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Arts

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For historians of medieval Iberian art and architecture, María Rosa Menocal's most important legacy lies in her work's normalization of a culturally decentralized, multidisciplinary frame through which medieval visual objects became part of a broadly shared network of cultural production that was unrestricted by firm boundaries between particular polities or "faith groups." While Menocal was not the first to advance such an approach, her persuasive promotion of it in works such as *The Ornament of the World* and the co-authored *The Arts of Intimacy* dovetailed closely with concurrent trends within the discipline of art history: new attentiveness to the variability of the Iberian cultural economy; a renewed concern with questions of reception and meaning; revived emphasis on close, contextual readings; and an openness to extra-disciplinary methodologies. The conceptual and disciplinary flexibility that Menocal's work encouraged now lies at the very heart of current work on Iberian visual culture.

Keywords: María Rosa Menocal; art history; visual culture; tolerance; *convivencia*

As an art historian who came of age shortly before María Rosa Menocal's works attracted the full attention of my discipline, I could not have missed their impact on the study of Iberian art history. While in future years this impact surely will multiply in directions yet unknown, Menocal's most immediate legacy for the primarily Anglophone scholars for whom her work has been most influential seems to me to lie in her easy but persistent normalization of a culturally decentralized, multidisciplinary frame for the understanding of medieval Iberian culture. Her insistence on taking a bird's-eye view, on stripping away the habitual scholarly paradigms that for so long isolated texts, objects, and buildings within the province of a single discipline, or the arbitrarily delimited silo of a particular "faith group," modeled for art historians and those throughout Iberian studies a revolutionary way of understanding them. She invited us to see all forms of Iberian cultural production, as Ryan Spiezch recently put it, as "texts expressed in a single, polyphonic cultural language," components in a broadly shared network whose tangled roots and intriguing intersections demanded a disciplinary and conceptual flexibility that now lies at the very heart of current work on Iberian visual and material culture.¹

Menocal's arguments became best known to art historians through both her widely disseminated *Ornament of the World* and the more recent, co-authored *Arts of Intimacy*.² Each book in its own way encouraged the recognition and exploration of a reality that many in our discipline had

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¹Spiezch, "Virtues of Exile," 5.

²Menocal, *Ornament of the World*; Dodds, Menocal, and Balbale, *Arts of Intimacy*.

long sensed: that the many instances of visual and material emulation, exchange, and hybridity that we had been taught to think of as exceptional, or at best as recording idiosyncratic moments of synergy among otherwise distinct and oppositional cultures, were in fact the most visible junctures in a continuous, integrated fabric of intercultural contact, negotiation, and mutual awareness, the substrate upon which most medieval Iberian Christians, Muslims, and Jews lived out their daily lives. Those points of contact we encountered – the sibling horseshoe arches of early medieval churches and mosques, the Andalusi silks and ivories repurposed to contain the bodies of Christian saints, the seemingly incongruous “Christian” iconography in Jewish Passover manuscripts – had breached expected cultural boundaries not through some daring or confusion of their artists, but because the boundaries often were not there.

Menocal was not, of course, the first to advance this particular cultural model or to assert its relevance to an understanding of medieval Iberian studies. For this, most scholars would point to the scholarship of Américo Castro, whose assertion of the fundamentality of Andalusi and Jewish cultural elements to what he called the *estructura vital* of Spanish history, although more essentializing than now might be accepted, was as much a touchstone for Menocal’s scholarship as for other Iberianists working today.³ Castro’s *convivencia* was founded on the deceptively simple claim that the religious cultures of medieval Iberia functioned not as largely independent or oppositional entities, but as deeply imbricated communities whose language, policies, scholarship, literature, and art were inevitably shaped by their consciousness – at least as often hostile and reactive as admiring and imitative – of the alternatives offered by those outside their immediate cultural circle. It ignited work in a number of disciplines that foreshadowed Menocal’s own: in literature, this included that of Menocal’s own mentor Samuel G. Armistead, and in history, that of a robust generation of Iberianists including Thomas Glick and Robert I. Burns and followed by Elena Lourie, Mark Meyerson, and David Nirenberg, to name only a few.⁴

