

Connecting Lines between Islamic and Spanish Art from the 8th Century to 1750

Islamic and European art and culture have always inspired and influenced each other to varying degrees.

This fruitful mutual influence became particularly apparent in Spain from the 8th century to the middle of the 18th century. Today it marks the appearance of two Spanish cities in particular: Cordoba and Granada. Both cities are situated in the southern Spanish province called Andalusia. For first in Cordoba and later in Granada, Arabic artists and architects created new forms of expression that they combined with imaginative transformations of Roman or Christian stylistic elements. They succeeded in merging these different styles into a new and surprising unity whose rare, practically celestial beauty inspired increasing admiration in both the East and the West. Taken as a whole, Arabic art and architecture reached an absolute zenith in these two cities. Here one can study in minute detail how masterfully the Arabs managed to unite, elaborate, and create a new language of form inspired from completely different artistic traditions.

Already in the 2nd century b.c. the Romans began to occupy Spain. And within a short time considerable areas of the country were marked by Roman art, architecture, and culture. But at the beginning of the 5th century a.d., Spain was invaded by a number of different peoples from the north. The most influential among them were the Germanic tribes called the Visigoths. By 415 they had conquered most of Spain. In 554, however, the area surrounding the capital in southern Spain, Granada, was occupied by the Byzans from the East and Byzantine art and culture started manifesting itself. But in 711 the last Visigoth king, Roderic, was beaten by the Arabs, who had gradually conquered great areas of Spain. In 755 they made it into an independent empire and Cordoba was selected to be its capital. In 929 it was reorganized into an independent caliphate and began experiencing a period of incredible cultural and economic prosperity. (Fig. 1..)

Islam had thus created a vital bridgehead in Europe. This had an important effect on the cultural development of the West. It was therefore primarily Spain that ended up dispersing Islamic culture to the Christian West. Islamic culture influenced philosophy, science, architecture, and art at the height of the European Middle Ages in the 13th and 14th centuries. Islamic culture enriched in a very original way the influence that it had received itself from the Greek-Roman culture and from late-Antique Christian art and architecture in its first phases of development.

The mosque in Cordoba. The first cultural and religious center in the Umayyads' great Muslim Empire.

In the newly established caliphate in Spain, the Spanish Christians were permitted to live their religious life without hindrance provided they were politically loyal and showed respect for Islam. At the same time, solid growth conditions were created for a mutual influence between the highly developed culture that the Arabs had brought along with them on the one hand and the Spanish-Roman cultural tradition and Byzantine art and

architecture on the other. The Arabs who created this time of prosperity belonged to the dynasty of Umayyad, which was part of the prophet Muhammed's tribe, called the tribe of Qoraish. The Umayyads were also known for their decision to move the capital of the Arabic Empire from Medina to Damascus.

And as David Talbot Rice rightfully remarks: "This new capital was established at Damascus (...) it was in this area that the earliest developments of an art which can truly be termed Islamic took place. The earliest phase took its name from that of the first dynasty of Islam, the Umayyad, which sponsored it. For it was here the Arab artists met both Byzantine style and Eastern nonfigurative art. These divergent trends merged with the different types of Arabic calligraphy, which became one of the most distinctive features of Islamic style.

In the mosaics in the Great Mosque of Damascus (715) (Fig. 2). one can clearly see the influence from the stylized Byzantine mosaics for example, from the ones adorning Hagia Sophia in Constantinople (532-37) (Fig. 3). The Sophia Church has since been transformed into a mosque. There is no doubt that "in the fantasy and delight of their compositions () the Damascus mosaics far surpass any similar works of Roman, Hellenistic or Byzantine art that survive, and they undoubtedly constitute not only one of the greatest glories of all Islamic art, but also one of the most delightful mosaic decorations known to the world.

In the 300 years that the Umayyads ruled Spain, Cordoba became one of the most important cultural centers of the Islamic world. Only Bagdad achieved a higher status. In Spain, which contained new sources of inspiration, Umayyad art was developed in new and surprising ways. In addition, it was marked by an extremely delicate form. Finally, the Umayyad artists in Spain were capable of creating an incredibly harmonious unity in the multiplicity of decorations in stone, stucco, mosaic or wood that characterize both the small and big spaces in the monumental Islamic buildings.

