History in the making: the ornament of the Alhambra and the past-facing present

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The Alhambra, a palatine fortress perched on a mountainous outcrop above the city of Granada, has held a unique place in the historiography of Islamic architectural monuments, owing both to its European location in modern-day Spain and to the character of its ‘rediscovery’ by European travellers in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Originally constructed under a succession of Nasrid rulers between 1232 and 1492, the exceptionally well-preserved palace complex later became archetypal to Western scholarship of ‘Moorish’ architecture and ornament, despite its many subsequent alterations under the Catholic monarchs. Like all residential monuments with long histories of continuous use, the Nasrid fortress had been occupied and altered numerous times following its capture in 1492; after the conquest by monarchs Ferdinand II and Isabella I (who ruled as joint sovereigns of Aragon and Castile from 1479 until Isabella’s death in 1504), the site was occupied by their grandson, Emperor Charles V (r. 1516-56), and later by a motley crew of Napoleonic troops, Spanish Romany residents, prisoners of war, and travelling artists and writers. During each of these stages, alterations to the monument’s structure and surface decoration, as well as the gradual decay occasioned by extended periods of disuse in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, have reflected changing attitudes towards Spain and its history from both within and beyond its borders. Framed as the final chapter of Muslim rule in the region, and geographically removed from larger historical developments in North Africa and the Middle East, the art of the Nasrid sultanate became ‘a stepchild of

1 The term ‘Moor’, or the Spanish equivalent ‘Morro’, derives from the Latin Maurus and was first used in Roman times to denote the inhabitants of the province of Mauretania, which included large portions of modern-day Algeria and Morocco. Since the Middle Ages the term has been used by Europeans to refer generally to Muslim populations of Morocco and former inhabitants of al-Andalus, absenting any clear ethnic or regional distinctions. The term ‘Moorish’ continues to be used widely in contemporary descriptions of the historic art and architecture of these areas. Encyclopædia Britannica Online, s.v. ‘Moor’, [http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/391449/Moor accessed 16.03.2012]. For a definition of ‘Moorish Architecture’ in the context of nineteenth-century Britain see Pascual de Gayangos, Penny Cyclopaedia of the Society for the Diffusion of Useful Knowledge, vol. 15, London: Charles Knight and Co., 1839, 381-90.

2 Among the many changes made to the palaces was the conversion of the Mexuar to a royal chapel and the area surrounding the Cuarto Dorado or Golden Room into residences under Ferdinand and Isabella. Charles V continued this conversion programme through an extension of the Comares Palace into royal apartments, and the construction of a large Renaissance-style palace alongside the Lions complex. Victorian traveller and Hispanist Richard Ford gives a valuable record of what he calls the Alhambra’s ‘history of degradation’ after the sixteenth century in Hand-Book for Travellers in Spain and Readers at Home: Describing the Country and Cities, the Natives and Their Manners, the Antiquities, Religion, Legends, Fine Arts, Literature, Sports, and Gastronomy: With Notices on Spanish History, vol. 1, London: John Murray, 1845, 364-7.
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history, receiving unsteady attention from both the Islamic world and the European land it had once inhabited.\textsuperscript{3} The symbolic weight of the Alhambra, imagined both a relic of the lost golden age of al-Andalus and a war trophy of the Reconquista, has further ensured it a liminal position within the history of Islamic art.

Changing perspectives on Nasrid ornament

Within the Alhambra, those interiors of the Nasrid palaces which remain largely intact date from the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries (these have been retrospectively named the Lions, Comares, Partal and Generalife palaces; see figure 1), and are to greater or lesser extents surfaced with wood, ceramic and carved plaster ornament,\textsuperscript{4} exhibiting an extensive design vocabulary based on geometry


\textsuperscript{4} Within this essay I have used the terms ‘ornament’ and ‘decoration’ to describe the covering of structural surfaces with sculptural relief elements (such as \textit{muqarnas}), carved wood and plaster panelling, and cut-tile ceramic mosaic. This article will discuss how negative associations in Western
and foliation interwoven with epigraphic inscriptions (figures 2 and 3). The general plan of the palace-complex itself is typologically indebted to the tenth-century Spanish Umayyad complex Madinat al-Zahra, near Córdoba. D. Fairchild Ruggles suggests that in adapting the palatial design of the fallen caliphate, the Nasrids were able to differentiate themselves from their immediate predecessors, the Almohad dynasty (1130-1269), and to propagate ‘a legitimacy that was sorely needed as they balanced themselves politically between Christian Castile and the Merinids of Morocco’. The wide vocabulary of decorative patterns and design formats applied throughout the Alhambra, however, grew and developed from stylistic models left behind in the region by the Almohads, and contains important distinguishing elements that are specific to the Nasrid period.

Figure 2. Patterned stucco and ceramic decoration in the northwest corner of the Comares Hall (also called the Hall of the Ambassadors), Comares Palace, Alhambra (photograph by the author).

Figure 3. Patterned stucco, ceramic and wooden decoration of the main entrance facade of the Comares Palace, patio of the Cuarto Dorado (Golden Room), Alhambra (photograph by the author).

art history regarding surface decoration have influenced Islamic art discourse, and how associative etymologies can make neutrally descriptive terms difficult if not impossible.

Despite the many regional and dynastic innovations that characterize its palatial decoration, the Alhambra has historically been viewed as a culmination of past achievements disconnected from the contemporary conditions from which it gradually emerged. This article will examine the impact of nineteenth- and twentieth-century European art historical perspectives on the study of the architectural interiors of the Alhambra. While I do not wish to suggest a simplistic causal connection between nineteenth-century perspectives and twentieth-century art historical interpretations, it is important to point out the unusual circumstances under which the monument was introduced to Western audiences and the subsequent impact which early encounters appear to have had on the development of Alhambra scholarship. While Romantic associations played a major role in sideling a critical understanding of the monument throughout the nineteenth century, so too did the ‘analytic’ practice of schematically documenting, copying and reproducing its decorative elements. With minimal consideration given to source materials and archaeological evidence, empirical reproductions were equally effective in dislocating its forms from both the material and social reality of the Nasrid period, and from larger architectural systems of meaning found within their palaces (notwithstanding the deliberate omission from scholarly consideration of later conversions or additions). This led to the fragmentary isolation and scrutiny of Alhambra surface-design to the point of fetishization (part of a vogue for the ‘Alhambresque’ style), particularly within Britain and France. Early twentieth-century art historians thus encountered a monument already deeply compromised by specific ideological approaches, and physically reworked according to multiple, often conflicting agendas. It will be argued that it was in fact a combination of Romantic and modernizing perspectives that delayed a critical art historical engagement with the Alhambra’s architectural ornament until relatively late in the twentieth century.6

In recent decades a number of contemporary scholars have addressed the need to revisit the ornament of the Alhambra within the cultural and political context of Nasrid Granada, and, where possible, to discuss specific examples of its ornament in relation to the wider architectural spaces for which they were designed. Earlier views are now being challenged as part of a wider initiative to revisit the material history of al-Andalus from a range of critical and scientific perspectives, allowing a deeper understanding of the Alhambra by examining the formal and material complexities that comprise its hybrid and multilayered surfaces. Given the constraints of space, rather than providing a comprehensive overview of Alhambra scholarship, this essay will instead present a series of recent perspectives that reflect the changing position of the Alhambra within the field of Islamic art history. Before turning to these contributions, the study will first set out to explore some possible origins of the historic critical estimation of the Alhambra as a monument inspired by the past and thus disconnected from both the Nasrids’ contemporary view of their own present, and from the reality of the palace’s continuous use over many centuries, during both Muslim and Christian residencies.

