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## A Poem is a Robe and a Castle: Inscribing Verses on Textiles and Architecture in the Alhambra

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**A Poem is a Robe and a Castle:  
Inscribing Verses on Textiles and Architecture in the Alhambra**

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Medieval Persian poet Farrukhi Sistani writes, "I left Sistan with merchants of fine robes/ The robe I bore was spun within my heart/ And woven from my soul."<sup>1</sup> To write in these terms is to weave a text. Another poem of the *qasida* type by Nasir-i Khusraw varies the analogy, "I shall make a castle of my *qasida* and within it / Create gardens and porticoes from its verse."<sup>2</sup> A poem, then, is both a robe and a castle.

Jerome W. Clinton brings these and other samples together to examine "metaphors of craft," the better to understand the construction of Persian poetry.<sup>3</sup> My concerns are more even handed. There is much to learn about the craft of poetry from the self-conscious comparisons to textiles and architecture, but the interrelationship is triangular, and architecture and textiles will have their say as well, both to one another and to poetry.

This interdisciplinary outlook is of special importance in the study of the art of the Nasrids, the last Muslim dynasty in the Iberian Peninsula, or al-Andalus, and its chief monument, the Alhambra in Granada (Fig. 1).



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<sup>1</sup> The requirements of this publication with regard to the font of the text preclude me from providing proper transliteration of terms, names and toponyms in Arabic and Persian. For the translation of Farrukhi's *qasida* see Jerome W. Clinton, "Image and Metaphor: Textiles in Persian Poetry," in Carol Bier, ed., Woven from the Soul, Spun from the Heart. Textiles Arts of Safavid and Qajar Iran (16<sup>th</sup>-19<sup>th</sup> Centuries) (Washington: The Textile Museum, 1987), 7-11.

<sup>2</sup> Clinton, "Image and Metaphor," 7-11.

<sup>3</sup> Jerome W. Clinton, "Esthetics by Implication: What Metaphors of Craft Tell us about the "Unity" of the Persian Qasida," Edebiyat, vol. 4, num. 1, 1979, 73-96.

*Figure 1. Alhambra. Court of the Myrtles. (Author's photo).*

Viewed in isolation the abundant poetic inscriptions throughout the palatial precincts are largely dismissed as pedestrian; the textiles are ignored for lack of documentary evidence and because the relatively few extant remains are either fragmentary or refashioned for Christian purposes; and even the architecture, though the object of much scholarly attention, has suffered from being treated as the set of empty rooms of the present-day tourist site, rather than the richly furnished, lived environment of Nasrid times.

But a castle, or in the case of the Alhambra, a palace is a robe and a poem. The first verse of Ibn al-Khatib's short poem inscribed in the left niche in the entrance arch of the Hall of Comares (Fig. 2) reads: "My brocade skillful fingers embroidered (*raqamat*),"<sup>4</sup> while verses by Ibn Zamrak inscribed in the Hall of the Two Sisters state: "For its radiant portico, the palace/ Competes with the heavenly vault/What vestments of brocade you cast/Upon it! They make one forget the brocades of Yemen!"<sup>5</sup>



*Figure 2 (right). Alhambra. Palace of Comares, niche on the right side of the entrance arch to the Sala de la Barca. (Author's photo).*

Modern scholars may separate the media through the hierarchical division that relegates textiles to the "minor arts," but the aesthetic experience of the beholder of the Nasrid Alhambra would have been fully integrated--and by design. Where documentary evidence is lacking, poetry, robe and castle must speak for themselves, and a theoretical approach must supplement historical research.

I begin my discussion with Ibn al-Khatib's key word *raqamat*. I wish to note that the word *raqm* (the verbal noun of the root *r-q-m*) usually refers to a type of variegated cloth. There are a number of medieval textual sources that refer to textiles in which the derivatives of that root have

<sup>4</sup> For the texts in Arabic, see Emilio García Gómez, *Poemas árabes en los muros y fuentes de la Alhambra* (Madrid: Publicaciones del Instituto Egipcio de Estudios Islámicos, 1996), 105. Though I often take issue with García Gómez's translations and interpretations, I wish to acknowledge my debt to his text and translations into Spanish.

