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**Alhambra Palace: A Representative Image of Paradise**

**ABSTRACT**

*The aim of this paper is neither style nor history, but an intrinsic and iconographic analysis of the Alhambra Palace. Architecture, sculpture, wood carving, gardens, water, arabesque, inscriptions, and warm nature might be an image of Islamic Paradise. The paper is based on data obtained from formal analysis in order to understand concepts, symbols and iconography. It also combines qualitative method relies on observation via field study and content analysis of both primary sources that had described the Palace and its surrounding. Through both inductive and deductive research approaches, this paper suggests that Alhambra Palace is a rich program. Both geometric and arabesque ornamentations, with endless expansion and craftsmanship, contain images of the eternal paradise. The arabesque, with its infinite patterning, is identified as a representative art. This is the first time to have the intrinsic quality of the Alhambra Palace studied as a program not as an architecture that had developed in a period of two hundred and fifty years by at least twenty-three sultans who made administrative changes in the court and subsequent modifications.*

**Keywords:** *Alhambra, Islamic art, Andalucía, ornamentation, iconography*

## Introduction

The Alhambra is situated at the base of the Sierra-Neveda, above which it rises like the Acropolis of Athens. It occupies a site measuring 720 by 220 meters. The name of the palace is derived from the color of the clay that was taken from the hill on which the building stood and that was used in constructing its walls (Rodriguez 127). As a symbol for man's life (Gautier 32), the palace is filled with immeasurable sadness. Looking at the Alhambra, a typically Islamic combination of fortresses, royal residences, ceremonial settings, and administrative centers helps to see how the images of Paradise were deliberately exploited.

Andalusia has been influenced by several cultures. In the Spanish vocabulary there are many different terms for Christians and Muslims who lived in Andalusia during these eight centuries, 711-1492. For example: Christians who lived under Muslim rule were called *Mozarab*; Christians who were converts from Islam or their descendants were *Moriscos*. Muslims who lived under Christian rule, *Mudejar*; and, Muslims who converted from Christianity or their descendants, *Muwallad* (Harvey 3). Another significant group among this mixed population was made up of Jews who played an important role in the life of Andalusia because they were among the richest and most successful merchants of Spain (Grabar, Islamic 7). This racial diversity left its cultural imprint, especially in the art and architecture.

The impact of the courtly arts and sciences on southern Spain was significant. Islamic science and medicine "as manifested in astrolabes, astronomical tablets, translations of Plato and Aristotle, mathematics, and technology for the manufacture of paper" (Dodds and Walker xxii), passed through Spain to France (Ibn Khaldun 66). Writing was used as a logical accompaniment to explain the meaning of visual representation: such use of writing in artistic products continued in Byzantine art. With Islam, however, writing and calligraphy were to undergo a profound metamorphosis which changed them from merely discursive symbols into aesthetic and fully iconographic materials (Al-Faruqi 173). Arabic calligraphy was always executed with care, respect, and perfection, reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Accordingly, the art of beautiful writing in both plasticity and legibility, elongated and abstracted, is combined with non-calligraphic motifs to produce Islamic ornamentation (Bravmann 23).

Islamic art is symbolic (Al-Faruqi 175). The imaginative dimension of the Islamic garden is furnished by the architecture ". . . without which no garden was complete" (Gomez 91). When a pool is depicted, it is a symbol of "Spring of Life" (Dickie, Hispano 238). A symmetrical setting is verbally describes paradise in Quran, which may have inspired the Muslim artist who visually transforms it into symmetrical design of ornamentation, the architectural composition and the gardens.

## The Architecture of Alhambra Program

The entrance to the ancient fortress of the Alhambra has two large gates: the Justice Gate (a southern gate) and the Gate of Arms (a northern gate). The walls of the fortress are studded with towers; those on the south toward the Plain were used for defense. On the northern wall, which is protected by nature, charming habitations were created for the sultan and his harem. The exteriors of these gates follow the *Almoahad* tradition to which the Alhambra is “a direct inheritor” (Lopez 156). *Bawabat al-Shariha* “the Gate of Justice” is the most monumental of all the Alhambra’s gates and now it is the main entrance into the fortress.