6 A notable earlier exception is Ernst Kühnel’s study of the art of the Nasrid period as a separate, regionally connected tradition in Kühnel, *Maurische Kunst*, Berlin: B. Cassirer, 1924.
The popularized narrative of Nasrid kings, isolated from their Arab origins and doomed in the face of encroaching Christian forces, satisfied nineteenth-century Romantic fantasies and has endured throughout the following century and well into the present day.\(^7\) The clan of the Banu’l-Ahmar, which later became the Nasrid sultanate, was indeed the last Muslim dynasty to rule over the diminished territory of al-Andalus, and remained a paying tributary of Castile. However, the Nasrids’ 250-year reign also included extended periods of peaceful relations with Christian kingdoms and with the Merinids of North Africa, as well as instances of military advantage in which they were able to win back Christian-conquered territory.\(^8\)

While the region of Nasrid Granada was greatly reduced in size and its Muslim population marginalized by the thirteenth century, the theatrical conception of its rulers as lonely, ill-fated and knowing their days to be numbered is, as Cynthia Robinson has rightly pointed out, a historicized perspective that could not possibly have been shared by the Nasrids themselves.\(^9\) Nonetheless, by the early nineteenth century the Alhambra had grown in the European imagination as an isolated fortress under permanent threat from outside forces, a deeply engrained narrative that persisted within Western travel literature and books on the subject late into the twentieth century, and one which Robinson has identified as ‘a sort of a lethargic nostalgia [that] is generally presumed to permeate all of Nasrid cultural production’.\(^10\)

While the nostalgic view of the Nasrid period may have its prototype in the Romantic writings of travellers, the Welsh-born designer-architect Owen Jones (1809-74), whose works on the Alhambra will be discussed in more detail in the following section, was equally responsible for presenting its ornament in retrospective terms to a European audience. He felt that Nasrid design perfectly demonstrated the set of modern design principles laid out in his universalizing theory of ornament, but he was largely unconcerned with and even unaware of the development of regional styles or dynastic variations within Islamic art history. Idealizing certain elements and necessarily re-presenting them out of the original architectural context, by publishing colour-plate reproductions and exhibiting plaster replicas, Jones revealed an Alhambra to British audiences that had only surface value, and which he framed as a highly-refined archetype, formulating all past Arab or ‘Mahomedan’ achievements in design. Writing in *The Grammar of Ornament* (1856), he describes the Alhambra as a perfect synthesis of established traditions:

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\(^10\) Cynthia Robinson, ‘Marginal Ornament’, 189.
Our illustrations of the ornament of the Moors have been taken exclusively from the Alhambra, not only because it is the one of their works with which we are best acquainted, but also because it is the one in which their marvellous system of decoration reached its culminating point. The Alhambra is at the very summit of perfection of Moorish art, as is the Parthenon of Greek art. We can find no work so fitted to illustrate a Grammar of Ornament as that in which every ornament contains a grammar in itself … We find in the Alhambra the speaking art of the Egyptians, the natural grace and refinement of the Greeks, the geometrical combinations of the Romans, the Byzantines, and the Arabs.  

Jones was one of the first to address ornament in a truly global context, and his work was an important precursor to the formalist theories that emerged in the early decades of the twentieth century. However, while he and other design reformers of the period initially offered new inroads to the study of non-Western decorative traditions, they also set in motion a reductive system of formal categories that ultimately served to sideline such practices in favour of a Eurocentric lineage. Also relevant to the study of the Alhambra, a Western art historical tendency to privilege originality, exalting novelty, non-conformity and even rupture, led to a devaluation of appropriative and standardizing practices. Thus the continuity of regional styles and formats exhibited through the Alhambra’s elaborate systems of stylization and serialization led some nineteenth- and early twentieth-century commentators to see it as a mere showcase of the art of previous periods. 

While the discipline of art history has long since recognized the problems of this strain in modernist thought, and new ways of engaging with different languages of forms and their translation across cultural divides have long since been developed, these earlier world views have cast a long shadow. 

Despite the many technical innovations and variations of form introduced by the Nasrids, the basis of such designs in established traditions of architectural decoration continued to prompt Western scholars of Islamic art to view the Alhambra as largely derivative in its form and character, if not overwhelmingly dependent upon earlier building processes and traditions. In 1978, Oleg Grabar, one of the first to discuss the palace critically in relation to a wider history of Islamic architecture, surmised that the palaces of the Alhambra had only reflective value, their art serving primarily as ‘a sort of summary of medieval themes about princely ideology’. In his wide-ranging synthetic study of Islamic architecture (1994), 

12 Ralph Wornum, for example, saw the ‘diaper-tiles’ of the Alhambra as ‘identical’ to those of the ninth-century mosque of Ibn Tulun at Cairo, a direct continuation of a much older ‘standard’ of surface ornamentation. Ralph Wornum, _Analysis of Ornament: The Characteristics of Styles, an Introduction to the Study of the History of Ornamental Art_, London: Chapman and Hall, 1869, 110. 
Robert Hillenbrand described Nasrid art as ‘stagnant if not decadent’, offering ‘little that was not explicit or implicit in earlier Moorish and Maghribi art’. 15 He refers to the Alhambra as an ‘extended elegy’, writing that: ‘in its poised and lyrical classicism, its consciously antiquarian quality with numerous Graeco-Roman reminiscences, it encapsulates the many centuries of Moorish art and brings that art to its final flowering’. 16 It should be noted that at the time of writing, the archival and archaeological remains of al-Andalus had been considerably less thoroughly explored than is now the case. Nonetheless, the characterization of the Alhambra as a particularly reflective monument is symptomatic of a longstanding practice within Western scholarship that positions the Nasrids on the outer edges of the Islamic world, both geographically and in terms of their cultural production. The following section will explore some of the earlier Western encounters with the monument which laid the groundwork for later interpretations.

Nineteenth-century perspectives: copies and contradictions

The large volume of historical fiction and travel literature that grew up around the ‘Old Enchanted Pile’ (as it was affectionately called by Washington Irving) 17 played an important role in the European art historical reception of the Alhambra, liberally attributing names and narrative associations to its decorated spaces and to the ‘Moors’ that once occupied them. 18 The monument was celebrated in numerous

16 Hillenbrand, Islamic Architecture, 457.
18 Robert Irwin provides a good overview of the history of mistranslations and misnomers attributed to various areas of the palaces; see chapter one of Irwin, The Alhambra, London: Profile Books, 2005. Some of these names originated in the sixteenth century, while others were almost certainly invented later, such as the ‘Sala de los Abencerrajes’ which was described by François René Chateaubriand in Les Aventures du dernier Abencérage (1826) as the location of a bloody execution of the members of a noble family, the Banu'l-Sarraj. The pink discolourations found on the alabaster fountain in the centre of the room are made out to be stains from the blood of the heads of thirty-six Abencerrajes, supposedly massacred by Boabdil (the last Nasrid ruler, Muhammad VII), who suspected that one of them was in love with his wife. The story borrows directly from Pérez de Hita’s historical fiction, which may also have inspired the theme of Henri Renault’s 1870 painting Summary Execution under the Moorish Kings of
travel journals and handbooks from the Victorian era for the elaborate and technically refined artistry of its interiors, but usually only in terms of a perceived sensual ability to enchant its viewers or transport them to a theatrical place suspended from any real-world associations, indicating the profound influence of an earlier nineteenth-century European literary tradition of Orientalist fantasy. Writing in 1873, Augustus Hare directs his readers to an entranceway behind the palace of Charles V, through which one is ‘translated out of fact-land into fairy-land’. Its ornate interiors were often contrasted as a generic whole with its undecorated, fortress-like exterior, lending itself to many a ‘fairy palace’ and ‘buried gem’ analogy. H. Pemberton writes in 1868 that the exterior of the Alhambra Palace is ‘so simple and plain that the contrast becomes ten times more striking with its fairy-like interior’. The tenacity of such Romantic views of the Alhambra not only undermined attempts at more critical engagement with the history of the Nasrids, but also precluded examination of the palace’s decorative programmes in relation to systems of courtly and philosophical meaning that were integral to its use during the Nasrid period. As late as 1908, John Lomas wrote that the Hall of Two Sisters (Sala de las dos Hermanas) and Hall of the Abencerrajes ‘mark a period when luxury and phantasy [sic] were allowed to rule in art as they had already ruled long in life’. The division of public, private, and ceremonial spaces, along with their respective decorative programmes, were subverted or altogether ignored within such exoticized descriptions. Others imagined the Alhambra to be a throwback to earlier, more authentic Arab traditions, a nostalgicizing view that further obscured any understanding of the political realities of Nasrid courtly life. Describing the Alhambra for visitors in 1898, a Baedeker handbook states: ‘this Moorish palace comes to us like the resuscitation and artistic glorification of a far-distant past; the tent of the nomad Arab celebrates a late resurrection in its halls’.

The mid-nineteenth century represents a crucial turning point in the art historiography of the Alhambra, and one which in many respects prevented an engagement with the monument’s ornament on its own formal and ideological terms. With the exception of Jones and James Cavanah Murphy (1760-1816), there are few ‘analytical’ interpretations from this period, which is otherwise dominated by Romantic representations in the form of drawings, prints and paintings which spatially distort the monument, often placing it within sublime or picturesque

Granada, and tellingly, remains an integral anecdote for guided tours around the monument to this day.

