

Book reviews

The Arts of Intimacy: Christians, Jews, and the Making of Castilian Culture

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New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2008

ISBN 978 0300106091, 395pp, hfb, £25

The Mediaeval period in Al-Andalus, the greater part of what is now modern Spain, was multi-lingual, multi-cultural, multi-ethnic, and had significant communities of all three Abrahamic religions. *The Arts of Intimacy: Christians, Jews, and the Making of Castilian Culture* is primarily about their shared cultural milieu, the 'intimacy' between them.

The art and architecture of Islamic Spain was both distinctive and brilliant, but as Oleg Grabar has observed:

The art of Islamic Spain can be seen in two ways. It can be part of a large body of monuments known as 'Islamic', that is to say as made by or for people who professed the Muslim faith; or else it can be seen as Spanish or Hispanic, that is the creation of a land with traditions which would have been, in part at least, independent of the religious, ethnic or cultural allegiances of rulers of the moment.¹

Grabar appeals to artistic aspects of the mosque of Cordoba that are carried over in the Christian chapels added to that structure much later by Alfonso X (who reigned between 1252 and 1284)², and also in the Cathedral that rose within its core. Those qualities included the stucco designs, horseshoe arches and the geometric tile dados which echo aspects of the former mosque. In their turn those horseshoe arches had been borrowed from earlier Visigothic architecture of the Iberian peninsula. While indulging a Moorish taste in this context, Alfonso also built León Cathedral in imitation of Reims Cathedral, the French coronation church. Style and design were manipulated in different visual languages to carry different political messages to the local ethnically and religiously diverse population, and to the courts of the Christian kingdoms to the north. He embraced the ethnic and religious diversity of his realm, while sending clear signals to his European neighbours: Reading and interpreting the use of these diverse artistic and architectural languages is not at all straightforward, but is clearly

key to the understanding of mediaeval Spain. Do these visual languages, and their various dialects perhaps represent 'collective memory', as Grabar suggests, is it cultural continuity and ethnic mix, or is it perhaps the triumphalist display of cultural trophies from one culture and religion by another? Which reading, for example, gives us the best understanding of the successive stages of building at the Bāb al-Mardūm mosque in Toledo? It rose on the site of a Visigothic church, incorporating *spolia* from the earlier structure. The main features of the building including the articulation of the walls and the dome are very clear references to the Great Mosque of Cordoba. In the 1190s after the re-conquest, the little mosque came into the possession of the Knights of St John and a large apsidal chancel with an altar was added to convert the Bāb el-Mardūm Mosque into an axial church. Given different cultural and political situations, the reading of this mix of signs may well shift between various possible approaches, or from different vantage points there may be a simultaneity of readings. Whatever the motivation of the patron of work, often a successive stage in the life of a building, the architect, artists and artisans might well come from another ethnic, cultural and religious community. So much of their artistic currency was held in common that Grabar appears to suggest that this is Spanish art given a particular emphasis because of the context in which it was commissioned. Take the examples of two synagogues in Toledo built in Islamic style and subsequently converted to the churches of Santa Mariá la Blanca and El Tránsito. Even their plans, architectural treatment and artistic design are strikingly similar to a mosque, but that does not indicate a confluence or mixing of belief, but rather cultural interdependence.

Not only religious, but secular architecture too had to use these complex architectural and artistic languages to negotiate politics and power. The

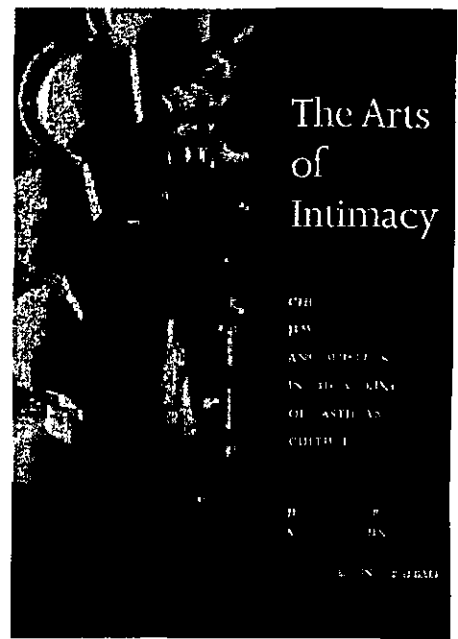


image of (Christian) kingship was expressed in the architecture of the palace, and the defining image remained the (Islamic) Alhambra. Even when Pedro the Cruel built the Alcazar Palace in Seville in its present form, he reproduced the confusing sequence of rooms and courts, the slender columns supporting elegant tracery, geometric tile dados and even Arabic inscriptions. It is treated as a magnificent and powerful cultural heritage and a necessary cultural setting for Spanish kingship, whether Muslim or Christian. The diversity of the ethnic heritage was unified in the convergent embrace of the cultural heritage. Aspects of that cultural heritage were used locally, nationally and internationally as dialects or languages, speaking eloquently in those different contexts and consolidating political unity and power through cultural means.

The Christian kingdoms in north-western Spain developed a very particular style both in contact with and in contrast to Islamic architecture. In its turn this northern style made a considerable contribution to the development of the Romanesque which appeared during the first half of the eleventh century in these northern kingdoms and across southern Europe to Lombardy. At Santa Maria de Naranco near Oviedo the walls are clearly articulated with piers of clustered, sculpted columns, capitals with a braided astragal and an early stiff-leaf decoration. This supports an elegant arcade with roundels in the spandrels and a barrel-vault with heavy ribs, a kind of architectural articulation found on the gates and the interiors of the Great Mosque of Cordoba.

