Review Essay

Presentation as Representation: An Exhibit Review of the Islamic Moorish Spain as Opposed to Magisterial Spain

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Islamic Moorish Spain: Its Legacy to Europe and the West. International Museum of Muslim Cultures, Jackson, Mississippi. Permanent exhibition.

The Majesty of Spain: Royal Collections from the Museo del Prado and Patrimonio Nacional. Mississippi Arts Pavilion, Jackson, Mississippi. Temporary exhibition, April 1-September 6, 2001.

Jackson, Mississippi was the site of two contrasting yet related public exhibits in 2001. Both exhibits were tied to state economic development ventures, and both celebrated a specific historical period while failing to acknowledge what Adorno and Horkheimer call the real conditions of existence. *The Majesty of Spain* exhibition reflected the 17th century western emergence of the ideal self as owner of accumulated property, which signals that the world is one's own (Macpherson; Stewart). The exhibit assumed that royalty have wealth without asking how they came by the wealth that fostered such acquisitive behavior.[1] *Islamic Moorish Spain* highlighted a period when culture was measured in terms of the capacity to deepen and widen experiences,[2] and where knowledge "truly and essentially" was the measure of a person (Addison). This flowering in the Islamic world preceded a withering into religious law of the very precepts that created the climate for revelatory

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cultural exchange. If the exhibits are considered separately and then in conjunction, they can be seen as emblematic, if not prescient, of what is today a primary national concern: the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks upon the United States.[3]

Prior to September 11, 2001, Islam had been increasingly gaining adherents in the state of Mississippi, where the Muslim community numbers 5,000 (Graham 10). Many are professionals, with both men and women holding prestigious jobs in education, medicine, computer science, and other areas. The state capital is home to two mosques which bring a substantial Muslim immigrant community into contact with African-American Muslims. This leads many of Jackson's Muslims to identify with and support the political objectives of black elected officials such as Jackson's first black mayor, Harvey Johnson. On Johnson's watch, the city of Jackson allocated somewhere between $500,000 and $800,000 for the state sponsored exhibition of "treasures" from imperial Spain entitled *The Majesty of Spain* (Floyd 1A).[4] A city agency, the Jackson Convention & Visitors Bureau, put an additional $500,000 into the exhibit. These monies supplemented the $3 million from the Mississippi State Legislature and $2.2 million from corporate donors. The local Islamic community could not ignore the memory of the infamous Spanish "Reconquista," as well as the Spanish Inquisition, where the application of torture was commonly deployed to extract confessions from conversos. These memories were coupled with the fact that "as the Spanish national state became stronger this would eventually lead to a demand for absolute religious orthodoxy and purity of blood, untainted by Jews or Muslims" (McKay et al.).[5]

To avoid a political rumble, local leaders supported the creation of a new permanent museum funded, in part, by the city's Convention and Visitors Bureau, $25,000, as well as the Mississippi Development Authority together with the Mississippi Band of Choctaw Indians, $10,000.[6] The museum developers also raised approximately $200,000 from local individuals and small businesses. The International Museum of Muslim Cultures, the first and only Islamic Museum in the United States, opened its doors on April 15, 2001. The premier and now permanent exhibit, *Islamic Moorish Spain: Its Legacy to Europe and the West*, focused on the period of the Umayyhad dynasty from 755 to 1400. Modern scholars consider this one of the most brilliant periods in the world's history as the cross-fertilization between Muslims, Christians, and Jews accelerated the development of human knowledge and laid the foundation for the European Renaissance.[7]

The developers of the Islamic museum transformed a small stand-alone office building into a replica of the famously photographed Cordovan Mosque replete with an arching striated façade. 10th century tile patterns, representative of those found in Moorish Spain, covered the foyer, which also held an exquisite working fountain with an eight point star-like base symbolic of an open book, symbolizing the importance of learning, enlightenment, and the acquisition of knowledge.

Any worshiper entering a mosque must perform "wudu," or ablutions, at least five times a day prior to prayer. Accordingly, the entering theme was water. Printed plaques addressed the Islamic precept of the unity of all people, pointing out that Christ used water for baptisms and that the Jewish religion prizes water for its cleansing properties. The introductory video suggested that Islamic Spain, with its

multiethnic and multinational population, was the "first society of its kind in human history." The mix included Arabs and Jews from the Middle East, Berbers from North Africa, European Christians from Spain and elsewhere, and Mozarabs or Christians who converted to Islam.

