Islamic Art in Spain

Introduction

In less than one hundred years after the death of Muhammad in Medina, Arab armies had erupted out of Arabia to conquer the whole length of the North African coast as far as what we now know as Morocco. They brought with them the Islamic religion which they imposed on the peoples of the lands that they conquered. This empire was ruled by a succession of caliphs until 661 AD. In that year the governor of Syria, Ali ibn Abi Talib, overthrew the caliphate and established the Umayyad caliphate with its capital and seat of power at Damascus.

In 710, Tarif ibn Mâlik, a Berber, carried out a preliminary reconnaissance across the Straits to Gibraltar. This was followed by a full scale invasion. Târiq bin Ziyâd, a Berber official of Mûsâ ibn Nuysayr, a Syrian ruler in North Africa, lead an army of mainly Berbers across the Straits to Gibraltar and secured Southern Spain. Within seven years the entire peninsula was under Islamic control except for Galicia, Asturias and fragments of Navarre. The new Islamic state was referred to as al-Andalus by Muslims The next 50 years saw frequent disputes, skirmishes and strife amongst the several groups that settled in that part of the peninsula under Islamic control, which had become a province of the Islamic Empire centred on Damascus. The Moslem population at the end of the 8th century probably increased from about 40,000 to 200,000.

In 750 the Umayyad caliphate in Damascus was overthrown by the Abbasids and all save one member of the Umayyad dynasty were massacred; the last survivor, ’Abd ar-Rahmân, fled to North Africa. In 756 ’Abd ar-Rahmân (Rahman I) reached Spain and in Córdoba he was proclaimed Emir of al-Andalus in May, breaking the link with the Abbasid rulers in Syria. He made Córdoba his capital and unified al-Andalus under his rule.

The Umayyad Period in Spain

Rahman I began the construction of the Great Mosque of Córdoba in 784 on the West bank of the Guadalquivir on a site that is reputed to have been where the church of St Vincent had stood. This would have paralleled the building of the Great Mosque of Damascus on the site of the church of St John. There is no archaeological evidence in support of the existence of the church of St Vincent at that site. In the construction of the Mosque many Roman and Byzantine forms were used, possibly to distinguish themselves from the Abbasid rivals, but they share with the Abbasids the use of Arab inscriptions and stylised leaf motifs. The Mosque consisted of an open courtyard and a prayer hall with eleven naves, of which the central one was a little wider than the others and the two outer aisles being somewhat narrower than the others; these last were perhaps for use by the women. It was built in a year, that speed being made possible with the abundant Rahman and Visigoth remains that were available to be re-used. The aisles are divided by antique columns that are topped by capitals of Roman and Visigoth origin. The columns supported two tier arcades that were an ingenious way of creating a lofty space that gave an instant impression of grandeur. The lower arches are horseshoe shaped; the upper arches, which are larger, are more rounded
and rest on pillars that are larger than the capital below that supports them. Colour was added by the use of alternating yellow stones and red bricks. The two tier design was not new: the Romans had used it in the construction of the aqueduct at Mérida.

Mérida – Roman aqueduct

From 836 the Mosque was extended South by Rahman II

Great Mosque of Córdoba, Floor plan of 786 (left) and central aisle of Rahman I & II’s mosque (right)
Great Mosque of Córdoba, looking South-east (left) and column and capital from Roman spolia (right)

Of the four entrances to the original Mosque only that on the West wall survives. Known as the Bāb-al-Wuzāra or Minister’s Gate it allowed court officials direct access to the prayer hall from the palace opposite. It is now known as the Stephen’s Gate. The arrangement of the decoration was to become the model for the gates for each stage of the enlargement of the Mosque. It has a two storey arrangement with decorative panels to the sides. The door itself has a form of lintel with a horseshoe arch above it. This is contained within an *alfiz*. Within the horseshoe arch there is a thin line of script. The arch, as is the case with the arches inside the prayer hall, has alternate red and yellow stone. The vegetal decoration on the yellow stones is thought to have been added in the mid IX century. The origin of the horseshoe arch used here is uncertain. It was employed in Syria in the Umayyad Mosque in Damascus that was completed in 715. However, although the narrowing of the base was less accentuated, the Visigoths had used the arch in their churches for several centuries prior to the Islamic invasion. It is therefore very possible that it was the Visigoth arch that was the model. Pious Hispanic Moslems made the pilgrimages to Mecca and Medina; they studied with the scholars at Damascus, Baghdad and Alexandria and would have returned to al-Andalus with ideas and concepts that came to their attention during such travels.
Great Mosque, Córdoba. Puerta de San Esteban with detail of the tympanum

Above the doorway is an unusual line of stonework that resembles castle battlements. This is set on a line of corbels that were to become models for corbels employed on Christian churches across Northern Spain.

