

# Guiding the Imagination: Perception and Inscriptions

## The Court of the Lions at The Alhambra

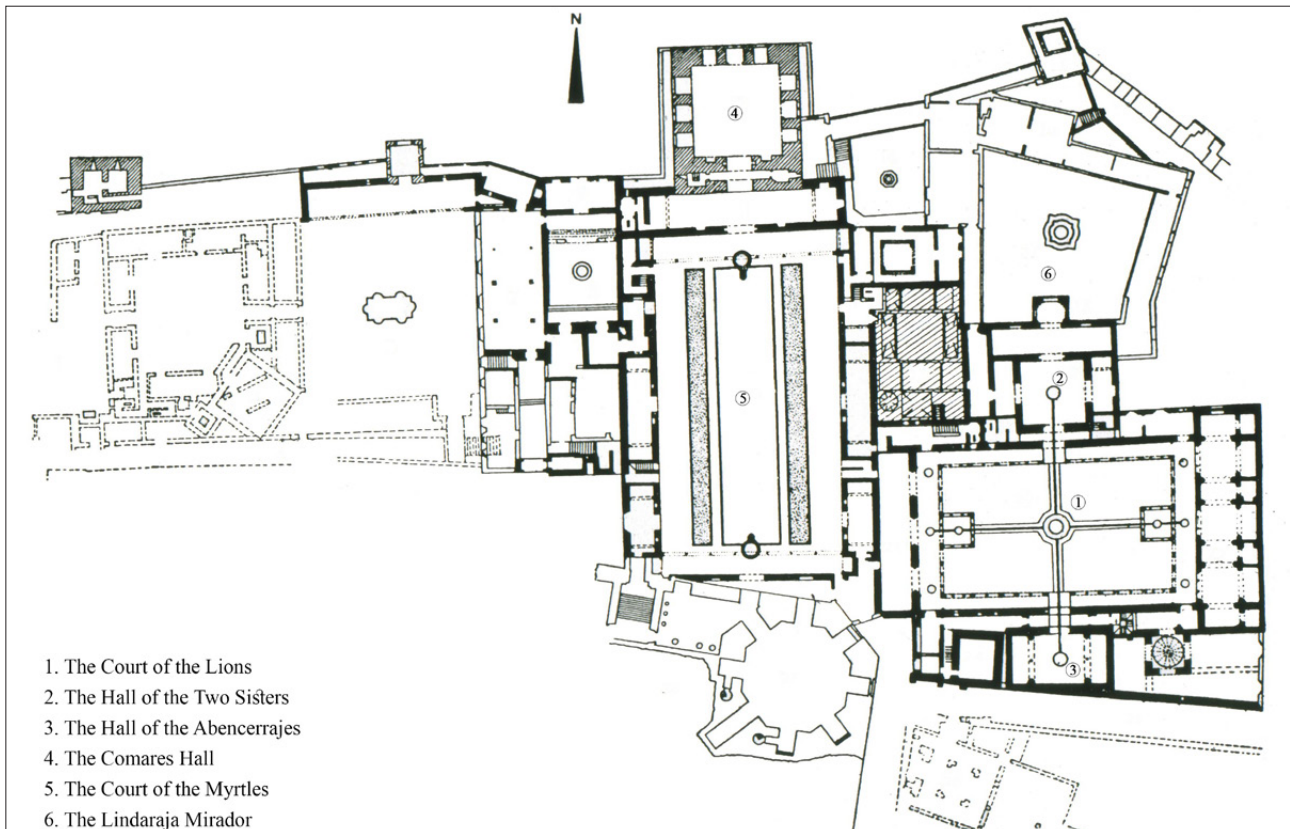
**Gillian Barker**

Ph.D. in History of Art, Bristol  
University, Bristol, UK.

gillianbarker830@btinternet.com

**Abstract** | This paper explores perception by examining various elements of The Court of the Lions at The Alhambra in Andalusia, focusing mainly on the fourteenth century. The position of The Court of the Lions in relation to the site of The Alhambra is set out within its historical context. The paper outlines the relationship of The Court of the Lions to its adjacent spaces: The Hall of the Two Sisters, The Hall of the Abencerrajes and The Lindaraja Mirador. The muqarnas prisms in the domes of the two halls are described and explored, particularly in terms of how they might function perceptually. The overall context of The Court of the Lions is briefly described in terms of outside and inside spaces. Architectural inscriptions are described and interpreted, particularly poetic epigraphs on specific locations. The perceptual effects produced by all these architectural and poetic features, as well as by still and moving water in the courtyard, do not have a merely aesthetic effect; they are also designed specifically to release and guide our imagination.

