

CHAPTER TWENTY

An Early Muqarnas Plaster Ceiling in the Alhambra Palace, Granada

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THIS CASE STUDY focuses on one of the earliest plaster *muqarnas* ceilings in the Alhambra. It is found in the mirador of the Partal, a building also known as the Torre de las Damas, that was built in the first decade of the fourteenth century. This small *muqarnas* domed ceiling is not widely known and not usually publicly accessible to visitors, but it marks the beginning of a tradition of plaster ceilings at the Alhambra palace that would culminate in the large-scale and widely celebrated ceilings of the Court of the Lions from the latter half of the fourteenth century.¹ It sits therefore at a critical point in understanding the history of the Alhambra, marking the early use of a technique that can be linked back to a longer history of plaster ceilings from North Africa and al-Andalus in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries (Figure 20.1).

This close examination of the plaster ceiling will explore the techniques and material used in the Partal ceiling, speculate on its origins, its possible function and consider its significance in Nasrid architecture. Particular use will be made of studies that examine the Victoria & Albert Museum's section of carved wall plaster from the portico of the Partal (Figure 20.2), as well as of recent studies of Nasrid plasterwork in the Alhambra, which can help to illuminate this little-known ceiling.

While this case study focuses on a single plaster ceiling, its relationship with the wider practice of plaster *muqarnas* ceilings, cross-over with complementary crafts such as woodwork, and the working practices of craftsmen in the medieval period will also be considered. The Partal mirador also contained the carved and painted wooden cupola that is now in the Museum of Islamic Art in Berlin (1.5/78).² The combination of carved and moulded plaster with carved and painted wood within architectural interiors is a practice that would become widespread in al-Andalus and North Africa from the late twelfth century, in important buildings such as palaces, synagogues, churches, mosques



Figure 20.1 *Partial mirador niche, plaster muqarnas ceiling. Photograph: Anna McSweeney.*

and funerary monuments. The evidence seems to point to a sophisticated level of coordination between craft practitioners – particularly carpenters and plasterworkers – as well as the central role of the master craftsman or ‘*alarife*’ (a master builder) in coordinating the overall design and construction.

Partial pavilion: context and patronage

The ceiling crowns the highest point in the Partial, a pavilion (Figure 20.3) that was built in the first quarter of the fourteenth century by the Nasrid rulers of Granada, under the reign of Muhammad III (r. 1302–1309). It sits above a small, raised niche space that is accessible from the second room in the mirador adjacent to the main mirador room, which housed the carved wooden ceiling that is now in the collection of the Museum of Islamic Art in Berlin. The two rooms and the niche are accessible via a narrow staircase and together comprise the mirador tower. Today the tower staircase is accessible through a door that opens on the south facade, towards the water pool, but



Figure 20.2 *Fragment of plaster from the Partial portico in the Victoria & Albert Museum (acc. no. 360–1901). Photograph: Victoria & Albert Museum, London.*

when it was built it was accessed through a door that opened into the attached Partial portico, a door that has since been bricked up. The portico comprises a long open arcade on the ground floor with a ‘qubba’ or square, domed room projecting from its centre towards the north; together with the mirador to which it is attached, these form the Partial pavilion. To the south of the pavilion is a wide pool of water that is almost the width of the portico arcade, and into which the entire structure is reflected in the eyes of the approaching visitor. To the north of the pavilion, the steep sided slopes of the Alhambra forest drop directly down to the Darro River, which separates the Alhambra palace from the Albaicín area of Granada. The pavilion is situated on the route between what was the Alhambra mosque (now the Church of Santa María) and the Generalife palace; both can be seen from some of the mirador’s fifteen windows.

As I have discussed previously, the Partial was probably built as a pavilion rather than as a residence, and functioned as a stopping-off point, a private and secure meeting place with panoramic views of the city and palace, and extraordinary light from its many windows and the reflections from the pool of water.³ It was built by the Nasrid ruler Muhammad III, whose achievements within the Alhambra complex were notable despite his short reign. He was responsible for the construction of the Alhambra mosque, which was situated on the site of what is the now Church of Santa María within sight of the Partial.