Great Mosque, Córdoba. Corbels over Stephen’s Gate
Towards the end of the 10th century the population of Córdoba is thought to have increased to around 90,000. In 961 al-Hakam II acceded and he initiated an expansion to the Mosque, extending it a further twelve bays to the South. Whilst following the basic form the existing structure the bay housing the maqsura enclosure and within it the qibla and mihrâb.

The extension introduced a significant new element in the form of interlocking polylobed arches across the front of the qibla and across the last two bays at right angles to the qibla wall. No religious representation of people was permitted in
Islamic religious art; artists developed many skilful variations of stylized plants and geometrical forms that could fill any surface elegantly. Although the decoration is organised on a strict geometry, the decoration shows constant variations in the details.

Great Mosque, Córdoba. Decoration on the polylobed arches

There are three bays on the end wall, the middle one being the Mihrâb. In front of these bays are three ribbed cupolas, of which the central one is the most dramatic. They resemble the cupola that is over the first bay of the al-Hakam II extension only the ground plans of these three are square. Each of these cupolas is supported by four pairs of parallel curved ribs that are secured to the rectangular cross section. There is no agreement as to the origin of this concept. Examples in Armenia and Persia have been suggested but these are of a later date than the cupolas at Córdoba. There is no example from Visigoth Spain either. It is, however, interesting that the solution adopted here does not draw on the solution that was adopted for the St Sophia, Constantinople (later Hagia Sophia), a building that would have been familiar to the Umayyads. There a much larger dome was supported on a square base with the inclusion of squinches.
Great Mosque, Córdoba. Cupola over the bay in front of the Mihrâb
Hagia Sophia, Constantinople – Cupola and squinches

Through this ‘hall’ is the Mihrâb, a deep niche with a scalloped mother-of-pearl hood. The single most important element in any Mosque is the Mihrâb or niche that indicates the direction of Mecca. Because it is the focal point in the mosque a great deal of care and attention was given to its decoration. The horseshoe arch at the entrance is set into what is almost a façade. The arch of the doorway is set within an alfiz. To the sides and below the level of the arch are marble slabs. On each side of the doorway is a coloured column that is probably from the earlier Mihrâb. Around the arch are plaques with gold mosaics on backgrounds of different colours. The mosaics depict arabesque patterns. In the corners are circles of various sizes; the circle motif appears frequently in Islamic art in the Western Mediterranean. The arch and the spandrel have a border of sculptured marble within which is second broader border of epigrams of gold Kufic script on a blue background. These are both verses from the Qur’an and historical statements. Across the top of the doorway is a line of seven small, tri-lobed, blind arches decorated with mosaics and divided by marble columns below pale marble arches.
Great Mosque, Córdoba. The Mihrâb

The mosaics of the horseshoe arch have a Byzantine character that is attributable to the fact that Hakam had earlier asked the Byzantine Emperor to send him a skilled artisan of mosaics, a request that was met. The multi-coloured mosaics and their gold background stand out against the pale marbles. The interior of the Mihrâb is panelled with pale marble that contrasts with seven more tri-lobed arches each bordered by a black marble column. Over the top is a mother-of pearl hood that brings a sense of regal opulence to the room.
Great Mosque, Córdoba. Details of the arch and spandrel for the Mihrâb

Great Mosque, Córdoba. Details of the mosaics in the cupola before the Mihrâb

The decorative elements of the dome and Mihrâb include leaf and lotus forms, florettes, vine tendrils and fleur-de-lys. As we shall see, these motifs were to be developed into more stylised and geometric forms.

