Patricia Blessing

5 The Vessel as Garden: The “Alhambra Vases” and Sensory Perception in Nasrid Architecture

A poem from the Hall of the Abencerrajes, a major structure within the Alhambra, offers the opportunity to observe the poetic devices that are at play within the palace complex of the Nasrid rulers of Granada. Like other poems found in the epigraphy of the Alhambra, this text is attributed to court poet Ibn Zamrak (d. 1393), a major literary figure at the Nasrid court in the second half of the fourteenth century. The poem serves the purpose of giving voice to the monument. Its author created a first-person speaker – the building – to establish comparisons between the specific part of the monument in question, certain objects held within it, and the architecture of the palace as a whole. The poem exalts the monument’s beauty and, toward the end, in a seeming afterthought that is in fact central to both text and building, glorifies the patron:

1. The Imam Muhammad inherited the same grandeur
   inna l-imāma Muḥammadin waritha l-ʿulā
   as his father, our lord Abu-l-Hajjaj
   k-abihī mawlaṇā Abī-Ḥajjāj
2. Behold the vase standing at its door
   fa-ṣur lā l-ibriqi qāma bi-bābihi
   surrounded by me with adornments like brocade
   fa-ḥafaṭtu bil-washi kal-dibāj
3. There, sitting on a throne, it will seem
   wa-qad iʿtalā l-kursī taḥṣibu annahu
   as a valiant sultan, sitting on his throne
   sulṭanun fārisun qāʿidan bil-tāj.¹

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Note: For suggestions on this chapter, I thank the editors Fiona Griffiths and Kathryn Starkey, Beatrice E. Kitzinger, all participants of the Sensory Reflections workshop at Stanford University in October 2016, Anja Heidenreich, Rikard Nordström, and Bissera V. Pentcheva. I am grateful to Cristina Parterarroyo Lacaba at the Instituto Valencia de Don Juan in Madrid and Moya Carey at the Victoria and Albert Museum in London for granting me access to objects relevant to this study. For research support, I thank the Society of Architectural Historians and the Gerda Henkel Stiftung.

¹ José Miguel Puerta Vilchez, Reading the Alhambra: A Visual Guide to the Alhambra through Its Inscriptions (Granada: Patronato de la Alhambra y Generalife, 2011), 174. Unless otherwise noted, all transliterations are mine, following the Arabic printed text published by Puerta Vilchez. Translations follow Puerta Vilchez, with some modifications.
Taking this poem as a starting point, I will propose a discussion of the so-called Alhambra Vases: large-scale luster-ceramic vessels, some of which carry poetic inscriptions akin to those on the building. Through these inscriptions, a close connection is formed between the monument, the vases, and the visitor who has been invited into the multisensory space of the Alhambra. Thus the vases offer a concrete starting point from which to discuss the sensory experience of this monument and – short of a reenactment of poetry readings within the space – provide inroads into understanding the building’s immersive nature. Overall, the Alhambra Vases and the architectural decoration of the palace are closely intertwined. This is true not only of the objects that bear inscriptions and the sections of poetic text in the Alhambra, but also of the vegetal and geometric motifs that appear in textiles, in the monumental decoration, and on at least some of the vases. Thus, imagining a reconstruction of the palaces with the objects in place – vases in niches, curtains and wall hangings over openings and along walls – we can begin to understand the level of intense sensory effects at work in the Alhambra.

In the rich haptic and aural space created, objects such as the so-called Alhambra Vases and various types of textiles were integral. Aurally, the sound of water running through the monument’s myriad fountains and the rustle of curtains suspended in doorways, niches, and windows would have become part of this multisensory landscape. The haptic aspects of architecture – according to Juhanni Pallasmaa, the ways in which touch can influence human perception of space – are central in the Alhambra, with its multiple surfaces of different textures: sleek tiles, deep reliefs in stucco, polished marble. While some of these surfaces lie within reach of human hands, along with ephemeral, movable objects such as vases and curtains, others are too far away to touch and remain in the realm of desire. This tension is part and parcel of the artifice established in the Alhambra, a combination of accessible haptic space and evoked desire for the surfaces far above, such as the muqarnas dome of the Hall of the Abencerrajes. The notion of artifice – that is, the purposeful creation of highly sophisticated and carefully orchestrated spaces in which nothing has been left to accident – is crucial in order to understand the Alhambra as a multisensory space, and the poetic epigraphy of the monument is an integral part of this design.
process. Throughout the palace complex, poetic inscriptions present the monument as a first-person narrator. These poems add layers of perception to the monument: in addition to seeing the decoration, the beholder can also potentially engage with the building through the poetry. Indeed, these and similar texts were not only inscribed on the walls of the Alhambra but might potentially have been recited during court ceremonies (as certain other poems were). In many instances, the poems are written in such a way as to steer the visitor’s perception of the structure, highlighting certain elements or suggesting comparisons and metaphors. In this sense, the poetic inscriptions are essential for the activation of the multisensory space.

Scholarship on the Alhambra is extensive, but so far has only marginally addressed modes of sensory experience beyond vision. Thus, Olga Bush has considered how the visual overload created in the architectural decoration of the Alhambra was combined with poetic descriptions – some inscribed onto walls, others recited at royal ceremonies – in order to impress the beholder. Yet even though poetry and textiles are central to Bush’s insightful study, she does not examine aural and tactile properties. Similarly, focusing on the Mirador de Lindaraja, a small belvedere within the complex of the Alhambra, D. Fairchild Ruggles has emphasized the presence of poetic inscriptions, representations of Nasrid power, and their relationship to the visually overwhelming architectural decoration. Still, the experience of the Alhambra described in these studies remains a visual one, focusing on the eye of the beholder.

