



## WHAT IS 'MUDÉJAR ART'?

REVIEW: FRANCINE GIESE (ED.),  
MUDEJARISMO AND MOORISH REVIVAL  
IN EUROPE: CULTURAL NEGOTIATIONS  
AND ARTISTIC TRANSLATIONS IN THE  
MIDDLE AGES AND 19TH-CENTURY  
HISTORICISM (BRILL, 2019)

RODRIGO GARCÍA-VELASCO

As readers of the *Cuadernos de la Alhambra* may attest, the nineteenth-century revival of the history, arts, and architecture of the Maghreb and al-Andalus is itself experiencing something of a reawakening. In the past decade, a growing number of publications have shed important light on this influential revivalist and historicist movement, and its role in the fraught journey for national self-fashioning that followed the Napoleonic Wars and the events of 1898.

Among those recent publications is this hefty volume, containing 24 chapters plus an introduction, index and bibliography (totalling 697 pages). The volume is divided into five parts, each proposing different ways of delving into both the construction of Iberia's medieval artistic legacy and its re-imagination in the nineteenth century. Part 1, entitled 'Between Fascination and Conflict', contains studies appraising the revival of the concept of medieval Islamic art in Iberian lands. The distinction between 'Mudéjar' as a medieval artistic phenomenon, and the nineteenth-century revival of such forms and techniques, remains central to the rest of the book. Part 2, 'Agents and Networks', then explores the lives of key intellectuals, practitioners, statesmen and their social webs that shaped this transcultural artistic legacy, with chapters that explore the original medieval contexts for such acculturation, followed by supplementary articles on the nineteenth century contexts. Giese and other collaborators argue that the Spanish 'Neo-Mudéjar' revival and its continental European Orientalist cousin, 'Neo Moorish' architecture, were jumpstarted thanks to key intellectual interactions forged at polytechnic schools and through social and patronage networks across Europe. Part 3, 'Artisans and Architects as Protagonists of Transcultural Exchange and Artistic Transfer', delves into the shaping of these movements through praxis. Part 4, 'Artistic Translations between Imagination, Politics and Ideology' collects studies that explore the meanings of 'transculturation in practice', using Iberia as a practical case to explore this theoretical framework. Finally, Part 5, 'Transmitting Islamic Aesthetics Across Centuries' collects essays on the diffusion of specific techniques and motifs associated with 'Mudéjar' art and architecture across time. A final essay, sectioned off as an epilogue, explores the threat of modernity and neglect that loomed over Neo-Mudéjar architecture in twentieth-century Spain.

Francine Giese, editor and main contributor to this collection, describes at the outset the impact of José Amador de los Ríos' famous 1859 inaugural lecture at Madrid's *Real Academia de Bellas Artes de San Fernando*. In it, De los Ríos asserted that the artistic influences of Islamic lands, once translated to Christianity in places such as Toledo, were fundamental in shaping 'Spanish civilization'. This artistic praxis was labelled as 'Mudéjar', thus linking art to ethnicity, for Mudéjar was – and still is – the term applied to the vanquished Muslim populations that remained under Castilian and Aragonese rule in the aftermath of the twelfth- and thirteenth-century conquests. As Giese reminds us, such Mudéjar architecture was then partitioned by De los Ríos and contemporaries from 'European' Romanesque, Gothic,

Renaissance artistic influences in medieval Iberia (p. 15). Pedro Madrazo, a contemporary conservative politician and art historian, challenged De los Ríos by asking if the art was even produced by Muslim 'hands'. Thus, Madrazo described non-Andalusi Islamic styles as 'bastard Arabic', 'bastard Mauritanian' or 'bastard Christian' (p.13). In this context, as Giese affirms, the concept of Mudéjar as a Christianised form of Ibero-Islamic art 'paved the way out of this dilemma by offering a reasonable alternative that not only embraced Spanish nationalism but also the country's deep-rooted Catholicism.' (p. 71)