A mature Romanesque style enlivened by Islamic forms is to be found all along the pilgrimage routes to Compostella. For example the early 11th century dome of Notre-Dame du Port, Clermont-Ferand, uses squinch arches to fit the dome to the square space, which may well have been learned from the Great Mosque in Cordoba and the arches at tribune level in the nave are horseshoe arches, and decorative tiles and coloured voussoirs on the apse reinforce the sense of Arabic influence. The façade articulation of Notre-Dame, Le Puy-en-Velay likewise seems related to Cordoban examples. Further Islamic details include pointed and cusped arches, stripes in the coursed ashlar and the voussoirs, patterned panels, and wooden doors with cufic inscriptions. As far away as Vezeley at the beginning of one of the most important pilgrim routes to Compostella, the semi-circular transverse ribs of the vault alternate the colour of the voussoirs just as in the emblematic Great Mosque of Cordoba, and this is surely a visual reference to the political and cultural context at the other end of the pilgrim road.

The relationships amongst the Muslim, Christian and Jewish communities of Mediaeval Spain, whether seen as confrontation or intimacy, have always been used politically and polemically. The subject is clearly of current relevance and deserves reassessment, but its linguistic, cultural, religious and historical complexity presents a formidable obstacle. *The Arts of Intimacy* has taken the combined talents of an architectural historian, a literary historian and a Middle Eastern specialist with the further support of a wide range of expert colleagues, to make this heroic attempt at mapping the territory. They have gone to great lengths to integrate their contributions, not simply providing separate signed chapters or sections. The text retains audibly separate voices and the stars that appear between sections most often seem to signal shifts between them.

The approach taken by the group of American authors is fresh, even within the revisionist tide that has been rising since the turn of the millennium. The American origin of the work is significant because it takes its beginning and ending in the year 1492, when Columbus sailed under the sponsorship of Queen Isabella and King Ferdinand – the same year the monarchs expelled the Jewish community from Spain and conquered the last Muslim kingdom in

the Iberian peninsula. The introduction, 'Palos', takes its title from the little port city from which Columbus sailed; the other chapters take their titles from key words in the book's rhetorical approach: 'Frontiers', 'Dowry', 'Others', 'Union', 'Babel', 'Adab', and 'Brothers', ending with a postscript on 'Intimacy Betrayed'. Typically footnotes are kept to a minimum, but the complexity of the subject clearly posed problems for the structure of the book, and the apparatus grew accordingly to more than a third of the book: many of the terms central to the argument needed extended explanation (distributed throughout the text on coloured insets); maps of shifting borders were needed (and more would have been helpful); a long chronological table is provided; complex relationships and alliances had to be organised into genealogies; and there is a long and helpful descriptive bibliography as well as a very full documentary bibliography and index. Moreover, the book is beautifully, almost extravagantly, illustrated.

There are consequences of this wealth of overlay for the flow of the narrative and even the clarity of argument. The task was immense – to bring such an important subject to proper prominence and reconsider the historical spin of old political ideologies. To prepare the reader for all of this complexity within the confines of the narrative of a single book has taken a very special kind of teamwork. Reading such a book cannot be rushed. It must be savoured, and it will provide a rich return for the attentive reader.

A key example given detailed treatment is the church of San Román in Toledo: "This church was consecrated," an inscription over San Román's entry once recounted, "by Archbishop Jiménez de Rada, on Sunday, the 20th of June, Era MCCLIX (1221[sic])." (p. 170). Something must be wrong here. Unless there is some force to 'Era' that is not explained, the Roman numerals record 1259, which would have some considerable effect on the extended argument that follows, including the date of his burial (reported on p. 186 as 1247), the interpretation of the mixed architecture of San Román, its multiple artistic styles and the imagery of its painted Apocalypse. Taking a line which at first seems very different from the authority Oleg Grabar, who considered that such mixing of styles was evidence of the emergence of a Spanish

rather than Christian or Islamic style, this book concludes that:

This is not to say that these forms were uniquely understood as part of a homogenous Islamicizing culture shared by Christians and Muslims alike. It is rather that the meanings of these forms were in constant flux, just as Rodrigo's understanding of the Mozarabs and their culture was. Such images could hold multiple meanings simultaneously: spolia from a vanquished enemy, pride in a glorious shared Arabic culture, pride in a resistant Christian culture, pride in an ancient Visigothic culture. All these meanings were superimposed, and Rodrigo ran to concretize them, to incorporate them into a theology of unity as fast as his paintbrush would allow him. (p. 183)

This is subtle and nuanced but, depending on the dating, Rodrigo may not have been in quite so much of a rush as that, and the insecurity of the dating shakes confidence in other aspects of the conclusion. Following Simon Barton, the authors note the allegiances of some Castilian families shifting between military support for Christian and Muslim rulers, which may, in fact, plead for Grabar's 'Spanish' interpretation. In any event there is something wrong here that is not easy to disentangle given the particular approach to footnoting, and confidence in this revisionist history is somewhat eroded.

That having been said, this was a massive undertaking demanding a vast range of expertise, and *The Arts of Intimacy* and its authors are nonetheless to be applauded for taking up the challenge with *brio* and the publishers for producing a beautiful book.

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1. Oleg Grabar (1992), 'Two Paradoxes in the Islamic Art of the Spanish Peninsula', in *The Legacy of Muslim Spain*, edited by Salma Khadra Jayyusi, Leiden, New York, Cologne, Brill, 583-91, p. 583
2. See Manuel Casamar Perez (1992), 'The Almoravids and Almohads: an Introduction', in the exhibition catalogue *Al-Andalus: The Art of Islamic Spain*, New York, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 75-83, p. 78