

“A Drop in the Pond: Islamic influence in a Conquistador’s Dreamland” by Sofia Guerra FIU at Vizcaya Museum and Gardens

Upon arrival to Vizcaya, one is greeted by Miami’s native heavy greenery adjacent to a grand driveway. In James Deering’s hayday his personal monument was upon the grandest of buildings in South Florida, requiring years of construction and one tenth of Miami’s population to contribute their labor. The shallow fountains guide visitors to the main house with the soothing sound of cascading waters. It is a surreal experience whether it be 1916 or 2018.

Thousands of natives and tourist pass through Vizcaya each year, all of them are welcomed warmly by the Islamic-fashioned fountains. While the mansion is inarguably executed in a conglomeration of classic French, Italian, and Spanish styles, traces of ancient Islamic craftsmanship and innovation shine through. Muslims lived in Spain for hundreds of years before they got pushed out upon the rise of Christianity. As seen throughout history, the Spanish have a niche for conquest. In this process of pushing an entirely different culture out, Christian-conquest-Spain integrated facets of Islamic artistic practices into their own cultural quilt.

The qualities of repetition and sensory occupation are rooted in Islamic art. The beautifully colored patterned tile designs clad on every floor surface of Vizcaya are also Islamic in nature. These are some of the richest, most stimulating parts of the experience at Vizcaya, yet they viewed as part of the Western classic styles. Upon comparison it becomes evident that the cascading, downhill fountain is integrated for its sound component, as a creator of ambiance. French and Italian fountains are not focused on the water component but rather the visual sculptural components.

It is important to point out provenance. It is important to not only read history through the eyes of the victors. The achievements of groups that have been pushed out or down need to be recognized, not altered into the narrative of the oppressive. Just as the Spanish set out to conquer the Americas, they attempted to conquer the artistic voice of the Islamic Spaniards. However, if one looks hard enough, they can see the reflection of the divine inspiration present in Islamic art in a drop in Vizcaya’s reflective fountains.