<sup>5</sup> García Gómez, *Poemas árabes*, 116. Ibn al-Khatib and Ibn Zamrak were viziers and court poets of the Nasrid sultans.

been understood as inscriptions, embroidery and stripes. So, for instance, writing on silk, embroidery, and striped silk are designated as *raqama*, *raqamat*, *raqm*, respectively, and a *tiraz*, which is a term for a band with inscriptions, has been also called either *raqm-i-nusakh* or *marqum*.<sup>6</sup> The term *tiraz* itself is another and more obvious example of lexical evidence of the overlap between media. The linguistic origin of the Arabic word *tiraz* is a Persian loan word *taraz*, whose meaning is “adornment” or “embellishment.” The associated Persian verb form means both to weave and to compose poetry,<sup>7</sup> thus highlighting the primary dependence of both crafts on the modular structure of the “object”—verses or stanzas for a poem, and a warp-weft relationship and alternation of units in the design of a textile.<sup>8</sup>

In addition to the use of the word *raqm* to designate a striped cloth or a cloth embellished with epigraphy, another term, *muwashshaha*, also appears in medieval textual sources. Etymologically unrelated, but closely connected semantically, the term *muwashshaha* shares the double valency of *raqm*. *Muwashshaha* probably derives from *wisha*, a girdle or sash for the body, which was embroidered in alternating colors.<sup>9</sup> On the other hand, it also has a literary sense as a form of strophic poetry, originating in medieval al-Andalus, and whose earliest examples date to the eleventh century.<sup>10</sup> The themes of the *muwashshaha* poems are generally love, panegyric, and wine, often combined in a single poem.<sup>11</sup>

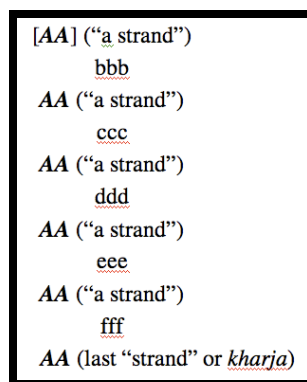


Figure 3. Basic rhyme scheme of the *muwashshaha*.

This Andalusí genre is distinguished from traditional Arabic poetry by its strophic form and its use of polyrhyme.<sup>12</sup> The *muwashshaha* (Fig. 3) is composed of five strophes, and the rhyme within each strophe is uniform, but it changes from one strophe to another. The strophes

<sup>6</sup> Serjeant, R.B. *Islamic Textiles. Material for a History up to the Mongol Conquest*. Beirut: Librairie du Liban, 1972, 8, 146, 61, 172, 68, and 168.

<sup>7</sup> Yedida K. Stillman and Paula Sanders, “*tiraz*,” EI 2, (Leiden: E. J. Brill), X, 534.

<sup>8</sup> Clinton, “Image and Metaphor,” 7-11.

<sup>9</sup> Tova Rosen, “The *Muwashshah*,” in María Rosa Menocal, Raymond P. Scheindlin and Michael Sells, eds. *The Literature of al-Andalus* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 165-189.

<sup>10</sup> The bibliography on *muwashshaha* is extensive. For a concise and illuminating introduction to this genre, see María Rosa Menocal, “The Newest ‘Discovery’: the *Muwashshahat*,” in Menocal, *The Arabic Role in medieval Literary History: a Forgotten Heritage* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1987), 71-114, and Rosen, “The *Muwashsha*,” 165-89. For a discussion of the relationship of this genre to Provençal poetry see Cynthia Robinson, *In Praise of Song. The Making of Courtly Culture in al-Andalus and Provence, 1005-1134 A.D.* (Leiden-Boston: Brill, 2002), 273-300.

<sup>11</sup> Rosen, “The *Muwashshah*,” 169.

<sup>12</sup> The following discussion of *muwashshaha* is based on the studies of Menocal and Rosen.

alternate with a set of isolated, single verses differing in their contents but unified by a common rhyme.<sup>13</sup> These isolated verses are referred to in Arabic as “a strand for stringing pearls,” that is the strophes are, metaphorically, the pearls and the isolated verses the strands.