Art history, too, had begun to shake off old disciplinary habits in these years, especially by the 1970s and 1980s, when the study of art and architecture in “medieval Spain” – which, at that time, meant primarily the visual traditions of the northern Christian kingdoms – was enjoying something of a renaissance in the hands of scholars such as John Williams and Otto Karl Werckmeister.⁵ Werckmeister’s prescient early analysis of “Islamic” forms in Beatus manuscripts and Williams’s memorable study of anti-Muslim polemic at San Isidoro in León stand among the first works to scrutinize the intersection of Christian and Muslim traditions as having shaped artistic production and reception in the northern Spanish kingdoms, although at this stage such research tended to emphasize more the oppositional than the collaborative dimensions of these exchanges.⁶

In the 1990s, impelled in part by Spain’s increasing openness to foreign researchers and in part by new opportunities related to the multiple quincentenaries marked in 1992, art historical scholarship addressing the impact of what by then was routinely described as *convivencia* in Spain had increased dramatically. Some of this was pursued in connection with several handsomely catalogued US exhibitions organized in and after the quincennial year: the multidisciplinary

³Castro, *España en su historia*. On the impact of Castro’s *convivencia*, see esp. Glick and Pi-Sunyer, “Acculturation”; Wolf, “Convivencia in Medieval Spain”; Soifer, “Beyond *Convivencia*”; and Doubleday, “Descolonización del concepto de *convivencia*.”

⁴Just a few of the many contributions through the 1990s are Glick, *Islamic and Christian Spain*; Burns, *Muslims, Christians, and Jews*; Meyerson, *Muslims of Valencia*; Nirenberg, *Communities of Violence*; Lourie, *Crusade and Colonisation*.

⁵For an overview of medievalist art historical scholarship in post-Franco Spain, see Mann, *Romanesque Architecture*, 43–45.

⁶Werckmeister, “Islamische Formen” and “Islamic Rider”; Williams, “Generaciones Abrahæe.”

Convivencia: Jews, Muslims, and Christians in Medieval Spain at The Jewish Museum, New York; the unprecedented *Al-Andalus: The Art of Islamic Spain* at the Metropolitan Museum; and the Met's ambitious if unrealized *Art of Medieval Spain, 500–1200*.⁷ These exhibitions prompted an explosion of academic scholarship that opened the eyes of many art historians to the previously unrecognized volume, pace, and variability of interaction among the artists and patrons of Iberia's presumably disparate medieval communities. In doing so, they challenged the applicability not just of cultural assumptions until then standard in the discipline but also of cherished labels like "Mozarabic" and "mudejar" – never mind plain old "Spanish" – to this diverse body of works.⁸ The best scholarship of that decade, which included Jerrilynn Dodds's now-classic *Architecture and Ideology in Early Medieval Spain*, Julie Harris's research on mosque conversion and booty, Katrin Kogman-Appel's studies of the multicultural roots of Hebrew manuscript decoration, and important publications on the monuments of Muslim-ruled Iberia by D. Fairchild Ruggles and Cynthia Robinson, demonstrated a refreshing willingness to grapple with the variability of the medieval Iberian cultural economy and a new sensitivity to the interpretive nuance this required.⁹

Yet to a great extent this work, like that in other Iberian fields, still remained disciplinarily circumscribed. Like the proverbial blind men with the elephant, historians of art, literature, science, or law had made enormous strides toward characterizing how mutual consciousness of, and openness to, a multiplicity of practices and forms had shaped the production of culture in their respective disciplinary spheres, but they had yet to connect this fully with the larger epistemological frame within which they all had begun to work. The publication of *Ornament of the World* in 2002 helped to remedy this simply by demanding that we all acknowledge the elephant. A synthetic, accessible, and pleasurable read, it insistently dissolved the disciplinary obstacles that had separated our work by turning our attention to the wide mix of medieval Iberian texts, monuments, institutions, and people that collectively owed their development to the more or less constant state of cultural enmeshment – the "culture of tolerance," as Menocal rather breezily described it – that surrounded them. It challenged Iberian medievalists of all disciplines to look beyond our self-imposed walls, to transfer our disciplinarily-bounded discourse to an open intellectual platform.

