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For my Fulbright, I spent a few years wandering away from Jerusalem in search of ever wider context to early Islamic high culture.

I share a few documentary images now, not because they are my art, but to expand context and to suggest how they influenced mine and other's artistic creations.

I found rural and urban landscapes dotted with castles, baths, estates, mosques, churches (... cities. long abandoned, ...)



2

...cities, long abandoned, that harbor the fruits of those civilizations.

in most of these places, the culture and life is buried in the sands, like here in Sergiopolis/Rasafa in NE Syria. Byz outpost of 4th–6th centuries.



3

most of these sites are in the middle of nowhere today, though many had substantial populations 1400 years ago.



4

I explored Roman ruins as well as those of the presumptive Arab Palmyran culture, here 2nd to 4th centuries C.E. It was here that the Umayyad tribes first camped when they entered Syria and here where they surely developed their appetite for monumental architecture.



5

The grand temples to Baal from Antiquity (here 3rd c C.E.), temples to Plato and Aristotle from the Classical period...



and the mosques of the Umayyad period...



... and the shrines.

With this image of the Qubbat alSakhra reflected in the doors of the Aqsa mosque, I would like to return to a personal theme: Patterns which are a screen both over and under reality

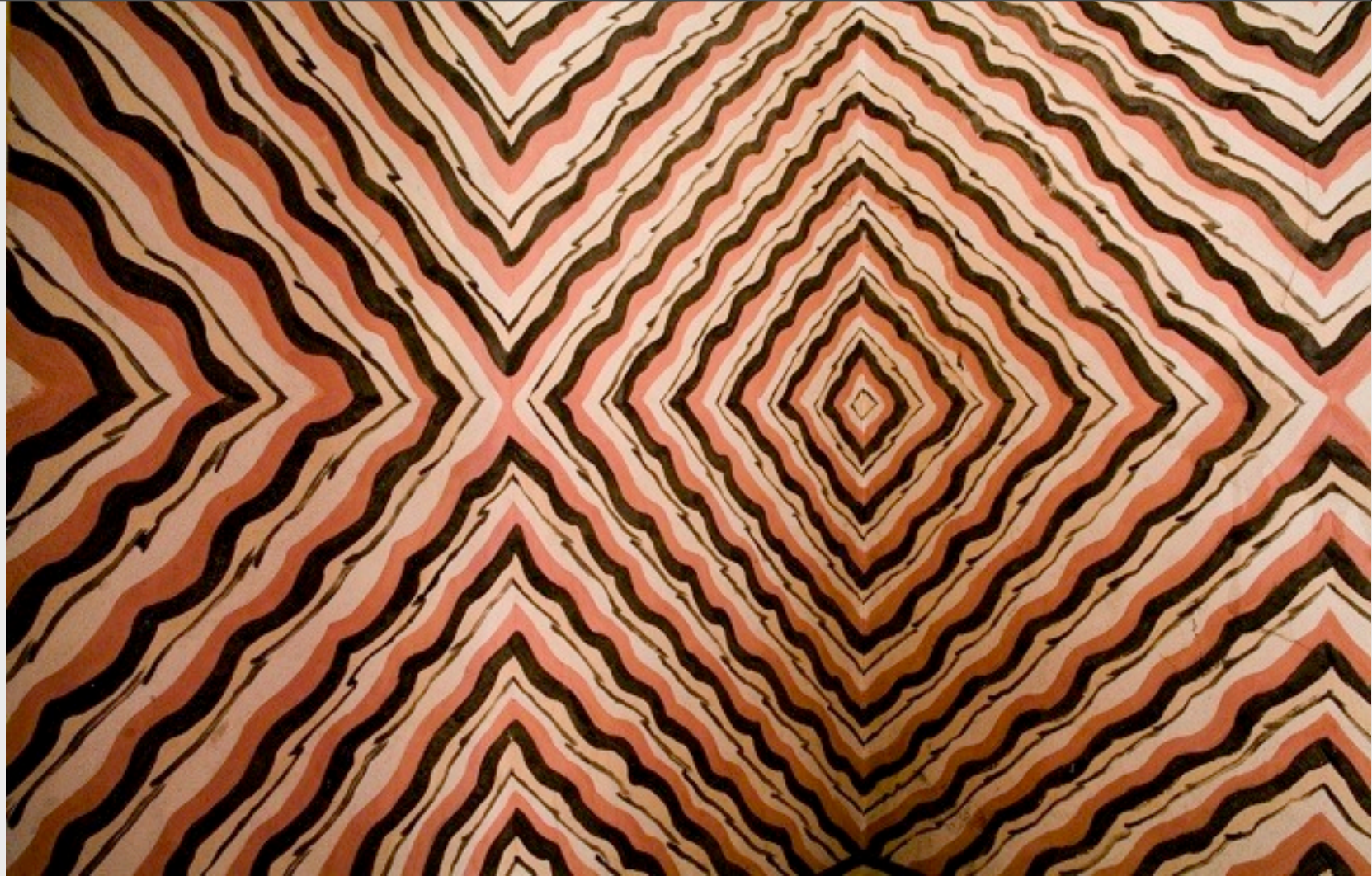


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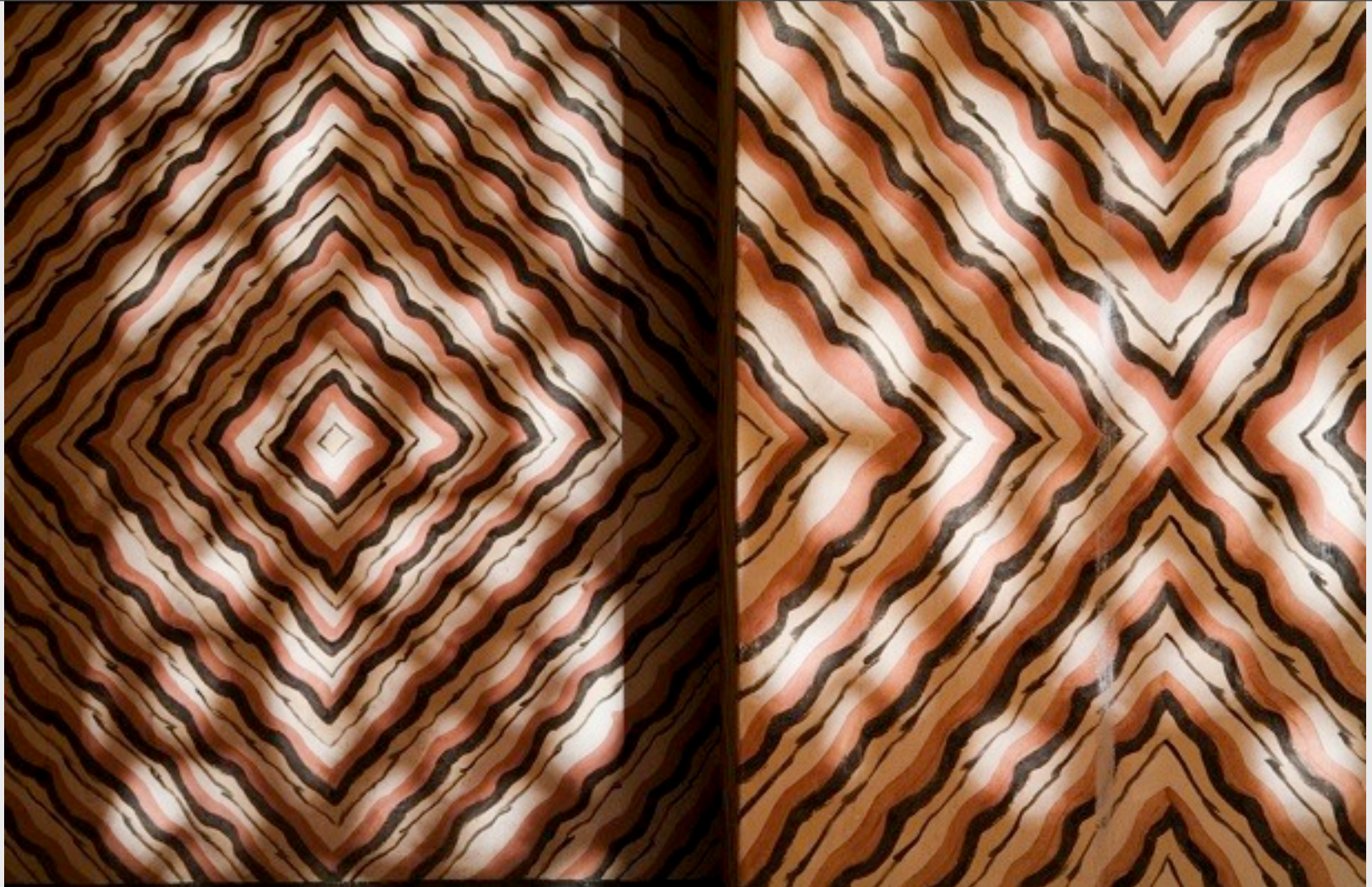
This is not a new theme but one that has gained momentum through the millennia... Thanks to the Fulbright, I was on hand to witness the discovery of long buried Umayyad mosaics...



in this and other archaeological digs.



