

OPERCULA

(LONDON COAL PLATES)

Sketched by
ÆSCULAPIUS JUNIOR

Introduction by
Raymond Lister



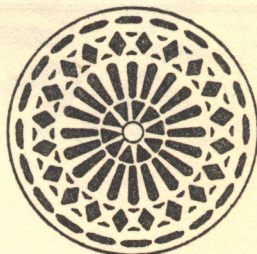
Cambridge :
THE GOLDEN HEAD PRESS

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INTRODUCTION

THE drawings reproduced in this little book are a unique record of a bygone artefact—the cast iron coal plate cover for the chutes once used to feed fuel into the cellars of urban houses. Many specimens survive, giving a surprisingly hollow echo to a footstep, but essentially they belong to the days of those tall city houses, without front gardens and with cellars close to or beneath the pavement, that were built in rows in Victorian times.

The drawings were made by a young medical student who was working in London in the 1860s, at the height of the Foundry Age, when every imaginable (and sometimes unimaginable) object was cast in iron: furniture, stoves, garden seats, chessmen, cooking utensils, pavement kerbs, coffins, urinals, pumps, spittoons; gates windows, bridges, even ears for roundabout horses are but a few random examples.¹ But let us quote the words of the artist himself, Dr. Shepherd Taylor, ninety years old in 1929, to show how his record originated.

¹ See my *Decorative Cast Ironwork in Great Britain* (Bell, 1960.)

"The coal-hole *opercula*² herein illustrated were all sketched by me in the year 1863, when a medical student at King's College Hospital, London, when that institution was situated in Portugal Street, in the vicinity of the Strand. I was a lodger, at the time, in Argyle Square, near King's Cross, in which district my attention was first drawn to the great variety of devices on the *opercula*.

"I determined to try to reproduce them on paper, and, although I had no particular artistic skill or genius, I found no great difficulty in making a fair sketch of the more simple devices. In process of time, as my hand got more accustomed to the work, I was able to tackle successfully the more complicated patterns. I took no actual casts from the *opercula* themselves; but simply made notes in my pocket-book of their characteristic features. My eyes got so accustomed to the work that I could immediately recognise the smallest difference between any two *opercula*, without comparing them one with another. I might have added largely to the series, if I had remained in London; but at the close of my curriculum I had more important duties to attend to in my native county."

What a variety of design is here! It is amazing that the founder, or more accurately, the pattern maker could derive such inspiration from simple squares and circles. The designs were functional, too, for the raised patterns served to prevent the pedestrian from slipping on a too-smooth surface, the perforations to allow ventilation into the cellar.

² The Latin word *operculum* means a cover, covering or lid, and is used by zoologists as a name for the plate over the entrance to a mollusc's shell or for the apparatus that protects the gills of a fish. Perhaps it is a somewhat pedantic word for the homely coal plate. But since it was Dr. Shepherd Taylor's choice we will, in the present work, retain it.

Some are as delicate as snow crystals (p. 23 Euston Road, p. 16 Bernard Street), some seem to have been inspired by the patterns produced on Jacob Perkins's Improved Rose Engine, used among other things for making the engraved background patterns on the penny black postage stamp (p. 16 Bayham Street, p. 23 Portland Place), some remind us of the late Gothic Revival (p. 31 Newcastle Street, p. 25 Rupert Street), some are almost Japanese (pp. 13 and 27 Oxford Street, p. 26 King Street), others are purely functional (p. 11 Regent Street, p. 30 Wardour Street, p. 31 Gray's Inn Road). The variety is indicative of the rich elaboration of design in all artistic activities during Victoria's reign. Yet here, for once, we feel that it is not misplaced. Perhaps it is because the metal itself, with the constant wear and tear from walking, running or shuffling feet moving on its surface, acquires an accidental beauty that no pattern, however unnecessary or over-elaborate, can add to or take away. Or it may simply be that here and there, floating on the bare surface of the pavement, these discs and squares are like abstract flowers in an otherwise arid field, bringing a note of flippant gaiety into the often depressing city surroundings.

It is easy to see how some of the designs have been made : a ruler and a pair of dividers would account for many. On the other hand some are inspired. The charming chequer pattern from Portland Place (p. 22) is brilliant, though quite simple, and the same may be said of the pattern of concentric rings from Bernard Street on p. 29 made into a meritorious design by the simple expedient of cutting a depression through all but the three outer and the innermost rings. One or two are lamentably weak, and of these the worst are the two strange designs, one from Tottenham

Court Road on p. 14 with its weedy thistle and shamrock, the other from Regent Street on p. 21 with its odd concentric arches.

The identity of the designers is unknown. Doubtless they were ordinary artisans, pattern makers told off by their employers to make something suitable for a stock line. Each was, indeed, repeated many times, often in thousands, for it is possible, once the founder has a wooden pattern, to repeat a casting *ad infinitum*. Some of the designs reproduced here may be seen in towns and cities all over the country, for many still remain in use. I have seen some (for example Wardour Street, p. 9, Hunter Street, p. 10, Argyle Square, p. 16) in cities as far apart as Cambridge, York, Exeter, Manchester and Carlisle.

Extensive though Dr. Taylor's collection is (there are one hundred and fifty designs), it is, as he himself admitted, not exhaustive.³

One type which he did not illustrate is that on which the founder's name formed part of the design; nor does he mention that some have glass discs or beads let into them, to allow a little light to percolate into the cellar. A delightful combination this, distantly related to the art of stained glass, for there, too, metals (lead and wrought iron) are combined with glass to provide light added to strength, but with the decorative functions reversed: in *opercula* the decorative aspect is reserved for the metal, the glass is a functional addition. Also absent from Dr. Taylor's collection are those *opercula* made for the grand patron, with lettering in brass inlay, such as may be seen outside Spink's in King

³ One or two not included in the present book were reproduced in an article "Design underfoot" by Anthony Robinson. *Typographica* 7 (May 1963) pp. 33-45.

Street, St. James's. Nearby, in St. James's Street are *opercula* with oriental inlay.

As old terrace houses are pulled down and replaced with modern structures, coal plates are disappearing, for the house of the 1960's has no coal cellar, nor its owner a maid to drag the scuttles up and down the stairs. For this reason alone we should be grateful to the young medical student of just over a hundred years ago for his hobby, for, with the enthusiasm of a brass rubber, he placed on record much that might otherwise have been forgotten.⁴ Several designs he illustrates may already have disappeared, and in years to come, none perhaps will be left. But with his drawings we can, in imagination, follow him on his rounds through the streets of Victorian London, and share his delight in these flat discs and squares of decorated iron.