**Keywords** | Court of the Lions, Alhambra, Perception, Inscription, Garden.



Pic 1: The Deccan Sultanates, Bijapur and Golconda.  
Source: Husain, 2011.

**Introduction** | This paper is about perceptual experiences evoked by architectural features and inscriptions at The Court of the Lions at The Alhambra in Andalusia. It concentrates mainly on the fourteenth century. The features include: aspects of the courtyard, muqarnas prisms, and an inscription on the central fountain and poetic epigraphs on surface decorations. These features are discussed in relation to function, meaning and the role of the imagination. The discussion also references the work of previous scholars.

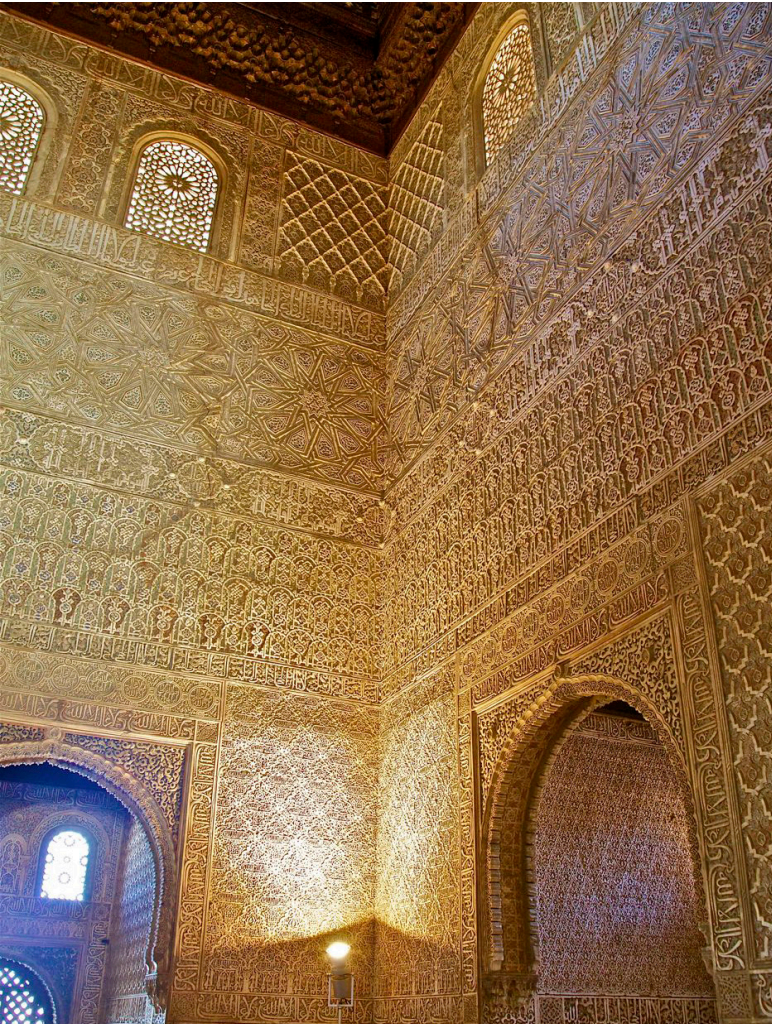
### The Alhambra and The Court of the Lions

The Court of the Lions and its adjacent spaces at The Alhambra palace complex in Andalusia have received much attention from writers and scholars; less attention has been paid to the kind of perceptual experiences evoked by its architectural features and inscriptions. In this study, focussing mainly on the fourteenth century, I describe some of these, drawing on some previous interpretations and observations, and conclude that their overall purpose is to guide the viewer's imagination. Most of the palace complex was built during the Nasrid dynasty (1238-1492) to the south east of Granada, on a terrace measuring 700 by 200 metres. The palace, its courtyards and gardens exemplified Nasrid art. An aqueduct supplied water to the site from the River Darro. This was constructed by Mohammed I in 1238 and it was at this time that work on The Alhambra began. Further construction continued under subsequent caliphs, most significantly Mohammed V

