

Chapter XVI

Two Paradoxes in the Islamic Art of the Spanish Peninsula*

Introduction

Of all the lands of the earth which have preserved masterpieces of Islamic architecture, or from which unique monuments of craftsmanship attributable to Muslim artisans or to Muslim patronage have come, two are no longer ruled by Muslims. They are India, the home of the Taj Mahal and of Fatehpur Sikri, and then there is Spain. Of the numerous sub-cultures which shaped European Christian civilization in the Middle Ages and in pre-modern times, two were for several centuries in close connection with and at times even subjugated by the world of Islam. One is the Eastern and South-Eastern European world of, for the most part, orthodox Christians and the other is a major portion of the Iberian Peninsula, more specifically that part of the Peninsula which has been called al-Andalus, the southern section of which has become the contemporary province of Andalucia; for, in the Middle Ages, al-Andalus was to Arab Muslim writers every part of the Peninsula under Muslim rule and control.

I shall not, in the context of this essay, pursue the parallels between the intercultural contacts of the Iberian Peninsula and those of other parts of the Eurasian and African worlds, though I shall refer to them toward the end of my observations, as they may well provide a useful interpretative framework within which to see and to explain the art of Muslim Spain. What I shall try to show is that the art of Islamic Spain can be seen in two ways. It can be part of a large body of monuments known as "Islamic," that is to say as made by or for people who professed the Muslim faith; or else it can be seen as Spanish or Hispanic, that is as the creation of a land with traditions which would have been, in part at least, independent of the religious, ethnic or cultural allegiances of rulers of the moment.

Good arguments can be made, and have been made in the past, in favor of either one of these positions or approaches toward the arts of Muslim

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Spain; for indeed each one of them is justified by some at least of the factual characteristics of the monuments involved, but especially by reference to two diametrically opposed ideological positions. I and others in this volume will deal with the monuments. The ideologies are less easy to define. On the one hand, there lies the achievement of a land remote from the centers of Muslim power and creativity; and that achievement can be interpreted as a demonstration of the divinely inspired power of a Muslim ethos or of the [584] brilliantly superior cultural bind that tied together, through a single faith with many variants, as diverse a crowd as Turkified Iranians from Central Asia and the descendants of Arabicized Berbers and of Hispanic women. But there is an alternative position to what may be called a pan-Islamic ideology explaining culture through the forceful mediation of the faith and of the ethic attached to it. From this other point of view, the qualities of a land's art are explained through the permanent operation of a national spirit, of an indefinable attribute of a land and of its past, through the presence of the "earth" and of the "dead," as theoreticians of nationalism defined the nation in the early years of the twentieth century.

The debate between these ideologies is not one in which someone who is neither a Spaniard nor a Muslim should intervene, but it is proper to wonder why it is that apparently incompatible attitudes of interpretation have emerged around the art of Islamic Spain, as they had also grown around its culture and indeed its very existence. I shall explore this question by identifying two apparent paradoxes concerning the art of Islamic Spain and by weaving various thoughts and observations around these paradoxes. The first is the apparently unique character, both typologically and aesthetically, of so many works of Spanish Islamic art. The second one is the unusual fit between forms assumed to be Islamic and patrons of art or settings for art which are not. In conclusion I shall return to some of the broader issues brought up at the beginning.

I. The monuments of Spain

The Great Mosque in Cordoba is acknowledged as a major masterpiece of Islamic architecture, and many scholars have used it as a prototypical exemplar of the hypostyle mosque which creates large spaces for the whole community by multiplying a single support, in this instance the column with arches, in a flexible manner adjusted to increases and decreases in the population of believers. And it is true that, at a very simple and elementary level, the mosque of Cordoba is planned and designed according to principles comparable to those which created the mosque of Qayrawan in Tunisia, the Azhar or the mosque of 'Amr in Cairo, the Mosque of the Prophet in Medina, the Aqsa mosque in Jerusalem, and, in slightly different ways, the large brick mosques of Samarra in Iraq and of Ibn Tulun in Cairo. All these

are buildings earlier than the Cordoban one or roughly contemporary with its latest phase in the fourth/tenth century. After the fourth/tenth century thousands of mosques, especially the ones in the Muslim West, would continue this hypostyle tradition.

But to see the mosque of Cordoba as “just” another example of a well-known type is to misunderstand the peculiar qualities of the building. As several present-day architects and architectural critics have pointed out, it combines a number of unusual features: a subtle harmony of proportions between [585] elements like thin columns and horse-shoe arches which are not themselves original; a geometry of the arch which gives it a feeling of repose rather than the strain of being a carrier of thrusts; an equilibrium between single supports and mass ensembles like naves; occasionally the conscious breakdown of nuclear forms like arches into segments which can then be recomposed in alternate ways; and, finally, the stunning *mihrab* with the three domes in front of it, an ensemble glittering with rich mosaics for the representation of highly composed vegetal motifs and for the copying of long written messages, and yet mysterious in the deep niche of the *mihrab* itself, which is like an empty chamber, or else the gate toward another realm than that of man.

