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1. Leopoldo Torres Balbás in the Alhambra, Granada, Spain. Photograph courtesy of Patronato de la Alhambra y el Generalife.

Leopoldo Torres Balbás

Architectural Restoration and the Idea of "Tradition" in Early Twentieth-Century Spain

The process of revision of contemporary architectural history set in motion some decades ago has not only revealed a rich and complex panorama that is not reducible to linear and teleological accounts, but it has also allowed us to finally place in the context of this historical landscape episodes and figures that had until recently received only local or marginal attention. That is precisely the situation of Leopoldo Torres Balbás (1888–1960)¹—an architect, conservator, architectural and urban historian, and theoretician of architectural restoration and historic preservation—who has now emerged as one of the key figures of Spanish architectural discourse in the first half of the twentieth century.

In 1916, when Torres Balbás published his first text, that architectural discourse was framed by a wide cultural polemic, which sought to define what "Spanish architecture" stood for and what its basic referents should be. The question of defining the essence of "Spanishness" was a key theme in Hispanic culture at the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of twentieth. The crisis of 1898, after war with the United States and the loss of Cuba and the Philippines, proved the urgency for modernization in Spain. But numerous intellectuals of what would later be known as the *Generación del 98* (that is, Azorín, Ramiro de Maeztu, Joaquín Costa or, above all, Miguel de Unamuno, whose thoughts on the relationship between modernity and tradition were fundamental for Torres Balbás) understood this modernization not so much in terms of a radical rupture with the past but as a return to the true roots of history and of popular tradition. Architects, having exhausted the expressive possibilities of nineteenth-century historicism, gave attention to the peculiar "mosaic" of Spanish villages and favored the blossoming of regionalisms. However, already by 1918–20, architects and intellectuals alike, from Torres Balbás to Federico García Lorca, were becoming critical of regionalism as nothing but a folklorist pastiche. In this context, Torres Balbás's theories assumed a fundamental role: the revalorization of the idea of *tradition* and the difficult attempt to make the authentic roots of the popular compatible with modernity.

Leopoldo Torres Balbás was born in Madrid, the son of a geographer father, who instilled in him a passion for travel. He entered the Madrid School of Architecture in 1910 and

graduated in 1916. On top of his architectural studies, he always remained tied to the *Institución Libre de Enseñanza* (Free Institution of Education), a foundation that pioneered secular, progressive, and high-culture education in Spain.² He was also a student in the archaeology department of the *Centro de Estudios Históricos* (Center for Historical Studies), then under the directorship of Manuel Gómez Moreno, one of the founders of twentieth-century Spanish art historiography. Both of these institutions gave Torres Balbás a solid education in history and archeology, and an ideology that would prove decisive in reviewing Spanish architectural history: the importance of travel as a way of acquiring knowledge and as a pedagogical tool. Thus, he inscribed himself in the tradition of those great travelers, who from the time of Antonio Ponz and the Romantic writers and artists had traveled across Spain creating an inventory of its artistic and architectural treasures.

Torres Balbás inserted the exaltation of travel into the preoccupations of the *Generación del 98*, finding the “Deep Spain,” which for them constituted the true soul of the country. Throughout his many voyages, Torres Balbás was able to catalog and bring to light buildings that would have otherwise disappeared. It is not by chance that the outbreak of the Civil War in 1936 took him by surprise in Soria, where he had gone on a study trip with his students and where he was forced to stay for the three years of the conflict.

One aspect of Torres Balbás’ early career as an architect, which has been overshadowed by his work as conservator, is the fact that he was a key figure in the journal *Arquitectura*, the official publication of Spanish architects and the main forum of architectural debate during the 1920s and 1930s.³ He was secretary of the journal from 1918 to 1923, and from its pages he was able to shape the forms and methods of architectural criticism in Spain, the absence of which Torres Balbás considered a sign of intolerable cultural backwardness.⁴ Most importantly, his articles, eighteen of which appeared under the general rubric of “*Arquitectura española contemporánea*” (Spanish Contemporary Architecture), opened the door for public debate on contemporary architecture for the first time in Spain. In his writings one can find, negatively expressed, a desire for architecture to be modern, not through blind rupture but precisely for knowing both how to look at the past with new eyes and how to incorporate anonymous secular memory into the demands of the contemporary city.

