Intercultural Appropriation and the Synagogues of Medieval Spain

Cathy J. Charbonneau

University of Missouri-Kansas City
3/14/2016
Toledo is a city located along the Iberian Peninsula of Spain. It was declared by
UNESCO in 1986 to be a World Heritage Site because of a phenomenon that occurred
there between the eighth and fifteenth centuries that is referred to as *la convivencia*. The
term was advanced in the 1940’s by Américo Castro, a Spanish linguist and
historiographer. Spanish for “the coexistence”, this period saw Christians, Jews and
Muslims living together in Spain in relative accord. But *la convivencia* was not a scene
of utopian harmony with three divergent cultures happily living side by side. This was
instead what Thomas F. Glick refers to as an “uneasy communion”—a marriage of
convenience in which people of different faiths lived, worked, and interacted together,
sometimes peacefully, sometimes not.\(^1\) As a result of these interdependencies many
elements of culture were appropriated and adopted among the three groups, forming a
unique shared heritage that is reflected in the arts and architecture of the period. A key
point of convergence was the religious architecture of Toledo, particularly in the Jewish
synagogues. Their conception and construction speaks of multilayered motives,
ideologies, and a complex legacy that has sparked multiple interpretations.

The unique experience of Spain sets it apart from the rest of Europe. The
continuous cohabitation of three separate and distinct groups under shifting hegemonies
gave rise to a society like no other, one that defies conventional modes of study. This is
particularly the case when exploring the relationship of art and architecture to ideology.
Several important scholars have studied the phenomenon of *la convivencia* from the
architectural standpoint, most notably Jerrilynn Dodds, whose corpus of work on the
subject spans more than two decades. It is within the context of the work of these

\(^1\) Vivian Mann, Thomas Glick, Jerrilynn Dodds, *Convivencia: Jews, Muslims, and Christians in Medieval Spain*, (New York: G. Braziller in Association with the Jewish Museum, 1992), 1-7
scholars that I will examine the ideological underpinnings of the development of mudejar style in architecture. In the process I will attempt to flesh out how those meanings informed the motives of the patron of the synagogue of Samuel Halevi Abulafia in Toledo, now known as El Tránsito.

The eleventh and twelfth centuries were a period of intense change for the Iberian Peninsula. Cities that had operated successfully under Muslim cultural traditions were now forced to assimilate to a dramatic shift in religious, social, and political philosophy. With respect to art and architecture, a unique amalgam of styles known as mudejar flourished during this period. The m structures are representative of a society composed of groups inextricably linked, and yet divided, at the same time.

Mudejar style buildings take their primary inspiration from Islamic construction and decoration. Islam was the dominant culture in the Iberian Peninsula for over 500 years and as such was deeply rooted in the collective consciousness of its residents. Even after the Reconquista, these stylistic customs were so entrenched that Christians and Jews continued to incorporate them, although in a more hybrid style, combining Islamic designs and construction methods with Judeo-Christian forms and functions. This new hybrid was later referred to as mudejar because it was believed that it was simply an extension of Muslim architecture, wholly conceived and constructed by the Muslims. More recent scholarship points to Muslim style adapted for Christian and Jewish purposes. So instead of a static, fixed style, it was an approach to architectural design that varied by patron and motive. Christian patronage was vital to the development of the style; its adoption by Christian monarchs and its popularity among Spain’s elite attest to
how it rose above cultural boundaries. It was in Toledo in the thirteenth century that
*Mudejar* religious architecture really began to mature. Toledo was the city most
associated with the concept of *la convivencia*, especially during the reign of Alfonso X.
During this period there was a great drive to translate Arabic texts of science and
literature into Latin and the local vernacular. All three cultures participated in this
undertaking, believed by Alfonso to be a means of ruling all his subjects. Out of these
collaborations arose works of art, literature, and architecture that reflect elements of the
three cultures. Churches during this time were built in brick to better assimilate with the
earlier Islamic architecture. The use of the Islamic style and construction methods were
also adopted in Jewish synagogues. Toledo was an important center for Spanish Jews,
drawn there by Alfonso’s cultural program and the atmosphere of tolerance. Ten
synagogues are believed to have been built there, with only two extant today. The earlier
of the two, now known as Santa Maria Blanca, shows continuity with Almohad forms of
an earlier period. It features horseshoe and trefoil arches and a mosque-like façade with
courses of stone alternating with brick. The second, El Tránsito, reflects the evolution of
*Mudejar* to a form of Nasrid architecture seen in the kingdom of Granada and adopted by
the Castilian court. This is a more Gothic style with vegetal motifs. The synagogue’s
stucco designs incorporate elements from all three Toledo cultures: Torah verses, Arabic
script, and symbols of the Castilian court.  

