

VISIT. The Nasrid Palace

Exhibition

Techniques and Uses of Ceramics in 11th to 14th Century Muslim Malaga

[1] The exhibition that is hosted in the Halls of the Nasrid Palace is dedicated to the ceramics of the Muslim era. Restored pieces from the remains found in the Alcazaba have been included, in addition to other pieces found in excavations in the urban areas of the city. This permanent exhibition in collaboration with the National Archaeological Museum has been designed with an eminently educational focus.

Unit 1 occupies the first square Hall next to the northern portico of the Patio de los Naranjos

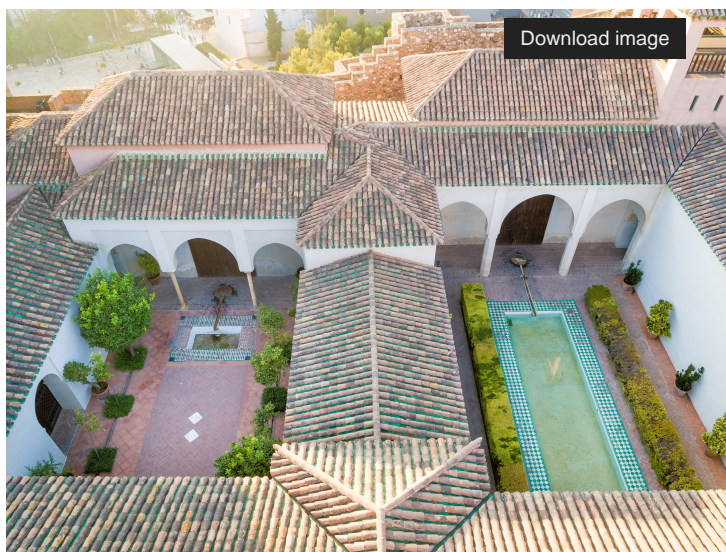
(Courtyard of the Oranges). It is dedicated to highlighting the importance of the collection of ceramic fragments from archaeological excavations and presents how the study was carried out and how the pieces were restored. These materials of very humble appearance provide a lot of information about the life of the former owners, as well as about trade, manufacturing, etc., and are essential for dating sites.

Unit 2 is located in the **hall with the domical vault** that was painted by Hermenegildo Lanz and is inspired by the Alhambra's Sala de la Barca (Hall of the Boat). Here the wide variety of forms and the diversity of functions of ceramics are on display. Four display cabinets show containers for food preparation, for cooking, for holding and serving liquids, for transporting and storing, for consuming food, for heating food and the room, for lighting, for games, for industry, etc. Each type is represented by an object and accompanied by panels with an explanation and a drawing.

At the back of the room, next to a beautiful original piece of latticework found in the Alcazaba, there are two panels, one with the names of the parts of ceramics comparing them with the human body. The other explains the multiple re-uses that a ceramic object can have.

Entering the **Patio de los Naranjos**, on the **left a room opens with an alcove** at one end. Here in the wall can be seen some remains of arches with voussoirs adorned with arabesque decoration that were found during excavations in the area, although not in its structure. Like the whole Nasrid Palace, the very ornate ceiling is the product of the restoration carried out in the 1940s. In this room several panels present **Unit 3**, showing the layout of a Muslim pottery workshop and the location of some of the many that existed in the city. Archaeological excavations have made it possible to verify the persistence of pottery workshops in the same place over a long historical period, especially in the area of Ollerías, where the toponym has survived.

Since making pottery was considered "harmful and dangerous", the pottery workshops stood outside the walls of the *Madina*, and around them the pottery neighbourhood grew up, especially in the area of El Ejido that had abundant clays. Here most of the Muslim "*ollerías*" (potteries) were set up on the street that still carries the name, and in its vicinity kilns have been found dating from the 9th to the 14th century, with the Christian workshops established over them.



On reaching the palace's **second courtyard**, the **Patio de la Alberca** (Courtyard of the Pool) or **Patio del Arrayán (Myrtle Courtyard)** and its large hall, open to the north, we find part of **Unit 4** dedicated to the technical process involved in manufacturing a ceramic object. In the first place, a display case and a panel show how objects can be made through modelling, throwing and moulding, with drawings and original objects that show us the differences. Opposite this, in a room that is almost closed and which has an original pavement of large slabs of stone, we find the recreation of a working kiln. In front of the hall is a panel with original photos of the excavations of kilns in the city, showing their parts and how they operate. It is estimated that the average life of a kiln was 60 years and the maximum utilisation of the kiln's capacity was fundamental to the performance of the pottery workshop, since the most expensive aspect was the firing.