Some of these features, like the mosaic technique or the expensive *mihrab* area, can be explained by specific local contingencies, namely the politico-cultural relations with the Byzantine world which explain the mosaics themselves and the existence of more elaborate ceremonies than was usually the case around the daily prayers required of all Muslims. In Cordoba, perhaps in imitation of Christian practices, the muezzins came and prayed in front of the *mihrab* before calling for prayer. There was in the mosque a gigantic copy of the Qur’an which required two men to move it, and in which were included four leaves from a Qur’an attributed to the caliph Uthman, a hero of Umayyad tradition, who had allegedly been assassinated while reading the Holy Book; drops of blood were in fact found on these pages, which had obviously become symbols for something much greater than pages of text. This Qur’an was carried around at prayer time preceded by an acolyte with a candle, just as the Gospels are carried in a church.

But, even beyond such specific details, which are original to the mosque of Cordoba but which are typologically not different from objects associated with other mosques, two features differentiate the mosque of Cordoba from nearly all other Muslim congregational buildings. One feature is that so much about it has been recorded and maintained even by historians and geographers who wrote much later, after the city had been taken by Christians. It is as though collective memory, Muslim, and probably also Christian since that particular mosque has been preserved, recognized something unique about the Cordoban monument. The second feature is the consistency of aesthetic purposes in the building, that is to say of creating visual effects which would affect the senses, which would give pleasure to the visitor or to the user. Few

other mosques (Ibn Tulun's in Cairo is a major exception) are designed in such a way that everything in it, even later additions like the Christian chapels and the church, has to be done in the harmonic key of the constructions of the early third/ninth century. A concern for sensory effectiveness and for visual beauty is a hallmark of Cordoba's mosque in ways that are more consistent, more fully anchored and more gripping than in most examples of congregational buildings within the medieval Muslim tradition.

[586] An even stranger case is that of the ivory objects of the fourth/tenth and early fifth/eleventh centuries. Some twenty small boxes have remained, which were probably used for the storage of precious items, kerchiefs of different types or unguents. Many of them are dated and localized either in Cordoba or in the royal city of Madinat al-Zahra' only a few miles from the urban center itself. Inscriptions often identify the owners of many of them as members of the ruling family or very high officials of the Umayyad state. In itself there is nothing unusual about expensive objects in a rare material being made for members of ruling classes in the Muslim world. Chronicles and other written sources are full of references to the fancy things and the fancy clothes which surrounded the princes and assorted aristocrats in Baghdad, Nishapur, Cairo, Herat, Rayy or Bukhara. But hardly anything has remained from these treasures, and one way of interpreting the Spanish ivories is to argue that they are an accidentally preserved set of princely artefacts of a type which would have existed elsewhere as well. In all likelihood it was the possibility of reusing these objects for church treasures which saved them from being destroyed or utilized, and then handled over the centuries to the point of becoming totally worn.

To a certain extent this is probably the correct conclusion to draw. These ivories are indeed aristocratic household objects illustrating the wealth and the taste of the Umayyad court in al-Andalus. But there are several reasons for wondering whether we are not also dealing with a unique group of objects reflecting some uniquely local phenomena. I will mention just two peculiarities of these ivories which cannot be explained, at least within our present scholarly capabilities, in terms of a wider Muslim culture. One is that some among this group of objects – for instance the cylindrical casket of 357–8/968 in the Louvre, the 359–60/969–70 one in the Victoria and Albert Museum, and an undated one in the Museo Nazionale in Florence – are very deeply cut, so that the decoration on them appears in high relief, almost like the sculpture on antique and early Christian sarcophagi. This sculpted effect is, especially in the Louvre object, carried to the point where the personages, animals and plants of the design appear almost like free-standing sculptures in the round fixed on an object. Nothing like this is known in Islamic art elsewhere, nor, for that matter, is it known in early medieval Christian art. It is likely in fact that some antique model influenced the patron or artisans of these objects, but it is difficult to imagine how and why such an impression would have been sought.

The second peculiarity of some of these ivories is even more unsettling. The Louvre and Victoria and Albert examples, as well as several others in the Cathedral Treasury of Pamplona, the one in Burgos, and once again in the Victoria and Albert Museum, are decorated with personages and animals either arranged formally and symmetrically, as they often are on textiles, or else in what are clearly narrative or symbolic scenes: a prince enthroned, [587] wrestling, hunting, plucking eggs from a nest, riding elephants, picking dates, and so on. It is, first of all, remarkable that these scenes using personages in a narrative context occur in Spain nearly a century and a half before they become common in Egypt and the rest of the Islamic world. But even more remarkable is the fact that, while some of the representations would eventually become fairly common in Islamic art, most of them are unique. We are thus faced with the strange paradox of being unable to explain images which are easy to describe.

