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NASRID LUSTER POTTERY: THE ALHAMBRA VASES

The Alhambra vases are a group of large ceramic vases painted in luster, sometimes in combination with cobalt-blue paint, produced in southern Spain in the fourteenth century. They are perhaps the rarest — only ten complete (or nearly so) vases exist today, plus a number of fragments¹ — and most splendid works of art produced by the Nasrid dynasty, the last Muslim rulers in Spain, who reigned from 1232 to 1492. They are called the Alhambra vases because it was once believed that they were produced to decorate another great Nasrid work, the Alhambra palace.

Despite their grand size (over four feet in height), rich decoration, and rarity, the beautiful Alhambra vases have yet to be collected together and studied in depth as a unit. Consequently, their function and much about their lavish arabesque and inscriptions are still unknown. The first significant study of the vases was done by José Ferrandis Torres, in his article "Los Vasos de la Alhambra."² Arthur Van de Put compiled a catalogue of the vases in 1947,³ and shortly thereafter, Mrs. Alice Wilson Frothingham presented the first concerted effort to classify the vases in her book, *The Lustreware of Spain*.⁴ Her text offers a great amount of data on the historical context of this pottery, and when combined with Richard Ettinghausen's essay "Notes on the Lustreware of Spain,"⁵ it provides a useful guide to many facets of the vases' history. Unfortunately, after this essay little further work was done on them, and they have received only passing mention in texts on Spanish art or luster pottery,⁶ perhaps because their character is difficult to explain. They are an isolated example of a peculiar artistic development, and as such they have no satisfactory analogy elsewhere and must be examined mainly on their own terms.

What follows is a description of the eleven known Alhambra vases, a few fragments and an engraving of another vase, now lost (for the purpose of clarity, each vase is named according to its provenance or some distinguishing characteristics; these names, though well established by previous researchers, are not necessarily universally accepted). Because of their rarity and the lack of recent research, it is important to emphasize the need for a complete and thorough investigation not just of the

vases, but also of the historical context of their production. These vases provide much useful evidence for the social and historical study of late Moorish Spain, such as the role of certain major cities, the relationship between the Christians and the Muslims, and the style of courtly life in vogue in Muslim Spain in the fourteenth century. After an introduction examining these facets of the environment that produced the vases, the vases will be considered in chronological order, comparing them with other objects made at the same time, such as ivories and textiles. An analysis of the information gleaned from the examination of the vases will demonstrate their importance to the study of Islamic art in general.

MÁLAGA

This study of Spanish pottery must include mention of Málaga's role in the import, export, and production of ceramic wares. The Alhambra vases, from the fourteenth century, belong within the period of Nasrid rule in southern Spain (1232–1492), inaugurated by the unification of Jaén, Granada, and Málaga under Ibn Ahmar, prince of Jaén. Ibn Ahmar was well able to exploit the natural benefits of the region's geography and made the most of the trading opportunities he had with the Christians of Castile and the Almohads of North Africa, even using one as an ally against the other as it suited his diplomacy.⁷ Although Granada was his capital, Málaga as a major port became the artistic and cultural center of the province owing to its constant traffic in both people and goods.

A considerable amount of documentary evidence exists to support Málaga's extensive involvement in the trade and commerce of Granada. Inventories, such as one from Portsmouth, England, dating from 1289, mention the arrival of some lusterware from Málaga en route to Eleanor of Castile, wife of Edward I of England. Two others refer to Málaga ceramics, one from Kent in the early fourteenth century and another from Collioure, in the Narbonne region, from 1297.⁸ Furthermore, the famous traveler Ibn Battuta wrote in 1350 that "at

Málaga there is manufactured excellent gilded pottery, which is exported thence to the most distant lands."⁹

Spanish lusterware has been discovered elsewhere in the Mediterranean world; in fact, two of the Alhambra vases were discovered in Sicily. This is not surprising considering the role of Sicily as a trading and exchange center between the Muslim Middle East and the kingdoms of western Europe after it was first conquered by the Muslims in 827.¹⁰ That the Muslim traders and merchants continued to be active in Sicily after the Norman conquest in 1091 is supported by the fact that one vase, now in the Instituto de Valencia de Don Juan in Madrid, was owned by Count Burgio di Villafiorita,¹¹ a scion of an Italian family that claimed to descend from a member of the Banu Hamud who ruled Cordoba, Málaga, and Algeciras for a short while in the eleventh century. Furthermore, a dish in the Museum für Islamische Kunst, Berlin, from the late thirteenth century, shows that there was continuing mercantile activity between Spain and the Middle East. Found in Fustat, or Old Cairo, the luster-painted bowl is inscribed on the bottom with the word "*malaqa*" (fig. 1), as is a fragment in the Victoria and Albert Museum, translated by many as Málaga.¹² It is very unusual for a Spanish potter to inscribe his works like

this, and it is a testimony to Málaga's renown for luster pottery abroad.

With the exception of Ibn Battuta, none of these sources mentions that lusterware was produced in Málaga, but it seems reasonable to conclude that it was made there, partly because of Ibn Battuta's account and partly because of the inscriptions on the Fustat piece. In addition, export pottery was most often made in the port cities from which it was shipped. Ibn Sa'īd writes (ca. 1250) that "glazed and gilded earthenware" was produced in Málaga, Almería, and Murcia, which were cities easily accessible by sea, although no shards have been found at either of the latter two sites.¹³ Al-Idrisi, writing in 1154,¹⁴ claims that he saw at Calatayud in Aragón pieces of luster pottery being made "and these exported in all directions," and it is likely that emigrant craftsmen settled there to trade from this important area, a crossroads between the Christian north, the important mercantile town of Zaragoza to the east, and the Islamic towns to the south, as opposed to settling in Zaragoza itself.¹⁵ However, for Calatayud this was probably a short-lived industry initiated by migrant artisans (possibly from Egypt as their Fatimid-style wares suggest) that al-Idrisi happened to witness.¹⁶ In any case, their produc-

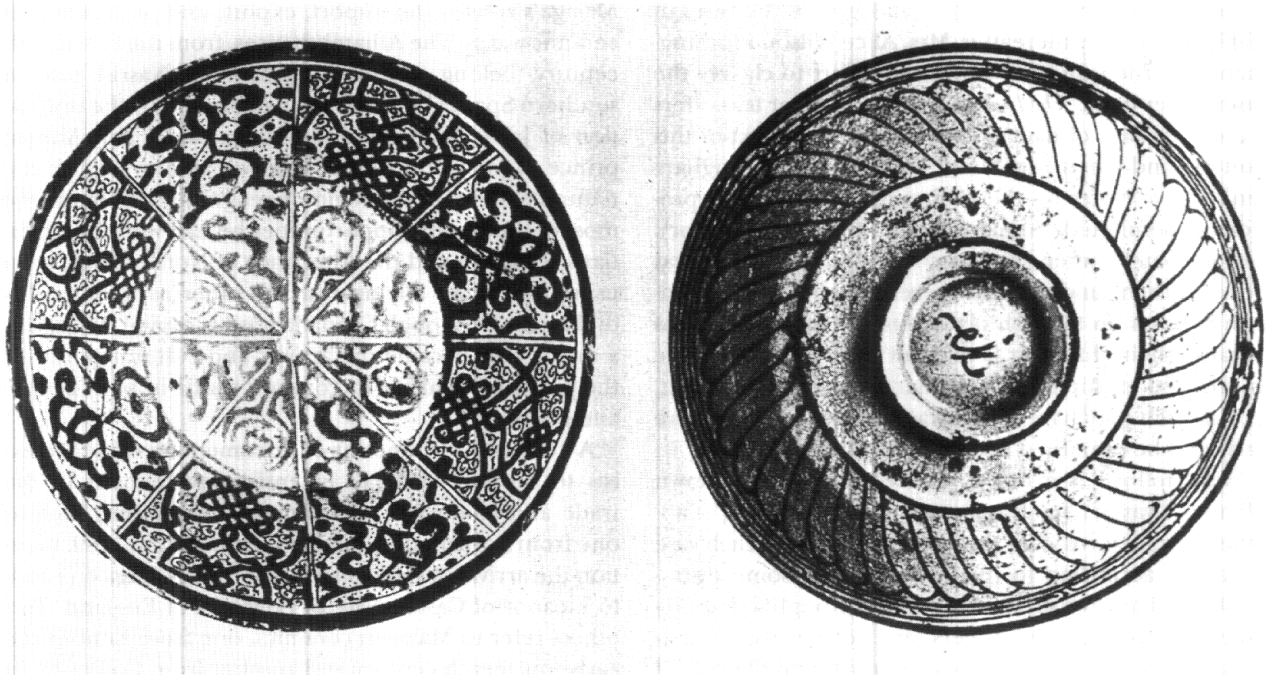


Fig. 1. Luster painted bowl. Staatliche Museum, Berlin. (photo: Frothingham)

tion was so limited that it had little impact on pottery production in Spain in general, and it is possible either that the industry was taken over by the Christians or that the artisans moved elsewhere after the Christian conquest of the city.

Ceramics, especially the Alhambra vases, are bulky and fragile and consequently very difficult to transport by land. It is probable that craftsmen and raw materials came from inland to the ports, thus minimizing the costs and risks of shipment, rather than that the finished products were transported to the coast from inland. This is true of Greek wares from the south Italian coastal areas of Apulia and Campania and of Chinese export wares from the southeastern port cities, such as Swatow in Fukien province, so it is not unlikely that this was the procedure in southern Spain as well.

The theory that there must have been a ceramic industry in Granada because royal textiles and ivory carvings were made there during this period is not necessarily incorrect. However, luster ceramics were as important as exports as they were in decorating the Alhambra palace of the Nasrid kings in Granada, so both functions for the industry are possible and must be taken into consideration when determining the location of the industry's center. For the sake of reducing costs, the production site could also have been used for shipping the products overseas, and a seaside factory would therefore make the most sense. Only the occasional piece destined for Granada would then have to undergo the risk and expense of being sent by mulecart over the mountains.

Van de Put proposes that the cobalt-blue and luster-painted vases were Granadine¹⁷ and the luster-only vases were Málaga, but the distinction was rather the result of changing tastes and styles than provenance. The fragment in the Victoria and Albert inscribed "*malaqa*" is painted with both blue and luster. The variations in the color and texture of the ceramic biscuit are unfortunately not a reliable indicator of the source of the raw clay, as the qualities are consistent enough to attribute any deviances to differences in firing conditions or to normal variations in clay from a single site. While it is certain that there were potters working in Granada, it is improbable that they produced anything other than household goods and tiles.

THE PALATIAL CONTEXT

The interest in the study of the Alhambra vases has been limited because of their extreme rarity. This is not surprising considering their great size and presumably

great cost.¹⁸ It is curious, however, that pieces as grand as these and as sought after across the Mediterranean world should be so rare. Because the vases are so tall — over four feet in height — and extremely heavy and still have been discovered outside Spain, one is led to believe that they were precious enough to warrant the great risk and expense of shipment. If they were so desirable, it seems strange that so few remain. Although some fragments suggest that there were more produced than exist intact today, they are not so common as to imply that many more were actually made, and in the light of their certain popularity, one wonders why their production seems to have been so limited.

The answer to this discrepancy could lie in the methods of production. Little is known about how these vases were made, although a few points can be concluded on the basis of how ceramics are produced today. The vases were certainly molded in parts, and then probably fired as a single piece. Problems of firing arose because a kiln big enough to hold a complete vase of this size could not heat satisfactorily, hence the pitting on some of the Alhambra vases, such as the Stockholm vase (fig. 2) and the dripping paint of the Antelope vase (fig. 3).¹⁹ Furthermore, preparing a vase like one of these in parts would increase the length of time required for its planning, molding, and decorating, as well as increasing the risk of error due to inaccurate sizing of the elements. Consequently, the number of vases produced in a given period of time would be limited, especially if the workshops were making other objects as well and so sharing the use of the kilns between these vases and other more marketable items.