(1361-91). Eventually, the palace complex was composed of three main sections, all surrounded by a city wall. One area was a citadel to protect the site. A palace area provided a residence for the sultan and his family. A medina, a small self-contained town, housed administrative officials and artisans who served the needs of the community. A summer palace called The Generalife was connected to The Alhambra. It was built during the rule of Mohammed III (1302-1309) and included colonnades, pavilions and gardens. The Court of the Lions relates to the overall impression of the architecture, particularly its relationship to the outside landscape, and water, both moving and still, plays a large part (Pic. 1).

One of the main areas connected with The Court of the Lions is The Comares Hall. Its façade comprises geometric design, inscriptions and ornamental foliage carved into stucco panels (Pic. 2). This façade provided a harmonious background, in front of which the sultan sat to administer justice. Behind the façade, a corridor leads to The Court of the Myrtles, a courtyard garden in which a long pool reflects the surrounding buildings. The Court of the Lions and its adjacent complex of rooms were built at right angles to The Comares Hall. This court and its buildings existed independently, with its own entrance. The Court of the Lions was set on an east-west axis, rather than on a north-west axis like most of the other courtyards of The Alhambra. The most likely explanation for this different orientation is that it was a later addition and so had to be positioned within already existing buildings.





Pic 2: Pavilions on hills overlooking gardens.  
Photo: Ali Akbar Husain.

The courtyard is sectioned by a cruciform of two sunken water channels (Pic. 3). At the centre is a fountain, supported by twelve stone lions. At the east and west ends are two projecting, ornamented porticoes. The supporting columns of these two porticoes are grouped in one, two or three, suggesting the merging of inside and outside space. The water rills enter the porticoes at the east and west, and end in circular basins. There is a room off the north side, The Hall of the Two Sisters, and another on the south side, The Hall of the Abencerrajes.

### Muqarnas Prisms

Both of the halls are surmounted by domes. The Hall of the Abencerrajes is a perfect square, lit by latticed windows. Overhead is a domed structure based on a central star motif of muqarnas prisms. This connects to the square ground plan of the room by means of hanging stalactite muqarnas spandrels. In The Hall of the Two Sisters, there is a muqarnas vaulted dome, which is equally, if not more impressive, and also based on a star motif. Constructed of plaster, this dome contains over five thousand prisms overlaid at different levels

and covers the whole of the central part of the room.

Interpretations of the function of the muqarnas dome have varied, but Yasser Tabbaa's is one of the most authoritative and detailed historical explorations. Tabbaa links the design of the dome to a particular cosmology, called occasionalist, which was developed in Islamic thought from the tenth and eleventh centuries (Tabbaa, 2001: 133). Occasionalist cosmology differed from the notion that the universe was separate to God and subject to its own laws, deriving instead from a theology that proposes the presence and activity of God in all things. According to this view, the world is a place of discontinuity and chaos that depends on God's presence for its continuity. Some of Tabbaa's reading of the muqarnas dome is worth quoting as it is relevant to the theme of perception:

"In order to represent an occasionalist view of the world, a fragmented and ephemeral-looking dome was created by applying muqarnas to its entire surface, from transition zone to apex. This procedure creates a comprehensive effect intended to reflect the fragmented, perishable, and transient nature of the universe while alluding to the omnipotence and eternity of God, who can keep this dome from collapsing, just as he can keep the universe from destruction" (Ibid).

### Exterior and Interior Spaces

The Court of the Lions, nestling between the two halls, also presents continuity between the interior courtyard garden and the outside landscape. With its adjacent rooms, The Court forms a continuum of interior and exterior spaces. It leads from the Hall of the Two Sisters and concludes in box-shaped room facing the outside garden, The Lindaraja Mirador. Two single windows allow views of the exterior landscape. During the sixteenth century, Charles V built walls that obscured the view; prior to that, the views would have been extensive. The Mirador contains intricately carved plasterwork and inscriptions.