At this stage we can only speculate about the reasons for these peculiarities of the Spanish Islamic ivories of the Umayyad period. They might have reflected, at the height of Umayyad power and wealth, the unusual cultural and artistic depth of the Umayyad court, in which new motifs are invented to give an old look, classical in mode, to the expensive materials brought from Central Africa. A hundred or more years later, under the rule of a Christian king, quintessentially Muslim motifs would adorn the ceiling of the royal chapel in the Norman palace of Palermo in Sicily. This later example suggests that in the Western Mediterranean a cultural mix was perhaps created different from that of places further east. A couple of minor points would confirm the sense of a difference in the art of Muslim Spain in its earliest and greatest time. The names of artists and craftsmen for objects and for architectural decoration have been preserved from Spain much earlier and much more frequently than from elsewhere in the Muslim world, as though the status of the artisan was higher there. And then it is interesting to note the visibility of the patronage of objects by women, again a phenomenon rare elsewhere at that time. The two earliest dated ivory objects were made for daughters of 'Abd al-Rahman III, and one of the later ones was made for a Princess Subh.

My third example is that of the most celebrated monument of Islamic art in Spain, the Alhambra. This is not the place to discuss either its archaeology or its stunning features which attract millions of tourists every year. What is important from the point of view I am developing in this essay is that it too is unique in Islamic architecture, even though everyone, from scholars who have written about it to Hollywood or rich Arab patrons from the Gulf who have copied it or imitated it or parts of it a thousand times, regards the Alhambra as so characteristic of Islamic culture that popular as well as sophisticated imagination has, since the early nineteenth century, woven its Orientalist fantasies around it. Yet it is curious that there is no other building, no other part of a known building, which resembles the Alhambra, some

later imitations in Morocco in particular notwithstanding. And it requires a considerable stretch of the imagination to see in the Top Kapi Seray in Istanbul, the palace of the Ottoman sultans or the later Safavid palaces of Isfahan and the Mughal palaces of India, more than occasional similarities with Granada's masterpiece. We are less well informed about earlier and contemporary [588] palaces around the Mediterranean, but what is known for instance about the citadel of Cairo in the heyday of Mamluk rule bears very little relationship to the Alhambra. It is maybe just possible that a dying Muslim dynasty in al-Andalus did not create a "typical" palace belonging to a set which has disappeared elsewhere, but something adapted to its own specific history and to its own specific needs and expectations.

The mosque of Cordoba, the fourth-/tenth-century Umayyad ivories and the eighth-/fourteenth-century Alhambra are all unique monuments which fit uneasily within the generic cultural types with which they have usually been associated. And yet all three – as well as several additional ones like a number of silks and bronzes, or the small mosque of Bib Mardum in Toledo – illustrate functions and tastes which were indeed part of the traditional and classical ethos of the Islamic world: the large congregational mosque, the princely household object of great value, the luxurious setting for the life of rulers. None of these needs, except to a degree the second one, was significant to the medieval Christian world. Their Spanish expression, however, seems to have obeyed other constraints, other forces than those which obtained elsewhere in the Islamic world. Why?

II. Islamic forms and non-Islamic patrons

The second paradox I would like to develop is easier to define than the first, but equally difficult to explain. It has long been noted that the forms of Islamic art lingered on in Spain much longer than in Sicily or in the Balkans or Russia, where they had hardly affected the arts of the local population (except in clothes), even during Muslim domination.

Examples abound. Pedro the Cruel's Alcázar in Seville comprises architectural forms associated normally with Islamic art, and, in the decorative cartouches of plaster which appear everywhere, his name is clearly written out in Arabic letters. For several centuries the churches of Toledo and Saragossa utilized real or blind decorative arcades which come out of the façades and minarets of the earlier Islamic tradition. As profoundly Christian a building as the so-called "tempietto" in the monastery of Guadalupe bears unmistakable and obviously deliberately chosen traces of medieval Islamic themes. In Burgos, one of the main centers of Spanish life to escape Muslim rule, and which became one of the centers of the *reconquista*, the monastery of Las Huelgas, in the early thirteenth century, was designed in part as a commemorative monument for Alfonso VII, one of the main Crusaders

against Muslim power in the South. But not only is its stucco decoration entirely taken from Islamic models, but the textiles which had been kept there, often as shrouds, were for the most part either manufactured by Muslims or imitated Muslim types. Ceramic production remained for centuries under the influence of the high-luster techniques developed in the Muslim world and brought relatively late to Spain. And two remarkable synagogues built in [589] Toledo under Christian rule – one from the twelfth century, known today as the church of Santa María la Blanca, the other dated 1357, and transformed into a church under the name of El Tránsito – were decorated in the purest style of Islamic ornament.