Figure 20.3 *Partal pavilion, Alhambra. Photograph: Anna McSweeney.*

He also developed the cemetery for his ancestors in the Rauda of the Alhambra, and may have been responsible for the building of the trading centre, or *funduq*, known as the Corral del Carbón, in the city of Granada, in the first decades of the fourteenth century.⁴ He constructed the small bath house opposite the mosque, which was established as *waqf* or endowment for the mosque, as well as an attached house, of which only the west and south rooms survive together with a courtyard with a pool.⁵ The Nasrid court vizier Ibn al-Jayyab wrote about this house in his *Diwan* and mentioned its ‘splendid cupola’, which does not survive.⁶ Further evidence of his patronage can be found in objects, including a large marble basin from caliphal Cordoba, that he had reinscribed with his name and titles in 1305, after it had been brought from caliphal Cordoba to Granada at some point in the eleventh century, and a bronze mosque lamp.⁷

His primary architectural legacy can be found today in the Partal. Stylistically it sits within the Almohad tendencies of early Nasrid palatial architecture, alongside other late Almohad and early Nasrid palaces in Granada such as the Alcázar Genil and the Cuarto Dorado de Santo Domingo, also known as the Dar al Manyara al-Kubra from the thirteenth century. These share elements that would feature strongly in Nasrid architecture, including the *qubba*, or square room

that projects from the main portico; the mix of brick with wood and plaster; the combination of plaster with intricately carved and decorative wood and glazed ceramic tiles; and the particularly central role of large pools of water alongside the architecture. These elements can be found at the Partal pavilion and would go on to form part of the distinctive aesthetic of the Alhambra.⁸

Muqarnas ceiling

Made entirely of plaster, the Partal's *muqarnas* ceiling has no structural function, instead its plaster niches are suspended beneath the ceiling, protected from the exterior by a roof above it. The niche over which the ceiling sits is a small space measuring 107 cm × 83 cm, while from ceiling to floor it measures 241 cm, with two external windows and one internal opening to the mirador (Figure 20.4). The *muqarnas* navigates the transition from a sixteen-sided central star form, through a dome to the four-sided, square shape of the niche. At the centre of the ceiling are sixteen curved lozenges which form a sixteen-sided star. From the star, sixteen points radiate downwards to meet the eight sides of *muqarnas*. Each of these eight points is marked with a carved form of an eight-pointed star. From each of these eight points, *muqarnas* arches lead down towards the four sides of the niche walls, culminating in a series of eight miniature engaged columns on the four walls, two on each wall, from which the *muqarnas* arches appear to spring. Each of the facets of the *muqarnas* is painted with blue and green motifs in simple floral and/or vegetal motifs. Some appear to be of higher quality painting and decorative design than others, and it is unclear which among them may be later additions.

On the walls beneath the ceiling, in the spaces between the miniature engaged columns is a repeated Arabic inscription carved in plaster relief in a knotted Kufic script. It reads *al-ghibta al-muttasila* (continuous happiness).⁹ This phrase is repeated around the base of the ceiling, with one word contained in each arch, against a painted blue and red background (Figure 20.5). The same common benedictory phrase is found repeated in many places in the Alhambra.¹⁰ The inscriptions survive on three of the four walls of the ceiling. The inscription on the fourth side, that sits above the staircase, has been lost but remaining plasterwork appears to show that it would have continued the same decorative scheme. The words sit inside the arched niches of the *muqarnas* plaster cupola, using the curves of the arches to accentuate letter shapes. Letters form knots beneath the arches on either side of the *muqarnas* niche, framing a central fleur-de-lis formed of half palmettes. Palmettes and half-palmettes fill the spaces between letters, recessed slightly from the height of the letter forms. Further recessed still, thin plaster scrolls interlock and join the vegetal motifs. The raised areas of the letters, palmettes and scrolls show no sign of colour, but the recesses of each of the *muqarnas* niches is painted with



Figure 20.4 *Partial niche from inside the mirador. Photograph: Anna McSweeney.*



Figure 20.5 *Detail of the Partial plaster ceiling inscription. Photograph: Anna McSweeney.*

alternating blue and red paint tones. Analysis of the paintwork on the ceiling to establish its age or chemical properties has not, to my knowledge, been carried out.

