

# Claustro de la Merced: A Re-Evaluation of Mudéjar Style in Colonial Mexico

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The term Mudéjar art or Mudejarismo was coined in 1859 by Spanish historian, José Amador de los Ríos. Mudéjar art has its origins in the Iberian Peninsula, present day Spain and Portugal, a product of the *convivencia*, or coexistence of the Abrahamic religions throughout the later medieval period. Scholars describe Mudéjar art as a “uniquely Iberian artistic hybrid” in which Islamic motifs were assimilated and incorporated into Christian and Jewish works of art.<sup>1</sup> Mudéjar art primarily included architecture, but was also displayed in ceramics, textiles, and wood carving among others. The most emblematic features of Mudéjar are mainly considered in the decoration of architectural exteriors and interior spaces, in which bright colors and geometrical patterns are embedded in some media. The concept of Mudéjar art, however, is a notion based primarily in European and American intellectual ideas.<sup>2</sup> The definition of Mudéjar art is based on the emphasis on formal visual analysis, common to Western practice during the nineteenth and twentieth century.<sup>3</sup>

This fact calls for a redefinition of Mudéjar art, specifically in the way it has been assessed in its inclusion in other Hispanic countries. It is known that Mudéjar art reached Latin America as a result of trans-Atlantic migration of Spanish conquistadors in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. However, the existing scholarship of Mudéjar art in Latin American countries focuses on how Mudéjar buildings are labeled as Christian temples, with decoration inspired by Islamic aesthetics, as an expression of the Mendicant Orders' embrace of multiculturalism. Moreover, the transmission, transformation, and display of Mudéjar art in the Americas, particularly in Mexico, have been limited,

primarily to a type of wooden ceiling ornamentation known as *artesonados*, recalling the use of *muqarnas* and *Seljuk* wooden ceilings in Islamic architecture.

Nonetheless, recent scholarship has drawn attention to the fact that the categorization of these buildings as Mudéjar was primarily based on formal analysis, typical of twentieth-century scholarship. According to art historian María Judith Feliciano, for instance, this has led to an anachronistic analysis of Mudejarismo, as well as assessments that only considered the views of the Spanish viceroyalty, undervaluing the expression of contemporary ideals of local indigenous populations.<sup>4</sup> Scholars also state that scholarship is in “need of critical analyses of the role of Mudejarismo in the development of artistic phenomena during the early colonial period.”<sup>5</sup> Feliciano's discussion, the scope of which is limited to three temples in Mexico, inspired research on the Cloister of the former convent of Our Lady of Mercy, Claustro de la Merced, in Mexico City, dated to the seventeenth century. The existence of other materials such as stone to define Mudéjar demands further examination of the stone carvings in Mexico's cloisters within convent complexes, including the subject of this analysis (Figure 1).

The Cloister has been surveyed under the anachronistic parameters that these pioneering scholars have challenged. Previous scholarship mainly focuses on the aesthetics of the building, particularly on the diamond rustication featured on its archways, and omits a consideration of the unusual use of stone. The Cloister in the former Convento de la Merced demands the examination of a fleeting, but significant remark made by renowned Mexican archaeologist and scholar, Luis Alberto Martos. He suggests the probable cause for the assimilation of Islamic motifs within the Cloister could be the Mercedarian monks' nostalgic

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- 1 Mariam Rosser-Owen, *Islamic Arts from Spain* (London, UK: V&A Publishing, 2010), 17.
- 2 Maria Judith Feliciano, “The Invention of Mudejar Art and the Vice-Regal Aesthetic Paradox: Notes on the Reception of Iberian Ornament in New Spain,” in *Histories of Ornament*, ed. G. Necipoğlu and A. Payne (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2016), 70.
- 3 Ibid.

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4 In November 2004 Leyla Roughi and María Judith Feliciano organized the symposium “Interrogating Iberian Frontiers: A Cross-Disciplinary Research Symposium on Mudéjar History, Religion, Art and Literature” where the main objective was to generate discussion and draw away from the broad generalizations in which the role of Mudejarismo has been assessed. The symposium challenged historiography concerning cultural exchanges in late medieval and early modern Iberia as well as the first century of the Spanish Colonies in the Americas. For more information see: María Judith Feliciano and Leyla Roughi, “Introduction: Interrogating Iberian Frontiers,” *Medieval Encounters* 12, no. 3 (2006): 317-28.

