

Out of the Stream
Studies in Medieval and Renaissance Mural
Painting

Edited by

Luis Urbano Afonso and Vítor Serrão



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CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

MURAL PAINTING AND THE TRANSFORMATIONS
OF SPACE AND MEANING: THE *SAGRARIO* CHAPEL
OF CÓRDOBA IN THE CONTEXT OF THE OLD
MOSQUE'S HERITAGE AND RECEPTION

ANTONIO URQUÍZAR HERRERA

Introduction

The process of transformation of the Old Great Mosque of Córdoba into Christian Cathedral is easily perceived through the evidence of its massive new building and its new ornamentations. But, in order to gain the full appropriation of the space, an ideological actuation was also needed. In the following pages is provided an analysis of the decoration of the Sixteenth Century tabernacle chapel in terms of its relation with the Islamic heritage of the building.

The purpose of painting

In the first decades of Seventeenth Century Seville, Francisco Pacheco, the painter, art theorist and father-in-law of Velázquez, wrote that the main purpose of painting was to serve God and religion:

“la pintura, que tenía por fin solo el parecerse a lo imitado, ahora, como acto de virtud, toma nueva rica sobreveste; y además de asemejarse, se levanta a un fin supremo, mirando a la eternal Gloria; y procurando

apartar los hombres de los vicios, los induce al verdadero culto de Dios Nuestro Señor”¹.

That thought of Pacheco, almost literally taken from Paleotti's *Discorso intorno le imagini*² shows the nature of the Spanish Christian reception of Italian Humanism, the derive of Catholic Art Theory after Trent, and, after all, the affirmation of Alberti's idea on the story as a basic ingredient of painting.

Imitation and illusion of reality were pillars in Leo Battista Alberti's struggle for defining a new painting. But he also knew that “la istoria è summa opera del picture”³. Telling the story was the main task of a painter. From that point, more than one century later, when Renaissance painting had achieved its maturity, theorists could focus their writings on the nature of the stories, what is the meaning of paintings. Some time after Alberti, Giovanni Battista Armenini devoted part of his treatise on painting to iconographical matters. He was one of the main sources of Pacheco's theory, and said:

“Non dubito punto che la maggior impresa, che da un eccellente pittore pigliar si possa e per dove ogni suo concetto debba spiegare, non sia veramente quella d'una istoria, che glia sia proposta di tal qualità e soggetto, ch'egli componer vi possa dentro cose diversissime [...], perciò che in così ampio e spazioso campo può l'uomo giudizioso adoperarsi agevolmente e mostrare et esprimere, con tutte le forze del suo ingegno, tutto ciò ch'egli sa e possiede”⁴.

Painting, meaning and space were joined in this interesting text by Armenini. If telling a relevant story in the proper space is the painter's duty, the surface, the space, is the base for it. The “campo” sets the conditions of work, establishing a field and a frame for the representation of the story and the concretion of the painter's conceptual idea and technical skills. But the “campo”

¹ “Painting, that previously only had the purpose of seeming imitated appearances, now, as an virtue act, wear other clothes, and as well as seeming appearances, amount to a supreme aim: looking at the eternal Glory, and trying to put man aside from vices, move them to the real cult of God Our Lord.” (Pacheco, 1990: 249).

² G. Paleotti, *Discorso intorno le imagini sacre e profane, diviso en 5 libri, dove si scuoprono varii abusi loro e si dichiara il modo che cristianamente si dee osservare nelle chiese e ne' luoghi pubblici* (Paleotti, 1582).

³ “The story is the highest work of the painter”. L. B. Alberti, *Il trattato della pittura*, III, 60. (Papini, ed., 1913: 94).

⁴ “I do not doubt that the main task that a painter could take, and where all his ideas should be unfold, is any other but that of a story, that has been proposed to him having a quality and a topic enough to let him compose in it many different things [...], therefore in a wide field, the wise man can easily use, show and express, with the whole strength of his genius, all he knows and own.” G. B. Armenini, *De' veri precetti della pittura*, II, 11, 135. (Marina Gorreri, ed., 1988: 153).

is also changed by the action of painting and its narrative. A “campo” even more modified in the case of mural painting, where the audience relation with the architectural and spatial frame gains new conditions.

The transformation of architectural spaces through the use of wall painting needs no further explanation. The psychological perception of architecture and space is widely conformed by the actions of light and colours. And wall painting, indeed, has been frequently thought as part of an architectural project, or used in order to obtain a different perception of an extant architecture. The *aggiornamento* of buildings has been a classic use of wall painting since Renaissance discovered the need for aesthetical update of constructed and cultural landscapes. For this purpose, wall painting provided useful values: first, the strength of colour and plastic elements focusing attention; then, the role of painted architecture, *trompe-l'oeil*, as an illusion of construction. Both radically change the perception of any building. The best example lays in the well known model of the Sistine Chapel: the simulated classical architectures and the power of Michelangelo's mannerist figures clearly model the perception of the chapel as an archetype of Renaissance space. Although architecture is medieval, painting disguises it, leaving no doubt on the modernity of the Sistine and its role as an icon of humanism and new art. The success of that work opened a path to later experiences that stated the strength of wall painting programs in Baroque Europe. Without leaving Rome, it is worthy to remember the heritage of Sistine through Pozzo's ceilings as a new European model of Baroque *aggiornamento* by illusion.

