



The Ornament of the World: How Muslims, Jews and Christians Created a Culture of Tolerance in Medieval Spain

By Maria Rosa Menocal

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Widely hailed as a revelation of a "lost" golden age, this history brings to vivid life the rich and thriving culture of medieval Spain where, for more than seven centuries, Muslims, Jews, and Christians lived together in an atmosphere of tolerance, and literature, science, and the arts flourished. of photos. 3 maps.

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Editorial Review

Amazon.com Review

María Rosa Menocal's wafting, ineffably sad *The Ornament of the World* tells of a time and place--from 786 to 1492, in Andalucía, Spain--that is largely and unjustly overshadowed in most historical chronicles. It was a time when three cultures--Judaic, Islamic, and Christian--forged a relatively stable (though occasionally contentious) coexistence. Such was this period that there remains in Toledo a church with an "homage to Arabic writing on its walls [and] a sumptuous 14th-century synagogue built to look like Granada's Alhambra." Long gone, however, is the Córdoba library--a thousand times larger than any other in Christian Europe. Menocal's history is one of palatine cities, of philosophers, of poets whose work inspired Chaucer and Boccaccio, of weeping fountains, breezy courtyards, and a long-running tolerance "profoundly rooted in the cultivation of the complexities, charms and challenges of contradictions," which ended with the repression of Judaism and Islam the same year Columbus sailed to the New World. --H. O'Billovich

From Library Journal

Menocal (R. Selden Rose Professor of Spanish and Portuguese and director of Special Programs in the Humanities, Yale Univ.) has previously published *The Arabic Role in Medieval Literary History: A Forgotten Heritage*, as well as other books on the role of the vernacular in medieval cultures. This book certainly reflects her deep scholarship. Menocal offers persuasive evidence that the Renaissance was strongly foreshadowed by the intellectual climate of Spain in the preceding centuries, starting in 783 with the founding of Andalusia by Abd al-Rahman, an Umayyad from Syria. The culture created was receptive to intellectual pursuits not allowed in the rest of Europe for several centuries, including the creation of impressive libraries and the study and translation of Classical authors. Menocal claims that this environment was largely a result of the tolerance shown by this ruler and his successors toward Christians and Jews and their cultures. Menocal has not given us a history book so much as a demonstration that puritanical cultures of any ilk are detrimental to the development of science, art, and literature. Her arguments are convincing even without the dark background of September 11. Recommended for all libraries.

Clay Williams, Hunter Coll. Lib., New York

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In the eighth century, the Abbasids took control of the Islamic empire from the once-powerful Umayyads. Abd al-Rahman, an Umayyad, fled to Spain and founded al-Andalus. There Jews, Christians, and Muslims lived together in relative peace and equality for centuries. The Andalusian kingdom has been largely ignored by Western and Eastern historians alike, but Menocal argues persuasively that to see the Middle Ages through an Andalusian lens reveals no dark ages among them but instead "a whole series of golden ages." Indeed, from the rediscovery of Hebrew by Jews to translations of Plato and Aristotle, the Andalusians laid the groundwork for the Renaissance. The culture of tolerance slowly fell apart, of course, and has never really returned. Menocal displays a lavish sense of place that should be the envy of many novelists, telling an engaging story in detail without ever alienating the general reader. Her seductively written history serves as both a testament to past tolerance and the hope of a peaceful future. The lessons of Andalusian history surely have never been more timely. *John Green*

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