5 Feliciano and Roughi, “Introduction: Interrogating Iberian Frontiers,” 326.

attempt to remember the beginnings of their Order back in the thirteenth century when its founder travelled to the Middle East and attempted to rescue Christians held captive by the Moors.<sup>6</sup>

Informed by Feliciano's re-evaluation of Mudéjar art in Latin America, and concurring with Martos' claim, this research argues that Claustro de la Merced is a primary and unique example in Mexico where Islamic aesthetics were assimilated not only because of the relevance of its visual components embedded in Islamic aesthetics, as has been proposed, but primarily as an expression of the Mercedarian Order's desire to create a long-lasting representation of Islamic aesthetics as a way to honor the Order's origins and foundation. The fact that Claustro de la Merced portrays Mudéjar motifs carved in stone, as opposed to wood as found in many of the Mudéjar temples in Mexico, suggests the Order's concern in creating a more tangible and culturally-specific association to the Order's past. This proposition, in turn, helps revise the twentieth-century idea that Mudéjar aesthetics were limited to wooden ornamentation in ceilings.

Although it has been classified as Mudéjar architecture Claustro de la Merced has never received scholarly attention in its entirety, which embodies other assimilated architectural styles. The analysis is focused on a fraction of elements of the structure and on the reminiscences of Islamic elements within the architecture (Figure 2).<sup>7</sup> What is important to realize is that in the Americas, Islamic decorative forms were amalgamated with other architectural styles, such as Gothic, Renaissance, and Baroque styles creating a hybrid defined as Mudéjar.<sup>8</sup> In architecture, the Islamic forms such as polylobed arches, *muqarnas* (ceiling decorations on the shape of stalactite vaults), and *sebka* (lozenge pattern also known as rhombic or diamond shape), as well as scrolling plant motifs within architectural ornamentation, are considered the most emblematic features of Mudéjar.<sup>9</sup> Equally remarkable, the inclusion of ogival and rectangular pillars, the use of stucco to create geometric motifs to decorate the *alfiz*, or molding on the sides of an arch, archways and spandrels, as well as the inclusion of horseshoe arches are all characteristics of Mudéjar art.<sup>10</sup>

Nonetheless, in Mexico, Mudéjar was primarily considered in the ornamentation of wooden ceilings with the use of geometric strapwork. Scholarship has categorized the use of wood as "...superficially decorative or as empty familiar forms without culturally specific associations, because at worst, the materials required were simply 'cheaper' and

'quicker'."<sup>11</sup> This is an example of the anachronistic assessments that were provided when Mudéjar art emerged as an artistic discipline. Through this line of analysis, Mudejarismo has been subjected to generalizations, and with these, a considerable misreading of Mudéjar manifestations. While this research does not disregard previous scholarship, the only assessments regarding the cloister's main features as Mudéjar have led to a vague and inadequate understanding of it. For instance, Manuel Toussaint, Mexico's first professor of Colonial art, is the first scholar to categorize Claustro de la Merced as Mudéjar in 1946. Following this, the few scholars that have considered the Cloister as part of their scholarship, do not delve into a richer understanding of the aesthetics that makes the building Mudéjar. They are mostly concerned with the tumultuous history of the Cloister, as well as the attempts to preserve and restore the building.<sup>12</sup>