Another explanation for the few vases made is that they all come from a single workshop. There is no evidence to refute this theory, and something to support it. The lack of demand would certainly contribute to a limited production, possibly on a commission basis. This could improve the case that a single workshop received all of the orders for these peculiar items. It is also possible that many more were made than are extant today, and indeed, fragments of similarly shaped and decorated objects exist. Even so, the immense cost of creating objects like the vases would suggest that some care was taken in their preservation. But a better explanation is to be found in their function, which is not known for certain. Some clues can be found in the use to which vases like them have been put and in the features of the vases themselves.

The shape of the vases can be traced back to painted Greek neck amphorae, which were both functional and

decorative. Unpainted amphorae, usually with narrow necks or stoppers, were standard storage containers for oil or wine, but the painted ones, with lidless wide mouths, were used as decanters. Interesting relatives of these amphorae were the “panathenaic amphorae,” large painted vases with narrow necks of fine quality for public presentations at festivals or games. They were splendidly decorated because they were given as prizes, often filled with oil. However, the comparison with the Greek amphorae must be made with caution, because these vessels were often designed for function as much as form. Consequently, we find that the largest amphorae had tiny, horizontal handles to enable two or three people to carry them,²⁰ in contrast to the wide vertical han-

dles of the Alhambra vases. It is quite likely that the handles of the Alhambra vases contributed to a symbolic meaning of the vases’ shape, much as the shape of the Greek vases was meant to be anthropomorphic. This particular interpretation is appealing, for two of the vases have the *khams*, or sacred hand, painted on the wing handles. But the fragility and inefficient design of the handles imply that if the Alhambra vases were used for anything other than decoration, they were probably not used often and very rarely moved.

Today, in India and in Spain, large jugs of the same shape are used for the storage of everything from grain to road salt. In India they are fitted with tight lids and buried a few inches in the ground to keep them upright;



Fig. 2. Stockholm vase. Nationalmuseum, Stockholm. (photo: courtesy Statens Konstmuseer, Stockholm)

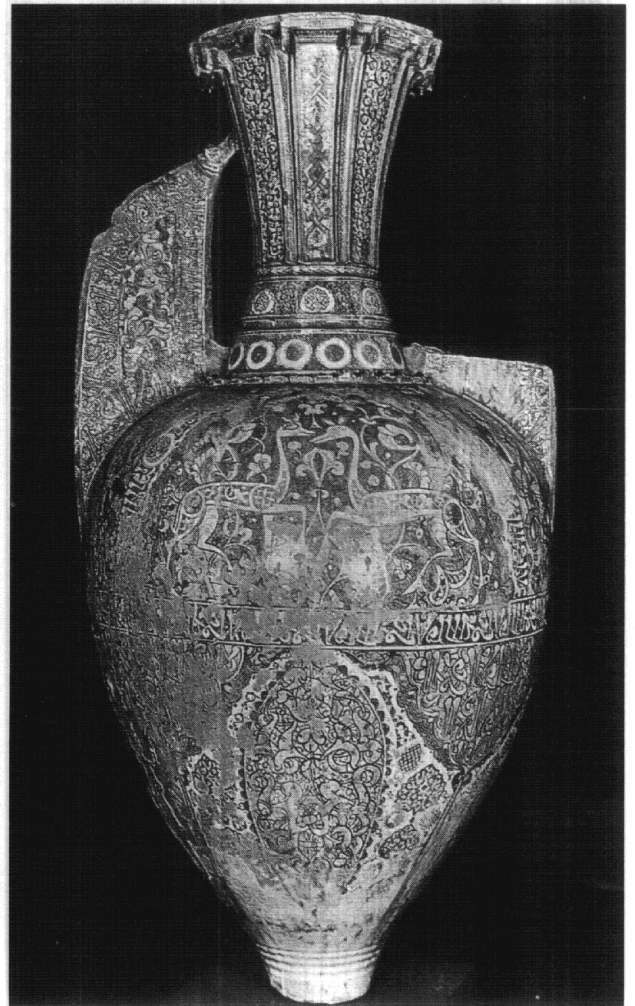


Fig. 3. Antelope vase. Museo Arqueológico de la Alhambra, Granada.



Fig. 4. Freer vase. Freer Gallery of Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C. (photo: courtesy Freer Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.)

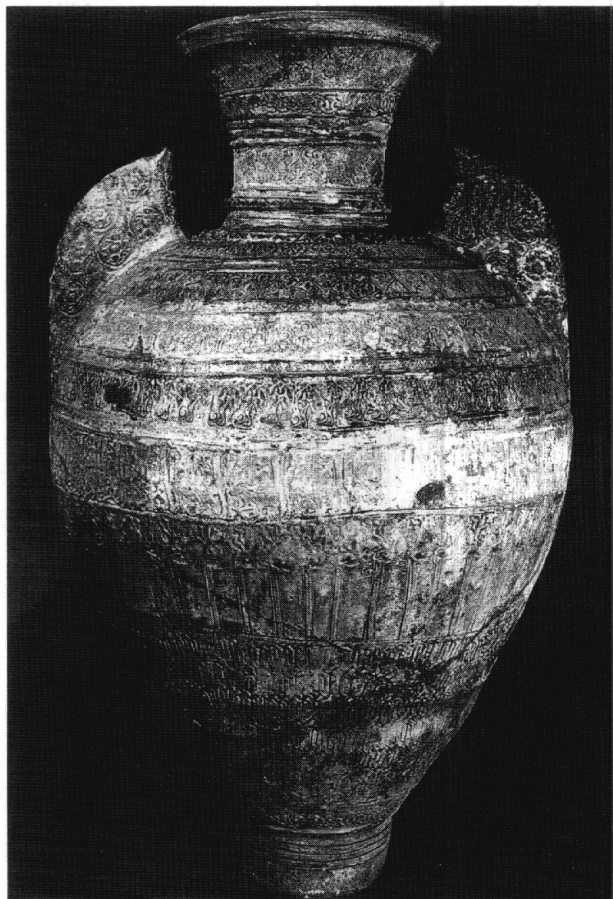


Fig. 5. Monochrome vase. Musée National de Céramique, Sèvres. (photo: Soustiel)

in Spain they are left open and allowed to lie on their sides.²¹ This contrast emphasizes the problem posed by the shape. A vase like this is not easy to use or to move — its great size makes it awkward, and added to that is its inability to stand upright securely. Even empty it is heavy, and the narrow neck makes it difficult to remove whatever is inside. One can either tip it, as the Spanish do, spilling out the contents all at once, or dip into it with a ladle like the Indians do.

The decoration of the Alhambra vases may tell us how they were used. Most have horizontal banded decoration. Horizontal decoration is better suited to vase painting than a vertical motif, especially in the case of inscriptions, although one vertically patterned vase was made. Did the horizontal decoration mean that the vases were intended to be buried partway in the ground? This

seems to be true of Roman amphorae, although their bases are so pointed as to make any other support impossible. Unlike the Alhambra vases they cannot stand upright on their own. Mariano Fortuny, a prominent Spanish historian who possessed a few of the vases at one time, built tripods for them based upon the fountain in the Court of the Lions of the Alhambra, of his own design. It is unlikely that the vases were originally held in stands like these. First of all, Fortuny's stand hides some of the ornamentation, as with the Freer vase (fig. 4), and so divorces the decorative aspect of the vase from the functional. Second, those vases never held by them do not show any damage to the painting that a stand would cause. Perhaps the vases were buried in dirt, but the ridged bottom common to all of them suggests the use of some sort of stand. However, none exists today and one

can only speculate on what it would have looked like. A small stand permanently fixed to, if not sunk into, the floor surface is most likely. If they were buried in the ground, however, it would be impossible to tip them to remove the contents, and if they were held on stands then they could have been moved.

The shapes of the rims suggest they could have had lids. Most have a protruding lip, supported by columnar ribs around the neck, to which it would be very easy to snap a lid securely. However some prototypes for the vases found in Seville and dating to the tenth and eleventh centuries have a simple folded-over rim, suitable only for a cork (fig. 5). The absence of a spout indicates that the vases were probably not intended to be tipped, so if they were used at all, the contents would have to have been removed with a ladle or scoop.

They also probably held something that in quantity is either very precious or symbolically important. Their grand decoration implies grand contents — something to match the cost and splendor of the vase and share in its exhibition, and only to be had in quantity by those who were wealthy enough to afford the vase itself. This eliminates things like water and grain as likely contents. Water vessels are also usually filled by dipping them into a well or pond, and this would be impossible given the size of the vases and the positioning of the handles. Wine is more likely, especially since, if it was ladled out, the dregs could be left at the bottom.

Drinking wine, whether made from grapes or figs, was sporadically prohibited throughout the period of Muslim rule in Andalusia, but its production never ceased, and there was always someone willing to consume it.²² During times of strict prohibition, the vines were sometimes damaged, but never destroyed, and their maintenance became the responsibility of Christian Mozarabs.²³ The banning of viticulture was occasionally considered, but as the vineyards were an important supplier of employment and commerce, their preservation was necessary.²⁴ Tending of the vines and the products of the grapes — not just wine, but juices and jams — provided jobs and valuable commodities on local markets. Protecting the vineyards was even used as an excuse for campaigns against the Christians.²⁵ Wine drinking was common, even at court, and wine was purchased by the court for distribution to soldiers to give them the courage to show bravery in battle.²⁶ Those who could afford it drank wine regardless of court decrees or public opinion.

Another possibility for the vases' use is olive oil, important for the Muslims, and while not necessarily expensive, in large quantities it would imply luxury. We know

that one *ratl* (about 20 ounces) of olive oil in Syria in the mid fourteenth century would cost almost all an average laborer's monthly discretionary income. In Egypt, the cost was even higher, and it appears that its price rose during the fifteenth century.²⁷ Oil was praised for its purity, and so was used for medicinal purposes, such as ointments for burns, as well as in religious practice for washing and dedicating talismans.²⁸ It was also an important part of the diet of the Muslims of Mediterranean countries, as well as the best suited of the available oils for burning in lamps.²⁹ It was exported from Spain, so it is likely to be another product associated with Malagan trade.³⁰ Removing it from the vases by ladle allowed the byproducts in the oil to settle to the bottom. Finally, olive trees are often associated with Mediterranean Islamic society; there is a saying from Islamic folklore of the Maghrib that "Muslims are never happy where the olive tree won't grow."³¹ We can see the symbolic importance of the olive tree in the Qur'an, which mentions the fig, the olive, Mount Sinai, and Mecca together as the sacred symbols of Islam (sura 95: 1–4). Another passage refers to the property of olive oil as a fuel for lamps, symbolically associating it with the sacred light of God because of its beautiful color and brilliant light (sura 24: 35³²). This symbolic and practical function of olive oil combined with its other extensive practical uses would suit the grandeur of the vases.

Unfortunately, there is no clue to be gained from the central inscription on many of the vases. It reads *al-mulk l'illah*, that is, "the power belongs to God," implying nothing about their practical or symbolic role. Still, there is no concrete evidence that they had any use other than a decorative one, and other vases of the same style, but smaller, and unglazed or copied by non-Muslim artisans were probably put to many different uses. But for the Alhambra vases themselves, the largest and perhaps most splendid Muslim ceramics in existence, it seems to be a reasonable suggestion that decoration was a primary function, regardless of any other purpose to which they were put, and so they were a luxury, rare and very valuable. If they were used for storage, the display of such a large quantity of an expensive product like wine or olive oil would only be enhanced by such a decorative container as one of these vases.

The social and political circumstances that produced the Alhambra vases had a considerable effect on their decoration. The earliest vases (that is, the ones painted with luster only) date roughly from the period of Yusuf I (r. 1333–54), judging from the similarity of their general appearance to those parts of the Alhambra for whose

construction he was responsible. The most relevant of these constructions for our purpose is the Gate of Law, an imposing, square and formal gate, capable of defense, yet its arched entry is delicately and gracefully decorated. The vases likewise share these characteristics; their shapes are squat and graceless compared to the later vases — those with blue paint and dating from the period of Mohammad V (r. 1354–91, intermittent) — and therefore they appear sturdier and potentially more useful, but their decoration is very careful and calculated, and beautiful and reliable in its precision. They present

nothing new or unusual, only the grand presentation of familiar motifs drawn so perfectly that no flaws surprise the viewer. The Jerez and Leningrad vases (figs. 6 and 7) even share some of the decorative features of the Gate of Law, such as the *khams* motif. The early vases and the Gate of Law were all certainly meant to be so perfect that no ordinary man could have made them. Like the Gate of Law, which Grabar suggests was a stage for the abstract concept of divine Law,³³ and hence power and justice and more importantly victory for the Faith, the early



Fig. 6. Jerez vase. Museo Arqueológico Nacional, Madrid.



