

Mozarabic art and architecture

Mozarabs were Andalusian Christians belonging to the Southwest of Spain, who lived independent from other regions until their re-conquest in the thirteenth century. Andalusia is also called Arabic Spain and the Mozarabs' works of art has glimpses of Christianity as well as Islam. The outcome of this blend of religions is evident in the works of art and architecture belonging to this period and is quite different from art belonging to other parts of Spain during the same period. The Mozarabs prevailed in this region until it was conquered by the Almohades or Moors of Morocco in the second half of the twelfth century and the art and rituals belonging to this period still remains in the form of relics in Seville.

Andalusia (earlier, Tartessus) was influenced by the Samians, Phocaeans and Rhodians, and this is evident in the temples of Hera, Artemis-Athene and Diana constructed in this region in the sixth and seventh centuries B.C. The existence of the base of a column of a Graeco-Tartessian temple in Niebla is further testimony to the art of this period. The features of the sculpture of the Lady of Elche has been borrowed from the sculpture of a Tartessian priestess, which currently stands in the Archaeological Museum of Madrid. The Lady of Elche has been inspired from the Greek art of the Hera temple as well as the statues of Tartessian priestesses. The traditional *chlamys* is also visible in the dresses draped on the sculptures.¹

In the early 8th century, the Visigothic kingdom was conquered by the Muslims, and they had quite an influence over the Mozarabic art and architecture. One integration was the use of horseshoe arches, which was seen in Iberian architecture and was included in the Mozarabic architecture after the 8th century. An example of the presence of horseshoe arches in churches is the Church of San Roman de Moroso. Information about this church is found in documents that have been written after its construction in the eleventh century. The documents call it a

monastery and indicate its passage as donation from Queen Urraca to the Benedictine abbey of Santo Domingo de Silos.

The entrance to this church is on the north side, which is different from the position of entrances of the other Mozarabic churches. This has been attributed mainly to the rough terrain in the area of construction. The interior of the church is divided into two vertical spaces: one running from north to south and the other running from east to west. At the point where these two spaces meet, the horseshoe arch is present standing four and a half meters tall. A second horseshoe arch is located just above the entrance of the church. They symbolize the relationship between Catholic Bishops and Visigothic rulers, where each adopted the culture of the other in their personal and professional lives.²

There are some general characteristics that are seen in Mozarabic architecture. They all either lack or have very little exterior decoration. They all bear a basilica with small rooms or compartments for the purpose of Visigoth forms of worship. The floor plans of all buildings and structures are quite diverse and represent creativity in thinking. As mentioned earlier, horseshoe arches as per the Islamic style are used. They are usually very tight and the slope is two-thirds of its radius. Other noteworthy characteristics include use of the alfiz, use of columns to provide support, Corinthian crowns on top of the columns decorated with characteristic vegetable elements, and eaves that extend outward from the structure. There are about 20 structures that are constructed as per the Mozarab style of architecture, and most notable of these are St Michel de Cuxa, St Martin des Puits and the crypt at St Guilhem le Desert.

An outstanding example of Mozarabic art is the sculpture of the Virgin of Carmel made in Seville. It currently resides on the altar at the church of San Lorenzo. It was sculpted during the third quarter of the eleventh century when all the Mozarabic churches of Seville were

renovated. It has all the general features of Mozarabic sculptures including the typical poise of the head, the characteristic oval shape of the eyes, and a general cast of the expression. Its dress bears the *chlamys*, which was typically worn by the early Christians until the twelfth century. The hair, eyebrows, eyes and lips are painted on the sculpture, which is another common feature of Mozarabic art.¹

An example of early Mozarabic architecture is the monastery of San Miguel de Escalada. It is located in Leon, Spain and it was constructed in 913 by a monk from Cordoba named Alfonso Abbot. This temple was built using materials that had previously been used for the construction of Roman and Visigothic temples. This was the reason the temple was constructed in just twelve months. The monastery has a triple nave in the shape of a basilica, which is sheltered by a wooden roof. Each of the three naves has aisles that end in small circular choirs, the middle one being slightly larger than the other two. The central aisle has two thin columns forming a horseshoe arch bearing small screens to separate the view of the choir by the audience. This form of construction is similar to the chancels built by the Visigoths. The other two aisles have thin columns with a Corinthian-like capital on top, on which rest horseshoe arches. The south wall of the monastery is lined by similar columns bearing Corinthian capitals and horseshoe arches. The east side of the monastery bears a tympanum-like structure over the door to the church. This structure is a reused chancel screen made by the Visigoths bearing their traditional geometric and vegetative decoration.