Beneath the inscriptions on each wall is a scalloped-edged, blind arch. On the side above the staircase, the plaster is reconstructed on this lower facade, so its original decoration is all but lost. Within these blind arches, on the two external walls are smaller, rectangular windows with an arched opening. The spandrels of each of the arches are decorated with plaster arabesque scrolls. Between the blind arch and the external window openings, schematic designs have been carved into smooth plaster, probably added during the repairs carried out in the 1920s under Leopoldo Torres Balbás who was conservator and director of the Alhambra from 1923 until 1936. Plaster wall panels or ceramic glazed tiles would have decorated this area, however, there is no evidence of these today. The two external windows on the south and west facades were completely blocked up for an unidentified length of time, until Torres Balbás uncovered them in 1923.¹¹

Craftsmanship

The early Nasrid period under Muhammad III, patron of the Partal pavilion, saw the evolution of a new technique for decorating walls with plaster, that of using pre-cast plaster moulds. Until this time, motifs were carved directly into plaster applied on the walls. This in situ, direct carving method was known as *naqch hadida* (sculpture with iron tools), in which the plaster was applied and then the carver followed a design outlined with dry point.¹² The new, pre-cast plaster mould technique involved making moulds in wood or plaster, from which plaster casts were taken. These casts comprised panels of around one metre in width, which were then applied to walls, using dabs of clay (known as *tantos* in Spanish) to attach them to the walls. Liquid plaster was used to backfill the space between the panel and the wall to ensure it stayed in place. The panels were then painted with a thin priming layer of white plaster to cover up the joints between panels and give a smooth, white surface to which colour could be applied.¹³

Pre-cast plaster moulds enabled the craftsmen to cover more of the walls' surfaces with a repeated design more efficiently and precisely than hand carving would allow. It can be difficult to determine whether moulds or hand carving was used in some instances, but the presence of traces of an orange clay layer that was applied between the cast plaster and the final finishing layer of plaster, to allow for the easy release of the mould, is an indication that moulds were used. Rubio Domene has found the majority of Nasrid plasterwork shows evidence of this orange layer.¹⁴ In addition, the observation of division lines between cast panels, and the exact repetition in design and details across a space, can indicate that moulds were used. It is likely that both practices – in situ carving and pre-cast moulding – co-existed for a period of time, depending on the requirements of individual jobs.

A section of carved plaster from the Partal that is now in the Victoria & Albert Museum has been analysed by conservator López Borges, whose results have revealed methods used at this time with a greater level of accuracy and detail than we can gain from observation of plasterwork still in situ (Figure 20.2).¹⁵ The fragment,¹⁶ made up of two joined pre-cast panels, bears a partial cursive Arabic inscription of the Nasrid motto which translates as 'there is no victor but God'. It comes from the wall at the top of the arch over the doorway to the *qubba* in the portico of the Partal. López Borges has analysed the plaster and found it to be a fine white plaster, typical of the Nasrid period, with residue of orange clay and the remains of *tantos* on the reverse, both evidence of the pre-cast moulding process.

Despite this evidence of pre-cast moulding, the Partal seems to sit right on the cusp between the practices of in situ carving and pre-cast moulding, with wall panels such as the Victoria & Albert Museum fragment evidently made using casting while other, bespoke elements

such as the *muqarnas* ceiling, more likely to have been carved in situ. The plasterwork of the late thirteenth-century Nasrid palace, Dar al-Manyara al-Kubra, was carved in situ as it shows no evidence of the use of pre-cast moulds,¹⁷ while analysis of plaster *muqarnas* from an adjacent building to the Partal found no trace of the orange clay, indicating it was not pre-cast.¹⁸ Given the unique nature of the Partal ceiling and its bespoke quality, it probably mixed pre-cast moulding with in situ carving. It is likely that individual *muqarnas* cells in the ceiling may have been moulded before being adjusted to fit each of the segment areas, as would become the practice in the later Nasrid period. The star and the lozenge shapes may have been similarly pre-cast and affixed to the ceiling, although without close examination under magnification it is difficult to tell. However, close observation of the Kufic inscriptions in the ceiling, suggests that they differ sufficiently from each other in their details to indicate they were not made from moulds (or at least, that if they were made from moulds, these were then adapted or refined in situ). The lower relief carving of vegetal forms and palmettes behind the inscriptions were likely also hand carved.