Torres Balbás hardly practiced architecture professionally, but two of his rare works are related to Granada, the city where the ideas put forth in his writings would end up taking root. We will later return to his role as conservator of the Alhambra, but it was in Granada where he collaborated with Antonio

Flórez on the construction of the Escuela Normal (Normal School) and where he imagined the Granada Pavilion for the Iberoamerican Exhibition of Seville of 1929. The former especially proves the common interest of Flórez and Torres Balbás to base their designs on the use of traditional materials, in this case brick, and the construction methods employed in vernacular architecture. Torres Balbás's interest in popular architecture was crystallized in many publications, among them *La vivienda popular en España* (Popular Housing in Spain) of 1933, and must be understood as an attempt to bridge tradition and modernity, a constant theme of all his writings, beginning with one of his first articles, "Mientras labran los sillares" (While They Dress Ashlars).⁵

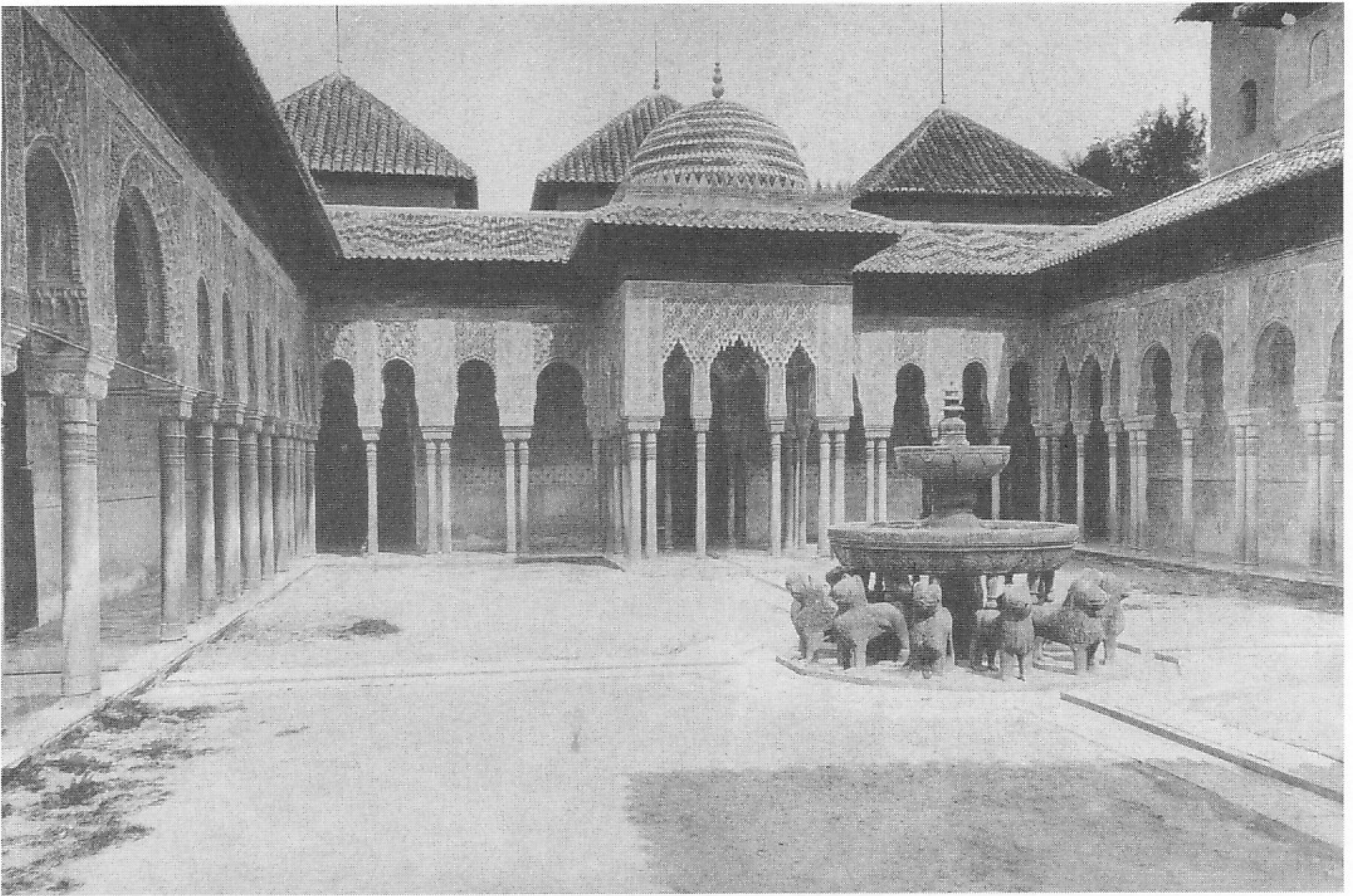
Popular architecture offered Spanish architects a way to renew architecture through simplicity, ornamental austerity, and sincerity of construction. These same features can be found in Torres Balbás's writings on Spanish architectural history. For example, Torres's analysis of the Escorial Monastery, the mythic building of Spanish architecture par excellence, described the design as a conflict between learned architecture, "with contempt towards our history and our race," and a living tradition, "buried and silent" within the people. This tradition is expressed in the toughness and austerity of a building that "pretends to be classical and European yet only manages to resemble one of those torn off, granite boulders, in the mountains for thousands of years."⁶