Mention has already been made of the extensive use of spolia from the Roman and Visigoth periods to provide both columns and capitals. Frequently, either the astragal of the capital or the top of the column had to be modified to ensure an acceptable fit.
Great Mosque, Córdoba. Four re-used classical capitals

To meet the requirements for capitals for later extensions, capitals were made locally. There were two types, both based on the form of the classic Corinthian capital; one was more elaborately worked than the other and it was to become the prototype for Islamic capitals that were decorated more finely still with extensive use of the drill to create what might be described as a honey-comb style. The other form was much more basic, with little detail being developed.

Two composite capitals from Córdoba from 960 (left) and 850 (right)

In the late X century a series of mutinies and revolts led to the collapse of the Caliphate and the Umayyad dynasty in Spain in 1131. We will return later to the
further developments at the Great Mosque of Córdoba. Before that we will look at the other great monument to Umayyad power, the palace complex at Madīnat al-Zahrâ’, possibly named after the favourite wife of ‘Abd al-Rahmân III, a certain Zahrâ’. The Caliph decided to build a new capital five kilometres from Córdoba in 936. In 941 the Mosque was consecrated and two years later the principal organs of state were moved there. The construction task was huge in terms of financial cost, labour and materials. 6,000 blocks of stone were said to be cut daily; over 4,000 marble columns were imported, mostly from Tunisia and other gold and marble items were imported from Syria and Byzantium. It was neither an oriental nor a classical city; it drew inspiration from earlier civilisations but fused them with locally developed concepts. In 1009 the whole complex was destroyed during a Berber revolt and the site was abandoned. So great was the destruction then and as the result of subsequent looting of the site for materials that much of it is known only through archaeological excavation and reports that have survived. Parts of the palace complex have undergone very extensive and painstakingly researched restoration during the second half of the twentieth century.

Madīnat al-Zahrâ’ from the air looking North-west

The palace complex at Madīnat al-Zahrâ’ included pools, houses for the prosperous and the poor inhabitants, a water supply and a sewage system, a Mosque, and, most importantly the palace itself with a throne room and two reception rooms. The palace complex was to function as the setting for the display of royal power. The two reception rooms were used to receive official delegations. Contemporary records of these lavish gatherings are still available today. The Eastern reception room, known as the Sálón Rico, was built between 953 and 957; it is in a form that resembles that of a basilica, having a wide central space running the length of the room with two aisles.
that are divided from the central aisle by a line of horseshoe arches that are supported by marble columns and carved capitals. The arches and some of the walls have elaborate marble carvings.

Madīnat al-Zahrâ’, Sálon Rico

There are over 70 such panels, mostly with decoration using abstract vegetative designs of great complexity. Each panel is different, though many are based on the common theme depicting the ancient oriental ‘Tree of Life’ motif, of which examples are to be found across the Eastern Mediterranean region to Persia and beyond. The panels at Medīnat al-Zahrâ’ are much more elaborate and they draw on cultural themes from both the Umayyad heartland in Syria and indigenous Hispanic ones. Islamic art inherited motifs and ways of employing them from earlier civilisations that used plant motifs; these earlier origins included Sasanid, Byzantine and Coptic Egyptian as well as Roman ones. Over time Islamic art developed a distinctive form of its own and, as time passed, the designs became increasingly complicated with patterns and arabesques derived from abstract leaves, acanthus scrolls, flowers and winding vine stems forming more elaborate patterns.

Madīnat al-Zahrâ’, Sálon Rico – Marble panels with foliage designs
Islamic artists had incorporated geometric designs in their decoration. Examples that pre-date Madinat al-Zahrâ’ may be seen in Damascus and Jerusalem, for example. At Madinat al-Zahrâ’ the geometric plaques have mostly been placed around the alfiz above panels with foliage designs.
We noted above that Islamic sculptors of capitals developed a form of composite and Corinthian capital that was worked more finely than had previously been the practice. Such was the detail desired that white marble was the most suitable material to allow the sculptor to create the honey-comb effect that left almost no part of the capital without decoration which was mostly based on the many foliage designs seen on the marble plaques around the walls. Many of the capitals have a small Kufic inscription, usually on the upper edge of the decorated surface. This was to be the predominant style of capital at Madīnah al-Zahrā’ī. There are two pairs of capitals that are mounted on the top of rectangular pillars. The decoration on these follows the form of the other capitals in its intricacy; on these there is a small inscription at both the top and bottom of the capital. However, of the 35 capitals that are positioned around the interior of the Salón Rico only 12 are original. Many of those that are missing are to be found in museums.
Madīnat al-Zahrā’, Sálon Rico - Composite and Corinthian capitals

Madīnat al-Zahrā’, Sálon Rico – Capital on pillar
The quality and attention to detail in the production of the columns for the palace is further exemplified by the finely carved bases for the columns. These had thin bands of floral and geometric decoration topped by an epigram in Kufic script.