22 Romantic descriptions of the Alhambra as a luxury palace drastically underplayed its function as the central hub of Nasrid political and cultural activity. While it is at least likely that the Generalife palace was used by ruling families as a retreat from the demands of the court, both the Comares and Lions palaces comprise a network of spaces that served a number of public and private functions. The intimately-sized Mexuar was used for conducting council business (described in a poem by Ibn Zamrak from 1365), while larger, more elaborately decorated spaces such as the Hall of Comares were reserved for official or ceremonial purposes.
lakesides. 24 Joseph-Philibert Girault de Prangéy (1804-92) produced a series of picturesque drawings, along with a single plan of the Alhambra, published as hand-coloured lithograph illustrations in *Monuments Arabes et Moresques de Cordoue, Séville et Grenade, Dessinés et Mesurés en 1832 et 1833* (1836-39), 25 while David Roberts presented portraits of *gitanos* or Spanish ‘types’ posed within and around its crumbling walls in *Jenning’s Landscape Annuals* (1835). 26 By contrast, schematic or illustrative contributions produced in more ‘scientific’ contexts, like those of Jones and Murphy, were seen to be faithfully accurate in their rendering of the monument, but in fact these equally reflect the proclivities of their creators.

Murphy, an Irish antiquarian who visited the monument in 1802, produced the first British survey of the Alhambra with a series of detailed plans, elevations and sections in *The Arabian Antiquities of Spain* (1815). However, his engravings greatly exaggerated its vertical scale and overall dimensions according to a Gothic-Saracenic style. Jones’ reproductions in *Plans, Elevations, Sections, and Details of the Alhambra* (published in two volumes between 1842 and 1845), possessed an exactitude that made him an uncontested authority on the monument. Comprising over one hundred drawings and prints based on sketches and tracings made by Jones and the French architect Jules Goury (1803-34) during a six-month stay in Granada in 1834, the limited edition survey included a historical foreword by the Orientalist scholar Pascual de Gayangos and a selection of his translations of epigraphic inscriptions, further adding to its authority. 27 Jones’ polychrome lithographs, however, significantly altered the appearance of the plasterwork patterns by rendering them in strong primary colours, and it was this presentation


27 Goury died of cholera during their stay, and Jones made a return trip to the monument in 1837. He sold a number of subscriptions to finance the publication process, releasing the first volume in ten parts in 1842, and the second volume in two parts in 1845 under the full title: *Plans, Elevations, Sections, and Details of the Alhambra: From Drawings Taken on the Spot in 1834 by the late M. Jules Goury and in 1834 and 1837 by Owen Jones/ With a Complete Translation of the Arabic Inscriptions and an Historical Notice of the Kings of Granada from the Conquest of that City by the Arabs to the Expulsion of the Moors, by Mr. Pasqual De Gayangos*, 2 vols, London: n.p., 1842-45.
of bold and clinical pattern segments that would characterize the pages of *Grammar* (see drawing for ‘Moresque Ornament’ section, figure 4).

In addition to publishing these elaborate volumes, Jones was also responsible for introducing the monument to British audiences in the form of a dramatic architectural reproduction known as the ‘Alhambra Court’, completed a year after the grand opening of the Sydenham Crystal Palace building in 1854 (figure 5). The original Crystal Palace, built in Hyde Park to house the Great Exhibition of 1851, was moved to Sydenham in southeast London after the initial six months of the exhibition were over, and rebuilt according to an enlargement and complete reconfiguration.\(^{28}\) Debates surrounding the moral and cultural value of

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\(^{28}\) The first ‘Great Exhibition of the Works of Industry of all Nations’ was located in Hyde Park, housed within a structure affectionately called the Crystal Palace. It was dismantled and in 1854 some of its contents were moved to an expanded structure set within a park in Sydenham (subsequently destroyed in a fire in 1936), which also included full-scale architectural displays.
ornament took centre stage at International Exhibitions, grand showcases where visitors could survey and compare the stylistic qualities of design deriving from different historical and geographical sources. While the original Crystal Palace in Hyde Park housed only a ‘slab from the Alhambra’ in amongst other artefacts attributed to Spain, the second site at Sydenham included a full-scale architectural reproduction. After a period of campaigning, Jones was granted permission to build a facsimile of the Court of Lions and its adjoining rooms based on his extensive study of the monument. Even with its bright polychrome colour scheme, Jones’ Court was widely believed to accurately resemble the original, a belief confirmed by visitors to the Exhibition who had seen the monument in Spain. The popularity of the Crystal Palace display meant that Jones’ interpretation of the Alhambra came to be generally regarded as definitively representative of Islamic architecture in both popular and specialist architectural circles in London. As Kathryn Ferry has observed, the Sydenham Court provided ‘a more accurate and easily-accessible representation of an Islamic monument than was available anywhere else outside the Muslim world’.

Figure 5. Philip Henry Delamotte, Entrance to the Court of the Lions, Alhambra Court, Sydenham Crystal Palace, 1854-1889 (photographed). Albumen print from collodion negative. London: Victoria and Albert Museum, number 39:316.

29 Spain was located in the ‘foreign countries’ section of the Sydenham exhibition that included exhibits of raw produce, minerals, vegetable, manufactured articles (including an octagonal table of inlaid wood), a sword and other specimens from Toledo. See Popular Guide to the Great Exhibition of the Works of Industry of All Nations: With a Plan of the Building, Rules for Visitors, and Suggestions for the Guidance of Large Parties Visiting the Exhibition, London: William Clowes and Sons, Spicer Brothers, 1851, 11.

30 For example, ‘…we could not help comparing notes, in our mind, with Owen Jones's restorations, and mentally admiring the fidelity of his copy of this court’ (Henry Blackburn, Travelling in Spain in the Present Day, London: Sampson Low, Son & Marston, 1866, 196).


For these reasons, Jones’ reproductions would have significant repercussions on the way the Alhambra came to be viewed historically. As the work of a pioneer of the British design reform movement, Jones’ Alhambra Court became a means of illustrating a set of modern design principles that advocated propriety, flatness and the conventionalization of natural forms, as well as the polychrome colouring of decorated surfaces. He would eventually outline thirty-seven ‘propositions’ in the introduction to The Grammar of Ornament that elaborated on these principles, and would also apply them later in his own commercial designs for textiles, books and wallpapers. In the section of the Grammar titled ‘Moresque Ornament’ he makes fourteen observations about the principles that informed Nasrid art, duplicating many of the statements found in the introduction: decoration must always follow construction (so that no decoration is made ‘gratuitously’); all lines within designs must gradually grow out of each other or from a parent stem (as a leaf or branch); designs should be subdivided into general lines and areas of pattern, with smaller details never permitted to interfere with the overall effect; a proper balance and contrast of ‘the straight, the inclined and the curved’ should be maintained (achieving a melody or harmony of form); nature should be treated conventionally and not be too exactly reproduced; and colour must be used to assist in the development of form (‘the colours employed by the Moors on their stucco-work were, in all cases, the primaries, blue, red and yellow [gold]’). In addition to educating the public about the art of this unfamiliar period, Jones also saw the intricacies of Nasrid style as exemplary of the means by which natural or plant forms could be refined and reworked through the process known as conventionalization, thus serving his own design mission for nineteenth-century British art production. To better illustrate this point within his Court, the Alhambra’s many imperfections were ‘corrected’ and only a selection of examples of the monument’s surface decoration were included, comprised mainly of the low-relief panels which were particularly suited to Jones and Goury’s tracing process. Jones explains his criteria for choosing patterns as follows:

The limited space at our command, and the necessity to perform in a few months what with the Moors was doubtless a work of years, has prevented our doing more than reproduce some of the interesting features of these remains; and in making our selection, we have endeavored to utilize the space at our command so as to unite as far as possible whatever could best recall the

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33 Led by Henry Cole, the design reformers set up the government-run Department of Practical Art (est. 1852-53) and the South Kensington Museum (est. 1857), both products of a new attitude toward cultural production that was defined largely by utilitarian and pedagogical interests in supplying British manufacturers with the skills needed to compete with foreign producers.