Fig. 7. Leningrad vase. Hermitage, Leningrad. (photo: Frothingham)

vases also impart to the viewer an impression of the grandiosity, wealth, and perfection of the Islamic state.

The vases produced during the reign of Muhammad V are very different. They show a change in taste and style corresponding to that in the political conditions of Andalusia. Between 1350 and 1460 were about 25 years of war and 85 years of truce, forced upon both sides by their own internal dissensions. Thus it was that Peter I of Castile aided Muhammad V to return to the throne in 1362 when he killed Muhammad VI — in opposition to Muhammad V — because he had sided with Aragón against Castile; in his turn, Muhammad V had helped Peter I in 1368 with his siege of Baeza.³⁴ Because these were times when the Muslims traded and corresponded with Christians almost as often as they fought them, the Alhambra structures of Muhammad V were often more celebratory than defensive. The Alhambra was transformed from a fortress to a palace during his reign. The Puerto del Vino, a decorative gate that is entirely within the walls of the Alhambra and therefore cannot serve a defensive purpose, is a triumphal arch to celebrate Muhammad V's return to the throne and his one major military victory in Algeciras in 1369.

The impact this contact with the Christians had on the arts of Andalusia can be seen in poetry,³⁵ where ballads tell of cross-cultural marriages, joint festivals, and multiple conversions. The ballad of Bovalias el Pagano tells of an individual who converted back and forth eight times; no doubt poetic exaggeration, but it does suggest that conversion was both simple and frequent. Chronicles and ballads also tell of intermarriage and intimate friendship between Moors and Christians. It seems even possible that the ballads themselves grew out of both Christian and Arabic folklore. Passage of both people, including, of course, artisans, and goods for trade was common.³⁶

Still, Muslims and Christians remained fundamentally in opposition. It is this love-hate relationship that characterizes the art of Muhammad V's reign and eventually led to the escalation of frontier hostilities and finally to the all-out attack on the Muslims which brought about their downfall. A marvelous example is the ceiling paintings in the Hall of Justice in the Alhambra, presented by Jerrilyn Dodds.³⁷ She has deduced from the sources she cites that the painters of these murals could have been Muslim slaves, owned by Don Pedro of Toledo, and loaned to Muhammad V specifically for decorating the palace. That these Muslim artists living in Christian lands — *mudéjars* — would be sent back across the frontier at the request of the Muslim king is remarkable. Then, tak-

ing into consideration that under the Christian patron they certainly would have been working in a northern Spanish Christian style, from what were probably Frankish examples of ivory carving, textiles, and book illustrations, the Frankish character of these paintings in the Alhambra is understandable. Why Muhammad V would specifically select artists working in this style is explained by the awareness of Christian society that the cross-cultural contacts would have given him. It is not unreasonable to think that he must have envied the power and successes of this encroaching force, and so, if somewhat uncritically, admired their arts as well and desired to imitate them. But, variable as the relationship of the Christians with the Muslims was, he could hardly be expected to forget his Islamic values, and neither could the painters. They too were Muslims, and in these paintings we can see a display of their pride in their religion and their country, surely encouraged by Muhammad V as he planned the paintings and watched over their formation. They used scenes taken from the Christian Spanish and Frankish examples provided for them in ivories and paintings,³⁸ but showed little understanding of their meanings, and even distorted them whenever they saw the opportunity to provide the scenes with a context of Islamic superiority.

For pottery, the effects were less extreme, although the fact that the itinerant habits of the potters was facilitated by the ease of trans-frontier travel does account for the visible change from a predominantly eastern Islamic influence to a Gothic one. It is likely that this contributed to the sudden appearance of figural representation on the Freer and Antelope vases. These vases are too early to exhibit the full effects of the Gothic influences which manifested themselves in the portrayal of people in European dress and an abundance of animals and birds,³⁹ but the early stages of this development are represented by these two figural vases, and perhaps we also can take seriously a European-style drawing of a missing vase (fig. 8, and see below). An artistic environment that produced the ceiling paintings in the Alhambra mentioned above could easily have favored figural representation on these vases. But we must contrast this with the increased sensuousness of the form and decoration of the later vases, and conclude that this was a result of an attempt to display Islamic motifs in a highly ornamental and vibrant manner to increase their impact, while at the same time responding to the artistic renaissance that Muhammad V's sacrilegious truce with the Christians allowed.

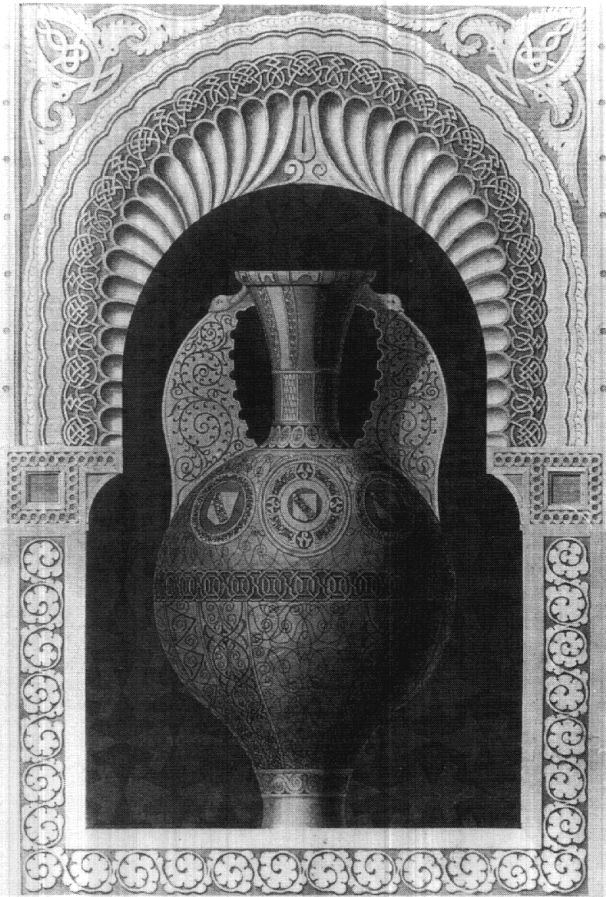


Fig. 8. Engraving by J. C. Murphy of a missing vase.

A CHRONOLOGY OF THE VASES

In most of the publications mentioning the Alhambra vases some attempt is made to put them into chronological order. This is a difficult task, because the vases have a wide variety of features that seem to recur without any discernable pattern. But remembering that the vases were not the only pottery produced in Andalusia at this time and that some features were likely to have been well-established characteristics of ceramic design, we must not place undue importance upon what are likely to be trivial details. However, some major, more general changes in the overall style of the vases' decoration are reflections of developing techniques only suitable for works of this size and splendor. These could well be reflections of the developing Nasrid civilization, from the simple but grand art produced by the warring nation of Yusuf I to the vibrancy and freedom characteristic of



Fig. 9. Osma vase. Instituto de Valencia de Don Juan, Madrid. (photo: Frothingham)

the art of the dying but proudly victorious city-state of Mohammad V's second reign (1362–91).

The earliest vase of the group is the so-called Osma vase (fig. 9) in the Instituto de Valencia de Don Juan, which dates from the early fourteenth century. Its shape is wider and more bulbous than that of the others, and it lacks their grace and elegance. This means that the potter has not yet separated the decorative function of the vase from its actual practical purpose as a storage container in the style of the vase from Seville. Its inscription occupies the widest decorative band on the vase, in contrast with the narrow bands of less elegant naskh on later

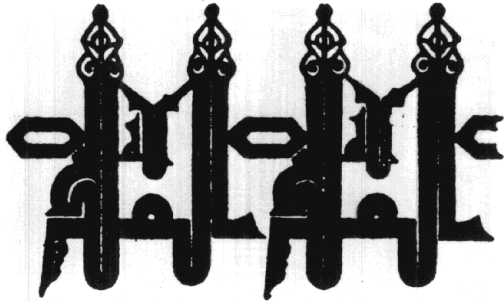


Fig. 10. Osma vase. Inscription. (after Ettinghausen)

vases, e.g., the Antelope vase in the Museum of the Alhambra. Furthermore, to summarize Ettinghausen's observations, it is the only vase whose inscription is complete, that is, it is written *al-mulk l'illah* rather than using any of the various shortened permutations that appear on other vases. Additionally, it uses formal, floriated Kufic, with only the smaller *l'illah* exhibiting the angled terminating points of the later Kufic inscriptions (fig. 10).

Another interesting feature of this vase is provided by the two large decorative roundels filled with a complex geometric pattern. Roundels are hardly an oddity in Islamic art, and Ettinghausen's conclusion that they originated in eastern Mediterranean art and that therefore this is an early vase can be supported by comparison of these roundels with the decorative ovals on the later Antelope vase. While he is correct that roundels are not especially suited to the decoration of vases, the Nasrids often used circular patterns on ceramics, such as that on an albarello in the Louvre.⁴⁰ This does not necessarily indicate an artist who has not yet developed a repertoire of decorative motifs better suited to vases. More important, Ettinghausen implies that roundels were simplified later on, suggesting that this is an early vase, and this conclusion is supported by the appearance of oblong decoration filled with a common arabesque on the Ante-

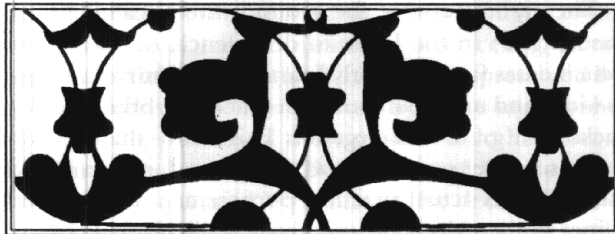


Fig. 12. "Alhambra arabesque". (drawing: Christian Kenesson)

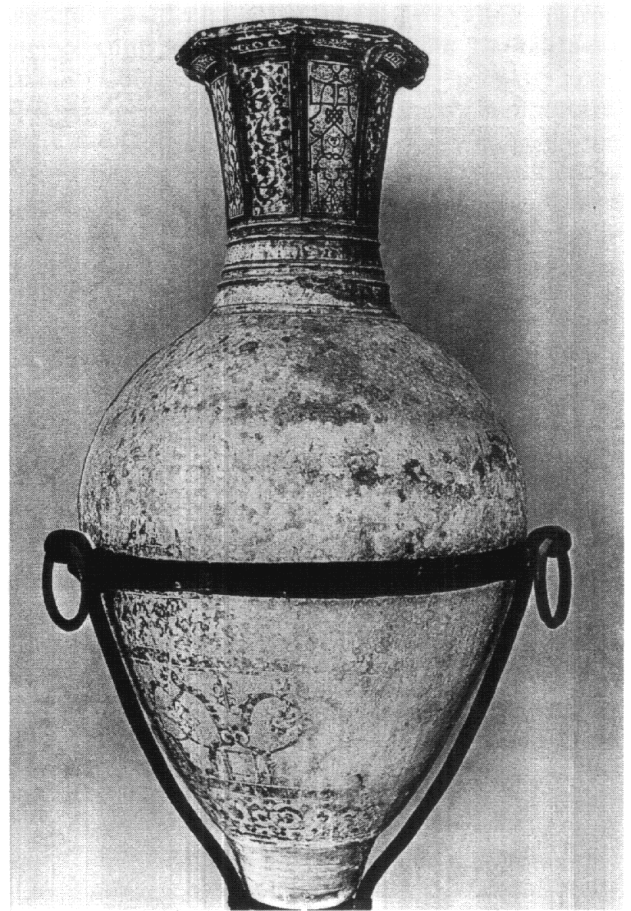


Fig. 11. Heilbronner vase. (photo: Martin and Sarre, *Meisterwerke muhammedanischen Kunst*, pl. 118)

lope vase. Furthermore, it is likely that this is the oldest on the basis of its bulbous shape and the complete inscription.⁴¹

The next oldest vases, probably also produced in the early fourteenth century, but after the Osma vase, are the Heilbronner vase (fig. 11), once part of the Raoul Heilbronner Collection in Germany, but no longer extant, and a vase in the Museum of the Alhambra. The Heilbronner vase was sold to a Spaniard in the J. Seligmann sale in 1925, and only eleven years later it was destroyed in a fire in the customs house at Irún.⁴² Happily a good photograph is available,⁴³ and from it a few tentative conclusions can be drawn. The handles and much of the decoration on the body are missing, but the decoration on the neck and the structure of the body are in good condition. It is significantly taller and more slender than the Osma vase, its proportions are more pleasing, and it



Fig. 13. Simonetti vase. Museo Arqueológico de la Alhambra, Granada.