But the power of wall painting as a transformation agent does not stop at the aesthetic renewal. Since mural painting should be considered a cultural artefact, its refurbishment action goes beyond forms to reach meaning and ideology (Brown, 1998). As was soon recognized, meaning was able to change, on its own, the whole perception of a building. The history of wall painting since Altamira or Egypt is a story of narratives and symbolic spaces. Medieval wall painting spread is based on its success in the transmission of religious, ideological, political and social contents in an illiterate world: a narrative that both answered and conformed to the use of religious buildings (Kupfer, 1993).

Story telling, as Alberti, Armenini, Pacheco and many others said, was the main task of the painter. Even under Renaissance discovering of aesthetics and art concepts, the topic lasted as the most important part of a painting. The need to tell something was the origin of commissions and the first thing to be perceived in most artefacts. Consequently it had to play an equivalent role in its *aggiornamento* function. From that point of view, the purpose of this paper is to analyse that process of meaning transformation and construction through a relevant example: the role of the *Sagrario* Chapel of the cathedral of Córdoba as a key pillar in the program of Christianization of the old mosque.

From mosque to cathedral

The architectural transformation of the old mosque of Córdoba into Christian church (Fig. 17-1) was the main artistic challenge of this town in the Humanism Age. This process can be seen today from different points of view. First, as a demand where the best local architects, sculptors, painters and goldsmiths worked under the promotion of the most capable clients of the town, that were, in this time, the bishops and canons of the cathedral. The result was a very interesting mirror that reflected ideological, social, economic and politic experience through aesthetic languages.

Then, as a cultural process. The local structure of Catholic Church tried, by intellectual means, to appropriate an architectural Islamic space which already had spent more than two centuries under Christian use. We should consider that the refurbishing of the building rested on the interest on the Christianization of the old mosque. It was part of a very complex process where different perceptions of the history of the mosque, diverse personal interests, and different artistic languages, styles and disciplines interacted at the same time. The evidence of the Islamic forms of that cathedral took part in its history.



Fig. 17-1. Cathedral and Old Mosque of Córdoba. View of the Islamic building with the Christian interventions

The Christian conquest of Córdoba in 1236 meant the conversion of the mosque into cathedral (Urquizar, 2003: 523-531). That change of use implied some liturgical needs that caused the erection of altar-pieces, the promotion and ornamentation of burial chapels, and the construction of a primitive high-altar reusing some Islamic structures. But none of these interventions had a real impact in the visual strength of its Islamic architecture. A proof of that perception can be seen in the description of the mosque given by the local priest Jerónimo Sánchez, *circa* 1450:

“La Mezquita, maravilla del mundo. [...] [the town] tiene un templo merecedor de toda clase de alabanzas en cuya vistosisima hermosura se reanima el espíritu del que lo contempla. Es gloria de España y señal distintiva del honor de Córdoba, inclita sede de su Obispo y monumento que honra a los reyes, alivio de los fieles e injuriosa venganza digna de lágrimas para los antiguos bárbaros.

¿Acaso la artística construcción de tan gran edificio moverá a admiración no sin causa a los hombres que contemplen la multitud y altura de las columnas de mármol? El talento de los arquitectos determinó de tal modo su ordenadísima estructura que a cualquier parte que se mire la vista marcha majestuosamente.

Allí está en pie una torre insigne construida con tablas de piedra, marcada con celosías de mármol, cuyo coronamiento termina con un pináculo cubierto de bronce. Se sube desde dentro por dos escaleras en las que parece que el geómetra imprimió toda su pericia.

También tiene una capilla dorada por todas partes en la que descansan sepultados los cuerpos de los reyes, y otra capilla de mármol cuyo techo termina con una concha torneada de piedra, está decorada con dos columnas de jaspe en su entrada y su fachada destaca y se compone de mosaicos de artística taracea. En un cuarto separado se guarda para perpetuo recuerdo de los vivos un trono decorado con marfiles de un cierto rey Almanzor elegantemente realizado con cubierta de artesonado. Se entra al templo por doce puertas protegidas de latón. Se ennoblece con la deliciosa corriente de fuentes vivas que manan el agua de diversas formas.

