

Zeitschrift: Revue du réseau suisse de l'historicisme = Zeitschrift des Schweizer Netzwerks für Historismus : Historismus.ch

Herausgeber: Réseau suisse de l'historicisme = Schweizer Netzwerk für Historismus

Band: 1 (2020)

Artikel: Moorish architectural models in the Musée d'art et d'histoire in Geneva

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-919723>

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Moorish Architectural Models in the Musée d'Art et d'Histoire in Geneva*

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Architectural models of the Alhambra are the focus of growing international attention and studies.¹ This contribution presents three models and two architectural items recently found in the reserve collection of the Musée d'Art et d'Histoire in Geneva, which testify to the interest raised by these objects and their use for the renewal of industrial arts in the second half of the nineteenth century.

In Geneva, interest for a global history of ornament, which included Islamic styles, was specially promoted by the engraver and local expert on decorative arts Herman Hammann (1807–1875).² An active member of the *Société des arts*, Hammann also collaborated with the *École professionnelle d'art appliqué à l'industrie*, created in 1869, introducing the study of the Alhambra in his teachings.

Like many other didactical institutions in Europe, both the *École professionnelle* and the *École des arts industriels* (founded in 1876), possessed a collection of plasters casts which served as objet-lessons for students and included Moorish examples. However, small-scale architectural models of the Alhambra were only available to students in Geneva after 1887, as part of the collections of the *Musée des arts décoratifs*, inaugurated in 1885.

First produced by Rafael Contreras Muñoz (1824–1890), head of the restoration workshop for stucco and ceramics decoration in the Nasrid palaces since 1847, small-scales models of the Alhambra not only provided colorful souvenirs for tourists but also came to be seen as valuable objects for the improvement of decorative arts, becoming part of the collections of several museums around the world in the second half of the nineteenth-century. The best known example of this is the South Kensington Museum, which pur-

* This short article is the result of research related to courses given at the University of Geneva in 2019–2020. It follows a five-year research-project led by Francine Giese at the University of Zurich, during which I investigated related topics in different contexts; I am therefore grateful to her for introducing me to these objects. My thanks go to Bénédicte de Donker, curator of decorative arts at the Musée d'Art et d'Histoire in Geneva; to Danielle Buysens, historian and former curator of the Musée d'Ethnographie in Geneva; and to Sylvain Wenger at the Société des Arts.

¹ Rosser-Owen, 2010, 118; Rodríguez Domingo 2016, 83–87; González Pérez, 2017; González Pérez 2017, 29–49; Giese/Varela Braga 2017, 97–111; González Pérez 2018, 165–178; Kondratenko/Saviona, 2018, 311–326; Giese 2021 (in press).

² Varela Braga 2019.



Fig. 1 a and b:
Diego Fernández Castro, model of the Oratory of the Partal with its mihrab. Between 1874–1887. Plaster, mastic and wood, and paint, 48 x 33 x 11.5 cm. Inv. n. P 0076-003 © Musées d'art et d'histoire, Ville de Genève, photography: Bettina Jacot-Decombes.



chased four Contreras models in 1852, followed by twenty-six more in 1865.³ From London to St. Petersburg, models of the Alhambra played an important role as transfer media, and together with plaster casts, engravings, and photographs, contributed to the global diffusion of the Moorish Revival in the second half of the nineteenth century.⁴

Of the three Geneva small-scale models, two came from the workshop of Diego Fernández Castro (1847–?), as may be seen from the inscriptions at the bottom on the front and the original paper labels on the back. Fernández Castro, who presented himself as ‘Sculptor of Arab Ornamentation of the Royal Chamber of H.M. of Spain and of the Imperial Palace of Germany’, had a workshop on Calle Gomérez 30, strategically situated along the street leading to the Alhambra.⁵ Founded in 1874, his workshop was the second oldest in Granada and offered a vast choice of architectural reductions, both polychrome and uncoloured.⁶

³ Rosser-Owen, 2010, 118. For the argument in general, see Giese 2021 (in press).