Cynthia Robinson has suggested that interpretations need to be revisited in light of deeper understandings of aesthetics and philosophy based on studies of Nasrid poetry. José Miguel Puerta Vilchez has opened new avenues by discussing the Alhambra’s poetic epigraphy in relation to notions of aesthetics in Arabic thought and language.

The presence of the haptic and the aural in the Alhambra’s inscriptions and objects needs to be considered in order to reach an understanding of the space as a

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product of artifice, rife with different media that are geared toward the creation of an immersive experience. The space engages the senses not only through fixed structures, but also carefully designed portable elements. The poetry so insistently refers to such elements, including water, garden, and textile metaphors, that it amounts to a set of instructions in how to read the space and become absorbed in its artifice. These poetic texts comment on the monument’s beauty in metaphorical terms – for instance, in repeated comparisons between the building and a bride in her finery. Such metaphors appear in several instances, including in the second verse of a poem inscribed on the frame of a niche on the left-hand side of the entrance to the Comares Hall:

1. I resemble a nuptial throne, or even exceed it,
   wa-ḥakaytu kursiya l-ʿarūsi wa-zidtuḥu
2. and I assure the happiness of bride and groom
   anni ḍamintu saʿādata l-azwāji.¹³

Despite the rich record of multisensory engagement that appears in these poems, we do not have texts that comment on these features of the Alhambra and their effects from the point of view of a medieval visitor. Only the mid-fourteenth-century account of Ibn al-Khatib, describing royal celebrations, provides an occasional glimpse of the palace’s and court’s splendor, although in rather general terms.¹⁴ Thus, Valérie Gonzalez’s attempt to understand the immersive experience of the Comares Tower within the Alhambra in comparison to a work by current-day artist James Turrell, as problematic as it may be from the point of view of historical context, offers reflections about aesthetic experiences in the absence of relevant statements in primary sources.¹⁵

In this chapter, I investigate how the Alhambra Vases fit into the framework of the fourteenth-century Nasrid palace, a space carefully crafted to entice the senses at various levels.¹⁶ While it is not verifiable that most of these large-scale vases (most complete examples are about 120 to 135 cm tall; see Table 1) were used in the Alhambra itself, they clearly engage with the aesthetic proposed by the palace. Those vases with poems inscribed on them most closely correspond to these aesthetic principles. Here I insert the surviving pieces into the premises of multisensory space established at the Alhambra, a space that includes vision, hearing, and touch. The inscriptions provoke a visual engagement with the complex ornament and the luster of the glaze on the vases, but also invoke the haptic potential of textile motifs and metal sheen, calling attention

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¹³ Puerta Vílchez, Reading the Alhambra, 120.
¹⁴ Commentary in García Gómez, Foco de antigua luz sobre la Alhambra. For the Arabic text and Spanish translation, see García Gómez, 123–169.
¹⁶ Other furnishings would also need to be considered, although furniture belonging to the Alhambra has yet to be identified, if indeed it has been preserved.
Table 1: Overview of extant vases and large fragments

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Museum; inventory number</th>
<th>Provenance</th>
<th>Height</th>
<th>Color</th>
<th>Date</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Simonetti Vase</td>
<td>Museo Nacional de Arte Hispanomusulman, Granada</td>
<td>Attilio Simonetti, Rome; Fortuny; bought by the Spanish government in 1934.</td>
<td>121cm</td>
<td>glaze damaged</td>
<td>early 14th c.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gazelle Vase</td>
<td>Museo Nacional de Arte Hispanomusulman, Granada, inv. no. 290</td>
<td>Presumed to have been produced for the site.</td>
<td>136cm</td>
<td>blue</td>
<td>14th or 15th c. [Al-Andalus, cat. 112]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Osma Vase</td>
<td>Instituto Valencia de Don Juan, Madrid</td>
<td>From mid-nineteenth-century excavation at Mazara del Vallo, Sicily; Count Burgio di Villafiorita; called Burgio Vase by Van de Put, and there noted as recorded by Michele Amari in 1872</td>
<td>120cm</td>
<td>gold</td>
<td>c. 1333–54</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jerez Vase</td>
<td>Museo Arqueológico Nacional, Madrid, inv. no. 1930/67</td>
<td>Excavation in monastery of Santa María de la Defensión near Jerez de la Frontera; found in 1927; in the museum since 1930</td>
<td>126cm</td>
<td>gold</td>
<td>c. 1354–91</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hornos Vase</td>
<td>Museo Arqueológico Nacional, Madrid, inv. no. 50419</td>
<td>Found in Jaen</td>
<td>135cm</td>
<td>blue</td>
<td>c. 1333–54</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Galleria Regionale della Sicilia, Palermo, inv. no. 5229</td>
<td>From excavation at Mazara del Vallo, Sicily; then sacristy of the church of Our Lady of Paradise in Mazara, in museum since 1880s</td>
<td>128cm</td>
<td>gold</td>
<td>late 13th c, [Al-Andalus, cat. 110]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fortuny Vase or Salar Vase</td>
<td>State Hermitage Museum, St. Petersburg, inv. no. F-317</td>
<td>From El Salar, Andalusia; Collection Fortuny since 1871; Fortuny sale 1875, n. 42; Collection Prince Basilevsky; Hermitage since 1885</td>
<td>117cm</td>
<td>gold</td>
<td>early 14th c. [Al-Andalus, cat. 111]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Nationalmuseum Stockholm, inv. no. NMK 47</td>
<td>part of the so-called Prague booty of 1648 when the Swedes occupied Prague at the end of the Thirty Years War.</td>
<td>125cm</td>
<td>gold</td>
<td>c. 1333–54</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
to the vases’ semblance of precious materials. Thus the vases are both small pieces in the Gesamtkunstwerk of the Alhambra and pars pro toto, in that they mirror the sensory devices employed in the monument. Within the Alhambra, sight, sound – that which is implied in poetic inscriptions (with the option of recitation) as well as that of the water in the fountains – and the haptic potential of architectural decoration all together form a sensory space that is at once closely tied to the architecture itself and beyond physical presence. Thus, a discussion of the vases can provide insights into the ways in which the space operated at the level of artifice, beyond the architecture itself.

