

THE HERMENEUTICS OF ISLAMIC ORNAMENT: THE EXAMPLE OF THE ALHAMBRA

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“Artists make meaning; that’s what we do.”
Joseph Kosuth, American conceptual artist

Ornament is the least understood, most elusive, and perhaps the most complex of all traditional art forms in Islam. Yet, ubiquitous on all artistic media, it is one of the fundamental elements of Islamic visual expression throughout its history. In this sense, ornament constitutes a no less ipseitic feature of visuality and force of intervisuality in the cosmopolitan world of Islam than does the art of calligraphy in Arabic script, with which it forms an inseparable duo. Although much scholarly effort has been deployed to unravel this duo’s meaning, the hermeneutics of Islamic ornament remains characteristically flawed. The reason lies in the maintenance of an outdated epistemology by the academic mainstream and, in the process, the marginalization of the rare methodologically advanced studies available. Through the case study of the Alhambra’s palaces in Granada, thirteenth–fifteenth centuries, al-Andalus (Islamic Spain), these few pages deconstruct some misinterpretations and provide a few clues to look afresh at the hermeneutics of Islamic ornament.

WHAT IS ISLAMIC ORNAMENT?

Islamic ornament exists through its relationship with calligraphy, which, in terms of both conceptual involvement and aesthetic refinement, distinguishes it from the other ornamental forms in global art (see figure 52.1). Thus, what is known as “Islamic ornament” comprises two distinct visual lexicons: the ornamental patterns of vegetal, figurative, and geometric order, also plainly called “ornament” in the generic art-historical parlance; and calligraphy or artistically shaped epigraphy. The inscriptions’ semantic field covers all the religious and secular domains of Islamic intellectual life, including the Qur’ān, poetry, historical information, and so on. Although these two distinct parts of the Islamic ornamental sum have their own rules and work in their own domains of cognitivity, as visual art calligraphy also acts as pure aesthetic pattern. In other words, calligraphy shares the ornamental function with the nonscriptural vocabulary.

Owing to this commonality of function, both registers obey the same structural law of Islamic ornament, that is, the law of geometry and the abstraction of forms it engenders in visual aesthetics. With calligraphy, geometry indeed is the other major feature that contributes to the uniqueness of this art. In tune with the inherently abstract morphologies of writing, the noncalligraphic themes present more or less accentuated abstractive qualities, thanks to variegated stylistic manipulations ranging from radical geometric abstraction to diverse degrees of stylization. But most remarkable is the level of sophistication in the application of mathematical systems to

create patterning. The muqarnas design epitomizes this crossing between geometry as science and geometry as art in Islam. This three-dimensional design, looking like natural honeycomb or stalactite formations, is the product of a processual construction of multiple units mathematically organized in hyperflexible deductive structures.

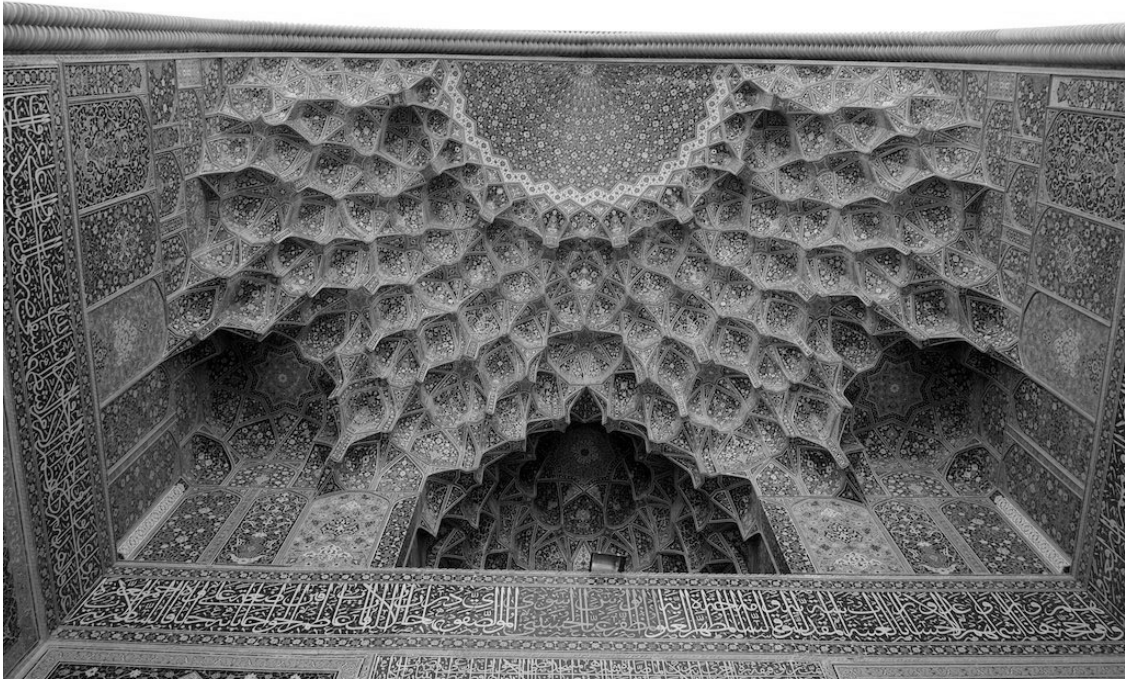


Figure 52.1: View from underneath the entrance porch, Shāh ‘Abbās Mosque, Isfahan, Safavid art, seventeenth century. Photo courtesy of Sanaz Mazinani, contemporary Iranian artist, San Francisco.

