feast, spread over 360 pages and covering 47 monumental sites on four continents, with an accompanying text that conveys the unique setting and qualities of each site. Especially breathtaking are images of Leonardo da Vinci's *The Last Supper*, in Milan, the 14th to 17th-century Kremlin, the imposing 14th-century Castel del Monte near Bari, Italy,



The cell at the Tower of London in which Thomas More was imprisoned. The Tower is a UNESCO World Heritage Site



Above, the lavish Mosque of the Shah – Masjid-i Shah – at Isfahan, Iran, 11th-15th century. Right, the great pyramid of Chephren (2520-2494 BC) at Giza, on the outskirts of Cairo

and the heavily Rococo Pilgrimage church in der Wies, Bavaria.

Each entry in the book receives two to three pages of text that describe the history and development of the site. This text is augmented by illustrations and a secondary text in the form of an extended caption, giving brief portraits of notable personalities associated with the site and its buildings, as well as providing obscure and intriguing pieces of information. One such fascinating morsel relates to the magnificent Cathedral of Chartres, dedicated to the Virgin Mary: the site previously held a sacred oak grove where a spring and a female fertility goddess were worshipped. She was associated with another image known as Our Lady Underground, who was the first of a series of Black Madonnas who were venerated here. For those interested in such esoteric subjects, further investigation would lead to the origin of many early Christian sites, from Palestine to northern Europe, that are known to have pre-Christian origins extending back into the mists of time. The cult of Black Madonnas was certainly popular in medieval France, and may also be the inspiration for the 11th-century coat of arms of the Port of Leith in Scotland.



Descriptions in this book occasionally debunk myths, as in the story of Shah Jahan, who, it was claimed, ordered the master craftsmen's hands to be cut off, the calligraphers' eyes gouged out and the architect beheaded when the Taj Mahal was completed so they could never build a similar monument! – a range of fates that some might think appropriate for a few of today's architects.

This particular entry in *The Treasury of World Culture* is followed by a cultural and architectural discussion that includes the extraordinary idea that the Taj Mahal was designed by a European – a suggestion soundly refuted. On an adjacent page there is a wonderfully evocative image taken in that hazy light of sunrise in hot countries: a minaret, an arched *iwan* and the distant entrance building, with a khaki-clad mosque servant in the foreground, his head protected by a scarf against the early morning chill as he sweeps a vast paved area with a twig broom.

When describing the elaborate 17th-century Masjid-i Shah mosque in Isfahan, central Iran, technical details of the tile manufacture are included to explain the visual differences between the uniformly coloured enamelled ceramic tiles of the Timurid period, and the later seven-coloured tiles of the Safavid period (which speeded up decoration, but produced a less precise colour distribution). No guide book has explained this difference so succinctly; even that giant of Persian art scholarship, Arthur Upham Pope, in his small volume *Introducing Persian Architecture* avoids giving a technical reason when he remarks that "the enamel tile which covers the whole interior of the Masjid-i Shah is inferior to mosaic faience of preceding centuries, or even to its own outer portal". There are other similarly interesting gems scattered throughout the book.

It was disappointing that neither the authors nor the researchers are acknowledged – despite their magnificent contribution. Should a reader wish to follow up a particular point of interest there is no identifiable individual to contact; such contacts can benefit both author and questioner.

However, the editorial team must be congratulated, especially Marcello Francone and Serena Parini, respectively responsible for design and layout: the flexible page layout successfully brings together relevant texts and pictures and assists the reader's cross referencing, making this a very readable and enjoyable book.

This volume is indeed a treasury of world culture; it whets the appetite for further travel and by far surpasses, for example, the Sunday paper travel sections – and without, of course, bringing one down to earth with depressing references to travel and accommodation costs.

Dr Archie Walls