34 Jones’ wallpaper and textile designs of the 1860s and 70s had departed almost completely from the patterns found within the monument. For a concise overview of his commercial work see Michael Darby, The Islamic Perspective: An Aspect of British Architecture and Design in the 19th Century, London: Scorpion Pica Ltd, 1983.


main features of the original, and at the same time convey the most useful lessons...\textsuperscript{37}

Jones’ obsessive attention to detail gave the exhibition an air of irrefutable truth, despite a number of more liberal interpretations of the monument’s appearance (including the addition of a decorated exterior façade and the controversial gilding of the patio columns). The Court was intended as an ‘aid’ to Jones’ studies, one which he referred to as ‘a fragmentary reproduction of the real Alhambra’.\textsuperscript{38} While he clearly stated his rationale and provided floorplans of both the original court and of his reproduction for comparative purposes, Jones nonetheless (and however unwittingly) obstructed an understanding of the spatial context of the Nasrid palaces by dislocating and reproducing their decorated surfaces in new configurations. While the general layout of the Court of the Lions and its adjoining spaces was maintained, he concedes that ‘the diaper on the walls is taken from the Sala de la Barca, [and] the mosaic dado from the Patio de la Alberca’.\textsuperscript{39} With its plaster panels having been made from new moulds based on Jones and Goury’s tracings, and the muqarnas ceiling of the Hall of Abencerrajes produced from a new technique using gelatine, the Court contained none of the signs of decay or deterioration found in the original palace.\textsuperscript{40} Those who preferred the natural irregularity of hand-produced designs took particular offence at the mechanized aesthetic of Jones’ Sydenham Court. Commentator and antiquarian John Ruskin (1819-1900), who had never actually visited the monument in Granada and based his opinions solely on Jones’ reproductions, remarked:

The Alhambra is no more characteristic of Arab work, than Milan Cathedral is of Gothic: it is a late building, a work of the Spanish dynasty in its last decline, and its ornamentation is fit for nothing but to be transferred to patterns of carpets or bindings of books, together with their marbling, and mottling, and other mechanical recommendations. The Alhambra ornament has of late been largely used in shop-fronts, to the no small detriment of Regent Street and Oxford Street.\textsuperscript{41}

Revealingly, Ruskin makes a causal link between the politically marginalized position of the Nasrids immediately prior to 1492 and what he sees as the overripe decline in their architectural decoration, refusing even to rate the Alhambra as worthy of the noble rank of architecture, condemning these apparently decadent designs as better suited to ‘lower’ art media and to the vulgar window-dressing of

\textsuperscript{37} Jones, \textit{The Alhambra Court}, 30.
\textsuperscript{38} Jones, \textit{The Alhambra Court}, 30.
\textsuperscript{39} Jones, \textit{The Alhambra Court}, 32.
\textsuperscript{40} Full-sized drawings were made by Jones’ pupils, Albert Warren and Charles Aubert, based on his casts and paper impressions, and new panels were ‘carved, moulded, cast, and fixed by Mr. Henry A. Smith and his two sons, assisted by a very intelligent body of English workmen’ (Jones, \textit{The Alhambra Court}, 4). For the muqarnas dome, Jones writes that it was ‘preferable to adopt a more economical and rapid process’, which allowed various combinations of individual muqarnas forms to be assembled on a table and applied to the surface of the ceiling in large blocks (\textit{The Alhambra Court}, 86).
London shops. In effect, he blames the Nasrids’ political decline for what he sees as the poor quality of the ornament in their monument. His negative opinion of the Alhambra was also connected to his well-known disdain for industrial progress as well as process, alarm at the dangers these presented to manual craft and individual expression, and his own prejudices regarding non-European cultures and societies. For Ruskin, the repose and repetition of Nasrid ornament lacked the improvisation and irregularity of the artist’s hand, while he associated its abstract, ‘line-based’ designs (that were not drawn directly from the natural world) with barbarism and cruelty. The ornament in Jones’ court was cast using tracings from the walls of the Alhambra and was brightly coloured to achieve a ‘neutralized bloom’, which in turn amplified the uniformity and regularity of its patterns.

Mark Crinson has argued that it was Jones’ and other design reformers’ growing enthusiasm for the formulaic organization of Islamic art and design that caused critics such as Ruskin to intensify their Eurocentric views. The very virtues of Nasrid art which Jones championed were attacked by those opposed to modern design principles, the ‘all over’ repeat-patterns indicating certain moral corruption. This suspicion confirmed a polemic characterization of Islamic art which was already circulating within British art historical circles, evident in a description of the Alhambra by Edward Freeman from 1849:

…Lavish splendour, tinsel decoration, walls where not an inch is left unadorned with sumptuous carving, remind us of the subject genii that reared the palace of Aladdin; but the true soul of art, the inspiration which can make the plainest pile of Greece or England replete with the truest beauty, never found themselves a home among the followers of the impostor of Arabia.

Programmed by cultural and religious prejudice, such expert testimony would verify an estimation of the Alhambra as replete with enchanting flourishes, but possessing very little in the way of substance if not integrity. This impression was reinforced by the proliferation of cast copies of its carved plaster ornament in the second half of the century. While British audiences were visiting Jones’ Court, Rafael Contreras Muñoz (1826-90), ‘restorer of ornaments’ at the Alhambra from 1847 and director from 1869, was mass-producing plaster casts on the palace grounds in Granada. The casts served a number of purposes; they were used to resurface areas of the palaces that had been badly damaged or stripped of their ornament, were sold directly to tourists as souvenirs (helping to prevent further theft of original material from the walls of the Alhambra), and were also exhibited at

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43 Crinson, Empire Building, 54.
44 In ‘The Two Paths’, Ruskin makes this bias against non-canonical Eastern artforms most evident in his analysis of the art and mental disposition of the people of India, as compared to a supposedly superior Western equivalent identified in the people of Scotland.
International Exhibitions in London and Paris. Contreras also created a series of small-scale architectural models based on different areas of the palaces, which were painted in polychrome. These intricate tableaux were sold to tourists as luxury souvenirs, and some were exhibited in the Spanish section of the Great Exhibition in London in 1851 and the Exposition Universelle in Paris in 1867. A number of these models were acquired in the 1860s by the South Kensington Museum (renamed the Victoria and Albert Museum in 1899), of which only one remains.

Unlike previous custodians of the Alhambra, Contreras developed ties with design professionals and museum institutions outside Spain, accelerating the spread of the Alhambra style throughout Europe. He was also responsible for a series of ‘creative restoration’ projects within the monument, such as the addition of a false Iranian-style dome to the eastern pavilion of the Court of Lions in 1859 (subsequently dismantled by Leopoldo Torres Balbás in 1934), and the polychrome redecoration of the Comares Palace hammam. The nature of Contreras’ interventions in the monument, along with their subsequent removal, are particularly interesting in light of the establishment of the Alhambra as a national monument of Spain in 1870, reclaimed after a long period of apparent official disinterest. Orientalist interventions of the mid-nineteenth century were largely removed during the 1930s under the ‘scientific’ restoration programme of Torres Balbás, architectural curator of the monument from 1923 to 1936, which resulted in a heavily restored, ‘authenticated’ version of the monument with an emphasis on its Nasrid history.

The historic concurrence of nineteenth-century imperialism with British design reform introduced ideal conditions for a new formulation, discussion and comparison of national art styles, organized into hierarchies which, inevitably, confirmed the global political landscape. Gottfried Semper, writing in the 1860s, 46, 47

46 The popularity of Contreras’ two- and three-dimensional models in both Britain and France is noted within travel journals, and indicated by their continued production later in the century by artists such as Enrique Linares. For a concise overview of the life of these plaster reproductions see Mariam Rosser-Owen, Islamic Arts From Spain, London: V&A Publishing, 2010, 114-18; and by the same author, ‘Colecionar la Alhambra: Owen Jones y la España Islámica en el South Kensington Museum’, in Juan Calatrava, Mariam Rosser-Owen, Abraham Tomas, and Rémi Labrusse, eds, Owen Jones y la Alhambra, Granada: Patronato de la Alhambra y Generalife; V&A Museum, 2011, 43-69 and 159-68.


48 For the remaining model see V&A museum number ‘REPRO.1890-52’. The other twenty-six models that Contreras sent to the museum in 1865 were either diffused through a network of regional design schools across Britain – part of an education initiative of the South Kensington Museum in the 1860s – or later disposed of by the V&A in the 1950s to make room in storage. See Rosser-Owen, ‘Colecionar La Alhambra’, 59, 67.

49 In addition to his dealings with the South Kensington Museum, Contreras travelled several times to London, gave a speech at the Great Exhibition of 1851, and was offered an honorary position within the Royal Institute of British Architects (RIBA). See the entry on Rafael Contreras y Muñoz in Enciclopedia Universal Ilustrada Euro Americana, vol. 15, Barcelona: Espasa Calpe, 1908-30, 256. Raquejo has also speculated that he would have had dealings with Thomas Hayter Lewis (architect of the Royal Panopticon), and Matthew D. Wyatt, as all three architects participated in the Exposition International in Paris in 1867 (Raquejo, ‘La Alhambra en el Museo Victoria y Albert’). He also received a silver medal for his plaster casts at the Paris Exhibition: see Catalogue General de la Section Espagnole, Exposition Universale de 1867, Paris: 1867, 109.
believed that the synthesis of cultures within International Exhibitions would allow for a wider field of cultural history to come into focus, thereby rescuing art history from a ‘critically divisive and archaeological viewpoint’. However, these same exhibitions were to be responsible for the selection, arrangement and ranking of technical achievements within powerful imperial showcases. The display of the most ‘advanced’ products of world cultures was also a public demonstration of Britain’s power to absorb the achievements of other nations. As Crinson notes, during this time critics and historians were expected to ‘make cultural differentiation meaningful’, whether through discourses of ethnicity, or models of natural history, philology, social sciences or religion. He argues that Jones (along with Freeman and James Fergusson) contributed to the creation between 1840 and 1870 of a large corpus of material devoted to Islamic architecture, which was ‘gathered and made available to the privileged architect or architectural historian who wished to study the subject without actually venturing out into the Islamic world’. Accordingly, the exposure to non-Western forms that was enabled by International Exhibitions encouraged European art historians to study objects of Islamic art and architecture completely out of cultural context, and with their focus firmly set upon available systems of surface decoration.