Even when the figural repertoires preserve a certain level of naturalism, they strictly follow this geometric order governing with absolute authority Islamic ornament in all its aspects. For example, repeated along an axis or in rhythmic repetition, trees, plants and flowers become endlessly enfolding designs that no longer belong to the mundane (see figure 52.2). Based on vegetal lineaments, the arabesque is a typical instance of this abstractive strategy. Thus unrestrictedly extended to the thematic inspired from the real, the aesthetic of geometry and abstraction constructs with the aesthetic of writing a conceptual binary structure of muteness/discourse, at the core of the hermeneutical preoccupation with Islamic ornament.

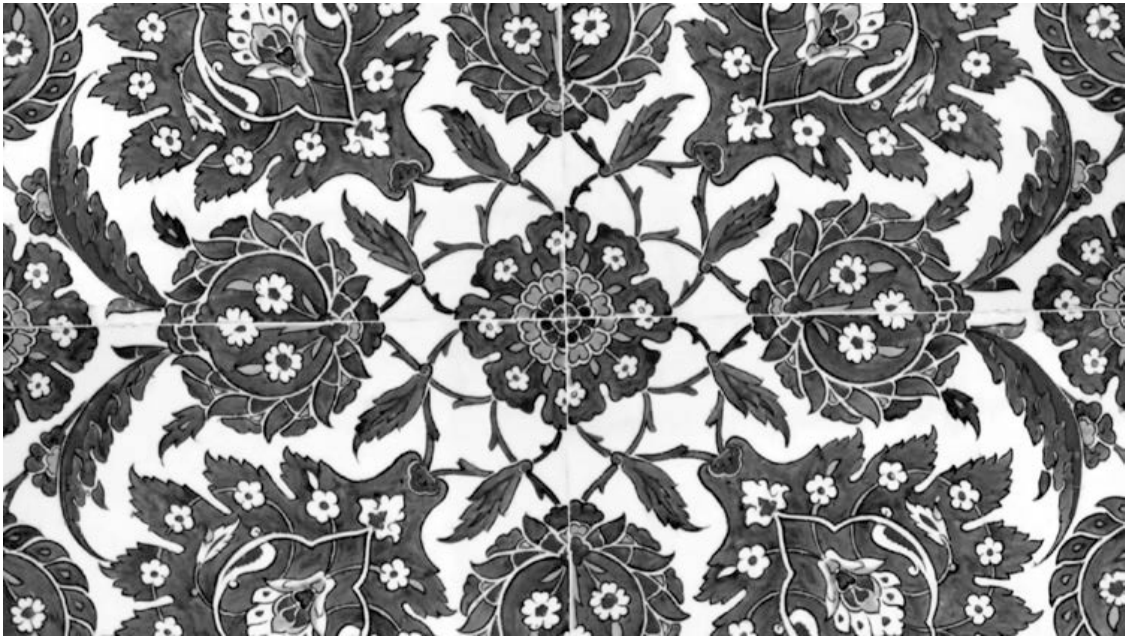


Figure 52.2: Blue and red Iznik tiles, Ottoman art, sixteenth century. Photo in public domain.

THE HERMENEUTICAL QUESTIONING

In Islamic ornament, the mingling of calligraphic and noncalligraphic repertoires raises the question of the nature of the phenomenological and semantic interaction this mingling institutes between these repertoires. It thereby brings to the fore the corollary question of the articulation between form and discourse the interaction sets forward in this art. The answer to this double question is the condition sine qua non to proposing a definition of the meaning of the Islamic ornamental complexities. In examining this interaction and articulation, straight away a difficulty arises.

The double capacity of calligraphy to perform discursively and visually, compared to the one-track sensory phenomenology of pure patterning, could a priori suggest that an imbalance of aesthetic power underpins their pairing. Moreover, the fact that messages are plainly given through the most direct, least ambiguous of all means of communication, namely language, may lure one to think that in Islamic ornament the inscriptions are the main meaning provider. This in turn may induce one to conceptualize the rest of the ornamental thematic as an accessory to the calligraphy. The superlative cultural value of writing in Islam only strengthens this deceptive suggestion.

Inevitably, this state of affairs has caused some misdirection in the scholarship, prone to overvalue and privilege the critical potentiality of texts over that of the artworks themselves. Assuming that calligraphy holds the ultimate *raison d'être* of Islamic ornament, the experts have tended to favor text-centric readings of the ornamental ensembles and/or to approach ornament as a form of symbolic language with hidden or unseen significations. Both tendencies are problematic, as we shall see through the interpretations of the Nasrid decoration in the Alhambra's palaces.

THE TEXT-CENTRIC VISION OF THE ALHAMBRA'S ORNAMENT

The Nasrid palaces of the Alhambra display throughout lavish decorations comprising an extensive epigraphic program of variegated topics, most particularly poetry (see figure 52.3). The inscriptions' explicit textual imagery a priori offers the perfect conditions for the text-centric approach. The poem inscribed in the Tower of the Captive represents well the poetic style of these texts:

This piece of art has come to decorate the Alhambra, which is the home of the peaceful and of the warriors; Calahorra that contains a palace.

Say that it is at the same time a fortress and a mansion for joy!

It is a palace in which magnificence is shared among its ceiling, its floor, and its four walls; on the stucco work and on the glazed tiles there are wonders, but the carved wooden ceilings are even more extraordinary.

These were all united and their union gave birth to the most perfect construction in the place where the highest mansion already stood. They seem poetic images, paronomasias, and transpositions, the decorative branches and inlays. Yūsuf's visage appears before us as a sign that this is where all the perfections have met. It is from the glorious tribe of Jazray, whose works in favor of the religion are like dawn, when its light appears in the horizon.