Tonight I really want to distill this experience for you, and to share my joy of geometry both how I see it in the Islamic culture in general, and also how it has taken root at a profoundly personal level.



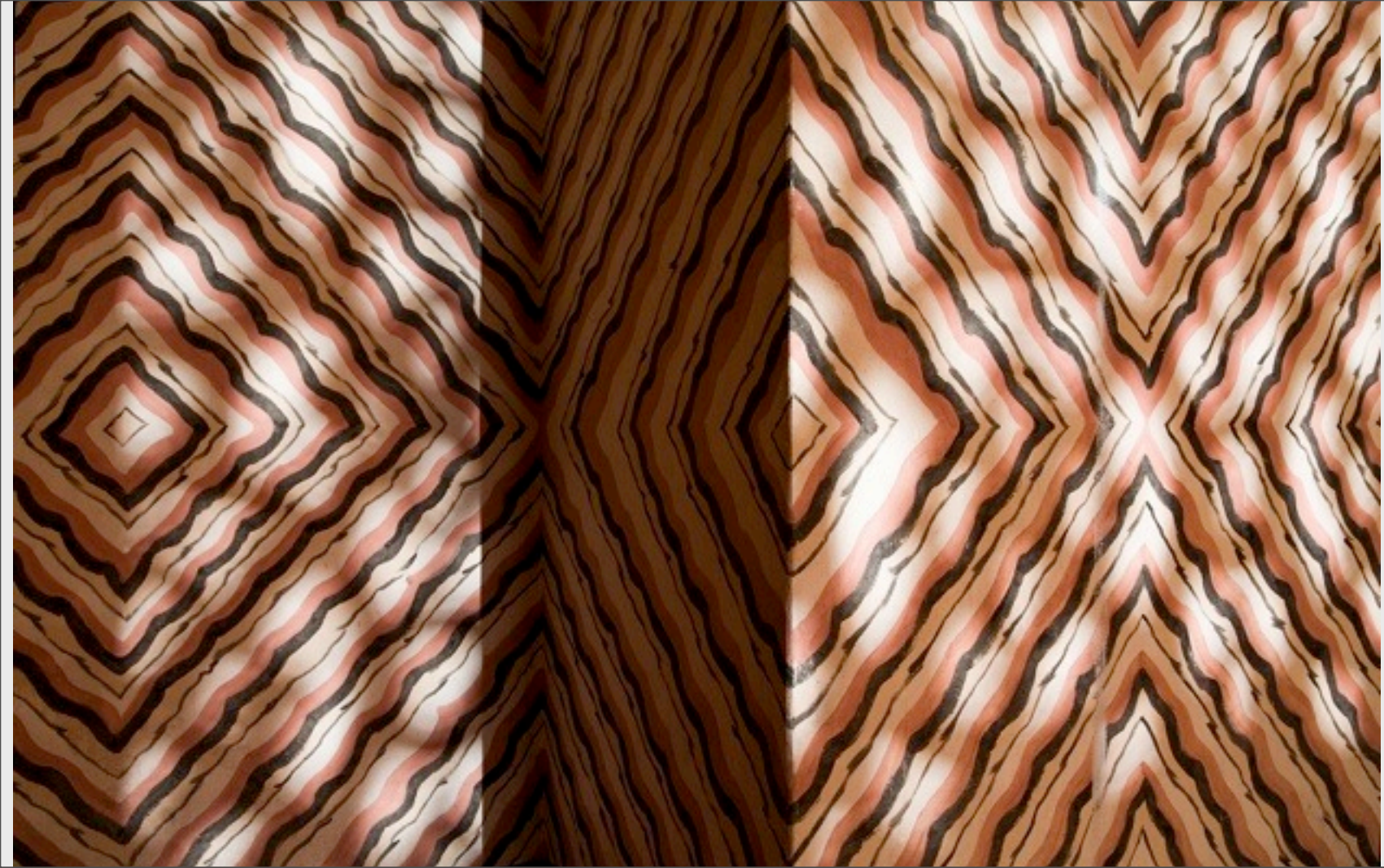
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These are 1930's reconstructions of some of the Umayyad fresco dados now installed in the Damascus Natl Museum. They mimic the quartersawn and bookmatched marble panelling of the DOR. The most pressing point I want to bring out to you is the play of two geometries: look at the shadows of grilles on top of the faux marble frescos