¿Qué queda por decir de este templo famoso? Los historiadores refieren los atributos prodigiosos solamente de siete obras en la tierra. El templo de Diana en Éfeso, el bellissimo sepulcro del rey Mausolo de donde le ha venido el nombre de mausoleo. El signo broncineo del sol al que llaman Coloso. La estatua de marfil y oro de Júpiter Olímpico que hizo Fidias, el primer escultor, con suma elegancia. El palacio de Ciro, rey de los Medos, que construyó sin mezcla con un arte riquísimo uniendo las piedras con oro. Los muros de Babilonia que mandó construir la reina Semíramis cocidos con leche y azufre. Las Pirámides de Egipto en las que consumiéndose la sombra no se la puede contemplar más allá del espacio construido. Pero, ¿quién apreciará en adelante que estos

monumentos son los que destacan sobre los demás cuando contemple tal templo en nuestras ciudad? Gozaron de este honor los que le precedieron en el tiempo porque en aquellos siglos rudos cualquier cosa que de nuevo apareciese se contaba de boca en boca con derecho como algo maravilloso.”⁵

That speech in Jerónimo Sánchez’s *Descripción de Córdoba* mainly speak about the richness, sumptuousness, architectural quality and splendour of the building. The old mosque was not only considered the proud of the town, but also a wonder equitable to those of the antiquity. In Sánchez’s times, the old

⁵ “The mosque, world’s wonder. [...] [the town] has a temple that deserves all kind of praises, a temple in whose eye-catching beauty the viewer’s soul revives. It is a glory of Spain, and a distinctive sign of the honour of Córdoba, also it is eminent site of its Bishop and a monument that honours the kings, it is a relief of the believers, and an insulting and tearful revenge for the old barbarians.

Could, not without reason, the artistic construction of so great building move to admiration the men who contemplate the enormous amount and height of its columns of marble?

As the talent of the architects determined its arranged structure, wherever you look, the sight goes majestically.

There stands a celebrated tower constructed with stones, marked with lattices of marble, which ends with a covered pinnacle of bronze. The tower has two wonderful inner stairs, where it seems that the geometer stamped all his knowledge. Also the mosque has a golden chapel where the bodies of the buried kings lay; and another chapel of marble whose roof has got a stone shell. It is decorated by two columns of jasper in its entry, and its front is made out of artistic mosaics. In a separated room, for the everlasting memory of the living, there is an old throne decorated with ivories of a certain king Almanzor elegantly constructed with wooden roof pieces.

The gates of the temple are composed by twelve doors covered by brass. They are enriched with the delicious flow of vivacious fountains where the water runs in diverse forms.

What does rest to say of this famous temple? The historians recount the prodigious attributes of only seven works in World. Diana’s temple in Éfeso, the most beautiful sepulcher of the king Mausolo wherefrom the name of mausoleum has come. The bronze’ sign of the Sun called Colossus. The statue of ivory and gold of Olympic Zeus made by Fidias, the first sculptor, with supreme elegance. The palace of Ciro, king of the Medes, which he constructed without cement, joining the stones with gold and the richest art. The walls of Babilonia, that were constructed by the orders of queen Semíramis, using cooked milk and sulphur. The Pyramids of Egypt, in which the shade of the end of the day could not be seen beyond the built space.

But, after seen such a temple in our city, who could keep saying that those monuments stand over the rest? The ones that preceded it enjoyed that honour because in those rough centuries any new thing was told by right as something wonderful.” (Nieto Cumplido, ed., 1972: 67-68). Also see Nieto Cumplido, (1998: 321-322).

mosque turned in cathedral was seen without stylistic prejudices, as a beautiful, orderly and artistic building in its Islamic architecture. The description of the beauty of the columns, the mihrab, or the tower (still a minaret) does not explain it in terms of exoticism. The building was understood as legacy of a common history and, at last, as a trophy of the Christianity's victory. Even the old wooden mimbar was preserved in a room to be seen, as in a museum, for its beauty and "para perpetuo recuerdo de los vivos". After two centuries of Christian use, the building kept almost the same Islamic look. Its beauty, the lack of aesthetic prejudices, and its use as an everlasting memory for the living made substantial changes unneeded and non desirable.

But finally, in Sixteenth Century major transformations of the mosque took place when bishop Manrique decided to follow the example of Seville, and gain a real Christian architectural environment for his cathedral. New times and new visions. In Renaissance and Imperial Spain, Islamic architecture started to loose its prestige in religious buildings. Its sumptuousness was still suitable for domestic architecture and representation, but the image of Christianity wanted the new language of classic architecture. The living's memories had to be built with other raw materials. And soon the old mimbar disappeared, to be replaced with new points of attention.

On one hand, the traditional process of funerary foundations kept going on, and many new small altarpieces, fences and other ornaments were added to the private chapels located in the external walls of the mosque. On the other, a massive nave was built in the middle of the old Islamic oratory. During the years 1521-1608, three masters named Hernán Ruiz I, his son Hernán Ruiz II and finally his grandson Hernán Ruiz III—helped with other architects as Juan de Ochoa—worked in the complex labour of that construction⁶. First, removing the columns and roofs of the central area of the mosque. Then, replacing them with higher and wider pillars, vaults and an ambitious dome that radically changed both the building and the skyline of the town. At least, and fortunately, in the case of Córdoba those changes did not mean the destruction of the whole mosque as it happened in Seville, but only the disappearance of a part of its central area. Thanks to the resistance of the local authorities, and mostly to the lack of money, most of the Islamic architecture was preserved⁷. Moreover, the

⁶ For a summary of the construction process, see Nieto Cumplido (1998: 497-540).

