Architecture ornament fragment

Place of origin: Madinat al-Zahra (Probably, made)

Date: 936-976 (made)

Artist/Maker: Unknown (makers)

Materials and Techniques: Carved limestone

Credit Line: Given by Dr W. L. Hildburgh, F.S.A.

Museum number: A.124-1919

Gallery location: In Storage

Descriptive line
Sculpture; Probably Palace of Madinat al-Zahra; Limestone Islamic Spain 10th cent

Physical description
Fragment of architectural ornament, Limestone carved with trefoil leaves in heart-shaped compartments

Dimensions
Height: 6 in, Width: 5 in

Museum number
A.124-1919

Object history note
Madinat al-Zahra' was first excavated by Ricardo Velazquez Bosco in 1912 and has been in the process of archaeological investigation for much of the rest of the 20th Century. Dr W. L. Hildburgh probably obtained the objects later received by the V&A over the course of his many trips to Spain in the early 20th Century. The V&A collection includes many different fragments of carved decorative limestone wall panels and carved marble architectural fragments.

Historical context note
Madinat al-Zahra' founded in 936 by Abd al-Rahman III (912-961) was to be a new imperial capital to honour his recently proclaimed title of Caliph. The site chosen for the new city was on the slopes of the Sierra Morena on a large natural spur between two ravines, located just 5 kilometres east of Cordoba. The landscape was utilised in the design of the city to further exalt the position of the Caliph, by dividing the city into terraced levels with the Abd al-Rahman's official Caliphal residence occupying the highest point followed by other lower level official structures on the levels below.

Construction of the city continued apace under Abd al-Rahman's successor al-Hakam II. Two richly decorated reception halls used to receive foreign dignitaries were constructed. The pace of the construction prompted new sourcing of marble including the re-opening of local marble quarries in addition to importing marble from as far away as Byzantium and Tunisia. Previous Umayyad building projects in Spain had relied heavily on re-using salvaged material from older Roman and Visigoth constructions. However, the scale of construction at Madinat al-Zahra' prompted the carving of columns and capitals as well as wall decorations specifically for the construction of the imperial city.

As a result a distinctly Iberian Umayyad style emerged, which decoratively borrowed much from late Roman Corinthian models with the innovation of deeply undercutting more abstract decorative motifs often vegetal in inspiration. Another important development was the elaborate carving of stone paneling, which was added onto the surface of the architectural structure. The V&A collection includes many different fragments of carved decorative limestone wall panels and carved marble architectural fragments. All surfaces of the internal façade would have been decorated with such carvings. This universal coverage allowed interior space to act as a single unified decorative entity.

URL
http://collections.vam.ac.uk/item/O402464/architecture-ornament-fragment-unknown/