Thus, quasi unanimously agreed upon is the view that in the Alhambra, as a leading scholar put it, the inscriptions “describe, symbolize, and fill the buildings with meaning.”¹ But this view raises a few epistemic problems.

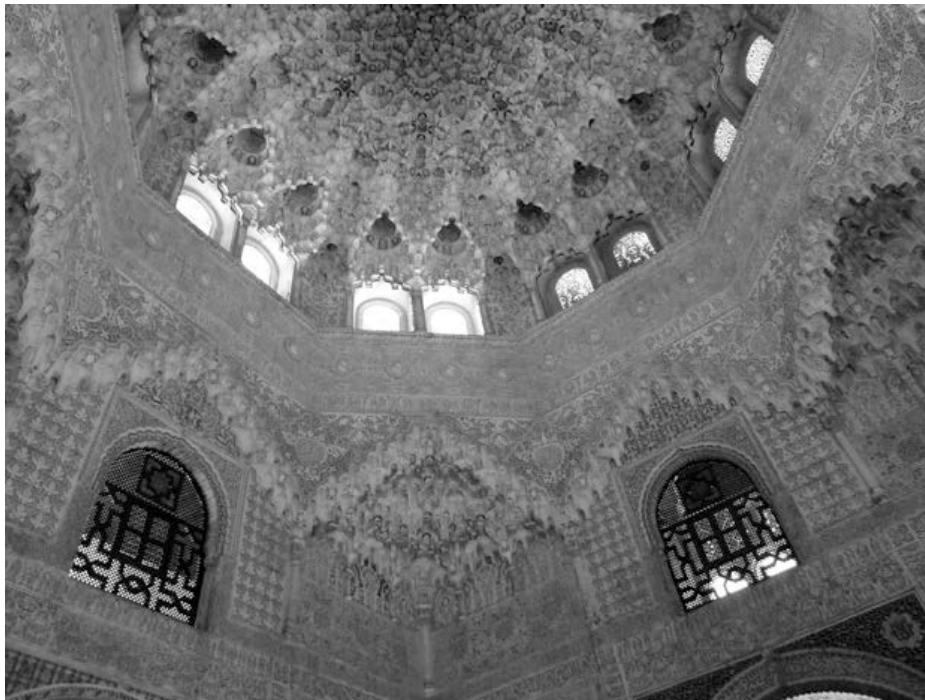


Figure 52.3: Sala de Las Dos Hermanas (The Hall of the Two Sisters), Alhambra, fourteenth century, Granada, Spain. Photo by Liam987, in public domain.

First, the statement about the epigraphy filling the Alhambra with meaning, although obviously not untrue, conveys some ambiguity concerning the capacity of the architecture and its patterned decoration to make meaning by themselves.

Second, de facto establishing a literal, discourse- and language-centered, aesthetic linkage between the two ornamental lexicons, this view implicates a binding submission of the forms to the inscriptions' semantic. It thereby confers upon the Alhambra a status of exception in medieval Hispano-Maghribi architecture that the archaeology cannot confirm. Although no other medieval palace in the region stands in a comparable condition of preservation to scientifically acknowledge or refute this status of exception, in North Africa the inscriptions of mosques, tombs, and other monuments belonging to the same aesthetic tradition as the Alhambra tell a different story. They show no particular semantic linkage between texts and visual patterns. Therefore, if the prolific poetic program might constitute a particularity of the Nasrid compound, it does not necessarily mean its ornamental design breaks away from the contemporary tradition to which it is attached. Consequently, the articulation between discourse and form in the Alhambra's ornament might potentially be of another order, imparting more aesthetic autonomy and weight to the visual lexicon. But problematically, the text-centric viewing of the building tends to exclude this consequential possibility from its purview.

Third, by the same token, this viewing fails to consider another possibility of great importance: that the visual surroundings might reciprocally have a significant effect or implicative role in the epigraphy's discursive workings, in particular for the poetry.

Upon these unsteady premises, the analyses of the Alhambra basically reduce the function of its patterned decoration to mere materialization of the epigraphic discourse. The abundant poetic imagery, in particular, is seen as evidence that the patterning designs a kind of iconography equivalent to material representation, despite its dominant logic of abstraction. As purported by the verbing "describe and "symbolize" in the citation above, the patterns represent any image the inscriptions in their midst may depict. In this interpretive light, several specific ornamental configurations become direct visual representations. The ceiling of the Comares Hall, adorned with starry geometric designs, represents the seven Islamic heavens described in Surat *al-Mulk* (Qur'ān 67), inscribed in its entirety at the device's basis (see figures 52.4 and 52.5); the muqarnas cupolas and niches incarnate the celestial bodies and gardens centered on the glorious figure of the sultan pictured in the decorative verses (figure 52.6); or the gardens' design constructs an earthly visualization of the Qur'ānic paradise alluded to in some inscriptions.

In the areas of the building where the poetic epigraphy uses standard flowery language filled with common tropes, such as "pearl strings" or "embroideries," the visual patterns turn into pure décor of the "architecture-poem" and its "*divān-garden*", drawing parallels with the linguistic embellishments of medieval Arabic poetry and the illuminations (aniconic decorative painting) in book art. In summary, according to this reading, the Alhambra's patterned networks serves either as text illustration or as decorative text framing.