One cannot detach Torres Balbás's position within the contemporary architectural debate from his thinking and practice in heritage conservation and architectural restoration, which are the best-known aspects of his work. Since the end of the nineteenth century, the criterion for monumental restoration had been under debate in Spain, and the so-called stylistic restoration, based on Viollet-le-Duc's theories and the idea of the "unity" of the monument, had come increasingly into question.⁷ At the Sixth National Congress of Architects, held in Madrid in 1904, this subject was chosen as one of the topics for debate. The most important among the defenders of Violletian ideas was undoubtedly Vicente Lampérez y Romea, a prestigious architect and author of important works of architectural history.⁸ Lampérez restored both cathedrals in Cuenca and Burgos, where he completely reconstructed the façade of the former and isolated the latter. Although he did criticize the fantasizing excesses of Viollet-le-Duc's disciples more than once, the truth is that Lampérez clearly aligned himself with interventionist restoration and with the attempt to give back to the monument an original image, which was not always based on rigorous historical and archaeological knowledge.

The confrontation between the Spanish Violettian and Ruskinian schools took place in 1919, at the Seventh National Congress of Architects held in Saragossa and chaired by Lampérez himself. The young Torres Balbás spoke on "Legislación, inventario gráfico y organización de los Monumentos históricos y artísticos de España" (Legislation, graphical archive, and organization of Spanish historical and artistic monuments). He outlined the main arguments for a new way of engaging the remains of the past: "To preserve buildings just as they have been passed on to us, to protect them from the ruin, to maintain them and consolidate them, always with great respect toward the ancient construction; never to complete them or remake the existent parts."⁹ Against stylistic restoration he set an emphasis on conservation and a demand for maximum historical and archeological rigor before undertaking any intervention. Moreover Torres Balbás was one of the first to stress that the best guarantee for the conservation of historic buildings was to put them to modern use through activities compatible with their essence.

Torres Balbás would have numerous occasions to bring these principles into practice. His interventions on historical monuments were always accompanied by publications and studies of their architectural history. His trajectory had two climaxes: in 1923, when he was appointed preservation architect of the Alhambra in Granada; and 1929, when he became chief architect of the National Artistic Treasure and was in charge of a wide region that included all southeastern Spain, which allowed him to extend his field of work. In 1931 he took part in the renowned congress from which the Athens Charter was drafted. The document had wide circulation thanks to its publication both in the French journal *Mouseion* and, in a revised version later on, in *Arquitectura*.¹⁰ In Athens, Torres Balbás could have met Gustavo Giovannoni, a figure with whom he had fundamental differences (among others, political) but with whom he also agreed in some points, such as the critique of the isolation of historical buildings.¹¹

Torres Balbás served as preservation architect of the Alhambra from 1923 until 1936. This Andalusian city had a fundamental impact on his thinking. Shortly after his arrival he wrote *Granada, la ciudad que desaparece* (Granada, the Disappearing City), a text of great significance that called for the safeguard of historical memory as part of the modern growth of cities.¹² The thirteen years that Torres Balbás was in charge of the Alhambra proved absolutely decisive for its conservation and study. Following the ideas that Ricardo Velázquez Bosco, another pioneer of new restoration, had presented in the plan of 1917, Torres Balbás applied a new working model to the Alhambra, defined in his own words as "Not trying to