As one approached the exhibit, the 1,400 year-old Muslim call to prayer resonated on background speakers. The exhibition was anchored around enlarged photographs and material objects. The enlarged photographs included pages from the Qu'ran written in Arabic, pictures from 15th century Persian dictionaries, ancient manuscripts written in Latin, Hebrew, and Arabic, and depictions of exemplary scholars, scientists, and philosophers. The material objects focused on the staggering number of crops introduced by 8th century Muslims into Spain.[8] The advent of these new products spurred trade and lead to the development of the waterwheel followed by the invention of the windmill. The exhibit reflected the prosperous region, whose proliferation of mosques, synagogues, and churches began to attract a great variety of scholars, the most famous being Ibn Rushid or Averros. As a physician, lawyer, and philosopher he considered the relationship between philosophy and faith.[9] He, like the other Islamic scholars of his era, relied heavily upon ancient Greek texts which had been translated into Arabic. As a student of the Greek philosophers, particularly Plato and Aristotle, Averros would write commentaries on Aristotle's work in biology, medicine, meteorology, logic, and ethics.

Spain was so fertile that the Muslims called it Andalusia, or "green garden." Because all Muslims learned Arabic to read the Qu'ran, a common language stretching from Moorish Spain across North Africa, Arabia, and India into Central Asia, China, and the Spice Islands fostered the development of an active trade route. As Spanish exports made their way along the trade route, Islamic scholars were translating ancient Greek works in science, medicine, and philosophy into Arabic. Toledo and Castile, where Alfonso the Wise recruited scholars of Latin, Arabic, and Hebrew, became centers for translations of ancient texts from Arabic to Latin and Hebrew. The subjects included astronomy, medicine, mathematics, physics, chemistry, mining, sports, and the games of chess, checkers, and backgammon. It was here that Greek works, once regarded as pagan and expunged from the consciousness of European Christians, were restored to Europe.

Muslim traders needed to be able to calculate their gains and losses and so developed Arabic numerals modeled after those in India. Arabic numerals quickly replaced the cumbersome Latin numerals. The increasing complexity of Islamic society led to the development of algebraic equations and the concept of positive and negative signs, along with the concepts of sine, cosine, tangent, and the development of trigonometric tables. Algebra is an Arabic word coming from "al jabr." Al-Khwarizin introduced the concept of algorithms and the decimal system.

Muslims needed to understand geography to know how to locate Mecca for daily prayer and in the event of a pilgrimage to the hajj. Al-Idrise, a celebrated Muslim cartographer, worked in the court of King Roger II of Sicily. By the 9th century Cordova and Toledo had astronomical observatories. The English word "almanac" comes from Arabic. The Cordovan astronomer Al-Zargali built a precise water clock, developed a flat astrolabe, and constructed astronomical tables.

Jabir Ibn Haiyar and Al-Kindi worked with chemical compositions and wrote the leading text in chemistry, which was translated into Latin and used in Europe until the 18th century. Al-Haitham, also known as Alhazen, correctly described the function of the human eye and discovered the laws of refraction before inventing optics similar to lenses used today. His work would lead to the European invention of the microscope, telescope, and the magnifying glass. His student, Kamal-al-din, correctly explained the refraction of white light into the colors of the spectrum.

Bin Al-Baitu used plants to develop medicinal drugs. He combined ancient Greek with Arabic knowledge to write the standard text on medicinal drugs, *Collection of Simple Drugs and Food*, used in Europe through the 16th century. Al Hambra of Grenada separated the study of pharmaceuticals from the study of medicine, inventing the concept of toxicology. His work is based upon the ancient work of the Greek Discordes, whose herbal treatise formed the basis for Islamic pharmaceutical science. Muslims would also translate and employ Galen's *Book of Antidotes* to introduce the practice of quarantine. Ibn Zuhu Avenzou developed ways to set bones.

By the time all of the Greek texts on medicine had been translated there were 50 public hospitals attached to medical schools in 10th century Cordova. Al Zahrarir, regarded as the father of modern surgery, wrote 30 volumes on surgical methods, including the first illustrated medical book, *Al-Tasrif* or *The Method*. It would be used for the next four centuries as the standard European text on surgery. Al Razi studied the diseases of children and invented the concept of the case history. His 25 volume *Comprehensive Book on Medicine* was used in medical schools.