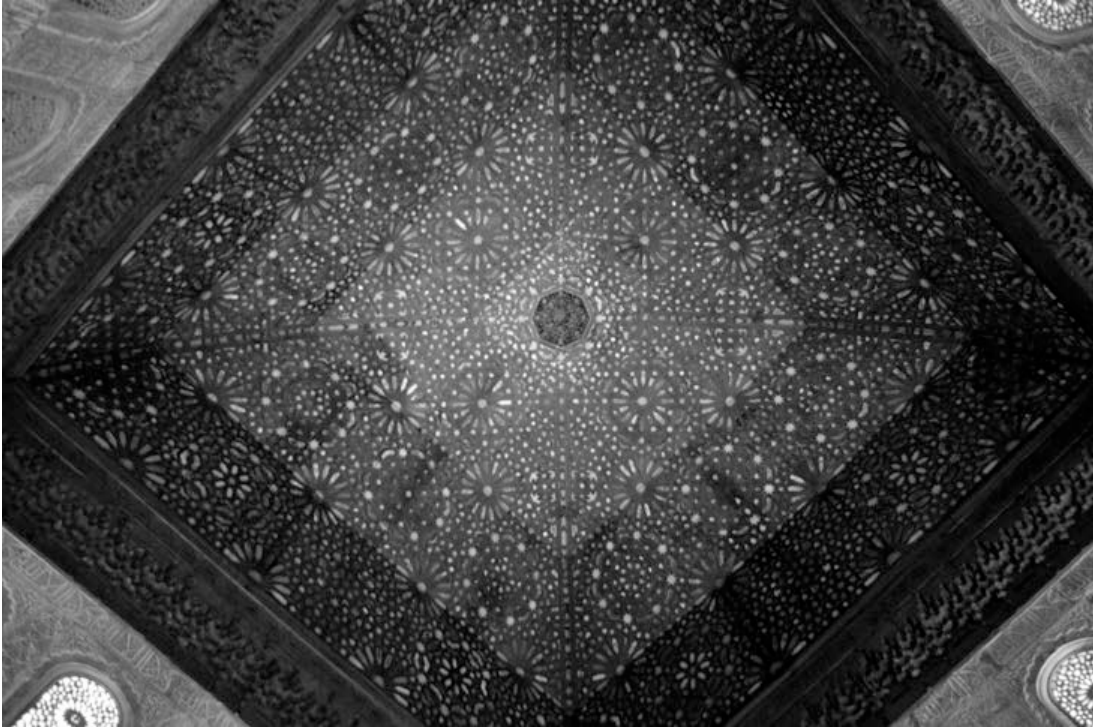


Figure 52.4: Ceiling of the Comares Hall, Alhambra, fourteenth century, Granada, Spain. Photo in public domain.



Figure 52.5: View of the Comares Hall, Alhambra. Photo in public domain.

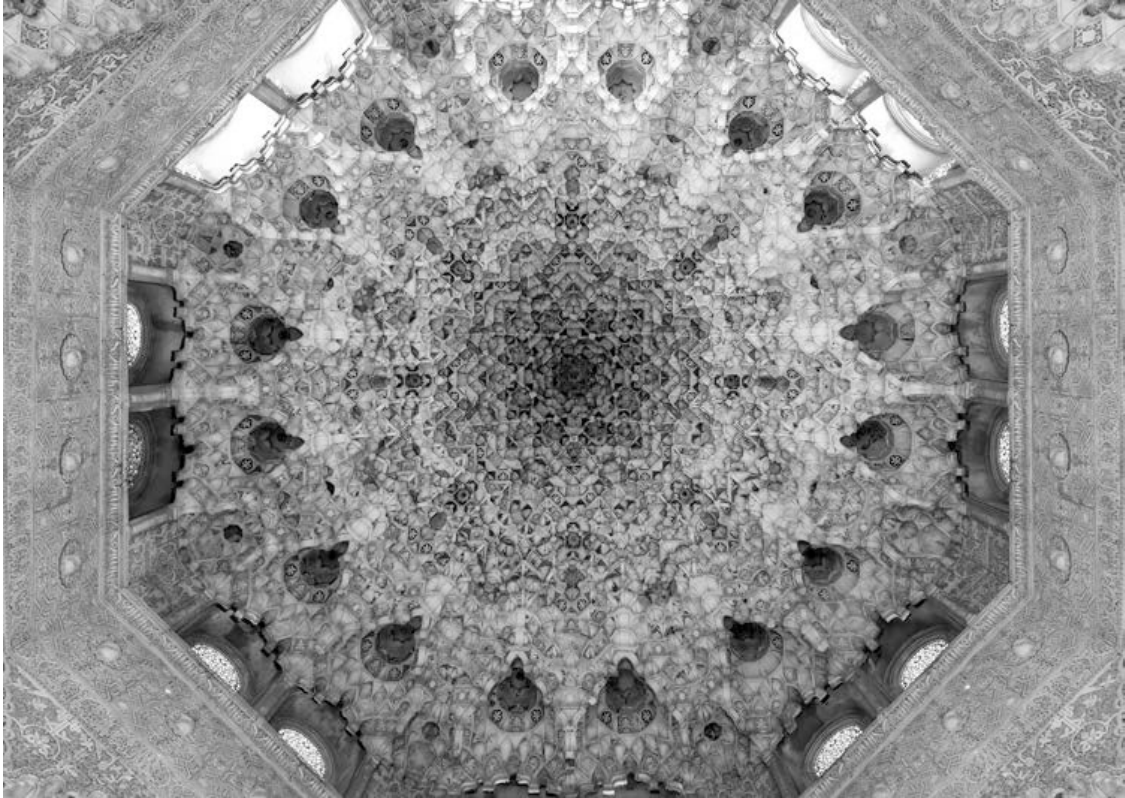


Figure 52.6: Muqarnas cupola in the Hall of the Two Sisters, Alhambra. Photo in public domain.