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Here's in this image is an independent plaster grille featuring an original interlace knot. The Umayyads used these patterns on windows, doors, balustrades, mosaics, illuminated manuscripts, tapestries, jewelry, dishware, as well as carved and painted woodwork.



Again the two media juxtaposed. In the Damascus National museum, I had a waking vision of a complex chiaroscuro, a dynamic interaction of these decorative motifs —far from the institutional museum environment in which they live now— and I sought to use my lighting to illuminate how I saw this vision from the Umayyad domestic environment; it's exciting to plumb the vitality of these pieces.



For me, patterns are more than inanimate designs: they are communications.

Photographing gives me the opportunity to experience and study their visual, emotional, and metaphoric potential.... That said, the more that I can photograph things not merely as they are, but as they interact singularly with the energy web of the universe, then I'll feel the most accomplished creatively.



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Here is the second of two images from a study of faïence, or glazed tile. I sought to work not only with geometry, or texture but also with the vigorous interplay of iridescence and serendipity off these centuries-old Moorish tiles in Andalucia. Contemporary light, activating a new and singular life into these aged glass and stone designs.

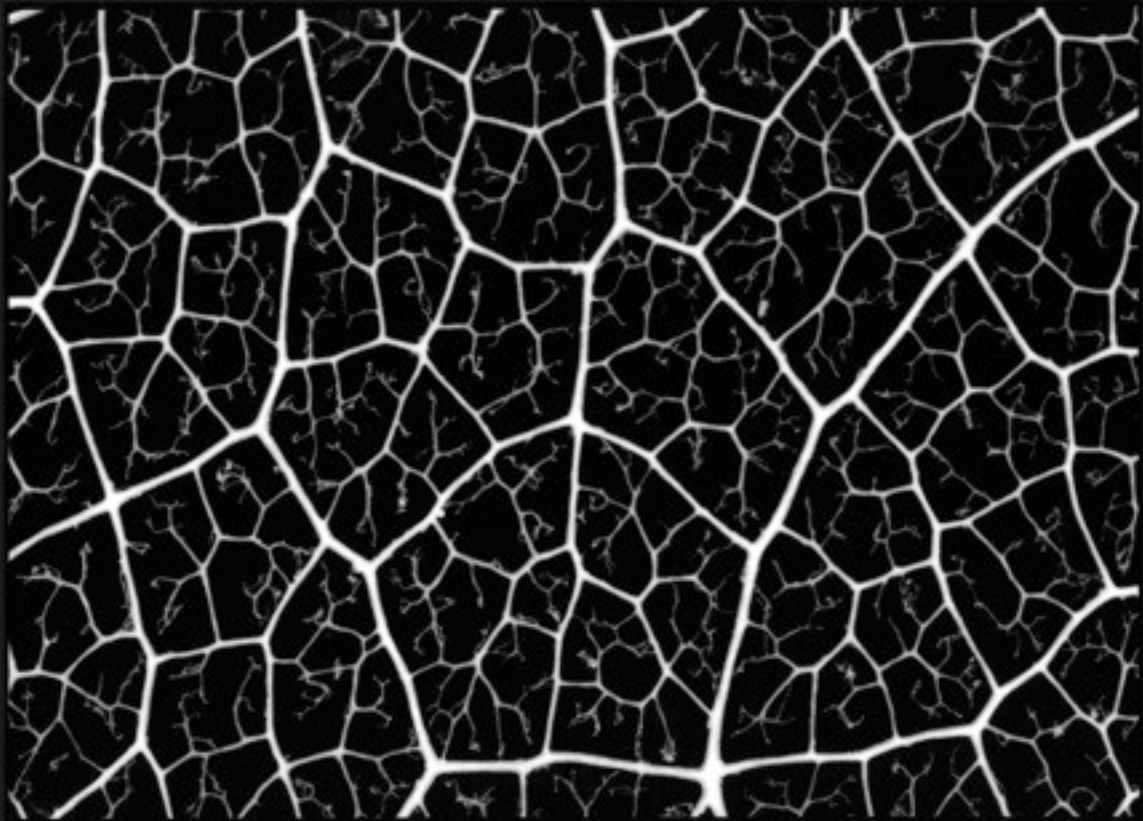


Sometimes, as in the Alhambra in Spain, these patterns acquire a more sophisticated 3-dimensional articulation, and allow for a mandala-like meditative experience