What conditions led to such a unique intermingling of three cultures, to such
widespread adoption of the styles of a divergent group? Interpretations differ. Some
older treatments of the subject by Rachel Wischnitzer and Carol Krinsky seem to imply

---

3 Mann, *Convivencia*, 113-129
an appropriation of style made necessary by societal restraints. Wischnitzer, a noted Jewish architectural historian, characterizes the period as prosperous time for Jews, whose synagogue architecture “benefited from a happy interchange of Moorish, Jewish, and Western European ideas.” She describes the evolution of style as being formed by the artistic currents of the time, as allowed by the culture that the Jewish minority lived within. Because Jews had been denied entry into the building trades via membership in the medieval guilds any craftsmen available in the region would most likely have been Muslim. Wischnitzer points to the Moorish style of the synagogues as a result of this fact. The more closed orientation of the synagogues comes from the fact that they were built during a period of Christian rule, when a more Romanesque or Gothic influence would be found. There is no implication of a conscious choice of this type of style on the part of Jewish patrons. Krinsky also points to style as a practical matter, making mention of the fact that it was necessary to rely on non-Jews when building in most of Europe during the medieval period. Christians would also have found the supply of craftsmen to be primarily Muslim, trained in a specific style. But why would a patron have so little control over the process?

Dodds suggests that though there were certainly practical reasons for continuing to build in the Islamic style, there is really a suggestion of a shared culture. Much of what began as strictly (formally speaking) Islamic became part of a shared architectural language for all the people of Toledo. This certainly was the case for the Toledan synagogues, with mosque-like arches, stucco reliefs, and vegetal ornamentation. But, Dodds argues, this is not due to an assimilation of ideologies but rather a “secularization”

---

5 Ibid.
of artistic form. It went beyond the convenience of using existing Islamic-trained masons
or the lack of skilled craftsman versed in another style, even. Dodds characterizes the
phenomenon:

*It was a web of cultural interdependencies in lands which had known many different
rules, and as such involved an idea about art, one that grew and changed and made
renewed references to the Islamic arts, which were at its roots.*

Many times, she says, scholars see relationships between opposing cultures and their arts
in terms of influence, such as with colonialism. The term “influence” in her view equates
to “power”, where the dominant culture imposes its artistic forms upon a passive, inferior
culture. In reality, she argues, the “process of creation which grows out of confrontation”
comes from a conscious choice in this case.

Dodds’ description of the Halevi synagogue makes reference to the work of numerous
architectural scholars including Wischnitzer, Krinsky, and Francisco Cantera Burgos.
Burgos’ 1955 book *Sinagogas Españolas* provides richly detailed and comprehensive
descriptions, as well as photographs of the structure. Drawings in Burgos’ book by
Fransiscus and Palomares, c. 1752, show the synagogue as it was in the past. This
important text also details every inscription within the synagogue, along with
translations, and is referenced in most later descriptions of the structure. Dodds’
*Architecture and Ideology in Early Medieval Spain* cites the work of medievalists
Richard Fletcher, Joseph O’Callaghan, Gabriel Jackson, and Thomas Glick, along with
foundational work from Américo Castro and Claudio Sánchez-Albornoz. Castro and
Sánchez-Albornoz were two of the earliest modern scholars to study the Iberian

---

7 Dodds, Jerrilynn Denise, *Architecture and Ideology in Early Medieval Spain*, (University Park:
Pennsylvania State UP, 1990), 3
Peninsula in the medieval period. Glick wrote the forward for, and contributed to, Convivencia, and his medieval studies focus mostly on the sciences and technology of early medieval Spain. Arts of Intimacy features a bibliographical essay rather than typical footnote documentation. Some reviewers of the book have criticized the authors for this format, suggesting that it was rather hard to determine the source of some of the arguments, but I disagree. I personally found the narrative format quite informative, if a little overwhelming, rather like a long conversation with the authors. There are many sources recommended for further reading, too many to list here. A very interesting note in the bibliographic essay was a reference to Jonathan Ray’s “Beyond Tolerance and Persecution”, where he argues that acceptance, not exclusion, was a problem for Jewish leaders. Ray asks how the assimilation into non-Jewish society could have been prevented, given the permissiveness of Christian and Muslim leaders. He views the erosion of differences among groups as a threat rather than a positive occurrence.9

In order to clarify the methods underlying her conclusions about intercultural exchange I contacted Professor Dodds with some questions. I would like to quote some of her comments here, as explanation:

I think that the methods for drawing conclusions about hybridity and identity come out of the Post Colonial discourse. It is useful to work with the idea that religions are not cultures...religion is only one part of the culture. People who are Jews or Christians do not live in a separate sealed society. They share many things about society, economy, and culture with people of other religions. Remember that the people in Toledo, regardless of their religion, all spoke the same languages on the street, though they might also speak another (Hebrew or Arabic) at home. At Samuel Ha-Levi, the decoration of the synagogue itself is the material culture that makes the point.10