The first complex is comprised of *Sahn al-Rayaheen* “the Court of Myrtles”, *Qahat al-Baraca* “the Hall of the Blessing”, and *Qahat al-Suffara’a* “Salon of the Ambassadors.” The second complex is *Sahn al-Ossoud* “the Court of Lions.” It consists of a dome with four reception halls, all for entertainment purposes. They are *Qahat al-Mulook* “the Hall of the Kings, *Qahat alOkhtayn*” “the Hall of the Two Sisters, *Qahat alMocarnas*”, “the Hall of the Muqarnas”, and *Qahat Ibn Sirajj* “the Hall of Abencerraje”. The main architectonic elements in the Court of Lions are arranged around a courtyard that is based on two axes. In the center of the court, a fountain sprays water and refreshes the atmosphere through the mouths of twelve white marble lions. The lions’ backs carry a twelve-sided bowl and on its sides a poem by Ibn Zamrak is inscribed (Acedo 86).<sup>1</sup> It is important to compare and contrast both the Complex of the Myrtle and the Complex of the Lions. It seems that the former is symmetrical, mono-axed, linear, official, ceremonial, and formal while the latter is asymmetrical, multiple-axial, intimate, subtle, and relaxed. Although both palaces were built in different times and on different axes and had independent entrances, both are separated by the same wall (Simonet 254).<sup>2</sup> In creating this contrast, the Moorish architects of the Alhambra illustrated in a uniquely preserved fashion the deeper meaning of a palace-citadel or a palace-fort, that it possesses a secret that construction seeks to defend (Grabar, Alhambra 88).

After the brief discussion of the Alhambra, some points are important to note. First, the palace as a villa structure incorporated many advantages of the Moorish life style, especially its agriculture. Second, there are many examples to show that the progression from one passage to another is never obvious in the Alhambra. There are no portals leading from one unit to the other. Courts and palaces are like traps; they do not indicate the correct direction. Third, there is a contrast between the interiors and the exteriors. For example, the

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<sup>1</sup>The stucco-work in this Court is a modern and very inferior imitation of the original one. They are “. . . coarse and dirty, and are rapidly moldering to decay. The ancient work, on the contrary, which is out of the reach of hands, is beautiful, white, clean and sharp” (Murphy XXXIV).

<sup>2</sup>There are some red marks in the bottom of the fountain that are either iron oxide or, according to myth, the blood of 36 murdered knights from Abencerraje family (Chateaubriand 2011).

visible shells of both the Lions and the Myrtle complexes do not suggest their brilliant interiors.

### **Ornamentation is Essential**

Another important aspect of the Alhambra program is its geometric and non-geometric ornamentation and iconography. The decorative arts are of one family with architecture: the effort to heed one will help the other. Floral and foliate motifs is a symbol of heavenly flowers. Sunburst medallions symbolize the vault of heaven; the arches filled with flowers stand for the gate of paradise. Fountains and pavilions are used to create an ambiance for relaxation which provide physical and spiritual renewal. Many of the poem's verses inscribed on the walls by Ibn Zamrak, describing the Alhambra as a paradisiacal palace (Blair and Bloom 41-2). The Moorish pictorial and poetic images of paradise are in the palace's constituent parts, its different media and forms: buildings, gardens, water courses, wall ornamentation, inscribed poetry, and *muqarnas* "pendentive tips" ceilings.

*Al-zukhruf* "the ornamentation" is not something superficially added to a completed work of art, for example, to embellish, to satisfy the appetites of pleasure-seeking people, or a mere filling of space to escape emptiness. The fact is this art fulfills four specific functions which define their significance (Al-Faruqi 379).

- The first function of ornamentation is at the core of the spiritualizing enhancement of the Islamic artistic creation and the Muslim environment. "It guards against the bifurcation of life into a religious and a secular realms, for which the ideology has little or no relevance" (Al-Faruqi 380).
- The second function is the transfiguration of materials which is constituted by the techniques. The object or surface transfigured by ornamentation has undergone a change in form or appearance but not in substance. In other words, to transfigure is to stylize, de-naturalize, and beautify the materials with which the ornamentation is made.
- The third function is the transfiguration of structures. Islamic art strives for the disguise of the basic framework. It is produced to draw the attention away from earthly materiality to a higher order of expression and meaning.
- The fourth function is beautification, a universal in aesthetic creation. The Islamic motif can perform this function with great success since the patterns it creates on the decorated object are themselves intrinsically pleasing to the eye (Al-Faruqi 383).