The paved quadrants of the court are now gravelled and without vegetation; the plainness, with its hint of severity, contrasts with the highly intricate stucco decoration on the arcade and porticoes. However, it is likely that this effect is relatively recent; in earlier times, the space was probably planted, and stucco work was often painted in colours. During restorations in the nineteenth century, soil levels from medieval times were found to be eighty centimetres lower than the existing level. This gap between levels strongly suggests sunken gardens, to be viewed from above by people sitting on cushions. Antoine de Lalaing, an early sixteenth-century traveller, reported seeing six orange trees in the courtyard, large enough to stand under (Ruggles, 2000: 193).

### The Function of The Court of the Lions

The exact function of The Court of the Lions, beyond that of a garden space, has been the subject of some debate. The significance of the fountain and its lions has also been the





Pic 3: Source of water supply of garden in Golconda citadel.  
Photo: Ali Akbar Husain.

subject of different interpretations. The basin on which the lions are set is fourteenth century. Although the inscriptions around the fountain do not refer specifically to Solomon, there have been arguments both for and against linking the fountain basin to Solomonic themes and images. As D. Fairchild Ruggles points out, it is more likely that any Solomonic connection was part of a general array of regal references available to the Nasrids and their predecessors:

“...one of a myriad of princely themes current in Andalusian court culture from the Umayyads to the Nasrids and having a very long genealogy in the Mediterranean and Persian world” (Idem: 200).

The view that The Court of the Lions was mainly for living quarters has generally prevailed, although the distinction between public and private spaces in Islamic palace structure was not necessarily always clearly delineated.

An interpretation of The Court of the Lions by Robert Irwin offers a more radical departure from this reading. He refers to a 2001 study by Juan Carlos Ruiz Souza, which puts forward the possibility that The Court of the Lions was a madrasa, devoted to studying the Qur’an, theology and law. Scholarly debates conducted before the sultan, in settings such as The Court of the Lions, did take place in the fourteenth century. In support of this interpretation, Irwin describes similarities between Moroccan madrasas of the fourteenth century and The Court of the Lions. There was a close relationship between the North African and Nasrid courts. The Merinid dynasty had its capital at Fez in Morocco between 1244 and

1465 and development of madrasas was a particular feature of this dynasty. The Merinid madrasas were often small spaces built around a central patio. They were surrounded by galleries, richly decorated walls and porticoes, with upper storeys, ceilings and muqarnas vaulting. Irwin gives the example of the madrasa at Salé in Morocco, built in 1333, which he thinks can be compared to The Court of the Lions. Whatever the function of The Court of the Lions – and it is possible it may have had several – Irwin’s study of The Alhambra rightly points to the refined and complex mathematical proportioning of its architectural and decorative elements. At The Court of the Lions, for example, the fountain was based on a rhomboid shape generating twelve-pointed star shapes that mapped the position of the twelve lions, suggesting that it was specifically designed as a centrepiece for the courtyard. If a six-pointed star is imposed on a ground plan of The Court of the Lions, the points of the star reach exactly the four corners of the courtyard and the fountains in The Hall of the Abencerrajes and The Hall of the Two Sisters. This, as well the classical and measured proportioning of the columns, invites perceptions that engage the mind as much as the senses. This leads to Irwin’s conclusion that The Alhambra was designed to be experienced as much intellectually as aesthetically: “It was a machine for thinking in. Its lacework decoration and watery reflections hint at the impermanence of all material and visible things. The beauty of the Alhambra is based on proportion and upon abstract geometric designs of staggering complexity” (Irwin, 2004: 99).

## Architectural Inscriptions

Architectural inscriptions are not peculiar to Islamic architecture but, as Nasser Rabbat points out, western scholars have concentrated on dating or details of patronage rather than considering the content of the inscriptions themselves. At The Alhambra, there are different kinds of inscriptions: epigraphs integrated into surface decoration, Qur'anic quotations set in cartouches, and poetic epigraphs composed for specific locations. The latter are of most interest here, since these are the kind featured in The Court of the Lions and its adjoining spaces. Work of several of the poets of the Nasrid court appear, most notably Ibn Zamrak (1333-1393), whose poetry surrounds the central fountain at The Court of the Lions.