10 Correspondence with the author, 11/24/14
The synagogue of Samuel Halevi Abulafia is a rectangular, single-aisle building covered by a slanted roof on four sides. Scholars generally agree it was built around 1357, though the inscription has been obliterated. All the initial history of the synagogue is found in inscriptions on the building interior, with Halevi documented as the patron. The outside of the building consists of an unadorned façade with broad vertical bands of rubble masonry alternating with narrow bands of brick in large horizontal courses, typical of the *mudejar* style. Above the front door is a window with two horseshoe arches, known as an *aljima*. The bell tower atop the structure was added later by Christians after the expulsion of the Jews from Spain. (Fig. 1)

Inside the building is an east-facing hall with a single nave or aisle. A series of chambers adjoin on the north and south sides and a vestibule admits the public from the west. The chambers probably once led to Halevi’s home. The interior decoration consists primarily of high quality plasterwork with Islamic motifs. There is a frieze of Arabic inscriptions along the top of all four walls which is a common feature in mosques. (Fig 2) Below the frieze, an arcade decorates the walls with alternating windows and multifoil blind arches. The windows have decorative grills which are also common in mosques. (Fig. 3) At the top of the eastern wall there are two windows in the shape of tablets which are thought to represent the Two Tablets of Law. Directly below the windows at the bottom of the wall, there are three recessed niches which probably served as the Torah Ark. The niches were probably originally protected by wooden doors. (Fig. 4)

Overall the east wall is the most decorated. Below the arcade there is a band of *muquarnas*, corbels used as decorative devices in Islamic architecture. Above the three
arches of the niche there are three panels. The central panel is decorated with arabesques (an ornamental design with intertwining flowing lines), and vegetal motifs. On either side of the panels there are vines, pinecones, and scroll work surrounding the Castilian coat of arms.\textsuperscript{11} The coat of arms bears the crest of the kingdom of Castile, surrounded by a web of vegetation, arches, and scroll work. The ornamentation is suggestive of the Nasrid palace of Alhambra in Granada. Below the arms there is an inscription in Hebrew that proclaims Samuel Halevi to be a “prince among princes” who is under the protection of the king (Fig. 5). There are two inscriptions about Halevi, one on either side of the niche. Both identify him as the founder of the synagogue and glorify him. By featuring the crest of Castile there is also homage paid to Peter I.\textsuperscript{12} The other walls are more Gothic in style, richly decorated in red, blue, white, and black. Natural light comes through six windows on the western wall and the high clerestory windows situated between the arches that surround the space more than thirty feet above the floor. The upper chamber is believed to be the women’s gallery and was originally decorated with inscriptions from the Psalms and the Song of Miriam. A wing was added on the north side during a period of ownership by the Calatava knights, and a bell tower was added by Christians after the expulsion of Jews in the fifteenth century.

One of the most spectacular features of this synagogue is the wooden artesonado ceiling, constructed in the mudéjar style (Fig. 6). The wooden beams are ornamental as well as functional—smaller pieces of wood joined in a decorative pattern hides the structural supports and the interlacing bands form stars and rosettes. The wooden beams

\textsuperscript{11} Esther Goldman, \textit{Samuel Halevi Abulafia’s Synagogue (El Transito) in Toledo}, Jewish Art Vol. 18 (1992), 58-69
\textsuperscript{12} \textit{Arts of Intimacy}, 214-247
have foliate and geometric interlacing, intertwined with Arabic inscriptions.\textsuperscript{13} Much use is made of the kinds of geometric patterns and interlace seen in other Spanish synagogues, as well as floral \textit{rinceau} (stylized decorative borders with vines and leaves), cartouches, blind arcades, and a heraldic shield.\textsuperscript{14}

Samuel Halevi Abulafia, sometimes referred to as Samuel Halevi, was the patron of El Trán sito. During the mid-fourteenth century, Samuel Halevi served as treasurer and advisor for King Peter I, or Pedro the Cruel as he was also called. In spite of restrictions, Jews flourished in Toledo and occupied some important positions. Halevi amassed a large fortune as a member of the royal court. He is thought to have founded of a number of synagogues in the city of Toledo, but the one constructed on the grounds of his residence was definitely the most palatial. El Trán sito was located in the Jewish quarter, or \textit{juderia}, at the center of the city, and was meant to be a private house of worship for Halevi and his family. Halevi’s personal residence was adjacent and connected to the synagogue but has since been demolished. The original name of the synagogue is not known; it is generally referred to by the name of its founder or Nuestra Señora De Trán sito, the name later given by the Christians. Though church law prohibited the establishment of new synagogues, many Christian kings granted permission. There were more than ten synagogues in Toledo alone. Synagogues served not only as places of worship but also as the center of political and social life.\textsuperscript{15} These were usually constructed in the \textit{mudejar} style, with columns and arches. The size of the Halevi synagogue is attributed to his status in the king’s court. It was one of the last extravagant buildings erected in Toledo, before the center of power moved to Seville. His

\textsuperscript{13} Goldman, 7-69
\textsuperscript{14} \textit{Convivencia}, 113-129
\textsuperscript{15} Goldman, 7-69
extravagance may have led to his downfall—several years after the construction of his synagogue Halevi was imprisoned, tortured, and eventually executed by Peter I, allegedly over a secret fortune, the location of which he refused to divulge.