Today, as a result of demolitions and restorations, little is left from the original temple and convent complex first built in the mid-sixteenth century in Mexico City. The magnificence and care in which this convent complex was first built can now only be assessed in the main cloister structure of the complex. The cloister architecture of this convent is understood as an equilateral squared courtyard surrounded by two-story covered walkways. The top floor is composed with fourteen arches. Seen from the courtyard, these archways alternate two to one with the first floor, creating a rhythmic visual effect with the top and bottom walkways. With this two-to-one alternation, Toussaint categorized the Cloister as Mudéjar and compared it to the Cloister of Guadalupe in Spain.<sup>13</sup> Toussaint, however, did not offer any other insight and this is the only time Claustro de la Merced is mentioned in his book. In Claustro de la Merced the diamond rustication is believed to symbolize jewels or diamonds within the architecture (Figure 3).<sup>14</sup> The inclusion of these architectural elements as well as the fact that these prime Mudéjar characteristics were chosen to be displayed on stone challenges the previous notion of the election of certain materials due to their "cheapness" and "quicker" use.<sup>15</sup> Other monuments in Mexico displaying Mudéjar ornamentation are the Church of San Francisco in Tlaxcala, and its namesake in Michoacán, which have been reassessed by Feliciano. Her argument efficiently proves the inclusion of the locals' interest in the direct parallels of pre-Hispanic aesthetics within the ceil-

6 Luis Alberto Martos López, "De fe, redención y arte: el claustro de nuestra señora de La Merced de la Ciudad de México," *Boletín de Monumentos Históricos* 29 (2013): 35.

7 Manuel Toussaint, *Arte Mudéjar en América* (Mexico City, MX: Editorial Porrúa, 1946), 26-28.

8 *Ibid.*, 7.

9 Mariam Rosser-Owen, *Islamic Arts from Spain* (London, UK: V&A Publishing, 2010), 83.

10 Toussaint, *Arte Mudéjar en América*, 7.

11 Feliciano, "The Invention of Mudejar Art," 71.

12 In the mid-nineteenth century after President Benito Juárez established the separation between Church and State, most of the convent complex including the church was demolished. Circa 1915, renowned Mexican artist, Gerardo Murillo, most commonly known as Dr. Atl, lived in a room located on the roof of the Cloister. The artist's relationships with intellectuals and other artists of the time brought the Cloister back to life with soirées and art exhibitions organized by Murillo and held in the Cloister. For more information see Martos López "De fe, redención y arte," 30-31.

13 Toussaint, *Arte Mudéjar en América*, 28.

14 Martos López, "De fe, redención y arte," 29.

15 Feliciano, "The Invention of Mudejar Art," 71.

ing ornamentation. She focuses on the decorative gilded stars in the church in Tlaxcala, and the geometric wooden strapwork in Michoacán. In both churches, the decoration displayed within their ceilings is the prime feature in which ornamentation is rooted in Islamic aesthetics. Such is the case on the strapwork with celestial imagery in the ceiling of the open chapel at the Church of San Mateo Apóstol. However, the strapwork is painted in the form of a mural with the purpose of imitating wood, and does not speak to the durability of the material.

The Cloister's main Mudéjar features are not limited to the geometric and vegetative ornamentation in wooden ceilings, however. Rather they offer a more thorough understanding, a composite architectural approach, involving polylobed arches and their lavish decoration in stone. The amalgamation of cultural and religious tradition is manifested throughout the architectonic and sculpted elements of this Cloister. As Finbarr Flood explains in his theory of translation, "cultural formations are always already hybrid and in process, so that translation is a dynamic activity that takes place both between and within cultural codes."<sup>16</sup> This is further understood in the embedded traditions brought by the Mercedarian monks from Spanish-Islamic influence and its establishment in Colonial Mexico. Flood's theory of translation also resonates with the re-definition of Mudéjar proposed by Feliciano, in which Mudéjar "serves as evidence of nothing other than a pan-Iberian aesthetic that existed in a constant state of flux."<sup>17</sup> The dynamic activity that Flood references is well exemplified by the Cloister which is an architectural structure brought by Spanish imperialist powers, that, in turn, had the purpose of eradicating pagan beliefs held by the locals. The architecture and style of Claustro de la Merced can be understood as a vibrant and fluid occurrence that involved not only the portrayal of the aesthetic qualities of the cultures, but was embedded in the geographic and socio-cultural past of the diverse cultures involved. Its relevance also lies in today's interpretation of the Cloister as a microcosm in a city with more than eight million inhabitants. Located in what became a heavily transited and disadvantaged neighborhood, the fact that this Cloister survived almost four centuries of neglect and decay speaks to the ideals held by Mendicant Orders in Colonial Mexico. These ideals are manifested within the Cloister and are directly related to the Mercedarian Order beginnings, and contest the belief that these were displayed as "unmediated Islamic survival."<sup>18</sup>