RAYMOND LISTER

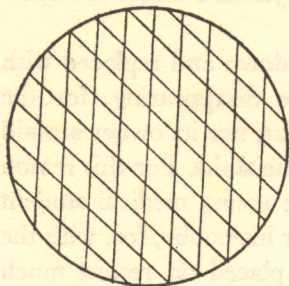
NOTE

In the illustrations which follow, some plates are without captions. They are thus in the original edition.

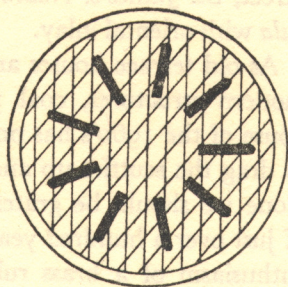
The following streets no longer exist: Upper King Street, Whittlebury Street and Newcastle Street.

⁴ In this connexion it is interesting to note that a successful exhibition of coal plate covers was held at Gallery One, London, in 1962, at the opening of which Mr. John Betjeman spoke appreciatively of their design and regret over their fast disappearance from the London streets. One firm sells equipment for taking rubbings of coal plate covers. It is Phillip's Antique Shop, 50 Kensington High Street, W.8. It also has a good selection of original opercula.

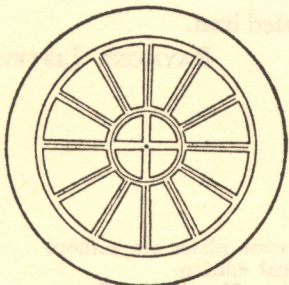
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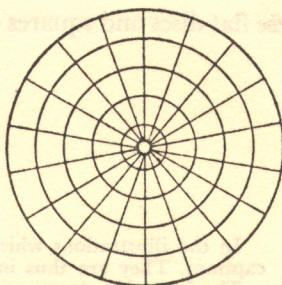
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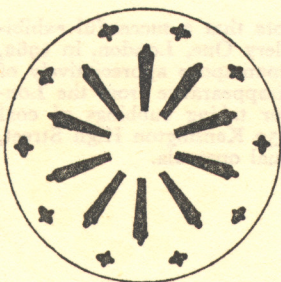
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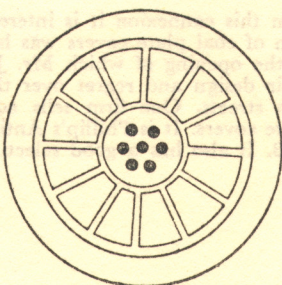
Lincoln's Inn Fields



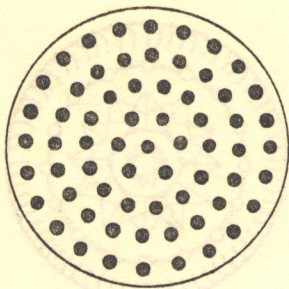
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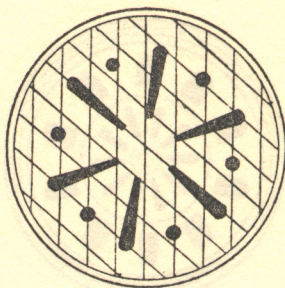
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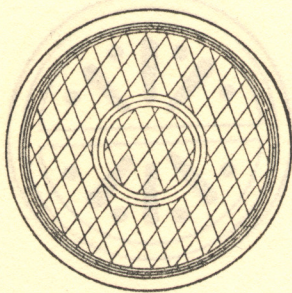
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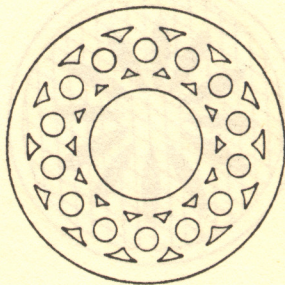
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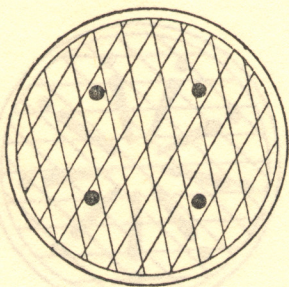
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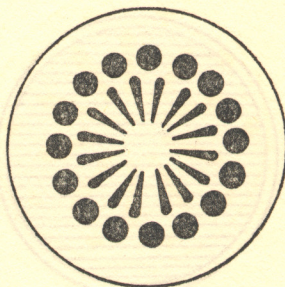
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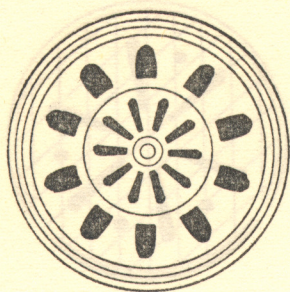
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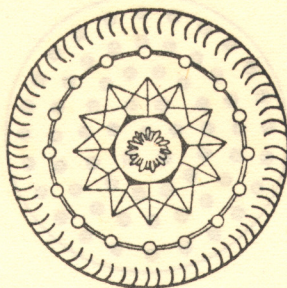
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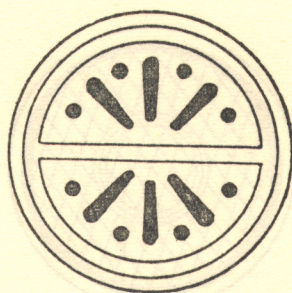
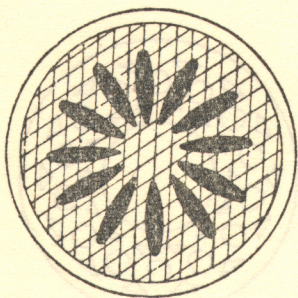
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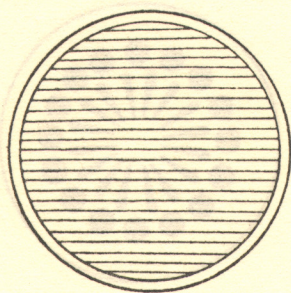
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Argyle Square