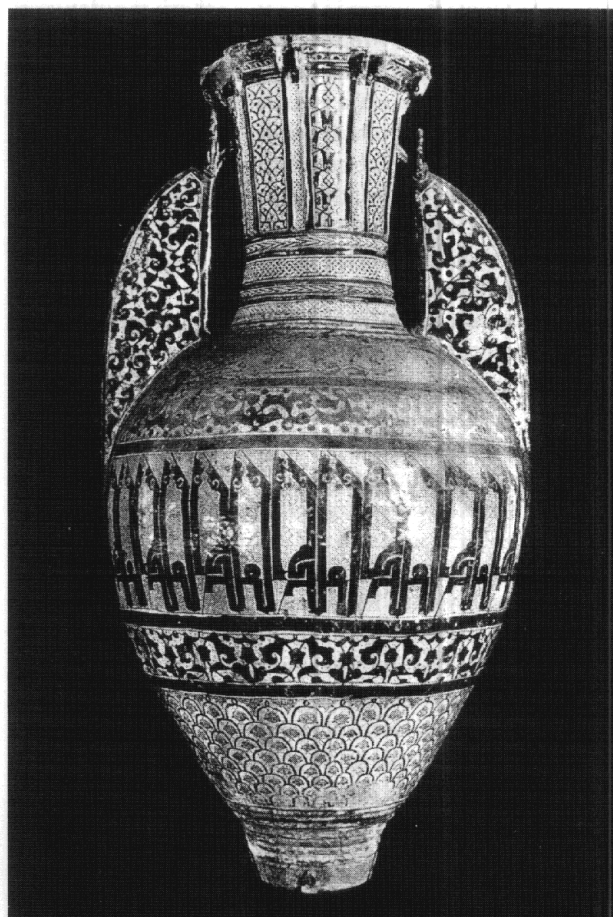


Fig. 14. Palermo vase. Galeria Nazionale, Palermo. (photo: University Prints)

has taken on a more decorative than functional appearance. Certain patterns on the neck were to become standard for the decoration of the later vases, they include overlapping palmettes, the interlocked Kufic as on the neck, and most important, the characteristic "Alhambra arabesque," to be found on numerous pieces of Nasrid art, even in the Alhambra itself (fig. 12). This same pattern, and a more impressive band of interlocked Kufic, account for most of what can be determined of the decoration on the body of the vase, although what appears to be a small bit of a central band of inscription is just discernable. Interestingly, the vertical Kufic is outlined in white, just as it is on the Osma vase, so it is likely that this vase indicates a small progression in the design of the overall vase and less in the individual decorative schemes.

Also of the early fourteenth century is the Simonetti vase in the Museum of the Alhambra (fig. 13), once in the collection of Mariano Fortuny; before that it belonged to Attilio Simonetti in Rome. In 1934 it was bought by the Spanish government.⁴⁴ Most of its handles and all the body decoration are missing. However, the ornament of the neck is almost identical to that of the Heilbronner vase, and the general shape is comparable, so it is reasonable to conclude that they were made at about the same time.

After these three vases it becomes increasingly difficult to put the vases in chronological order. The three presented next, which probably date from the second quarter of the fourteenth century, are deceptive in their features, as the mismatching of techniques such as paired columnar ribs on the necks or painting in reserve spoils

the chronological succession that such criteria demand. It is possible that they represent different workshops or different schools, and thus need not be of widely differing dates. Further, such a peculiar and extreme variety could be a reflection of a blossoming in the ceramic arts — a period of experimentation brought about perhaps by the increasing international fame of the vases, and of the luster pottery of southern Spain. In any case, the three vases that will now be discussed are all splendid, if in very different ways.

The most straightforward vase of this group is the Palermo vase (fig. 14), found with the Osma vase in the mid nineteenth century in excavations at Mazzara del Vallo, Sicily. It was formerly in the sacristy of the Church of Our Lady of Paradise in Mazzara and is now in the Museo Nazionale in Palermo.⁴⁵ The decoration of this splendidly preserved vase holds no surprises, except that the Kufic of the main band of inscription shows an important development. The text no longer contains the full *al-mulk l'illah* but has been changed to a simple *al-mulk*, and it uses angled terminating points instead of the vertical, formal floriated Kufic of the inscription on the earlier Osma vase. The change of the text from “the power belongs to God” to simply “the power” could imply a deliberate change of meaning from religious to secular, but it is more likely just a decorative shorthand — that is, the shorter inscription is intended to resemble the longer one, yet be less complex and so less difficult to paint. The neck of the vase shows for the first time the use of paired columnar ribs, although this also seems to be only a decorative feature and does not seem to have any implications for the function of the vase itself.

Another vase of nearly the same date is the Jerez vase (fig. 6), so called because it was discovered in 1927 during excavations of the vaults of the Carthusian monastery of S. Maria de la Defensa (founded in 1475) at Jerez de la Frontera in southeastern Spain.⁴⁶ It is fortunately in fairly good condition, for it has lost only a few fragments of its surface decoration and the finial of one wing. The inscription is painted in reserve (that is, the background is painted and the inscription itself is left white), the Kufic has become more stylized, and although the ground is cluttered with decorative floral motives, the inscription still stands out owing to the use of brilliant white against the dark luster background, and because the ornamental bands of arabesque above and below the inscription are not in reserve. It demonstrates how effective the art of painting in reserve can be in highlighting particular areas in a collage of ornament. Painting in reserve is a difficult and expensive technique, because a

large amount of luster paint is required. Since it is a more difficult technique, this would be used on a later vase. Ettinghausen comes to this same conclusion when dealing with examples of luster-painted pottery in Iran, and indeed it seems to be true also in Iran that those pieces painted in reserve date to a later period than those painted in luster on a plain background.⁴⁷ While this does not help to date the other vases, it seems safe to assume that this vase was made after the first group and shortly after the Palermo vase. At the same time, its stout shape, especially through the neck, should predate the slender and elegant vases of the latest group (those painted with cobalt blue from the second half of the fourteenth century), such as the Antelope vase and another elegant vase in Madrid (fig. 15).

A particularly interesting feature of the Jerez vase is the representation of the sacred hand, or *khams*, on the

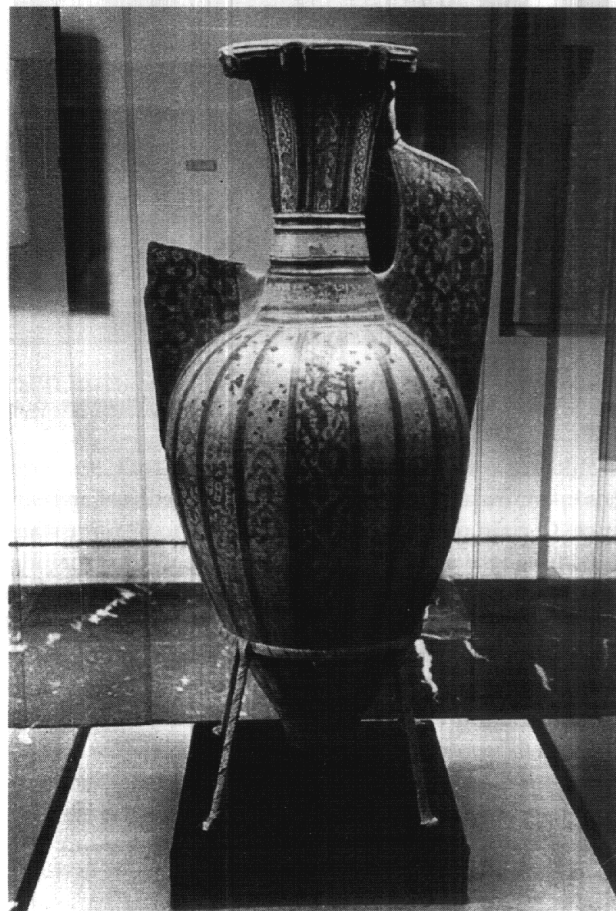


Fig. 15. Horos vase. Museo Arqueológico Nacional, Madrid.

handles. It appears again on the Leningrad vase and also on a few other pieces.⁴⁸ It has a long and complicated history which can be traced back to ancient Egypt.⁴⁹ The psychological connection between a representation of a hand and the concepts of power and domination has been given religious significance by Christians, Buddhists, Hindus, and Muslims. It is possible, then, that in this case it symbolizes royal authority or the divine power of God. An interesting passage in the Qur^ʿan referring to the hand of God reads “that His Grace is entirely in His hand, to bestow it on Whomsoever He wills” (sura 57:29). This implies that Allah’s hand is the instrument by which Faith, Grace, and Fortune are meted out to believers, a particularly attractive interpretation considering the princely function of the vases. This is doubly convincing if it can be agreed that the five straight fingers of the hand are meant to represent the word “Allah” (الله) in Arabic. On the sleeves of the arms painted on the Leningrad vase is written *ghibta*, “happiness,” but this is such a common evocation of goodwill that it does not explain the symbolic motifs.⁵⁰ In her book, Mrs. Frothingham draws attention to the “eyes” on the hands of the Jerez and Leningrad vases, stating that this implies a further talismanic significance of the *khams*.⁵¹

The other inscriptions on the Leningrad vase are most interesting, as they are evidence of a significant change in the types of decoration preferred for the vases, although the basic premises still remain unaltered. The topmost band, as on the Palermo and Jerez vases and the Stockholm vase, has a cursive inscription which is very difficult to read, since the painters were not necessarily literate and did not always understand the text they copied. The consequence of this is that inscriptions on later Moorish pottery were often altered for the sake of decorative effect, and mistakes were frequent.⁵² Because diacritical marks were not used, and the glazes are in poor condition, it is impossible to translate many of these cursive inscriptions with any confidence.⁵³

The next band is composed of roundels, not seen since those of the Osma vase, which contain the same inscription as the sleeves of the arms on the wing handles, again in reserve. The main band — and it is the main band only because it occupies the widest part of the vase, for it does not stand out well against the white roundels and reserve script of the band above — has a simple inscription reading *al-ʿafiya*, or “good health.” But it is the calligraphy that is most interesting, in that it is very much like that of Maghribi Qur^ʿans of the twelfth to sixteenth centuries,⁵⁴ which helps to prove at least that the

vases came from the western Mediterranean; the dotted background on the handles can be found on earlier luster pottery found at Medinat al-Zahra near Cordoba, although the technique has its ultimate origins in tenth-century Abbasid ceramic decoration.⁵⁵

The next chronological step, probably into the third quarter of the fourteenth century, involves a fragment formerly in the Jacob Hirsch collection in New York (fig. 16) and the Stockholm vase. We can separate these pieces from those which apparently come before because these exhibit an increased emphasis on grace and elongation in both their shape and their decoration. The Hirsch fragment allows a close look at the methods of collar decoration, as the grander ornament of the body cannot distract from the more minute decoration of the neck. Unfortunately, poor temperature control in the firing has left much of the decoration pitted, although an example of the diaper pattern and one of the “Alhambra arabesque” remain. The pinecone type of diaper is nothing new; it appeared in some variations on the necks of the other vases, but it is much more precise in this case, and so presents an interesting analogy. Mrs. Frothingham sees in it an attempt to mimic the effect of the muqarnas vaulting so prevalent in the Alhambra,⁵⁶ and indeed, where the muqarnas of the Alhambra is rendered two-dimensionally, or nearly so, it does have a similar appearance (fig. 17).