Muslims would bring paper from China to the west in 751. Shortly thereafter the first paper mills appeared in Spain at Xavier, Valencia, and Toledo. This paper made from flax with linen threads was a workable alternative to parchment coming from animal skin or papyrus developed from plants. Knowledge of papermaking spread to Italy and onto Germany, thence Gutenberg and the first printing press.

By the 10th century 800 public schools existed in Cordova, including mosque schools, palace schools, library schools, and public academies. Universities appeared in Toledo, Seville, Valenica, Cadiz, and Granada. Students traveled from France and England to study medicine, mathematics, astronomy, physics, philosophy, literature, history, and law. The first Umayyad rulers established a library with over 100,000 volumes at Cordova by the 10th century. This was Europe's first large library.[10] The multicultural and religiously tolerant society spiraled into decline when the califate collapsed in the 11th century. Christians took over and promptly converted the fabulous Cordoba mosque into a cathedral by 1236. In the pivotal year, 1492, Grenada fell into the hands of Fernando and Isabel, who initiated the infamous "Reconquista." It is at this historical juncture that the west began to build a civilization in direct opposition to the powerful system established by Islam (see Frank; Voll).[11]

During the 300 years following the Reconquista and the Inquisition, imperial Spain accumulated astonishing amounts of wealth from its New World holdings. Absent from the exhibit were references to the colossal impact Spain had upon the New World. A portion of the accumulation was on display for six months when *The*

Majesty of Spain: Royal Collections from the Museo del Prado and Patrimonio Nacional opened to the general public. This exhibit was the third in a series of "blockbusters" staged in Jackson, Mississippi.[12] Spain, in exchange for what the press reported as "millions in fees," assembled a colossal collection described as "masterworks" (Floyd; Lucas).[13] In true superstar style the King and Queen of Spain, Juan Carlos I and Sophia, jetted into Jackson to review the largest exhibition of art and decorative arts ever to leave their country. Most of the objects on display were normally inaccessible, stored in Spanish warehouses.[14]

The exhibit reflected the early 18th century, when the last Spanish Hapsburg king and direct heir to Fernando of Aragon and Isabel of Castile, Carlos II, died childless, willing his throne to his great nephew, the Bourbon grandson of French King Louis XIV. This came at a time when the royal households in Europe competed intensely for the best European architects, artists, and artisans to build and decorate grand domiciles. Outside of the paintings of Francisco Goya and a few Spanish crafted objects, the majority of original objects and paintings in the exhibit were works of French and Italian artists and artisans. The exhibit concentrated on the years 1746 to 1833, spanning the reigns of the Spanish Bourbons Fernando VI, Carlos III, Carlos IV, and Fernando VII, which coincided with the American Revolution. The exhibit included letters from Benjamin Franklin and George Washington written to King Carlos III during the American Revolution, when the Spanish monarchy reluctantly supported the colonists in their struggle for independence. Recent research argues that both the Spanish and French monarchies harbored deep suspicions of what they saw as a revolt among the common classes. However, their hatred of the English overrode their class bias and both monarchies mustered critical support for the American colonists (Faragher et al.).

Five of the 14 exhibition galleries were recreations from four royal Spanish palaces (El Pardo, El Escorial, Aranjuez, and Palacio Real) and three "casitas" or small outbuildings situated on palacial estates. In addition to the small porcelain room with walls and ceilings entirely covered in brilliantly painted chinoiserie, or Chinese rococo panels, a Spanish art restoration firm, El Barco, also restored the Hall of Stuccoes from the Casita del Principe at the Royal Palace of El Pardo.[15] Three hundred pieces of scagliola, a faux marble, covered the walls in stacked panels, some of which were eight layers deep. Both recreations remain as permanent exhibits in Mississippi. The other recreations included a banquet hall containing 12 porcelain settings from the reign of Fernando VII and the Sculpture Gallery from the Labrador Casita, or "worker's house," at Aranjuez, a neoclassical style room with a marble floor showing aged Roman mosaics and ancient Roman busts and various sculptures from the Patrimonio Nacional.

The oldest and largest object in the display was the 55-foot carved and gilded royal gondola built in 1668 during the reign of Carlos II. It is made of carved wood covered with 22-carat gold leaf sea nymphs at a cost of $100,000. Situated opposite the gondola was the 1832 royal carriage of Fernando VII, replete with mythical Diana, Apollo, and Medusa in gilded bronze, crystal, and precious stones, displayed realistically with eight life-size horses in full livery replete with driver and footmen. Both the gondola and the carriage were restored specifically for this

exhibit by twenty skilled Spanish craftsmen and artisans working for three months.