But is there such a thing as 'Spanish'-Islamic, or 'Mudéjar', art? This question, which Francine Giese asks at the outset in Chapter 1, was pivotal to articulating both the way in which art and architecture of Al-Andalus were re-imagined in the nineteenth century; how architects, artisans and museums engaged creatively with that legacy through praxis; and how scholars may engage with this dual heritage - Mudéjar and Neo-Mudéjar - today. In fact, the construction of 'Mudéjar' as an art-historical ontological framework continues to be readily employed by scholars, despite the racial and Orientalist connotations of the term. For Giese, one way forward might be to consider Mudéjar art as 'one way for representing the transcultural reality of medieval Iberia.' (p. 17). This hybridity is the key premise of this book. Giese thus argues that both Mudéjar architecture and the nineteenth-century revivalist movements are characterised by 'different cultural layers', which did not accumulate in an orderly or sedimentary fashion 'but merged at once to form the characteristic features of hybridity.' (p. 536). The thesis advanced in the final chapter, written by Giese and Laura Álvarez Costa and serving as a conclusion for the rest of the book, is that efforts to clarify and purify the boundaries between artistic traditions during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries have resulted in the neglect of Mudéjar and Neo-Mudéjar art precisely because of their hybrid, multi-layered, and in-between characteristics.

Notions of 'transculturation' and inter-connectedness loom large across the volume. Some of the chapters contain theoretical assessments of such hybridity, as then applied to specific building techniques and motifs (especially the essays collected in Parts 4 and 5). The contributors appear to follow Peter Burke's theses on 'cultural hybridization' as the consequence of 'intercultural encounters' and 'cultural exchange' (p. 110). This exchange is later connected in Chapter 13, authored by Giese and Sarah Keller, to notions of 'Otherness' and 'entanglement'. These are interesting propositions, although it is worth pointing out that this approach to 'acculturation' is not novel, and has sometimes been cast off as a self-explanatory and a-historical concept. In this sense, can we account for cultural differences and disruptions in the shaping of Mudéjar art? Were there moments of greater 'hybridization' or cultural exchange than others? Was this solely a top-down phenomenon? These questions are certainly hinted at while reading, for instance, Michael A. Conrad's piece on fourteenth-century Toledo (Chapter 6), but they are not brought together or addressed holistically. In this context, the emphasis on artistic 'hybridisation' proposed in this volume can be interpreted to some extent as a continuation of the very ideas that De Los Ríos – and later Américo Castro – used to explain the mixed and syncretic historical trajectory of Spain and its peoples.

The strengths of this book lie in its reappraisal of nineteenth-century historicism and the multi-faceted movements of Islamic revival found in Parts 1 through 4, both within Spain and also in connection to France and Central Europe. Chapters 4, 7, 8, 9, 12, authored by Francine Giese, Christian M. Schweizer, Ariane Varela Barga, and Katrin Kaufmann (et al.), all provide useful context to some of the networks of intellectuals that shaped the revival of Iberia's Islamic legacy. These include analyses of the impact of key

1 Peter Burke, *Cultural Hybridity* (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2009)

French and German architects and their journeys to Spain such as Christian Friedrich von Leins, Emil Otto Tafel, or Emile Boeswillwald. This last architect designed the famed Palacio de Xifré in Madrid between 1862 and 1865 for the Catalan-Cuban entrepreneur Jose Xifré Downing. Later destroyed in the 1950s, this palace was influential in disseminating the style across the Spanish capital during the second half of the nineteenth century (Chapter 8, written by Giese). Even more instrumental in the diffusion of 'neo-Mudéjar' was the Alhambra, and nineteenth-century *Alhambrismo*, as it was diffused through the Alhambra casts and models by Rafael Contreras (Chapter 11, authored by Giese and Alejandro Jiménez Hernández) and museum displays such as Owen Jones's 1854 Alhambra Court (Chapter 16, by Giese and Varela Braga). The impact of the Alhambra extended to its much-maligned restoration works, which, despite its now unimaginable interventionism, was at the origin of heritage restoration in nineteenth-century Spain (Chapter 11). The transnational dimensions of this revivalist movement are also clear from Katrin Kaufmann et al.'s work on the mostly unknown St Petersburg's Alhambra Collection (Chapters 12 and 17, as well as the plates of these models included at the end of the volume). Nonetheless, neo-Moorish buildings constructed outside of Spain also had a bearing in the Spanish re-imagining of medieval architecture. As Giese highlights, it was only after the Prussian architect Carl von Diebitsch designed the famed 'Moorish Kiosk' – which Spaniards enviously visited at the Prussian section of the 1867 Paris World Fair – that Spanish architects, artists, and academics strived to incorporate neo-Mudéjar aesthetics into the national pavilions at the increasingly important World Exhibitions (Chapter 4, by Giese).