The entire plaster ceiling would have been constructed in sections beneath a wooden four-sided roof construction that protects the decorative ceilings from the exterior elements. The lower wall decorations, including carved plasterwork in the spandrels, were probably made using pre-cast panels that were applied to the window arches using the *tantos* that enabled the plasterer to backfill the mould to stick to the wall.

Material

The early Nasrid period also saw a change in the quality of raw material, with a less refined mix of plaster, known as *yeso negro* (black plaster) being replaced by a *yeso blanco* (white plaster), a whiter plaster made from plaster mixed with fine dust of alabaster or marble. Hydrated calcium sulfate ($\text{CaSO}_4 \cdot 2\text{H}_2\text{O}$ also known as gypsum) is the main ingredient of plaster used in the Nasrid period and *yeso blanco* is made with a minimum of 66 per cent of this ingredient, with fewer impurities or stains from the combustion process than the *yeso negro*.

The source of the plaster used in the Alhambra was mined close to the city of Granada, possibly in the town of Gabia la Grande. While documents from the Nasrid period on the source have not survived, references from the fifteenth century to the extraction of *yeso* (gypsum) from the quarries in Gabia la Grande, note the great demand for the raw material in the early sixteenth century. This was known as a good source of pure, white plaster and was noted as the source for the Alhambra repairs in the sixteenth century.¹⁹ The presence of calcite and celestine indicates that the origin of the raw material was an area near the city of Granada.²⁰

While many parts of the Alhambra were repaired and restored since the Nasrid period, particularly those used as residences by the Catholic monarchs including the Court of the Lions and the Comares palace, the mirador of the Partal has less evidence of significant restorations to its plasterwork. A sketch of the mirador interior from 1833 shows the same pattern of plasterwork loss and change as we can see today, indicating that at least since the early nineteenth century, the wall plaster has not been significantly altered.²¹

Colour

Analysis has not been carried out on the paint remains on the Partal plaster ceiling, however, pigments found on the Victoria & Albert Museum plaster fragment from the portico include red vermillion, azurite blue, tin foil and carbon black (Figure 20.6).²² This is consistent with findings from the Dar al-Manyara al-Kubra, in which the blue was azurite, the red was cinnabar or vermillion (names for a single compound of different origin) as well as minium, the green was verdigris or copper chloride, the black was iron oxide with bone black and the white was plaster; there were no metallic decoration found in this earlier palace.²³ The pigments were applied over a white priming layer and, in case of the foil, used gum Arabic as an adhesive agent. The foil was found on the raised inscription in the Partal portico and may have been used as a base for *corladura* or gilding on the inscriptions.²⁴ The findings of López Borges et al. are inconclusive on the possible date of this metallic foil, suggesting that it may have been added during the post-1492 restorations of the building. They acknowledge however that in the Nasrid court vizier Ibn al-Khatib's writing about the Mexuar in 1362 he described how the inscriptions were covered with layers of fine gold and surrounded by lapis lazuli so it may have also been a Nasrid practice.²⁵ The remnants of colours in the *muqarnas* niche have not been analysed, but from observation it includes blue, red, green and black; no metallic foil or gilding is evident. The plaster of the *muqarnas* is a bright white, while that of the lower wall panels is a creamier, slightly red-tinted plaster similar to that in the rest of the mirador. This may reflect later over-painting, or that the *muqarnas* ceiling was covered over, perhaps concealed behind a panel and therefore not subjected to restoration or the accumulated dust that is found on much of the plaster in this part of the building.