One gallery was made up entirely of the paintings of the renowned Spaniard Francisco de Goya with their identical tapestries. This work was originally installed in the bedroom of King Carlos IV at the Royal Palace of El Pardo during the late 18th century. The most valuable of the Goya paintings in the exhibit was *El Quitasol*, "The Parasol," which remained in Jackson only a mere six weeks before returning to Spain. An adjoining gallery featured additional artworks from the Museo del Prado and seven royal residences, including German native Anton Rafael Mengs's *Crucifixion of Christ*, regarded as the most important neoclassical painting in Spain today, and major works by the Italian master Giovanni Battista Tiepolo. There were 17 rare French designed and produced clocks, depicting themes from Greco-Roman mythology as they displayed the time, day, month, and movement of the moon and the earth. The exhibit also included Carlos III's 16 foot tall throne chair from the Palacio Real and twelve place settings of porcelain, crystal, gold, and silver from the reign of Fernando VII. Chandeliers, candelabra, fans, costumes, ivory sculptures, tables, chairs, engraved muzzle-loading pistols and shotguns, as well as porcelains, bronzes, furnishings, and religious objects completed the exhibition. While each exhibit was illuminating, they were also both deceptive in that each drew the "circle too narrowly and disarticulated the subject from wider historical determination(s)" (Young). *The Majesty of Spain* exhibition, with its emphasis upon imperial acquisitiveness, did not spell out the costs incurred during the Reconquista or the 300-year extraction from the Americas, worth billions in gold and silver. It was this invasive plundering that lead to the genocidal decline of Native Americans and the activation of a 400-year African slave trade to the Americas. *Islamic Moorish Spain*, for its part, pointed to a time when Islam prized innovation and change, before it became what V. S. Naipaul calls "rigid and text ridden" (Varadarajan A10).[16] But its modesty and thoughtful concentration on learning and enlightenment pointed to the possibility of building a global society that moves beyond tolerance to genuine understanding. The combination of exhibits in Mississippi inadvertently signified the tensions between the west and Islam painfully brought home to America on September 11, 2001. Looked at in conjunction with one another, *The Majesty of Spain* could not help but represent the materialist and acquisitive west that ignores what it does to "other" people versus what once had been an Islamic cultural call for unity of all people through an understanding of all religions and, by extension, all cultures. Of course, we all know that the totality of either perspective can never be represented in a single set of exhibits, just as we know that the acts of September 11 do not represent the entirety of current Islamic perspectives on the west. Those terrorists who appropriated western openness and used it to inflict damage upon the west are not representative of the Muslims around the world who daily work and pray for the unity that will bind the whole of humanity into endearing communities (Maneck).

Notes

[1] Jacques Derrida argues that western conceptions of a center, such as origins, truths, purity, ideal forms, God, etc., are attempts to exclude and flow out of accumulation. The conceptual development of a center creates and then marginalizes those whose history is nonwestern, rendering them "others" (Powell).

[2] This concept is attributed to F. R. Leavis (During 2-3).

[3] This juxtaposition between the West and the Muslim world centered, for the first time since the Spanish Muslim revolt of 1499, in the West. Previous to the opening of the Islamic Moorish Museum and the 1993 and 2001 attacks on the World Trade Center, most direct contact between the two has been in the Muslim world. The Muslim revolt of 1499-1501 was the last attempt on the part of the Spanish Muslims and Jews to resist their expulsion from the Iberian peninsula by Christian Spain.

[4] The press release for *The Majesty of Spain* exhibit reported $800,000, but local newspaper accounts lowered the figure to $500,000.

[5] During the "Reconquista," Jews and Muslims were given the choice of Christian conversion or exile, Arabic was banned, traditional Islamic dress forbidden, Muslim and Jewish property seized, books burned, and mosques and synagogues converted to Catholic churches. The consolidation of the Spanish national state led to calls for an absolute orthodoxy extending to so-called purity of blood.

