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Alhambrism in Russian Architecture: The Islamic Heritage in Europe and Its Rediscovery in the Nineteenth Century

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Abstract: In Europe, a fascination with Islamic art and culture led to an impressive amount of Orientalist architecture and interior design, especially in the nineteenth century. The so-called Moorish Revival emerged after the rediscovery of the Islamic heritage in the Iberian Peninsula. The Alhambra in Granada or, rather, the décor of its medieval Nasrid palaces, frequently served as an archetype for designs in the neo-Moorish style.

In most European countries, buildings and interior designs testify to the widespread fashion. However, the fact that the Alhambra's architecture was also heavily adopted in Tsarist Russia is nearly absent from the non-Russian scholarly literature. In the former capital St. Petersburg alone, there were more than fifty interior designs done in the Moorish Revivalist style between 1830 and 1917. Initially, English, French, and Spanish books were the basis for most of these designs. Later, Russian architects, sent to Europe by the Imperial Academy of Arts to widen their horizons after graduation, traveled to Granada and studied the Alhambra in situ. Their works were then exhibited at the Imperial Academy of Arts, where they served as exemplars to students. The Museum of the Academy of Arts thus still has an extensive but little-known collection of drawings, models, and plaster casts of Spanish Islamic landmarks.

Focusing on Russian examples, my paper considers the phenomenon of the Moorish Revival from an unusual perspective. It highlights its extent and complexity, briefly referencing its diverse manifestations in Europe, but also insisting on its consistency. Islamic landmarks were part of the European cultural heritage, and the neo-Moorish style was part of the common European patrimony. This was the result of both close connections between countries and farreaching cultural transfers in art.

Keywords: Tsarist Russia, Architecture, Moorish Revival, Orientalism, Cultural Transfer

1. Introduction

The so-called Moorish Revival in architecture was enabled and stimulated by far-reaching connections in scholarship and art in nineteenth-century Europe. Even if many buildings and interior designs in the neo-Moorish style have been lost over the decades, we can find extant specimens in most European countries. They testify to a widespread fashion and can be considered a common European or even global heritage, as the neo-Moorish style in architecture was disseminated almost worldwide. A team of researchers from the University of Zurich has been investigating several aspects of the Moorish Revival in Europe, some of them less known, as, for example, Russian architecture in the neo-Moorish style.

In architecture, the terms "Moorish Revival" and "neo-Moorish" are sometimes generally applied to architectural elements and décor in "Orientalizing" styles. Strictly speaking, they denominate architecture referring to the Islamic architecture of al-Andalus, originated after 711 on the Iberian peninsula. As the Alhambra in Granada or, rather, the décor of its medieval Nasrid palaces frequently served as an archetype for neo-Moorish designs, terms like Alhambresque, Alhambrismo, and the English equivalent Alhambrism are used additionally to denote architecture that alludes explicitly to the Alhambra.

2. The Rediscovery of the Islamic Heritage in Europe

A key factor in the emergence of the Moorish Revival was the rediscovery of the Islamic heritage in the Iberian Peninsula, preceded by an enthusiasm for Spain and its culture, which had been growing in Europe since the Romantic period. The interest in Spanish Islamic Architecture, mostly ignored after the Reconquista, grew palpably beginning in the mid-eighteenth century, when the Royal Academy of Fine Arts of San Fernando in 1756 began to work on Antigüedades Arabes de España, commissioning detailed drawings of Muslim buildings in Córdoba and Granada. Before the two volumes of the book, featuring fine engravings, were finally published 1787 and 1804, Britons Richard Twiss and Henry Swinburne had published the first visual representations of the Alhambra in their travelogues of the 1770s. Subsequently, Spain and its Islamic legacy attracted the attention of many foreign travelers. Fascinated by the erstwhile cultural diversity of a region where Orient and Occident had coexisted for nearly eight centuries, they idealized it as a place that was still authentic and unspoiled. The iconic palace city of the Alhambra in Granada was the main destination of writers, artists, and architects traveling to Spain in the nineteenth century. In 1829, bestselling

American writer Washington Irving published his *Chronicle of the Conquest of Granada* and shortly afterwards his influential *Tales of the Alhambra* (1832), which popularized the romantic idea of a dream palace.⁷