Working practices

How might we understand how the plaster elements worked in Nasrid palace spaces? Poetic inscriptions written by court viziers for the royal patrons and inscribed in the walls of the Alhambra can illuminate how the plaster was considered part of an overall aesthetic programme



Figure 20.6 *Detail of the Partial plaster ceiling. Photograph: Anna McSweeney.*

alongside ceramics and wood in the creation of significant interior spaces. Olga Bush has examined how the poetic inscriptions on the Qalahurra al-Jadida (also known as the Torre de la Cautiva) tower can be understood as an intermediary between the viewer and the building, 'such that the reader of the one is prepared to become the reader of the other'.²⁶ Court vizier Ibn al-Jayyab's poem written for Yusuf I (r. 1333–1354) on the interior walls of the tower in moulded plaster, includes the Arabic verse that translates to 'Marvels of plaster [*al-jissī*] and ceramic tiles it holds, but the carpentry of its ceiling is even more marvellous'.²⁷

The walls were supposed to be read and considered alongside the ceramics and ceilings as part of an all-encompassing aesthetic experience. The ceramic tiles of the lower walls of the mirador, now missing, reached up to the height of the wall plaster, which in turn met the wooden and plaster ceilings, in what is clearly a conscious attempt to cover all the visible surfaces of this interior with repeated ornamentation in bright, primary colours. The metaphor of textiles and clothing is repeatedly invoked in the poems of the Alhambra, in which its decorative plasterwork is described as embroidery.²⁸ In the Partial itself there is a visual correlation between the plasterwork and the wooden ceilings and an attempt to create a space of variety, colour and intensity of aesthetic experience that is similar to those found elsewhere in the Alhambra. Individual motifs such as scalloped arches, stars and engaged columns with Kufic inscriptions are found throughout the mirador; the same phrase, 'continuous happiness', is carved in plaster in the walls of the smaller mirador room as in the niche *muqarnas* ceiling. The result is a coherent, harmonious space, within which the eye of the viewer moves through its materials from floor to ceiling with the same rhythms of ornament and colour, while the other senses – sight and smell in particular – are stimulated by the far-reaching views through its fifteen windows and the scent on the breeze from the palace gardens below.

To achieve this aesthetic coherence, it is likely that the plasterers, ceramicists and carpenters worked in close collaboration with a master builder or *alarife*, as the builder in charge was known. The high level of knowledge of applied geometry necessary to create a *muqarnas* ceiling, even one as small and relatively simple as that of the Partial mirador, suggests that the *alarife* would have been highly trained not only in building practices but also in applied geometry. In his treatise on carpentry and building practices written in Seville in the early seventeenth century, master builder Diego López de Arenas described how *muqarnas* were made and noted that the master builder was required to be also a geometrician.²⁹ His treatise, published in 1633 but based on an earlier manuscript of 1619, likely drew from earlier Arabic sources that may have been employed by the master builders at the Alhambra. Necipoğlu has explored how the intricate geometric designs of the Alhambra may have been transmitted through a

combination of empirical experience, manuals of practical geometry, and workshop drawings which have not survived, but the memory of which can be found in the text and drawings of the treatise of López de Arenas.³⁰

We do not know the identity of the *alarife* of the Partial mirador, or indeed that of the craftsmen or individual plaster workers in the fourteenth century. Reference to plaster workers, or *yeseros*, who repaired the Alhambra in later years can be found in the account books of the Alhambra from just after its conquest in 1492. Labourers who worked in 1498 and 1499 included two plaster craftsmen, referred to as 'Aljayat', and 'Alí de las Maderas', both of whom worked on the plaster repairs to the Alhambra.³¹ Their names, along with the names of other craftsmen and builders who worked at this time on the Alhambra, indicate that they were probably Muslims who had been employed by the Christian court for their expertise and knowledge of the building.