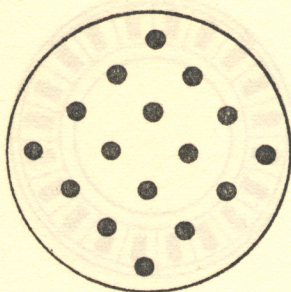
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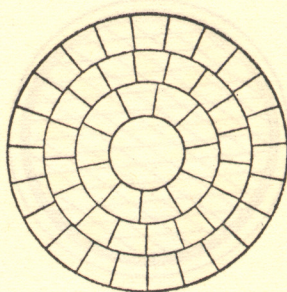
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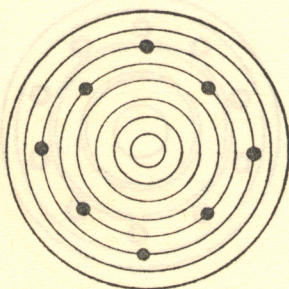
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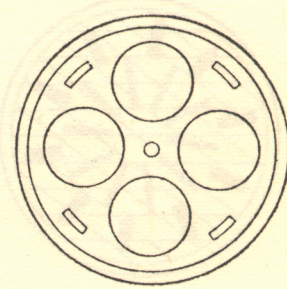
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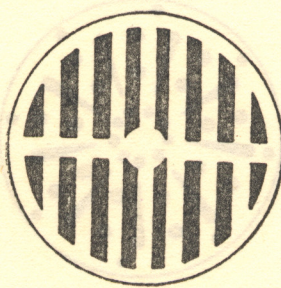
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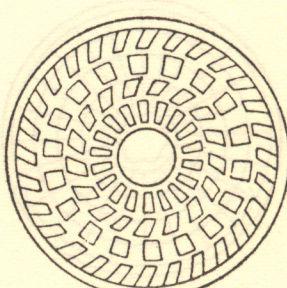
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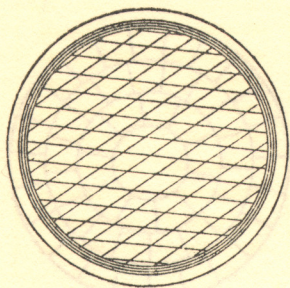
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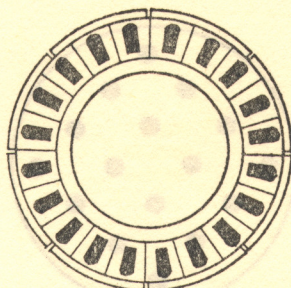
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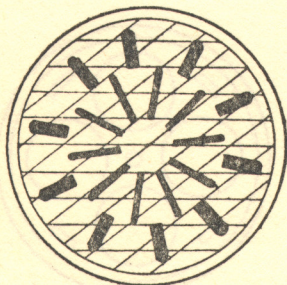
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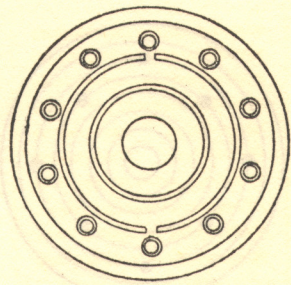
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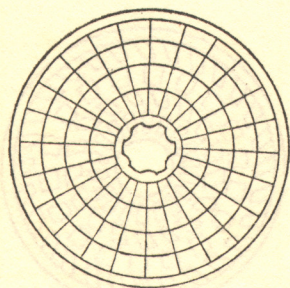
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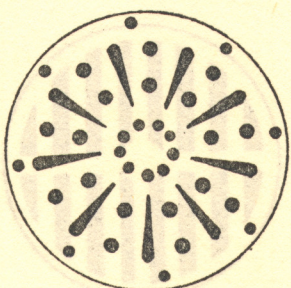
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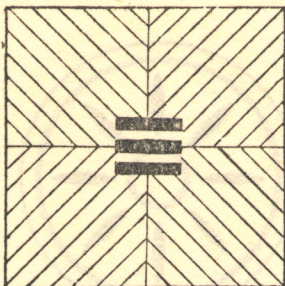
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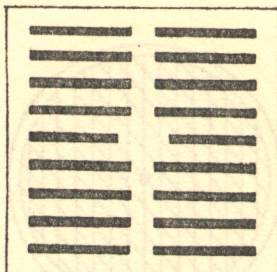
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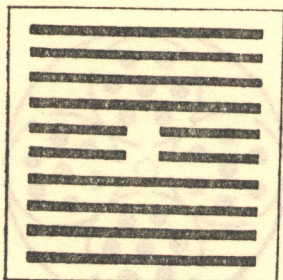
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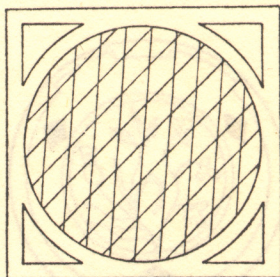
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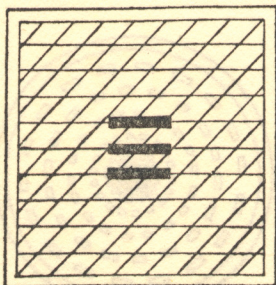
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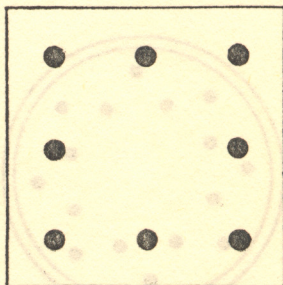
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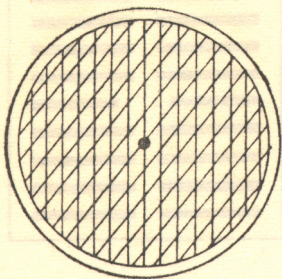
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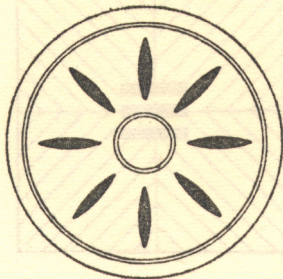
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Hunter Street