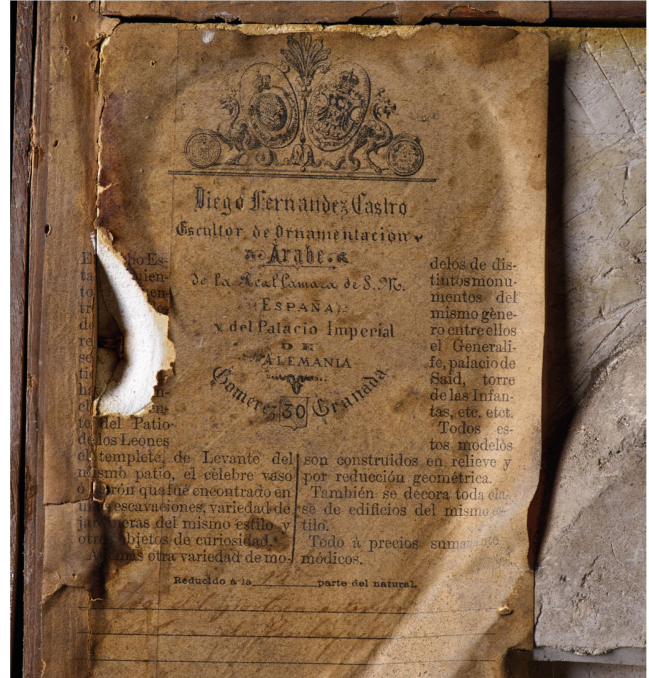
⁴ The subject is treated in depth in Giese 2021 (in press).

⁵ These information appear on the paper label. ‘Escultor de Ornamentación árabe de la Real Cámara de S.M. de España y del Palacio Imperial de Alemania’, titles that according to González Pérez’s dissertation are not confirmed by archival data. González Pérez, 2017, vol. 1, 286.

⁶ *Catálogo* 1901.



Fig. 2 a and b:
Diego Fernández Castro, model inspired by Mirador de Lindaraja. Between 1874–1887. Plaster, mastic and wood, and paint, 51 x 34.5 cm. Inv. n. P 0076-001 © Musées d'art et d'histoire, Ville de Genève, photography: Flora Bevilacqua.



The first model (Fig. 1) shows the interior of the Oratory of the Partal in 1:10 scale, with the three-dimensional *mihrab* and its mosaic dado, as well as two transenne on the upper level.⁷ Its description and measures suggest that it corresponded to item number 28 in Fernández Castro's catalogue.⁸ Except for the different pattern of the mosaic dado, it is a fairly faithful representation of the state of the oratory after Contreras's restoration, as may be seen in a photograph by Jean Laurent (1816–1886) taken in the 1870s.⁹ In contrast to Contreras, who often juxtaposed several different parts of the Alhambra, Fernández Castro's models are considered to be more faithful reproductions of the palace's actual state of conservation¹⁰, therefore becoming precious testimonies for reconstructing the history of the monument's restoration.

Nonetheless, the second model (Fig. 2), in 1:12 scale, appears to be an amalgam of the arcade from the Mirador de Lindaraja as seen from the Hall of

7 This model was broken at some point and signs of damage are still visible despite its restoration, dating probably from the nineteenth century. *Arts Décoratifs, Fonds Anciens, Répertoire*, Archives MAHGE, item number 76, value at the time 85 fr.

8 *Catálogo* 1901. In 1901 it was sold for 50 pesetas. The number is not visible on the paper label.

9 *Granada. 1136. Interior de la Mezquita (Alhambra)*. J. Laurent, Colección del Archivo de la Alhambra y Generalife, APAG/Colección Fotografías/ F-05192.

10 González Pérez 2017, vol. 1, 341.



Fig. 3:
Rafael Contreras (?), model inspired by the side window of the Mirador de Lindaraja, second half of the nineteenth century. Plaster, mastic and wood, and paint, 63 x 34 cm. Inv. n. P 0076-002 © Musées d'art et d'histoire, Ville de Genève, photography: Bettina Jacot-Decombes.

the Two Sisters and the geminated windows of the Hall of the Ajimeces.¹¹ The inscription on the label is barely visible, but a similar model was auctioned in Paris in 2011 with its paper label indicating that it corresponded to item number 49 in Fernández Castro's catalogue, representing a 'view of the portico, Hall of the Two Sisters, with centre of windows'.¹² This model was also included in a photographic album of the Alhambra by José García Ayola (1841–1898) under number 109, titled 'ajimez del Mirador de Lindajara'.¹³

As for the third and largest model (Fig. 3), it bears no signature or paper label. It is inspired by the side-window at the Mirador de Lindajara and appears

11 *Arts Décoratifs, Fonds Anciens, Répertoire*, Archives MAHGE, item number 77, valued at the time 100 fr.

12 'Vista del pórtico, Sala de las Dos Hermanas, con centro de ventanas', lot. 107, Auction Pierre Bergé & Associés, Paris, June 2011: <<https://www.pba-auctions.com/lot/10104/1880737?npp=50&>> (consulted on June 3, 2020). In the 1901 catalogue it was sold for 50 pesetas.

13 Colección Museo Casas de los Tiros. Granada. Número de Inventario E. 3294, published in González Pérez 2017, vol. 2, 266–267.

to be the work of a different workshop, most likely Contreras', who produced several versions of this popular place in the Alhambra.¹⁴ All three models offer a polychromatic version of the Alhambra according to Contreras' restoration, and show the strong presence of gold, following the observations made by Owen Jones and Jules Goury in the 1830s and published in *Plans, Elevations, Sections and Details of the Alhambra* (1836–1845).