Madînat al-Zahrâ’ is important even in its ruined state because it represents the only Andalusian example of an Islamic palace city and is one of the largest examples of Islamic architecture in Spain. Other such cities arose at approximately the same time at al-Qâhira, in Egypt, and at Sabra al-Mansûriyya, in Tunisia. By the 8th century the basilica was no longer the accepted architectural form in the Near East; but at Madînat al-Zahrâ’ it was the significant feature of Islamic royal architecture and was to be seen in the reception halls of the House of the Army and the East Hall and in the mosque. Madînat al-Zahrâ’ might be thought of as the Spanish Islamic Versailles.

In 978, the all-powerful Muhammad ibn Aamir al-Mansûr, al-Hakâm II’s vizier who governed on behalf of the child-prince Hishâm, embarked on a further substantial enlargement to the Great Mosque at Córdoba. Eight new aisles were added along the whole length of the East side of the hall and the courtyard was also correspondingly enlarged. In a mark of shrewd humility no attempt was made to embellish the extension so that it might outshine al-Hakâm’s extension. Sections of the former East wall were left in place; this gives the impression that al-Mansûr’s extension is but a side hall to the pre-existing main hall. With this enlargement the Great Mosque at Córdoba became the third largest mosque in the Islamic world.
The last century of the Umayyad caliphate was a period of peace and prosperity throughout much of al-Andalus. New buildings were constructed in many towns, but regrettably only a small number have survived in a recognisable form. In Toledo, the church of San Cristo de la Luz was built as a Mosque and is recorded as al-Bâb al-Mardûm, which is the name of the nearby gate. An inscription has survived that gives the date of its foundation as 999. The same inscription also indicates that it was privately endowed.

It is a small, square building constructed using brick. The exterior brickwork is attractively patterned with interlocked arches below a narrow strip of open brick lattice-work. On the North wall, above three arches are six small, tri-lobed arches.

Inside the there are three aisles each of three bays, giving nine square ‘boxes’. These are demarcated by solid columns each with a large capital that supports an elegant
horseshoe arch; the capitals are mostly re-used and of Visigoth origin. Over each space in the nave is a small cupola that is supported by an arrangement of eight pairs of ribs; over the central square space of the hall is a larger cupola. Though it lacks the splendour of its larger counterpart at Córdoba, this is a copy of the cupola at the Mihrâb of Great Mosque at Córdoba. is further confirmed by the tri-lobed arches and the interlocking arches of the exterior.

San Cristo de la Luz, Toledo – Looking West (left) and central cupola (right)

The Tâ’ifa Period

The usurping of power by al-Mansûr was followed by a break down of the central authority and the creation of a state of anarchy and the creation of many constantly feuding petty kingdoms. It was into this situation that Abû Ja’far Ahmad ibn Sulaymân al-Muqtadir billâh built the ‘Dâr al-Surût (‘House of Joy’) as his summer palace in his capital at Zaragoza between 1065 and 1081. Today it is known as the Aljafería. He was the most powerful leader in the North March facing the growing power of the Christian kingdoms beyond the Ebro River. Recent restoration work has reinstated the Aljafería to a state that resembles that of its heyday before the fall of Zaragoza to Christian armies in 1118.

The palace complex is secured within fortified walls and is built around a courtyard that had pools that reflect the arcades and porticos. The main surviving element is on the North side and consists of reception rooms and a rectangular hall, which was the throne room. This hall opens out onto a portico. On the West side of the portico is the entrance to the mosque. The hall and portico are very reminiscent of the Sálón Rico at Madinat al-Zahrâ’. However, the functional concepts for Aljafería were not as a setting for the display of royal power but for pleasure within the context of kingship. The decoration is based on complex interlocking arches; these are in several forms
including the traditional rounded horseshoe arch, polylobed arches and rounded arches; they are interlocked and crisscross each other.