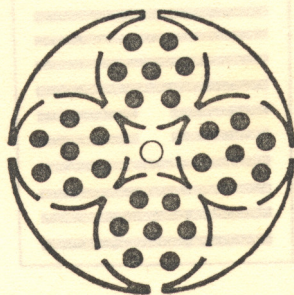
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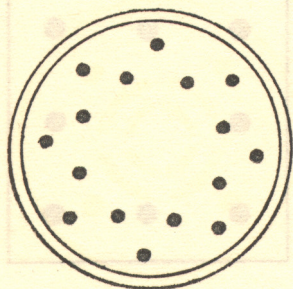
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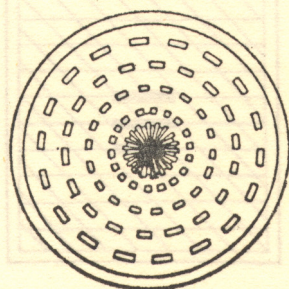
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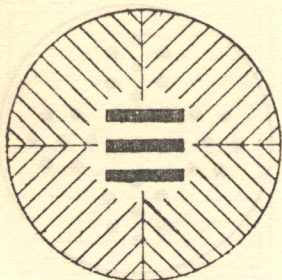
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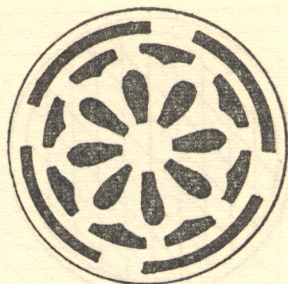
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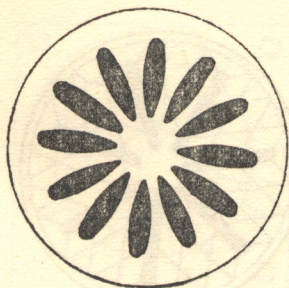
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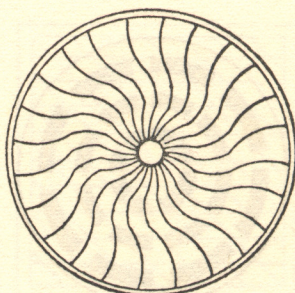
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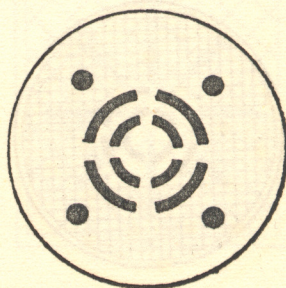
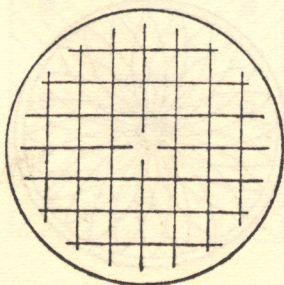
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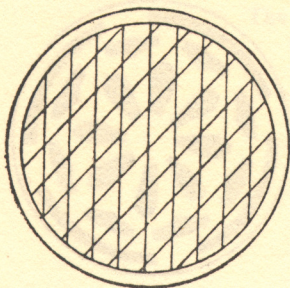
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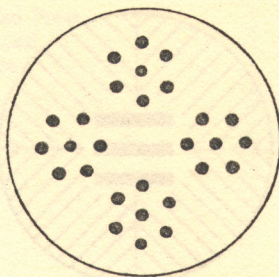
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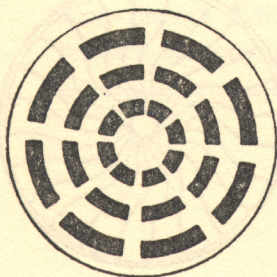
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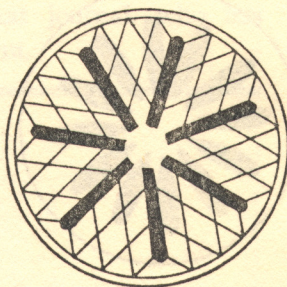
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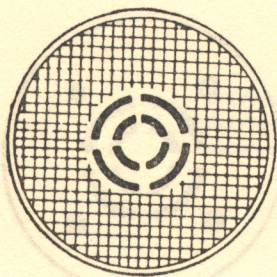
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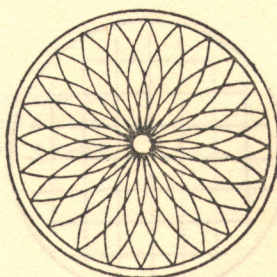
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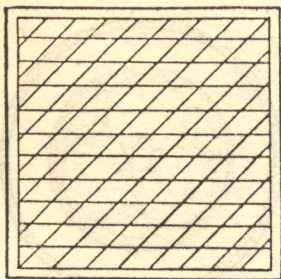
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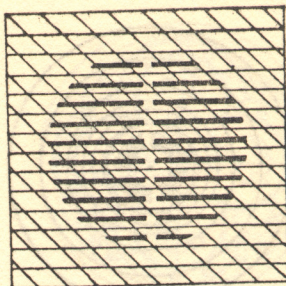
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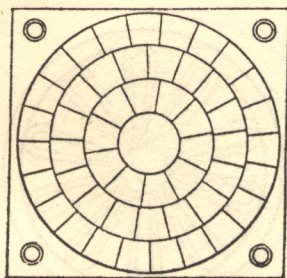
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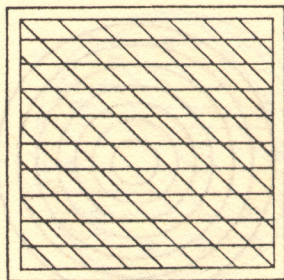
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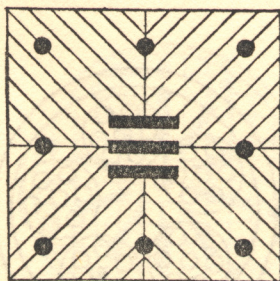
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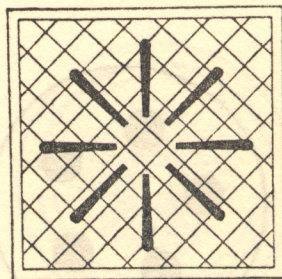
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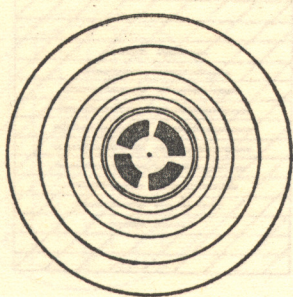
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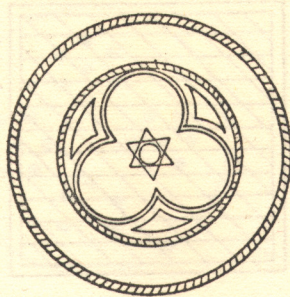
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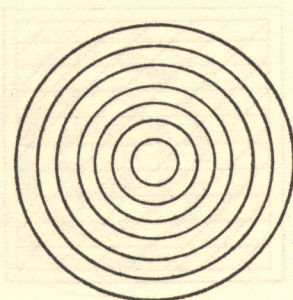
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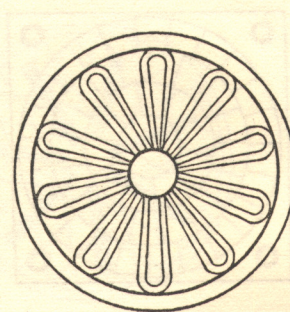
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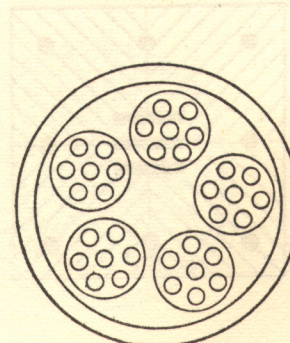
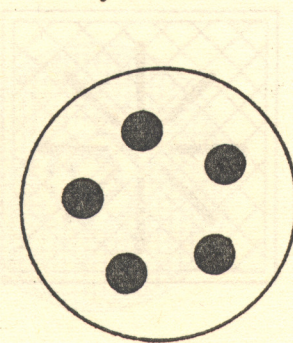
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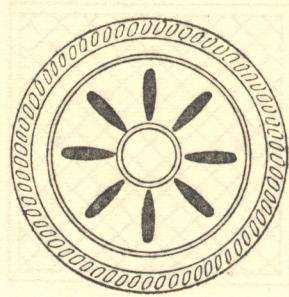
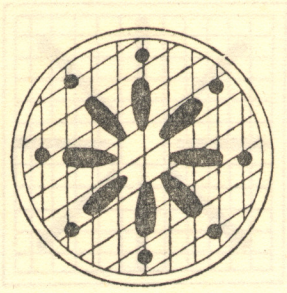
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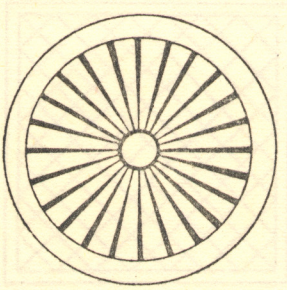
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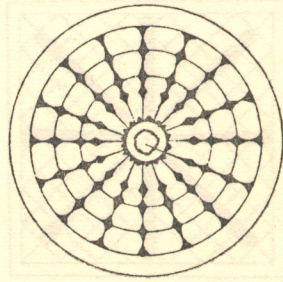
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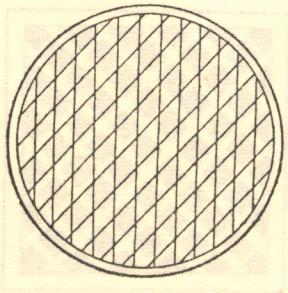
Whittlebury Street