3. Alhambrism in Russian Architecture

The interest in Spain was widely shared by Russians as well, and Spanish motifs could be found in Russian literature, music, and art. It is thus not surprising that the Alhambra was highly regarded in Russia, too, despite the rather large geographical distance between the Russian Empire and Spain. In the former imperial capital St. Petersburg alone, there are extant more than fifty neo-Moorish interior designs, produced between 1830 and 1917. Anyone visiting St. Petersburg as a tourist today might accidentally stumble into a room designed in the neo-Moorish style, most likely in the Jusupov Palace (Mojka River Embankment, 94). However, our accidental tourist would not immediately grasp how common these neo-Moorish rooms still are in St. Petersburg, as most of them are not open to the public, and the scholarly literature on the subject is nearly inaccessible to non-Russian speakers. Using a few Russian examples, I will now outline the extent and complexity of the Moorish Revivalist fashion, as well as some of the factors that facilitated its dissemination.

3.1. A Bathroom in Neo-Moorish Style for the Empress Alexandra

After a devastating fire in the Winter Palace in St. Petersburg in December 1837, architect and artist Alexander Brjullov (1798–1877) was commissioned to design new private quarters for Nicholas I and his family. Amongst other rooms, he designed a bathroom for the Empress Alexandra Fjodorovna (nee Princess Charlotte of Prussia, 1798–1860). The interior was one of the earliest Russian examples clearly featuring structural elements and décor borrowed from the medieval Islamic architecture of Andalusia. It was redesigned during the reign of Nicholas II, but two earlier drawings of the bathroom have survived. The first is a detailed draft by Brjullov, showing three colored elevations and dated 1838. The latter is a watercolor by Eduard Hau, dated 1870, depicting the bathroom slightly differently from Brjullov's drawing, and many years after it was completed.

Only one observation should be emphasized here. 13 Although Brjullov spent many years in Italy and France after his eduation at the Imperial Academy of Arts in St. Petersburg, he most likely never visited Spain. 14 Nevertheless, his sketch proves he had very detailed information on the architecture of the Alhambra. The niche on the smaller side of the room strongly recalls a niche in the Patio de la Alberca at the Alhambra. Brjullov accurately copied elements of its décor: the tilework in the lower wall, a frieze in the backwall of the niche, the ornament on the spandrels, as well as a frieze with Arabic script, to cite just a few examples. Some elements have been simplified by Brjullov, such as the corresponding half-dome with muqarnas. Others have been replaced or added, such as the pillars with annulets and capitals, characteristic of Nasrid columns. Brjullov must have used printed illustrations as the patterns for his designs. At the time, knowledge of Spanish Islamic adornment was disseminated mainly through prints and books. Comparable to model books in the Middle Ages, illustrated publications were used by architects as prototypes for their own neo-Moorish works. The accuracy with which Brjullov reproduced Nasrid décor is striking, as he produced his designs at a very early stage of the fashion in Russia. The radiant colors of the tilework in his sketch are near-reproductions of the original. Brjullov must have used a precise—and colored—template, such as Plate IX in Jules Goury and Owen Jones's Plans, Elevations, Sections and Details of the Alhambra. ¹⁵ The full edition of the book (in two volumes) was published in 1842 and 1845, but its first three parts had been published in 1836. Although it is not known whether Plate IX has been published in 1836, Brjullov's drawing very much suggests this was the case.

In an extensive 1839 account of the renovated Winter Palace, Aleksandr Bašuckij praised the bathroom as a space where "all the luxury of the Moors from Granada" was concentrated. Here, the visitor could get a "genuine idea of the brilliance and splendor of the Caliphs' dwellings", which were reproduced "with the utmost fidelity." Indeed, I would argue that Brjullov's design was, to a large extent, a quite convincing application of the architectural and decorative elements of Granada's medieval Nasrid palaces. His work aroused enthusiasm among contemporaries and led to a series of similar interior design. We can concur with Bašuckij's amusing résumé of the Empress's bathroom: "Yes, the artist stole all this from the Alhambra, and probably no one will blame him for the theft."