Function

The *muqarnas* ceiling can be understood as part of a coherent aesthetic space within the palace walls. However, the question remains as to what the small niche was for, as part of a space that was set aside for private, royal meetings in the Nasrid court. The function of the niche within the mirador needs to be understood in relation to that of the mirador space within the Alhambra. The situation of the mirador, above a portico flanked by water and a steep hill, made it secure and private, while its many windows and the close proximity of a large pool of water made it a light-filled space from which the comings and goings both in the Alhambra and in the Albaicin below could be easily viewed and overheard. It was probably used by the ruler and his close confidantes, as a place to meet in private during his short reign.³²

Within this private space, the purpose of a raised niche is not clear. At just over a metre high and less than a metre in width, the space is not large enough for a person to stand in, though it would fit a seated person with a little difficulty (it is not large enough to be used as a private prayer space). It is exposed on two sides to the elements with windows and on the third is open internally to the mirador, which makes it unlikely to have been used as a storage niche, for books for example. It may have served as a very private place to sit, extremely protected and with direct views up to the mosque of the Alhambra and across to the city of Granada below. Access to the niche is not easy, but perhaps a small set of portable stairs from the mirador room would have allowed a person to enter into it, though this kind of extra privacy seems unnecessary given the already very private access to the mirador itself. The smaller mirador room, from which the niche is accessed, is connected visually through the use of the same phrase

(*al ghibta al-muttasila*) in Kufic script in plaster beneath the *muqarnas* plaster section at the top of the walls. The spandrel of the arch in all the rooms and niche is decorated with the same carved arabesque motifs.

While it might have been used as a seating or storage area, as there are no other examples of this kind of raised niche space in the Alhambra complex, we must consider other possibilities for its function. Some lower sections of the niche are clearly repairs, probably from the early twentieth century; these include the floor of the niche, the panel of wall on the staircase side, and the lower sections of the niche on all sides. Furthermore, nineteenth-century images of the Partal show that the exterior windows of the niche had been blocked up at some point in time. The painting from the 1830s by George Vivian shows the west window blocked (Figure 20.7 (a)), while a photograph from 1886 shows how the south window was also blocked (Figure 20.7 (b)). Gaps in the original plaster around the entire mirador at head height, probably from beams inserted in the walls, as well as an historic image of the Partal showing a dormer window in the roof of the second room (visible in Figure 20.7 (b)), indicate that another floor or attic space was inserted at some point prior to the mid-nineteenth century.

These changes lead to the suspicion that the original configuration of the space might have been entirely different. The niche might not have had a base at all, but instead have opened to the staircase below. In this hypothesis, the plaster ceiling above would have marked the turning point on the stairs below, its windows providing light for the person climbing the staircase on the narrow route that leads up to the mirador. Near the base of the staircase, a few metres after entering the tower on the first turn of the stairs, there are traces of another *muqarnas* niche of similar dimensions. It comprises a central, sixteen-sided roundel, leading to an eight-sided plaster dome, which rests on a series of *muqarnas* arches, their decorative outlines traced in red (Figure 19.8).³³ The continuing staircase is plunged into darkness today, but if our *muqarnas* niche were not enclosed by its floor, but open instead to the staircase below, it would have both marked the next turn of the stair and lit it up through its open windows, enhancing the grandeur of this narrow staircase approach while continuing a decorative programme begun at the base of the staircase to the private mirador above. There may still have been an internal opening into the mirador area above (although inconsistencies in the plasterwork of the internal walls suggest that the configuration of this opening might also have originally been different). If this was the case, the person inside the mirador would have enjoyed a view across the void of the staircase below, with its plasterwork cupola above, through the windows to the mosque in one direction, and across to the fortress of the Alhambra in the other (before the construction of the Comares tower which is now in sight today). This view down into the staircase would give the benefit of added security, allowing the person coming



b

Figure 20.7 (a) *Lithograph by George Vivian (1798–1873) from Spanish Scenery pl. 28; (b) photograph of the Partal pavilion by Antonio Almagro Cárdenas c. 1886, from Museo Granadino, Private Collection.*



Figure 20.8 *Detail of the Partal lower staircase plaster ceiling. Photograph: Anna McSweeney.*

up the staircase to be seen from within the mirador space above before they arrived into the room.

