

The Alhambra and the Generalife

An Art History Guide

M.^a Elena Díez Jorge (ed.)

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P r o l o g u e

SOME YEARS AGO, in my former role as Director of the Alhambra and Generalife trust, (*Patronato de la Alhambra y del Generalife*) I commissioned a new edition of the official guidebook to the monument to replace the earlier, 1988 edition. The commission entailed significant revision and broadening of contents as well as the creation of a tool for study that would complement its specific use on a visit.

The present work, coordinated by Elena Díez Jorge in collaboration with José Manuel Gómez-Moreno and Pedro Galera Andreu, is the result of that commission. The authors are university teachers who have conducted substantial research into the Nasrid complex. Elena Díez Jorge has studied the layering of Islamic and Christian elements from the point of view of multiculturalism, as well as having made a suggestive interpretation of the use of spaces from the perspective of the feminine and masculine in the architecture. José Manuel Gómez-Moreno has pursued his principle interest in the architectural defences and Pedro Galera Andreu, as well as being the author of a volume on the romantic image of the Alhambra, has conducted various studies of the Palacio de Carlos V. The three, as university teachers, have often followed their own paths through the complex, accompanied by their students, unravelling its qualities. Their experience of research and teaching come together to produce the present, scientifically and didactically grounded volume: something much more than a typical, run-of-the-mill guidebook.

The "guide" is a genre of artistic literature with a long, fruitful tradition. Art historians of importance have had no qualms about availing themselves of the genre in order to present the findings of their research in a concise format, succeeding in making good the enlightened ideal of popularizing knowledge. Today the genre has been somewhat devalued. Guidebooks are written in haste by people with limited knowledge, or even unconnected with the specialized field of art history, and are usually mere commercial products for the consumption of an undemanding tourist market. When they do not actually include gross errors of detail, these appear in the overall presentation: a jumble of names, dates and data mingled with anecdotes but lacking an interpretative overview that selects, structures and organizes information to offer a coherent vision of the historic meaning and aesthetic values of a city, monument or museum exhibits. When present, such an overview dignifies the genre and links it to the tradition I mentioned earlier. The authors of the

present guide have fully accomplished their aim of presenting indisputable facts about the precinct in Granada within an interpretative overview: the information and structure draw on the most recent studies of the topic and state-of-the-art methodological approaches to the historiography of art.

The book is in two parts. The first, an introductory "History of the Alhambra: spaces, life and people" establishes the principle themes that are later elaborated and enlarged on in the second part. Among other topics, it deals with architecture, understood not as an index of types and purely formal elements but in relation to its practical and symbolic functions; the historic layers (the Muslim Alhambra and the Christian Alhambra), viewed not as sentimental adherence to the past but with rigorous, historic consciousness, capable of appreciating the cultural contribution and formal interrelationships. The brief section dedicated to the "Care of the Alhambra" is highly relevant as, if the monument has survived to our times this has not been due to chance or love, as one prestigious specialist in Arabic studies would have it, but to reason. At the turn of the nineteenth century a concept of modern historic knowledge was established that made the conservation of monuments a basic requirement. A requirement that, in Granada's Alhambra precinct, has been fulfilled in exemplary fashion.

The second part, "Visit to the Alhambra and the Generalife", proposes an exhaustive, documented, guided tour. Centred on the inside of the walled precinct and the almunia of the Generalife – the Generalife estate comprising the palaces surrounded by their gardens – we are invited to follow other paths that complement and enrich our experience of the place: the wooded Bosque de Gomérez, the Dehesa, – the meadows in the Generalife – or the enticing pedestrian route via the Cuesta de los Chinos, and the indispensable view from the city.

The text, written in a clear style, does not overdo the use of specialized terminology and, when this is unavoidable, provides precise definitions in the glossary (one of several useful, well-thought-out appendices). Likewise, the neat, up-to-date transcriptions from the Arabic, made with the advice of Juan Castilla Brazales, a researcher at Spain's national science research council School of Arabic Studies and the person responsible for the corpus of epigraphs of the Alhambra. Finally, the graphic material brilliantly completes the volume. Together with the planimetry of Lourdes Gutiérrez Carrillo and Antonio Orihuela Uzal, the photographs by Vicente del Amo, lecturer in the University of Granada's Faculty of Fine Arts, eloquently underline the formal qualities of the architecture: the relationship with the countryside, the geometry of volumes and spaces, or light as the element that gives shape to matter.