Aljafería, Zaragoza looking North to Palace portico

Aljafería, Zaragoza looking North across main hall
The walls and arches were exquisitely decorated with stucco painted with floral and geometric reliefs of great complexity. The stucco and plaster decoration within the portico and hall was painted in different colours with red, blue and gold being predominant and giving an impression of wealth and regal power. Sadly much of this has been lost, as has the white marble of the flooring. Fragments of decoration are in museums.

Aljafería, Zaragoza – Details of decoration on arches

On the West side of the hall was a decorated doorway leading into the Mosque. The doorway has a horseshoe arch that has, at the narrow neck of the arch, an unusual ‘S’ shape. Above it is a line of interlocking arches with decorated reliefs of floral and foliage patterns within the arches, in the spandrels of the *alfiz* at the sides of the door arch. The interior of the Mosque is a two storied structure with balustrades and polylobed arches defining the upper storey.
Aljafería, Zaragoza – door to the Mosque and detail of top right side

The space of the Mosque is covered with an octagonal cupola that is modelled on those at the Great Mosque of Córdoba. It repeats the use of parallel ribbed arches to support the cupola, thus giving it a pedigree that leads back to the Umayyad era. The cupola is set within the upper storey and has polylobed arches round the lower circumference of the cupola. It should be noted that this cupola has been extensively restored.
The entrance to the Mihrâb is framed by another horseshoe arch; this one lacks the ‘S’ shape of the Mosque entrance; it is narrower at the shoulders. The arch retains the form of that at the Great Mosque at Córdoba, having an elaborately decorated arch within a smaller alfiz. However, neither the skilled Byzantine artisans nor the lavish mosaic materials used at Córdoba were available for this Mosque; instead the alternating bands are of coloured plaster and stucco. Above the alfiz is a prominent Kufic inscription. Many of the inscriptions at Aljafería serve to exalt the ruler. One in particular, part of which is to be seen on the North wall of the main palace room, has a narrow border top and bottom that perhaps represents stitching. It is therefore perhaps alluding to one of the remarkable tīrāz fabrics produced at the time in Almèria. These inscriptions were possibly to be the models for the inscriptions at the Alhambra, Grenada.
Aljafería, Zaragoza - Entrance to the Mihrâb

With the exception of the entrance to the Mihrâb, the capitals were used in pairs. Their form follows that of the composite capitals developed under the Umayyads of Córdoba. The patterns are more varied and less intricate than those at Córdoba and, instead of marble, the material used is alabaster or plaster.
Aljafería, Zaragoza – Two pairs of capitals from the portico

After the capture of Zaragoza by the Christians in 1118 the Aljafería was remodelled to provide a palace and a church for the kings of Aragon.

Almoravids & Almohads

The turbulent Tâ’ifa period was brought to an abrupt end with the arrival of Yusuf ibn Tashfin, the Islamic ruler of Morocco and the leading member of the Almoravids, a very ascetic dynasty. They had established a new capital at Marrûkush (Marrakesh) in 1070 and under their rule several new mosques were constructed in North Africa. In 1086 they established themselves in al-Andalus and rapidly set about reuniting it and strengthening defensive works both to consolidate their hold on the territory and also to defend it more effectively against the encroaching Christian armies. Whilst their imprint may still be seen in fortified sites, the Almoravids left no new palaces or mosques in the Iberian Peninsula before the dynasty declined.

The Almoravids were succeeded by the Berber dynasty of the Almohads, who were even more ascetic than the former. Their religious creed called for absolute simplicity. Their power also centred on Morocco, and their capital, Marrakesh and it is there that the best visual evidence of their style is to be found. The oldest Almohad minaret in Marrakesh is that of the Kutubiyya Mosque; it is the direct ancestor of the Giralda minaret in Seville. The minaret had formed the tower for the Almohad Friday Mosque in Seville. The original building has been preserved up as far as the blind arches below the five open arches. In keeping with the religious philosophy of the dynasty, ornamentation was geometric and austere.
Kutubiyya minaret, Marrakesh (left) and Giralda minaret, Seville (right)

It is only in Seville that significant traces of Almohad art are to be found. The Alcázar was used as a palace site over many generations but the complex has been altered, elements destroyed and rebuilt so often that it is not easy to establish, what if anything remains of the original Almohad palace. Most of the buildings seen today originate from 1375, when Pedro the Cruel tasked craftsmen from Granada to build and decorate the sumptuous palace. The fact that there are religious inscriptions in Arabic in the decoration of some rooms is no proof that it pre-dates Christian rule. Much of what is seen today has been the object of sometimes extensive restoration.