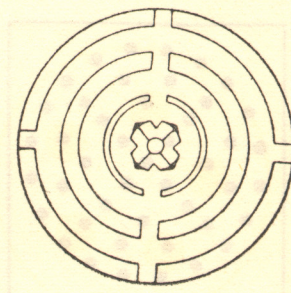
Hunter Street



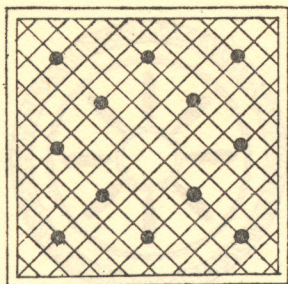
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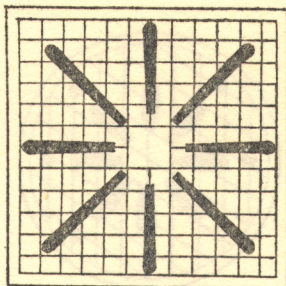
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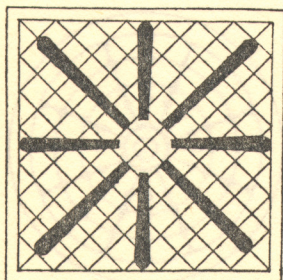
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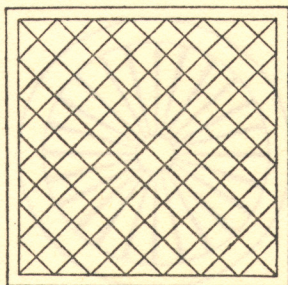
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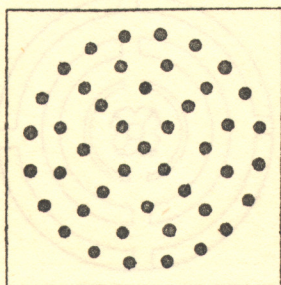
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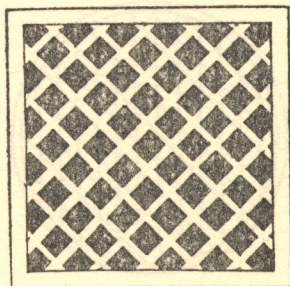
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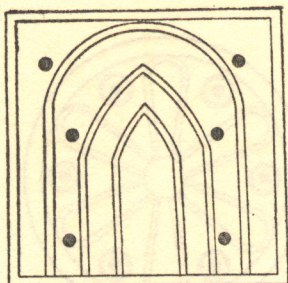
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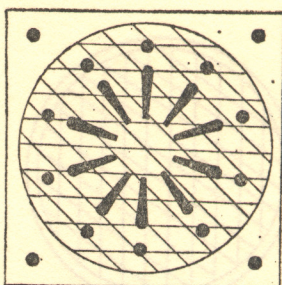
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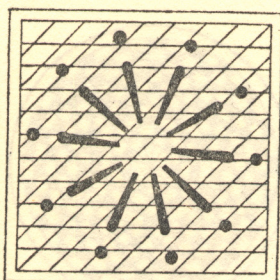
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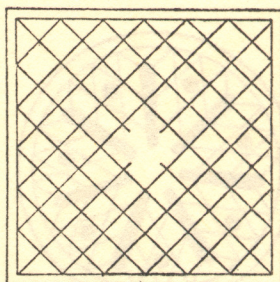
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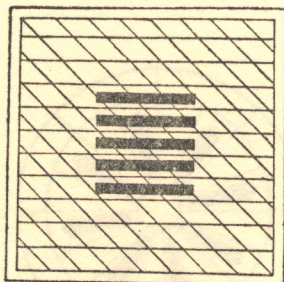
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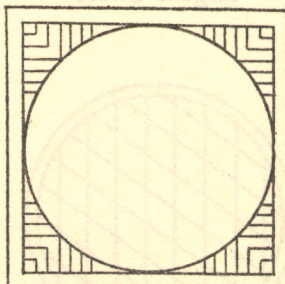
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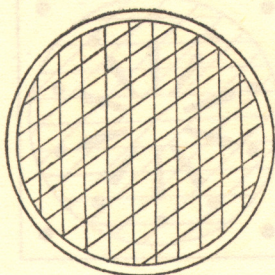
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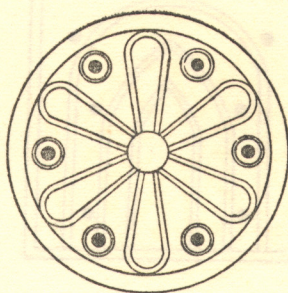
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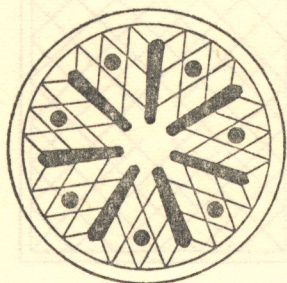
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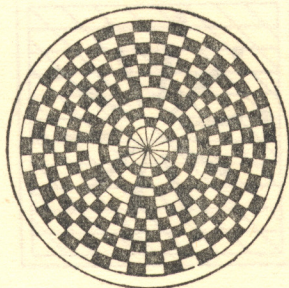
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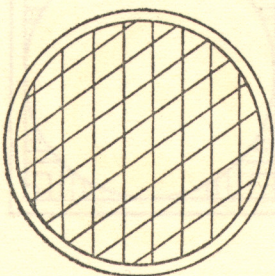
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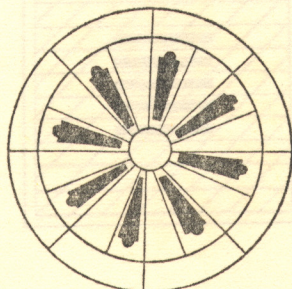
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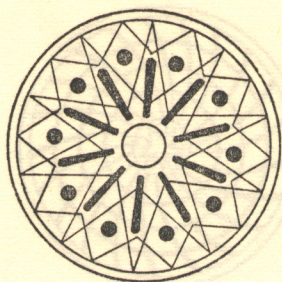
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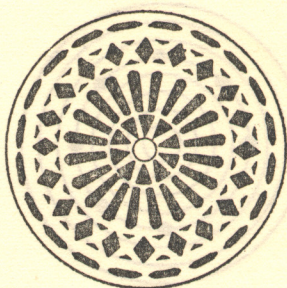
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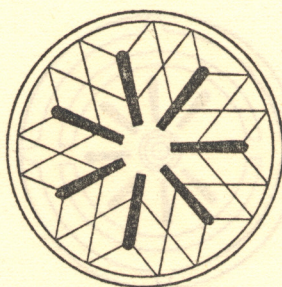
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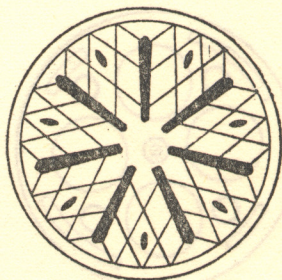
Euston Road