In general, critical debates were played down for general audiences within the recreational context of the Crystal Palaces, where visitors were encouraged to stroll through themed environments as a form of simulated world travel. Overwhelmingly, Western exhibits were associated with business, industry and confident progress, while exotic and foreign sections provided entertainment and leisure. After 1851, design was no longer the specialized interest of the design reformers but rather, to quote Lara Kriegel, ‘the stuff of enchantment, edification, and entertainment for general audiences’. Such design enchantment no doubt also stimulated desire for similar commodities, encouraging the general public to buy imported manufactures from these ‘Other’ nations. While the industrial focus of International Exhibitions led to the admission of a number of ‘Oriental’ nations, such as Tunisia and Turkey, on the basis of the perceived quality of their manufactured goods or natural resources (not to mention political and commercial relationships with the host country), their industrial activity was often assigned a sidebar position within a dominant narrative of Western progress and industrialism. Jones’ Alhambra Court presents a fascinating fusion of these modes, simultaneously lauding the design achievements of the Nasrids in line with a series of modern design principles, while offering an authenticated vision of a conflated preindustrial Oriental past.

The largely transformed spaces of the Alhambra itself in the nineteenth century, and the fragmentary understanding of its ornament formed through the

51 Crinson, Empire Building, 38-39.
52 Crinson, Empire Building, 38-39.
dissemination of copies and reproductions, detracted from contemporary understanding of the palace’s design programmes undertaken during the Nasrid period. Thus taken out of context and only ever loosely compared with other Islamic architectural decoration, the Alhambra’s formidable sequences of tilework and carved plaster ensembles were increasingly characterized as static: the products of a compromised culture that had reached a point of saturation. In combination with the fact that the Alhambra’s early ‘rediscovery’ by nineteenth-century European travellers coincided with their lack of wider knowledge about Islamic art history, or the history of al-Andalus more specifically, these factors resulted in the monument’s misinterpretation as a mere showcase of past achievements. As John Sweetman has noted, by the mid-nineteenth century, through the devoted activity of artist-antiquarians such as Jones, the Alhambra was celebrated as ‘a repository’ of Islamic culture in general, and its decoration in particular.55

A problem of form: misreading ornament in the twentieth century

The plural interpretations of the Alhambra that were formulated throughout the nineteenth century coincided with an explosion of interest in the ornamental production of non-Western cultures, and the emergence of formal strategies for understanding and categorizing artforms on a global scale. It is necessary to explore the ways in which these complex and multilayered interpretations impacted on discussions of the Alhambra in the twentieth century, particularly with respect to the development of formalist thought. As a monument whose history had been fragmented and exoticized in equal measure throughout the preceding century, how was it perceived differently from other Islamic buildings, and to what extent did scholarship on the subject continue to be shaped by modernizing and essentializing frameworks? These questions must be addressed within the context of early formalist discourse, for at the same time that a global picture of art production was taking shape, the terminology and critical tools with which to discuss it were rapidly shrinking under the rubric of modernism.

As David Summers has observed, the formalist tradition of the early twentieth century, and the work of Alois Riegl in particular, were initially well suited to a discussion of both pre-modern and non-Western art forms in a truly global context, but the linkage of this discourse with the rise of Western modernism was ultimately to lead to the exclusion of decorative traditions from an evolutionary Western lineage.56 Historical continuity was a central theme in Riegl’s work, particularly in his best-known book Questions of Style (Stilfragen, 1893) where he argued against locally or regionally developed ornamental motifs in favour of a universal underlying drive towards ornament. In Late Roman Art Industry (Spätromische Kunstindustrie, 1901) he applied these ideas to a chronological study of


56 ‘Before it was linked to historicist ideas of evolution and development...the idea of form, at least in principle, promised access to all kinds of art. The idea of form, however, also arose together with Western modernism, and for all its admirable reach, has proved to be an unreliable means of engaging the art of cultures outside the European tradition and its tributaries.’ David Summers, Real Spaces: World Art History and the Rise of Western Modernism, London: Phaidon, 2003, 28.
antiquity from the Egyptian to the late Roman period. These two works in particular have been both contested for their hierarchic (if not racial) linearity and revered for their detailed formalist strategy of reading visual elements to reveal perceptual shifts in a culture’s understanding of its own relationship to the external world.\textsuperscript{57} Despite his claims to cultural pluralism and a reflexive understanding of the limits of the historian’s discourse, however, Riegl’s application of the Kunstwollen or ‘will to form’ to the history of global style ultimately celebrated an ‘evolved’ Occidental tradition at the expense of ‘less developed’ Oriental motifs.

On the one hand, Riegl offered an entrance point for understanding the vegetal motifs found across many periods of Islamic art in terms of their individual stages of development (thereby recognizing innovation within the confines of tradition),\textsuperscript{58} while on the other, his insistence that each variation was to be viewed as a stage within a gradual progression of style undermined a synchronic view of different periods of production.\textsuperscript{59} For example, in describing the progression of the lotus flower from Ancient Egypt to Classical Greece, and finally into late Roman Antiquity, he argued that it was the tendency to move beyond the separation of repeated forms within a flat plane (originally developed to allow for sensory perception of the beholder), that indicated a culture’s greater understanding of depth.\textsuperscript{60} Although Riegl was one of the first Western thinkers critically to examine decorative traditions in a comparative light, and to recognize that conservatism and creativity within design are not mutually exclusive, interpretations of his theories in the following decades would prove by and large counter-productive to the study of non-Western art, with after-effects that can be charted in the study of Islamic art in general, and, less explicitly, in the treatment received by the architectural decoration of the Alhambra.

By 1908, self-proclaimed ‘modernists’ such as Adolf Loos were lobbying for the elimination of ornament from modern buildings on the basis that it served as a symbolic impediment to progress. Expanding the evolutionist element of Riegl’s

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\textsuperscript{57} The implications of Riegl’s formalist approach for the historical representation of culture have not been overlooked, and revisiting his ideas over a century later continues to expose its strengths and contradictions. Acknowledging the shortcomings of his model, Margaret Iverson discusses Riegl’s early recognition of decorative or ‘lower’ artforms as worthy subjects of scholarly attention, not least because with abstract work, ‘one was not distracted by iconographical motifs’ (Margaret Iverson, Alois Riegl: Art History and Theory, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1993, 7). Michael Podro has also written on the importance of Riegl’s linkage between cultural shifts in attitude to the transformation of motifs, thus introducing a ‘psychological urgency to the development of pattern’ (Michael Podro, The Critical Historians of Art, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1982, iv).

\textsuperscript{58} Margaret Olin has argued that Riegl’s Stilfragen can be read as a defence of a special kind of representation, by which an object (a plant or leaf form) is depicted through ‘immediately comprehensible analogy and association, making already available motifs signify in new ways’. She explains that for Riegl, ‘progress’ in plant ornamentation (exemplified in the acanthus leaf or lotus flower), occurred only when artists took up the types handed down to them by their predecessors. Margaret Olin, ‘Self-Representation: Resemblance and Convention in Two Nineteenth-Century Theories of Architecture and the Decorative Arts’, Zeitschrift für Kunstgeschichte, 49(3), 1986, 389.

\textsuperscript{59} For a critical discussion of these theories see Erika Naginski, ‘Riegl, Archaeology, and the Periodization of Culture’, RES: Anthropology and Aesthetics, 40, 2001, 135-52.

work, Loos argued that decorated surfaces were excessive and vulgar to the point of being criminal and degenerate. Loos and the Vienna School formalists went one step farther than the critics of the preceding century; they not only saw ornament as devoid of meaning and a sign of cultural stagnation, but as a retrograde step in the evolution of form. Decades later, Erwin Panofsky was to continue this line of thinking in his 1927 *Perspective as Symbolic Form*, in which he states that the abstract ornament of ‘Arabic’ civilizations was a diversion from the rules of representation first laid out by Hellenic and Roman societies, rules that were later returned to and perfected during the Italian Renaissance. Such etymologies partly explain the persistent use of terms such as ‘horror vacui’ within European descriptions of Islamic art, insinuating an irrational fear of empty space which compels artists to cover whole objects and surfaces with surface pattern, a practice which is implicitly condemned.