⁷ The Town Council was firmly opposed to the construction of the new building. That reluctance was not derived from an Islamic heritage conservation belief, as local tradition claims, but on the contrary, was the result of fear to the real risk of loosing some particular privileges in the old cathedral. Namely some burials and chapels. Finally, the Town Council opposition was solved by the Crown intervention. Also the tradition on the regret of Charles V at his first sight of the building—"si hubiera visto antes este edificio, no hubiera permitido su transformación"—, has also being interpreted as a legendary

spatial nature of the mosque had turned into something different by the insertion of a wide Gothic church covered with Renaissance vaults.

Nevertheless, although the building process the Sixteenth Century had definitely transformed the architectural perception of the temple, it was largely seen as an Islamic remain. In 1575, at a middle stage of the works, the historian Ambrosio de Morales could still say that "no altera nada del todo lo añadido dentro [del edificio] de Nuevo"⁸. Amazing statement: who could believe that the same works that already supposed the removal of dozen of columns and the roof of some arcades, leaving the rain fall inside the temple, as the the canons themselves claimed, did not distort the building?⁹ That statement was obviously false and interested, but at last reveals the reality of the strength of Islamic forms in the building's reading.

In this situation, further interventions in the mosque were needed in order to get a fully Christianization of it. This time, other paths were explored. Now, the architectural changes were accompanied by an ideological discourse based upon ornamentation and literature. Precisely, both fields converged at the *Sagrario* Chapel and Ambrosio de Morales played an important role in its narrative.

Along with the elevation of the structure of a Christian traditional church, another mean of possessing the mosque was its ornamentation. Since the Christian conquest of Córdoba, the Gothic, Renaissance and Baroque decorations of the chapels worked as new visual attention points, and reasserted the Christian new nature of the building through its use and forms. Some chapels received Gothic refurbishments, but except for the *Espiritu Santo* one (Fig. 17-2), almost no other of the Sixteenth Century foundations transformed its medieval architecture into a Classical one (Nieto Cumplido, 1991: 215). Most of them showed a high contrast between Renaissance altarpieces and Islamic architecture that framed them. The most relevant example is the new chapel of *El Sagrario*.

The *Sagrario* Chapel

The *Sagrario* Chapel (Fig. 17-3) kept an architecture based on Islamic horse shoe arches renewed with Gothic vaults, but it recovered all its architectural structure with a Mannerist mural program painted by the Italian Cesare Arbasia. It was a sort of skin that only hid the surface of medieval architecture through

topic. He could not easily be against a work that, first, consisted in the Christianization of a mosque, and, then, was strongly impelled in the glory of his family by a close relative, the bishop of Córdoba Leopold of Austria (1541-1557). See Urquizar (2001a).

⁸ "Nothing of the whole [building] is changed by the new things added inside." (Morales, 1575: 120v).

⁹ On the claims of the canons, see (Urquizar, 2001a: 194).

the new visual language of Italian Renaissance. The Chapel is located in the South East corner of the building, placed as the result of enclosing three arcades of three consecutive naves of the old mosque. It was first built at the start of Sixteenth Century as chapter's library, receiving for that use late-Gothic vaults by master Hernán Ruíz I (Nieto Cumplido, 1991: 215; idem, 1998; Villar, 1985: 209-233). Since then, its architecture remained as a mixture of Islamic arches covered by western vaults, settled in a space close to a traditional church floor plan, but derived from a mosque partial division. At least, it was a strange arrangement for an architect that has been claimed to be one of the introducers of Renaissance in Andalusian architecture (Morales Martínez, 1996).



Fig. 17-2. Cathedral and Old Mosque of Córdoba. Chapel of the *Espíritu Santo*

The decision of moving the library and setting there the tabernacle was taken in 1571 by the chapter of canons of the cathedral (Pérez Lozano, 1991: 57-64; idem, 1993). The tabernacle was formerly placed in the small chapel of San Pedro, which was placed next to the old mihrab of the mosque. Although being relevant in the past spatial organization of the building, this site was starting to be peripheric due to the new structure caused by the works in course. Also, it was a chapel insufficient for the requirements and relevance that tabernacle liturgies deserved after Trent. So, and as could be expected, the new *Sagrario* Chapel was conceived at its foundation as a place devoted to the eucharistical cults that had been promoted in the recently finished Council of Trent. The canons simply followed a movement of exaltation of eucharisty that was spreading tabernacles all around Spanish churches and high altarpieces. The example of *El Escorial* is, for instance, particularly relevant in a process that also had a long history and success in Andalusia.