Regent Street



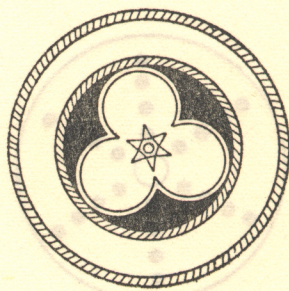
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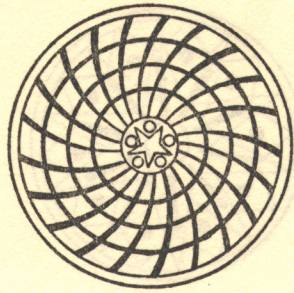
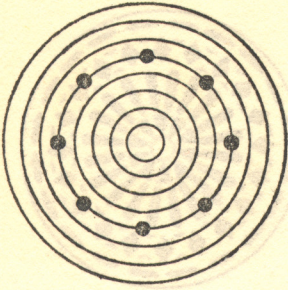


Portland Place



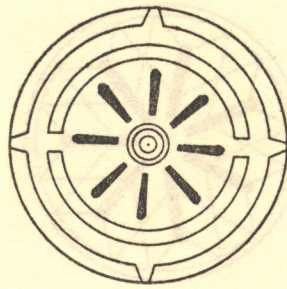
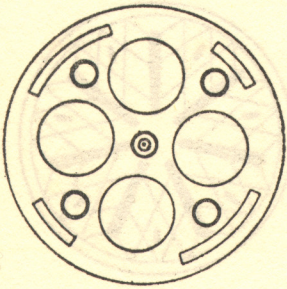
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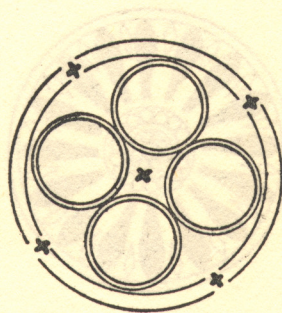
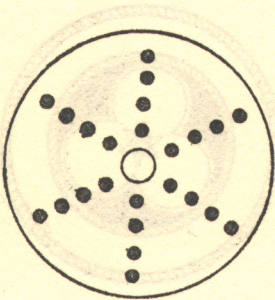
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Regent Street

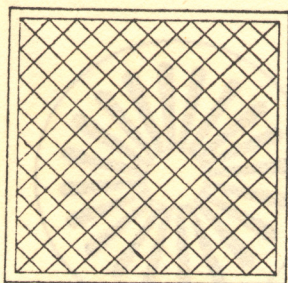


Regent Street

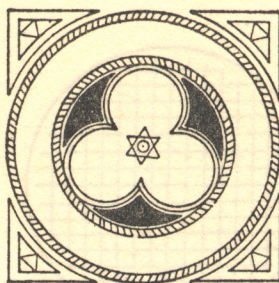
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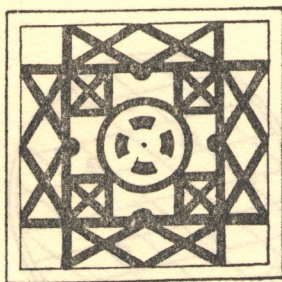
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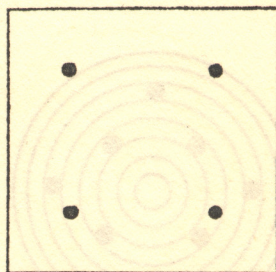
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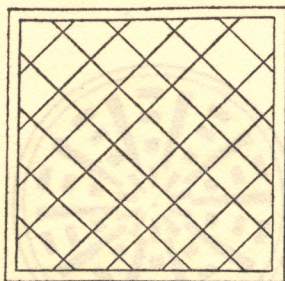
Oxford Street