What is distinctive about many of the poetic inscriptions is that they speak in the first

person, so anthropomorphising the architecture. This is exemplified in the poetry on the walls in The Lindaraja Mirador, as in the following inscriptions. The first is in a niche on the right of the entrance, the others surrounding the inside of the Mirador's window:

1. I am not alone, since from here may be seen a garden  
Splendid, to which the eyes have not seen a comparable thing
3. In this garden I am the satisfied eye

Whose pupil is none other than the Lord (Muhammad V)

7. From here, (The King) regards the capital of his kingdom whenever

He sits on the throne of the caliphate, from which location the vision is clearer.

9. And he casts his sight upon the place where the breezes play

And then returns it content and exalted (Rabbat, 1985: 68)

The garden referred to here is the one that would have been visible prior to the sixteenth-century alterations. From the Mirador, this would be the first place where the viewer's eye

would rest before seeing the hills beyond Granada. The third quotation also acts as an extended metaphor for perception. The king is not only completely identified with the architecture but also with architecture as a means of perception. The regal appropriation of the outside landscape links it to The Court of the Lions through The Hall of the Two Sisters.

In The Hall of the Two Sisters, several inscriptions refer to the garden. This indicates that The Court of the Lions and the continuum of halls and rooms linked to it were understood as a kind of series of interior and exterior spaces which, as a whole, could be termed a "garden". An inscription in The Hall of the Two Sisters by Ibn Zamrak metaphorically links the garden and the cosmos:

"I am a garden full of beauty, clad with every ornament. The stars would gladly descend from their zones of light, and wish they had lived in this hall instead of heaven" (Hillenbrand, 2005: 455).

Inscriptions in The Hall of the Two Sisters relate the garden below to the vault above, the muqarnas dome. The poetic linking of the architecture above and the garden below suggests that the garden was perceived as part of a cosmology. The inscription around the fountain in The Court of the Lions also by Ibn Zamrak uses a variety of forms of address. The garden is referred to as "this", although the term "we" is used, implying that the poet (and perhaps by implication, the king) and the viewer are together engaged in the contemplating the garden, and more particularly the movement of water in it. One particular stanza describes how this movement confounds the senses:

4. The fluid appears to the gazing eye like solid

So we did not know which of the two is flowing (Idem: 70)

Rabbat comments on this "visual confusion between liquid and solid" as an important metaphor, which "stresses among other aims, the contemplative function of water; a work of art to be meditated upon for the ultimate beauty it displays in sculpting the water" (Ibid). This is an aesthetic interpretation; while the inscription can be thought of in this way, Rabbat's interpretation does not entirely bring out how this disorientation can function in terms of perception. A play of perception on water and how a muqarnas vault works on the eye can be compared. The effect can be one of a shifting surface of detail, which can fuse into a whole for a moment before the surface seems to move again. Conversely, the whole effect can seem still for some while, before the eye captures movement.

## Perception and Imagination

Still and moving water can produce similar perceptions, so what is the purpose of this perceptual effect? If it is only to entrance and entertain the eye, then an aesthetic interpretation suffices. If, on the other hand, the purpose of the apparent confusion allows for a similar shift of perception within the viewer's mind, then this provides an opportunity for a viewer's thoughts to move in another direction, or more



Pic 6: Shower Pavilion at Kumtagi, Bijapur.  
Photo: Antonio Martinelli.



simply, a chance to release the faculty of imagination.

The way inscriptions personify as if “speaking” to the viewer allows architectural features and the garden’s natural features to engage the perceiving mind. As Rabbat comments, the “association between the eye and the mind was well understood by the builders of the Palace of the Lions” (Idem: 72).

The shift in perception suspends understanding in order to focus on visual confusion; when restored, the perceiving mind sees – and understands – differently. This change of perception could be little more than a disorientation of the senses followed by a pleasant sensation of seeing things afresh. For others the change could be more profound. The inscriptions, especially one such as Ibn Zamrak’s on the fountain at The Court of the Lions about still and moving water, act as a kind of intermediary stage between the viewer and the architecture.