Ornament of the World has been criticized both for that easily overinterpreted phrase "culture of tolerance" and for its tendency to focus on the more benign and productive aspects of Iberian cultural relationships.¹⁰ The latter is perhaps forgivable as a corrective to the excessive cultural antagonism posited in earlier scholarship, as well as for its appeal to a public hungry for an optimistic model of intercultural relations. As to the former, it seems clear that Menocal never once confused what passed for tolerance in the medieval world with the kind of benevolent acceptance implicit in modern Anglo-American usage of the word. On the contrary, Menocal's medieval tolerance was a nuanced and irregular phenomenon, a pragmatic, patient struggle to cope productively, though often grudgingly, with the presence of others.¹¹ In this sense, it accords well with the likewise oft-misconstrued term *convivencia*, which Castro himself had applied to a

⁷Mann, Glick, and Dodds, *Convivencia*; Dodds, *Al-Andalus*; *Art of Medieval Spain*.

⁸On such terminology, see Glick's revised (2005) *Islamic and Christian Spain*, xx–xxii, and Dodds, "Mudéjar Tradition," 113–14.

⁹These include Dodds, *Architecture and Ideology*; Harris, "Mosque to Church Conversions" and "Muslim Ivories"; Kogman-Appel, "Christian Pictorial Sources" and "Hebrew Manuscript Painting"; Ruggles, *Gardens, Landscape and Vision*; and Robinson, *In Praise of Song*.

¹⁰See, for example, the review by García-Arenal, 803.

¹¹Soifer, "Beyond *Convivencia*," 22–23.

similarly competitive negotiation among coexisting cultural forms, and it remains well suited to evoke the fundamental complexity of the societies on which Menocal focused.¹²

The efficacy of Menocal's paradigm for the study of art history in particular was showcased in her self-consciously interdisciplinary *The Arts of Intimacy: Christians, Jews, and Muslims in the Making of Castilian Culture* (2008), co-authored with art historian Jerrilynn Dodds and cultural historian Abigail Balbale. The collaboration with Dodds, a disciplinary pioneer whose own work broke open the problem of Iberian multiculturalism for a generation of art historians, persuasively demonstrated how the multifaceted "intimacy" among Iberia's various cultural communities shaped Castilian artistic traditions. Setting mudejar towers beside Almohad mosques and the carved-stucco walls of synagogues beside opulent Nasrid throne rooms, and interspersed throughout with the poetic and philosophical excerpts that once filled those spaces with sound, the book's fluidly structured chapters echo the continuous interchange they describe among medieval Castilian patrons and tastemakers.

The Arts of Intimacy's preferential focus on those tastemakers permitted Menocal and her collaborators to advance another strategy well matched to art historical work: the interpretation of medieval artistic works and their meaning as inextricably enmeshed with the unique micro-contexts surrounding their production and reception. To understand the manuscripts of Alfonso X not merely as products of a generic *convivencia*, but as inspired by the king's pursuit of that ineffable courtly quality that the Arabs termed *adab*; to view the semi-legible Arabic inscriptions of San Roman through the eyes of Mozarabic Christians still resistant to an encroaching Latin culture in twelfth-century Toledo – this is to recognize the wide range of factors that decided medieval artistic production, from the agenda of the patron and the economics of the commission to widely diverse circumstances within which works of art were viewed and used. This contextually attentive approach, consistent with the move toward case studies and micro-histories that has gained currency in art history, effectively preserves the nuance so critical to our work.

It would be both inaccurate and unnecessary to claim that Menocal introduced to art historians the virtues of either the case study or a decentralized cultural paradigm. Rather, her contribution was to promote such strategies as a supra-disciplinary norm, just as her work encouraged many other habits that art historians now take for granted: our suspicion of hard-edged cultural models; our sensitivity to questions of reception and meaning; our openness to the insights and methods of non-medieval fields, such as colonial Latin America, where scholars have shown innovation in confronting cultural questions similar to our own.¹³ The fruits of these changes are readily observed in scholarship of the most recent decade, during which continued work by scholars like Dodds, Ruggles, Kogman-Appel, and Robinson, joined by figures such as Heather Ecker, María Judith Feliciano, and Francisco Prado-Vilar, successfully embraces both the complexity of the cultural questions posed by medieval Iberian art and the panoply of potential solutions that await them.¹⁴

The benefits opened to art historians by what one might call this "new normal" in medieval Iberian studies are not without their challenges. One of these, already alluded to above, is that the current scholarly appetite to identify and analyze meaningful instances of medieval cultural interchange may lead to the misinterpretation of seemingly culture-specific traditions that in truth should be seen as transcultural idioms. An evident example is the late medieval architectural

¹²On this, see Glick, "Convivencia: An Introductory Note," 1–2.