A longer tradition

Whether the ceiling crowned an enclosed niche, or a staircase turn, its early date is evidence for the introduction of a building practice in the Alhambra complex that would within fifty years become one of the most celebrated and important features of the palace buildings. Suspended *muqarnas* plaster ceilings are found throughout the Alhambra, but are particularly celebrated in the Court of the Lions, in the so-called Hall of Abencerrages and the Hall of the Two Sisters. In the Partal, the Nasrids were adopting an established practice of building entirely decorative and increasingly inventive plaster ceilings that seems to have spread across the western Mediterranean from the early twelfth century, as descriptions of *muqarnas* and archaeological remains from palace sites in al-Andalus, North Africa and Palermo indicate.³⁴

An important early example is at the Qubbat al-Barudiyyin (1117) in Marrakech, which, like the Partal, may have functioned as a pavilion.³⁵ Its ceiling is made from plaster and demonstrates an imaginative use of the space, with a central eight-sided star projecting down through arched forms and deeply carved plasterwork embellished with conch shells, its four corners punctuated with deep miniature *muqarnas* cupolas. A real sense of the three-dimensional plasticity of the plaster and an exploration of the potential of the material to create new shapes in a small ceiling space mark this as a departure point for the medium from which the Alhambra ceilings would emerge.

While the Almohad Tlemcen Great Mosque in Algeria (1136) employs plaster in the ceiling of the dome in front of the mihrab in radically new ways, cutting through to the light above and creating new shapes and dimensions, it is not a fully *muqarnas* ceiling. That can be found in the Qarawiyyin Mosque in Fez from a similar date (1134), with its two *muqarnas* plaster vaults in front of the mihrab. Similarly, the 1153–1154 Tinmal Mosque south of Marrakech includes a *muqarnas* plaster ceiling over the domes in front of the mihrab and along the *qibla* wall. From the final quarter of the twelfth century in Almohad Seville, the plaster *muqarnas* ceiling at the Puerta del Lagarto survives as one of the remaining entrances into what was the Friday Mosque in Seville (1172–1182), now the cathedral (Figure 20.9).³⁶ The combination of plaster and *muqarnas* ceilings was not limited to Muslim contexts either, as the two small plaster *muqarnas* ceilings over the lateral chapels of the thirteenth-century Church of San Andrés in Toledo demonstrate (Figure 20.10).

In all these cases, *muqarnas* plaster ceilings were used to mark significant spaces within important buildings, of religious and secular



Figure 20.9 *Plaster ceiling, Puerta del Lagarto, Cathedral of Seville.*
 Photograph: Anna McSweeney.

functions – a palace hall, the dome in front of the mihrab, or marking the threshold to the mosque or the ceiling of a chapel. In the Alhambra, the small *muqarnas* ceiling of the Partal may have had a similar function in lighting the passage of the visitor through the staircase to the private and exclusive space of the mirador above. It directed the visitor through increasingly important spaces within the Partal, identified as such by their proximity to the presence of the ruler. It may alternatively have crowned a niche at the highest point of a charged, royal space of private meetings, expansive views and exquisite beauty.

This study has shed light on a ceiling that despite its small size and inaccessible position, remains a significant early surviving example in the Alhambra of what would become one of its most well-known and important artistic practices. It was made at the cusp of a change in craft practice from bespoke, in situ carving to pre-cast moulding, a change that reflected the increasing ambition and scale of the Nasrid building project at the Alhambra. It demonstrates how ceilings, particularly plaster *muqarnas* ceilings, were used to mark specific spaces in important buildings, creating spaces so intensely ornamented from floor to ceiling that they were worthy of poetic description, inscribed on the walls of the Alhambra. In subsequent decades, plaster *muqarnas* domes would be supercharged in size and ambition in the Alhambra, made to fill the ceiling spaces of entire rooms in a dazzling display



Figure 20.10 *Lateral chapel ceilings at San Andrés Church, Toledo. Photographs: Anna McSweeney.*

of the geometrician's expertise and the maker's skill at the Court of the Lions. The Partal niche ceiling, diminutive and understudied, can nevertheless point the way to these remarkable suspended sculptures.

