One feature that makes the Alhambra of Granada an extraordinary ensemble of monuments is the extremely important role played by words. The combination of votive, Koranic, royal and poetic inscriptions, in addition to some foundational inscriptions and the omnipresent Nasrid motto, in excellent Kufic and cursive designs, or a combination of both, give the monument a powerful and unique dimension that is both visual and semantic.

While votive inscriptions express wishes for joy, happiness and eternity (good fortune, blessing, eternal joy, etc.), Koranic inscriptions give the buildings the solemnity of the holy word, proclaiming the oneness of God and the triumph of Islam (as in the Puerta de la Justicia and the Puerta del Vino and the façade of Comares), and also convey prophylactic messages (Captive’s Tower, Hall of Comares) and notions of paradise (wall niches of the Salón del Partal, the northern portico of the Generalife), and they even inspire the construction of the greatest medieval throne room conserved today, the Hall of Comares, in which the Koran’s Surah Al-Mulk (Sovereignty) is reflected in the structure of the large wood ceiling, representative of the seven heavens mentioned in the holy book, which illuminates and protects the throne of Yusuf I.

In addition, royal inscriptions (divine aid, dominion and clear victory for our lord Abul Hachach Yusuf [Yusuf I] and glory be to our lord al-Gani bi-l-lah [Muhammad V]”), praise the figure of the sovereign as a victorious defender of Islam, and are useful for dating the buildings and their remodelling, as do some important foundational inscriptions that are still in place, such as the one on the Gate of Justice, which announces the conclusion of the works in “the month of the excelsis Birth of our Prophet in the year 749” (which would be May/June of 1348). As for the well-known Nasrid motto, Wa-la galiba illa Allah (Only God is Conqueror), it was adopted by Muhammad I as the dynasty’s emblem and it was stamped on the coins and other court products and, even very early on, in the buildings, in which, both in its typical cursive form and also in complex architectural calligrams in Kufic script, it can be seen in every
corner of the Alhambra in ceramic decorative borders, plasterwork, friezes, wooden arrocabes and funeral stones. Although the phrase does not come from the Koran (it was probably coined by the Almohads), it reproduces the message of divine presence and at the same time it acts as a royal inscription, as it links the works with the sultanate of Granada.

But what gives the Alhambra a singularity like none other in the history of Islamic art, and in the history of architecture in general, are the poetic inscriptions, because here is where we find the largest collection of Arabic mural poetry, with over 70 poems having been engraved into elements of the Alhambra. Of these, about half can still be read in situ. After the insertion of two simple poems in the mural decoration of the Palace of the Partal, the rich poetic-architectural programmes for which the Nasrids are known would have a more central role with the remodelling by Ismail I of the Generalife and they would culminate in the works of Yusuf I, such as the Captive’s Tower, the Hall of Comares, and the Baths, and in the works commissioned by Muhammad V, the poetic axis of the al-Riyad al-Said (Happy Garden, also known as the Courtyard of the Lions).

In these poems, besides praising the figure of the sultan as a luminous, triumphant sultan and a builder and defender of Islam, the palaces are idealized in astral, paradisiacal and nuptial metaphors. The poems also allude to the function of the place in which they were etched, such as in the case of the middle alcove of the Hall of Comares, in which the alcove itself is described as the throne of the kingdom of Yusuf I, protected by the divine light of its dome. Another case is the observation point Mirador de Lindaraja, where a poem describes the place as the “eye” from which Muhammad V “sees the city” when he occupies his “caliphal throne”. The wall niche poems at the entrance to the main chambers mention the jars of water placed in the niches as a sign of abundance and of the sovereign’s magnanimity, and they present, in first person feminine, the place as a beautiful and perfect bride.

Deserving of special attention are the poems of the Hall of Two Sisters and the Fountain of the Lions. The former, with 24 verses, is the longest poem of all the poems conserved at the Alhambra. Images of stars and aromatic gardens predominate and each verse forms a beautiful calligraphic frame in which Nasrid cursive script reaches its zenith. The Fountain of the Lions poem, in the centre of the palace, attributes Muhammad V’s commissioning of the building to divine inspiration, singing of the pearls and the silver water, which does not overflow, and mentioning the “lions of war”, which obey and defend their master, from whom they receive generous treatment. Also for Muhammad V, two poems of royal
and victorious themes were carved in the wooden arrobes of the door to the Mexuar and of the Comares façade. Another poem, this time commemorating the capture of Algeciras by this sultan in July of 1369, was carved on the northern portico of the Patio de Arrayanes (Court of the Myrtles).