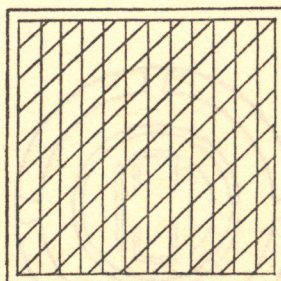
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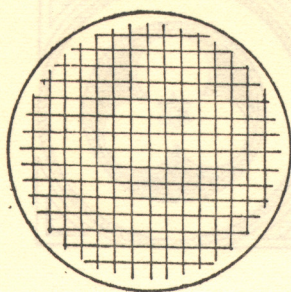
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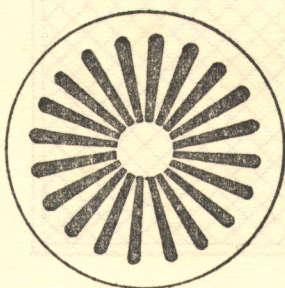
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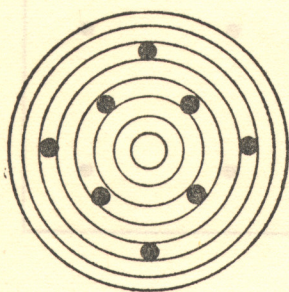
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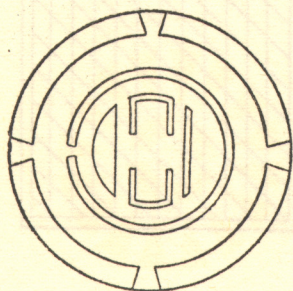
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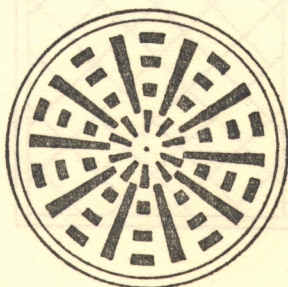
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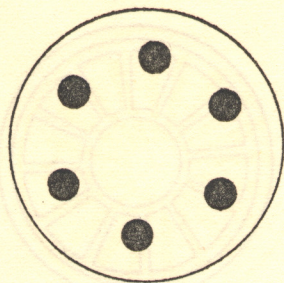
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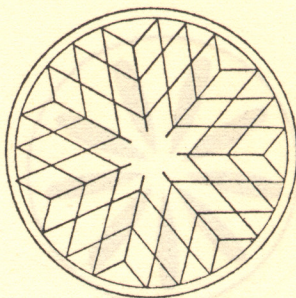
St. Martin's Lane



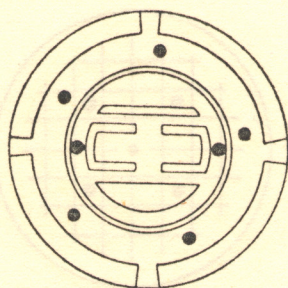
Gray's Inn Road



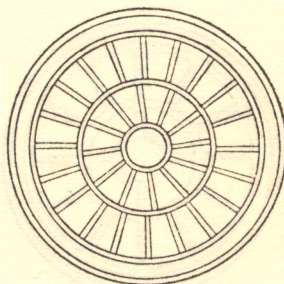
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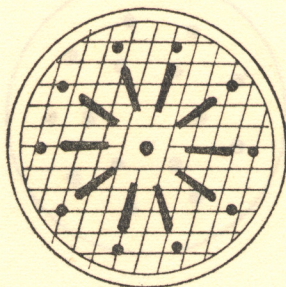
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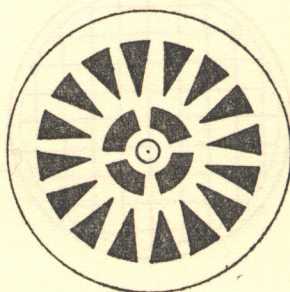
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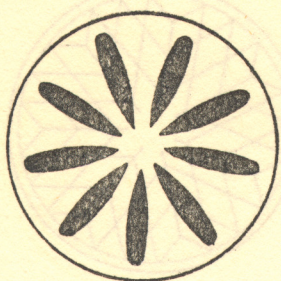
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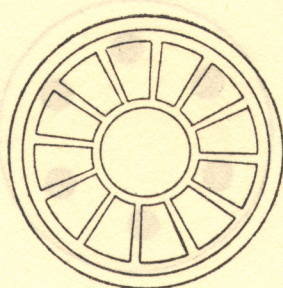
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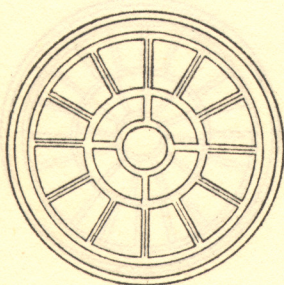
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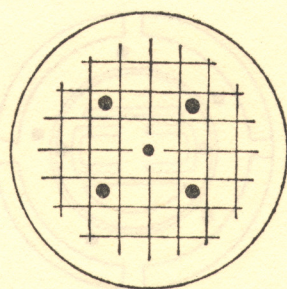
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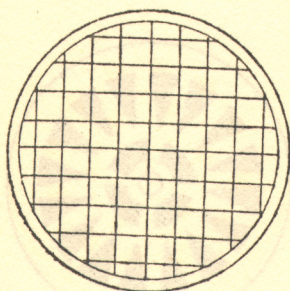
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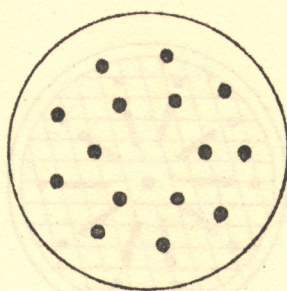
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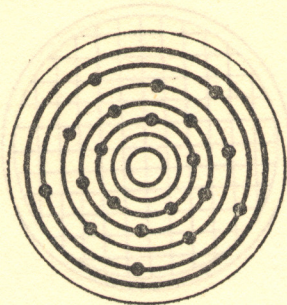
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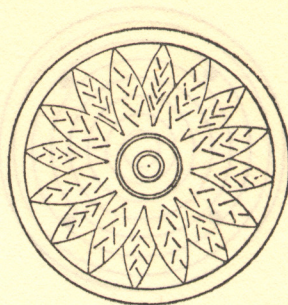
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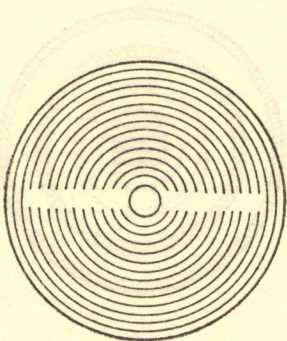
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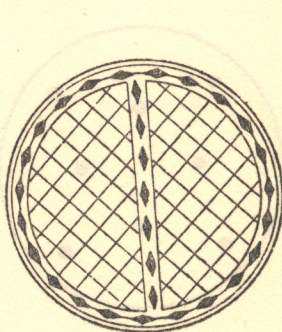
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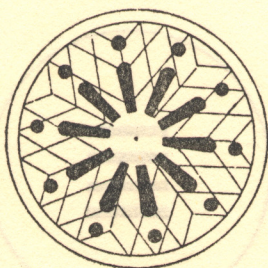
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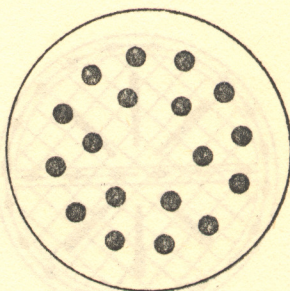
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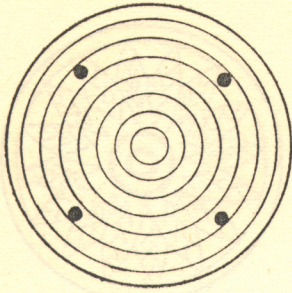
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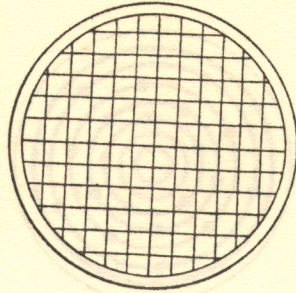
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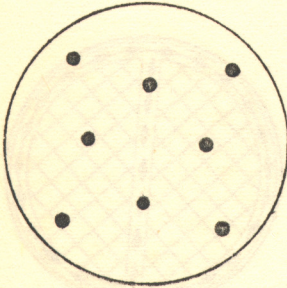
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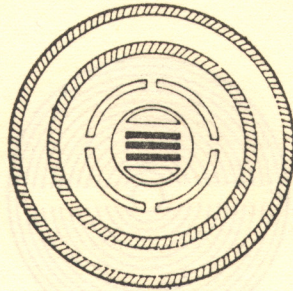
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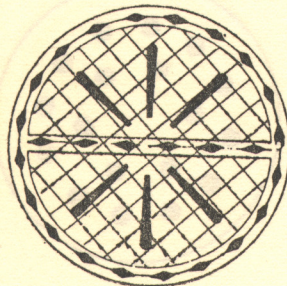
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Wardour Street