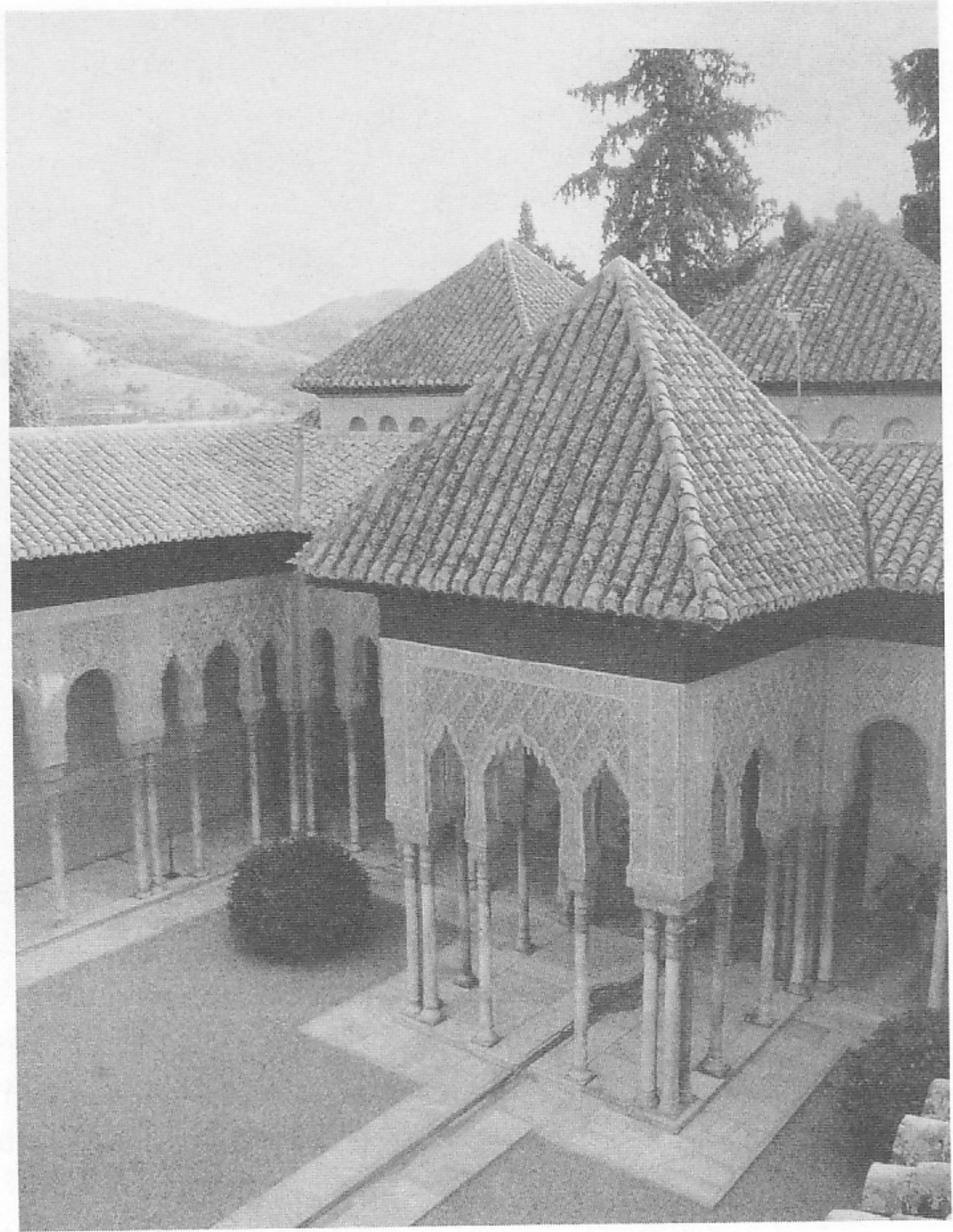
2. The Alhambra: the east wing of the Courtyard of the Lions, circa 1880. Photograph courtesy of Patronato de la Alhambra y el Generalife.

reproduce one part or element of ancient times, neither removing nor altering any testimonies from the past, respecting the works subsequently added to the first construction process; purely concerned with consolidation, sustainability, and preservation.”¹³

