



FROM PALACE TO CONVENT

The Real Monasterio de Santa Clara houses an important part of Murcia art and history. During centuries it was on the outskirts of the city, in the walled suburb of Arrixaca. The Franciscan nuns' convent was founded over the Alcázar Seguir, a 13th-century Islamic palace attributed to the Emir Ibn Hud. Formerly, during the Almoravid period and the Ibn Mardanish emirate, another palace had been built on the same site. Following the Mudejar uprising and suppression in 1264-1266, the Banu Hud palace was taken from the control of the Muslim kinglets, and turned into the Royal Palace of the Castilian monarchs until King Pedro I, in 1365, granted it to the Abbess Berenguela de Espín and the Orden de Santa Clara (Order of Saint Claire) to extend the convent that they already had in the vicinity and which some decades ago had originally belonged to their brethren, the Friars Minor. Under the patronage of some Murcia aldermen, a church was built, annexed on the east to the palace buildings, and the great pond and flower beds of the palace were used until they turned into simple arable land. At the dawn of the Modern Era, the double Gothic gallery was built, being annexed to the galleries and façades of the Islamic portico. The spacious rooms and narrow porticos of the Banu Hud palace were divided up to create the parlour and gatehouse, refectory, kitchen and annexed cellar. Later, the west nave was built for the nuns' dormitory and place of work and, finally, on the east side, the current Baroque gallery. Parallel to this, in the 17th century, a new church was built to replace the medieval one.

The 20th century brought hard times for the community of Santa Clara. Driven on by need, they parted with the west wing of the convent. Not long after this came the Civil War, which brought with it the expulsion of the nuns and the convent was turned into military barracks.

During the Sixties, the south wing was knocked down, destroying the remaining arcades of the Islamic palace, in order to build a garage. Finally, in the late Seventies, restoration and excavation works timidly began on the convent, receiving their definitive and conclusive impulse in 1995. New residential quarters were built for the nuns in the south wing, which allowed for the

reconstruction of the elevations of the Islamic palace on the north side as well as the gardens. The works conclude with the adaptation of the north and west galleries.

ISLAMIC ART & ARCHAEOLOGY

13TH-CENTURY ISLAMIC PALACE: POND AND GARDENS

The convent cloister recreates in part the original layout of the grand open space typical of the Banu Hud palace during its heyday: a large longitudinal pond, measuring 27.5 x 7.50 m on the north-south, and four leafy rectangular flower beds. A novel design contributed by Islamic Murcia which exemplifies the transition between the famous cross-shaped gardens of the 12th-13th centuries extended by the Almoravid and Almohad Berber empires, such as Castillejo de Monteagudo, and the characteristic courtyards of 14th-century Granada architecture which can be found in The Alhambra. The vegetation planted in the flower beds partly reproduces the



original flora (palm trees, plum trees, citrus fruit trees, apricot trees, fig trees, pomegranate trees, etc.). The union of water and vegetation creates an evocative atmosphere typical of Islamic palaces.

13TH-CENTURY ISLAMIC PALACE: PORTICO

In front of the palace pond and gardens stands a long

piazza made up of three tented arches, with small alcoves (*alhanías*) raised on the sides. There is a fountain in the centre, which recovers the original one that would have been connected to the pond.

A chronological journey is presented from the Caliphate, with the incipient pottery imitating that from Córdoba, to the artistic expressions typical of the Berber empires and their last derivations with Mudejar and Islamic pottery. There are also foliated capitals and marble stelae, including gravestones (*maqabrya*) and stepped tombs, metal tools and the wealth and formal diversity characteristic of 13th-century Murcia pottery, highlighting the golden dish (*ataifor*) from Calle Serrano Alcázar and, above all, magnificent sgraffito jugs, glazed items, small ablution basins and the interesting painted horsemen from Monteagudo.

13TH-CENTURY ISLAMIC PALACE: HALL

Preceding the Banu Hud palace portico we have a great hall, with an elegant doorway featuring large alcoves (*alhanías*) raised on the ends. They are intercepted by slender polychrome cusped arches propped up on semi-columns with acanthus-leaf capitals and enclosed by a moulding (*alfiz*) with cursive inscriptions. The lobes are covered in scotia moulding with epigraphic decoration on a red or blue background. Supposedly, these spacious “throne rooms” were used as audience chambers, for the reception of embassies and for administering justice.

12TH-CENTURY CROSS-SHAPED COURTYARD.

Prior to the recovered Banu Hud palace, the Almoravid governors and the Emir Ibn Mardanish had built an extraordinary palace complex comprising various buildings, including a small bathroom, latrines and service buildings. It is necessary to highlight the remains of a great cross-shaped courtyard similar to that of Castillejo de Monteagudo, with brick-tiled paths that delimit small gardens, cross-shaped channels and a *Qubba*, or pavilion, in the centre where the paths intersect. From here come some of the Almoravid and Mardanisi polychrome carved plasterwork samples that are on display in the room.

13TH-CENTURY PALACE: SOUTH WING ARCADES.

Following the demolition of the south wing of the convent in the Sixties, numerous fragments of ornamental plasterwork were rescued from the palace, corresponding to the doorway arch to the great hall and the western alcove, now finally reconstructed and on display in this room.

The western alcove consists of a slender stilted semicircular arch with acanthus-leaf capitals and semi-columns. The *alfiz* is enclosed by cursive inscriptions on a degraded blue background that contains Basmala, Tasliya and other Koranic texts. The great hall arch has the same layout, although with a bigger intrados and moulding in monumental writing, on a blue background, with a brief propitiatory text.