Part 5 focuses on the transmission of key mason motifs, surface ornamentation, and building technologies across time. It is a helpful section in its appraisal of the re-discovery of such techniques during the nineteenth century: for instance, Sarah Keller's studies on neo-Moorish Gothic-inspired stained glass (Chapter 15), or the diffusion of window grilles made from stucco, stone or wood known as *transenna* and found in the Alhambra or the Mosque of Córdoba (Chapter 23). There are also accounts by Giese and Varela Braga on the nineteenth-century rehashing of star-shaped rib vaults (Chapter 19) and *sebka* ornaments (Chapter 20); as well as an appraisal of the Court of the Lions and its 'universalisation', especially after Owen Jones' model (Chapter 18). However, these techniques are disorderly discussed, and treated mostly in relation to the nineteenth century revival, without comprehensive explanations of the original artistic contexts for these techniques and motifs.

The volume is somewhat irregular in terms of its coverage of the history of medieval al-Andalus and Christian Iberia. This medieval heritage is discussed in Chapters 2, 3, 5, 6, all authored by Michael A. Conrad; as well as in Chapter 10 by Luis Araus Ballesteros, Chapter 13 by Giese and Keller, and Chapter 14 by Elena Paulino Montero. Together, these articles comprise a polyptych of Iberian art history during the Late Middle Ages. Chapter 2 describes King Alfonso X's intellectual milieu, in an account that sets the scene for Christian-Islamic artistic encounters, but that is only loosely linked to the shaping of hybrid architectural practices. Chapter 3, on the impact of Mudéjar architecture after the Trastámara takeover, also highlights the sustained Naşrid influences in Castilian royal buildings during a period traditionally perceived as one of religious intolerance and political disorder. However, these articles do not result in a comprehensive study of Granadan or Maghribi building practices (the technical studies in Part 5 address some of these issues). The North African and Granadan context is introduced in Chapter 5, which focuses on fourteenth-century transfers between Iberia and North Africa and Ibn Khaldūn's (fascinating) travels to Islamic and Christian courts of Iberia after 1362. It is only in Chapter 14, by Paulino Montero, that there is a fuller treatment of specific Naşrid architectural elements appropriated under King Pedro I such as the proliferation of centralised halls based on the Islamic *qubba*. The result

is perhaps an all too faint interpretative framework for Marinid and Naşrid architecture – in spite of its centrality to the shaping of the ‘Mudéjar style’, according to Giese and her collaborators. That being said, studies on the building practices of the urban elites of fourteenth-century Toledo (Chapter 6) and the fifteenth-century Castilian aristocracy (Chapter 10) provide useful repositories of lesser-known exemplars of non-royal architectural hybridity. Unfortunately, these accounts of medieval *Mudejarismo* abruptly stop in the fifteenth century when, in fact, building techniques and motifs that fall within the categorisation of ‘Mudéjar’ carried on for centuries after 1492. A description of the continuation of such practices after the expulsions and conversions may have added to Giese and her collaborators’ plea to focus on the praxis of cultural hybridity rather than on old art-historical notions of geography and identity.

The focus on the impact of the architecture of Christian Seville and Toledo on the one hand, and Naşrid Granada on the other hand, also results in a near-exclusive attention to Castilian-Andalusī exchanges as pivotal to the shaping of medieval Mudéjar art. This approach may give an impression to the uninitiated reader that Mudéjar masonry did not leave such a steady imprint in other areas of the Iberian Peninsula, especially in the Crown of Aragon. Towns moulded by Islamicate masonry such as Calatayud, Teruel, or Zaragoza – let alone the kingdom of Valencia – deserved a fuller treatment in this study. In fact, Zaragoza or Teruel’s famed Islamicate building practices, also had a substantial role in shaping the nineteenth-century architectural neo-Mudéjar visual language. Likewise, a discussion of Mudéjar and neo-Mudéjar architecture in Portugal would also have been useful. As it stands, the volume provides a rather narrow vision of the development of ‘Mudéjar’ architecture within Castilian lands – or, rather, within New Castile’s main urban centres.

