

## Court of the Lions, the Alhambra Palace (mid-14th century)

The Alhambra was the largest of the great alcazars, or fortresses, that the Moors built in Spain. Its history, like that of most of medieval Spain, is complex and often difficult to unravel. Indirectly, it began with the Moorish invasion from North Africa in the 7th century CE. By 732 CE, these adherents of Islam had conquered Spain and reached Poitiers in southern France. Here, they were met and defeated by an army of Christian defenders led by Charles Martel. For the next 700 years, Christians and Muslims fought for control of the Iberian Peninsula. The Muslims, handicapped by internal strife and intrigue, as well as external pressures from the Moors in North Africa and the Christians in the north, began to give way in 976 CE.

Granada, the city in southern Spain where the Alhambra was built, was not much more than a village in the early days of Muslim dominion. By 1025 CE, however, it had grown enough to attract the attention of the Zirids, Muslim Berber kings of one part of Muslim Spain, who began building fortifications on the site of what later became the Alhambra. It has also been suggested that the famous stone lions that are now part of the magnificent Court of the Lions were built at this time.

The Alhambra consists of a vast fortified enclosure, within which an alcazaba (military fortress with barracks, stables, etc.), a palace area, and a craftworker's quarter are situated. The entire complex includes a dazzling array of domes, courts, vaults, columns, galleries, and gardens. The perimeter of the enclosure measures some 7,218 feet (2,200 meters), and is studded with no fewer than 22 towers of various shapes and sizes. The beautifully constructed palace area includes three main sections, the Mexuar (believed to be where the royal court met), the Palacio de Comares (built around a splendid rectangular pool), and the Palacio de los Leones (which surrounds a courtyard with a fountain supported by carved stone lions).

Much of the palace area is decorated with geometric patterns and poetic calligraphy rendered in stucco, tile, or wood paneling. This ornamentation is often quite intricate and detailed. For example, 8,017 pieces of different-colored woods were used in the decoration of one room alone, the Hall of Ambassadors. In some places, the interior design of the Alhambra reflects the influence of

Christian art on the Muslim community in Spain. Contrary to the conventions of Islamic art, the Hall of Kings contains several ceiling paintings of men at war, all of which appear to be in Gothic style.

The space is elegant. The slim (sometimes double) marble columns stand below the arches—the rounded ones inspired by Roman architecture as well as the Muslim pointed arches. Stucco (plaster used in decoration) creates a rich surface texture, filling every flat space with intricate, abstract designs. The lacy, linear patterns repeat in the calligraphy around the fountain rim. The calligraphy is an Arabic poem that describes how the fierce lions are behaving themselves out of respect for the king. The fountain's burbling water adds to the beauty of the palace.

Washington Irving, an American writer whose work students study this year in language arts, briefly lived in the Alhambra. Irving was serving as an American diplomat in Spain from 1826–1829, and while there, he resided in and wrote about the Alhambra. Irving published his sketches and stories as *The Alhambra* in 1832 (see *More Resources*). Irving later returned to Spain from 1842–1846 as the U.S. ambassador to Spain.

### Looking questions

**Note:** Cover up the title on the front of the print before showing to students.

- **If you closed your eyes in this courtyard, what sounds would you hear?**  
*You would hear water from the fountain.*
- **What animals surround the fountain?** *Lions surround the fountain.*
- **What different shapes of arches are used in the building?** *There are both pointed and rounded arches.*
- **What kind of decoration covers the walls?** *There are abstract patterns covering the walls.*
- **What examples of Islamic art and architecture do you see in the picture?**  
*There are two types of arches and decorative mosaics along the top of the walls. Point out the geometric patterns.*