Notes

1. For an explanation of the history, etymology and geometry of *muqarnas*, see Necipoğlu 1996, pp. 349–59.
2. McSweeney 2020. I am grateful to the Patronato de la Alhambra, and to Jesús Bermúdez López for enabling me to access the Partal and its mirador on several occasions.
3. McSweeney 2020, pp. 63–74.
4. Puerta Vilchez 2011, p. 26.
5. Torres Balbás 1945, pp. 196–214.

6. Puerta Vílchez 2011, p. 288.
7. Museo de la Alhambra, Granada Inv.R.243 and Museo Arqueológico Nacional, Madrid Inv. 50519, respectively. See McSweeney 2020, pp. 76–9.
8. Orihuela Uzal 1996.
9. Puerta Vílchez 2011, p. 262.
10. Puerta Vílchez 2011, p. 54. More or less contemporary examples of the use of the term are found in a ceramic tiles from the palace bath in the Alhambra museum in knotted Kufic (ibid., p. 298); in the Qalahorra of Yusuf 1 in Kufic script (ibid., p. 305); in the mirador of the west gallery of the Generalife (ibid., p. 333); in the north pavilion of the Generalife (ibid., p. 336); and Torre de Ismail (ibid., p. 349) in cursive script.
11. McSweeney 2020, pp. 153–4; Torres Balbás 1965, pp. 75–92.
12. Garcia Bueno and Medina Flórez 2004, p. 77.
13. Rubio Domene 2010, p. 194; López Borges 2004.
14. Rubio Domene 2010, pp. 195–8.
15. López Borges 2012, pp. 23–43.
16. The fragment (acc. no. 360–1901), measures 21.9 cm × 34.5 cm × 5 cm.
17. Garcia Bueno and Medina Flórez 2004, p. 89.
18. Cardell-Fernández and Navarrete-Aguilera, 2006, p. 172.
19. Rubio Domene 2010, pp. 103–5. See also Rubio Domene 2006, and at: <https://www.alhambra-patronato.es/el-yacimiento-del-yeso-que-se-empelo-en-la-alhambra-sigue-activo-desde-hace-mas-de-dos-mil-anos>.
20. Cardell-Fernández and Navarrete-Aguilera 2006, p. 172.
21. McSweeney 2020, pp.101–2. See Tate Collection London, John Frederick Lewis ‘Mirador in Sanchez’ Cottage, Alhambra’, 1833, Inv. No2202.
22. López Borges, de la Torre-López and Burgio 2012, pp. 142–4.
23. Bueno and Flórez 2004, pp. 86–7.
24. López Borges, de la Torre-López and Burgio 2012, p. 144. *Corladura* was a technique of using metal foil to give the appearance of gilding. See object entry in the Collections Catalogue of the V&A at: <https://collections.vam.ac.uk/item/O449014/wall-decoration-unknown>, last accessed 26 October 2022.
25. López Borges, de la Torre-López and Burgio 2012, p. 144; López-López and Orihuela Uzal 1990, p. 122.
26. Bush 2009, p. 121.
27. Ibid., p. 141; Puerta Vílchez 2011, p. 311, verse 4.
28. Poem 4, Torre de la Cautiva, see Puerta Vílchez 2011, p. 312: ‘The embroidery on its walls by its ineffable beauty stops the mouths of the most eloquent’. See also ibid., p. 213, for example. The walls are also likened to a garden or a jewel.
29. See López de Arenas 1633, p. 79 on the obligation for the *alarife* to be trained in geometry.
30. Necipoğlu 1996, pp. 152, p. 172, see also p. 160.
31. Rubio Domene 2012, p. 540; Vilar Sánchez 2007, p. 99.
32. McSweeney 2020, pp. 72–4.
33. This lower *muqarnas* ceiling is noted in Orihuela Uzal 1996, p. 38.
34. Carrillo Calderero 2017, pp. 1–18; Carrillo Calderero 2009, p. 521.
35. Tabbaa 2008, pp. 133–46. See also Marcos Coboleda, Chapter 19, this volume.
36. Carrillo Calderero 2009, p. 531.