ART OF THE ALHAMBRA

Introduction

The Alhambra is both an architectural complex and a multifaceted art work of art. This brief paper focuses on Comares Hall (Hall of the Ambassadors), and outlines construction materials, decorative motifs, and practical reconstruction considerations that I hope you will find helpful as you participate in The Alhambra Restoration problem-based learning unit.

The Alhambra is meant to be viewed from its center. Islamic palaces and private dwellings tend to avoid any exterior expression of their interior brilliance. The builders of the Alhambra intentionally showed nothing on the outside walls that would arouse envy.

Comares Hall is the most majestic room in the Alhambra. It is located within Comares Tower, which was built by artisans from the nearby town of Comares. The Hall measures 30’x30’, with a 60-foot-high domed ceiling and nine large windows. The ceiling, beams, and doors of Comares Hall are of carved wood, the floors and wainscoting are glazed earthenware mosaic, and other ornamental surfaces are of painted stucco.

In his book The Alhambra: From the Ninth Century to Yusuf I, Antonio Fernandez-Puertas states:

This vast square room is an outstanding architectural achievement in its simplicity and grandeur. Its walls are covered with complex decorations whose construction and design have fascinated scholars for many years.  (p. 319, Fernandez-Puertas)

Diplomacy kept the Nasrid dynasty alive during the 250 years that preceded the final reconquest, and rulers met important visitors, held state receptions, and conducted public business in Comares Hall.

Decorative Motifs

The Alhambra decoration combines three general motifs: stylized carved foliage; elaborate geometric tile patterns in primary colors; and the repetitive use of Arabic calligraphy. As a result of influence from textile and rug design with geometric patterning, the rectangular panel is the basic unit of composition for most ceramic and stucco decoration in the Alhambra. The use of human figures in Islamic art is generally limited to book-scaled miniatures or private living spaces.

Stylized floral and vegetal motifs derived from trees, flowers, and fruits, are prominent in the plasterwork of Comares Hall. Filling the spaces between geometric star-patterns, these *aturique* (from the Arabic *al-tawriq* meaning leaves, foliage, flora) also fill empty spaces within geometric compositions in tile.

Geometry in the surface ornamentation is an overwhelming presence in the Alhambra. The geometric designs in Comares Hall are based on grid systems that repeat the proportional system used for the architectural ground plan and elevations of the room.

The Alhambra decorative calligraphy reached an extraordinarily high degree of development, and the Comares Hall contains an unusual number of inscriptions. Written in Kufic or Naskhid-Thuluth scripts, the texts include Koranic inscriptions, historical chronicles, and verses praising the ruler composed by the court poets. These texts form an important source of historical information and often explain the function of the room in which they are found.

Materials: Tile, Stucco, Wood

The decoration of the Alhambra is a façade of ornamentation constructed over a structure of concrete, brick, or rubble masonry. The decoration from floor to ceiling uses marble, ceramics, plaster, and wood. The lower parts of most walls are covered with mosaic tiles, while the upper
sections are decorated with stucco. Wood is used for structural beams and as *muqarnas* (modular wooden elements used both architectonically and decoratively in arches and domed ceilings). The dominant decorative features of Comares Hall are complex geometric patterns in ceramic, calligraphic and floral stucco, and domed ceilings of interlocking wooden pieces.

**Tile Mosaic**

In *The Alhambra: From the Ninth Century to Yusuf I*, Fernandez-Puertas states:

> In an *alicatado* mosaic, the geometrically proportioned pieces are all directly related to the dimensions of the wall or surface that they cover—just as this surface is related to the proportions of the room, and the room itself is proportionally related to the whole building. (p. 91, Fernandez-Puertas)

Most of the tiles in the Alhambra were made in the ceramic workshops of Malaga, which were also renowned for glazed lusterware. The geometric designs are based on star patterns and polygons. The geometric *lazo* of eight, generated by an eight-pointed star in a square grid, is an important feature. Floral ornamentation fills most of the empty surface.

Geometric principles were applied to floral ornament through the creation of a grid of interlace or through geometrization of vegetal forms. This geometric ornamentation is a visual example of the affinity between Islam and mathematics. By contrast to the tiles on the walls, the clay tiles used on the floors are not as ornate.

**Stucco (plaster)**

Surfaces of walls, arches, vaults, ceilings, and cupolas were carved and then cast in stucco. These stucco decorations are derived from long silk draperies or tapestries descending to the tile. Both the ceiling and walls were delicately painted with detailed miniaturist technique.

As Michael Jacobs states in *Alhambra*,

> Above the sultan's throne, and extending all the way to the top of this 60 foot high room, soars a formerly multicolored stucco “tapestry” into which has been woven some of the richest sequences of geometrical motifs ever conceived in Islam, and a wealth of panels with inscriptions. (p. 101, Jacobs)

**Wood**

Comares Hall is capped by a domed *artesanado* ceiling containing 8,017 interlocking pieces of wood in a geometric pattern suggesting radiating stars or constellations. The optical effect is to create the impression of boundless visual space overhead. Calligraphy of Koranic verse LXVII, the Surah of the Kingdom, suggests that the ceiling contains a geometric version of Islam’s seven heavens.

Flat ceilings, archways, and domes in other sections of the Alhambra (for example, the Hall of the Two Sisters) utilize complex *muqarnas* (modular wooden elements) both architectonically and decoratively.

**Reconstruction Considerations**

In *Islamic Art and Architecture: The System of Geometric Design*, El-Daid Issam states:

> …Innumerable intricate patterns, for use in art and architecture, can be created with the use of compasses, simple tools, templates, and whole numbers…
Hence all the relevant dimensions of the master grid-pattern can be extrapolated by simple addition and subtraction...By the manipulation of the side and diagonal of a square module, the proportional divisions of a repeat unit can be established and the calculation of dimensions can be performed easily (and with reasonable approximation) without resorting to complicated trigonometric and Pythagorean calculations. (p. 9 and p. 28, Issam)

In 1812 the French blew up some of the Alhambra’s towers. Nine years later, more damage was sustained in an earthquake. When the restoration finally began, the existing decoration was carefully studied before decisions were made.

Contained in the central *qubbas* are “semi-columns” covered with curved ceramic pieces that were difficult to manufacture and install. Tile *lazos* have traditionally had accurate angles and strictly established proportions. Nevertheless, artisans have always had to make use of the “geometry of approximation” where a small geometric error would permit the construction of designs that would not be possible if the rules of geometry were precisely followed.

Rather than relying on a written record, artists and artisans passed down their knowledge and skills through the generations, through master-apprentice relationships. For centuries, local craftsmen have cared for the buildings: they have substituted panels, repaired inscriptions, and replaced faded tiles.

In a sense, the Alhambra is like a living organism with living cells that renew themselves over the years. Although comparatively little remains of the original polychrome decoration, the buildings retain much of their original presence.

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References and Additional Reading


Glossary

Alicatado -- decorative glazed ceramic tiles with geometric patterning

artesanado -- a technique of wood mosaics in which small units of varying shapes, sizes, and sometimes color are inlaid or imbricated (fitted into each other)

ataurique -- Nasrid floral and vegetal ornament (from the Arabic *al-tawriq*-leaves, foliage, flora) consisting of highly stylized forms that have developed from an abstraction of classical vegetal themes, such as the acanthus leaf, fruit, flowers, and so on

dado -- decorated lower part of a wall

lazo -- geometric design

muqarnas -- modular wooden elements used both architectonically and decoratively in flat ceilings, arches, and domes

qubba -- vault; from the Latin word *cupula*; came to signify a room covered over by a vault or cupola

Qur’an-Koran -- sacred book of Islam