In support of the objections previously enunciated, this text-centric vision of the Alhambra and the representational thesis it promotes do not stand the test of visual phenomenological analysis. The most obvious shortcoming lies in the reading of the patterned ornaments as beautiful text framings when the poetry becomes linguistically more archetypal, that is, iconographically or symbolically less specific, and more concerned with the praising of the forms' pure beauty.

Indeed, this reading implies by default that, whenever the epigraphic texts lose semantic substance or poetic power by falling into the verbal commonplace of complimenting the grandiose palace and its illustrious patron, so do the visual forms, thus left incapacitated to assume a more dimensional role than that of pure décor. However, the concrete reality of the patterned formations does not permit the distinction between meaningful symbolic or iconographic ornamental configurations, on the one hand, and generic, simply beautiful, decorative motifs, on the other. If the ornament reaches spectacular peaks of expression and technical refinement in some places, such as in the ceilings and cupolas, it nevertheless consistently maintains its own overall dynamic unfolding, keeping up with the same abstract rationale, despite the linguistic fluctuations.

Moreover, this conceptual duality of pure décor versus meaningful iconographic-symbolic forms projected on the Alhambra's design sounds unsettlingly familiar. It echoes the bygone Orientalist perception of this building, and of Islamic architecture in general. Let us recall that the Orientalist hermeneutics, oblivious to the cultural profundities manifest in this art and not yet acquainted with abstraction in vis-

ual creation (this was before the modernist deconstruction), heeded only the technical quality and perceptual beauty of Islamic patterning. Associating artistic instances characterized by abstraction, or free of any iconographic or symbolic narrative, with mere decoration, the Orientalist observers considered Islamic ornament a highly seductive and technically sophisticated, yet meaningless craft. By extension, they perceived the whole of the Islamic arts as essentially decorative.

Since then decried and in principle contested, this Orientalist reduction has, however, left traces in the practice of Islamic art history until today, as evident in the text-centric analysis of the Alhambra's ornament and, more broadly, in any endeavor to identify at all costs a defined intentional representational narrative or symbolic meaning in the Islamic abstract, abstractive, and stylized forms. Today, like yesterday, these approaches betray a lingering allegiance to the outdated "logic of sense" in art that recognizes meaning only in discursive, referential, or message-bearing forms and that, consequently, considers abstract designs largely insignificant, although beautiful according to taste.² Yet beyond the Orientalist era, the major artistic events of the modernist revolution and its ensuing developments in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries have rendered this logic obsolete, in demonstrating with great force how expansive the notion of artistic meaning can be. In doing so, these events have revealed one crucial thing in particular, namely, the superpower of meaning-making that forms that signify nothing or refer to nothing outside themselves may possess. The critical potential of this concept of nonreferential self-signifying artwork is immense for the hermeneutics of the Islamic art of patterning.

There is no room in this essay to discuss further these Western artistic movements and the decisive theoretical-critical acquisitions they have helped to bring forth for all art historians, including specialists of Islam, to learn from. So suffice it to cite some representative works of this artistic philosophy, such as Fernand Legér's *Contraste de Formes*, or Donald Judd's *Specific Objects*. Detached from representational concerns, these works make meaning through the sole act of their own being, that is, the plainly phenomenal given of their plasticity. Owing to its aporetic property (the ability to block any referential or signifying operation), abstraction is the plastic strategy to achieve this aesthetic goal.

No doubt that Islamic ornament, in the Alhambra and elsewhere in Islam, is aesthetically of the same essence as these Western masterpieces that it historically precedes. The objection of anachronism or irrelevance asserted by some to discourage the comparison and to disregard the use of contemporary art criticism, theory, and other aesthetic philosophies for the study of Islamic art in general just bespeaks a fundamental misunderstanding of this art's profound nature. Indeed, powerfully attesting to these affinities between Nasrid-Islamic ornament and the aforementioned Western masterpieces, the Alhambra's visual lexicon resists any attempt to contour it in fixed figurative or symbolic referents. Instead of composing different tableaux mirroring the epigraphy's wordings, as the studies claim, the patterned networks display the great aesthetic autonomy that abstraction typically confers on forms. Effectively escaping the grip of the inscriptions' semantic, the same patterns purportedly imbued with a determined representational or symbolic property on the basis of the presence of verbal imagery in their midst may resurface somewhere else

where no such presence supports this interpretation. The analysis of a few key elements of the Alhambra's decoration will make the point.

CEILINGS, CUPOLAS, AND NICHES: ICONOGRAPHIC-SYMBOLIC OR PURELY ABSTRACT DEVICES?

The ceiling of the Comares Hall, supposedly picturing the seven Qur'ānic heavens stacked one upon another, presents a type of starry geometric design widely and fluidly applied on an infinite range of media—walls, doors, minbars, textiles, ceramics, and so on. The seemingly endless spread of this design also crosses Islamic geopolitical spaces, from Islamic Spain to the Maghrib, Egypt, Turkey, and other locations.

Still, seven concentric circles have been detected in the ceiling's geometry and brought forth as evidence of its iconographic function. Certainly, the possibility is not to be excluded that, in this particular room, the number seven has been purposely inserted in the device's mathematical structure to allude to the Qur'ānic cosmic icon. The latter's pure constructivist geometry (Kasimir Malevitch's paintings spring to mind) makes it particularly suitable for enabling the architectonic masterpiece to produce such an allusion without compromising its fundamental nonrepresentational nature. Yet, apart from the fact that the structure's complex combinatorics hardly foregrounds the number seven, the seventh row at the ceiling's basis comprises only semicircles, in rupture with the flawless spherical shaping of the Qur'ānic heavens. In addition, half-concealed behind the muqarnas cornice topping the room's four walls, these circles (in optical appearance semicircles) virtually implicate the continuous deployment of the starry geometry beyond the cornice's rim. This feature in effect eradicates the sense of a defined construction with precise edges and numeric proportions, instead giving the illusion of a space in infinite expansion.