[6] Mississippi manufacturers have multiple trade agreements with Saudi Arabia, making that country ninth on the state's list of primary importers of Mississippi products. In the mid 1990s, the U.S. Ambassador to Saudi Arabia, Ray Mabus, a Clinton appointee and a former state Governor, facilitated contractual agreements between Saudi Arabia and Mississippi's poultry farmers. Much of the chicken grown in Mississippi today is exported to Saudi Arabia. This chicken must be slaughtered in a religiously acceptable manner that includes blessings to Allah prior to slaughter and eventual frozen transport by ship. Some of the state's poultry processors employ resident Imams, who are religiously certified to perform the sacred rites. Others ship their poultry "fresh."

[7] It was in this era that the Islamic poet, Jelaluddin Rumi, dismissed the terminology of Jew, Christian, and Muslim as "false distinctions" focusing instead on individual brilliance and achievement, no matter the background.

[8] They included rice, cotton, sugar cane, oranges, lemons, limes, bananas, pomegranates, hard wheat, watermelons, spinach, artichokes, eggplants, saffron, cumin, anise, mint, cinnamon, pepper, nutmeg, coriander, parsley, and mustard.

[9] His seminal work, *Tubafut al-Tuhafut (The Refutation of the Refutation)*, was a response to Imam Al-Ghazali's *Tahafut-al-Falosfah (The Refutation of the Philosophers)*.

[10] Other representative scholars include: Al-Briuni who, collected and classified fossils and measured the gravity of precious stones and metals; Ibn Sina or Avicenna, who used the classical scholarship of Greece to develop a philosophic and scientific encyclopedia, construct a theory on the formation of sedimentary rock that lead to the study of geology, and wrote over 200 books including a *Canon of Medicine,* which was used as a major text in medical schools in Europe until the 18th century; Maimonides, the Jewish philosopher and court physician to the Sultans of Egypt and Syria who codified the Talmud and wrote *The Guide for the Perplexed*; Alfonso the Wise, who added 100 chess problems to the book of chess; Al-Zargali or Arzachel, the astronomer who built a precise water clock and developed a flat astrolabe; the Muslim mathematicians Al-Qalsadi of Grenada and Jabir Ibn Aflah of Seville; and Abbas Ibn Fumas of Cordoba, who, among other things, manufactured crystals and discovered the process of calcination (reducing drugs to powdered form). Roger Bacon read Fumas's manuscripts following their translation into Latin from Arabic at Toledo. This

enabled him to introduce gun powder, transferred from China by the Muslims, to the west.

[11] Henry the Navigator, third son of the King of Portugal, set out to reestablish the Crusades and take over the lucrative Muslim-dominated trade routes across northern Africa and the Indian Ocean. Portugal paved the way for the Spanish explorers. Andre Gunder Frank points out that "the usual western Eurocentric rendition (of Western Civilization as history) jumps from ancient Mesopotamia to Egypt to 'classical' Greece and then Rome, to medieval western Europe and then to the Atlantic west, with scattered flashbacks to China, India, et cetera. Meanwhile all other history drops out of the story" (261). What is left includes the Islamic world system, which incorporated the traditions of the Afro-Eurasian landmass.

[12] The state of Mississippi, along with the cities of Memphis, Tennessee, and St. Petersburg, Florida, brought "high culture" to the masses by sponsoring similar lavish "blockbuster" exhibitions to encourage economic development. The pattern has been described by the media as a "splendor/treasure" model, highlighting luxury items of exotic ancients (Puente D1). In 1996, Russia joined Mississippi by staging *The Palaces of St. Petersburg: Russian Imperial Style,* followed by France in 1998 with *The Splendors of Versailles.*

[13] *Palaces* was estimated to have pumped $61 million into the local economy, as it brought 825,000 visitors to Jackson, Mississippi. *Versailles* tallied 271,262 visitors. *Spain* lost $185,000, although promoters claim it added $41 million to the local economy. Attendance was around 273,000. This figure is 53,000 short of the planned attendance of 326,000. For the last two exhibits, the overwhelming majority of visitors were from Mississippi, whereas most that attended *Palaces* were from outside the state.

[14] Not surprisingly, the King told the press that he had never seen most of the 600 artifacts accumulated by the twenty generations of his ancestors (Puente D1).

[15] This room is no longer open to visitors in Spain and was one of the two room recreations that remain intact in Mississippi. The other is the chinoiserie paneled porcelain room.

[16] Other writers point out that Islam made a transition in the 12th and 13th centuries from an "effervescent" society to one "weighted" with the "fully developed Shari'a (Islamic legal code), madrasa education, and the Sufi brotherhood" (Bulliet et al. 246).

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