Many non-Moslem art historians deal with Islamic ornamentation with either a misunderstanding or a misconception of its most crucial premises: since ornamentation is for them only superficial addition to the aesthetic entity,

they have judged the proliferation of ornament in Islamic art to be indicative either of the hedonism of the Muslim peoples, or an abhorrence of empty space (Al-Faruqi 407).

The Moorish conventional treatment of ornamentation discourages representation of nature and avoids a direct transcription. For this characteristic, Islamic art is accused of flatness, as not being capable of using perspective to give the illusion of three-dimensional space. This judgment is misguided as the objective is to avoid imitation. The philosophy of Islam incorporates abstraction in art and, in fact, reintroduces the concept of abstraction to Western art.<sup>3</sup> It is suggested that abstracted shape is a transformation of “mathematical formulas depicting the universe” (Grabar, Alhambra 163). Abstracted and geometric shapes are visual translation of the cosmic view of Islamic mysticism which is reflected in the relationship between mathematics and ornamentation in Islamic art. The underlying geometry in the Alhambra is mostly based on the perfect, golden means. Although most cultures used geometry, “Islamic art alone spread it so consistently throughout its creativity” (Grabar, Mediation 153). Geometric principles are applied to the non-geometric floral and foliate ornamentation through creating a grid of interlace (Grabar, Alhambra 161). The de-naturalized foliate ornament is called “arabesque”<sup>4</sup> because its invention was certainly the outcome of a particular Arab attitude and, as Brown notes, parallel developments occur in Arabic poetry and music (513). The arabesque, either geometrical or non-geometrical ornamentation, is the main stylized motif in Islamic art. All lines flow out of a main stem: every ornament, however distant, can be traced to its branch and root. There are four arabesque structures which are identified as representative by al-Faruqi.

- The first structure is the multi-unit arabesque, an infinite pattern, “composed of distinct parts or modules combined in an additive and repetitive fashion” (Al-Faruqi 404). This structure lends itself to any medium and method.
- The second structure is the interlocking arabesque. It is an interpenetration of the elements of the design resulting from the combination of these units replacing the simple additive juxtaposition of the multi-unit designs. Repetition and multiplicity of focal points give the impression of never-ending succession.
- The third structure is the meander arabesque that can consist of calligraphy, leaves, flowers, tendrils, and abstract shapes. The motifs may be mounted on a trailing vine or suggest a continually evolutionary pattern.
- The last structure is the expanding arabesque that affords more than one infinite pattern. A succession of borders and figures are added to

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<sup>3</sup>Some examples are: Mondrian’s *Broadway Boogie Woogie*, Frank Stella’s *Marrakech*, Picasso’s *The Bull* and of course Escher’s *Sky and Water* (Grabar, Mediation). In many of his writings, Escher mentioned his visit to Alahmbara Palace and its great influence on his style.

<sup>4</sup>Arabesque has been generally used for Islamic ornamentation in general.

the central core either by the artist or are suggested to the viewer's perception.

*Tawrik* "foliage" as another non-geometrical ornamentation is another kind of arabesque which clearly implies the leafage and leaflet (Kuhnel 560). It is mostly seen in spirals and leafy vines whose interlacing leaf-scrolls and branches wind back on themselves. "The leaves may be flat or curved, pointed or round or rolled, smooth or rough, feathered or pierced, but never isolated and always joined to the stalk for which it serves as an adjunct or a terminal" (Kuhnel 558). It represents a perfect transcription of the law of rhythm into visual terms. "It always has certain repetitions, whose rhythmic character is accentuated by the fact that the sounds and the silences are aesthetically equivalent" (Burckhardt 60). Another characteristic of arabesque is the interlacement of geometrical complexity and rhythmic. Interlacing, medallions, or cartouche compartments are built up from a main circle which controls the star-shaped polygon. The proportions inhering in the basic figure are re-echoed at each level of development. This kind is also called "woven", a quality of some Islamic motifs, especially when two shapes are drawn from the same angle, bifurcated and rotated around one point. The favorite patterns are those based on dividing a circle by five, six, or eight. For example, the hexagon, the six-fold division, "is the most 'organic' because it comes about naturally from the radius; subdivided into twelve, it corresponds to the zodiac" (Burckhardt 61). Radiation is another aspect of Islamic ornamentation; motifs grow out of a continuous stem. Another observable principle is the tangential curvature: all junctions of lines, whether curved or straight, should be tangential to each other (Jones 39).