This work has come to light thanks to the University of Granada press and the Andalusian regional government department of Innovation, Science and Business in collaboration with Granada's Institute of Quantity Surveyors. It is a good example of how one objective of university publications – the social dissemination of knowledge – should be interpreted. Written by university teachers in response to visitors' desire to understand, it will also serve students of Islamic art at university level who, to date, lacked a manual that rigorously but simply helped them study the Nasrid monument.

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I n t r o d u c t i o n

WHEN WE VISIT A MONUMENT WE WANT TO SEE, understand and feel it. In the Alhambra we want to see the spaces, their formal elements, the countryside, the surroundings..., to see in order to understand what others saw and felt in their time. To understand in order to feel the pleasure of water, light, the gardens, and especially to feel the pleasure of being able to attain a deeper knowledge of Islam, a deeper understanding of medieval times in al-Andalus.

Many visitors arrive here with just such a desire and we want to respond to them when they enter into these pages. So, this Guide has been created as something more than a simple descriptive tour of the rooms and spaces of the precinct. We wanted to present a collection of reflections that would guide visitors into each corner of the Alhambra and the Generalife, suggesting more than describing, so you can sense what it may have been like in times gone by.

The magnificence of the Alhambra and the Generalife is such that one visit is not enough to understand it. That is why this Guide is intended to offer you a tool you can read even if you are far away from the Alhambra, so you can continue to feel and live the Alhambra, in spite of the distance.

In these pages you will find suggestions and reflections to increase your understanding of the Alhambra and the Generalife but also – and why not? – to give free reign to your imagination as you begin a journey through time.

Essentially, the book is divided into two parts. In the opening pages we reflect on the meaning of the Alhambra as a palace city and the place it occupies in the history of architecture. Aspects treated superficially in traditional guides to the precinct are gathered together to offer not just a historic and artistic analysis of the Alhambra, but also to give you, the reader, clues as to its interpretation so you can question the monument: How did the meeting of cultures in the Alhambra take place? What was daily life in the palaces like? These are some of the topics openly analyzed in these first pages.

The second part of the book suggests tours, following different routes that gradually uncover each of the individual parts that make up the precinct. We analyze each of the spaces and rooms and their outstanding features through text and

image, initially accompanied by a brief summary to help locate the period and style of the space you are visiting.

Finally, a series of annexes present key figures cited in the book because of their connections with the Alhambra and the Generalife, historic events, and a glossary of words and terms intended to help you with some of the questions that occur to you while reading these pages.

The responsibility that a book of this nature entails is, we believe, compatible with our choice of style. While maintaining the maximum scientific rigour, we hope it both stimulates and attracts the reader. As authors, we hope to transmit not only our knowledge of the Alhambra, distilled from years of work, but also the immense passion, delight and respect that the Alhambra gives us, day in and day out, never failing to surprise.

The Authors

The Alhambra: A palace city

The hill called La Sabika, summit of paradise and power

THE FIRST THING THAT SURPRISES about the Alhambra is its geographical location on a hill sometimes likened to a ship with, at its bows, the walled precinct of the Alcazaba sited on the spur closest to the city. This location, without a doubt, conditions the shape and subsequent evolution of the Alhambra. The building has clearly adapted to the hilltop: as well as laying its foundations in the very materials of the hill, it draws the most out of the earth and the water of its surroundings. However, La Sabika (al-Sabika), the hill, and the Alhambra do not constitute an isolated space. Their varying heights facilitated the establishment of other buildings, some for private use and others for defence, that are set out like a crown around them.

To a certain extent, the geographical space conditions the

siting of the three main areas the palace city can be divided into: the essentially military area, the centre of which ran from the beginning of the spur that looks out towards the city of Granada; the palace area, distributed all over the site but which in its final configuration would be grouped especially on the north side of the hill; and the area dedicated to housing and services, extending to the south.

The Alhambra's position on a high, rugged hill does not make it a palace city isolated within its walls but, rather, a city with needs that stretch out into its surroundings. The Torres Bermejas would be the defensive bastion of the Alcazaba, defending it from the Antequeruela, where the Jewish quarter (or Garnāṭat al-Yahūd); spread out; the Silla del Moro or Castillo del Moro controlled access from the River Darro valley and, especially, the arrival of water along the Acequia Real (Royal Watercourse). Near

the Silla del Moro, the palace or estate, *almunia*, of Dar al-Arusa (Dār al-'Arūsa); would be constructed. The extension of a recreational space with the Generalife was completed with its vegetable gardens, a truly royal *almunia* supplying the Alhambra. In short, the Alhambra's surroundings have to be understood as a complete urban-agrarian system intended not just to fulfil their needs but also to continue extending the residential areas as the Dār al-'Arūsa palace shows.