It is generally agreed that the Patio del Yeso does date from the Almohad period. It is a long, rectangular garden with a narrow water channel down the centre; to the sides the buildings are of brick and there is a portico running the length of the long sides.

Alcázar, Seville – Patio del Yeso

On each side there is a larger central arch set between six smaller arches. All are polylobed with both shallow and deep lobes. The spandrels to the sides of the larger arches are decorated with interlocking arcs in a crisscross pattern. Above the three smaller arches to the sides is a latticework of small interlocking arches.
The other rooms and courtyards of the palace of Pedro the Cruel clearly draw on the vocabulary of the Nasrid craftsmen. There are the familiar arcades and columns with capitals, many originally from Madinat al-Zahrā’.

![Image of Alcázar, Seville – Salón de Embajadores](image)

Alcázar, Seville – Salón de Embajadores

![Image of Alcázar, Seville – Courtyard of the Maidens (left) and a Royal bedroom (right)](image)

Alcázar, Seville – Courtyard of the Maidens (left) and a Royal bedroom (right)

The style of the layout of the palace and much of the early decoration can be compared with that seen in the Alhambra, which was being built at the same time, (as we shall see in the next section).
The Nasrid Dynasty

In 1212 the Almohad army was defeated by Christian armies at Las Navas de Tolosa, a defeat from which they never fully recovered. History in Islamic Spain was to repeat itself: as the Almohad Empire decayed, the country broke up into small, quarrelling kingdoms. Muhammad ibn Nasr, the founder of the Nasrid dynasty, seized power first near Jaén, in 1232; then a year later he took Seville followed by Granada in 1237. The dynasty was to rule the South-east corner of the peninsula until their expulsion of the last ruler, Abū ‘Abd Allâh Muhammad XII, (also known as Boabdil), in January 1492 by the combined Christian armies of Ferdinand and Isabella.

The al-qal’a al-hamrâ meaning ‘Red Citadel’ is known today as the Alhambra. It was a sumptuous palace complex in Granada and is considered by many historians as the culmination of architectural ideas that began four hundred years earlier with the
arrival of 'Abd ar-Rahmân (Rahman I) in Córdoba. The Alhambra occupies an outcrop of the Sierra Nevada that looms over the deep gorge of the Darro, Vega and Genil valleys. It was a palace city that was in a direct line of descent from Madinat al-Zahrâ’. It was surrounded by walls with twenty-three towers and four gates. Within were seven semi-independent palaces and a range of dwellings and offices of all kinds. Only two of the most beautiful of the palaces have been preserved and restored; some were altered by the Christian rulers; others were damaged in later centuries; most of the buildings for the less important inhabitants have disappeared; all the buildings that are to be seen today have been restored, often on the basis of conjecture and prejudices that reflect the tastes of the age. So the visitor today has an unbalanced impression of what the Alhambra complex was like in its prime. But it is unique as the only Islamic palace complex in Spain to have survived with so many of its principal buildings with some of their decoration intact.