The ornamental portions are executed in gypsum. The mosaic pavements and dados are baked and glazed earthenware, and the *muqarnas* ceilings, beams, and doors are made of wood. They are repeated in the various halls in different positions, and always fit the place they occupy. The Muslim artist embellishes the ornamentation with color which has a crucial role in art and architecture, especially in the colored glazed-faience.

Color is used in the Alhambra to assist in the development of the form. It is always employed as a further means of bringing out the constructive features of the building. The Moorish color system shows an observation of nature's law. Jones also supports this idea and gives examples of the primary blue in the sky above, the secondary green in the trees and fields, ending with the tertiary's earth color (44). For example, in the stucco-work primaries are used, but the secondary colors occur only in the mosaic dado which is near the eye to form a point of repose from the more brilliant coloring above (Jones 43). Colors are employed with much care in the gardens of the Alhambra, according to the primary sources which describe the flowers, fruits, and vegetable trees in detail.

## **Forms in the Alhambra Palace**

Owen Jones notes that “It is evident that in the compositions of the Moors, the whole assemblage of forms and even each particular member was a multiple of some simple unit” (33). The architectural principle in general is to decorate construction, never to construct decoration (Jones 34). In the Alhambra not only the decoration arises naturally from construction, but the constructive idea is carried out in every detail of the ornamentation of the surface. All lines grow out of each other in gradual undulations and never-ending motifs. Nothing could be either removed or added. Harmony of form appears to consist in the proper balancing and contrast of the straight, the inclined, and the curved lines. In the creation of Moorish architectural compositions which are more meaningful from inside, the artist develops ornamental and subdivided architectural forms into infinitely smaller elements. This phenomenon still invites research for the inner principle of the single unit that makes the whole. It is important to mention the sensuousness of the forms --walls, columns, ceilings, gardens, and water--which is physically attributed to any part of the Alhambra Program.

The Moorish gardens are well known for their exotic plant species, controlled cultivation and acclimatization, and as testing grounds for new techniques that in turn stimulate agriculture expansion. The association of water with gardens occurs in the Alhambra in both static and dynamic ways. The representation of water and its surrounding gardens is an important element of a specifically Islamic paradise, “a sensuous paradise of physical well-being” (Grabar, Alhambra 90). Grabar adds that the Alhambra “belonged to a long and well-established tradition of paradisiacal gardens in palace settings” (91). In the structure of the Alhambra the eye is constantly invited to look through and beyond the garden walls. Le Corbusier mentions the Alhambra palace as a modern monument, an intelligent interplay of volumes correctly and magnificently united under the light (18).

## **Conclusion**

The Alhambra resembles an artifact rather than a building. Many scholars tend to focus on architectural elements and forms in their analysis of this palace, but the texture of small parts and details is equally important. The space becomes alive with sensuous lines and profiles, with moving surfaces or ornaments endlessly affected by a changing and contrasting day and night lights.

The brilliant ornamentation portrays a unity of philosophical, symbolic, and aesthetic images of paradise on earth. The function of a visual image in this architectural program needs to be examined more closely. The main function of a visual image is to present us with an iconic cue of our experience of the world in that way drawing out its unique way of knowing. The visual images are distinguished motifs known as carriers of a predictable meaning;



when images are joined together, they are called “stories or allegories” (Stephan 117). According to Panofsky, the interpretation of symbols such as forms, motifs, images, and allegories is the subject of iconology, which rises from synthesis rather than analysis. “The correct identification of motifs is the prerequisite of their correct iconographical analysis, so is the correct analysis of images” (Panofsky 32). The recognition memory systems are responsible for perceiving those visual images (Stephan 8).

Visiting Alhambra Palace has become a human experience that affects the visitor’s personal and aesthetic experiences. The Alhambra with its surroundings became a direct visual source for many artists and poets. Examples are Théophile Gautier’s *Voyage en Espagne*, Victor Hugo’s *Les Orientales*, Washington Irving’s *Tales of the Alhambra*, Philippa Gregory’s *The Constant Princess*, Federico García Lorca’s *Doña Rosita la soltera*, Amin Maalouf’s *Leo Africanus*, Radwa Ashour’s *Granada Trilogy*, Chateaubriand’s *The Last Abencerraje*, and M.C. Escher’s paintings.

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