3.2. Russian Architects in Granada and St. Petersburg

A shift in the Alhambra's reception occurred when Russian architects visited the place themselves, thus expanding first-hand knowledge of its architecture and decorative details. The top graduates of the Imperial Academy of Arts were routinely sent to Europe for several years to expand their knowledge of art history and refine their skills as artists. Rome and Paris were the main destinations of scholarship students from the Academy's architectural department. Towards the mid nineteenth century, with the shift from Neoclassicism to Eclecticism in Russian architecture, architects could travel more extensively through Europe and broaden the scope of their interests. Due to

the widespread enthusiasm for Spain, the Iberian Peninsula and its Islamic architecture were among the new destinations.²¹ One of the first architects who visited Spain and Granada in the 1840s was Aleksandr Krakau (1817–1888). Many years after his visit to the Alhambra, he designed a dining hall in the neo-Moorish style in the mansion of Baron Alexander von Stieglitz in St. Petersburg (English Embankment 68, 1859–1862). The neo-Moorish style was rarely employed for the design of such a large, semi-official hall, but more often for smoking rooms, cabinets, and living rooms, i.e., smaller, more intimate spaces. As archetypes for his design, Krakau could have used his own drawings of the Alhambra, adapting them to his needs. Other architects followed his example in the following decades.

A major role in disseminating the Alhambresque style was played by architect Pavel Notbek (1824–1877), although, as far as we know, he did not build any neo-Moorish buildings in St. Petersburg. Notbek arrived in Granada in 1852 and stayed there for ten years, researching the architecture of the Alhambra. He produced fantastically detailed and beautifully coloured architectural models of some of the most famous rooms of the Nasrid palaces, such as the Sala de las Dos Hermanas and the Sala de los Abencerrajes. In 1862, he brought his works to St. Petersburg, where they were acquired by the Imperial Academy of Arts and installed in a room devoted to the Alhambra. Notbek's oeuvre, which contributed to a detailed knowledge of Spanish Islamic architecture in Russia, was accessible to students of the architectural department and was meant to further their education. Numbering over three hundred items, the Notbek Collection contains, besides the above-mentioned models, a vast number of plaster casts of architectural details and ornaments in the Alhambra. Currently, this extensive collection is being studied by the Research Museum of the Russian Academy of Arts (NIMRAKh) in cooperation with the University of Zurich.

Even at a time when Russian architects often traveled to Granada, books remained an important source of their designs. In some cases, such as the neo-Moorish boudoir in the Vladimir Palace, built in the early 1870s for the Grand Duke Vladimir Alexandrovič, the exact prototype of a design can be identified. Although the architect Aleksandr Rezanov (1817–1887), was one of the first Russian architects to visit the Alhambra himself, the décor of the boudoir is at least partly based on published reproductions. A frieze on the back wall of semi-circular niche shows a sequence of arcades and ornaments that originally appear in the stucco work of the Alhambra. It is highly likely that Rezanov or his assistants used a plate by Owen Jones as their prototype. While the colors painted on the plaster at the Nasrid palaces in Granada had mostly disappeared by the nineteenth century, the frieze in St. Petersburg exhibits the same vivid polychromy (white, red, blue, and gold) and zigzag pattern that Jones suggested in his reproduction of the ornament. Description of the ornament.

3.3. The Culmination of the Alhambresque Style

The neo-Moorish fashion culminated in St. Petersburg in the 1870s, when elements of the style were first applied to the façade of a huge block of flats on Liteinij Prospekt. The building was commissioned by Prince Aleksandr Muruzi (1807–1880), and construction of the complex lasted from 1874 to 1877. Ever since, the so-called Muruzi House has been the stuff of myths and legends. Dubbed by the press as "Petersburg's Alhambra" in 1877, writer Joseph Brodsky called it a "Moorish wonder" more than a century later. The building was commissioned by Prince Aleksandr Muruzi (1807–1880), and construction of the complex lasted from 1874 to 1877. Ever since, the so-called Muruzi House has been the stuff of myths and legends. Dubbed by the press as "Petersburg's Alhambra" in 1877, writer Joseph Brodsky called it a "Moorish wonder" more than a century later.