This argument finds support in tracing back the Order's origins by means of understanding the political and social situations, involving both Christians and Muslims during the

Middle Ages. Starting in the eighth century, Christians and Muslims were engaged in an ongoing war. Christians had need to take up arms and defend against Muslim armies. For over six hundred years, these constant armed confrontations produced numerous war prisoners on both sides. These prisoners, who all believed in Christ or Allah, received the legally acknowledged status of captive.<sup>19</sup> This information sets the background to underscore origins of the Mercedarian Order and its later expansion to the Americas. Written accounts place the official date of the Order's beginnings in 1218 and consider San Pedro Nolasco to be its founding father.<sup>20</sup> Scholar of Spain's history, Bruce Taylor, explains how the origin of the Order was a result of charitable work that expanded during the time of the Crown of Aragon, in Medieval Spain, throughout the twelfth century.<sup>21</sup>

Nolasco was an orphan who dedicated his life to commerce, leading him to travel outside Medieval Spain and reach the Middle East. During these travels, he encountered the "*pauperes Christi*," otherwise known as "poor captives" held in Muslim bondage.<sup>22</sup> Nolasco found himself caught up in the situation and dreamed that the Virgin Mary trusted him with the task to rescue these captive souls from the hand of the Saracens.<sup>23</sup> With the financial help of James I of Barcelona, Nolasco founded *la Orden de la Merced de Redención de Cautivos*, which translates to the Mercedarian Order for the Captives' Redemption, and received approval from Pope Gregorius IX in 1235.<sup>24</sup> During these years, the Order was focused on the ransom of captives, which came to be known as a "disinterested service or *merced*...the first expression of this notion in the title of the Order."<sup>25</sup> Therefore, the term Merced (Mercy) was known to be intricately linked to the ransom of captives. With this objective in mind, the Order included two types of members: the clergy and the military. The latter were warriors and were called to organize expeditions to Muslims lands, where they would face Saracens and, in the eyes of the Christians, other infidels and rescue captives. Considering the military background of the Order's past, it is concluded that the ongoing colonization process in "New Spain" must have had a special appeal to the Mercedarian Order. The ongoing conflict between the natives' resistance against the Spanish occupation, was a matter rooted in their beginnings and embedded in their military ideals. This, in turn, is proved by the fact that the Mercedarian Order was also sent to appease Guatemala and begin the construction of another convent there.<sup>26</sup>

<sup>16</sup> Barry Finbarr Flood, *Objects of Translation: Material Culture and Medieval "Hindu-Muslim" Encounter* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2009), 5.

<sup>17</sup> Feliciano, "The Invention of Mudéjar Art," 70.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 71.

<sup>19</sup> Bruce Taylor, *Structures of Reform: The Mercedarian Order in the Spanish Golden Age* (London, UK: Brill, 2000), 15.

<sup>20</sup> Martos López, "De fe, redención y arte," 11.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 15.

<sup>25</sup> Taylor, *Structures of Reform*, 15.

<sup>26</sup> Martos López, "De fe, redención y arte," 13.

It is known that Mendicant Orders have three basic vows or rules. These were vows of poverty, obedience, and chastity. The Mercedarian Order included a fourth: the vow of sacrifice. This was fixed on the belief that given the case when the military Order was rescuing captive souls and found themselves with no means to achieve it, the member of the Order would then offer himself in the place of the imprisoned soul.<sup>27</sup> This vow became the ideal of the Order and was carried out on several occasions.<sup>28</sup> On the other hand, the clerical Brothers would oversee the economical collection for the cause, the establishment, and enrollment of the Order.

Both military and clerics wore the coat of arms representing the Order on the front of their robes. The Mercedarian coat of arms consists of four red pallets on a golden background, with a white cross on its top. The coat of arms, which is the same as the one used today, was originally placed on the lintel of the main entrance of Claustro de la Merced. Curiously, the Order's coat of arms was also carved in rock, and placed on the most visible and accessible part of the Cloister. However, today it stands on the north-eastern access of the ex-convent (Figure 4). Smaller versions of the heraldic crest were displayed throughout the original nave.<sup>29</sup> The inclusion of these elements, as well as the repeated display of the figure of the founding father Nolasco within the Cloister's lower-level frieze, spoke of the attempt to link the Order established in the "New World" to their beginnings.