The vegetal patterns of this vase neck have certainly progressed from the Alhambra arabesque of the previous vases. The stems are considerably thinner and weaker, and the repetitions more frequent. The result is a pattern that is more vibrant and animated than the established style, but lacks its strength and formulaic consistency. This progression is carried a step further in the Stockholm vase, where there is no longer even any distinction between leaf and stem, and the ornament is more a vine scroll than an arabesque (fig. 18). The Stockholm vase has a strong decorative intent, as the bands of ornament are narrower, the shape is more slender than its predecessors, and the Kufic is outweighed by the elaborate interlacing of its ascenders. But the painting shows a degeneration of the refinement seen earlier in these established motifs, as the interlace is occasionally flawed and the composition of the body decoration as a whole is less commanding. However, its repetitive nature, the vibrancy of the freely painted designs, and the highly ornamental details, such as the medallions of the Kufic ascenders on the panels of the collar, bear a resemblance to certain splendid Granadine textiles.

Silk textiles were another art form for which Muslim



Fig. 16. Vase neck. Formerly Jacob Hirsch Collection, New York. (photo: Frothingham)

Andalusia, particularly Granada, was famed.⁵⁷ The beautiful brocaded silks produced from the thirteenth to the fifteenth century were renowned throughout Europe and were an important trading commodity. The production of textiles is simpler and less costly than the decoration of architecture, and their transport is less risky than that of ceramics, so fabrics were a useful testing ground for new patterns, many of which were borrowed from other Spanish Islamic arts as well as from textiles imported to Spain from France.⁵⁸ The lower cost of textile production meant that textiles were less subject to the economic fluctuations in the Nasrid kingdoms than ceramics. We find in them amazingly close parallels to the decorative patterns we see on the vases, and perhaps textiles were the drawingboard for favorite Moorish patterns like the interlaced ascenders of the Kufic and the horizontal bands of white "ribbon" interlace (fig. 19).

The principle of increased decorative intent is what lies behind the vertically patterned decoration of the

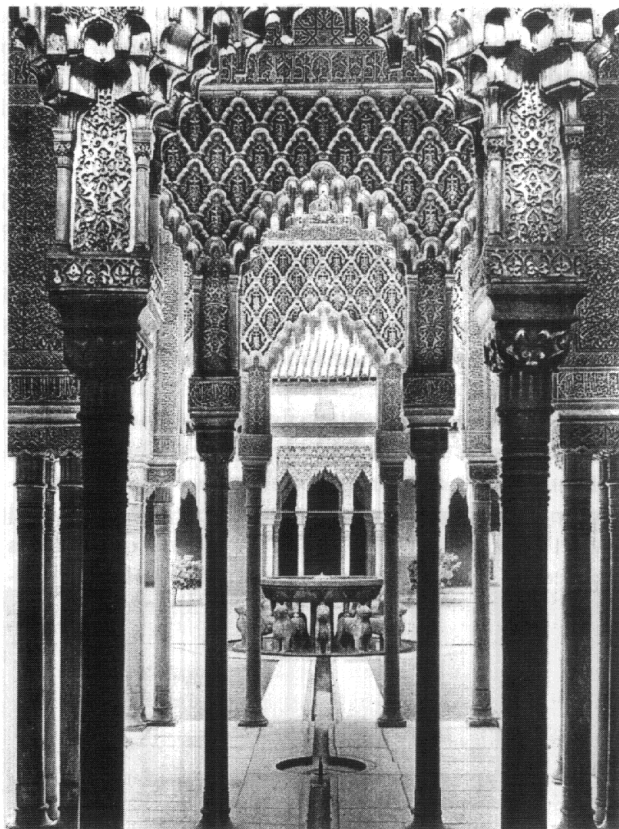


Fig. 17. Granada. Alhambra. Stucco decoration. (photo: Torres-Balbas)

Hornos vase, which has provoked some interesting hypotheses. Mrs. Frothingham suggests that this vase and the Stockholm vase could have been made by the same artists,⁵⁹ and Van de Put attributes their decorative intentions to their having been made in Almería or Murcia.⁶⁰ But neither author provides evidence for these suggestions, and while they are not impossible, they are unlikely explanations. There is no proof of a ceramic industry in Almería or Murcia of a scale comparable to that of Málaga, and so there is no reason to believe that any of these vases were produced in either of these cities. While it could be that these two vases were produced by the same artists, this would have little influence on the causes for the increased emphasis on the vases' decorative role.

What can be inferred from the Stockholm vase's appearance is that its new style is a reflection of a general change in Nasrid taste. This vase must predate the vases which show the addition of blue paint in their decora-



Fig. 18. Stockholm vase, figure 2. Detail. (photo: courtesy of the Statens Konstmuseer, Stockholm)

tion because its artist has not yet shown an interest in the use of cobalt-blue paint which was later to become popular in Moorish ceramic decoration. However, on the basis of the similarity of its shape and decoration to that of the blue and luster-painted vases, it belongs with them as being from the period of the reign of Muhammad V, as evidenced by the comparisons with the architectural ornament of the portions of the Alhambra constructed during this time.

Mohammad V's second reign (1362–91) was certainly a time for rejoicing, and the parts of the Alhambra that he built, such as the Court of the Lions and the Puerto del Vino, are far more celebratory than defensive. Most notably, his important victory over the Christians at Algeciras in 1369 brought about a revival of a "princely style" involving a reinterpretation of symbolic motives from bygone victorious eras, whether Islamic or not:⁶¹ hence the fountain in the Court of the Lions, the lion being a universal symbol of the conqueror, and the Puerto del Vino, a gateway inside the walls of the Alhambra and so more a triumphal arch than a fortified entrance. On the vases, there is a new inscription, *la ghalib illa'llah* or "there is no conqueror but God," replacing the former simple exclamation of God's kingship, as well as a revival of more traditional Islamic motifs such as the "tree of life." These splendid displays of pride and victory provide a sharp contrast to the efforts of Yusuf I to impart a sense of dignity, refinement, and strength to a struggling regime, as seen in the earlier vases and such structures as the massive Gate of Law (today the main entry to the Alhambra) and the core of the imposing Hall of the Ambassadors

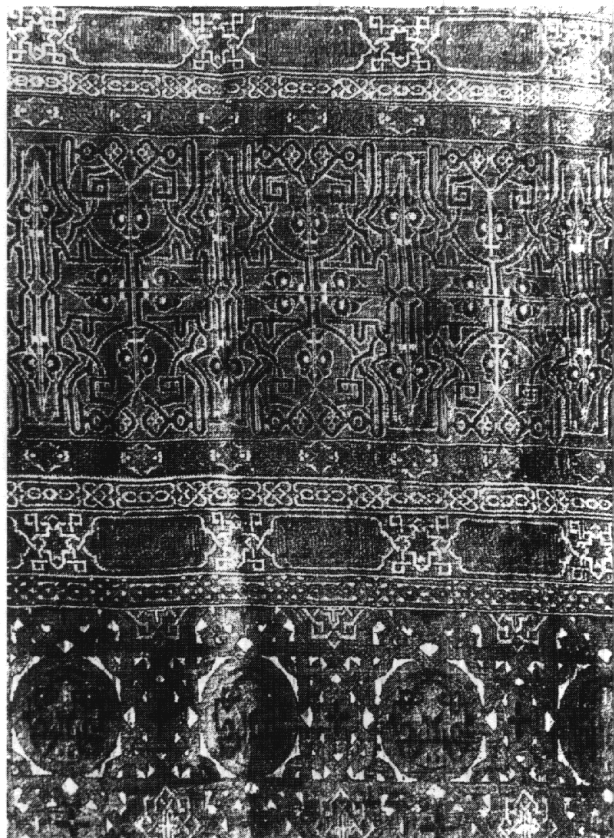


Fig. 19. Toledo. Cathedral. Detail of a shroud of Sancho IV. (photo: May)

(the decoration was commissioned by Muhammad V) where Yusuf I may have received guests.

Of the later vases, the Hornos vase, found in Jaén in southern Spain and dating from the third quarter of the fourteenth century, is the first to use cobalt blue in addition to gold luster paint.⁶² This feature is shared with all of the Alhambra vases and fragments from the second half of the fourteenth century. Frothingham associates the sudden appearance of blue paint with the arrival in Spain of Iranian craftsmen fleeing the Mongols,⁶³ as they had known of this carefully guarded technique for many centuries. Along with the arrival and subsequent local development of the new technique, the decoration becomes more delicate and shows increased vitality after the style of thirteenth-century Kashan pottery.

While it is not impossible that Iranian artists were responsible for the sudden discovery of cobalt pigment for glazed pottery, there are gaps in this theory. Al-Razi and al-Shakundi tell of Iranians in Spain as early as the tenth

century,⁶⁴ and Ibn Battuta writes of Iranian dervishes in Granada: "There is also at Gharnata a company of Persian darwishes, who have made their homes there because of its resemblance to their native lands. One is from Samarqand, another from Tabriz, a third from Quniya [Konya], one from Khurasan, two from India, and so on."⁶⁵ If Iranians had settled in Andalusia before the Mongol invasions, there is no reason to believe that they would not have done so during and after that cataclysm as well. Pottery production in Kashan dropped after the Mongols attacked in the thirteenth century, and we know that this was due to the emigration of the potters, at least in part.⁶⁶ Since evidence suggests that the Nasrids favored eastern wares (shards from Iran, Syria, and Mesopotamia have been found at the Alhambra⁶⁷) emigrant Iranian artisans may have found their way as far as the province of Granada.

Stylistically the vases show many Iranian techniques, such as the division of the surface into decorative bands and zones, the use of similar motifs such as dotted backgrounds, eight-pointed stars, and roundels formed of interlace, and in the style of the Kufic.⁶⁸ However, all of these traits were to be found in Spanish art by the beginning of the fourteenth century; while Iranian influence in Andalusia is certain at some point, it need not be the decisive factor here. Cobalt blue first appeared on Spanish pottery in the mid thirteenth century, much earlier than the suggested dates for these later vases. The most likely solution is that the artistic revival of Muhammad V involved the expanded use of popular — and sometimes Iranian — techniques, including the development of cobalt painting.

The earliest of the last group of vases — blue vases with more complex decorative motives than those of the Hornos vase, and dating from the last quarter of the fourteenth century — is now in the Staatliche Museen, Berlin⁶⁹ (fig. 20), and is in reality just a fragment, as the lower half, most of the collar, and the upper portion of the wings are missing. The decoration that remains on the upper portion of the vase is very interesting: an elaborate geometric arrangement reminiscent of that adorning the Osma vase and referred to by Van de Put as the talismanic sign called "Solomon's Seal."⁷⁰ However, Solomon's Seal is a six-pointed star,⁷¹ not the eight-pointed one we see here, so this is simply not the same motif. This does not necessarily mean that the pattern does not have any talismanic significance, however, as such designs incorporate the mystical ideas associated with knots, circles, and squares that are believed to protect from curses or to trap evil spirits.⁷² In any case, this elaborate polygo-

nal interlace replaces the white ribbon type of interlace on the Stockholm vase.

This design, along with some other new motifs and adaptations of it, gives this vase an appearance of increased religious symbolism. Between and above the star shapes the "Alhambra arabesque" is painted for the first time in medallions very much like Qur'anic margin illuminations. Likewise, the half-medallions and the inscriptions in roundels on the collar remind one of Qur'anic adornments. The script is in naskh, a style that replaced the formal Kufic, which here has been relegated to simply filling in the decorative roundels. The inscription is in repetitive bands, which are far more numerous than on earlier vases; these are found all around the wings and were probably on the body as well. The appearance of naskh as the premier form of script on the vases reflects the increased favor given in the West to new, freer cursive scripts from the eleventh century, culminating in a new Maghribi script in the sixteenth century.⁷³ This helps, though only in a rather general way, to date these later vases.

We can speculate on the decoration of the missing portion of the Berlin vase by examining its close counterpart in the Freer Gallery; its body is fairly well intact, but the wing handles and the collar are missing. It was discovered by Fortuny in Granada, where it was being used as a "receptacle" in a tavern. Sold with the Fortuny collection in 1875, it was purchased from Charles Davis of London for the Freer collection in 1903.⁷⁴ This vase shares many of the decorative features of the Berlin vase, with its band of naskh calligraphy and roundels of "Alhambra arabesque" between star-shaped decorative medallions, of which two contain the inscription *al-ʿafi-yah* as seen before.⁷⁵ However, this vase exhibits figural representation, a very important decorative innovation.