The outright rejection of architectural surface ornament at the turn of the nineteenth century would have unfortunate implications for the study of Islamic art. In modern Western models used for thinking about architecture, as Anne-Marie Sankovitch has observed, structure has been allocated temporal priority over


64 Writing in 1979, Richard Ettinghausen attempted to explain this phenomenon, citing a general tendency in the Islamic world toward exaggeration and lavishness. The pejorative implications of the term were soon after addressed by Gombrich, who renamed it ‘amor infinity’ and argued that ‘fresh periodicities’ were created through the linking of regular or symmetrical designs, creating ‘a rich network of progressive intricacy’ that characterized different eras of Islamic production (Ernst H. Gombrich, *The Sense of Order: A Study in the Psychology of Decorative Art*, 2nd ed., London: Phaidon, 1984, 80). Lisa Golombek’s 1988 essay, ‘The Draped Universe of Islam’ (in Priscilla P. Soucek, ed., *Content and Context of Visual Arts in the Islamic World*, University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1988, 25-49) was one of the first attempts to discuss the practice of ornamentation in relation to specific cultural conditions. She identified a ‘textile-reflex’ that recurred within a number Islamic societies in which textiles ‘were incorporated into codes of social and religious behavior at every level of society and in every phase of human existence’. These studies were important to the development of a more critically grounded consideration of ornament within Islamic art history, even while they retained elements of the formalist tradition through their association of form with cultural tendencies or behaviours. Oleg Grabar’s *The Mediation of Ornament* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992) encapsulated many of these ideas and established the critical role of ornament as an intermediary between viewers and artistic works across different periods and cultural contexts.

65 As Irene Winter has argued, Western analysis often considers ‘ornament’ as a form of embellishment with no intrinsic meaning of its own, while ‘adornment’ in the art of many Eastern cultures (and the medieval West) is integral to aesthetic expression and experience. Irene Winters, ‘Defining Aesthetics for Non-Western Studies’, *Art History, Aesthetics, Visual Studies*, Williamstown, MA: Sterling and Francine Clark Institute, 2002, 14.
ornament. This ensures that ornament is always secondary to structure, and correspondingly the latter is usually given priority within historical interpretations. Sankovitch’s ‘structure/ornament’ divide is particularly useful in engendering an understanding of how the Alhambra was interpreted by nineteenth-century audiences, for the structure’s intermediary elements complicate this hierarchy of forms. In the case of the Alhambra, the nineteenth-century tendency to view its architectural decoration as ‘mere ornament’, whether interpreted from Romantic or analytic viewpoints, further detracted from an understanding of it as part of architectural context, or its construction within the cultural context of Nasrid Granada. Severed from its relationship to structure and to the function of certain spaces, palatial ornament was thus emptied of its meaning in relation to the larger architectural programme and demoted to, in the words of Sankovitch, ‘a relic, a fetish, a sculptural souvenir, or a memory of a whole object’.

Hybridity and authenticity

In addition to the problem of formal categories, the study of the Alhambra’s ornament has suffered from a priori definitions of ‘originality’ and ‘authenticity’, tropes of formal analysis that are unsuitable to any tradition based on the continuation and reworking of existing styles and processes. A disciplinary tendency to frame the history of art as a series of breaks with convention has proved incommensurate with a study of conventionalized forms as they are transformed across multiple regions and periods. Hence, a traditional Western art historical narrative that posits ‘avant-gardeism’ as the benchmark for stylistic and ideological change overlooks a vast number of traditions that develop and build upon established templates and vocabularies of form.

The periodizing perspective of traditional Western art history also presents a problem in terms of the classification of ‘hybrid’ complex monuments. In the case of the Alhambra, a large percentage of its buildings were converted or rebuilt by Christians in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries (and creatively restored throughout the nineteenth century). However, the desire to see the Alhambra as an ‘authentic’ Islamic palace functioned to both flatten the history of its Nasrid construction, and draw a veil over its wider history of transformation after 1492. A number of European visitors were dismissive or resentful of later ‘interventions’; a travel journal from 1868 states that in order to enjoy the grandeur of the Alhambra ‘you must lose sight of the Palace of Charles V, the rankest toad-stool that ever grew up amid sweet summer flowers’. Despite the prominence of its Christian contributions, the Alhambra of the nineteenth century came to be more closely associated with a ‘pure’ Muslim past than with its richly layered history of interventions, which were critically recognized for the first time only in the first decades of the twentieth century, following the foundational projects of Manuel

Gómez-Moreno González, historian, archaeologist and painter (1834-1918),69 and Torres Balbás,70 The post-conquest alterations to the complex were later recognized as integral to its history by Antonio Gallego y Burín, art historian, mayor of Granada and head of the Alhambra Council from 1945 to 1951.71 Only at this late stage in the monument’s history would the accusations of ‘inauthenticity’ levelled at so much of its architecture begin to receive substantial attention. In order to understand the full significance of the Alhambra as a chronologically complex monument, it is necessary to consider the richness of its layers of decoration without predetermined judgments about originality or innovation. This has been crucial to the revisiting of Nasrid art within the context of its regional history and architectural production, as well as the conditions that allowed for subsequent additions and changes under Christian rule. In addressing this lacuna within earlier scholarship, a new chapter of research has opened up fresh approaches to discussing the Alhambra within the wider social and political climate of ‘frontier Granada’, a cultural and religious frontier zone which David Coleman argues lingered for decades after the Christian conquest.72 Since the 1990s, scholars of the Alhambra have revealed that rather than exhibiting a ‘passive’ or ‘lethargic’ engagement with precedent models, the adaptation and translation of forms and techniques from previous periods allowed the Nasrids to strengthen and reinforce their sovereignty within a tense political climate, a practice that was rooted firmly in their own present.

In Nasrid palatial decoration the component forms and motifs are strongly stylized, drawing from and elaborating upon an inheritance of motifs and design formats received from the preceding ruling power in the Iberian peninsula, the Almohad dynasty, which had in turn borne the impact of designs and motifs formulated under its own predecessor, the Almoravid dynasty. Both of these powers originated from the Maghrib. The vegetal forms found within Nasrid patterns (also called ‘ataurique’ from the Arabic ‘al-tawriq’ meaning leaves, foliage, or flora), were taken directly from Almoravid and Almohad art and re-interpreted, with increasing variation in form and a noticeably exaggerated curvature, throughout the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries.73 The use of these design

69 Gómez-Moreno González’s Guía de Granada (Granada: Indalecio Ventura, 1892) presented a comprehensive overview of the remains of the monument and its historical background, while the ‘scientific restoration’ programme implemented by Torres Balbás rescued a number of areas of the palaces from destruction, and made great advances towards a more comprehensive understanding of Nasrid building and ornamentation.
70 Leopoldo Torres Balbás, La Alhambra y el Generalife, Los Monumentos Cardinales de España, Madrid: Editorial Plus-Ulta, 1953. Sections of his ‘Diario de Obras’ have been published in Cuadernos de la Alhambra (issues 2, 4, 5 and 6). For a good overview of the work of Torres Balbás see Carlos Vilchez, La Alhambra de Leopoldo Torres Balbás (Obras de Restauración y Conservación, 1923-1936), Granada: Editorial Comares, 1988.
73 This basic set of forms includes rings or small circles, stems, small leaves in the shape of a crescent moon, leaves of varying curvature, single or double palm leaves projecting upward or downward, peppercorns, pine cones and lobed palmettes. Antonio Fernández-Puertas, The Alhambra: From the Ninth Century to Yusuf I (1354), vol. 1, London: Saqi Books, 1997, 103.
compositions in carved plaster reached a pinnacle of sophistication during the reigns of the Nasrid sultans Yusuf I (r. 1333-54) and Muhammad V (r. 1354-59 and 1362-91). During the second reign of Muhammad V a number of foreign design elements also made their way into the Alhambra, including the lotus flower, attributed by Mariam Rosser-Owen to the sultan’s personal awareness of contemporary cultural developments outside the borders of al-Andalus, particularly through trade with the Mamluk realms.

The sophistication and delicacy with which existing vegetal and geometric motifs were reworked and refined within Nasrid architectural decoration can be said to distinguish the period from previous eras of production. New technologies were developed to accommodate the richness and complexity of patterns, most strikingly the mould-making process that produced the smooth stucco panelling of the fourteenth century. The new use of moulds facilitated up to four impressions upon a single surface, producing high-relief designs with a depth of up to four centimetres. Replacing the heavy, hand-carved blocks of gesso used in earlier periods, the thinner panels of moulded stucco also accommodated larger areas of vegetal patterns (divided and framed by linear arcading, striated bands, cartouches and intricate strapwork, often containing epigraphy), to create immersive systems of meaning.