His *Diario de Obras* (Construction Diary) of the Alhambra logged the enormous work undertaken and partly undermines his ideal of pure conservation of the existing fabric. Torres Balbás had to develop two types of intervention that are responsible for the present look of the monument. On one hand, the restoration of greatly degraded spaces involved the replacement of the original room with new elements recalling the original space but with modern materials. Such was the case in the Patio de las Damas (Courtyard of the Ladies) in the Palacio del Partal (Partal Palace) and in the southern gallery of the Patio de Machuca (Machuca Courtyard), which, although entirely missing, was evoked with topiaries. On the other hand, Torres Balbás did not extend his deference for subsequent additions to the interventions by nineteenth-century conservators steeped in Orientalist aesthetics, which he viewed as absolutely arbitrary. There, Torres Balbás did not hesitate to “restore the restored,” that is, to remove some of those fantasizing additions.

This provoked rage of those elites in Granada who had become habituated to the Orientalist image of the Alhambra. The climax of this debate came in 1934 when Torres Balbás decided to remove the ceramic, polychromatic small domes with which Contreras had covered the small temple-like

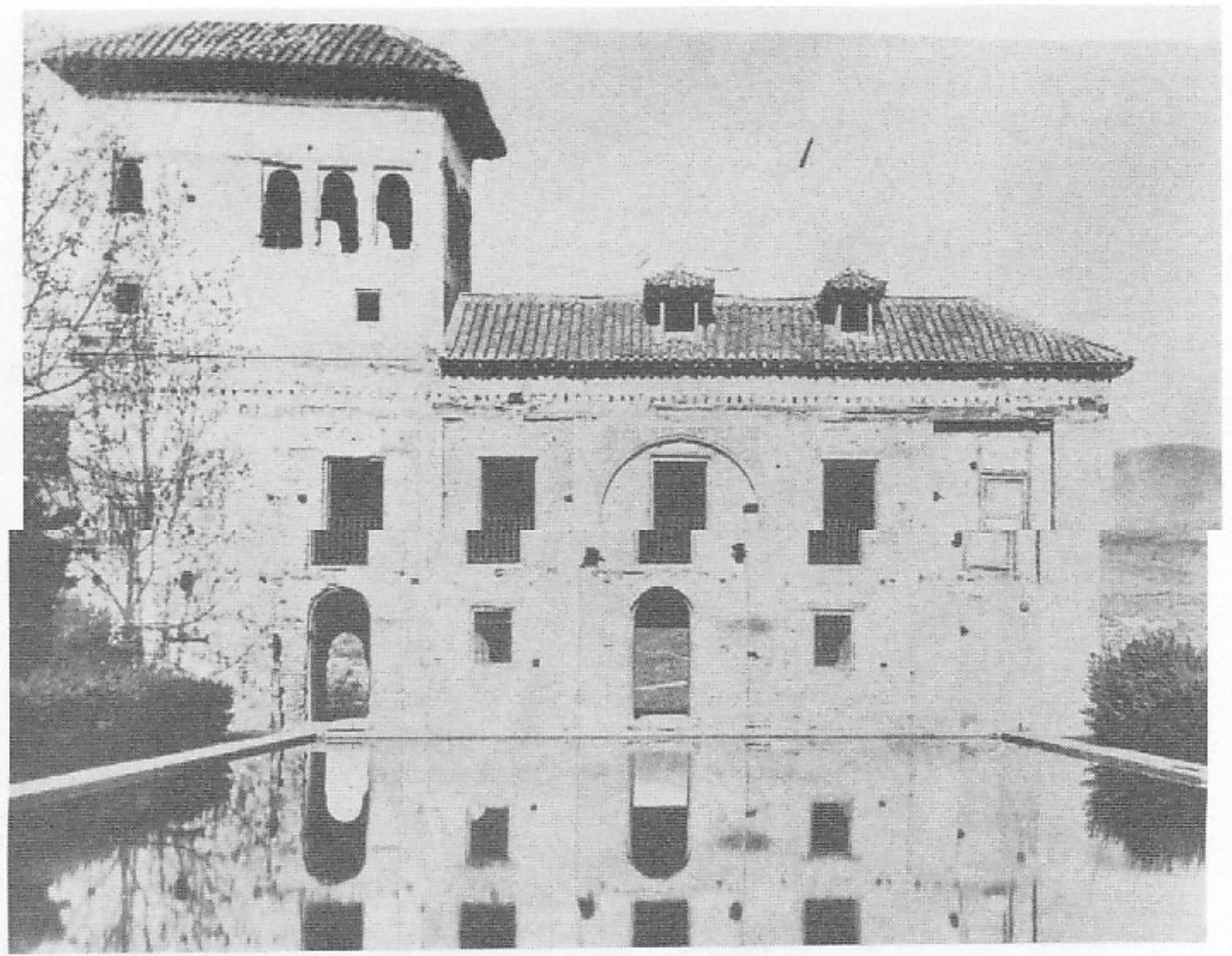
3. The east wing wing of the Courtyard of the Lions in its present state. Photograph courtesy of Patronato de la Alhambra y el Generalife.