In this outer urban area, the woods that surround and isolate the Alhambra attract your attention but, in fact, they distort the earlier image of a steep, impregnable hill, handed down through history by the travellers and painters who gazed on it. The wood has gained an upper hand over the Alhambra, making a very different impression to that it once did. The greenery has taken a leading role in our perception, replacing the bare curtain walls.

The creation of these woods many years after the Nasrid dynasty meant the fortress lost its essential defensive capacity. Although the question of whether or not a wood existed in Nasrid times has remained controversial – a hunting reserve did exist here under Christian rule – what we actually see today is largely a product of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Nevertheless, it has been suggested there must have been

some woodlands during the Nasrid period where the Sultan could hunt, and the area close to the Generalife has been considered a possible location. However, the natural environment that surrounds the Alhambra is not solely centred on these woods as the Generalife's terraced vegetable gardens stretch out on the northern side and remnants of the walls built there can still be seen.

This privileged location, which has been compared with the Acropolis of Ancient Greece, helps reinforce both its markedly defensive nature and the majesty and omnipresence of a space where the summit of political and religious power is clearly perceived in the definitive perimeter of its walls.

However, before it attained the form that we see today, the Alhambra lived a long history. The Alhambra, Qal'at al-Ḥamrā', the Red Castle, mentioned in a ninth-century chronicle, was a castle defending a strategic location as the lookout post of Umayyad Granada. Under the Zirids, the castle was reinforced, despite being relegated to second place behind the all-important frontier hill of the Albaicín, the main enclave at the time.

The arrival of the Nasrids was to reverse roles and the Alhambra would become a great city where a wide variety of buildings would have to be constructed, needed not only for



The towers of the Alhambra comprise a varied catalogue of forms and functions; together some of them constitute an important defensive structure.

physical survival, but also to express the political prestige of government. La Sabika became the stronghold, the heart of the capital city of the recently created sultanate. In the beginning, Muḥammad I (1237-1273), or Alhamar as the founder of the Nasrid dynasty was known, would raise up the great Torre de la Vela and Torre del Homenaje entirely military constructions. But his first efforts would be surpassed in the following century with the consolidation of the palace city, converting the distorted shapes of the fortress into a regal stage, ostentatious, filled with pres-

tige, to which the revealing structures of whimsically decorated rooms and infinite inscriptions were added.

In the Alhambra, the need for walls and their complexity is understood as a specific issue of strategy and security, given the historical circumstances in which it had to be built and its role as territorial capital. These walls, with their towers and gates, became a sophisticated system fulfilling different functions. At first sight, their essential purpose was to defend against attack from outside, but no less important was their role in controlling the comings and goings of inhabitants,

visitors, numerous suppliers and all those who undertook one or another of the activities derived from the specific nature of the city. Some towers are believed to have played a role in the security and vigilance of the inside. We should also bear in mind their purely political value in representing the power of the Sultan,

which can be seen in the way the towers and, above all, the palace gates evolved.

In addition to the walled precinct, the Alcazaba also contributed to the defence of the Alhambra. As headquarters of the palace city and jail too, it possesses a structural unity of its own. Initially, in the thirteenth



The Alhambra was built on one of the highest points of the city of Granada, the hill of La Sabika. The site is not only a strategic defensive position but, moreover, a clear symbol of power and dominion, as portrayed in the mind of Arab poets through beautiful metaphors such as in the poem by al-Maqqarī in *Nafh al-tib*.

“Await on La Sabika and look from its esplanade: the city is the bride who reveals herself to the mountain, her husband”

(English version based on a translation from Arabic into Spanish by M.^a Jesús Rubiera Mata)

century, the Alcazaba and the palace city may well have been separate: the one cut off from the other as independent units with a deep pit where today we find a square known as the Plaza de los Aljibes. Originally, then, there was a defensive structure and perfectly articulated organization that only fourteenth century and, above all, Christians modifications to the palace, have hidden or distorted to some degree.