All horseshoe arches used in this monastery are very steep and they are similar to the ones used in Roman pagan architecture, as seen in the museum of Leon. These typical horseshoe arches are also seen in Visigoth churches, although they have slightly different features. The arches are made of wood and there are paintings in their centers. The carvings in the stone

structures represent plants such as grapes and palm trees, geometric designs and representation of clusters of birds.⁴

There are numerous other examples of Mozarabic architecture built with characteristic Roman and Visigothic styles. The church of San Cebrian de Mazote in Castille, similar in construction to the church of San Miguel de Escalada, has also been built by the monks of Cordoba. It is different in that it lacks the screens in the aisles and it has names of monks inscribed on the windows. The church of Santiago de Penalba, constructed in 930, is shaped like a cross. It has a single nave instead of two, with a rounded chapel on both sides and horseshoe arches on its entrances. There are two horseshoe arches on the South end and one on the North. The church of Sant Julia de Boada, situated between the Pyrenees and Barcelona, has a single nave and a similar construction to the church of Santiago de Penalba. The church of Sant Quirze de Pedret near the town of Berga has a raised aisle on the North end and columns bearing Corinthian capitals as per the Visigoth style. Several other churches in Roussillon and Languedoc also follow the Mozarab style of architecture.¹

All information about Mozarabic architecture is available through primary sources, mainly documents written by monks during that period. One such example is the Commentary on the Apocalypse written by a Spanish monk named Beatus in 776, which throws light on the monastery of San Salvador at Tabara. This monastery and the tower of Tabara has been described in detail and the artist has provided accurate illustrations of the structure. The figures typically show a monk ringing the bells of the tower of Tabara. The walls of the tower are lined with glazed tiles as per the Islamic tradition, and it has ladders on the inside and horseshoe arches over its windows as per the Visigothic style. Another manuscript written by Beatus in 975 describes the Girona Cathedral in detail.

The Mozarabs have spoken volumes in their paintings too, and one such example is the Nuestra Senora de la Antigua in Seville. This painting resides in a Cathedral in Seville where the Mozarabs had served for a long time as priests. The time period of this painting is still a matter of debate; however, most historians believe it was painted during the eleventh century before the invasions by the Almohades. A similar painting is the painting of Our Lady of Rocamador, which currently resides in the church of San Lorenzo. Another Mozarabic painting is Our Lady of the Corral, which is present in the Church of Saint Isidore in Seville. These paintings have also encompassed the typical features of the Mozarabs as evident in the sculptures of that period.¹

Thus, the Mozarabs have skillfully captured the traditional styles of architecture of various kingdoms to develop a very distinct Mozarabic form of art and architecture. The influence of the Muslims and Visigoths is apparent in the Mozarab churches and monasteries. The most commendable inclusion has been that of the horseshoe arches, which is seen in varied forms in every piece of Mozarabic art and architecture.

Annotated Bibliography

Kaplan, G. B. The Mozarabic horseshoe arches in the church of San Roman de Moroso (Cantabria, Spain). *Journal of Medieval art and architecture*, III(3).

This article focuses on the introduction of horseshoe arches in Mozarabic architecture, including its various forms and historical importance. It particularly concentrates on tracing the history and symbolism associated with the horseshoe arch and the meanings it holds amidst Mozarabic churches.

Kleiner, F. (2012). *Gardner's art through the ages: A global history*. Cengage Learning.

This book provides a bird's eye view of the history of art and architecture, with relevant images and historical events relating to each monument. It is most useful for students who have undertaken a survey of art and architecture as all information is systematically organized and points to relevant references for further research.

Ministry of Education and Science. (n.d.). Miguel de Cervantes Virtual Library. Accessed November 13, 2015. Information on their official website.

The official website of the Ministry of Education and Science provides a description of all famous Mozarabic churches and monasteries. In particular is the church of San Miguel de Escalada, which has been described in excruciating detail.

Mitchel, R. (2010). Spain: Islamic and European influences in Spanish art. *Manual of Fine Arts*, 376-377.

This article talks about the various alterations that took place in the general characteristics of Spanish architecture due to the influence of various kingdoms. It includes a discussion of the

Mozarabic architecture and its general characteristics in relation to foreign occupation and rule of their land.

Whishaw, E. M. (1921). Mozarabic art in Andalusia. *American Journal of Archaeology*, 25(4), 364-375.

The American Journal of Archaeology is published by the Archaeological Institute of America, and its main objective is to preserve historical information by disseminating it in its raw and unaltered form. This article provides a very detailed discourse on the Mozarabic architecture with an extensive description of all important paintings and churches developed during that period.