pavilion on the eastern side of the Patio de los Leones (Courtyard of the Lions) in 1859, and replaced them with a simple, four-sloped ceiling designed on the basis of a rigorous historical study and comparative analysis of Islamic architecture of northern Africa. The magnitude of the controversy provoked of a group of intellectuals to publish a joint letter in support of Torres Balbás. These figures would later see their destinies unraveled by the civil war. Among them were the musician Manuel de Falla, instigator of the letter and exiled from 1939 onward; Antonio Gallego Burin, who became the first mayor of Granada under Franco; and Francisco Prieto Moreno, Torres's successor as the head of the Alhambra. The antagonism toward Torres Balbás found a direct path to action in the political changes precipitated by the civil war. When Franco took Granada on August 25, 1936, the city's new military officer removed Torres Balbás from his office as head of the Alhambra, "for being a person affect to the leftist regime." He escaped an almost certain death because, at the time, he was in Soria with his students.

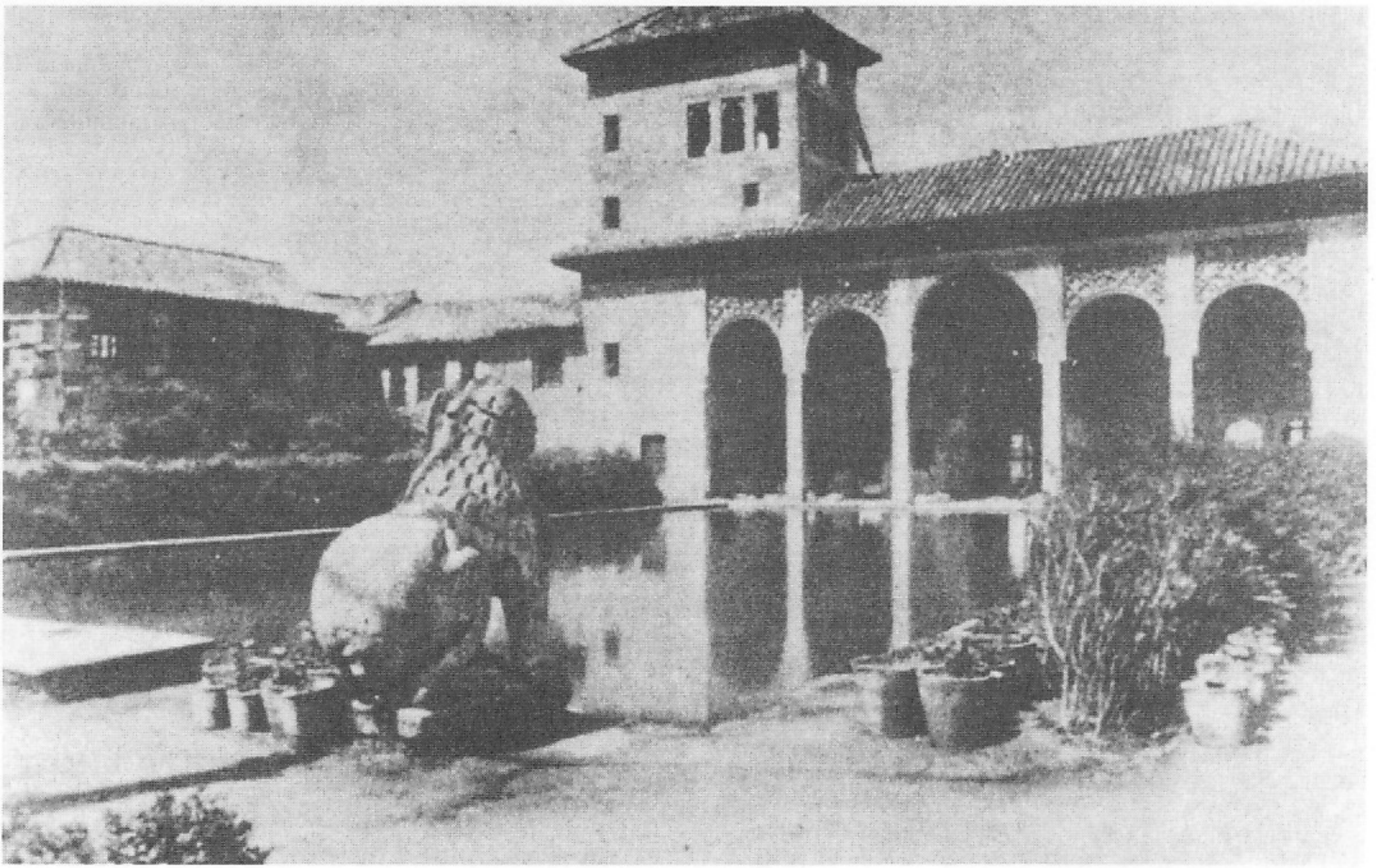
In 1931 Torres Balbás earned the Chair of History of Architecture in the Madrid School of Architecture. Until 1936 he had been able to teach and carry out his tasks in the Alhambra