Rabbat notes that nowhere in the inscriptions in The Court of the Lions is the word “paradise” mentioned (Idem: 71). While it is possible that viewers may have had associations of paradise, there is nothing to suggest that this meaning is prescribed. The tone of the inscriptions in The Hall of the Two Sisters linking the garden and the cosmos rather suggest an invitation to wonder and expand the mind.

The relationship between perception and imagination in garden history is explored in papers edited by Michel Conan (Conan, 2008). In his introduction he proposes that the proper role of the garden is as a background to an event or experience, and this “implies a particular relationship between garden activities and imagination” (Idem: 14). He goes on to say that the interaction between the imaginative force of a place and the activities within it create a particular frame of perception. This “frame” generates expectations as they would in a performance. The inscriptions being discussed here play a role in generating expectations in the viewer.

**Conclusion |** The Court of the Lions and its surrounding spaces was and is rich in means and devices to guide the imagination in a variety of ways. There were originally extensive views from The Lindaraja Mirador. There is the continuous play of space and light, not only in the relationship between inside and outside areas, but also within the columns and porticoes of the courtyard. The sophisticated mathematical proportioning of the architecture, as well as the

One of the few contemporary writers to have examined the role of perception in Islamic aesthetics is Valerie Gonzalez. In one of her essays on the subject of the geometries of The Alhambra, she describes the spatial geometry of the Court of the Lions as kinetic:

“This rhythm, in three dimensions, plays with a subtle alternation between emptiness and fullness, opening and closing, light and darkness, and wide and narrow spaces, a kind of visual music with highly varied notes. Moreover, the projection of the two pavilions within the court introduces another type of alternation, that of forward and backward planes. The centre, underlined by the imposing fountain, forms the focal point of the general distribution of all these elements” (Gonzalez, 2001: 87).

This sort of “visual music” would have added yet another element to the overall effect: the relationship between garden and architecture. Yet the architectural effects do not necessarily depend on any historically representative idea of Islamic architecture. Gonzalez points out that the perception of the architecture is both objective and subjective (Idem: 88); it encourages an awareness of the abstract, but this is achieved by means of the perceiver’s immediate, kinetic spatial experience.

Gonzalez also explores how inscriptions function at The Alhambra. Writing about The Comares Hall, which adjoins The Court of the Lions, she notes “the rhetorical strategy of personifying the architecture” and at The Alhambra in particular “the rhetorical function of addressing the imaginative and the marvellous” (Gonzalez, 2013: 256-257). The purpose of the perceptual response evoked by the relationship between inscription and architecture is to work on the imagination. As she notes, “it is the imagination that the inscriptions manipulate, fashion, or orient towards an enlivened and corporeal world of images” (Idem: 261).

muqarnas decoration in the two adjoining halls, encourages the mind and imagination to engage in wonder and cosmological speculation. The language of the architecture is often expressed in inscriptions which serve the same purpose. The inscription from Ibn Zamrak’s poem at the fountain, describing the shifts of perception between still and moving water, is a reminder that the imagination can emerge in that intermediary stage between the viewer and the architecture.

## Reference List

- Tabbaa, Y. (2001). *The Transformation of Islamic Art during the Sunni Revival*. Washington: Washington University Press.
- Ruggles, F. (2000). *Gardens, Landscape and Vision in the Palaces of Islamic Spain*. Pennsylvania: Pennsylvania University Press.
- Rabbat, N. (1985). The Palace of the Lions, Alhambra and the role of water in its conception. *Journal of the Islamic Environmental Design Centre*, (2): 64-73.
- Hillenbrand, R. (2005). *Islamic Architecture: Function, Form and Meaning*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.
- Conan, M. (Editor). (2008). *Gardens and Imagination: Cultural History and Agency*. Washington D.C: Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collection.
- Gonzalez, V. (2001). *Beauty and Islam: Aesthetics in Islamic Art and Architecture*. London: I.B. Tauris.
- Gonzalez, V. (2003). The Comares Hall in The Alhambra and James Turrell’s Space that Sees; A Comparison of Aesthetic Phenomenology. *Muqarnas: An Annual on the Visual Culture of the Islamic World*, (20): 253-278.
- Irwin, R. (2004). *The Alhambra*. London: Profile Books.