Thus the basic rhyme scheme appears as: [AA], bbbAA, cccAA, dddAA, eeeAA, fffAA, where AA stands for the strand. The last strand after the fifth and final strophe, fff, is called *kharja*.<sup>14</sup> In contrast to the rest of the *muwashshaha*, which is written in classical Arabic,<sup>15</sup> the *kharja* may likewise appear in classical Arabic, but it may be composed in vernacular Romance as well, or even in a vernacular Romance that includes Arabic words, resulting in a bilingual poetic composition.<sup>16</sup>

In addition to this bilingualism, multiple oppositions operate in the relationship between the body of the *muwashshaha* and its *kharja*. María Rosa Menocal points out, for instance, that the formal poetic language and the formal code of the strophes and preceding strands, “embody the equally formal courtly laments of a male speaker,” whereas the *kharja* “set off by its use of a much more casual code, is often spoken by a woman who does not use traditional formal expressions to convey her sentiments.”<sup>17</sup> Menocal argues nevertheless for the unity of this hybrid genre. The wide range of discontinuities (language, gender and voice) and continuities (rhyme and rhythmic patterns) in the *muwashshaha* are conjoined in the service of expressing the same sentiment --the lament of unrequited love. Menocal further urges the prominence of a meta-textual dimension; the *muwashshaha* is a poem “talking about itself and about literature and language at least as much as it is about its external subject.”<sup>18</sup> I would add that by dividing the voice between the poetic “I” of *muwashshaha* and *kharja*, the genre is also talking *to* itself, staging an inner conversation. The combination of these elements—the balance of continuity and discontinuity, the meta-textual dimension and the dialogic voicing—provides the grounds for an integrated study of Nasrid art across the boundaries of different media.

I now turn to the testimony of castle and robe. I will proceed first to the intersection between poetry and luxury textiles. A large silk garment (87 cm x 140 cm) (Fig. 4), sewn from several fragments of cloth into a pluvial (a type of church vestment), and housed in the Museo Diocesano-Catedralicio in Burgos, Spain, presents an interesting example of a type for which similar fragments can be found in many museum collections.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Rosen, “The Muwashsha,” 167.

<sup>14</sup> For an example of the Arabic *muwashshaha* with the basic rhyme scheme, see Otto Zwartjes, Love Songs from al-Andalus: History, Structure and Meaning of the Kharja (Leiden: Brill, 1997), 28-29.

<sup>15</sup> The study of Hebrew *muwashshaha* constitutes a field of its own; for the relationship between Arabic and Hebrew *muwashshaha*, see Zwartjes, Love Songs.

<sup>16</sup> For an example of Arabic *muwashshaha* with a bilingual *kharja*, see Zwartjes, Love Songs, 28-29.

<sup>17</sup> Menocal, “The Newest ‘Discovery,’” 99.

<sup>18</sup> Menocal, “The Newest ‘Discovery,’” 100-101.

<sup>19</sup> Similar and even identical fragments in this group are housed in various museum collections. Florence Lewis May noted that the fragments with a striped design and cursive epigraphy were “of more than average width,” and that several of these fragments were reused in chasubles. See Florence Lewis May, Silk Textiles of Spain (New York: The Hispanic Society of America, 1957), 193.



**Figure 4.** *Pluvial. Textile, Nasrid period, late 14<sup>th</sup> c, silk and gold thread, lampas weave, (140cm x 87cm). Museo Diocesano-Catedralicio, Burgos, Spain. Photograph by Sheridan Collins. Image © The Metropolitan Museum of Art.*

These textiles were made in al-Andalus in late fourteenth- or early fifteenth-century.<sup>20</sup> In the case of the pluvial, the cloth was woven horizontally on the loom,<sup>21</sup> and, most likely, it was intended to be employed such that the horizontal bands of the design could be appreciated. However, the width of the cloth made it possible to turn the textile vertically so as to be fashioned into the long garment of its current state. The widest band contains a tiraz formed by the repetition of the words, “*izz li-mawlana al-sultan*” (Glory to Our Lord the Sultan), a phrase inscribed in numerous places in the Alhambra.