Since figural forms are used throughout Islamic art, the use of animals in the decoration of the vases need not be taken as an issue of Muslim orthodoxy. However, Van de Put claims that the sudden appearance of animals in the vase decoration can be attributed first to a very lax form of Sunnism adopted by the Nasrid rulers, and second to a decline in orthodoxy in the Nasrid kingdom⁷⁶ — although for this he relies mainly on the report of Ibn Khaldun⁷⁷ who may not have been the most objective of observers. In any case, figural decoration was an established form of ornamentation among Muslim artisans all over the Islamic world long before the fourteenth century. Figural representations on many earlier Spanish wares and in the Hall of Justice in the Alhambra make it clear that they were a characteristic Nasrid deco-

ration and symptomatic of a common outlook on Islamic doctrine rather than, as Van de Put claims, of unorthodoxy. Figural decoration may represent a relic of Umayyad taste for animal and human representations.

The Almohads in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries preferred rectilinear geometric patterns, although whether this was for any ideological reason is difficult to ascertain, because it was an Islamic artistic tradition in Spain that can be traced back to the Umayyads of the Middle East. By the fourteenth century the Nasrids were as much a merchant state as an Islamic one,⁷⁸ and a universal decorative language would have been useful to pick up, develop, and utilize to facilitate a mutual cultural understanding with their non-Islamic trading partners. Such influences on Nasrid art could have come not only from the Middle East, including Persia, but also from as far north as France, as evidenced by the Frankish style of ceiling paintings in the Hall of Justice at the Alhambra; or they could have come from Sicily, Naples, and Venice.

We can perhaps gain a better understanding of the particular figures on the Freer vase if we consider them with those of the next vase, the Antelope vase in the Museo Arqueológico de la Alhambra in Granada, which is better preserved. The pairs of opposing quadrupeds on both sides of this vase are not of any immediately recognizable species, although they seem to derive from a representation of a camel on a luster fragment from Medinat al-Zahra,⁷⁹ which has the same swan-like head and neck. However, our creatures are certainly not camels because they have neither hump nor litter. Indeed, were it not for their cloven feet, their long mouse-like tails and arched backs would give them a more dog-like appearance. But the hooves and the horsey prance are perhaps best associated with a deer or antelope, hence the name commonly given to the vase. Composite animals are common in Hispano-Mauresque art,⁸⁰ so it is possible that they are deliberately meant to represent a number of different creatures. In any case, camels had no place in Spain, and it is not surprising that in their absence representations of them could undergo permutations, especially when the artist is trying to distort the image, increasing its two-dimensionality to divorce the representation from the object. Another interesting example is a Spanish dish found in Bristol, dating to the late fourteenth or early fifteenth century,⁸¹ on which are painted two opposing quadrupeds very much like those on the two vases.

The two animals are flanking what is indubitably a representation of the primitive "tree of life" motif, further

endorsing the claim that his figural representation can be traced back — at least in part — to early Umayyad motifs, although this was also an established Christian motif.⁸² The tree of life has a long and intricate history, taking on an elaborate iconography, although by this time its decorative role equaled its symbolic one. However, its symbolic interpretations may give some clues as to the practical role of the vases themselves. For instance, the most significant association with the tree of life motif is that of Paradise, where the tree grows, providing sacred fruits like the fig, and a nesting place for "soul birds."⁸³ It grows from an ever-flowing stream, and as such it represents all that is life-giving of the Earth — water and flora, from which the animals and man can feed. Hence it is often shown with animals nibbling at its branches, or with a guardian to protect it from the greedy ravages of these creatures.⁸⁴ The animals often take on a symbolic role themselves, such as birds nesting in the tree, which refers to the Zoroastrian tradition of soul birds which carry the spirit of the deceased to Heaven, or the lion and griffin which can be traced to a Cretan tradition representing the power of the "Mistress of Life" (comparable to our Mother Nature) guarding the sacred tree.⁸⁵ Perhaps, then, the vases were meant to enhance the connection between their paradisaical surroundings (such as the Alhambra) or their own beauty with the attributes of Heaven.

These are early associations, however, and by the fourteenth century this use of animals flanking a tree had become an established decorative motif with a variety of interpretations from the purely ornamental to the princely and the spiritual. These associations are not unique to Islam — the tree in the Garden of Eden is a particularly obvious Christian example of an association of the tree with paradise, and there are many others. The history and symbolic meanings of this motif are outside the range of this discussion, but in any case, the association with princely life and paradise supports the decorative role of the vases. Perhaps they were meant to enhance their already paradisaical surroundings and to provide a reminder of man's goal in heaven, much like the use of the tree of life on many splendid prayer rugs.⁸⁶ It is also possible that the vases held water, as the abundance of this substance is considered one of the many attributes of paradise. But this is only speculation; there is no further evidence that the vases were containers for water, either for daily use or for religious practices.

Such elaborate ornament implies that the Antelope vase was meant more for decoration than utility. The inscription is meant less to be read than to be enjoyed as

ornament. It is a type of Alhambrian inscription which Oleg Grabar called “redundant,” that is, a repetitive slogan which is meant to be recognized primarily by its appearance and the image that its presence implies.⁸⁷ Its very occurrence gives it its meaning and everyone who sees it is expected to recognize it; literary precision was not important, as it was on the celebratory poem on the Freer vase, which is representative of another type of Alhambrian inscription. This is more literary and meant to express either a particular symbolic association or simply to praise the beauty of a particular feature of the monument or of the ornaments within:

O thou onlooker who art adorned with the splendor of the dwelling
 Look at my shape today and contemplate: thou wilt see my excellence
 For I seem to be made of silver and my clothing made of blossoms
 My happiness lay in the hands of him who is my owner underneath the canopy.⁸⁸

The script on the Antelope vase is not very legible, and it is used all over the vase in bands moving in every direction. In fact, the entire vase is covered with all sorts of figural and calligraphic decoration, arabesques, roundels, geometric patterns, and ornamental palmettes. As Ettinghausen said of the similarly decorated Freer vase,



Fig. 20. Berlin vase. Fragment. Staatliche Museum, Berlin. (photo: courtesy Museum für Islamische Kunst, Staatliche Preussischer Kulturbesitz, Berlin)

“It looks like a ‘sampler’ in which the artist tried to apply a whole workshop repertory, thereby indicating a later date.”⁸⁹ The similarity of styles among the Berlin, Freer, and Antelope vases, as well as the fact that all three show increased elongation and slenderness in their overall shape, allows us to use the Antelope vase to imagine what the missing pieces of the other two might have looked like.⁹⁰

Unfortunately, the last vase of the series no longer exists, and the only available illustration is the engraving by J. C. Murphy (fig. 8)⁹¹ which is interpretative, as one can see by comparing his engraving of the Antelope vase (fig. 21) with the actual object. Clearly it had scalloped wings, a technique that Van de Put attributes to Valencian wares.⁹² The introduction of dolphin finials on the wing handles may be a result of the influence of Valencian motifs as well, especially when they are compared with the foliage style of finials on an earlier vase (fig. 14), which are more arabesque in character. But that these changes represent an increased northern influence is as

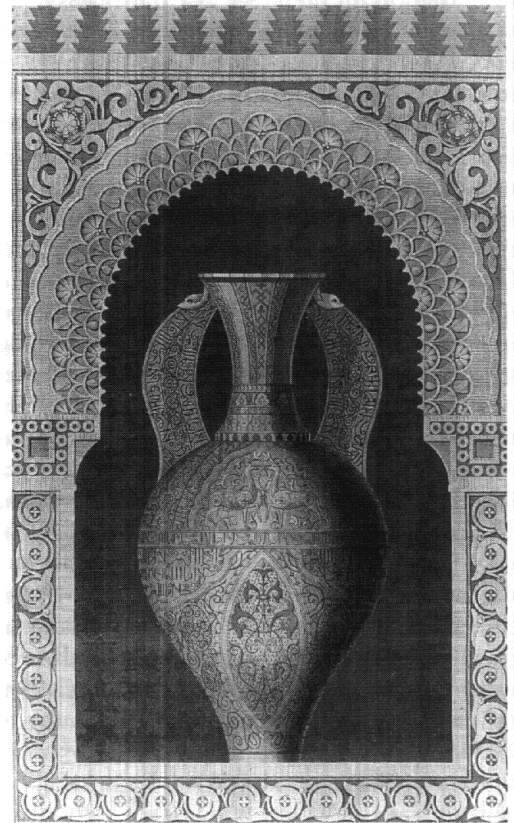


Fig. 21. Engraving by J. C. Murphy of the Antelope vase (fig. 3)

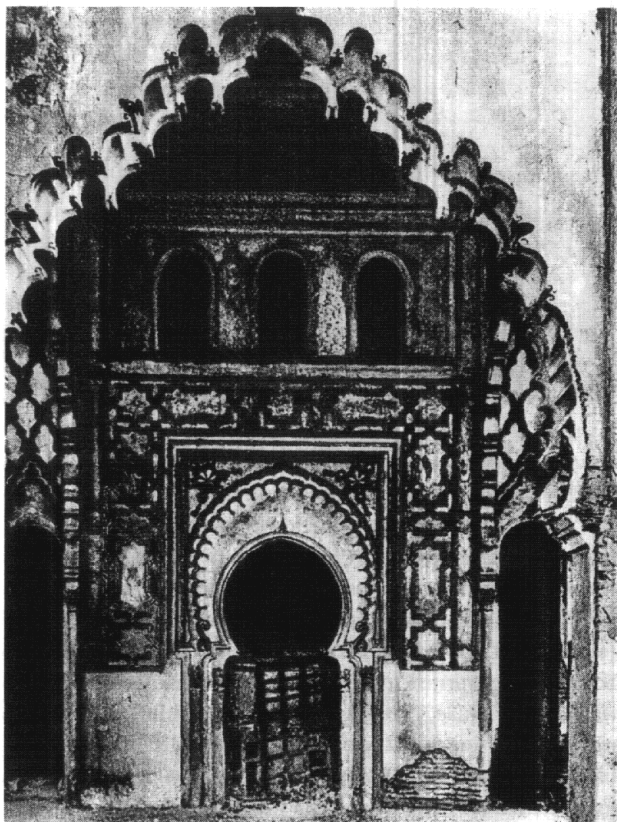


Fig. 22. Marrakesh. Mihrab. Mezquita de la Kutubiyya. (photo: Torres-Balbas)

much as can be concluded from their appearance; there is no reason to believe that the scalloped wings or dolphin finials had any symbolic import. The arabesques are more obscure; Murphy could have meant to draw the Alhambra arabesque as he did in the roundel of the Antelope vase, although understandably with some difficulty. Or perhaps he did see an arabesque affected by traditional Christian vine scrolls, as one would guess on the basis of his drawings of the wings. If the latter is true, the vines would provide an interesting contrast to a type of Almohad-influenced linear interlace (fig. 22) around the widest part of the vase, which has parallels to that on the dado of the Hall of the Two Sisters in the Alhambra. It seems that this vase exhibits a conflict between western Islamic styles and Valencian or Gothic techniques.