As Elizabeth Dospěl Williams points out in her study of jewelry from the late antique eastern Mediterranean in this volume, reactions to the visual, aural, and olfactory properties of objects often need to be retrieved from references that appear few and far between in late antique and medieval sources.¹⁷ In the case of the Alhambra,

¹⁷ See the chapter by Dospěl Williams in this volume.
the poetry inscribed on the monument should perhaps be viewed as such a source; this is the approach that I propose in analyzing the poem on one of the vases as it relates to the texts on the building. First, I will introduce the Alhambra Vases and the discussion of their provenance and dates. Then, I will turn to the so-called Freer Vase as a case study, in order to propose an analysis of the ways in which poetic epigraphy, used in a range of materials, becomes a means to construct and understand a multisensory space.

**Introducing the Alhambra Vases**

The set of known Alhambra Vases comprises a substantial number of pieces. As shown in Table 1, nine nearly complete vases and three large fragments have survived. While detailed studies of their material and formal qualities exist, the vases have yet to be fully understood within the dialogue of multisensory perception that is established in the Alhambra. Following an overview of the extant vases and their background, this chapter will seek insights into the ways in which these pieces were an essential part of the monument’s proclivity for artifice.

The connection of these large ceramic vessels to the Alhambra is not necessarily straightforward. Several vases are mentioned as being located on-site in sources from the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, but these pieces have, for the most part, not been preserved.¹⁸ Two of these vases were depicted in Antigüedades árabes de España in 1804.¹⁹ One of the two is the so-called Gazelle Vase preserved in the Museo Nacional de Arte Hispanomusulman at the Alhambra (Plate VI).²⁰ The second has been lost.²¹ Hence the Gazelle Vase, combined with seventeenth- to nineteenth-century sources indicating the presence of other such vases on-site, provides the strongest connection between the objects and the Alhambra.

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Other vases have varied provenances, as shown in Table 1, and only a few of them come from documented archaeological contexts, including the Jerez Vase, found in a monastery near Jerez de la Frontera.\(^\text{22}\) The Osma Vase at the Instituto Valencia de Don Juan, Madrid (Figure 1), and the vase now in Palermo (Figure 2) were both discovered

in Mazara del Vallo in Sicily in the nineteenth century, although the exact circumstances of the find are not documented.²³

Two vases are securely connected to the collection, sold in 1875, of Spanish painter Mariano Fortuny Marsal (1838–1874).²⁴ These are the so-called Fortuny or

²³ The vases are: Galleria Regionale della Sicilia, Palermo, inv. no. 5229; Instituto Valencia de Don Juan, Madrid, acquired in 1924. They are published in Van de Put, “On a Missing Alhambra Vase,” 75; Los jarros de la Alhambra, 158–161; Dodds, Al-Andalus, 354–355, cat. no. 110. For the provenance of both vases, see Ferrandis Torres, “Los vasos de la Alhambra,” 67–68.

Salar Vase (Figure 3), today preserved in the Hermitage in St. Petersburg, and the Freer Vase, a large fragment missing neck and wings, preserved in the Freer Gallery in Washington, D.C. Fortuny designed the bronze lion stands that these two vases still have.

The so-called Simonetti Vase is reported to have been in Fortuny’s collection, although it is named after an earlier owner, Attilio Simonetti; the Spanish government

acquired it in 1934 for the Museo Nacional de Arte Hispanomusulman in Granada.²⁷ The Hornos Vase was found in Jaén.²⁸ The vase in the Nationalmuseum in Stockholm was part of the so-called Prague booty of 1648, taken when the Swedes occupied Prague at the end of the Thirty Years’ War; it entered the royal collections at that point and was transferred to the museum in the late nineteenth century. The vase had reached Prague in the late sixteenth century, where it became part of the collection of Emperor Rudolph II after being bought by Ambassador Joachim von Sinzendorff in Istanbul. Before that, the vase is reported to have been located in Cyprus until the Ottoman conquest of the island in 1571.²⁹

Numerous catalogues and lists of the vases and fragments exist, pointing to the interest that these pieces have elicited among scholars since the 1920s.³⁰ Since little is known about the circumstances of their production, scholarship on the Alhambra Vases has been largely concerned with proposing sequences for dating the extant pieces based on types of decoration and colors of glaze (silver/blue versus white/gold).³¹ As places of production, Málaga and Granada have been suggested.³² In the first systematic publication of the Alhambra Vases in 1925, José Ferrandis Torres collected the ensemble of extant vases and large fragments; his catalogue for the most part remains valid today.³³ The exception is the addition of the Jerez Vase, which was found in 1927 (two years after Ferrandis Torres published his article) and acquired by the Museo Arqueológico Nacional in Madrid in 1930.³⁴ Another vase, depicted in Ferrandis Torres’s article in plate 4 and labeled as being held in Berlin, may be