The majesty and distinctiveness of the Umayyad's art was expressed in a very artistically convincing way in the great mosque in Cordoba, which to this day is considered one of the most magnificent monuments of Islamic architecture. It has received the name Mezquita Aljama and has been described as "the most beautiful Muslim temple in the world." Others have emphasized that "its sacred character is only surpassed by Mecca. This mosque, one of the largest in the world, perhaps even the largest, was rightfully also called "the most beautiful jewel" in the capital of the tolerant Caliphate, Cordoba. (Fig. 4: The mosque in Cordoba as it appears today.) The building went through two principal historic phases. 1. The Moorish phase from its construction in the 8th century to the year 1236. 2. The Christian phase, from 29 June 1236 until our times. Det var i juni 1236, at "King Ferdinand II, the Holy" erobrede Cordoba og transformerede den store moske til en kristen kirke, der blev viet til jomfru Marie. It was converted into a cathedral in 1239.

Allerede på den tid vakte bygningen udelt begejstring. F. eks. skrev "Alfonso X, the Wise", at "this building, inherited from Islam, surpassed in loveliness and splendour all other Arab mosques", medens ærkebiskoppen og historikeren Rodrigo Iméñez de Rada understregede, "that this mosque had no equal in the Muslim world for its ornateness and dimensions."

It took several hundred years to finish building the mosque. It was expanded no less than four times. The lengthy and often complicated history of its construction reveals with the utmost clarity not only the innovations of the Arabic artists, but also their often masterful transformations of stylistic elements from Roman, Byzantine, and Visigothic art and architecture. This distinctive new Arabic style was also called "Caliphal or Arabic Cordobese art."

1. The period of Abd alRahmán I The original construction of the mosque of Cordoba (786-788).

Abd alRahman was the first independent emir in Andalusia in southern Spain. At the beginning of his rule, 786 a. d. or "in the year 170 of the Hégira" the construction of the great mosque in Cordoba was commenced.

The mosque was designed according to the traditional ground plan of the Arabic mosque, originally consisting of a large closed rectangular area. The majority of the area was taken up by an open courtyard, "dedicated to Ablution rituals" - named Sahm - with a covered area – called Liwan - that functioned as a prayer hall with room for 10,600 faithful.

The mosque has five naves facing the East and four facing the West. The first series of arcades consists of horseshoe arches, clearly influenced by the local Visigothic style, but perhaps also influenced by the arches of Byzantine architecture. The columns supporting the arches are decorated with capitals showing traces of Corinthian, Visigothic or late Byzantine styles (Figs. 5 and 6: Various sectors of the Abd alRahman I mosque). Several of the capitals and the arches thus reveal a striking similarity to those supporting the nave in the Byzantine Church of St. Francesco in Ravenna in northern Italy. It was built after the middle of the 6th century. Through the uppermost series of arches in the mosque in Cordoba, the space is enlarged, while at the same time the light becomes noticeably intensified, the arches opening up towards "the Ablution courtyard." (Fig. 8: Sector of the Abd alRahmán I mosque).

The Arab architects transformed the inspiration from the Visigothic and late Byzantine forms of expression in such a way that big, interwoven spaces arise. The complicated network of double arcades and the shifting, suggestive play of light and shade creates a unique monumental effect characteristic of the Umayyads' highly developed art. The great space does not appear to the eye as a unified whole, but as ever new parts of such a whole. Hence, the artists have emphasized that everything in our world is piecemeal and divided. Unity only exists in eternity.

2. The period of Abd alRahmán II. The first extension (833-852) From 833 to 852 Abd alRahmán II undertook an important addition to the Cordoba mosque. It was increased with eight transversal naves and the Islamic quality became even more distinct. Delicate decorations and details began to cover the surfaces of the walls and alabaster columns (Fig. 9: The end of the Abd alRahmán II extension).