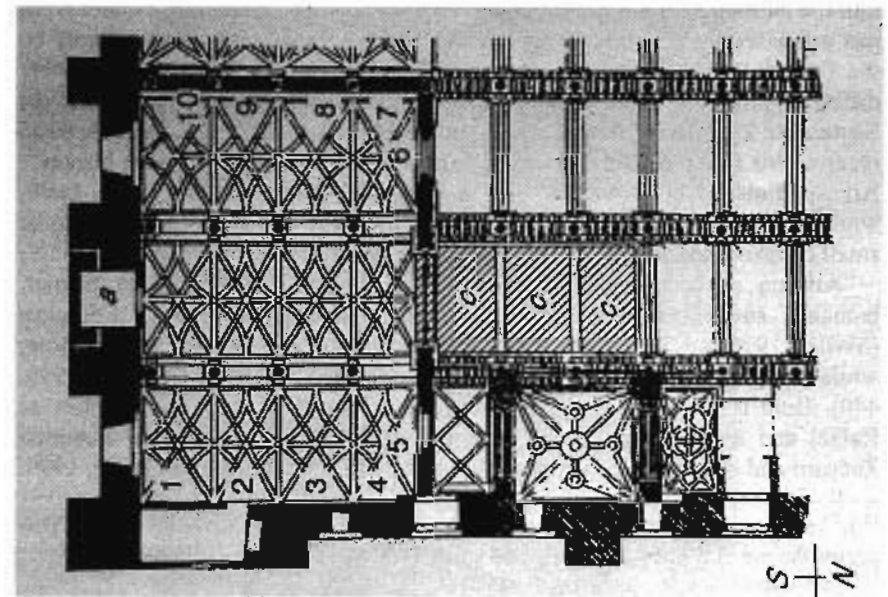


Fig. 17-3. *Sagrario* Chapel of the Cathedral and Old Mosque of Córdoba. Floorplan

A new ornamental project, the construction of a small room for the tabernacle, and some changes in the façade of the chapel were the few changes needed. In that way, the first commission for the *Sagrario* decoration was signed by Sevillian painter Luis de Valdívieso in 1571. Nothing remains of his

work, but it is supposed to be a representation of the Last Supper. Some other small works, as reparations of the previous paintings and decoration of doors and fences, were conducted in 1578 by local painter Alonso de Ribera and Flemish master Guillermo de Orta. Although not completely finished, in 1580 the new chapel was clearly in full use under its eucharistic program¹⁰.

In 1582, Antonio Mauricio de Pazos y Figueroa was named bishop of Córdoba. His new destiny seemed to be a retirement after a life devoted to church and court politics (Esquerria Revilla, 1994: 149-188). Bishop Pazos was a fine example of the ecclesiastical bureaucrats of Philip II's court. After studying at Bologna, he worked in the Inquisition at Seville and Toledo, he was bishop (non resident) of Ávila and President of the Castile Council, the main government structure of Spanish polysynodial system. One of the first things he did upon his arrival in Córdoba in 1583, was to promote a proper tomb for himself according to his dignity as noble and state man in retirement. He found the chance in the *Sagrario* Chapel. As it still needed some works, in August 8th the canons gave him the patronage of the chapel in payment of its final completion¹¹. Quickly, in just a few weeks, the new works started. And what was supposed to simply be the final accommodation of a common *Sagrario* Chapel, led to a completely different program: the vindication of the Christian past of Córdoba. In September 28th, Piamontese painter—but established in Malaga—Cesare Arbasia received his first payment in charge of the paintings committed by the bishop¹². Arbasia finished his paintings in 1586 (Fig. 17-4), short after Pazos death, working with the help of local painter Antonio Mohedano, and probably some small cooperation of Céspedes after his return from Rome in 1585¹³.

Arbasia arrived in Córdoba in 1577 following his friend the painter, humanist and churchman of the cathedral of Córdoba, Pablo de Céspedes (Muller, 1996: 89-91)¹⁴. They first got in contact in Rome some years before, while being working and learning together (Pacheco, 1985: 101; idem, 1990: 440). Both trained as painters copying the works of Rome's Old Masters as Rafael and Michelangelo; and, over all, following the example of Federico Zuccaro and collaborating in the circle of Danielle Volterra (Fallay Déste, 1990:

¹⁰ In 1580, canon Antonio Mohedano de Saavedra bought the old *Sagrario* Chapel. That proves the use of the new one by this date. See Torre y el Cerro (1988: 188 and 194).

¹¹ Actas Capitulares del Archivo Catedral de Córdoba, 8/07/1583.

¹² Archivo de Protocolos Notariales de Córdoba, Alonso Rodríguez, Of. 22, II. The chronology of the work in (Conti, 1991: 45-57).

¹³ Some of the frescoes were strongly repainted in 19th century. Recently the chapel has been restored.

¹⁴ Cesare Arbasia also worked in the wall paintings of the chancel of the cathedral of Málaga, where he also painted some altarpieces on wood; and probably took part in the huge mural program of the palace of the Marquis of Santa Cruz in El Viso. See Blázquez and Sánchez (2002).

43-76; Díaz Cayeros, 2000: 5-60; Baglione Romano, 1642: 30). These two references were equally important in their later work at the *Sagrario* paintings in Cordoba. On one hand, the development of their wall painting skills near Volterra at Santa Trinità dei Monti had to be decisive in the Arbasia's commissions in Andalusia, first in Malaga and later in Cordoba. On the other hand, Zuccaro's stress on the significance of Ideas and concepts in painting is one of the keys of Céspedes' artistic thought and of the ornamentation program of the *Sagrario* Chapel (Zuccaro, 1607; Céspedes, 1998).