Most of the complex was built between about 1230 and the mid fourteenth century, but on earlier foundations. Throughout the complex a number of architectural features that had been used in earlier buildings in Islamic Spain are developed further. One such feature was the hortus conclusus or enclosed garden around which the palace rooms were built, frequently with the addition of a mirador that enabled the occupant to enjoy the sights, smells and sounds. The theme of water was present throughout the complex; (modern maintenance constraints have reduced the use of water).
The decoration of the state rooms was more elaborate and extensive than at earlier buildings; the materials used were much less extravagant than those used on the Great Mosque at Córdoba or at Madīnat al-Zahrā': there was no marble or bronze, nor the silver and gold mosaics. Instead, the decoration was a combination of carved plaster, ceramic tile and wood, whilst marble was used on the floors of the courtyards and for the columns, capitals and fountains. Originally the plaster would have been painted; it was quick to make, easy to use and allowed for a richer finish. The Lion Court palace has graceful columns around the courtyard that separate the garden from the palace with as if with a screen; they are arranged singly, in pairs or in threes. All have elaborately decorated capitals that support interlocking arches that are decorated with a multitude of small geometric, vegetal and calligraphic motifs. A particular architectural ornamentation employed at the Alhambra was Muqarnas, which was used on arches, in cupolas and as a frieze. The Muqarnas had been developed as an architectural art form in the 10th century in both Iraq and North Africa. The Muqarnas of the domes was built to catch and reflect the light entering from the windows around the lower part of the dome. At the Alhambra the detailed decoration was generally made using stucco.
All the significant buildings in Islamic Spain had included in their decoration epigrams from the Qur’an or in praise of the ruler of the time. At the Alhambra the use of epigrams in decoration was taken to a new level with their incorporation into capitals, into friezes around arches and along the top of wall decoration. In the latter example, this was sometimes done using faience that contrasted with the bewildering variety of mosaic tiled patterns on the walls. The Arabic script, which began to replace the Kufic script from the early 11th century, allows for a graceful calligraphical effect when used in decoration. The script was frequently embellished with the addition of foliage. The inscriptions, which were usually set along friezes or in round or rectangular cartouches, provided many sermons in stone, with extracts from the Qur’an, exhortations to fear God or to cringe before their ruler, boasts of the power and virtue of that ruler and poetic extracts. It has been described as ‘an open book of poems. Of the 31 poems at the Alhambra, 25 refer to the architectural feature on which they were placed. The references were often written in the first person, thus giving a voice to the architecture. ‘I am the garden which beauty adorns….’. These inscriptions have been compared to the inscriptions that are found on some of the textiles produced by the local workshops. The geometric patterns found on the textiles relate closely to those moulded into the plasterwork. The script and similar inscriptions were used in the church of San Román, in Toledo, a Mudéjar church built in the early 13th century. It is probable that textiles that had been presented to the Christian court by the Almohad rulers provided the models.
Alhambra. Similar inscriptions on a stucco moulding and a tile

Alhambra. Panels with inscriptions set in foliage
Alhambra. Two inscribed capitals

Alhambra. Examples of epigrams with tiling
San Román, Toledo – Tribune arches with Kufic inscription

Early Islamic geometric art in the form of tessellation was derived from Roman traditions. But it rapidly developed a sophistication that was unrivalled in complexity, with artists exercising greater freedom and imagination than had been seen before. Examples of tessellation are on display as throughout the palaces of the Alhambra and they show the diversity of patterns many of which are formulated around a star motif, a motif that is to be found in art forms across much of the Islamic world.
Throughout the period of Islamic rule in al-Andalus the cultural links with the Umayyad origins in the Near East were retained. The basilica form was not abandoned. The domed halls that had been adopted in the East Mediterranean never reached al-Andalus. But some ideas were adopted and further developed by artists; these included the elaborate leaf and vine patterns that were used to such effect at Madīnat al-Zahrā’ in the Sálon Rico and the stucco Muqarnas in the palaces of the Alhambra. However, the artists were not immune to the charms of the Roman and Visigoth legacy that they found on their arrival on the Iberian soil and these influenced the art forms that they used, thus creating a style that was unique. The period of Islamic rule in Spain encompassed a most creative and formative era and it set the foundations of Spain as we know it today.

The expulsion of Abû ‘Abd Allāh Muhammad XII brought to an abrupt end this dynamic and lively artistic and cultural development that had prospered under Islam.
in Iberia. The period of Islamic rule had lasted for seven centuries, a period that is longer than the period since the capture of that last Islamic stronghold in Granada. The Christian conquerors displayed their intolerance of the vanquished Moslem population as they drove a policy of heterodoxy from the Iberian Peninsula through the Inquisition and the Expulsion Edicts. But they adopted the Islamic artistic legacy as their own. They took over the palaces; they used the mosques as churches; they employed Moslem artists and artisans, who proclaimed their Islamic birthright through the Mudéjar architectural and decorative styles; the widespread use of geometric patterns on the tiled walls of many a courtyard and stairway in houses across much of Spain are reminders of how much is owed by the Spain of today to the visionary artists of al-Andalus. The quiet, inner courtyards that are integral to so many Spanish buildings of the 16th and 17th centuries are testimony to the well-thought out architectural styles introduced during the period of Islamic rule. The addition of flowing water to many of these spaces was another legacy of al-Andalus. Whilst these legacies are widely admired in Spain there is, however, considerable ambivalence about the true place of Islamic art in the longer view of art in Spain.