Next, in the **rooms at the long end of the courtyard**, which border the house rebuilt as the Restoration Workshop, you can see how objects were finished and decorated. This varied according to the intended use, but even the most simple and humble pieces, destined for everyday use, showed a great appreciation of beauty. Explanatory panels and original restored pieces illustrate all the decorative techniques. In the simplest cases, the finish of the piece might consist of an exterior paint, a design stamped on the fresh clay, dipping or a simple glass layer intended either to waterproof the piece or give it a shiny finish. When it came to luxury pieces, the potters of Malaga were true masters and the Alcazaba has provided, through excavations, a very important collection of ceramics from the 11th to the 15th centuries, with spectacular pieces in green and manganese, using the *cuerva seca* (dry rope) technique, and in golden earthenware. These include pieces of international renown, such as the piece known as the Ataifor de la Nave, which is shown as an archaeological reproduction and a modern interpretation. This is complemented by another panel dedicated to decorative motifs, and although there were not many, they had an infinite number of combinations.

Following the thread of the exhibition, once finished, the ceramic piece went on to be sold. **Unit 5** recreates a souk in the room at the end, which is an enclosed room with an important presence of original Arab walls in which you can appreciate the double brickwork, and in the corners the large ashlars, characteristic of the Taifa period, and next to this the Nasrid masonry. Before accessing the room that hosts the recreation of the souk, a panel illustrates the different types of trading that existed and the differences between a souk, an *alhóndiga* (corn exchange) and an *alcaicería* (silk market), as well as how much importance the *zabazoque* (government representative) gave to the souk. This political figure had economic and policing powers, and could deal with any type of fraud that might occur in the manufacture of ceramic objects. This is illustrated by a couple of articles in the Libro del Buen Gobierno del Zoco (Book of Good Governance of the Souk) by Ibn al Saqati, written in the 13th century. The pieces on display in the reproduction souk are modern pieces inspired by the original forms of common ceramics found in the Alcazaba itself.

We move now to the **southern pavilion of the Patio de la Alberca**, which is covered by a wooden ceiling recovered from the military pavilions that occupied the lower area in the Modern Age. The room contains **Unit 6**, which aims to give an idea of the many contexts in which ceramic objects were used in everyday life. On the floor can be seen a fragment of the original Nasrid pavement found in the Alcazaba, made up of small two-colour pieces, and on the wall there is another fragment of a beautiful pavement found in urban excavations in the city. Two display cases show the different uses of ceramics, both domestic and industrial.

Among the domestic uses, it is worth highlighting the system for filtering water through jar stands and large ataifores (glazed bowls typical of al-Andalus); examples of industrial uses include one of the most beautiful pieces exhibited, the stamped wellhead, from the 12th century Almohad period. The wellhead is the visible part of a well that emerges from the well dug in the courtyard of a home. This was a place of great importance for domestic life, so it was very often beautifully decorated. In this piece the decoration is profuse, including text in

Kufic script ("full health" repeated over and over). This also came from urban excavations and was restored in the Alcazaba's Restoration Workshop. Other curious pieces include the funerary jar with "ears", the individual tiles that formed the tiled areas, roofing tiles, potable water and drainage pipes, *olambrillas* (small square decorative pavement tiles), etc.

From this Hall there is a beautiful view of the courtyard and of its pool. The interior pools in Hispanic Muslim buildings played the role of mirrors in which the architecture was reflected, and this one reflects the tower that occupies the extreme end of the northern hall. The small jets of the little circular marble fountains along the sides of the pool provide a faint sound and a slight ripple as they fall on the still water of the pool. All this invites calmness and meditation.

In the Hall that gives onto the adjoining courtyard you can see some large containers. The expertise of the potters allowed the manufacture and firing of large pieces, both ornamental, such as the famous golden earthenware Alhambra Vases, as well as others intended to be used to store grain, clothing, oil, preserves, dried fruits, etc., and the pieces that surrounded wells. These large pieces were placed in half-buried pantries, protecting the products from moisture, heat, animals, etc., as was done in Andalusian *cortijos* (farmhouses) until not so many years ago. A piece of larger size is exhibited at the entrance to the monument by the lift from Calle Guillén Sotelo, because it was too large to be taken upstairs and displayed in the Hall.

Back in the **Patio de los Naranjos**, this time on its **southern side**, we leave the Hall and we go into the last of the exhibition rooms, which is **Unit 7** and is entitled Pervivencias (Persistence). Here, using modern objects, the exhibition shows how those objects in daily use in our homes maintain the same form and function that they had a thousand years ago, expressing how deeply rooted these Arabic ceramics are in our culture. This is a selection that cannot be exhaustive, due to the great diversity that exists, and it aims only to serve as a reminder, since many objects now have only a decorative function. Examples include the *botijo* (drinking container) and piggy banks or moneyboxes.

After leaving the Palace there is another space that can be visited, whose access door is located next to the Gran Sala del Palacio Taifa (Grand Hall of the Taifa Palace). This room, in the southern part of the Patio de los Naranjos, serves as an entrance to the monument for visitors who make use of the lift leading to Calle Guillén Sotelo. Here, explanatory panels with abundant photos and drawings focus on comparing the monumental complex formed by the Alcazaba and Gibralfaro Castle with the other contemporary Moorish alcazabas, such as the Alcazaba of the Alhambra in Granada and the Alcazaba of Almería.

[1] The information presented in these texts was extracted from the book written by Fanny de CARRANZA SELL, Alcazaba de Málaga, Colección Domus Aurea, Ediciones Esirtu, Malaga, 2010.