This is all well known, and for over a century now scholars have identified examples of what has been called Mudejar art, an art of Muslim forms within a non-Muslim context. Even its migration into Mexico and Peru has occasionally been noted. What is more puzzling is that this preservation of allegedly Muslim forms often took place while Islam itself and those who professed it were persecuted, often quite brutally, and eventually physically expelled from the Iberian Peninsula. Gothic art coming from the North appeared at times like an outright intruder within a formal system which would have been the accepted genuine local one; and it is only with the Italianate taste of the Renaissance that Islamic motifs began to fade away, as in the lovely House of Pilate in Seville. But, even then, Charles V built his grandiose palace of Granada next to the Alhambra, dominating it no doubt, as a victorious culture would, but recognizing something of its values by preserving it. And earlier Alfonso the Wise was deeply imbued with Muslim values and aware of all that went into the making of a cultivated Muslim Arab.

How can one explain the contrast between policies that were leading to the destruction of Islam's presence in the Peninsula and this fascination with forms issuing from Islamic art, which continued quite consciously for several centuries, and, according to some, has remained in the background ever since? What, especially, is it that made Spain so different from other lands?

As most paradoxes do, mine about Islamic art in Spain end up with questions. Both questions imply that something happened in Spain which is different from what happened elsewhere. There does not seem, *a priori*, to be any reason why the Islamic monuments of Spain should be qualitatively and typologically unique within the huge spectrum of Islamic art, even though their functions were not. And it is strange that a land which had invested so much physical and psychic energy in reclaiming from an allegedly alien power what was presumed to be its own would, for several centuries, maintain and carefully nurture the artistic forms of the enemy.

To be able to reach an answer or answers to these questions, we must be willing to explore two propositions which go against well-established assumptions of the history of art, and perhaps of cultural history in general.

The first of these assumptions is that which involves labeling forms with cultural or national identifications. What seem to us today to be valid or even accurate means for the classification of visual evidence from the past, and for the appreciation of that evidence within our own, present-day minds, may not have been the appropriate criterion at the time when the monuments through which this evidence appears were created. If we consider a motif or a type of design as first of all colorful, geometric or vegetal, rather than [590] Islamic or Gothic or Byzantine, an appreciation of forms emerges which may well correspond more closely to what actually happened than the national and ethnic constructs we have posited. Alternatively, one can consider a motif as “ours,” as belonging to a tradition within a land rather than to a system of belief in that land. Analyses freed of prejudices may indeed begin to argue for a complex growth, in medieval Spain, of a common heritage of forms which was, in part if not as a whole, differentiated by its presence in that particular land rather than by its association with religious or national groups in that land. Within that heritage, some specific feature may be charged with an Islamic, Arab, Christian, Castilian or Catalan connotation, but such distinctions will only be reached after the realization that there was a common language for the expression of different thoughts and of different tastes and purposes. Perhaps after all it was other factors than those of cultural identification that predominated in the arts of the Middle Ages in Spain, and even elsewhere.

The second issue to be pursued springs not so much from a possibly wrong-headed assumption as from one’s awareness of the position of al-Andalus within the huge body of Islamic culture. It was a frontier area, at the outer edges of the *dar al-Islam*, and like all frontier areas it was endowed with a peculiarly paradoxical ethos in which intense identification of differences between groups and allegiances, at times warped by hate and contempt, coexisted with open-minded cohabitation and creative inventiveness. Thirteenth-century Anatolia, twelfth-century Sicily, Central Asia until the sixteenth century, were all frontier areas between opposing and at times warring factions of many different kinds. They were also areas of intense visual (and perhaps other) creativity, in which the desire to show off one’s unique qualities went along with competition with others and understanding of various ways of achieving visual effectiveness. With the advent of the rational doctrines issuing from the Renaissance, such tolerance became more difficult to maintain.

It is obvious that these hypotheses and assumptions need elaboration and reflection before they can be fully accepted as explanations for the Islamic arts of the Spanish Peninsula in the Middle Ages. That they can even be raised is a testimony to the extraordinary quality of the centuries which revolutionized a land and expressed some of the best ambitions of a universal religious and ethical system created far away.

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This essay is based on commonly known volumes of information such as Vols III and IV of *Ars Hispaniae* and the monumental E. Kühnel, *Islamische Elfenbeinskulpturen* (Berlin, 1971). I have much profited from the following more detailed or more recent studies:

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