THE EMIRS' COURT AND TREASURES.

Between the 12th-13th centuries, the convent housed the royal orchard (*almunia*) or the second residence of the governors and Murcia kinglets, a space linked with political, economic and religious power. In this room we can see, among other objects, the magnificent gold treasures from the Plaza Yesqueros in Murcia and La Pita in Alhama, or the dirham



treasure from Cehegín, as well as magnificent items and treasures: a narrow-necked bronze flask, a small glass, various metallic objects, besides the excellent works in bone such as sculpted combs, dice, hilts of knives or the supposed chess pieces.

As for the decoration in

plaster and wood that adorned the 12th-century palace chambers, we must highlight the *arrocabe* (wooden frieze on the upper part of the wall) and the carved corbels, the austere ornamental friezes, the *mocárabes* (stalactite-like decoration used for vaults, arches and cornices etc.) and their *adarajas* (the different geometrical shapes cut) that contain scenes as the famous piper, the delicate epigraphical vousoir arches also from Monteagudo or the spectacular painted baseboards dating from the Almoravid and Mardanisi period from the Banu Hud palace.

GOTHIC GALLERY.

During the reign of the Catholic Monarchs, thanks to the firm support shown by Queen Isabella to the observant reform of the Franciscan order and, especially, to the considerable donations made by

some nuns belonging to the Pacheco and Fajardo families, a double and irregular arcade was built featuring diminished arches, on the ground floor, and small mixtilinear arches on the upper one, joining it to the galleries and façades of the Islamic portico until the residence took on the typical aspect of a convent. A series of ceramic reproductions consisting of a huge earthenware jar, a stamped support and an ablution basin can also be seen. From the upper gallery, in the direction of the section “Times of Silence”, one can marvel at the colour, naturalness and harmony of the reconstructed Islamic courtyard in contrast with the simplicity of the double gallery of the convent.



TIMES OF SILENCE

Under the title “Times of Silence” we begin our visit to the convent part strictly speaking. The historical continuity shown in this new space

allows us to embark on a journey marked by the successive reforms and adaptations of the old Muslim palace and open up to the present the basic customs and philosophy of this community. Part of a Gothic church and monastic arches, built at a later date, are the scenario for the permanent exhibition that shows the different transformations of the building and the ways of thinking, the life and culture of a religious community of a long tradition, present in these spaces since the mid-14th century.

Thanks to their prolonged stay, this building so closely related to the history of Murcia is still here today. The exceptional nature of the Gothic space, unique in its kind among the monasteries and convents of the old diocese, is the logical continuity of its Islamic past, connecting two different worlds subtly linked by Franciscan mysticism, the tendency toward seclusion and the impulse of interior life reflected in the sobriety of the clean and white walls of the building.

In these rooms we can see works of art promoted by the convent’s patronage indispensable for knowing their iconographical preferences. The founding saints, the Immaculate and the Eucharist, the childhood and passion of Christ, all became the dominant bases of an intimate and personal devotion, which was reflected in images and paintings, and works for worship and the personal use of a great part of the

living experiences of the residents.

In the still and silence of a convent one lived and died in permanent solitude. The enclosed nature of its rooms gave them a halo of mystery zealously guarded behind the convent door, the only communication with the outside being the thick grilles of the parlour window and the turnstiles. The possibility to contemplate the heart of that inner city as an echo of a silent piety recovers, to the delight of us all, part of the historical heritage of a hidden Murcia. The section “Times of Silence” displays a good number of works of art belonging to the nuns of the Order of St. Claire, until now never exhibited.

Sculptures, paintings, documents, sumptuary items and devotional objects, most of them recently restored, show the history of the convent and its enclosed life. This rich heritage mainly comes from the donations made to give thanks for favours, to show personal piety and to ensure a last and final resting place in the great beyond.

The conventual architecture shines in all its splendour in the high choir of Santa Clara with its Gothic dome, its ribs decorated with dragons with eyes and open jaws, being one of the few left from this period, which documents a crucial moment of Christian architecture in the Region. This peculiar form of decorating these spaces with fantastic beasts was repeated in the Chapel of Macías Coque in the Cathedral and in the ribs of the Church of Santiago in Jumilla, before Quijano built the beautiful trefoil ceiling. The choir is unique in its kind among the monasteries and convents of the old diocese.

In the choir we can admire objects related with the primitive church and as singular as the Guadalupe altarpiece and that of Santa Clara, painted by Jerónimo Ballesteros around 1590, as well as a series of items and pieces of furniture closely related with the life of the founder and the community, and the public veneration of the Sacrament.

This choir is a privileged *mirador* from the Gothic past over the new Baroque church. This way, the visitor will understand that the changes in the building did not leap immediately from the Islamic world to the Baroque but had another aspect during the Gothic period and at the beginning of the Renaissance, that of the old church. When leaving the old choir, the visitor turns left to enter a stretch of the convent nave to admire two great 16th century works: the St. John the Evangelist altarpiece and the predella (decorative base of the altarpiece) of the Last Supper. The typical saints of the Franciscan order are also portrayed: St. Anthony of Padua, St. John of Capistrano, St. Bonaventure and Saint Claire. A visit featuring the craftsmanship in precious metals, textiles and small items of the Franciscan order marks the transition toward the liturgical area of the convent. There are works by Diego de Mora, Francisco Salzillo and Roque López. A series of 17th and 18th century paintings concludes with the view of the seated statue of St. Catherine of Bologna dressed in 18th-century nun’s habits, looking triumphant, one of the favourite types of sculpture to be found in nuns’ convents.