Significantly, the names and military victories of individual rulers are also commemorated within inscriptions located throughout the palaces – a clear indication of the importance of architectural decoration for the articulation of sovereignty during the time of the Nasrids. Of the thirty-one epigraphic fragments that remain remain in situ, twenty-five of these refer to the architecture itself, thus connecting rulers and their poet-viziers to certain areas of the palaces. For example, a poem by Ibn al-Jayyab found in the Qalaturra al-jadida (also known as the Torre de la Cautiva or Tower of the Captive) consists of metaphoric themes that establish the greatness of the tower and the Alhambra fortress, as well as its current patron, ending with a fakhr or glorification of sultan Yusuf I. Such processes and policies suggest that architectural surroundings explicitly reflected contemporary politics and patronage, rather than implying any ‘passive reuse’ of historical design

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75 The lotus flower is a Chinese motif that entered the design repertoire of Islamic art as a consequence of the Mongol conquest of Iran and Iraq in the second half of the thirteenth century, appearing on Mamluk luxury goods in Egypt and Syria before the turn of the fourteenth century. It is found within the woodwork of the Lions Palace, particularly in the ceiling beams of the galleries surrounding the patio. Mariam Rosser-Owen, Islamic Arts From Spain, London: V&A Publishing, 2010, 59-60.
76 Fernández-Puertas, The Alhambra, p. 92.
77 Fernández-Puertas, The Alhambra, p. 92.
78 Epigraphic texts are found throughout the Alhambra in great profusion and variety, either quoting from the Qur’an or speaking from the perspective of objects themselves, often in poetic verse. A full translation of the Comares Palace inscriptions has recently been released by the Council of the Alhambra in collaboration with the School of Arabic Studies, Epigraphic Corpus of the Alhambra: Palace of Comares, Granada: Patronato de la Alhambra y Generalife; Escuela de Estudios Árabes, 2010, with the inscriptions of the Lions Palace and further spaces forthcoming.
79 Ruggles, Gardens, Landscape, and Vision, 205.
precedents. The processes and techniques developed to facilitate this refinement are also specific to the period, and should be considered a critical component of Nasrid visual culture.

This practice was continued, albeit under very different circumstances, during the Christian redecoration of the Nasrid palaces in the sixteenth century, which involved Moriscos81 in the production of a new symbolic programme as well as the maintenance of the palaces. German humanist and traveller Hieronymous Münzer reported in 1494 that Morisco craftsmen were restoring the Nasrid palace in conformance with its style, which explains the skillful integration of Christian symbols.82 The Mexuar Hall is particularly rich in examples of these additions, executed using Nasrid techniques and embedded within a new decorative programme: the Habsburg eagle and Pillars of Hercules emblems can be seen in within the ceramic dados, alternating with the Nasrid shield symbol and epigraphic slogan (see figures 6-8). After 1550, increasingly intolerant policies ended the involvement of Moriscos in the reparation and decoration of the palaces; however, as Coleman has observed, even after the expulsion of the majority of the city’s Moriscos between 1568 and 1571 (during the second major Alpujarras rebellion), Granada retained much of its “preconquest physiognomy and character”.83 Artists and travellers in the nineteenth century tended to overlook this later history, favouring what were seen as the ‘original’ Nasrid elements. Even Jones, in his fastidious reproductions, edited out all traces of Christian intervention. Such omissions are revealing, for in decontextualizing the ornament of the Alhambra, Jones presented an ahistoric portrait untouched by the events following the conquest. What remains of the architectural programme today (and the documentation from the nineteenth century) tells the historian a great deal about the systems of meaning at work within different spaces, its surfaces acting as a material record of the changeover of rulers and their interactions with other communities and courts. This realization has led to a refocusing of Alhambra studies, and prompted new forms of scholarship that situate its material remains within the specific social and political conditions of multiple periods of production.

81 ‘Morisco’ being the term used by Castilians, following the mass conversions of 1500, to describe converted Muslims living under Christian rule (prior to that they were simply called nuevos convertidos). For the etymology of the term see Harvey, Islamic Spain, 2-5.
82 Hieronymous Münzer, Itinaria niue peregrinationi excellentissimi viri artium ac vtriusque medicine doctoris Hieronimi Monetarii de Felitkichen ciuis Nurembergensis (journey 1494/95; date of publication unclear), repr. ‘Itinerarium Hispanicum Hieronymi Monetarii, 1494-1495 (Herausgegeben von Ludwig Pfandl)’, Revue Hispanique, 48, 1920, 47-8.
83 The city’s main mosque was destroyed in 1588 and it was only in 1609 under Philip III that the expulsion of all Moriscos was ordered, a process completed by 1614 (Coleman, Creating Christian Granada, 2-8).
Figure 6. Habsburg double-headed eagle emblem, lazo tile, north wall, Mexuar, Alhambra (photograph by the author).

Figure 7. Pillars of Hercules emblem with ‘Plus Ultra’ banderole, lazo tile, north wall, Mexuar, Alhambra (photograph by the author).

Figure 8. Nasrid shield symbol with ‘God is the only Victor’ inscription, lazo tile, north wall, Mexuar, Alhambra (photograph by the author).
New perspectives on the ‘Old Pile’: 1960s to the present

A wealth of contemporary research on the Alhambra has emerged partly as the result of the critical unpacking of the term ‘convivencia’, first coined in 1948 by Américo Castro in *España en su Historia: Cristianos, Moros y Judíos* to designate interfaith and intercultural relations within medieval Iberia. This historical construction has been continuously revised over recent decades, first by Thomas Glick in the 1970s and later within a range of studies dedicated to unearthing the socio-political conditions that allowed for both cultural exchange and violent intolerance within ‘frontier Granada’, in the periods leading up to and following 1492. The art of al-Andalus has subsequently been revisited from a number of disciplinary perspectives, more firmly situating it within the complexities of a multi-ethnic and multi-faith network of communities that changed drastically over the course of nine centuries. Jerrilynn D. Dodds, Maria Elena Díez Jorge, María Rosa Menocal, Mariam Rosser-Owen, Juan Carlos Ruiz Souza, Cynthia Robinson, and D. Fairchild Ruggles, among many others, have duly queried overly straightforward dualistic readings of reciprocal ‘influences’ during times of conflict and also relative peace in the region. Through a close engagement with archival materials, objects, and recent archaeological findings, their studies have established more precisely the context of artistic and literary exchange between Christian, Jewish and Muslim groups at certain points and within different regions of al-Andalus and Christian-conquered Spain. This, in turn, has helped to shed light on the rich and politically-laden programmes of stylistic and iconographic meaning that were deployed throughout the Alhambra.

This section of the essay will briefly touch on a number of contemporary theories that elucidate the importance of a spatial and contextual understanding of the art of the Alhambra, and which challenge the idea of a ‘past-facing present’ in Nasrid Granada. First, however, it is necessary to point out that this emerging field has built upon and responded to a number of critical observations that were made from the 1960s onwards. The founding of the Spanish journal *Cuadernos de la Alhambra* in 1965 was instrumental in establishing critical dialogue and publishing archival materials relating to the monument. In 1968, Frederick Bargebuhr

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87 Another institution dedicated to the study of Islamic Spain, the Escuela de Estudios Árabes (EEA), was established in Granada in 1932, but its research programme was compromised in the years following
controversial book *The Alhambra: A Cycle of Studies on the Eleventh Century in Moorish Spain*, in which he claimed that the twelve lion sculptures supporting the central fountain in the Lions Patio originated from an earlier Jewish palace (and therefore dated from the eleventh and not the fourteenth century), made considerable waves amongst historians.\(^8\) Grabar’s 1978 monograph *The Alhambra*, while driven by a classicizing premise that saw Nasrid art predominantly through the lens of Umayyad achievements, was nevertheless the first attempt to critically integrate the monument into a wider field of Islamic art. Around the same time, James Dickie’s work on the gardens of the Alhambra laid the groundwork for further studies on their unique spatial and sensory effects.\(^8\) Subsequently, in the 1990s a number of historically comprehensive surveys of the region began to emerge, including Dodds and Walker’s exhibition catalogue, *Al-Andalus: The Art of Islamic Spain*, accompanying the exhibition held at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in 1992,\(^9\) and an important collection of essays edited by Salma Khadra Jayyusi published the same year (and corresponding with the 500\(^{th}\) anniversary of the conquest of Granada), titled *The Legacy of Muslim Spain*.\(^9\) Antonio Fernández-Puertas’ ambitious first volume dedicated to unpacking the meaning of the monument’s architectural programme, *The Alhambra: From the Ninth Century to Yusuf I (1354)*, published in 1997, was arguably the first text to explore elements of the monument while placing equal weighting on the history and inner workings of the Nasrid court, and the planning and decoration of its palaces.\(^9\) While his study remains incomplete and somewhat problematic in its admixture of historical background with the mathematical dissection of architectural and ornamental forms, it made important inroads for the dual consideration of the material production of ornament in relation to court culture and artistic processes.