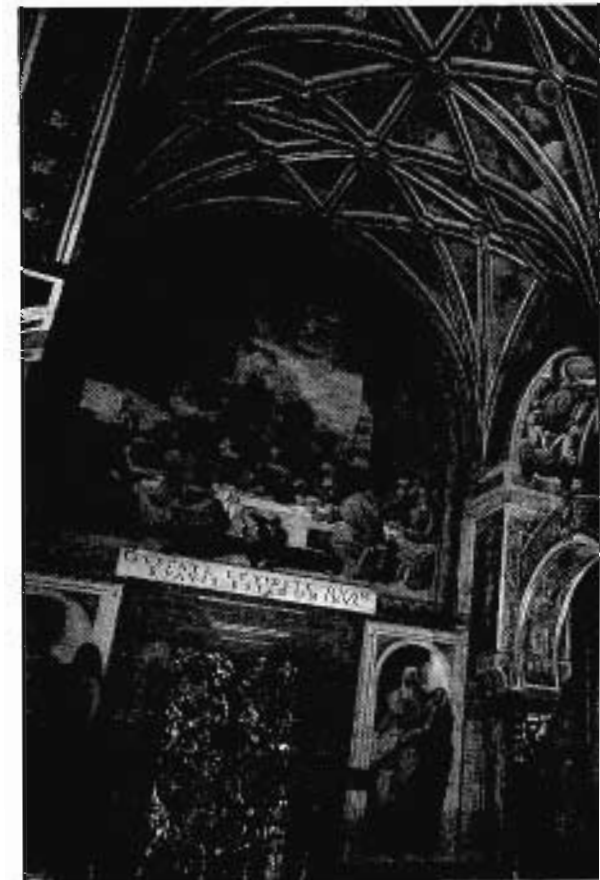


Fig. 17-4. Cesare Arbasia, *Last Supper* and general view, *Sagrario* Chapel of the Cathedral and Old Mosque of Córdoba

On his own, Céspedes was a pillar of Andalusian Renaissance humanism, and one of the most influential actors in Cordoba's cathedral cultural and ideological policy. He played a main role in the renovation program of the temple during the last quarter of the century, taking part in the decoration of many chapels and the design of some ornamentations in the new nave. He even wrote about the history of the site of the mosque, relating it to the Roman and Hebraic past of Córdoba (Urquizar, 2003: 523-531; idem, 2002: 23-35). He also had strong links with Pazos and the historian Ambrosio de Morales, the humanist who finally decided the meaning of the *Sagrario* paintings. Probably Céspedes was the first artist to be thought for that commission. His iconographical knowledge, his experience in mural painting, and overall, his personal implication with the program, made him the proper person. But in those days Céspedes was precisely at Rome, and he derived the commission to his friend Arbasia, the most suitable of the possible candidates¹⁵.

Anyhow Céspedes, along with Morales, was part of an interesting group of humanists that shared the idea of promoting a cultural base for Imperial Spain¹⁶. For them, it had to be founded on Catholicism and rooted in Classical past. The archaeological and philological surveys of Ambrosio de Morales, Benito Arias Montano, Pedro de Valencia, Rodrigo Caro, Martín de Roa, or Juan Fernández Franco, were clearly directed to strength, or even build, the collective memory of the glorious Spanish past (Morales, 1575; Fernández Franco; Caro, 1634; Roa, 1617, 1622, 1629). Their books formed a tradition made out of a curious combination of saints and stones (Hobsbawm and Rangler, 1983). Taking part of this atmosphere, many Spanish towns wrote their own history in these years. Cordoba did so, and his past was finally fixed in a mixture of Roman remains, Christian martyrs and contemporary nobles and churchmen (Morales Padilla, 1662).

Pazos, who had lived in Madrid and Rome as a religious and court man feeding and feeded with the ideology of Spanish Catholic Empire, completely assumed that vision. He also quickly understood the chance of relating his own burial to a vindication that defended the glorious Christian past of the building, the town and the country. As Morales himself said:

“Venido el Obispo don Antonio de Pazos mandó dar priesa en acabar ricamente el Sagrario y por un pintor piamontés llamado Cesar Erbasia se doraron y pintaron las bóvedas con un cielo de ángeles y las paredes con los Santos Mártires de Córdoba, dando yo los sujetos para pintura y

¹⁵ For Pablo de Céspedes, Cesare Arbasia, and Renaissance painting at Córdoba, see Urquizar (2001a).

¹⁶ As Peter Burke (1998) has established, Renaissance spreaded through groups of related humanists, and one of the main nets in Sixteenth Century Spain was that of the Court circle.

escriptura. Con esto quedó la capilla tan rica y hermosa que no hay otra cosa tal en España”¹⁷.

Morales defined the iconographical program of the chapel as a combination of Eucharistic themes and the figuration of the martyrs of Córdoba (Figs. 17-5 to 17-7). The first topics were depicted by the Last Supper and the prophets in the chancel of the central nave; and the seconds covered most of the walls. Also, two canvases, hung at the chancel of the lateral naves, joined both topics through the representation of *Christ in the Garden* and *Christ's farewell to his Mother*. As Manuel Pérez Lozano has said, they work as a post-eucharistical introduction to martyrial topics (Pérez Lozano, 1991: 57-64). The program was unusual to a *Sagrario*. Probably that caused, some years later, the decoration of the vaults preceding the chapel with some more eucharistic paintings by Italian brothers Peroli¹⁸.