³⁴ Aranda, “Jarrón nazarí llamado de la cartuja de Jerez.”
The Heilbronner Vase, destroyed in a fire in a Spanish customs storehouse in 1936.\textsuperscript{35} Writing in 1947, Van de Put describes the same set of objects, adding the Jerez Vase, which had been found in the meantime, and including a detailed appendix of complete vases and large fragments.\textsuperscript{36}

Later publications have contributed to the detailed analysis of decoration that has led to a clearer chronology of the vases, although not, in the absence of excavated kilns, to a better sense of their production. Ferrandis Torres, basing his conclusions especially on the large number of tiles preserved in the Alhambra (although hardly any in luster technique remain on-site), argues for their local production in Granada, although difficulties ensue in distinguishing this from Málaga’s production.\textsuperscript{37} He attributes the gold-glazed vases to Málaga, the blue-and-gold ones to Granada, and dates the former group to the second half of the fourteenth century, the latter to the early fifteenth century.\textsuperscript{38} The only dated piece of luster ceramic connected to Nasrid Granada is a large tile preserved in the Instituto Valencia de Don Juan in Madrid; its inscription mentions the name of Nasrid ruler Yusuf III (r. 1408–1417).\textsuperscript{39}

The chronologies and attributions established in the 1920s have largely been maintained in later publications. Richard Ettinghausen focuses on the question of dates, seeking to establish the oldest piece in the group.\textsuperscript{40} Although he concedes that analysis of the epigraphy remains inconclusive, Ettinghausen posits the Osma Vase as the oldest, followed by the pieces in Palermo and St. Petersburg.\textsuperscript{41} More recently, Carmen Serrano García has proposed further detailed analysis of decoration and measurements, suggesting that production continued for longer than previously thought; this change in chronology leads her to date the Osma Vase to the last quarter of the thirteenth century. The date range for the other pieces remains the same as Ferrandis Torres suggested.\textsuperscript{42}

The function of the vases is unclear. Although their basic shape recalls that of storage vessels, the luster glaze – both expensive and difficult to produce – would have precluded such use for the Alhambra Vases. As Ferrandis Torres points out, the glaze would have prevented the clay bodies of the Alhambra Vases from breathing, thus subverting a main function of storage vessels: namely, to keep liquids cool.\textsuperscript{43} The large size of the vases poses the problem of portability – or rather, their lack thereof. It is clear that the vases were not designed to be handled frequently and with ease,
considering their large size and considerable weight.\textsuperscript{44} The flat, smooth, wing-shaped handles do not, in fact, seem to be easy to grasp. Even with the vases stabilized on stands, maneuvering one would probably require at least two adults.\textsuperscript{45} At the same time, a court like that of the Nasrids would have had a sufficient number of slaves to ensure that such work could be completed, and so perhaps we should not insist on modern notions of portability that tend to imply small and lightweight objects.\textsuperscript{46}

Thus, to experience the vases likely required movement on the viewer’s part rather than the object’s. The circular nature of the decoration on many of the vases further supports this idea, particularly in the case of those vases that have poetry inscribed on them. In order to fully appreciate a piece like the Freer Vase, one needs to be able to walk around the object to read the inscription that runs in a band around its body without being repeated on each side. Thus, placement in a niche would not be the best option to ensure a viewer’s interaction with a piece: Figure 4 shows a modern copy of the Gazelle Vase placed in a niche in the northeastern corner of the Courtyard of Myrtles, a few meters from the entrance to the Comares Hall.

While these issues have been pointed out, they have not yet been pursued in detail. In methodological terms, a central problem is posed by the nature of the sources. Although all of the extant vases have various kinds of text written on them, known medieval sources do not contain any passages about them. Not all the vases have legible poetic text: some have pseudo-writing, others have phrases invoking blessings and luck for the owner. While both features are common within medieval Islamic art, and also occur frequently within the Islamic art of Spain, it is nevertheless relevant to note that the presence of text is highly valued, even if it isn’t legible. The illusion of text, in fact, enhances the value of those passages—such as the poems—that are legible. In what follows, I will focus on the Freer Vase, one of the extant pieces inscribed with a poem. While this text has been read and translated, an analysis within the larger context of poetic epigraphy and sensory perception in the Alhambra remains to be done. Notably, the poem on the Freer Vase works to engage the viewer using many of the same devices that are employed in the poetic inscriptions of the Alhambra, evoking the beauty of the object and a range of materials.

\textsuperscript{44} Unfortunately, no data is available on the weight of these vases.
\textsuperscript{45} It is unclear what kinds of stands these vases originally had. For examples of twelfth- and thirteenth-century cylindrical clay stands used to support large storage amphorae, see Bulle Tuil Leonetti, Yannick Lintz, and Claire Déléry, eds., \textit{Le Maroc médiéval: Un empire de l’Afrique à l’Espagne} (Paris: Hazan and Musée du Louvre, 2014), 344, cat. no. 197, and 345, cat. no. 199.
Figure 4: A modern copy of the Gazelle Vase on view in the Courtyard of Myrtles at the Alhambra in 2014. Photograph: Patricia Blessing.
The Freer Vase

The Freer Vase is not preserved in full: the neck and wings are missing, and only the body remains (Plate VII). The first recorded owner of the vase, Mariano Fortuny Marsal, bought it from a tavern in Granada. The bronze stand, inspired by the Fountain of the Lions at the Alhambra, was designed by Fortuny, as was the stand for the Hermitage Vase, also in his collection prior to being sold. The Freer Vase was in the sale of the Fortuny collection in 1875, a year after the owner’s death. It next appeared in the C. Stein sale in Paris in May 1886. Charles Davis of London bought the vase for the Freer Collection in 1903.