The inscriptions are executed in white silk against a dark blue ground, in which the spaces between the letters are filled with foliate motifs in red and yellow. This band is flanked on either side by a narrow band or border of red and yellow interlace on a green ground. The tiraz alternates with another band, nearly half its width, which is embellished with a horizontally-oriented pattern that consists of a rhomboid grid formed by tendrils and executed in yellow thread, and filled with foliate elements in yellow, white, green and blue colors on a red ground. The composition of the design is characterized, therefore, by an alternation of the two bands with two distinct decorative motifs, epigraphy and vegetal, and thus, resembles the structure of a literary muwashshaha, whose main feature is the alternation of the two distinct elements, that is the strophes and the strands.

I note another parallel on the structural level between the textile and poetic muwashshaha. The three main motifs in the design of the textile are each seen to dominate a distinct band: epigraphy in the widest, most prominent stripe; floral motifs in the medium-width band; and geometric interlace in the narrow border. Thus, the decorative composition can be viewed as tripartite. In this regard it corresponds to the polythematic tripartite structure of a poetic muwashshaha, whose strophes are usually divided to combine the themes of love, panegyric and wine.<sup>22</sup>

<sup>20</sup> Christina Partearroyo, “Pluvial,” in Jerrilynn Dodds, ed., *Al-Andalus. The Art of Islamic Spain* (New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1994), 336.

<sup>21</sup> Partearroyo, “Pluvial,” 336.

<sup>22</sup> Rosen, “The Muwashsha,” 169.



Finally, the Burgos textile is executed in lampas weaving technique, frequently employed in the production of luxury textiles during the Nasrid period. Its double structure consists of a satin ground and weft-faced tabby pattern, with silk used for warp and weft.<sup>23</sup> The double structure of the lampas, where the elements of the ground weave and supplementary weave of the pattern are bound together in complex relations, presents yet another parallel to the linguistic structure of the muwashshaha.

Such parallels, I contend, account for the use of muwashshaha as both the name for the new poetic genre in al-Andalus and as a designation for textiles of multicolored, striped cloth. The point may be stated more strongly. The term muwashshaha is attested in medieval Muslim sources in relation to textiles, but no extant examples have ever been attached to that designation. An inventory dating to 1339, preserved in the Cathedral of Sigüenza, in Spain, for instance, referred in passing to “striped Granada cloth” in connection with a chasuble, but the garment in question has not been identified.<sup>24</sup> With respect to textiles, therefore, muwashshaha has been set aside as an empty category. I am proposing that muwashshaha is the best designation for an identifiable type of extant striped Nasrid textiles and, moreover, that muwashshaha is especially apt for al-Andalus, where the popularity of the new poetic genre gave the term currency and depth in the same cultural milieu in which luxury textiles would have been in use as garments and furnishings. It is possible, then, to group numerous extant textiles into muwashshaha subtypes; the Burgos pluvial is a representative of one of these subtypes.



*Figure 5. Textile fragment, Nasrid period, 15<sup>th</sup> c, silk, lampas weave.  
The Textile Museum, Washington (84.29), image © The Textile Museum.*

I pause over an example of a second muwashshaha subtype (Fig. 5), which has immediate bearing upon the interrelationship of Andalusí artistic media. As is in the Burgos textile (Fig. 4), this fragment, sewn from two smaller pieces and measuring 75 cm x 138 cm in its current state,<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> The information pertaining to the structure of the textile in question is surmised from the analysis of an identical fragment in the Hayward Gallery in London. See *The Arts of Islam Hayward Gallery 8-April-4 July 1976* (London: The Arts Council of Great Britain, 1976), 81.

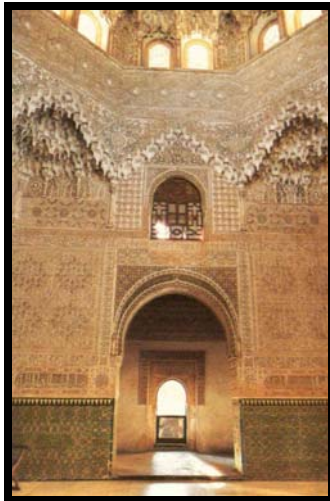
<sup>24</sup> May, *Silk Textiles*, 192.