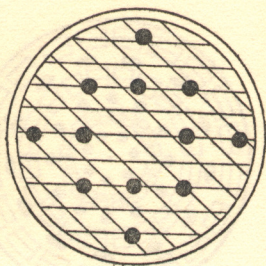
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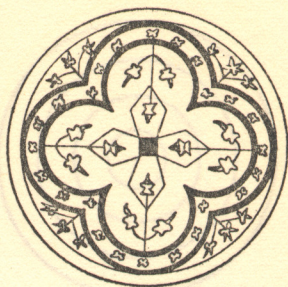
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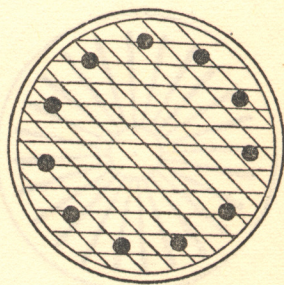
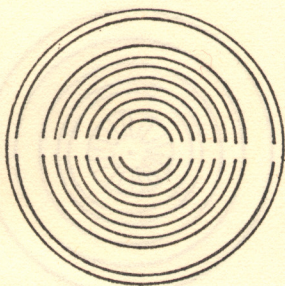
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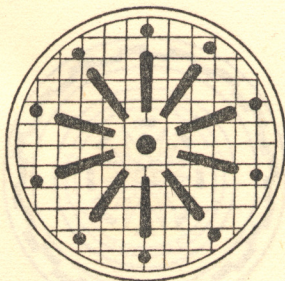
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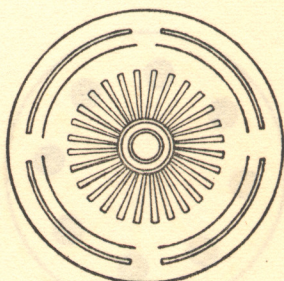
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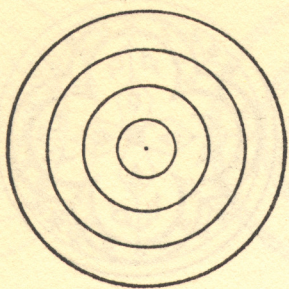
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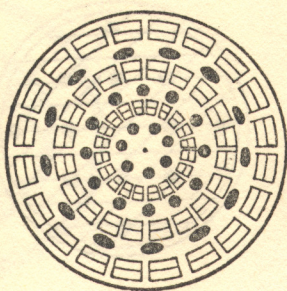
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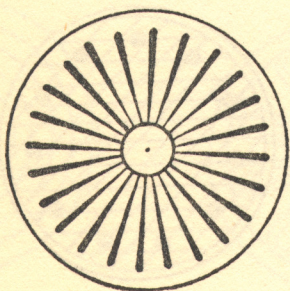
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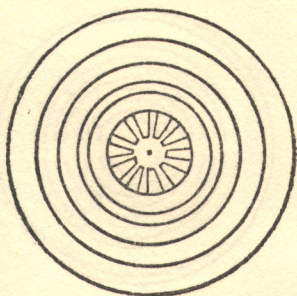
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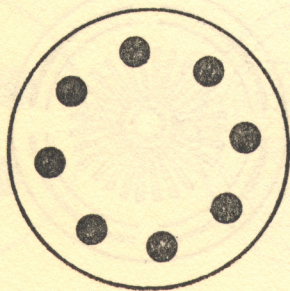
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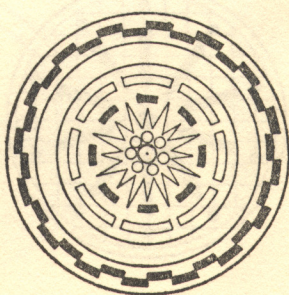
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