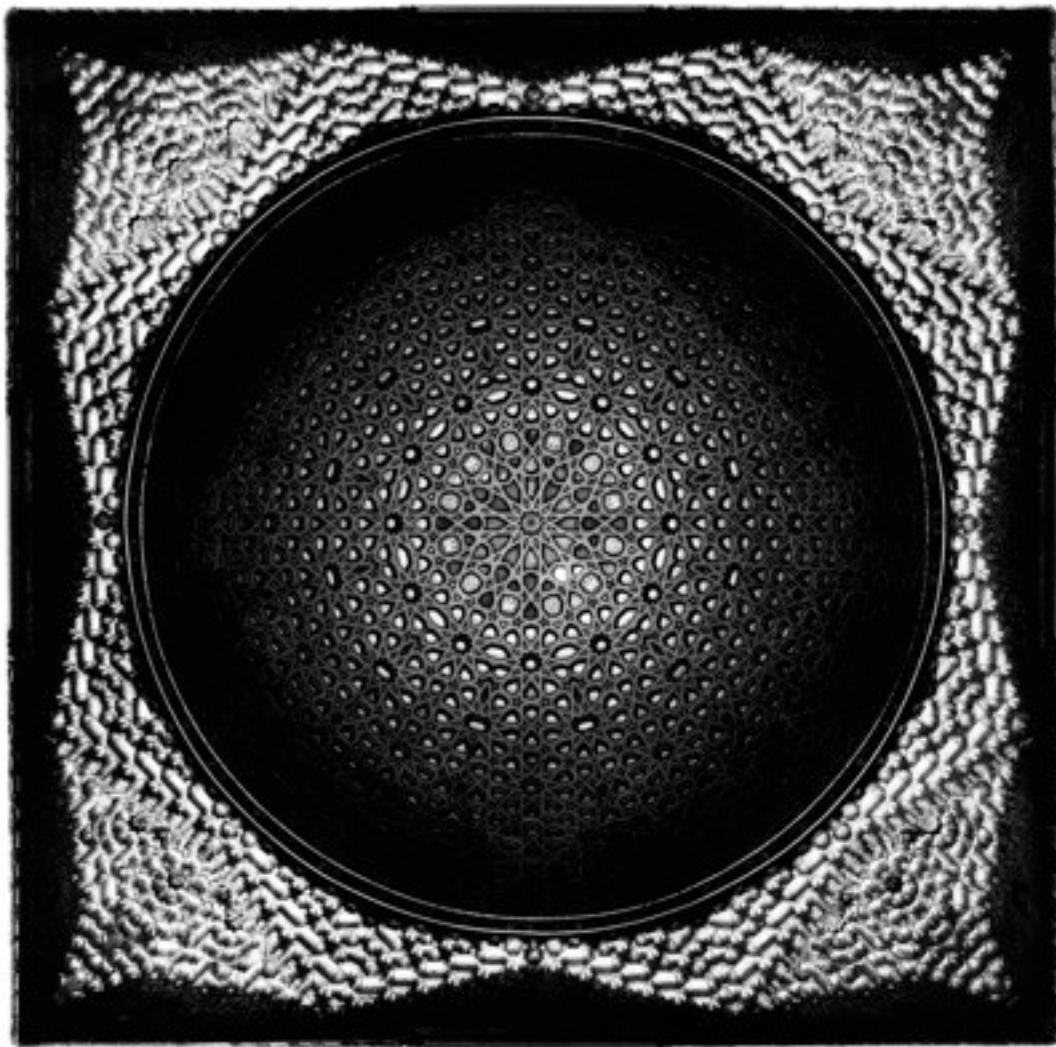
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Here we have more Moorish muqarnas, made out of stucco, but now in a floral pattern. These designs bring to my mind proverbs like, “everything in the universe is inter-connected,” or “the heart of creation is full of beauty and order”.



i see such integrative truths equally evident in the natural world. This was from a series of leaf photograms in 2000; the pentagon really caught my eye.