The volume is also limited in its approach to the exchanges between Maghribī and Andalusī art, on the one hand, and the Islamic world east of Tunis, on the other. This is a crucial pitfall on several levels. First and foremost, it may be perceived as contributing towards an essentialist approach of the Western Islamic artistic legacy. This is precisely the opposite of what the volume intends: indeed, as Giese suggests in the first chapter, the ideas about the existence of a distinctive, ‘Spanish’ form of Islamic architecture were tied to nineteenth century ideas of Spanish cultural and political gatekeeping. Yet in omitting a careful study of the extra-Iberian dimensions of said artistic legacy, both during the Middle Ages and in the context of nineteenth-century European colonialism, this volume appears to reify those very ideas. Second, this approach may be overly touting the significance of ‘transculturation’ processes between Morocco and al-Andalus, and between Granada and Castile, in shaping the Islamicate architectural legacies on both sides of the Straits. Thus, Giese and her collaborators underscore the mobility of artisans, intellectuals, techniques between Iberia and the Maghreb during the Middle Ages. However, these exchanges also took place laterally, across the Mediterranean into the Levant, Persia, and the Red Sea. Similarly, the conversation with – and opposition to – late-Ottoman aesthetics surely affected the practices of neo-Moorish architecture in places such as the Balkans and Austro-Hungary. Without wanting to dilute Western Islam artistic practices within a universalist vision of ‘Islamic art’, it is clear that these extra-Iberian connections need to be at the heart of our accounts if we are to truly transcend a Spanish-centred perspective of Andalusī art history. In this, we may want to take heed in Finbarr Barry Flood and Gülru Necipoglu’s appeal to study Islamic art as an ‘interconnected, multifocal and multivocal arena of inquiry’, which acknowledges the ‘the dialectic between transregional and regional, as well as diachronic and synchronic artistic forms and practices.’<sup>2</sup>

2 Finbarr Barry Flood and Gülru Necipoglu, ‘Frameworks of Islamic Art and Architectural History: Concepts, Approaches, and Historiographies’, *A Companion to Islamic Art and Architecture* (2 vols. Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2017), pp. 1-56, at p. 7.

Third, the proposed account of the proliferation of 'Neo-Mudéjar' and 'Neo-Moorish' architecture does not consider the impact that modern Moroccan, Algerian, Tunisian agents and networks necessarily had in this process of reinvention and rediscovery. Admittedly, the scope of the four-year research project on which this volume is based was limited to Iberia, such that North Africa was not considered. Nevertheless, a study of Tangiers or Tetouan's many colonial and autochthonous neo-Moorish buildings, or Algier's 'style Jonnart' structures, would have been warmly welcomed. As Eric Calderwood has recently shown, Moroccan authors, artists, intellectuals, and statesmen alike engaged with the colonial and Spanish nationalist imaginings of the Andalusí past when constructing ideas of the Moroccan 'nation' in the period that followed the 1860 war. In other words, the complex mediated process of transculturation, nationalism, orientalism through which al-Andalus was rediscovered was multi-directional.<sup>3</sup>

In spite of these issues, this remains a useful volume for experts interested in the study of the reception and reinvention of Iberia's Andalusí architectural heritage. The studies highlight the sinuous and transnational paths taken by key intellectuals and architects, as well as the diachronic dimensions of artistic and technological diffusion, which when combined helped to disseminate the arts of al-Andalus in the nineteenth century. Art historians interested in the afterlives of Andalusí architecture, as well as historians interested in the reception of the Iberian medieval tradition in modern Spain will learn from the apparent process of de-contextualisation and re-contextualisation that this artistic legacy has been subjected to since Amador de los Ríos lectures and the first restoration works began at the Alhambra. What 'Mudéjar art' actually constitutes is still up for debate. We may now be a little closer to reconciling ourselves with those early nineteenth-century discussions.

<sup>3</sup> Eric Calderwood, *Colonial Al-Andalus: Spain and the Making of the Modern Moroccan Culture* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard, 2018).