The Muruzi House was designed by architect Aleksej Serebrjakov (1836–1905). As the architecture of the Nasrid Alhambra palaces are pivoted inwards, Serebrjakov had no prototype for designing the façades. From a distance, the five-story building, outfitted with cornices, oriels, and balconies, resembles other apartment buildings of the period. The closer one gets to the building, the more elements and ornaments borrowed from Islamic architecture one recognizes. The horseshoe-shaped windows on the first floor, the neo-Nasrid capitals, strongly reminiscent of the capitals in the Alhambra's Lion Court, and the wrought-iron gate, bearing the motto of the Nasrid dynasty, are just as few examples. ²⁹

Serebrjakov's bulky residential block, with its neo-Moorish décor, has remained unique landmark in St. Petersburg, but the fashion flourished in interior design until the revolutions of 1917.

4. A Complex Phenomenon

Our final example is the so-called "Moorish living room" in Prince Nikolaj Jusupov's palace in St. Petersburg (Mojka River Embankment, 94), which I mentioned earlier. It was designed by architect Aleksandr Stepanov (1856–1913) in the 1890s. Almost everything about the room is reminiscent of the Islamic architecture of al-Andalus: the arcade separating the room, the generous application of ornament, and the walls, which are divided into three and four zones, respectively. The lower wall panels imitate *alicatados*. In the stucco above them, niches (resembling the *tacas* usually found on door jambs) and Arabic inscriptions provide even more food for the eye to feast on. However, the entire design (the architectural elements as well as the ornaments, except some of the Arabic inscriptions) also differs in

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form and application from the apparent archetype. Stepanov's room is thus not an exact replica in all its details, although knowledge of those details was available in St. Petersburg. It is, nevertheless, a detailed interpretation inspired by certain rooms in the Alhambra.³¹

In fact, Stepanov redesigned an earlier so-called Oriental living room, built in 1858–1860.³² The uppermost frieze, the ceilings, the fireplace, and the room's layout are all that remained of the original design. The earlier version of the room had long been ascribed to Ippolito Monighetti, a well-known architect and facile practitioner of the numerous styles that were prevalent during Eclecticism. Contrary to what was previously though, art historian Natal'ja Zajceva argued in 2009 that Monighetti had only been the supervising architect. According to correspondence housed at the Russian State Archive of Ancient Documents (RGADA) in Moscow, Prince Jusupov commissioned a French architect to do the project while living in Paris.³³ A watercolor by Andrej Redkovskij, dated 1863, shows the living room exhibited an eclectic mix of styles. The topmost frieze and the ceiling were reminiscent of Hispano-Islamic architecture. Interestingly, the frieze and the ceiling were purchased at Michel-Victor Cruchet's workshop in Paris.³⁴ Cruchet produced ornamentation and mouldings from papier mâché and carton pierre.³⁵ Cruchet's mass-marketed products were inexpensive and available in any style.

This brief account illustrates how complicated such architecture could be. It was produced by contemporary trends, close ties between architects and their clients, and far-reaching, complex cultural transfers. Although the typical elements of the Alhambra were copied many times over, they were also remodeled, applied in different contexts, and mixed with elements alien to Spain's Islamic architectural heritage. Therefore, each of the examples I have adduced in this paper differs from its archetype, but each of them clearly expresses the great visual appeal Hispano-Islamic architecture had at the time in Europe and beyond.

Europe's Moorish Revival is not only a common heritage. It also highlights the fact Islamic art cannot and should not be othered in art history, since it is an integral part of world art history.³⁶

In this short presentation, I have only supplied an outline of my subject. However, I am researching it in detail for my doctoral thesis. Methodologically, I pursue and link two main strands. On the one hand, I evaluate buildings and rooms in the neo-Moorish style as primary art historical sources, incorporating additional information from the archives and secondary literature. On the other hand, the reception of the Alhambra in Russia must be considered more generally. This is the only way we can comprehend in its entirety the adoption of the Alhambra by Russian architects, a phenomenon that was itself a product of different cultural transfers.

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Endnotes

One examples in Italy would be the Sala Islamica at the Museo Stibbert in Florence, see Varela Braga (2016).