On the other hand, in this audience hall in which the Nasrid ruler formally exerted his power, the presence of the inscription of the "kingdom" sura (*al-Mulk*) expounding the divine laws makes perfect sense. In this respect, the Comares Hall illustrates a well-established practice in Islam, which consists in selecting the inscriptions according to the location's practical function for primarily discursive purposes.

To cite other examples of this practice outside the Alhambra, the lavishly adorned mihrabs (architectonic elements indicating the direction of prayer) that many historic mosques still display, such as the mihrab of Uldjaytu in the Great Mosque of Isfahan, or the mihrab of al-Ḥakam in the Umayyad Mosque of Cordoba, present profuse Qur'ānic excerpts (see figure 52.7). In these cases, the presence of the holy text has been dictated by the religious function of the medium; no symbolism can be reasonably discerned in the mihrabs' patterned ornamentation to connect it with the inscriptions.

Another problematic iconographic-symbolic reading concerns the Alhambra's muqarnas cupolas and niches, seen as the materialization of the epigraphy's poetic imagery of alternately cosmological and earthly order. These architectonic elements, again, have countless analogues in Islamic architecture from different areas and periods. Those analogues do not bear epigraphic texts indicating that they represent

something specific or have any iconic or symbolic meaning whatsoever. Here it is worth mentioning another unsustainable hermeneutics of the muqarnas, which underscores just how unsuitable these traditional analytical models are for the study of Islamic artistic complexities.

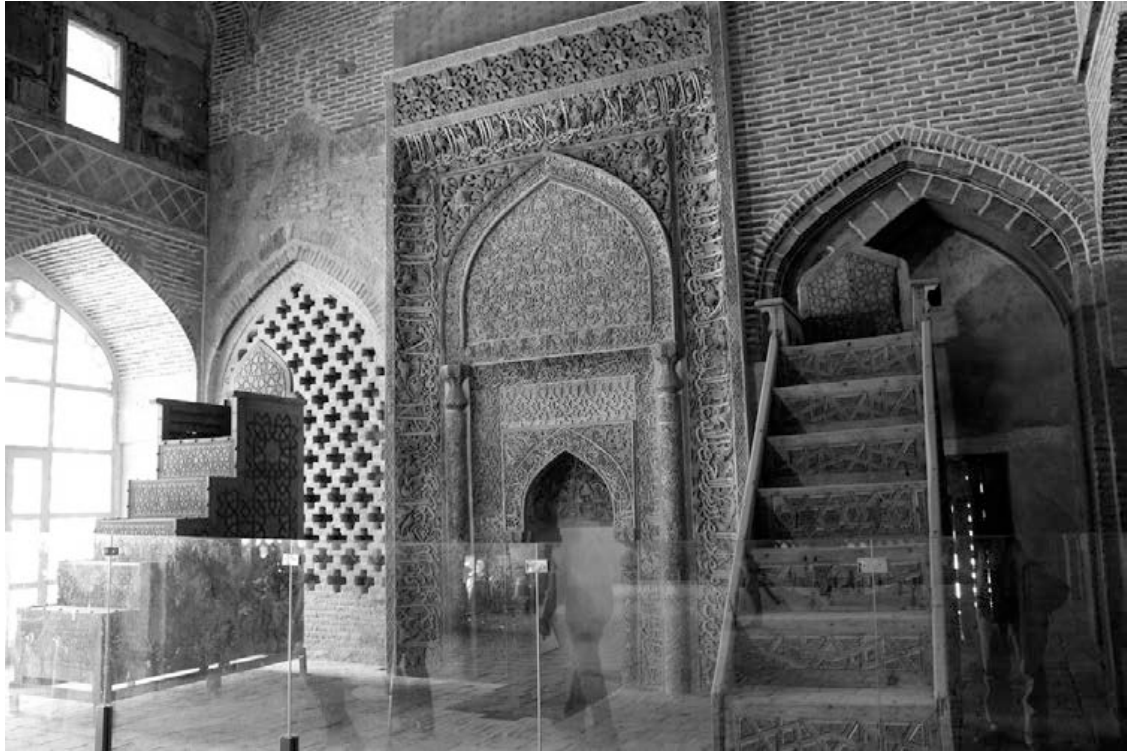


Figure 52.7: Mihrab of Uljaytu, Great Mosque of Isfahan, Iran, Ilkhanid art, fourteenth century. Photo by Marco Rameniri, in public domain.

The rise of muqarnas in the eleventh and twelfth centuries has been related to an intent to symbolize in an artistic form the Sunni revival against the threat of Shi'ism during this period.³ This theory has in common with the studies on the Alhambra the recourse to the model of symbolization, although unlike the latter, it is not text-based. Neither the period epigraphy nor the primary sources indicate that any intention ever existed to instrumentalize the muqarnas geometry to political-religious semiotic ends. Besides, this lack of textual support for such speculative readings of the art concerns not only this timeframe of the medieval Sunnism-Shi'ism rivalry, but also most of the historical periods of Islam. Very importantly, the archaeology itself invalidates this theory. If the muqarnas decoration was popular in the Sunni Abbasid caliphate, it equally graced the architecture in its Shi'ite Fatimid rival in Egypt and in other domains that Fatimid Cairo impacted directly or indirectly, such as Sicily under Norman rule, where we can still admire the muqarnas ceiling of the Cappella Palatina in Palermo (see figure 52.8). More generally, from its inception in the ninth to tenth centuries to the contemporary era, the glorious art of muqarnas developed indifferently in Sunni and Shi'ite cultural milieus.