<sup>25</sup> The examination of this fragment shows that all of its sides and edges are cut, thus hampering our knowledge of its original dimensions. My gratitude goes to Sumru Belger Krody, Associate Curator of Eastern Hemisphere Collections at The Textile Museum, who generously shared the records of the object's report.

is the largest in a group of identical fragments preserved in other collections.<sup>26</sup> Woven in lampas technique<sup>27</sup> and dated to the same period as the Burgos pluvial,<sup>28</sup> this large fragment, too, appears to have been reused as a garment, perhaps a chasuble.<sup>29</sup>

The decorative composition of this fragment is not dissimilar to the Burgos textile, with two alternating bands embellished with epigraphy and foliate motifs, and a narrow border of geometric interlace between the two main bands. But I adduce this example primarily for its epigraphic band, executed once again in *naskh* script in white thread on a red ground. The pluvial had an inscription, but in prose. Here, the robe is quite literally a poem. This textile fragment is the only one in the group that, due to its dimensions, preserved a poetic text in its entirety, which reads: “I am for pleasure. Welcome. For pleasure am I. And he who beholds me sees joy and delight.”<sup>30</sup> While the poem clearly highlights the aesthetic experience by addressing the beholder directly, the *source* of the address is less clear. The poem bids welcome to the delights of poetry; but at the same time, the text is materially inseparable from the textile, and so the verse must also be seen to give a figurative voice to the robe. The textile speaks through the poem; the textile, too, makes claim to be a source of aesthetic pleasure.

Having worked through the interrelationship between poetry and textiles, I turn to the architectural decoration and poetic epigraphy.



*Figure 6. Alhambra. Hall of Two Sisters, Palace of the Lions. (Author's photo).*

The interior of the Hall of Two Sisters (Fig. 6) presents lavish parietal decoration organized in horizontal bands of carved stucco, which were originally painted in vibrant reds, blues and gold on the upper parts of the walls; the lower portion is adorned with dadoes of polychrome ceramic tile mosaics. The carved stucco bands are composed of geometric motifs based on radiating stars alternating with bands filled with foliate forms, while epigraphic bands and cartouches complete

<sup>26</sup> Similar and even identical fragments are dispersed among various museum collections.

<sup>27</sup> Textile Museum object report.

<sup>28</sup> Carry Welch, *Calligraphy in the Arts of the Muslim World* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1979), 73.

<sup>29</sup> I wish to thank Louise W. Mackie, Curator of Textiles and Islamic Art at The Cleveland Museum of Art, for communicating this information to me.

<sup>30</sup> Welch, *Calligraphy*, 73.



the decorative scheme. But it is several verses of parietal epigraphy in another palatial precinct, the *Qalahurra al-jadida*, which I wish to examine here. Four poems were composed by the sultan's vizier and court poet Ibn al-Jayyab, each poem was inscribed in a rectangular tiraz band on two adjoining walls. The poems, panegyric in nature and glorifying the sultan Yusuf I, are very similar in their content and imagery. I focus here on several verses of just one of the poems,<sup>31</sup> especially pertinent to the three-way analogical relationship between architecture, textiles and textile metaphors. Verses two through four read:

2. *Qalahurra* outwardly, on the inside a palace (*al-qasr*)  
So, say: it is a stronghold or a dwelling for happy tidings.
3. Its walls (*hitan*); in them there are markings (*raqumun*) that  
disarm the most eloquent<sup>32</sup> And their beauty (*husn*) is ineffable.
4. They surprise; and each part equals another part in proportion [and/or prestige]  
(*nisba*), and so it is a muwashshaha and a literary work (*musannaf*).<sup>33</sup>