Teruel – Tower of Sta Maria (left) & Zaragossa – Tower of Sta Maria Magdalene

Annex A

Islamic Art in Spain – the time lines
632 Death of Abu I-Qasim Muhammad bin’Abdullah ibn’Abd al-Muttalib ibn Hashim (Muhammad) in Medina.

710 Tarif ibn Mâlik, a Berber, carries out a preliminary recce across the Straits to Gibraltar.

711 Târiq bin Ziyâd, a Berber official of Mûsâ ibn Nuysayr, a Syrian ruler in North Africa, leads an army of mainly Berbers across the Straits to Gibraltar and secures Southern Spain.

Tarif ibn Mâlik & Târiq bin Ziyâd recalled to Syria, where both die, leaving Mûsâ’s son, ‘Abd al-‘Azîz in charge; he marries the widow of Roderic, the last Visigoth king.

720 Islamic reconstructions of the Roman/Visigoth walls of Córdoba.

750 Overthrow of the Umayyad dynasty in Damascus. Only ʻAbd ar-Rahmân survives and escapes to North Africa. He joins units of Syrian cavalry and other Arab groups.

756 ʻAbd ar-Rahmân arrives in Spain and in May in Córdoba he is proclaimed Emir of Al-Andalus.

784/785 ʻAbd ar-Rahmân (Rahman I) builds a palace on the banks of the Guadalquivir, Córdoba; this is followed by the construction of a new Grand Mosque.

787 Al-Hakam succeeds.

822 Abûal-Mutarraf ʻAbd ar-Rahmân ben al-Hakâm (Rahman II) succeeds. He extends the Great Mosque in 836.

929 ʻAbd al Rahmân (Rahman III) proclaims himself Emir & Caliph.

936 to 975 Construction of Madīnat al-Zahrâ.

961 to 966 Hakâm II’s extension to Great Mosque.

976 Muhammad ibn Aamir al-Mansûr (al-Mansur), Hakâm’s vizier, seizes power from child-prince, al-Hishâm II, and further enlarges the Great Mosque of Córdoba.

999 to 1000 Foundation of al-Bâb al-Mardûm Mosque in Toledo (San Cristo de la Luz).

1009 Sacking by Berber mutineers of Madīnat al-Zahrâ.

1031 Collapse of Umayyad dynasty.

1031 to 1086 Tâ’ifa period (petty states).

1046 to 1081 Aljafería built by Abû Ja’far Ahmad bin Sulaymân al-Muqtadir billâh.

1085 Alfonso VI captures Toledo.

1086 Arrival of Almoravids under Yusuf ibn Tashfin.

1091 Capture of Seville by Almoravids.

1118 Capture of Zaragoza by King Alphonso 1 of Aragon.

1145 Berber dynasty of Almohads rule Al-Andalus.

1195 Abu Yusuf Ya’qub al-Mansur defeats Christian armies driving them back to the Duero.

1212 Almohads defeated by Christian armies at Las Navas de Tolosa, a defeat from which Islam rule in Spain never fully recovered.

1222 Collapse of Almohad rule.

1222 to 1492 Taifa rule (petty states).

1238 to 1492 Nasrid dynasty rules Southern Spain – Granada, Jaén, Alméria and Málaga.

1243 Nasrids pay tribute to Christian overlords and live in uneasy peace with them.

1237 to 1391 Building and decoration of al-qal’a al-hamrâ (Alhambra) with the Lion Palace built from 1370 to 1390.

1375 Building and decorating of the Seville palace for Pedro the Cruel.

1492 Abu ʻabd-Allah Muhammad XII (Boabdil) surrenders Alhambra and Granada to the Spanish king and goes into exile.

1610 Final expulsion of Moslems.
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