The great Roman Empire which spread through Southern and North-Western Europe, Northern Africa, and Western Asia, formed the roots of European culture. The Roman tradition was founded on local traditions, enriched by the work of conquered peoples, of whom the great Greek nation provided the richest influences. Before the Roman era there was skilled race of builders in Italy, known as the Etruscans, famous for their development of the round arch as a bold architectural feature, and also having a tradition of temple building on lines not very dissimilar from that of the Greeks. Upon the bold adventurous Etruscan traditions of building the Romans skillfully grafted the beautiful Greek classic orders, and developed out of these rich ingredients of the magnificent Roman style which has been the inspiration of all the most cultured periods of European art since their days.

In particular, they evolved orders following the general characteristics of their Greek models, but translated into terms more suited to the Roman mood and manners. They converted the Doric order, which the Greeks made so imposing and massive as almost to obstruct the practical uses of a building, into a more slender order, with bolder cornice and mouldings. The Romans were less happy in their treatment of the Ionic order, though their use of the special type of capital showed a readiness to progress.

It is in the Corinthian order that the Romans excelled and here they produced a sumptuous composition of great beauty, fitting in most suitably with the lavish spirit and scale of their buildings. The Roman Corinthian order is, in fact, a much more mature feature than its Greek counterpart, and it was natural that it should become the one they favoured most. The Romans also produced two additional orders of their own, the Tuscan, which was a simplified and sturdier Doric, and the Composite, which was an Ionic with a necking of acanthus leaves in the Corinthian manner.

The Roman temple was generally more similar the Etruscan temple in plan and proportion, though Greek feeling. The cella was more spacious inside, and less long and narrow than the Greek, and the porticoes were deeper, and approached by bold flights of steps between dwarf walls up to lofty platform or podium. The interiors were also more considered than the Greek, being roofed with a vault, and terminated by a semicircular feature called an apse.

The Romans used the classic orders with more freedom than the Greeks did. In temple architecture, the order remained, like the Greek orders, a literal expression of column and beam construction. As such, it is comparatively easy to understand the connexion between the structure and its architecture, a relationship we have already seen to be of the utmost importance in the art of building. But the Romans used the orders in other and less obvious ways, making of them finely developed features giving dignity and scale to a structure which was not of column and lintel construction. They used them in conjunction with arched work, spacing the columns more widely apart than it would be possible if the lintels were unsupported between the columns, and filling in the intervening spaces with arched openings, the arches of which gave the stone lintels intermediate support. The famous example of this kind of design is the Colosseum in Rome, where the treatment is carried out in three superimposed storeys of orders, with a fourth plainer storey above. It is a little difficult to justify by logical argument this combination of architecture expressing one kind of construction with building carried out in another, and Roman work of this type has sometimes been adversely criticized as comparing unfavourably with the honest purity of Greek architecture. The outstanding point about such work as the Colosseum is that it does create a fine effect which gives great pleasure to us when we see it, with its great sweeping lines affording a fresh aspect to each design unit.