The body of the vase is painted with blue motifs on a white background, a type of design that appears generally in those vases dated to the late fourteenth or early fifteenth centuries. From top to bottom, the decoration of the fragmentary piece shows a pair of gazelles (closely connected to those on the Gazelle Vase preserved at the Alhambra; see Plate VI) with a medallion of palmettes in between them, an inscription in cursive Arabic letters that runs around the thickest part of the body (this will be discussed below), and a lower zone where large stars alternate with palmette motifs. While the occurrence of poetic inscriptions is rare on the vases, this case is not unique: the vase in the Nationalmuseum in Stockholm has a similar band around the top part of the body between the two handles (Figure 5). To my knowledge, the inscription on the vase in Stockholm is unpublished, and I am currently working on reading it based

Figure 5: Detail of poetic inscription, Stockholm Vase, second quarter of fourteenth century. Photograph courtesy of Nationalmuseum Sweden, Stockholm, inv. no. NMK 47.

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48 Van de Put, “On a Missing Alhambra Vase.”
on photographs provided by the museum. The difficulty of this task is due to the fact that, because of the luster glaze, the vases are difficult to photograph without glare.

A further poem can be found on the Hornos Vase in the Museo Arqueológico Nacional in Madrid, at the base of the neck in between the wings. It reads: “All fountains spring and seem the most perfect flow/and increase abundant kindness and great good fortune./And confirm the memory of happiness and the poverty/that the fortune of time banished morning and evening.” Unlike some of the other poems, in particular the one on the Freer Vase, this text does not establish comparisons to other materials, nor does it evoke the glaze of the vase. Nevertheless, the mention of fountains and the flow of water is significant in order to connect the piece to the presence of such features within the architecture of the Alhambra. Thus, indirectly, the multisensory nature of the monument is part of the Hornos Vase as well.

On the Freer Vase, the poem endeavors to provoke the multisensory engagement of the viewer by establishing the vase as a first-person narrator who addresses the beholder. The poem is rendered below in the reading and translation offered by Alois Richard Nykl (with slight modifications):

1. O you onlooker who are adorned with the splendor of the dwelling
   Ayyuhā l-nāẓiru lladīhī zānahu rā‘īgu l-dārī
2. Look at my shape today and contemplate: you will see my excellence
   Unẓur al-yawma šūratī wa-ta’ammal tara khayrī
3. For I appear to be made of silver and my clothing from blossoms
   Fa-ka-annī min fiḏDATIN wa-libāsī mina-l-zahrī
4. My happiness lies in the hands of he who is my owner, underneath the canopy
   Sa’dī bi-yadāya lladīhī nāla mulki bi-miẓallā.

The poem places the vase front and center in a first-person discourse: the object introduces itself and invites the gaze of the onlooker (or beholder; the Arabic term nāẓir can mean one or the other), pointing out its own beauty. The vase is presented not simply as an object of ceramic, but also of metal, alluding to the luster glaze that both creates a silver sheen and actually contains metal – a necessary technical feature to attain the metallic aesthetic. The ambivalence of its nature is stated in the poem: First, the vase compares itself to a vessel made of silver (ka-annī min fiḏdatin).

50 Only older black-and-white photographs of the inscription are available: email communication from Rikard Nordström, Picture Officer, Nationalmuseum, Stockholm, 12 January 2017. The object is currently in storage since the museum is closed until the end of 2018 for renovations.
51 English translation in Puerta Vílchez, La poética del agua en el Islam, 66, after the Spanish text in a translation by Eduardo Saavedra in Los jarrones de la Alhambra, 148. The Arabic text has not been published.
52 A. R. Nykl, “The Inscriptions on the ‘Freer Vase’,” Ars Orientalis 2 (1957): 496. In the final line of the poem, miẓalla can be translated as “canopy” but literally means “an object providing shade”.

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In the same line of the poem, the vase refers to its apparent clothing (libāsī) made of flowers. This last phrase evokes a garden motif but also establishes one of the textile metaphors frequent in the poetic epigraphy of the Alhambra. Thus, precious metal and textiles are evoked in the self-description of the vase. Both are sources of wonder or amazement (ʿajab, in Arabic) – notions that can be closely tied to literature, but also to objects.53 The emphasis on the object’s own happiness points to the larger issue of personification, in that the vase receives the power to speak and feel. Thus, the object is not simply a lifeless piece of furniture but rather an actor in the larger scheme of things, moving under the auspices of the owner who, in most of these poems, appears as the culmination. Viewed by itself, the poem may not be all that remarkable, but in the context of the larger multisensory space that is the Alhambra, it becomes significant.

Olga Bush briefly discusses this vase in her study of the Alhambra, connecting the Freer Vase to prosopopoeia in poetic inscriptions on a range of objects from the medieval Islamic world.54 With regard to the poem on the vase, Bush states that the text contains a repertoire of features that are of interest to her study of prosopopoeia, including “staging ... the encounter between object and beholder”.55 This relationship between object and beholder, as Bush defines it, stands at the center of sensory perception within the Alhambra. The object might be a vase, or a curtain. Yet within the framework of a multisensory space that encompasses everything within it, the “object” might also be the building. Since the object takes on the role of guide through the building, the visitor is actively placed within the immersive space. The distinction between the different senses is dissolved, in that several of them – vision, hearing, touch – are directly addressed and included in this space of artifice. The sense of smell can also be evoked by the images that refer to flowers, with their pleasant fragrance (or even overpowering fragrance, thinking of a hedge of jasmine on a summer night). Such imagery is used on the Freer Vase, and in the following verse from a poem at the entrance of the Hall of the Two Sisters:


1. and who [referring to Muhammad V, the patron] has endowed you [the palace] with this fair
garden, in which the flowers
\( \text{wa-}\hat{\text{ha}}\hat{\text{b}}\hat{\text{a}}\hat{\text{k}}\hat{\text{a}} \text{ b}i\text{-}\hat{\text{r}}\hat{\text{a}}\hat{\text{u}}\hat{\text{d}}\hat{\text{i}} \text{ l-}\hat{\text{a}}\hat{\text{m}}\hat{\text{i}}\hat{\text{g}} \text{ f}a\text{-}\hat{\text{z}}\hat{\text{a}}\hat{\text{r}}\hat{\text{u}}\hat{\text{h}} \).