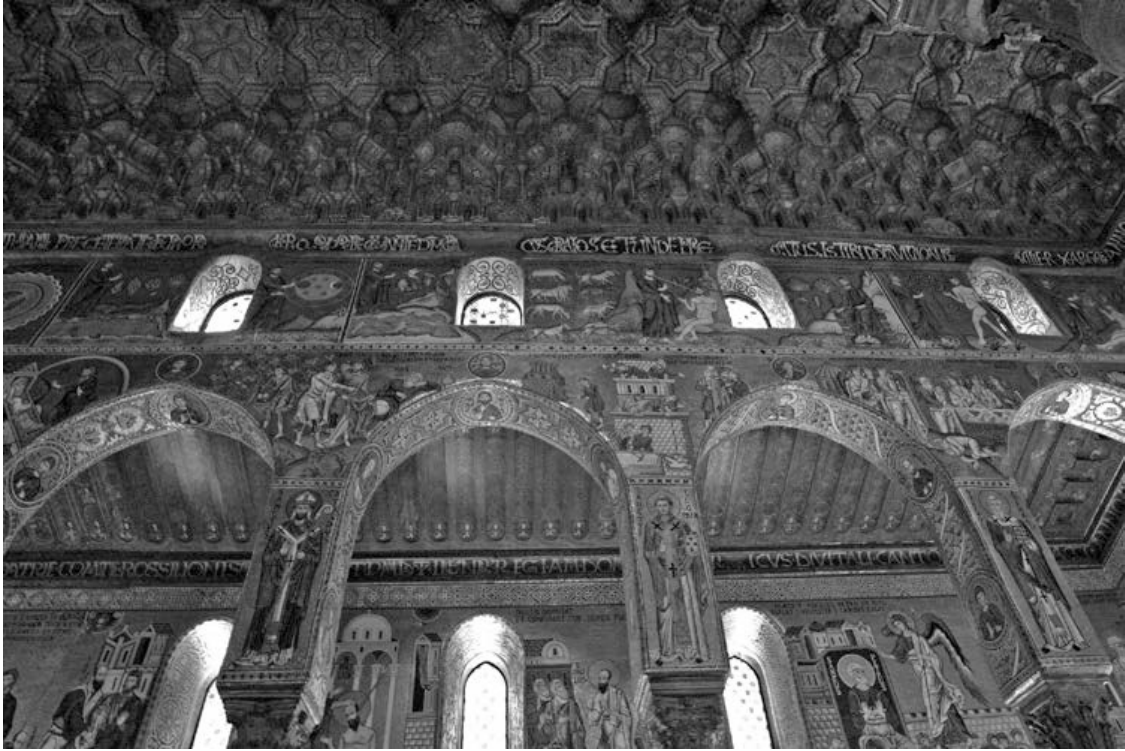


Figure 52.8: *Muqarnas* ceiling of the Cappella Palatina, Palermo, Sicily. Arabo-Norman art, 1130-1140. Photo by Kabaeh49, in public domain.

To conclude this discussion, let us briefly describe the phenomenology of the Alhambra's ornament. In the complex's different units, the patterned ensembles unfold in a consistent albeit constantly modulated flux, a mute material force organically adapted to the shapes and spaces that foster it. This flux virtually expands beyond the physical borders of the Alhambra itself and its Andalusí context. It is therefore in vain to look for the meaning of these transaesthetic ornamental expansions anywhere outside of their materiality, free of bondage to discourse, representation, and symbolism. This description brings us back to the difficult question of the nature of the relationship between patterns and texts in Nasrid-Islamic ornament, still unanswered. Interestingly enough, the flawed interpretations of the monument turn out to be useful to propose a first element of a response to this question.

THE IMAGING POWER OF ISLAMIC GEOMETRIC ABSTRACTION

As both the decorative poetry and the iconographic-symbolic theories of the Alhambra's ornament indicate, an imaging phenomenon of some kind is taking place on the Nasrid premises. Simply put, one *may see* images in the monument's decoration. But, let me insist, this phenomenon does not involve visual representation. What are, then, the terms of this imaging process? An example taken from the tangible contemporary art of cinema will help explain this process.

The Iranian film director Ashgar Farhadi has stated that the scene of a building about to collapse at the beginning of his 2016 movie *The Salesman* represents crumbling relationships between people.⁴ This theme underpins both Farhadi's film scenario and Arthur Miller's play *Death of a Salesman*, which is nested within it. Yet, un-

aware of the details of the maker's working method, most moviegoers might understand this scene differently. They might perceive in it a metaphor for, say, the fall of the Islamic Republic of Iran, the doubting of faith, or other existential topics. These topics are not part of Farhadi's conceptualization of the film sequence, and therefore, objectively, these moviegoers misinterpret it.

However, the scene's features—fissures in the walls, the shaking ground, the panic of the inhabitants, etc.—do invite viewers to produce such misinterpretations. In this sense, the latter have some validity. Even if the aforementioned topics are not featured in the film sequence itself, they exist in the moviegoers' minds, where they take shape; and they do so not out of pure fantasy, but based on the visual signals the sequence contains. Consequently, in terms of aesthetic ontology, the objective misinterpretations are also subjective interpretations. They fully partake in what constructs, in general aesthetics, the process of artistic communication between artworks and beholders, namely, its subjective part, which is the art's reception, the (subjective) aesthetic response to the (objective) artistic proposition. This response does not have to be objectively accurate, but it does have to rest upon some verifiable premises in the art's objective constitution; otherwise, it indeed falls under the sign of baseless elucubration.