The interrelated nature of textual and abstract elements within Nasrid ornament has meant that visual studies must overlap or at least complement the study of literature and poetry. José Miguel Puerta Vílchez, one of the first authors to approach the ornament of the Alhambra from the perspective of Nasrid aesthetics and philosophy (a blend of Sufism and Islamic interpretations of Aristotelian thought), has opened up new possibilities for examining possible meanings embedded within the structure and ornament of the Alhambra. Deconstructing the inscribed verses of Ibn al-Khatib and Ibn Zamrak, he suggests that the inscriptions contain symbols of noble lineage and concepts of infinity and perpetuity, which are

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88 Frederick Bargebuhr, *The Alhambra: A Cycle of Studies on the Eleventh Century in Moorish Spain*, Berlin: de Gruyter, 1968. He premised this theory on a reading of a Hebrew poem by Ibn Gabirol that mentions ‘a full sea’ supported by a ring of twelve lions (relating to a similar fountain in the temple of the King-Prophet Solomon that is described as a ‘molten sea’ supported by twelve oxen). A number of Alhambra scholars, including Ruggles, have since argued that rather than directly correlative, the lions were most probably inspired by a range of princely themes developed in al-Andalus from the time of the Umayyads of Córdoba onwards.


90 Dodds and Walker, *Al-Andalus: The Art of Islamic Spain*.


92 Fernández-Puertas, *The Alhambra*. 

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presented through heraldic elements and other aesthetic components such as mirroring and light. Continuing in this vein, a number of scholars have established links between Andalusian architecture and literary traditions by way of their associative and connective visual elements. Robinson has discussed palatial architecture in terms of metaphor and mimesis, highlighting a direct relationship between poetic devices and structural and decorative forms in the Alhambra. In her analysis of the Palace of the Lions, individual architectural and ornamental elements are viewed as having mimetic qualities, reflected in the verses of Ibn al-Khatib found throughout the court. Presuming that Nasrid court society would have had an understanding of these principles and theories, she argues that the juxtaposition of verse, structure and ornament came to allegorically represent gardens in literary or philosophic writings, and encouraged further study and contemplation within such spaces.

The interconnected roles of structure, ornament and inscriptions have also been explored by a number of authors in the last decade. In particular, Ruggles has proposed the multiple miradors or viewing spaces found within the Andalusi palace be understood as part of a ‘system of looking’ which did not simply offer views but in fact ‘demanded the very act of vision’. Describing the Alhambra’s windows as a kind of perforated frame through which a subject-object relationship was established, she argues that as the ruler observed the surrounding landscape, ‘he was made the commander of the vista or, in effect, its creator’. With regards to architectural decoration, she also made the important link between function and form in her study of the Lindaraja mirador, observing that the play of light and shadow over the carved plaster appears to ‘visually dematerialize the barrier between ruler and dominion’. Similarly, Olga Bush, building upon the seminal works of Puerta Vílchez and Grabar, has characterized epigraphic inscriptions in the Alhambra as an intermediary element between the beholder and the ornamental schemes, such that ‘the reader of the one is prepared to become the reader of the other’. These studies have effectively shown that architectural ornament was

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95 Robinson, ‘Marginal Ornament’, 196.


100 Grabar, Mediation of Ornament.

pivotal to the reception of meaning in Nasrid times, and in many cases acted as a visual and spatial articulation of sovereignty. They reveal not only the laudatory power of the epigraphic inscriptions within the Alhambra, but also the complex networks of meaning created when the inscriptions are viewed together with structure and ornament, as well as in relation to the surrounding landscape and the position of the viewer.

Alongside these art historical analyses, there have also been major developments in the field of Spanish archaeology, with a renewed interest in the material and cultural remains of al-Andalus intensifying in the last twenty-five years. Since 1989, the research group Toponimia, historia y arqueología del reino de Granada, or THARG, directed by Antonio Malpica Cuello (University of Granada), has greatly advanced archaeological study of the Alhambra, combining written sources with archaeological findings to better understand the economic and political structures of Nasrid society.\textsuperscript{103} Julio Navarro Palazón has also complicated the view of the Nasrid period through his identification of an earlier ‘protonazrid’ style based on excavations of palatial and urban residences from the twelfth and thirteenth centuries.\textsuperscript{103} More recently, Ramón Rubio Domene has scrupulously dissected the plasterwork panels of the Alhambra, making significant new discoveries about the materials and processes used in their production, as well as the methods employed during later stages of restoration.\textsuperscript{104}

It has been observed by Florin Curta that the development of the archaeological study of the Alhambra has been hampered by the uncertain relationship of the legacy of al-Andalus with a modern historical conception of Spain.\textsuperscript{105} Traces from the Muslim period which spanned over seven hundred years persist in the form of material remains, and in aspects of language and customs that have long been assimilated into the cultural landscape of the southern regions. Once the last stronghold of Muslim rule in the region, the Alhambra represents a historical paradox that remains at the heart of Andalusian identity. The hybrid nature of the monument and the series of esoteric restoration programmes it has undergone are both source and symptom of its uncertain historical position, and perhaps a constant reminder of the outsider status of Spain within the historical development of Europe. Following a century of neglect under the Spanish Crown, the Alhambra was finally declared a national monument in 1870, and a government council and official conservation programme established by 1940. However, the extent of the damage sustained during the preceding centuries, and the ongoing inflammatory debates over what constitutes the ‘original’ material of the Alhambra

\textsuperscript{102} Antonio Malpica Cuello, La Alhambra De Granada, Un Estudio Arqueológico, Granada: Universidad de Granada, 2002.

\textsuperscript{103} Navarro Palazón discusses the recent excavations of palatial and urban residences in uninhabited areas such as Saltis and Siyasa, as well as those in Murcia, Denia and Valencia, pointing out that their elaborate designs had already departed from the conservatism of the Almohad period and represent clear precursors to the Nasrid style. Julio Navarro Palazón and Pedro Jiménez Castillo, ‘Casas y Palacios de Al-Andalus. Siglos XII-XIII’, in Julio Navarro Palazón, ed., Casas y Palacios de Al-Andalus, Granada: El Legado Andalusí, 1995, 17-32.


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in relation to later alterations, reflect the unstable position it has held within both art
historical narratives and discussions around national identity.

**Conclusion: bringing the Alhambra into the present**

In the preceding sections, this essay has visited just a few of the transformative
moments in popular and scholarly receptions of the Alhambra, from its fragmentary
presentation within International Exhibitions to the historically and materially
grounded studies of the present day. Nineteenth-century criticisms of the
‘Moresque’ style as purely derivative, or past-facing in its use of stylistic precedents,
were to have have a lasting effect on studies of the monument throughout the
twentieth century, particularly in terms of the historical and cultural devaluation of
its ornament on a global scale. Critical readings were supplemented by
romanticizing narratives that saw the Nasrids as cut off from larger Islamic centres
and yearning nostalgically for an impossible return. While the regularity and
stylization of Nasrid designs were embraced by modernist reformers such as Jones,
critics including Ruskin and Freeman condemned such conventionalized forms as a
reprehensible sign of cultural stagnation and decline. Jones’ reproduction of the
Alhambra at the Sydenham Crystal Palace further provoked his critics, who saw its
surfaces as lacking in human expression or creativity. The demotion of ornament to
the realm of the superfluous was crystallized in modernist thinking at the turn of
the twentieth century, serving as a barrier to studies of non-Western traditions, and
Nasrid architecture in particular, whose main contribution arguably lies in the
complexity of its intermediary elements and the sophisticated reconfiguring of pre-
existing motifs and design formats.

The historiography of the Alhambra is one shaped by perceptual shifts and
categorical distinctions. Its geographic position in Spain has made it the object of
European fascination and intervention over the centuries, which was matched, in
the nineteenth century at least, by disinterest or even ignorance regarding the
palace’s wider cultural contexts. The recent raft of Alhambra scholarship has
challenged earlier narratives which positioned the Nasrids on the margins of Islamic
– as well as early Spanish – cultural formations: as a monument, the Alhambra has
been recreated both physically and ideologically throughout its multiple stages of
transformation. Now, in the twenty-first century, it is possible to peel back the
layers of its history, both real and imagined, to reveal autonomous and distinct
systems of meaning.

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