2. smile when they boast of your regalia
\( \text{muta}b\hat{\text{a}}\hat{s}\hat{\text{s}}\hat{\text{i}} \text{ lamm} \hat{\text{a}} \text{ m}\hat{\text{a}} \text{ azda}h\hat{\text{a}}\hat{\text{th}}\hat{\text{u}} \text{ hul}\hat{\text{\text{a}}}\hat{\text{k}}\hat{\text{a}}\).

Thus, the task in the remainder of this chapter will be to understand, firstly, how the
vase as an object is designed to address the viewer through shape, text, and refer-
ences to other materials; secondly, how the object relates to the space surrounding it;
and thirdly, how it mimics the larger space to the extent that a multisensory experi-
ence is incited in the object as much as in the Alhambra as a whole.  

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Poetic Epigraphy and Multisensory Space

Indeed, because of its mimetic capacity, the Freer Vase can serve as a hinge between
the group of vases and the Alhambra as a whole: the text on this vase is closely con-
nected to the poetry inscribed on the monument.\(^5\) The poetic inscriptions on the mon-
ument were for the most part written by court poet Ibn Zamrak.\(^6\) Born in Granada in
1333, Abu Abdallah Muhammad b. Yusuf al-Surayhi, known as Ibn Zamrak, entered
the service of the Nasrid administration in his native city. He remained in the service
of Sultan Muhammad V during the ruler’s exile in Fez (Morocco) from 1359 to 1362,
and was private scribe and court poet both during this time and after the court’s
return to Granada. In 1371, Ibn Zamrak became chief minister in place of his teacher
Ibn al-Khatib (d. 1374), who had fled to the rival court of the Marinids in Fez and was
captured and executed a few years later. Ibn Zamrak remained in office until 1391; after
this, he was deposed and reappointed several times until his assassination in

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\(^5\) Puerta Vílchez, *Reading the Alhambra*, 207.
\(^6\) I thank Richard Newhauser for suggesting the term “mimics.”
\(^5\) The text on the Freer Vase directly connects to the poetic epigraphy from the Alhambra that appears
in José Miguel Puerta Vilchez’s detailed study together with drawings of its locations on the walls of the
palaces: Puerta Vilchez, *Reading the Alhambra*. For more on issues of aesthetics by the same author, see
José Miguel Puerta Vilchez, *Historia del pensamiento estético árabe: Al-Andalus y la estética árabe clásica*
(Madrid: Akal, 1997). I was unable to access the English translation, published after this chapter was
completed: José Miguel Puerta Vilchez, *Aesthetics in Arabic Thought: From Pre-Islamic Arabia through
explored the monument’s poetic inscriptions and proposed interpretations: Bush, “‘When My Beholder Ponders’: Poetic Epigraphy in the Alhambra”; Olga Bush, “The Writing on the Wall: Reading the Deco-
134. A major figure in the literature of Islamic Spain, Ibn Zamrak left poems that have been documented on the walls of the Alhambra as well as in collections by Ibn al-Khatib (before the master’s death in the 1370s) and the seventeenth-century historian al-Maqqari, who compiled a wide range of sources on al-Andalus.61

The poetry of the Alhambra does not simply describe objects and architecture but rather, as Akiko Motoyoshi Sumi suggests in her discussion of Ibn Zamrak’s ode to Muhammad V, offers a carefully curated experience: “The poet imitates and improves on both nature and architecture, the palace, in his ode. That is to say, both of them are materials for his poetry, because he even idealizes the palace that is already a complete architectural work of art. What we experience is not the palace itself, but the mediated, i.e. verbalized, form ennobled by him”.62 Thus Sumi argues that the poem is both an engagement with nature (in its curated form in the gardens, and in general) and with the monument. Of course, due to its place in the epigraphy of the palace, the poetry also becomes an element of the architecture, a building stone of text within the larger project of artifice. Text, palace, and nature are closely connected, to the point of becoming one.

A second poem from the Hall of the Abencerrajes, attributed to Ibn Zamrak, enhances the issues raised in the first poetic epigraph discussed in the opening section of this chapter:

1. In this palace, Ibn Nasr has achieved his ambitions
   nāla Ibn Naṣṣīn bi-hādha l-qasrī mā-(i)qtarāhā
   For its door has opened to sublime victory
   fa-bābuhu liʿazīzī l-naṣṣīrī qad futīḥā
2. Observe the vase in my mīhrāb and you will see it
   fa-unẓūr li-(i)biṣiṣ miḥrābī tarāḥu biḥi
   as the imam beginning prayers
   mithla l-imāmī idhā ʿsalātahu (i)ftataḥā
3. My Lord, allow my owner to last forever as with him
   adāma rabbi l-mawla yā l-baqāʾ kamā
   his gifts will last for the world and for religion
   adāma lil-dīn wa-l-dunyā biḥi l-minḥā.63

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62 Sumi, Description in Classical Arabic Poetry, 185–186.
63 Puerta Vílchez, Reading the Alhambra, 174.
Both poems – the one above and the one that opens this chapter – are relevant in the present context because both of them describe a vase (ibriq, better translated as “ewer”) that is placed in a niche within the monument-narrator. While one can only speculate on the placement of vases within the Alhambra, the prevalence of deep niches of various sizes throughout the complex suggests that they did indeed hold objects, rather than standing empty as they do in the current museum space. Artifice is used to improve on nature; the latter is harnessed in order to establish the palace as a major source of artifice and amazement.