Clearly *mudejar* architecture is the signpost of a pivotal period in Spanish culture. It reflects a shifting hegemony that gave life to forms, which gradually shed their original meanings and became part of the shared culture of Spain. These artistic practices point to the development of an architectural style divorced from religious conventions. Though the style was originally derived from mosque plans, it evolved into something that transcended cultural differences. Dodds theorizes that centuries of living together with Muslims resulted in Jews and Christians becoming used to their style, eventually more or less making it their own. Ultimately the three groups all identified culturally with these artistic forms. Spanish synagogues reflect not only Muslim craft practices and ornamental style but also the ideologies of expressive meaning. The culmination of this concept is illustrated in the synagogue El Tránsito.

The Arabic verses from the Qur’an which appear on the upper walls of El Tránsito are characterized by Wischnitzer as a reflection of the contribution of Muslim craftsmen. Dodds counters, and I agree, that an arbitrary addition of script unbeknownst and unapproved by the patron seems illogical, especially given that the other Islamic elements were so consciously applied. Because the Jews of Toledo had lived within the Islamic tradition, speaking Arabic for centuries, it would follow that they would naturally adopt some of the literary culture as their own. And since Muslims and Jews both subscribe to

---

16 Jayyusi, 592-97
17 Wischnitzer, 34-35
a monotheistic philosophy, phrases like “there is only one God” would not conflict with the Jewish religious beliefs.

Much of the architecture of the synagogue is Castilian in its articulation and ornamentation. The monumental size and intricate stucco relief carvings evoke a royal style with Islamic roots—Castilian arms with Nasrid adornment and Arabic calligraphy. The patron of El Tránsito used the same group of craftsmen to construct his synagogue that had built one of the king’s residences. Dodds argues that this shows his connection with Peter I, as well as an “assimilated style” that signifies Castile in the same way the coat of arms does. By using these Christian forms his synagogue becomes an affirmation of his wealth and status.

Dodds illustrates time and again how the Jews of the Iberian Peninsula viewed Islamic form as an extension of their own cultural world. She calls Islamic architectural style “part and parcel of Jewish identity” in Spain. In our correspondence, she recommended further reading of literary sources and exploration of the material culture of the region for a deeper understanding of the workings of Toledo society. Religious architecture is only a very small part of this fascinating period. Much is left to be explored about the social, religious, and literary history of the Jews, Christians, and Muslims in Spain.

---

18 Arts of Intimacy, 307
Illustrations

Fig. 1. El Transito exterior. Flickr.com, https://www.flickr.com/photos/copetan/3171295015/

Fig. 2. El Transito interior. Sacred Destinations.com http://www.sacred-destinations.com/spain/toledo-sinagoga-del-transito
Fig. 3. Arcade. Trip Advisor. [http://www.tripadvisor.es/LocationPhotoDirectLink-g187489-d266737-i87120101-El_Transito_Synagogue_and_Sephardic_Museum-Toledo_Province_of_Toledo_Casti.html](http://www.tripadvisor.es/LocationPhotoDirectLink-g187489-d266737-i87120101-El_Transito_Synagogue_and_Sephardic_Museum-Toledo_Province_of_Toledo_Casti.html)

Fig. 4. Torah niche. Wikimedia Commons. [http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Sinagoga_del_Tr%C3%A1nsito_interior1.jpg](http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Sinagoga_del_Tr%C3%A1nsito_interior1.jpg)
Fig. 5. Stucco panel, El Transito. Flickr
https://www.flickr.com/photos/paulayjesus/5357115360/

Fig. 6. Ceiling, El Transito. Flickr
https://www.flickr.com/photos/paulayjesus/5357115360/
Selected Bibliography

**Primary Sources:**


Vivian B. Mann, Thomas F. Glick and Jerrilynn Dodds, *Convivencia: Jews, Muslims, and Christians in Medieval Spain* (New York: G. Braziller in Association with the Jewish Museum, 1992)


**Secondary Sources:**


Thomas F. Glick, *From Muslim Fortress to Christian Castle: Social and Cultural Change in Medieval Spain*, (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1995)