¹³See, for example, Altshul, "Future of Postcolonial Approaches," esp. 11–12.

¹⁴Notable among this more recent work is Dodds, "Rodrigo, Reconquest"; Ruggles, "Alcazar of Seville"; Kogman-Appel, *Jewish Book Art* and *Illuminated Haggadot*; Robinson, "Love in the Time of Fitna" and "Mudéjar Revisited"; Ecker, "Conquered City in al-Andalus"; Feliciano, "Muslim Shrouds" and Prado-Vilar, "Gothic Anamorphic Gaze."

tradition conventionally known as “mudejar,” which by the fourteenth century was so widely deployed to build everything from churches to synagogues to palaces that it had clearly become a sort of architectural koiné.¹⁵ While it is both exciting and satisfying to read the presence of mudejar brickwork in Aragonese church towers as a conscious expression of cultural identity, this claim must be mitigated by an awareness of other, less ideologically loaded but perhaps more influential factors, such as the inexpensiveness of brick and tile, the availability of appropriately trained builders, and above all the ubiquity of a mudejar tradition free of fixed religio-cultural connotations.¹⁶

Somewhat related is the risk of interpreting all cases of bona fide cultural exchange in which a motif, object, or tradition originating decisively in one culture is adapted to new use in a second – as when a caliphal ivory is repurposed as a Christian reliquary – as invariably conscious, intentional, and ideologically driven. In some instances, this seems quite substantiable, as when the congregational mosques of Seville or Córdoba were captured and, with an arguably triumphalist flourish, left in their original “mosque” form for centuries after their conversion to Christian use.¹⁷ Others, such as a Christian prince’s preference for silk garments of Islamic manufacture, or a Nasrid sultan’s commission of ceiling paintings sporting Gothic-style images of blonde European ladies and their knights, may reflect nothing more than a careless taste for what were then considered the finer things in life.¹⁸

Such interpretive risks are well outweighed by the rewards to be reaped by art historians’ exploitation of a normative multicultural frame such as the one Menocal promoted. The recognition of the complex cultural network that her work so persuasively evoked, and which has become so central to the efforts of our discipline, can only result in a more complex, more textured, and, it seems fair to say, more accurate understanding of the visual culture of the medieval Iberian world.

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Pamela A. Patton is Associate Professor of Art History at Southern Methodist University. Her research has won grants from the Kress Foundation, the National Endowment for the Humanities, and the Spanish Ministry of Culture. Her first book, *Pictorial Narrative in the Romanesque Cloister: Cloister Imagery and Religious Life in Medieval Spain* (Peter Lang), appeared in 2004. Her second, *Art of Estrangement: Redefining Jews in Reconquest Spain* (Pennsylvania State University Press, 2012), examines the transformation of Christian perceptions and portrayals of Jews during the Iberian Reconquest. Prof. Patton’s articles and essays have concerned monastic architectural sculpture, the text–image relationship in manuscripts, and the portrayal of ethnic and religious minorities in high and late medieval Iberia. A 2011 recipient of the SMU President’s Associates Outstanding Faculty Award, she teaches courses on medieval art and architecture, the visual culture of medieval Iberia, Jewish–Christian relations in medieval Europe, and symbol and storytelling in medieval art. Dr Patton’s newest research project concerns the semiotics of skin color in medieval Iberia and its environs.

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¹⁵On this, see esp. the articles in Robinson, Feliciano, and Rouhi, “Interrogating Iberian Frontiers.”

¹⁶Ruggles, “Representation and Identity”; but see also Ruiz Souza’s arguments for the cultural independence of the mudejar in “Castile and al-Andalus.”

¹⁷Harris, “Mosque to Church Conversions”; Crites, “Churches,” 393–96; Ruggles, “Stratigraphy of Forgetting.”

¹⁸Feliciano, “Muslim Shrouds”; Luyster, “Cross-cultural Style.”

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