4. The Alhambra: Courtyard and tower of the Partal before restoration by Torres Balbás. Photograph courtesy of Patronato de la Alhambra y el Generalife.



simultaneously, but his dismissal as preservation architect of Granada's monument drove him definitively into teaching and research. Once the Civil War ended he almost lost his chair in one of the purges to which Franco subjected public officials. Although he was able to keep his position in extremis, in practice he was prevented from any post or professional activity in the field of historic preservation. Despite personal grief, this new phase of forced withdrawal was essential for the development of modern architectural historiography in Spain. With the compound background of an exhaustive and direct knowledge of Spanish architecture and a reworked concept of "tradition," Torres Balbás published, throughout the 1940s and 1950s until his death in 1960, dozens of works on architectural history. These included publication reviews, monographic articles, especially on Islamic architecture, and several books, among them two volumes¹⁴ for the collection *Ars Hispaniae* and, first and foremost his monumental and posthumous work *Ciudades hispanomusulmanas* of 1970, still an essential reference.¹⁵

With his lectures and publications, Torres Balbás trained a whole generation of architectural historians in a methodological model of historiography that, even considering essential the knowledge of documents, broke with the excessive mystification that historiographical positivism had placed in archival work. Although he considered archival work necessary, he did not think it alone was adequate to the requirements for writing architectural history. To the archive he added travel and the critical, personal, and direct knowledge of buildings in their contexts. The relevance he gave to architectural analysis turned the monument itself into a document. He upheld a philosophy of history in which architecture was nothing but the translation of that "true" Spain



5. Courtyard and tower of the Partal immediately after restoration. Photograph courtesy of Patronato de la Alhambra y el Generalife.

he thought had been hidden under historicist tinsel and folkloric frivolity.

Torres Balbás's legacy was carried forth by Fernando Chueca Goitia, undoubtedly his best disciple. Through Torres Balbás's teaching, Chueca connected with the set of problems of the *Generación del 98*—that is, the relationship between history and tradition—and he became largely responsible for the renewal of Spanish architectural historiography from 1940 on. Indeed, in 1952 Chueca convened a meeting in Granada of modern architects to collectively reflect on the future of Spanish architecture. They chose the Alhambra as the setting. What resulted from that meeting was the renowned *Manifiesto de la Alhambra* (Alhambra's Manifesto), a programmatic text that called for a cautious modernity, one anchored in the tradition the Alhambra represented, not seen through Orientalist eyes but rather through the glance of architects in searching for “timeless” abstract lessons about volume and space in the Nasrid monument.¹⁶ Torres Balbás was not present in the Alhambra meeting: the man who had done the most for the monument's preservation and for advancing scientific knowledge about the Alhambra had been ignominiously expelled from it in 1936. His ideas were, nevertheless, the ones beating within the pages of the *Manifiesto*.