As intricate as this leaf is, though, artisans in the Islamic tradition...



... just take it to a special level.
Here in Sevilla: tesserae of glass gilded and plaster. This was constructed long after the Jews and Muslims were expelled from the country, a factoid which gives an image such as this one a special resonance, seeing the heightened beauty of so much interconnectedness from an atmosphere of dislocation.



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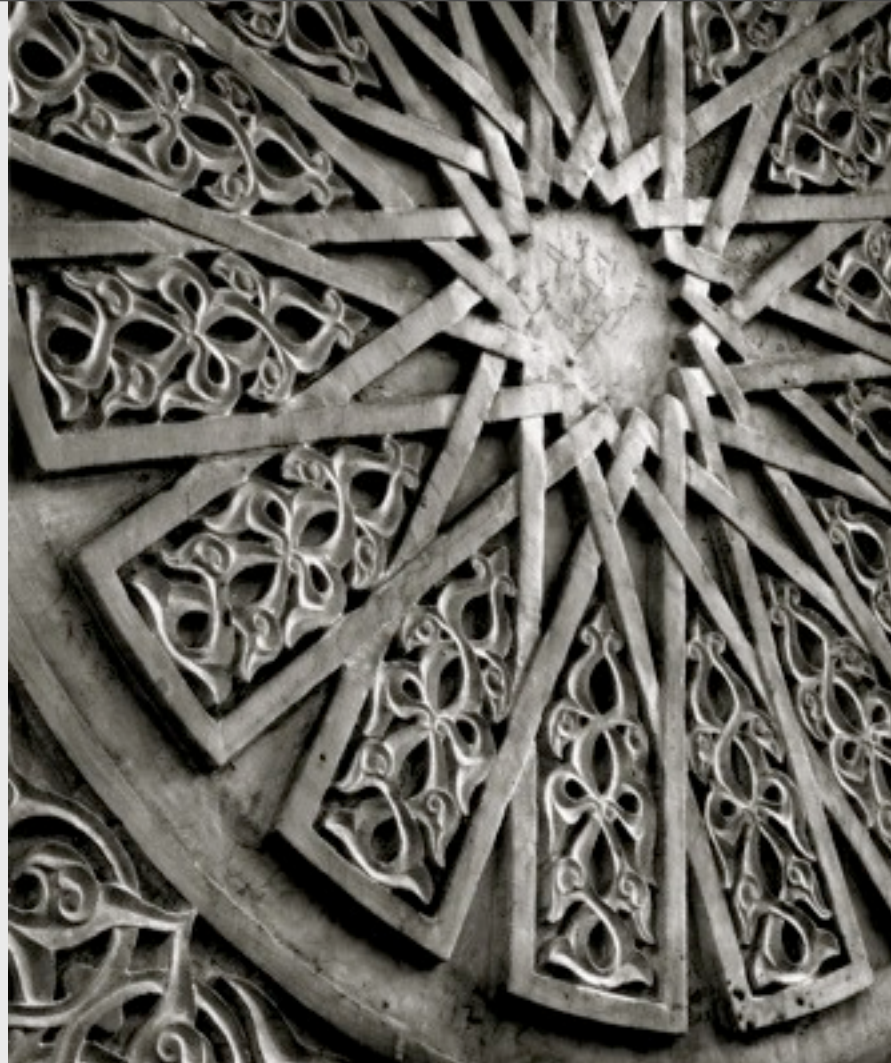
These geometric designs are ubiquitous across central and sw asia, north africa and spain. They are in different media, sizes, colors and shapes. This grill is from Torquemada's old headquarters in Granada.

I see one of my roles as an artist as not just interacting with them creatively...

... but actively working toward their preservation, restoration, and rehabilitation... I do not mean Torquemada's ideology, but of the creative artifacts and spirit that transcend his legacy and offer inspiration in lieu of fear.



I see a need to join others actively working toward the preservation, restoration, and rehabilitation of cultural artifacts before they crumble and disappear completely.