One might suppose that the two Fernandez Castro models were acquired together and thus correspond to the 'two reductions of the Alhambra, fragments of doors and windows, painted and gilded' donated by Camille Ferrier (1831–1905) to the *Musée des Arts Décoratifs* in 1887, two years after its foundation.¹⁵ A lawyer by profession, Ferrier served on the museum's board and was an active member of the *Société des Arts*, a local society created in the eighteenth century to promote arts and manufacturing in Geneva.¹⁶ He travelled several times to Spain, including in 1886, one year before he donated both models to the museum, and was an admirer of Hispano-Moorish art, on which he lectured at the *Société des Arts*.¹⁷ Contreras' model would instead correspond to the 'fragment in relief from the facade of the Alhambra, near Granada' mentioned in 1905 as decorating the library of art collector and benefactor Gustave Revilliod (1817–1890)¹⁸, the founder of the *Musée Ariana*, a private museum bequeathed to the city to enhance the arts in Switzerland. A great traveller, Revilliod seems however to have never been to Granada and the presence of this model in his collection still has to be determined.

More information is instead available regarding the origin of the two large ornamental windows sculpted in gypsum (Figs. 4–5). These were directly acquired by the *Musée des Arts Décoratifs* at the *Exposition Internationale d'Anvers* in 1885, an acquisition that benefited from Swiss federal funds.¹⁹ Even though they are referred to in the museum's historical repertoire as 'copies of the Alhambra', they have nothing to do with the Nasrid palaces, but are instead exemplars of the know-how of Tunisian craftsmen, in this

¹⁴ Two similar, although not identical, models are to be found for instance in the Scientific Research Museum of the Russian Academy of Arts in St Petersburg (inv. n. AM-515 and AM 516), published in Kaufmann 2019, 226 and Giese 2021 (in press). Six other versions, mostly preserved in London, are also documented in González Pérez 2017, vol. 2, 46–59.

¹⁵ 'Deux réductions de l'Alhambra, fragments de portes et fenêtres, peints et dorés', in *Compte rendu* 1888, 98.

¹⁶ *Compte rendu* 1887, 95. Ferrier was a member of the *Classe des Beaux-arts* of the *Société des arts* since 1859, becoming part of the executive committee in 1880 and was its vice-president for 1883–1884 (*Procès verbaux de la Société des arts*). He was also active as jury for the *Prix Galland*, a local competition for the promotion of decorative arts, in *Compte rendu* 1887, 83.

¹⁷ Ferrier lectured on the architecture of the Mosque in Cordoba on the 5th of October 1883. A transcription is preserved in the archives of the *Société des Arts* in *Procès-verbaux de la Classe des Beaux-arts*, n. 7, manuscript, 192–195.

¹⁸ 'un fragment en relief de la façade de l'Alhambra près Grenade', in Sidler 1905, 231.

¹⁹ *Arts Décoratifs, Fonds Anciens, Répertoire*, Archives MAHGE, items number 33 and 34, which then costed fr. 85 and fr. 95.



Fig. 4:
Moustapha ben Mohamed, Ornamental panels, c. 1885. Gypsum, 112 x 71 x 8,5 cm. Inv. n. P0033 © Musées d'art et d'histoire, Ville de Genève, photography: Flora Bevilacqua.



Fig. 5:
Moustapha ben Mohamed, Ornamental panels, c. 1885. Gypsum, 111 x 71 x 8,5 cm. Inv. n. P0034 © Musées d'art et d'histoire, Ville de Genève, photography: Flora Bevilacqua.

case the 'Maison Mustapha Ben:Ahmed (sic)' in Tunis, as indicated in the museum's repertory. This is most probably the same 'Moustapha ben Mohamed' who exhibited four plaster panels 'en plâtre fouillé' (plaster worked into lace) at the Colonial exhibition in Amsterdam in 1883²⁰, a technique that was much admired by Europeans.

The presence of these 'Moorish style' objects in the Geneva collections therefore confirms the taste for Islamic art that was cultivated in the 1870s and 1880s in both the municipal School of Applied Arts and the canton School of Industrial Arts.²¹ As well, it demonstrates the value these objects held as sources of inspiration for students and manufacturers around Lake Geneva, at a time when historicism dominated architecture and the industrial arts.

²⁰ *Exposition* 1883, 148. At the Anvers exhibition, the facade of the Tunisian section was decorated with this technique, as mentioned (but without naming the craftsman) by Corneli/Mussely 1886, 391. On the exhibition, and for illustration of similar panels, see De Hond 2010.

²¹ Varela Braga 2019, 165–183.

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