Traditionally, it has been the Alhambra's role as a fortress that has been highlighted, without integrating its defensive role with others that it might have played. But, beyond this principally defensive function, the Alhambra is first and foremost a palace city. A city first inhabited by the Nasrid sultans which, after the conquest of the city of Granada in 1492, began to be converted into a residential space for its new Christian kings.

A living space for the rulers does not mean just thinking of halls and rooms adequate for day-to-day life in the palace, as well as receptions and feasts; it also entails the entire infrastructure that a court needs for its maintenance. Consequently, artisans and food suppliers also gathered together in this place. The *medina* of the Alhambra was converted into a city created to serve the Court and filled with the life of its commerce, public baths, mosques, houses in the lower part near the Puerta del Vino, and

workshops in the upper part of the city.

Architectural evolution of the Alhambra

ALTHOUGH, GIVEN ITS STRATEGIC LOCATION, the hill of La Sabika may have been inhabited since the Romans or the Visigoths, the first recognisable remains date from the Islamic period. Some researchers consider the foundations made of a particularly hard cement that come to the surface in the lower part of the northern wall of the Alcazaba are the oldest remains.

The first written reference to the existence of a construction of some sort on the Alhambra goes back to 889 when, during the Berber and muwallad uprisings, Qal'at al-Ḥamrā' the Red Castle, is mentioned as a refuge of troops loyal to the Emir of Cordoba. In the mid-eleventh century its military value was reinforced and the first alcázar, or royal palace, was constructed by Ibn Nagrela, minister to the Zirid King Bādīs, being destroyed shortly after. In the same century, the Zirid dynasty founded Granada as the capital of one of the fifty or more, *taifas*, independent city-states resulting from the fragmentation of the caliphate, with the Albaicín hilltop at its core. Substantial remnants of walls, gates, bridges and a public baths can still be seen.

The eleventh-century Alhambra was a fortress reinforcing the defensive precinct of the city and linked to the Albaicín by a wall that crossed the River Darro at the Puerta de los Tableros, a wooden sluice gate. Of this, one pillar and the beginning of an arch have been conserved. Another wall stretched from the current Alcazaba to the Torres Bermejas. The oldest remains in the Alcazaba are believed to date from this period. During the Almoravid and Almohad reigns the Alhambra continued to be a strategic outpost but other constructions dating from the period have not been found.

There can be no doubt that the Alhambra's great historic and political moment was to come when Muḥammad I (1237-1273) came to the throne, with the advent of the Nasrid dynasty. No sooner had they taken power than he decided as a political and institutional gesture, to designate the Alhambra as the citadel where he would govern. However, to understand the complex reality of the Alhambra, it is important to remember that not even at the very outset did its building follow a preconceived plan.

According to the chronicles of the time, in 1238 (AH 636) Muḥammad I moved into the spaces now occupied by the Alhambra, supplying it with water through an independent watercourse. At that time and in the years to follow the Alcazaba would be defined as the first fun-

damental enclave of the new palace city and except for specific renovations and extensions would become the building that most clearly represented the thirteenth-century Alhambra, predating the construction of the great palaces. Under his son and, above all, at the beginning of the fourteenth century under the third sultan Muḥammad III, the Alhambra really started to become a city and walls, towers, gates and the first palaces began to rise up, defining the Calle Real and the main mosque.

The institutional and economic consolidation of the Nasrid dynasty came in the fourteenth century coinciding with certain tensions and confrontation between the Christian and North African kingdoms. It was under Sultan Ismā'īl I (1314-1325) and, especially, Yūsuf I (1333-1354) and his son Muḥammad V (1354-1359; 1362-1391), that the Alhambra was regaled with its finest robes in the form of the spectacular palaces now conserved and visited. Ismā'īl I built a palace in the northern area and the royal baths and a pavilion with a dome in the area known as El Partal remain, along with the Puerta de las Armas, near the Alcazaba. Part of the palace was destroyed no sooner than it had been finished to make way for new buildings commissioned by Yūsuf I who, with the construction of the Comares palace ushered in the greatest period of Nasrid splendour: the Salón de Comares, Torre

de la Cautiva, Puerta de las Albercas or de los Siete Suelos and the Puerta de la Explanada or de la Justicia were the buildings of greatest merit.