Author Biography

Juan Calatrava is an architectural historian who was also trained as a lawyer. He is professor of architectural history at Granada's Escuela Técnica Superior de Arquitectura, where he also serves as associate director of the school. He is author of five books and more than sixty articles on the history of architecture from the eighteenth to the twentieth century, as well as on the historiography and theory of architecture.

Endnotes

Translated by María González-Pendás.

¹ On Torres Balbás, see C. Vilchez, *La Alhambra de Leopoldo Torres Balbás* (Granada: Editorial Comares, 1988); monographic number in *Cuadernos de la Alhambra* 25 (1989); C. Vilchez, *Leopoldo Torres Balbás* (Granada: Editorial Comares, 1999); A. Muñoz Cosme, *La vida y la obra de Leopoldo Torres Balbás* (Seville: Consejería de Cultura de la Junta de Andalucía, 2005). Torres Balbás's more than two hundred texts have been gathered, if in an incomplete manner, in the nine volumes of his *Obra dispersa* (Madrid: Colegio Oficial de Arquitectos de Madrid, 1981–85). A good anthology of his main texts is Torres Balbás, *Sobre monumentos y otros escritos* (Madrid: Colegio Oficial de Arquitectos de Madrid, 1996).

² See, among a wide bibliography, the monographic number the *Institución Libre de Enseñanza*, no. 18–19 (1978) devoted to the journal *Poesía*.

³ See the catalog for the exhibition *Revista Arquitectura (1918–1936)* (Madrid: Colegio Oficial de Arquitectos de Madrid y Ministerio de Fomento, 2001).

⁴ "There is no architectural critique in our country. Modern painting and sculpture get discussed; hardly ever does a shy judgment on an architect or a contemporaneous building slyly slide into a newspaper or a journal." "No existe la crítica arquitectónica en nuestro país. Se escribe y discute sobre pintura y escultura modernas; poquísimas veces se desliza solapadamente en un periódico, en una revista, algún juicio tímido sobre un arquitecto o un edificio contemporáneos" ("Mientras labran los sillares," *Arquitectura*, 1918: 34; translation here and throughout is by the editors of *Future Anterior*).

⁵ Published in *Arquitectura* (June 1918): 31.

⁶ "What El Escorial Represents in Our Architectural History," *Arquitectura* 5 (1923): 215.

⁷ A good synthesis of this debate in P. Navascués, *Arquitectura española (1808–1914)* (Madrid: Espasa Calpe, 2000), 367–98.

⁸ Most significantly *Historia de la arquitectura cristiana española en la Edad Media* (1908) and *Arquitectura civil española de los siglos I al XVIII* (1922). On Lámpez, see P. Moleón, "Vicente Lampérez y el estudio de la arquitectura en la historia," an introductory study in the edition of the first cited work (Madrid: Giner Ediciones, 1993).

⁹ Leopoldo Torres Balbás, *Legislación, inventario gráfico y organización de los Monumentos históricos y artísticos de España* (Zaragoza, Tip. La Editorial, 1919), 21. The text was republished in full recently in *Cuadernos de Arte de la Universidad de Granada* 20 (1989): 195–210.

¹⁰ "La restauration des monuments dans l'Espagne d'aujourd'hui," *Museion* 17–18 (1932); and "La reparación de los monumentos antiguos en España," *Arquitectura* 15 (1933): 1.

¹¹ "El aislamiento de nuestras catedrales," *Arquitectura* 2 (1919): 358.

¹² Published in *Arquitectura* 5 (1923): 305–18. A modern edition was published by the School of Architecture of Granada, 1997.

¹³ "La reparación de los monumentos antiguos en España," 1.

¹⁴ *Arte almohade, arte nazarí, arte mudéjar* (Madrid: Plus Ultra, 1949) and *Arquitectura gótica* (Madrid: Plus Ultra, 1952).

¹⁵ Leopoldo Torres Balbás, *Ciudades hispanosumulmanas*, advertencia preliminar, introduction, and conclusion by Henri Terrasse (Madrid: Ministerio de Asuntos Exteriores, Instituto Hispanoárabe de Cultura, 1970).

¹⁶ See J. Calatrava, "El Manifiesto de la Alhambra," in *Estudios sobre historiografía de la arquitectura*, 259–70 (Granada: Editorial Universidad de Granada, 2005).

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