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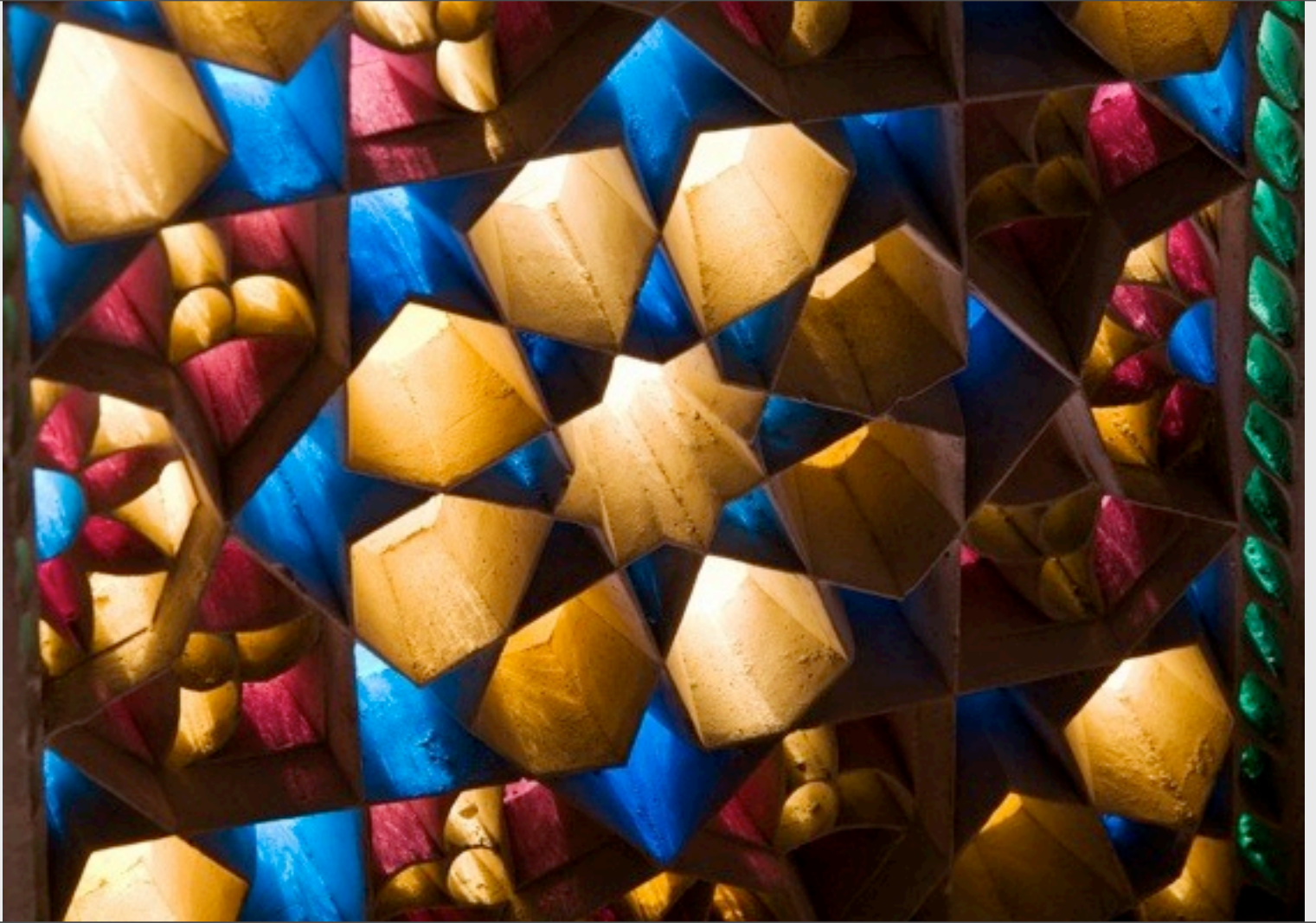
The strapwork interlace suggests cohesion. The juxtaposition of geometric and floral designs help communicate a harmony of dissimilars. By merely looking, you join me in this effort of rehabilitation. Beyond tonight, I do not expect you to see things as I do. I merely ask that you suspend your disbelief for a few moments and copy my gist.



For me, a photographic highlight is energy. This image from Cordoba is of a poor man's window screen, made of woven grasses. This basic light-modifying device evolved in subsequent years, cultures, & civilizations. From a primitive simple weave... these window coverings...