3. The period of AlHakam II. The second extension. (961-966). The second highly conspicuous expansion of the mosque was undertaken by AlHakam II from 961-966. In 962 he added twelve transversal naves. At the same time, new, very elegant and complicated arches were created, in particular the so-called "hexafoil and crossed

arches." They represent a new and original departure in Islamic architecture. (Fig. 10: Pavilion and lighted dome of the Al-Hakam II extension and Fig. 11: Springing of the Al-Hakam II extension). The architectonic gem in this enlargement of the mosque and the culmination of the development of "the Caliphal or Arabic Cordobese style" is the superb Mihrab. The construction of this dome encompasses a number of remarkable innovations such as the series of intersecting ribs which supported the dome. Or, as Manuel Salcines puts it: "Its extraordinary architectural importance as well as the superb foliated arches that open up the pavillions with their intercrossing were at least three hundred years ahead of their time." (Fig. 12: Crossing of the arches and the Al-Hakam II Mihrab).

The stucco and marble ornamentation along with the brilliant mosaics in "the Mihrab" are delicate and light as lace. They reveal the strict and functionalist construction of the dome, almost causing it to float like a canopy. Through the forever shifting play of light and shade, the viewer's experience of the solidity of the stones and brickwork is also attenuated. All the parts of the Mihrab merge into an incredible elevated whole that raises itself above our world and suggests eternity or the everlasting. The following words from the

Koran thus seem particularly fitting in this context: "And Allah's is the East and the West, therefore, whither you turn, thither is Allah's purpose; surely Allah is Ample giving, Knowing." (Sura 2, 115-117). (Fig. 13: General view of the magnificent cupola of the Al-Hakam II Mihrab).

In several of the decorations, bands are incorporated with Arabic inscriptions primarily containing citations from the Koran (Fig. 14: Frieze with cufic characters inside the Mihrab).

Al-Idrisi has expressed his admiration for "the architectural splendor of the Mihrab" in the following way: "Its beauty and elegance defies all description. Neither Greeks nor Muslims have in the past produced such an exquisite work of art."

The importance of the mosque in Cordoba in Western European medieval church architecture has been described as follows by Kenneth John Conant, an expert in this area: "The Moslem type of vault which appears in perfected form at the mihrab of the mosque of Cordoba has exercised much fascination. It was imitated in Spanish Gothic vaults, and it comes into the reflex architecture of the Pilgrimage. (...) A perfect example is to be found in Navarre, in the conventional but handsome octagonal church of the Holy Sepulcher in Torres del Rio."

(Fig. 15: A. Mihrab of the Mosque of Cordoba. Moslem ribbed and lobed vault. 961. B. Torres del Rio, Spain. Twelfth century, vault.

Another example of how the vault and decorations of the mosque in Cordoba have inspired Spanish ecclesiastical art may be studied in the cathedral (1523-1766) placed inside the mosque in Cordoba. This cathedral is characterized by what is called "the plateresque architectural style. It is peculiar to Spain in the early 16th century and characterized by extremely lavish ornamentation, gothic, renaissance and Islamic in inspiration." This ornamentation is (as in the mosque in Cordoba unrelated to the structure of the building on which it is used) (Fig. 16: View of the pulpits and the

Presbytery of the Crossing).

4. The final extension. Almanzor (c. 987). The final and greatest addition to the mosque was undertaken under the rule of Hisham 11. New and impressive spatial effects were created, but there were no remarkable architectural and decorative innovations. (Fig. 16: General view of the Almanzor extension). (Fig. 18: Design of the mosque of Cordoba).

Everywhere in the various rooms and halls of the mosque in Cordoba there is a very delicate balance between the calm, elevated effects of unity on the one hand and the incredible wealth of architectural details and the walls either decorated with complicated patterns in stucco or covered with brilliantly colored mosaics on the other. These decorations show a degree of elaboration not attained elsewhere in the Arab world, and they have always fascinated the architecture and artists of the West.

11. Alhambra in Granada: The New Cultural and Religious Center of the Arab Empire in Spain

'Cited from Manuel Salcines, in op. cit., p. 10.