Claustro de la Merced is the only remaining Cloister belonging to the Mercedarian Order in Mexico, yet, more than four hundred convents were built throughout the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries in this country.<sup>30</sup> Convent complexes were mainly constructed under the patronage of the Franciscans and the Dominicans. The fact that the Mercedarians chose the capital city of New Spain to be one of the locations of their establishment in the Americas speaks to the need to represent the Order in foreign lands. It is possible that the Order sought to create a visual discourse that directly related back to its origins and also displayed the most iconic features of their history and culture, including Mudéjar.

A reason why most art historians have overlooked the Claustro de la Merced is possibly due to its location in a run-down neighborhood which also adopted the name La Merced from the original convent complex. However, this locality has experienced vulnerability in the heart of a drug-ridden crime and prostitution area for as long as the convent has been functioning (Figure 5).<sup>31</sup> Most

residents of Mexico City avoid the area. As a result, the scant scholarship the Cloister has received is directed towards its rescue from demolition and, in some cases, its restoration.<sup>32</sup>

Mexico is a country that prides itself on the abundance and wealth of history since ancient times. Claustro de la Merced is just one example of the historical and cultural abundance that bespeaks a broad, yet novel, topic in art history: the reversal of outdated Mudéjar models.<sup>33</sup> Such research aims to honor the cloister's past and to grant Claustro de la Merced the attention it deserves. Most importantly, it is the objective of the research to contribute to the assessment of Mudejarismo. Artistic relevance goes beyond its manifestation in the Iberian Peninsula, and its dissemination to the Americas has been widely ignored. Future research on the topic is vital to prevent the loss of the Cloister's invaluable hybridity and its meaning for Colonial Mexico.

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<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 8.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., 8, 20.

<sup>30</sup> James Early, *The Colonial Architecture of Mexico* (Albuquerque, NM: University of New Mexico Press, 1994).

<sup>31</sup> Martos López, "De fe, redención y arte," 6.

<sup>32</sup> To this date, Claustro de la Merced continues to be under restoration. The Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia (INAH) in Mexico, has appointed the building as the future house of the National Center for Music, and Textile Design. It has been suggested that Martos López's publication on Claustro de la Merced was deemed relevant after this announcement was made. For more information see Abida Ventura, "INAH limitó proyecto en ex Convento de la Merced," *El Universal*, 23 May 2013.

Due to the earthquake that struck Mexico City in September 19, 2017, the plans for the restoration of Claustro de la Merced could have been postponed in order to accommodate other historic monuments that required immediate attention. To my knowledge, no public announcement has been made in this regard and public access to the Cloister is currently denied.

<sup>33</sup> Feliciano and Roughi, "Introduction: Interrogating Iberian Frontiers," 328.





▲Figure 1. *Claustro del Ex-Convento de Nuestra Señora de la Merced* (Cloister of the former convent of Our Lady of Mercy), c. 1676-1703, Mexico City, Mexico. Photo credit: Martha Lara Vázquez.

◆Figure 2. Detail of the Cloister's column involving Greco-Roman aesthetics. *Claustro del Ex-Convento de Nuestra Señora de la Merced* (Cloister of the former convent of Our Lady of Mercy), c. 1676-1703. Photo credit: Martha Lara Vázquez.





Figure 3. Detail of diamond rustication within the polylobed arches of Claustro de la Merced, c. 1676-1703, Mexico City, Mexico. Photo credit: Martha Lara Vázquez.



Figure 4. The Mercedarian Order's coat of arms on the northeastern access of the ex-convent. Claustro del Ex-Convento de Nuestra Señora de la Merced (Cloister of the former convent of Our Lady of Mercy), c. 1676-1703. Photo credit: Martha Lara Vázquez.





Figure 5. Detail of the decay in one of the outer windows of Claustro de la Merced, c. 1676-1703, Mexico City, Mexico. Photo credit: Martha Lara Vázquez.