In view of this enlightening cinematographic example, the text-centric readers of the Alhambra are like the hypothetical moviegoers: they deliver not an objective account of, but an aesthetic response to the art. And like in *The Salesman's* film sequence, in the Nasrid monument certain aesthetic signals or triggers allow for the construction of visionary interpretations. These signals reside both in the epigraphic texts and in the forms.

True, in the Alhambra correspondences and analogies can be built between the inscriptions' textual imagery and some ornamental elements such as the starry geometric design or the kinetic muqarnas. Geometry, here and elsewhere, combined with powerfully evocative architectural shapes such as domes, cupolas, and niches does have the capacity to produce certain types of pictures, celestial configurations, cosmogonies, and other cosmic or metaphysics-inspired imagery; a capacity I call the "imaging power of geometry." However, this power addresses the imaginary and associative faculties, and its effects concretize themselves in metaphors, analogies, and associations that are pure mental elaborations. Such Wittgensteinian processes of mental image construction, open and unfixed, and reliant on the fluctuations of the psyche and affect, remain impossible to anchor in the art's materiality, although it is this same materiality that allows those processes to occur. A most convincing example of that is the muqarnas seen as honeycombs or stalactites, by structural analogy. Yet undoubtedly the muqarnas does not represent honeycombs or stalactites in Islamic art.

To be precise, the problem arises when scholars posit honeycomb-type visions of the Alhambra's ornament as rational elucidations of it. In taking the perceptions encapsulated in the inscriptions as evidence to support their reasoning, they essentially put themselves in the place of the Nasrid authors of the Alhambra's inscriptions, with no scholarly pretention but animated by a rich, contextually informed, subjective mixture of feelings and intentionality, poetic awe, mystic rapture, religious sentiment, pious obligation, and political devotion. In this sense, the scholars be-

come the contemporary shadows of the Nasrid viewers/commentators, as subjectively driven as their medieval predecessors. This strange slip of role has, however, the merit of underscoring another fundamental phenomenological aspect of the Alhambra's ornament: its utterly participatory property.

The Alhambra possesses highly participatory qualities because it effectively engages the active participation of the viewers in its system of meaning-making. This entails that the fleeting metaphors, analogies, and amalgamations of which the epigraphy's poetic effusions and their shadowy academic reiterations give us a glimpse are a full part of the Nasrid ornament's meaning. This part is in perennial expansion, as long as the Alhambra solidly stands to receive visitors to view it and to fashion new impressions and perceptions of it. Here, a parallel may be drawn with the equally participatory abstract paintings by Mark Rothko that, like the Alhambra, are sites of open and immersive aesthetic experience. These paintings' abysmal fields of color that objectively show and signify nothing external to themselves similarly absorb the body and the mind and liberate the imagination of all constraints and limits. Hence, the trans-spatiotemporal connection between these works and their common elements of transcendence and mystique rooted in radical abstraction and its imaging power.

TRANSITIVE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN PATTERNING, IMAGINING, AND WRITING

It is now possible to reconstitute the creative dynamic at work in the Alhambra's ornament and thereby to get closer to a redefinition of the articulation of form and discourse in it. This dynamic rests upon the transitive relationship between the three distinct creative forces of patterning, imagining, and writing that ultimately brings the Nasrid ornamental complexities to full completion. This process of multiple intergenerational creations takes place in a precise order of occurrence in which, contrary to the academic assumption, the epigraphy is not in the first position. It is the Alhambra's visual aesthetics that, as primary source material, assumes this position and gives the impulse to the creative process. The scenario of this working method may be schematically described as follows.

First comes patterning: the conceptualization of the building and its decoration, in conformity with the Andalusí models of architecture and ornament of the period.

Second comes imagining: the conceptualization of the variegated epigraphic program that includes pieces by designated Nasrid court poets who, made acquainted with both these models and the particulars of the architectural project, set themselves to work accordingly.

Third comes writing: the calligraphy that crystallizes this epigraphic program in the ornamental materiality and, in the process, enriches its repertoires with the beautifully shaped Arabic script. The plasticity of calligraphy thus allows conjoining the visual and textual creations together into one single material compound of forms, the ornamental epigraphy-pattern duo. Open and participatory, this duo creates an immaterial, virtual, and transcendental capital of meaning built upon the past, pre-

sent, and future metaphorizations birthed in the beholders' mind, in a *mise en abîme* initiated by the original Nasrid politico-literary effusions embedded in its decoration.

In conclusion, revisiting the Alhambra has helped us to bring forth the fundamental idea that pattern art in Islam forms a mute, self-signifying, yet highly participatory space of experience and affect. This art epitomizes, *avant l'heure*, what the German philosopher Gernot Böhme calls "the aesthetic of felt spaces" in talking about contemporary aesthetics.⁵ To pursue this idea further in precise philosophical terms, I would say that this hypersensory material space of Islamic ornament is the phenomenological horizon of the discourse delivered in the inscriptions. But these are matters, among many other still unsolved questions, to think and argue about in future hermeneutical inquiries on Islamic ornament.

¹ José Miguel Puerta Vilchez, "La construcción poética de la Alhambra," *Revista de poética medieval* 27 (2013), pp. 263–264.

² Gilles Deleuze, *The Logic of Sense*, trans. Marl Lester, New York: Columbia University Press, 1990.

³ Yasser Tabbaa, *The Transformation of Islamic Art during the Sunni Revival*, Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2002.

⁴ See <https://www.rogerebert.com/reviews/the-salesman-2017>.

⁵ Gernot Böhme, *Atmospheric Architectures: The Aesthetic of Felt Spaces*, ed. and trans. A.-Chr. Engels-Schwarzpaul, London: Bloomsbury, 2017.