Martyrs and Islamic heritage

The change of meaning of the chapel by the introduction of the martyrs has to be explained through the religious atmosphere of the town and the own interests of Morales. The devotion to the relics and martyrs was confirmed by Trent, having a special reception in Spain, and a strong impulse from the court of Philip II and the ornamentation of *El Escorial*. In Córdoba, the organized cult for its martyrs started in 1572 upon the discovering in Oviedo of the *Memorialis sanctorum* by Saint Eulogio of Córdoba, a 9th Century chronicle of the prosecutions and death of all the Cordobesian martyrs from Roman times to his contemporaries. The text was, just, studied and edited by Ambrosio de Morales under Royal Commission, fixing the lives of fifty eight local martyrs. Oddly enough, soon after, in 1575, the osseous relics of the martyrs were *discovered* in the parish church of San Pedro, where tradition claimed them to be buried. Also in 1578, a local priest called Andrés Roelas suffered some apparitions that confirmed the veracity of the discoveries and expanded the cult for the martyrs and its relics. Finally in 1583, the Council of Toledo, where Pazos took part just

¹⁷ “When Bishop don Antonio de Pazos came, he ordered to rush and enrich the completion of the Sagrario works, and a Piamontese painter called Cesar Arbasia painted and gilded the vaults with an angels' heaven, and the walls with the Saints Martyrs of Córdoba, giving me myself the topics for painting and writing. That left the chapel more rich and beautiful than anyother in Spain.” in Sánchez Cantón (1937: 73).

¹⁸ These paintings are now unfortunately destroyed. They were even almost lost in the 18th century, when Antonio Palomino mentioned their poor state of conservation (Palomino, 1988: III, 94 and 129; Ponz, 1988: IV, 489).

before coming to Córdoba, first admitted the relics; and then the Pope approved its cult.

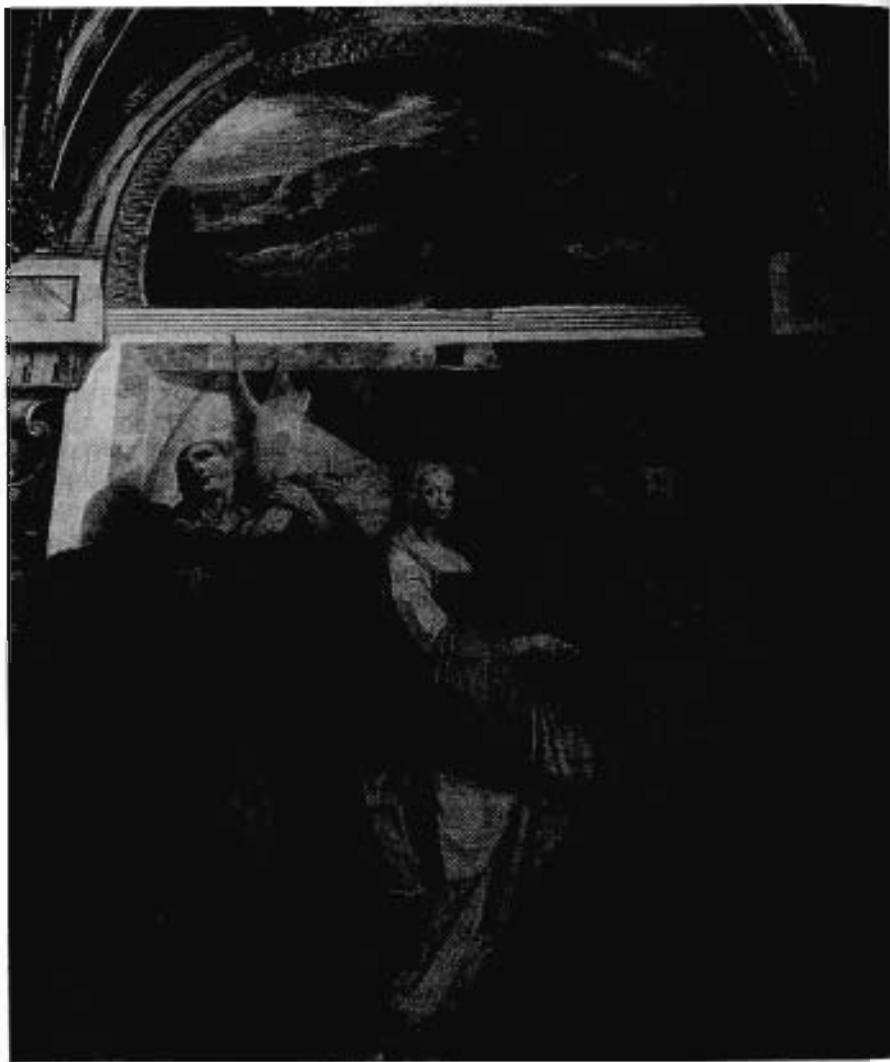


Fig. 17-5. Cesare Arbasia, Saints Acisclo, Victoria and Zoilo, *Sagrario* Chapel of the Cathedral and Old Mosque of Córdoba