I wish to stress several points: first, the emphasis on a variety of “markings,” termed *raqumun*, which would have referred to all decorative elements in the ornamentation, including the poetic inscriptions; and second, the overall decoration formed by such *raqumun* is designated in verses as “a muwashshaha and a *musannaf*.” The conjunction might tend to assimilate the former to the latter term, hence, a specific type of poem as an example of “a literary work.” However, the poems of Ibn al-Jayyab inscribed in the *Qalahurra al-jadida* are not in fact of the muwashshaha type. Why, then, use this term? While it does introduce the meta-textual dimension explicated by Menocal—poetry speaking about poetry—one must not hasten to foreclose the ambiguity of muwashshaha, which introduces a textile dimension as well. And I further note that the Nasrid beholder would have been alerted to precisely that ambiguity—textile and textual—by the immediately preceding verse through the use of the term *raqumun*, a derivative of *raqm*. In sum, if indeed the poems highlight the contribution of poetic “markings” to the aesthetic effect, and so represent the architectural ensemble as a *musannaf*, a literary work, so too the verses speak for and about the architecture in textile terms. The palace, with its alternating bands of architectural decoration, is likened both to a muwashshaha in the sense of a striped textile, and simultaneously, to a muwashshaha as a dialogic poem capable of giving voice to a conversation between the media.

To use the idiom of architecture, the various media *overlap* in the term muwashshaha, where by “overlap,” I refer to the mode of the stucco ornamentation in the Alhambra (Fig. 6), which consists of three distinct grids carved at differing depths, each decorated with vibrant colors that recall silk textiles, and, most importantly, superimposed one on another.<sup>34</sup> The result is a textured surface, but one may as well say, metaphorically, a textile surface. The castle is a robe and a poem.

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<sup>31</sup> For the complete text of all four poems in Arabic, see García Gómez, *Poemas Arabes*, 137-142.

<sup>32</sup> García Gómez's translation identifies *raqumun* with vegetal forms. Rubiera Mata translates the terms as “inscriptions” (see *Ibn al-Yayyab. El otro poeta*, 114). Both interpretations highlight particular aspects of *raqumun* and relate the term to the specific decorative context. But taken separately, each version obscures the breadth of the term, which can include those meanings and others. Hence, I render *raqumun* as the more general “markings,” which can encompass all types of parietal decoration.

<sup>33</sup> García Gómez omitted the words *muwashshaha* and *musannaf* from his translation of the verse.

<sup>34</sup> Fernández-Puertas, *The Alhambra*, 96-97.

Ibn al-Jayyab's verse articulates that overlapping as a relationship of equality between parts achieved by *nisba*, a term that at once means "proportion" and "prestige." *Nisba* as proportion is a geometrical property strictly governing all elements of architectural design in the Alhambra.<sup>35</sup> Such proportionality is not an anachronistic modern category, but rather, a pervasive design property in all visual media of Islamic art, thoroughly theorized and widely disseminated in the eleventh-century treatise on optics by Ibn al-Haytham, and, one may conjecture in his lost treatise on architecture as well. I will not be able to elaborate on Ibn al-Haytham's optics here, except to note that his related concept of harmony extends the understanding of proportionality to non-geometric principles of congruity, which, I have been suggesting on this occasion, may also be articulated as architectural *overlap*, lexical over determination or, I add, interweaving, to use in textile terms.

The striped design of the textiles, the strophic or "striped" composition of the poem and the band-like organization of the parietal decoration all contributed to the creation of the integrated inter-media space, in which different media "speak" to each other to the beholder. In this regard I return in conclusion to the second meaning of the term *nisba*, "prestige," and which should be understood as a reference to the valorization of luxury textiles, royal architecture and court poetry.



**Figure 7.** Textile fragment. Nasrid, 14<sup>th</sup> c., silk, lampas weave (102 cm x 36.3 cm).  
*The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Fletcher Fund, 1929 (29.22), image © The Metropolitan Museum of Art.*

What the poetic inscriptions in the *Qalaturra* tell us is that, first, all three media are manifestations of the prestige of the patron; second, that they are comparable to one another in their prestige; and finally, that only taken together, as when one views the interior of the *Qalaturra* in connection with a third subtype of muwashshaha textile, exemplified by a textile fragment (Fig. 7), do they constitute what Ibn al-Jayyab calls "ineffable beauty."

### **Acknowledgments**

I am honored that this paper was nominated for the Textile Society of America Founding Presidents Award, and I am grateful to the Textile Society of America for support that made it possible to present this paper at the symposium.

### **Notes**

The arguments I present in this paper are more fully developed in a chapter of my monograph-in-progress examining the aesthetics of the Alhambra.

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<sup>35</sup> Fernández-Puertas, *The Alhambra*, 96-97 and 312-315.