The blazons on the upper half of the vase likewise are related to Christian escutcheons. However, they are inscribed with the Nasrid slogan, "There is no conqueror but God," so we cannot attribute the vase to a Chris-

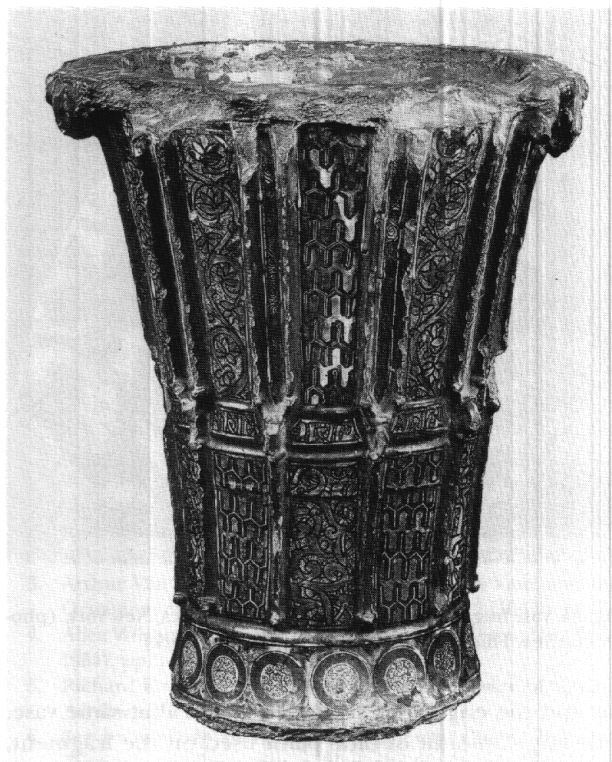


Fig. 23. Neck of an Alhambra vase. Hispanic Society of America, New York. (photo: courtesy Hispanic Society of America, New York)

tian patron. The other inscriptions are unreadable "pseudo-inscriptions"⁹³ and so were probably done by an artist who did not care much about the meaning of unfamiliar Arabic. Van de Put did a great deal of research on the shape of these shields, and concluded from parallel examples that those of our vase occur until the first half of the fifteenth century,⁹⁴ thereby giving us an approximate closing date for the vase chronology—a time when northern influence was so strong as to transform and even eclipse the Islamic motifs we have seen develop on the vases.

Finally, there exist a number of chips and fragments that serve to verify that there was one last vase and may even indicate that there were others. First, in the Hispanic Society of America is a badly damaged collar (fig. 23),⁹⁵ which Mrs. Frothingham, who had the opportunity to work extensively with the fragment, thought could have been the neck of the missing vase.⁹⁶ Its two-tiered design and concave structure resemble the engraving, and if we can attribute the variances to the interpretative nature of Murphy's sketches, it would seem that the col-

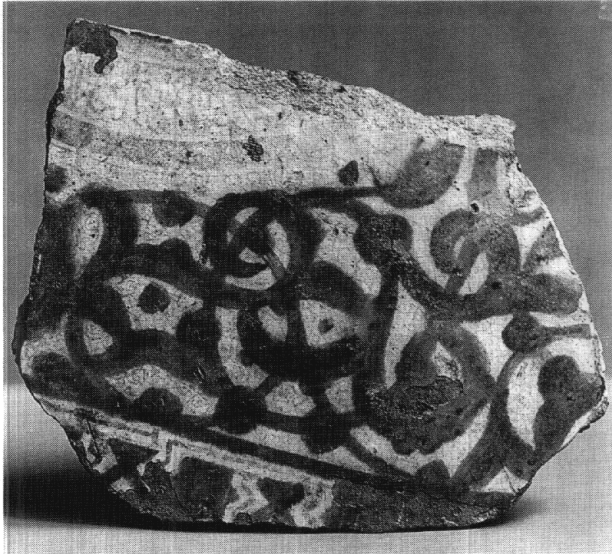


Fig. 24. Vase fragment. Hispanic Society of America, New York. (photo: courtesy Hispanic Society of America, New York)

lar and the engraving are indeed from that same vase. The large amount of blue paint used on the fragment, the degenerated arabesque, and the stylized diaper patterns also imply a very late date.

Another fragment belonging to the Hispanic Society (fig. 24)⁹⁷ could also have belonged to the missing vase, were it not for a shard in the Alhambra Museum (fig. 25, right) that more closely resembles the missing vase and cannot belong to the same item as the Hispanic Society chip. The lack of any known provenance for the vase implies that the Alhambra, where Murphy saw it, was its only home, and the discovery in the Alhambra of a few other fragments that resemble the missing vase of the engraving supports this theory.⁹⁸ Mrs. Frothingham is certain from examining the Hispanic Society fragment that it once belonged to a large vase.⁹⁹ The blue paint, rectilinear interlace, and circle containing Arabic letters correspond generally to the decoration of the vase in the engraving. The blue paint gives it a date later than the Heilbronner vase and the Hirsch neck fragment, and it could not have belonged to the lower half of the Berlin vase. If this were so, the positioning of the interlace would imply that the fragment is illustrated here upside down (assuming that the interlace belongs to the widest part of the vase) and then the inscribed roundel would be upside down on the vase itself. Furthermore, there is no evidence to suggest that inscribed roundels of the type illustrated on Murphy's vase appeared on the lower

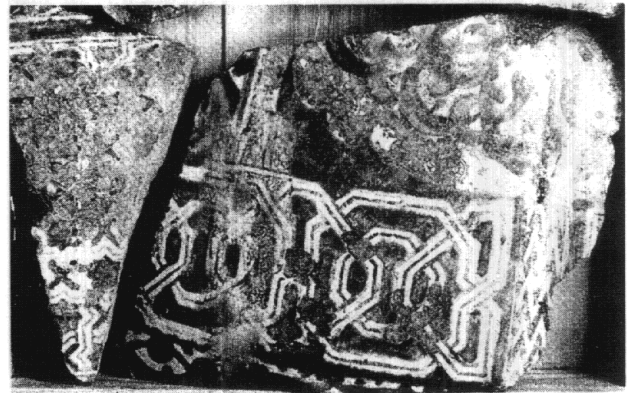


Fig. 25. Vase fragments. Museo Arqueológico de la Alhambra, Granada. (photo: Frothingham)

halves of the vases, particularly as this would make them more difficult to see and thus diminish their importance. The other fragment in the Alhambra Museum (fig. 25, left) could match the same piece as the Hispanic Society fragment. One hesitates to conclude that there was another vase, destroyed before Murphy's visit in the nineteenth century, but it does seem to be the most likely explanation.¹⁰⁰ One wonders how many others might have existed.

THE IMPORTANCE OF THE VASES

Because of its remote location and somewhat defiant character as a result of its early royal origin, Islamic art in Spain cannot be considered as a major center of influence in the development of Islamic art as a whole. However, it does seem to have been influenced by the preferences and tastes expressed in the art of Muslims in the Middle East, as well as its own established traditions, themselves originally of Middle Eastern origin. The Alhambra vases — and indeed the Alhambra itself — are no exception; they appear like textbooks of traditional Moorish art while betraying their eastern origins.

Earlier developments are seldom as important in art as the prevailing conditions, but they do have considerable influence. Islamic artists in Spain almost never innovated; they merely developed existing themes and styles derived from basic concepts of princely motifs or the use of symbolic inscriptions and geometric patterns found in the Umayyad east, such as the royal iconography of the well-known wall paintings at Qusayr 'Amrah, or the gilt but nearly illegible inscriptions in the Dome of the Rock.

On the vases in particular a few pan-Islamic motifs stand out. First, the repetitive inscription *al-mulk l'illah* is characteristic of the use of Qur'anic maxims over and over again to emphasize the glorious Islamic view of God, much like the cross or icon for Christians or the Star of David for Jews emphasizes the importance they place upon their doctrines. It is difficult for a non-Muslim to appreciate the symbolism of such a phrase, but the fact that they are in such variety (the Nasrid slogan "there is no conqueror but God" is another) and abundance and yet with little difference in meaning is testimony to the fact that they have a real underlying spiritual significance. A more approachable example from the point of view of art is the tree of life motif of the Freer and Antelope vases. These two examples may not be exact copies of the classic example from a floor mosaic at Khirbat al-Mafjar, depicting a conquering lion and antelopes; but the vases' antelopes are wearing an inscription that reads *al-ʿafiyah* or "good health," which could be taken as a blessing from God with paradisaical associations, and it certainly could connote the life-giving quality of the earth as represented by the tree in the same way that it does in the Khirbat al-Mafjar mosaic.

Why later medieval Spain should be such a considerable provider of splendid examples of matured pan-Islamic motifs comes from its combination of traditionalism, separated as it was from its geographic origins and its own economic and political conditions. Andalusia was an area of considerable wealth, thanks to its fertile climate, good farm management, and merchant bourgeoisie trading all over the Mediterranean world, even with their Christian enemies in Spain. Add to this the general Moorish taste for the traditional and an enjoyment of the visual and literary arts — especially poetry — which brought about a long period of "renaissance" in Muslim Spain in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries and the result is a state that is both willing and able to be decadent, splendid, and artistic.

The sources were not only taken from Andalusia's earlier authors and artisans, however. Because Andalusia was both distant and prosperous, it lured Muslim refugees from their threatened homelands farther east, or perhaps even fundamentalists or dervishes spreading their doctrine. When they began to feel increasingly threatened by the Christians in Spain, their art and poetry became increasingly "Islamic" out of defiance, although by this time they had been irreparably influenced by northern styles from the many years of largely peaceful contact during the reign of Muhammad V. This conflict between appreciation and contempt for the

Gothic form explains the curious Moorish-Gothic style of later Andalusian pottery.¹⁰¹

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NOTES

1. There are complete or largely intact Alhambra vases in the following museums: Instituto de Valencia de Don Juan, Madrid; Museo Arqueológico de la Alhambra, Granada; Galleria Nazionale, Palermo; Museo Arqueológico Nacional, Madrid; Hermitage, Leningrad; Nationalmuseum, Stockholm; Museum für Islamische Kunst, Berlin; Freer Gallery of Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C.; and smaller fragments in the Jacob Hirsch Collection, New York; the collection of the Hispanic Society of America, New York, and the Museo Arqueológico de la Alhambra, Granada.
2. José Ferrandis Torres, "Los Vasos de la Alhambra," *Boletín de la Sociedad Española de Excursiones* 33 (1925): 47–77.
3. Arthur Van de Put, "On a Missing Alhambra Vase, and the Ornament of the Vase Series," *Archaeologica* 92 (1947): 43–77.
4. Alice Wilson Frothingham, *The Lustreware of Spain* (New York, 1951), pp. 1–62.
5. Richard Ettinghausen, "Notes on the Lustreware of Spain," *Ars Orientalis* 1 (1954): 133–56.
6. See particularly Alan Caiger-Smith, *Lustre Pottery: Technique, Tradition, and Innovation in Islam and the Western World* (London, 1985), pp. 84–96; Lady Maria Millington Evans, *Lustre Pottery* (London, 1920), pp. 54–63; and Edwin Atlee Barber, *Hispano-Moresque Pottery in the Collection of the Hispanic Society of America* (New York, 1915).
7. W. Montgomery Watt and Pierre Cachia, *A History of Islamic Spain* (Edinburgh, 1965), pp. 147–50.
8. G. C. Dunning, "A Group of English and Imported Medieval Pottery from Lesnes Abbey, Kent, and the Trade in Early Hispano-Mauresque Pottery to England," *Antiquaries Journal* 41 (1961): 8; and J. G. Hirst, "Spanish Pottery Imported into Medieval Britain," *Medieval Archeology* 21 (1977): 68–105. Also Jean Soustiel, *La céramique islamique* (Fribourg, 1985), p. 180, citing G. Amardel, "Les faïences à reflets fabriquées à Narbonne," in *Bulletin de la Commission Archéologique de Narbonne* (1913).
9. Ibn Battuta, *Travels in Asia and Africa*, trans. H. A. R. Gibb (London, 1929), p. 314.
10. James D. Breckenridge, "The Two Sicilies," in *Islam and the Medieval West*, ed. Stanley Ferber (Binghamton, N.Y., 1975), p. 43.
11. Frothingham, *Lustreware*, p. 17, n. 24.
12. See Arthur Lane, "Early Hispano-Moresque Pottery: A Reconsideration," *Burlington Magazine* 88 (Oct. 1946): 246–53; Gaston Migeon, *Manuel d'art musulman* (Paris, 1927), p. 243; Soustiel, *La céramique islamique*, p. 180 (Soustiel believes Malaga to be the source of the term for Italian "Maiolica"). However, Alfred Joshua Butler, in *Islamic Pottery: A Study Mainly Historical* (London 1926), p. 93, says that the word read here as "*malaga*" underwent the permutations "Malaca," "Malica," and finally "Valencia," but this explanation is neither necessary nor probable, and on the same page