5 Kenneth John Conant, *Carolingian and Romanesque Architecture 800 to 1200* (Baltimore, 1959), p. 106.

In the 11th century the Umayyad dynasty in Cordoba began to lose its cultural importance. Not until the Nasrids came to power in Andalusia in 1232 did Arab culture experience a revival. The court in Granada achieved great importance in the surprising development that took place in the world of art, architecture and poetry. Numerous experts in Arab art and culture such as, for example, Ernst J. Grube have even claimed that the results of this development were characterized by "such greatness that it was unparalleled in Muhammadan Spain." The most original artistic and architectural achievement during the reign of the Nasrids is the construction of the Alhambra Palace, situated on the outskirts of Granada today.

The palace was built on a hill that towers above Granada. The first part of the palace was completed in the reign of Jusuf 1 (1333-1353) and the second part during the period when Muhammed V (1353-1391) was in power. The great palace complex has quite an irregular form. It is divided into various independent units, each of which is built around an open courtyard. The core of the palace consists of a great long courtyard, the Court of Myrtles (Fig. 19: The Court of Myrtles) and the Hall of the Ambassadors on the north side (Fig. 20: The Hall of the Ambassadors). The last part of the palace is built around the famous Court of Lions, which faces West (Fig. 21: Design of Alhambra).

The unifying center of the Court of Lions is a circular fountain supported by twelve lions originating from the early Byzantine period (Fig. 22: The Court of Lions). A stone forest of elegant projecting columns symbolizing the palms in the paradise of the Koran blurs the borders between the garden space and the residence, creating a lyrical play of light and shade.

From the Court of Lions lead four elevated walkways with water conduits out toward the

corners of the world to four grand halls, considered by historians of architecture to contain the purest examples of Islamic architecture. (Fig. 23: Design of the Court of Lions). The two most impressive of the four rooms is the Hall of the Abencerrajes and the Hall of the Two Sisters.

The twelvesided fountain is the central element of the Hall of the Abencerrajes. (Fig. 24: Section of the Hall of the Abencerrajes). Its water surface reflects the magnificent stalactite work of the ceiling, with the eightpointed star in the vaulting. There is no doubt that this eightpointed cupola, which almost seems immaterial, symbolizes the great open firmament (Fig. 25 and 26: The cupola in the Hall of the Abencerrajes). The walls of the room display an effective contrast between the complex patterns and the precise, linear, and geometric division of the wall surfaces. (Fig. 27: Wall surfaces in the Hall of the Abencerrajes). The low reliefs in the wall sections of the incredibly complicated patterns are on many levels. Each layer is laid upon the other, creating an incredibly varied play of light. Often the play of light in the goldplated patterns becomes so intense that it actually creates points of intensity that send strong flashes of light out into the room. From the richly decorated windows there is a view of the flowers and trees in the courtyards (Fig. 28: Window section in the Hall of the Abencerrajes).

6 Ernst J. Grube, *Islamsk kunst. Milepæle i verdenskunsten* (1971), P. 137.

The cupola in the Hall of the Two Sisters contains without doubt the most consistent and the most virtuous use of stalactites. Through it an absolutely incredible disintegration of both walls and cupola is created (Figs. 29 and 30: The cupola in the Hall of the Two Sisters). They have both been transformed into a light and almost lacelike beehive of hanging stalactites that "create an illusion of a floating baldachin. It shows in the most evocative way the Islamic interest in the disintegration of the thing itself." In addition to this, the structure of the cupola suggests that it is conceived as a rotating cupola. Oleg Grabar expresses this viewpoint in the following way: "We meet a surface which is broken up in what appears to be an almost infinite number of facets, at an angle from each other. The dome is lit by windows set below it, and as the source of light, sun or moon, changes its location, different combinations of facets are illuminated, giving an illusion of rotation. In fact this rotation would be an illustration of a preGalilean conception of the sun rotating round the earth."

The Hall of the Two Sisters has an inscription in its cupola with 24 verses by the court poet Ibn alZamrak (1313-1374). This inscription contains poetic descriptions of the almost "divine beauty" of this space. The verses are written in Spanish cursive characters and depict the space as a garden that symbolizes the garden of paradise (the Koran, Sura, 76). Fig. 31: The cupola of the two sisters with the inscriptions). In the poem the Hall of the Two Sisters is regarded as a person:

"I am the garden appearing every morning with adorned beauty."

