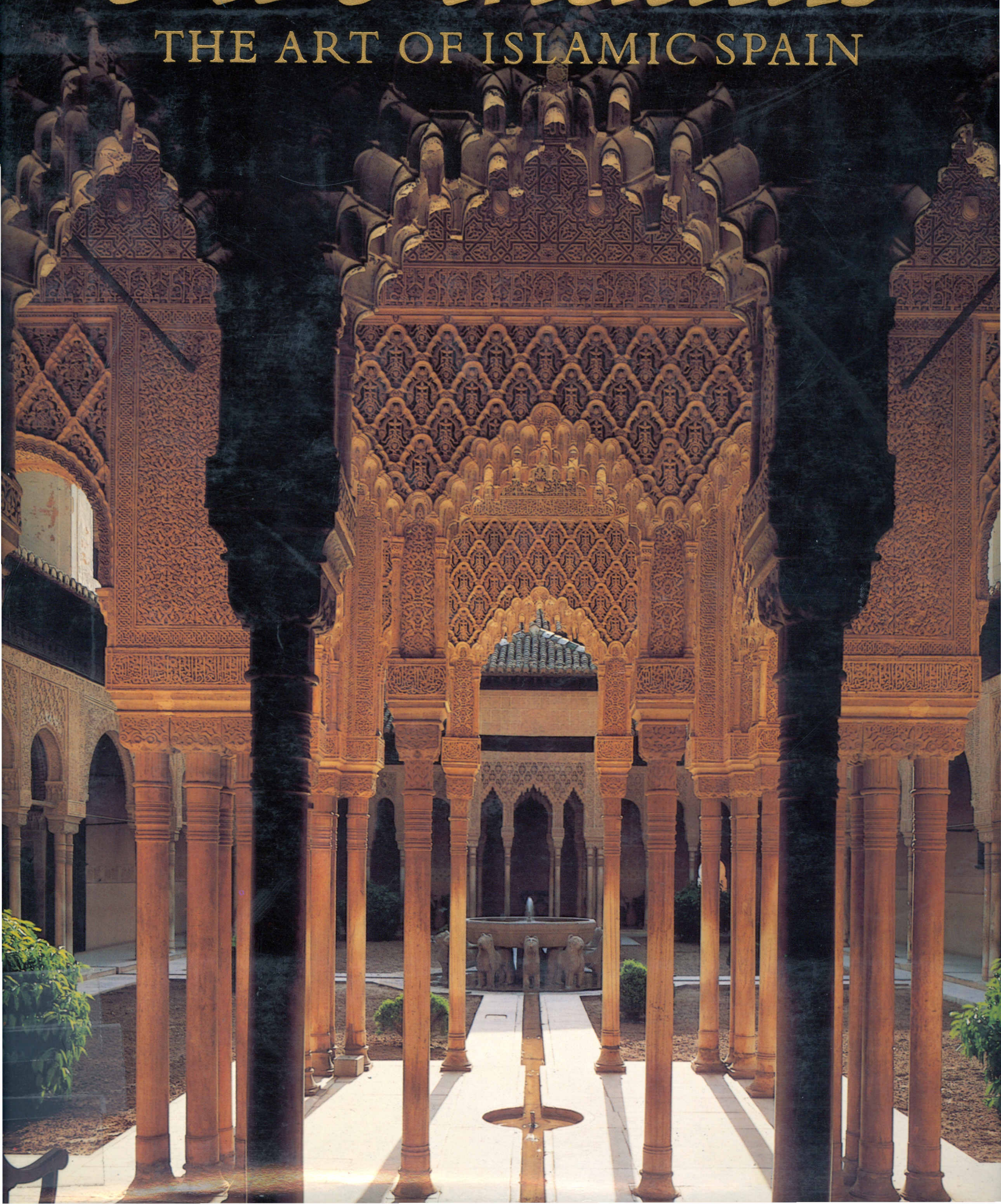


Al-Andalus

THE ART OF ISLAMIC SPAIN



Drinking Vessel

Almohad period, 2nd quarter of 13th century

Painted earthenware
H. 5¼ in. (13.4 cm)

Ayuntamiento de Murcia,
Centro de Estudios Arabes y
Arqueológicos "Ibn Arabi"

M-18-1-84-A-16

Absence of glaze and the peculiar clay used in its manufacture indicate that this container from Murcia is a receptacle for water. Specifically, it seems to have been intended as a drinking vessel.

The ornamental technique used was sgraffito, whereby the decoration was incised on still fresh manganese oxide. After that procedure, the jar underwent its first and only firing. The four zones in which the decoration is distributed are determined by the shape of the vessel and the position of the arms. The ornamental theme is the same in each of the zones: A profusion of *ataurique* motifs covers the entire surface, producing a broad range of spirals and counterspirals. Despite the freedom of the decoration, there was an attempt to establish in each of the zones an axis from which two stems spring to form a heart-shaped design. Because of the profusion of ornament, it was necessary to distinguish the design from the background; to do so, the latter was deeply scored to obtain a lighter tone.

A reason that this jar and many other sgraffito pieces are interesting is that they provide information about the metalwork of the time, of

which very little is known. It seems apparent that some of these vessels are creditable imitations of examples of that art. In the present case, the decoration and especially the manner of execution are highly evocative of the niello technique. Moreover, imitation of metalwork was not confined solely to decoration, but in some cases extended to the form of the vessel as well. It is possible that the extreme thinness of the walls of this jug, for example, results from the attempt to imitate a work in metal.

On the interior of the neck, running around the rim, is a band of script painted in manganese oxide. Although it has not been deciphered, nor have any of the signs even been identified, I am of the opinion that it is an inscription, specifically an apotropaic religious formula, since it was common in both the eastern and western Islamic worlds to protect the contents of such receptacles with legends of this kind. It is also possible that it is an epigraph of a more profane nature that refers to health and well-being.

J N P

LITERATURE: Navarro Palazón 1986a; Navarro Palazón 1986b; Navarro Palazón 1991.