While the vases are important parts of this setup, they are not the only objects that contribute to the multisensory space. Textiles such as curtains, hangings, and cushions were other elements in this setting, appealing to the senses with the sounds that they made when moved and the sheen of their threads. This idea connects to the larger discussion of textile motifs in stucco and woodcarving at the Alhambra, and their connection to extant pieces of fabric. Although none are preserved on-site today, a substantial number of textiles associated with the Alhambra through their patterns, aesthetics, dates, and possibly place of production exist. These include large-format pieces such as the so-called Alhambra curtains. These textiles tie into the same discourse of ʿajab that is evoked in the poem on the Freer Vase. In this line of thinking, Lisa Golombek has ascribed to medieval and early modern Muslim culture a sensibility particularly attuned to textiles and their patterns. Golombek emphasizes the rich textile production of the Islamic world and the use of architectural decoration that refers to woven models. Following Golombek, Oleg Grabar has suggested that a prevalent textile aesthetic exists in Islamic architecture, closely connected to the geometric ornament that covers large sections of monuments. Both arguments are certainly convincing, considering the fluidity with which textile patterns appear in other materials and contexts while architectural decoration is evoked in textiles. These patterns, in turn, cannot be divorced from the actual textiles that would have been used within spaces.

66 The Hispanic Society of America, New York, H 931; Mackie, Symbols of Power, fig. 5.26. The Cleveland Museum of Art, Leonard C. Hanna Jr. Fund, 1982.16; Mackie, Symbols of Power, fig. 5.29. For more on these textiles, see Mackie, Symbols of Power, 192–203.
67 See note 53 above and Sumi, Description in Classical Arabic Poetry.
Poems similar to those in the Alhambra and on the Freer Vase also appear on textiles that were produced in the context of Nasrid Granada and perhaps used within the palace. A fragment (Figure 6) in the collection of the Victoria and Albert Museum in London speaks in the first person, evoking the pleasure conferred on its viewer:

1. ُانَّ الْفِرَأ弘 الْفِرَأ弘 اهْلَان وَمَا رَأْيَانَى رَأْيُنَى سُرُورُ رَأْيُنَى هَانَأ َ
I am for pleasure. Welcome. For pleasure am I. He who beholds me sees joy and delight. ⁷⁰

Larger pieces of the same textile, sewn together to form a chasuble, are preserved in the Textile Museum in Washington, D.C.⁷¹ Despite the fact that two of these pieces were joined upside down, their size manages to suggest the effect of the original textile as a whole, in which the circular nature of the poem and the potentially infinite continuation of the woven pattern come together. Thus, the initial phrase “I am for pleasure” is repeated in inverted form: “For pleasure am I.” In this lies a

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The Vessel as Garden

Chiasm, following Bissera Pentcheva’s concise definition of the term: “Chiasm in literature operates through repetition of a word or phrase in a mirroring structure that establishes a frame arranged centripetally, about a center. As a result, the structure focuses attention on the center, which, in a chiasm occupying several lines, embodies the main idea, understood as a premeditated action, a counsel, or a promise.” The mirroring that hinges on a central concept here highlights pleasure (faraḥ). Hence, the pleasure taken by the viewer (or wearer) in the textile as well as the overall focus on just such pleasure within Nasrid poetry and aesthetics stand at the center of the poem. At the same time, the entire poem appears over and over again, forming the repeat of the weave pattern. The repetition of these phrases draws the viewer into the beauty of the language, and even more so into the beauty of the object, which is emphasized by the poem. Thus, even though the poems – on the Freer Vase, in various parts of the Alhambra, and on the textile fragment just mentioned – do not directly address the senses, they allude to multiple levels of perception.

Imagery related to various materials addresses the properties inherent in these materials and the ways of perceiving them. While vision takes a central place, the comparisons to textile and metal invite the poem’s reader or hearer to imagine these precious materials, also creating imagined experiences of touch. In the case of textiles, the sound of rustling fabric may be added to this multisensory illusion. The presence of sound is extended to the fact that poetic inscriptions might potentially have been read and recited, along with other poems that were known to the court’s poets but not part of the building’s epigraphy.

Moreover, the sound of water flowing in the many fountains of the Alhambra and running through channels in the Courtyard of Lions and adjacent rooms would have added to the immersive experience of the palace (Figure 7). In this sense, another poem is crucial in that it establishes a connection between water, perception, and artifice. The poem is inscribed on the rim of a marble fountain basin that was installed in the sixteenth century in the garden at the foot of the Mirador de Lindaraja, 72 Bissera V. Pentcheva, Hagia Sophia: Sound, Space, and Spirit in Byzantium (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2017), 85.