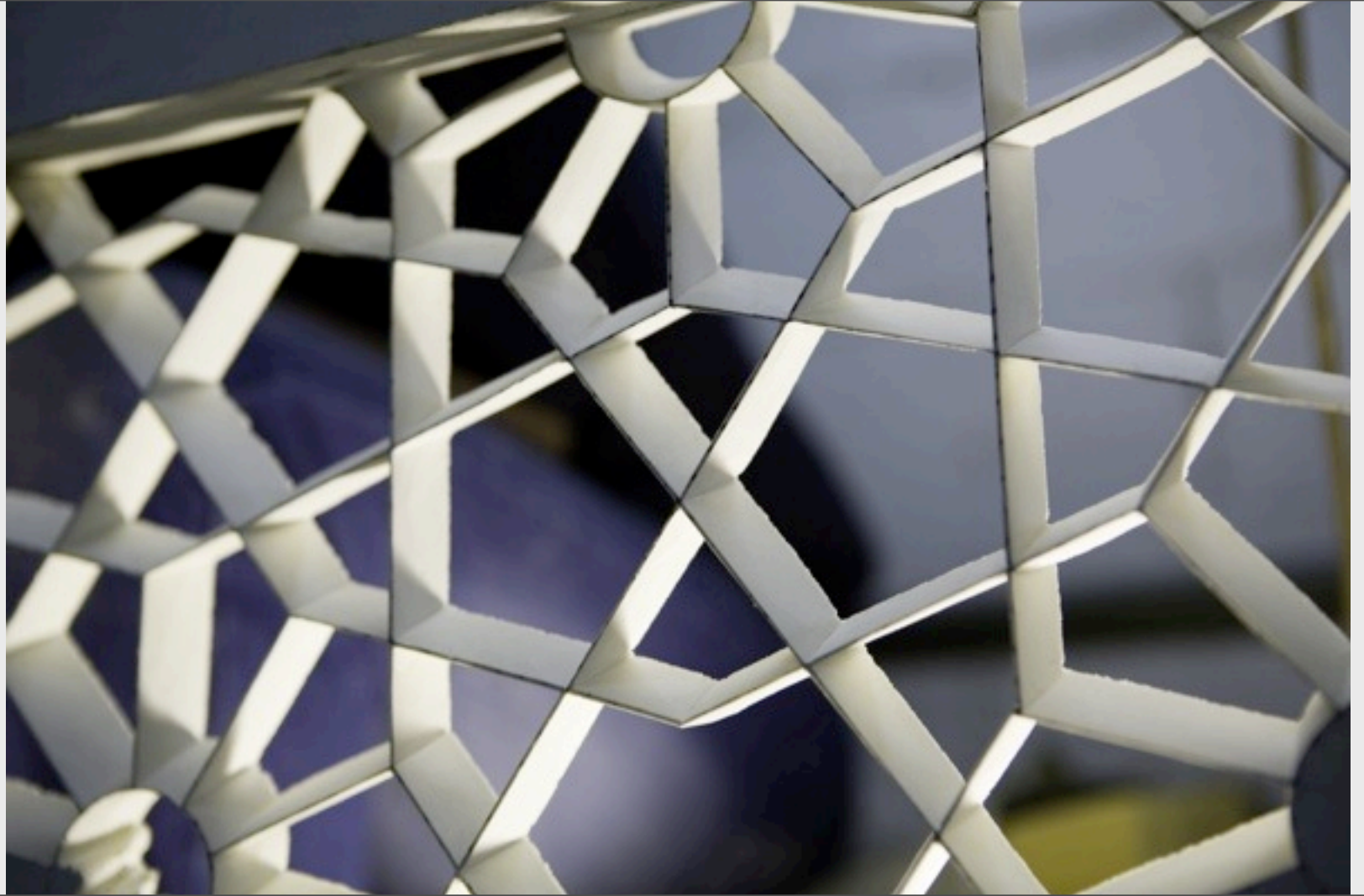


... became much more sophisticated in subsequent productions, here in Yemen employing stained glass & grilles. Each junction and each submotif has a place in the ordered structure. The component highlight themes pulsate against each other.



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Color too is energy. One of the big Umayyad contributions to architecture 1400 years ago was the stained- and patterned-glass window and stucco/plaster grilles.



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The lines themselves pull the eye: they are energy. We are now back in a workshop in alQuds.

So even while I like to document and plumb the wealth and diversity of ornamental patterning —before the glass and colored designs become even MORE shattered by the years— my alter-art-ego wants to simplify.... This gives me other ways to work with these inspirations

--PAUSE--