- he acknowledges the existence of ceramic works in Malaga, even after 1492.
13. Frothingham, *Lustreware*, p. 15.
 14. The Alhambra itself was not begun until 1273, and Migeon (*Manuel*, p. 243) believes this to be an important stimulus for the development of many more ateliers in southern Spain.
 15. Lane states, in "Early Hispano-Moresque Pottery," p. 246, that it would be unlikely that craftsmen would have settled as far inland as Calatayud, as opposed to Zaragoza. However, Calatayud was in fact the major crossroads for the area. There is, surprisingly, no evidence for there having been an established route from Zaragoza directly to the sea, and it has been shown that Calatayud was in fact on the only main road into Zaragoza. See *Grosser historischer Weltatlas*, pt. 2, "Mittelalter," ed. Joseph Engel (Munich, 1970), p. 87.
 16. Ernst Kühnel, *Daten zur Geschichte der spanisch-maurischen Keramik*, apud Frothingham, *Lustreware*, p. 15, n. 22.
 17. Van de Put, "On a Missing Alhambra Vase," pp. 55 and 74-75.
 18. Frothingham, *Lustreware*, p. 17. She writes: "The entire ornamentation of the vases shows by the diversity of the details, by the elegance and grace of the lustre-painting, and by the skill with which the intricate motives were rendered, that they were decorated by artists of great talent, probably for an amir or other important personage." Therefore, totaling the cost of employing such talented artisans and the cost of the large kilns, quantities of clay, and gold paint, it seems reasonable to conclude that the vases were indeed so expensive as to be only affordable by people of some wealth and standing.
 19. *Ibid.*, p. 21.
 20. R.M. Cook, *Greek Painted Pottery* (London, 1972), pp. 221-22.
 21. I myself have seen this type of vase put to many uses in Spain, and the reference to India comes from a friend who has traveled widely in rural areas there.
 22. Rachel Arié, *L'Espagne musulmane au temps des Nasrides, 1232-1492* (Paris, 1973), p. 382.
 23. Jan Read, *The Moors in Spain and Portugal* (London, 1974), p. 81.
 24. Bernhard and Ellen M. Wishaw, *Arabic Spain: Sidelights on Her History and Government* (London, 1912), pp. 155-56.
 25. Henri Terrasse, *Islam d'Espagne: une rencontre de l'Orient et de l'Occident* (Paris, 1958), p. 231.
 26. Wishaw and Wishaw, *Arabic Spain*, p. 157.
 27. See Elijah Ashtor, "Diet of Salaried Classes in the Medieval Near East," *Journal of Asian History* 4 (1970): 1-24; "Études sur la système monétaire des Mamluks circassiens," *Israel Oriental Studies* 6 (1976): 264-87; and "L'évolution des prix dans la Proche-Orient à la Basse-Epoque," *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient* 4 (1961): 15-46.
 28. Bess Donaldson, *The Wild Rue* (London, 1938), p. 141.
 29. On its purity as a fuel for lamps, Yusuf Ali, in his translation, *The Qur'an* (London, 1975), writes: "Its purity is almost like light itself: you may suppose it to be almost lit before it is lit. So it is with spiritual truth: it illuminates the mind and understanding almost imperceptibly, almost before the human mind and heart have been consciously touched by it" (note 3002). The Qur'an also mentions its quality as a cooking oil: "Also a tree springing/Out of Mount Sinai/Which produces oil/And relish for those/Who use it for food" (sura 23: 20). Yusuf Ali tells of its especially fine flavor (see his notes 2880 and 3000, and 3002).
 30. S. M. Imamuddin, *Some Aspects of the Socio-Economic and Cultural History of Muslim Spain, 711-1492 A.D.* (Leiden, 1965), p. 128.
 31. This saying was brought to my attention by an Algerian colleague, who tells me it is well known, at least in the Maghrib.
 32. See Yusuf Ali, *The Qur'an*, note 3001. He identifies the description of the tree, not as meaning it is literally "of neither east nor west," which would have implications as to its species, but as a poetic reference to its not being specific to any particular region; or possibly, as a reference to an olive tree that has exposure to both the rising (eastern) and setting (western) sun, thus growing more healthy and mature and producing the best fruit and oil.
 33. Oleg Grabar, *The Alhambra* (London, 1978), pp. 134-35.
 34. Angus MacKay, "Religion, Culture, and Ideology on the Late Medieval Castilian-Granadan Frontier," in *Medieval Frontier Societies*, ed. Robert Bartlett and Angus MacKay (Oxford, 1989), pp. 217, 218.
 35. For what follows on the sociopolitical analysis of medieval Spanish ballads, I am indebted to Professor Angus MacKay, who brought these parallels to my attention and provided me with copies of his articles, "The Ballad and Frontier in Late Medieval Spain," *Bulletin of Hispanic Studies* 53, 1 (January 1976): 15-34; and the aforementioned "Religion, Culture and Ideology on the Late Medieval Castilian-Granadan Frontier," pp. 217-44.
 36. J.E. Lopez [de Coca Castaner], "Institutions on the Castilian-Granadan Frontier," in *Medieval Frontier Societies*, pp. 127-50.
 37. Jerrilynn Dodds, "The Painting in the *Sala de Justicia* of the Alhambra," *Art Bulletin* 61 (1979): 186-97.
 38. A number of ivory caskets and one manuscript illumination with very similar scenes to those on the Alhambra's ceiling paintings are illustrated by Dodds in "The Painting in the *Sala de Justicia* of the Alhambra."
 39. Frothingham, *Lustreware*, pp. 63-64.
 40. Louvre, 3.373.
 41. While condensed inscriptions are not necessarily indicative of a date later than complete inscriptions, Richard Ettinghausen ("Notes on the Lustreware of Spain," p. 147) points out that in this case it is evidence that the complete inscription was at least known, although the form *al-mulk* was more popular. I propose that here the form *al-mulk* would have a later date, in that the artists, in this unique medium, would be following the example of the earlier inscription and therefore be alluding to it.
 42. Frothingham, *Lustreware*, p. 17, n. 24.
 43. See F. R. Martin and Friedrich Sarre, *Meisterwerke muhammedanischer Kunst* (Munich, 1910), plate 118; also, a lesser quality photograph in *al-Andalus* 4, 2 (1939), pl. 12.
 44. Frothingham, *Lustreware*, p. 17, n. 24.
 45. *Ibid.*
 46. *Ibid.*
 47. Ettinghausen, "Notes on the Lustreware of Spain," p. 146 and n. 51.
 48. Other Andalusian examples include Toledan tiles (Frothingham, *Lustreware*, pp. 206-7), and others are illustrated in Soustiel, *La céramique islamique*, pp. 176-78. The *khams* also appears as a Mughal symbol of protection (Ettinghausen, "Notes on the Lustreware of Spain," p. 151) and on Shi'ite finials (Donaldson, *The Wild Rue*, p. 208).

49. Henri Seyrig gives a history of the *khams* in his article "Représentations de la main divine," *Syria* 20 (1939): 189–94.
50. Ettinghausen, "Notes on the Lustreware of Spain," p. 148, n. 58.
51. Frothingham, *Lustreware*, p. 29.
52. *Ibid.*, pp. 27–28.
53. *Ibid.*, p. 28.
54. See Martin Lings, *The Qurʾanic Art of Calligraphy and Illumination* (London, 1976), pls. 98 (a Spanish ms. of the twelfth century in the Turkish and Islamic Museum, Istanbul) and 106–7 (a Moroccan ms. from the late sixteenth century in the San Lorenzo del Escorial Library in Spain).
55. The earliest examples are of the tenth century, from Nishapur, although many other examples from Mesopotamia and Egypt exist; and later, from Egypt, there are many Fatimid interpretations. See examples in Helen Philon, *Early Islamic Ceramics* (London, 1980), esp. figs. 327, 329, 331, 334–41, 357–61, and corresponding plates, and for similar Fatimid examples, see figs. 464, 571, 572.
56. Frothingham, *Lustreware*, pp. 35–36.
57. Florence L. May, *Silk Textiles of Spain* (New York, 1957), p. 158.
58. *Ibid.*, pp. 118–19.
59. Frothingham, *Lustreware*, p. 39.
60. Arthur Van de Put, "On a Missing Alhambra Vase," pp. 47–48.
61. Grabar, *The Alhambra*, pp. 43, 73, 93, and 152–53.
62. Found at Hornos, in Jaén, then purchased by Vincente Juan y Amat in 1875, and now in the Museo Arqueológico Nacional in Madrid. Frothingham, *Lustreware*, p. 47, n. 39.
63. *Ibid.*, pp. 21–24.
64. *Ibid.*, p. 23.
65. Ibn Battuta, *Travels in Asia and Africa*, p. 316.
66. Arthur Upham Pope, *A Survey of Persian Art* (London and New York, 1939), vol. 2, pp. 1626–27, 1632, 1640; and Richard Ettinghausen, "Evidence for the Identification of Kashan Pottery," *Ars Islamica* 36 (1936): 53, n. 20.
67. Frothingham, *Lustreware*, p. 24.
68. See some Persian examples with these motifs in Arthur Lane, *Early Islamic Pottery* (London, 1947), plates 12a, 15b, 19b, 42c, 44, 67b, and 88.
69. According to Frothingham (*Lustreware*, p. 49, n. 41), this vase was in a Paris collection until its purchase in 1900 by Julius Lessing.
70. Arthur Van de Put, "On a Missing Alhambra Vase," p. 53.
71. *Shorter Encyclopaedia of Islam* (Leiden, 1953), "Solomon," p. 550.
72. Donaldson, *The Wild Rue*, pp. 33, 206.
73. Lings, *The Qurʾanic Art of Calligraphy*, p. 204, compare plate 98 with plates 106–7.
74. Frothingham, *Lustreware*, p. 49, n. 40.
75. A. R. Nykl, "The Inscription on the Freer Vase," *Ars Orientalis* 2 (1957): 496–97.
76. Van de Put, "On a Missing Alhambra Vase," p. 60.
77. *Ibid.*, p. 60, citing Ibn Khaldun's *Prolegomena*, ed. DeSlane, p. 267.
78. On fourteenth-century economic conditions, see S. D. Goitein, *Studies in Islamic History and Institutions* (London, 1966), pp. 267–73.
79. Ettinghausen proves beyond doubt that the creature on the shard is in fact a camel ("Notes on the Lustreware of Spain," pp. 134–44).
80. Migeon, *Manuel*, figs. 395, 400.
81. Hirst, "Spanish Pottery Imported into Medieval Britain," pp. 88–89.
82. A history of the tree of life motif is given by George Lechler, "The Tree of Life in Indo-European and Islamic Cultures," *Ars Islamica* 4 (1937): 369–416.
83. *Ibid.*, pp. 369–80.
84. *Ibid.*, p. 390.
85. *Ibid.*, pp. 389–90.
86. *Ibid.*, p. 396.
87. Grabar, *The Alhambra*, p. 100. He divides the inscriptions of the Alhambra into three groups; those telling of the monument's details, those with repetitive formulas, and those which have some iconographic or poetical significance.
88. Nykl, "The Inscription on the Freer Vase," p. 497.
89. Ettinghausen, "Notes on the Lustreware of Spain," p. 154.
90. Esin Atl, *Ceramics from the World of Islam* (Washington D.C., 1973), no. 78, for an artist's rendering of a complete Freer vase.
91. James Cavanah Murphy, *The Arabian Antiquities of Spain* (London, 1813), pl. 98.
92. Van de Put, "On a Missing Alhambra Vase," p. 44.
93. *Ibid.*, p. 65.
94. *Ibid.*, p. 68.
95. The Hispanic Society purchased the fragment from a Paris art dealer who had had it since 1913. Frothingham, *Lustreware*, p. 53, n. 44.
96. *Ibid.*, pp. 53–54. Frothingham tells us that Guillermo Joaquín de Osma y Scull, a prominent Spanish historian, also believed this to be the neck of the illustrated vase.
97. Presented to the Hispanic Society by José Weissberger (*ibid.*, p. 55, n. 45).
98. *Ibid.*, pp. 55–57.
99. *Ibid.*, p. 55.
100. It is a pity Murphy did not sketch the other side of the missing vase — perhaps this could have provided an explanation!
101. Migeon, *Manuel*, figs. 400, 401.