Fig. 17-6. Cesare Arbasia, Saints Flora, María and Perfecto, *Sagrario* Chapel of the Cathedral and Old Mosque of Córdoba

In that context, bishop Pazos decided to encourage a cult that was useful to serve his own private and public interests. On one hand he related a popular urban cult to his burial and legacy to the town, on the other, he promoted the idea of Spanish glorious Christian past, just from the heart of one of the most visible remains of its Islamic heritage. Thirty of the fifty eight saints were depicted by Arbasia, in ten groups of three, literally following the texts and

instructions given by Morales' edition of the *Memorialis*. First, Saint Acisclo and his invented sister Victoria¹⁹, the patrons and protectors of the town, accompanied by Zoilo, Fausto, Januario and Marcial, dead under Roman prosecution. Then come Flora, María and Perfecto, the first martyrs under Islam in 9th Century Córdoba. Following them, appear saints Pablo, Tiberino, Sisenando, Pedro, Walabonso, Sabiniano, Habencio, Jeremías, Wistremundo, Isaac, Félix, Liliosa, Georgio, Aurelio, Sabigoto, Adulfo, Juan, Aurea, Leocricia, Eulogio and Pelagio. All religious and noble men and women killed for their fanatic opposition against Islam.

The list was compiled by Saint Eulogio accounting the martyrization movement experienced in 9th century Cordoba, seeking a break of the process of mass conversions to Islam then lived in the city (Wolf, 1988; Eulogio, 2005). In this context, to understand the significance of the lives of these characters in relation to the history of the building, we should consider their biographies. For instance, saints Cristobal and Leovigildo, two monks that left their monastery to injure Muhammad in presence of a Muslim judge. Consequently, they were condemned to death. Or Saint Aurea, the daughter of a Moorish nobleman and a Christian lady, who, being accused of impiety first admitted to adore Muhammad, and then retracted in favour of Jesus after leaving the trial. She was also condemned to capital punishment for that regret. Those familiar situations were in the origin of the faith crisis that the Mozarab leaders as Saint Eulogio were trying to abort. Mixed marriages and faith turnings were strongly increasing Islam conversions. For the first time in the history of Al-Andalus, Christians were starting to be a minority community, and these martyrs wanted to be a revulsive in their society.

This group of characters was disposed at the walls of the *Sagrario* Chapel, in order to surround the believer and to be a reminder of the roots and foundations of Catholic Spain, what means, Spanish empire. First, the martyrs under Roman ruling, painted among Classical architectures. They can be seen like a vindication of an ancient history independent from Rome, equally glorious and indubitable Christian. Then were the martyrs under Muslim ruling, now surrounded by Islamic remains. They, finally, stand as a proud memory of the maintenance of Christian heritage under the whole Spanish history.

Following Alberti's thought, the main purpose of these paintings was to tell a story: the history of these martyrs. As Armenini and Pacheco said, in order to serve God. So Morales wrote, remembering dead Pazos, "con el recuerdo de la pintura y de la historia levanta las almas al cielo, llamando ya todos en su ayuda

¹⁹ The existence of Victoria, martyr and sister of Acisclo, has been proved as a result of a medieval transcription mistake. But, as usually, she keeps being patron of the town.

a sus santos naturales y verdaderos abogados"²⁰. Both Roman and Islamic martyrs had a common message related to the environment of the chapel: we, the Christians were here, at this place, before, meanwhile and after this mosque was built. That was said, also, using the triumphant style of the Christian Humanism, using Renaissance frescoes that cover, hide and disguise the Islamic architecture of the building.



Fig. 17-7. Cesare Arbasia, Saints Flora, María and Perfecto (detail of Islamic architecture in background), *Sagrario* Chapel of the Cathedral and Old Mosque of Córdoba

Conclusion

These were new languages and new uses for an old mosque. The intention of the mural project was not only the stylistic update, but also an ideological one. The paintings' narrative on the local Christian martyrs under Muslims is a whole ideological manifesto and vindication of the transformations of the temple through the Classical and Humanistic language of Catholic empire. It is just another step in the process of appropriation. A *manifesto* that shows us the weakness of the process. The attempt of transformation of Islamic-Gothic architecture and space through wall painting could be understood as a both brilliant and bitter metaphor (Fig. 17-8). Brilliant if we think on how clearly it

²⁰ "the memory of the painting and the story raises souls to heaven, all calling for help to the saints, real and natural advocates." (Morales, 1586: preliminars).

reveals the epidermic nature of local Renaissance. Bitter if we consider it as a figure of the unreal purposes of Sixteenth century canons, trying to hide the Islamic past under a painted Christian veil. The visual appearance of the temple had changed, but not even saints and martyrs could fix that new interested interpretation of a polysemic building. And the evidence of their failure rests on the maintenance of that—still unreal—intention in today's canons' cultural and ideological policy.



Fig. 17-8. Sagrario Chapel of the Cathedral and Old Mosque of Córdoba. General view

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