² The global diffusion of the Moorish Revival is the topic of an international conference to be held in May 2019 in Madrid, a collaboration between the University of Zurich and the Escuela Técnica Superior de Arquitectura de la Universidad Politécnica de Madrid; http://www.transculturalstudies.ch/de/index/tagungen/global-diffusion-of-the-moorish-revival.html.

³ http://www.transculturalstudies.ch/en/

The term "Alhambresque" was already in circulation in the nineteenth century, while the term "Alhambrismo" was coined by Pedro Navascués in his articles during the 1970s and 1980s. Tonja Raquejo used the term "Alhambreco" in 1995 (Raquejo Grado 1995). Regarding the difference between the terms "Alhambresque" and "Moorish," see McSweeney (2015: 47–50).

⁵ See Lozano y Casela (1787, 1804) and Almagro Gorbea (2015).

⁶ See Twiss (1775) and Swinburne (1779).

⁷ The literature on this subject is extensive, see, for example, Calvo Serraller (1995); Galera Andreu (1992); García Mercadal (1999); Krauel Heredia (1986); López Guzmán (1995); Rodríguez Ruiz (2010); Scholz-Hänsel (1989); and Viñes (1999).

Biography

Katrin Kaufmann is a PhD Candidate at the University of Zurich and works in historic preservation. She has a degree in graphic design and has studied art history (with a focus on architectural history and historic preservation) and Slavic languages and literatures in Berne and Berlin. As part of the research project *Mudejarismo and the Moorish Revival in Europe*, Ms. Kaufmann is currently at work on her PhD dissertation, which surveys and analyzes Orientalist architecture in Tsarist Russia from 1830 to 1917.

⁸ See Amel'čenkova (2008). On the immediate reception of Irving's texts in Russia, especially the *Tales of the Alhambra*, see Tjurin (2007: 99–117).

⁹ In his dissertation on Orientalist architecture in Europe, Ludwig Marczoch (1989) first mentioned several Russian examples. Thus far, the most extensive work on the topic published in Russia Irina Andronova's dissertation (2008).

¹⁰ See Bašuckij (1839: 65–66).

¹¹ Research Museum of the Russian Academy of Arts, A-20621.

¹² State Hermitage Museum, Op. 14389.

¹³ The drawings and the interior are described in more detail by Kaufmann (2018: 328–329).

¹⁴ See Kondakov (1915: 298–299).

¹⁵ See (Goury and Jones 1842). The detailed analysis of the décor in the palaces of the Alhambra, as undertaken by architects Owen Jones and Jules Goury, was a decisive influence on the Moorish Revival.

¹⁶ See Darby (1974: 46–47).

¹⁷ Bašuckij (1839: 116–117).

¹⁸ Bašuckij (1839: 117).

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ They would spend the first year studying various architectural landmarks, while in the second year the scholarship students had to focus on a specific landmark and draft a survey of its structure. The third year was dedicated to a graphic restoration or reconstruction of this landmark. See Bogdan and Šujskij (2000: 21).

²¹ See Kaufmann (2018: 332).

²² See Kondakov (1914, 104–105; 1915, 366); Bogdan and Šujskij (2000: 84).

²³ See Kondratenko & Savinova (2018) and Kaufmann (2018: 332).

²⁴ See Goury and Jones (1845: Plate XXVII).

²⁵ See Kaufmann (2018: 331, Footnote 16).

²⁶ See Kobak & Lur'e (1988a, 1988b, 1996); Kaufmann (2018: 334–337).

²⁷ Vsemirnaja illiustratsija 17 (433): 319; Brodsky (1986: 457).

²⁸ For more on this topic and a comparison with a similar building in Berlin, see Kaufmann (2017).

²⁹ Wa-lā gāliba illā ʾllāh ("There is no victor but God").

³⁰ See Giese et al. (2016: 1339–1341) and Kaufmann (2018: 333).

³¹ Ibid

³² See the watercolour by Redkovskij (1863), reproduced in Kukuruzova & Utočkina (2010: 94).

³³ See Zajceva (2009). The prince presumably had not visited the Alhambra, but he surely had taken a liking to the fashionable Orientalist interiors in Paris.

³⁴ See Zajceva (2009: 130).

³⁵ A mix of papier mâché with clay or chalk.

³⁶ See Shalem (2012).