74 As evocative as photographs of water flowing through the fountains and marble channels of the Alhambra are, it is also important to note that the water features have been restored and the fountains largely replaced by copies to protect the originals. On the multiple layers of restoration and change at the Alhambra since the sixteenth century, see D. Fairchild Ruggles, “Inventing the Alhambra,” in Envisioning Islamic Art and Architecture: Essays in Honor of Renata Holod, ed. David J. Roxburgh (Leiden: Brill, 2014), 1–21.
although its original location is unknown.⁷⁵ Two lines of the poem are particularly pertinent in establishing the image of water:

1. a piece of ice, some of which has melted, and some of which hasn’t melted
   
   $\text{q}i\text{ṭ \atun min \b}aradin \text{fa-} \text{ba'} \text{ḥā dhā' ibun wa-} \text{ba'} \text{ḥā lam \yudhab}$

2. and when the bubbles float, you imagine that I am a heaven in which all kinds of stars arise
   
   $\text{wa-} \text{idhā tafā' l-} \text{ḥab̩ābu khiltani falakan} \text{aṭla'a} \text{shattā-l-shahab}$.⁷⁶

In this poem the water metaphors are taken to a higher level, connecting them to the firmament, and hence to other structures within the Alhambra such as the wooden ceiling of the Comares Hall (Figure 8), which has been interpreted as representing

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⁷⁵ The original basin is now in the archaeological museum of the Alhambra, and a copy is installed in the garden: Puerta Vilchez, Reading the Alhambra, 355.

Figure 8: Ceiling of the Comares Hall, the Alhambra, Granada. Photograph: Patricia Blessing.

Figure 9: Ceiling of the Hall of Abencerrajes, the Alhambra, Granada. Photograph: Patricia Blessing.
the firmament based on inscriptions, including Qur’anic texts, within the hall. The same metaphors are evoked in the muqarnas domes of the Hall of the Abencerrajes (Figure 9) and the Hall of the Two Sisters, two spaces located across from each other on either side of the Courtyard of Lions. Within this larger play of metaphors, objects such as the fountain basins – both the so-called Fountain of Lindaraja and the fountain basin in the Courtyard of Lions – are joined with curtains and vases in a discourse of beauty and amazement that is directly inscribed within poems in the structure and on these objects. This observation raises the question of the larger discourse on beauty and perception in medieval Islamic thought, and the aesthetics of wonder.

**Conclusion: The Alhambra and Beauty in Medieval Islamic Thought**

Perceptions of beauty and aesthetics were often connected to the notion of God and the Qur’an as paragons of beauty. Discussing the work of philosopher al-Ghazālī (d. 1111), Doris Behrens-Abouseif notes:

> But beauty is not only visual; it can be perceived by smell and touch as well as cognition, which lead to corresponding pleasures. The more exalted the subject of our knowledge, the higher the pleasure. Al-Ghazālī distinguishes between aesthetic beauty and beauty perceived by the intellect. Only external beauty is sensed through sight, hearing, touch, and taste, but there is also the beauty of abstract things such as knowledge and virtue, which are perceived by the “inner sight” (baṣira bāṭina), not by the senses. Knowledge of God is the perfect perception of beauty and the utmost form of pleasure, surpassing all satisfactions of the senses and the intellect.

The scientific discussion on optics in the works of scholars such as Ibn al-Haytham (d. 1039) also had a significant impact on the ways in which visual perception was understood and connected to the intellect. A difficulty in applying these ideas to the visual arts is that the medieval authors themselves did not do so. Rather, the concepts noted above were first and foremost relevant for the assessment of aesthetics in

77 Puerta Vílchez, *Reading the Alhambra*, 124–126.
literature or poetry, but not architecture or objects. Due to this discrepancy between a rich tradition of thought on aesthetics and an apparent disregard for the visual arts, certain limits remain to the ways in which we can approach sensory perception in medieval Islamic art. Nevertheless, these philosophical works also open up the possibility of a larger understanding of aesthetics that, as Puerta Vílchez argues, can be connected to the visual. In this sense, the Alhambra can be an important connecting point between the two modes of aesthetics, in that the space of the palace serves to demonstrate that the building, the poetic texts of the period (whether recited within or inscribed on the monument), and the portable objects that are part of the same aesthetic discourse all form a *Gesamtkunstwerk*.

With this unified aesthetic of architecture, object, and poetry in mind, the Alhambra as a space is the ultimate source of ʿajab. Indeed, the thirteenth-century Iranian polymath Qazvini (d. 1283/1284) defines this notion as “the sense of bewilderment a person feels because of his inability to understand the cause of a thing”. Applied to the multisensory space of the Alhambra, the sense of wonder is palpable in that a range of materials (stone, tile, wood, stucco) are used in the architecture, but often in ways that belie their physical characteristics. Thus, stucco takes on textile patterns, seemingly dissolving walls. At the same time, objects are added to this space and enhance the wonder it creates: vases made of ceramic are said to be of metal or wrapped in fabric; textiles embrace their own woven nature, but also show motifs that connect them closely to the walls. Often, in fact, one cannot tell whether the wall is a textile or the textile a wall. Similarly, in the case of the Alhambra Vases, the ceramic medium of their bodies is hidden behind layer upon layer of metal and textile metaphors as well as water motifs connecting them to the larger garden space that is also part of the Alhambra. In this sense, a deeper understanding of the Alhambra Vases offers insights into the ways in which this multisensory space is constructed, taking into account both the architecture and the objects placed within it.

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82 Puerta Vílchez, *Historia del pensamiento estético árabe*. Further investigation requires close reading of this extensive study together with the existing art historical narrative.
Plates
Plate VI (Blessing): Gazelle Vase, late fourteenth to early fifteenth century, Museo Nacional de Arte Hispanomusulman, Granada, inv. no. 290. Image: Album/Art Resource, NY.
Sensory Reflections

Traces of Experience in Medieval Artifacts

Edited by
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