But also the immaterial quality and symbolic meaning of the cupola is interpreted:

"In here is a cupola which by its height becomes lost from sight; beauty in it appears both concealed and visible."

And the bright stars would like to establish themselves firmly in it [the cupola] rather than to continue wandering about in the vault of the sky.

It is no wonder that it surpasses the stars in the heavens, and passes beyond their furthest limits.

In the Hall of the Abencerrajes and in the Hall of the Two Sisters, one of the most fundamental endeavors of Islamic architecture is realized almost to perfection. It is their dream of being able to create the illusion that the functional structure of the building becomes veiled in such a way that it almost seems to float above the earth. The stalactite cupolas and the lacelike patterns on the walls in the two abovementioned rooms increase the effect of intangibility. They reveal with the utmost clarity the Nasrids' absolute mastery of architectonic and pictorial methods. Ernst J. Grube expresses this idea as follows: "The Nasrids' art is distinguished by a highly delicate decorative effect, a sublime architectonic ornamentation that led to an almost perfect realization of the Muslims' most burning desire: the complete dematerialization of the thing."

III. Connecting lines between the Nasrids' art and the Baroque in southern Spain

7 Ernst J. Grube, *op. cit.*, p. 138.

8 Oleg Grabar, *The Alhambra* (London, 1978), p. 147.

'Cited by Oleg Grabar in the book *The Alhambra* (1978), pp. 144-45).

10 Ernst J. Grube, *op. cit.*, p. 139.

In the 17th and the beginning of the 18th centuries, in particular those parts of southern Spain where Islamic culture had previously been highly influential became dominated by a far more imaginative and daring baroque art than the baroque art characterizing the rest of Europe.

There is no doubt that the complex, folded spaces, the many crystalline sequences, and the themes of metamorphosis so characteristic of the Baroque in southern Spain are inspired by the Nasrids' art and architecture.

As in the Spanish Baroque later, the Nasrids' art, with its infinite pattern effects, contains references to the many repetitive forms of water, its wave movements, its spirals, and the countless mirror effects of its surface.

The connecting lines between the Nasrids' art and the southern Spanish baroque art is quite apparent in Cartuja, a Carthusian monastery situated on the outskirts of Granada (Fig. 32: Cartuja).

There is thus no doubt that Francisco Hurtado, who from 1742 until 1747 created the baroque decorations in the sacristy in Cartuja (Fig. 33: The sacristy in Cartuja),¹¹ was inspired by the architecture and decorative art in the Alhambra Palace. In this sacristy he has just like the Muslim artists obscured the function of the building. Instead of emphasizing the architectonic elements, the decoration tends to dissolve them here,

spreading out across the surface and seemingly able to continue forever. Both in Islamic art and in Hurtado's Christian baroque art, these pattern effects evoke an experience of infinite space, the cosmos, and divine providence (Figs. 34 and 35: Decorations in the sacristy in Cartuja). But Hurtado disintegrates the wall surfaces and creates powerful relief effects that provoke dramatic effects (?) of light and shade foreign to Islamic art (Fig. 36: Section of decorations in the sacristy in

Cartuja).

In Cordoba one can thus observe how early Islamic art was inspired by Roman and Byzantine art. But within a short time the Islamic architects and painters also developed forms of expression that were both original and characterized by a convincing artistic quality. Many of their innovations influenced Western European medieval architecture. In Alhambra in Granada, the basic principles of Islamic architecture and its fundamental ideas about architectonic form and ornamentation achieved an absolute zenith. And it became one of the sources of inspiration drawn on by the southern Spanish baroque artists in particular.

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"On Hurtado and the Spanish Baroque, see R.C. Taylor, "Francisco Hurtado and his school," *The Art Bulletin*, March, 1950, vol. XXXII, no. 1.

1. Map of the Islamic Empire from Spain to the Chinese border. The darkest areas refer to the conquests of the Umayyads in 661-750.
2. Mosaics of the Great Mosque of Damascus.
3. The interior of Sancta Sophia, Constantinople (Istanbul)
4. The Mosque of Cordoba.