Under the government of Muḥammad V, the palaces of the Alhambra acquired a certain sense of unity and the decorators reached their zenith, on completing the earlier palaces with great decorative screens (Mexuar, façade, portico and Patio de Comares) and adding the most unusual and subtle of all the works in the Alhambra, namely the Palacio de los Leones, as admirable in its architectural composition and decorative virtuosity as it is enigmatic in its specific political function and symbolic meaning. At the end of the fourteenth century, the political capabilities and power of patronage of the Nasrid sultans came to an end and with this the Torre de las Infantas was built and the palace of Yūsuf III converted, which closed the cycle of great creations in the Alhambra.

The fifteenth-century Muslim governors of the Alhambra lost interest in constructing new buildings. Even the existing structure was allowed to deteriorate to such an extent that in 1492, when Granada was conquered by the Catholic Kings, contemporary sources record that they immediately had to attend to the consolidation and reinforcement of the defences and remedy the state

of ruin to be found in some parts of the palaces.

From 1492 on, the Alhambra became the palace residence and seat of the Captain-General to the new Christian kings, expressing their wish to keep such a singular building standing both for its clear political significance and to use it as a royal residence. The sixteenth century saw far-reaching conversions with the careful restoration of some parts of the palaces, in harmony with the ancient Nasrid structures, and large-scale modifications to others, such as the Mexuar, the vizier's council-chamber, the Peinador de la Reina, Charles V's apartments, or the singular case of the Palacio de Carlos V. This was intended as an addition to the Islamic building for use as both residential space and for protocol and it caused an impact that even today attracts the attention of many, who perhaps fail to understand it is a building that has to be seen in its historical context and within the mindset of the period.

After the first centuries in which special sensitivity was shown along with great respect towards restoring things to their original condition, this approach was notably abandoned in the eighteenth and the first half of the nineteenth centuries. Only in more recent times has attention been returned to restoration and consolidation, not without the inevitable convulsions and

conflicting opinions that affect a monument precinct as complex and problematic as the Alhambra.

Consequently, what we see today is the product of evolution in time and in architectural tastes from the eleventh century to the most recent contributions in our own century. The variety of structures responds as much to a broad chronological sequence as to different ways of understanding the occupation of territory.

The importance of the Alhambra in the history of architecture

WHEN WE APPROACH A MONUMENT as famous as the Alhambra – the most visited monument in Spain – we must ask ourselves if its reputation is justified or is simply the product of whim and good advertising. First, we should remember that one of its principal attractions has always been the undoubted exoticism of finding a totally Islamic palace in the middle of European architectural tradition. It was the perfect manifestation of the East in the West. By a mishap of history, the visions offered by oriental tales and stories, including *The Thousand and One Nights*, became real thanks to this bewitching place. This very fact has doubtless led to it having attracted numerous travellers, poets and people of all kinds

who have passed through it over the centuries.

But beyond this circumstance, it must be said that the Alhambra is one of the best conserved Middle Age, palace complexes not just in Islamic but also in Christian Europe. The oriental concept of a palace as a place destined more to create a purely ostentatious setting, in consonance with the dignity of the governor, than a comfortable space, adapted as a residence, finds its best expression in the Alhambra. The legacy of the palaces of the pharaohs' Egypt, of Mesopotamian cultures (including Assyria, Babylonia and Persia), of Hellenistic Greece or even of Imperial Rome, of which only very partial remains are left, find their continuity in the lavish courts of Sassanid Persia and in Byzantium and from them pass into Islam. But of the Umayyad and Abbasid palaces and of the different dynasties that governed in the first centuries of Islam's expansion only shapeless ruins and nostalgic evocations remain.

Consequently, the Alhambra, descending in a direct line from this long tradition, is unique and especially fortunate for its state of conservation, despite having suffered substantial restoration and the disappearance of many of the buildings that made it up.

But the Alhambra is something more. In the eyes of

educated Westerners, accustomed as we are to an art of objects and concrete figures with specific bodily existence and personality, Islamic art and ornamentation, particularly in the Alhambra, seems light, ingenious and capricious, but lacking in substance and representative value. As Leopoldo Torres Balbás said, this art is difficult to understand in the West, given that its secrets are not revealed to the hasty, distracted glance of modern man. To be able to discover its hidden messages, profound reflections and contents, we need to visit

each corner, slowly; to be masters of our time and of the time when we visit the monument; to be able to sit on the floor, and thus, slowly and peacefully, follow the playful lines and linking motifs as they rise, flow and mingle with other rhythms and finally metamorphose the letters into flowers, flowers into bands and bands into a welcoming bower to cushion the symphony of forms to which colour lends the essential aroma. Only by understanding and knowing its forms can we then enter into its contents.