THE POETS OF THE ALHAMBRA

This mural poetry was written by the writers of the *Diwan al-Insha‘* (Editorial Office) created by Muhammad II. In addition to being viziers they were eulogists entrusted with writing qasidas about the sultan in official celebrations: the end of Ramadan, the Festival of the Sacrifice, the Prophet’s birthday, births, the circumcision of emirs, journeys, soldier reviews, military campaigns, funeral ceremonies, or epitaphs, in addition to poems to be inscribed on the walls of the palaces and in the court’s luxury arts. For most of the poems on the walls of the Alhambra copies have been found in the poetry collections by these ministers and in other works from that period.

This is how we know about their authorship. The figure that really developed the epigraphic qasida genre was Ibn al-Yayyab (1274-1349), who occupied the post for over 50 years and served six sultans of Granada, from Muhammad II to Yusuf I. His work as an epigraphic poet was foundational, in that he condensed the monarchic and aesthetic contents of encomiastic poems and transferred them to the construction activities undertaken by the sovereigns, creating a school in and of itself in Nasrid Granada: he prepared the building-poems of Muhammad III (r. 1232-1273), perhaps the Partal poems among them, for the Generalife of IsmaiI, for the major works by Yusuf I, such as the Captive’s Tower, the Royal Baths (the only baths in Al-Andalus with poems; one of the two poems that adorned the baths has been conserved) and the Madrassa, in which the genre *fajr* (vainglory or self-esteem) is applied to the work of art and in which he is especially careful in the formal description of buildings, recurring, as in the Captive’s Tower, to an interesting vocabulary drawn from rhetoric, in which he underlines the duality of the external fortress and internal pleasure palace and also introduces concepts from classical Arabic aesthetics, such as the fusion of opposites, geometric harmony and precision and the aesthetics of light. He was followed by the famed multi-faceted writer Ibn al-Khatib (1313-1375), the greatest erudite of the later years of Al-Andalus, who left behind a very significant historiographic, literary, medical and poetic oeuvre and performed important diplomatic missions in representation of the government of Granada.
The only poems of his that remain in the Alhambra are those of the wall niches at the entrance to Comares Hall, and perhaps the one in the middle alcove of the same Hall, composed during his very first steps in the service of Yusuf I. He also wrote a qasida of political content for the new Mexuar commissioned by Muhammad V, built in 1362 in commemoration of his regaining the throne, and he compiled the works of his teacher, Ibn al-Yayyab.

Ibn al-Khatib’s fall from grace in the eyes of Muhammad V forced him to flee Granada in 1371 and at that time his political and poetic functions were placed in the hands of Ibn Zamrak (1333–c. 1393), who would be the author of most of the poems now preserved in the Alhambra. Unlike his predecessor, the written production of Ibn Zamrak was restricted to poetry and to some epistolary prose. Most of his poetic creations were eulogies related to historic events involving Muhammad V and qasidas marking the birth of the Prophet, the end of Ramadan or the circumcision of the sons of the Sultan. Their setting tended to be the palaces of Muhammad V in Granada. His poetry is characterized by its formal classicism, by its ease of composition and by a certain degree of metaphorical innovation. His eloquence is reinforced by the necessary brevity of mural qasidas, which can still be read in the most famous corners in the Alhambra: the Court of Myrtles and the entrance to the Hall of the Ship, the Fountain of the Lions, the Hall of Two Sisters, the Lindaraja observation point, and probably also those of the door to the Mexuar, the façade of Comares and the Lindaraja Fountain. He also wrote poems for the Torre de las Infantas (Tower of the Princesses), the poetry programme of the Alixares and descriptions of the Generalife, the Casa de la Novia (House of the Bride) and the city of Granada.

Later, the king-poet Yusuf III (1376-1417), the grandson of Muhammad V, compiled the poetry of Ibn Zamrak, paying specific attention to the epigraphed qasidas, and he also composed a considerable oeuvre of his own, in which he described palaces and settings in the Alhambra, as well as his own palaces on Sabika Hill, which have not survived. At his service was the royal poet Ibn Furkun (c. 1379/80-15th century), in whose diwan he inserted numerous poems for stamping on weapons and other objects, and also those that Yusuf III asked him to write for al-Dar al-Kabira (Big House), which may have been the Palacio del Partal Alto, on the occasion of the remodelling undertaken by this sultan there.