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Interreligious Narratives and Contra-Religious Aesthetics in the Material Culture of

Navarra, Northern Spain

Daniel Moulin-Stożek and Anna K. Dulska

Contribution to a special issue of CrossCurrents, 'Interreligious Aesthetics: From Dialogue

to the Senses' edited by S. Brent Plate.

Abstract

The region of Navarra provides ample opportunities to explore interreligious aesthetics.

Made internationally famous by Ernest Hemmingway's Fiesta: The Sun Also Rises, and

more recently, as one of the most picturesque stages of the popular Camino de Santiago

walking pilgrimage, Navarra is located between the French and Spanish provinces of the

Basque Country, La Rioja and Aragon. Born during the *Reconquista*, Navarra was an

independent kingdom up to 1512 when it was incorporated into the crown of Castile.

Through the modern period it struggled to maintain its own cultural, religious and legal

identity within the Spanish Monarchy. In this article we examine the representation and

contestation of religions in the artistic and material culture of this province. We do this in

order to consider how religious narratives may be expressed and contested by invoking the

senses. We focus on examples of Navarran material culture that dispute or support

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historical narratives relevant to the ongoing identity politics of the regional government, nationalist groups, religious communities and the tourism industry. By considering these examples we make a wider contribution to the theory of interreligious aesthetics, arguing that religious difference is not only symbolically represented in architecture, images, art, and ritual, but can also be its *raison d'être*.

Introduction

Material culture can contest religious narratives as much as it can constitute or support them. When the artist Abel Azcona exhibited a photograph of an installation of consecrated hosts spelling the word 'Pederastia' (pederasty) in the *Sala de Exposiciones* (Exhibition room) in Pamplona's *Monumento a Los Caídos* (civil war memorial), it was met with uproar. Crowds of people gathered to protest this sacrilegious affront to their faith. In Phase One of the performance, Azcona surreptitiously smuggled 242 consecrated wafers from communion services, of which one video was uploaded on the internet¹. Subsequently he then arranged them to spell various provocative words on the floors of art galleries in Madrid (Phase Two). For Phase Three, photographs of these installations were exhibited in the neo-classical memorial to the civil war nationalist commander, General Emilio Mola, that dominates the South-Eastern quarter of Pamplona. Originally given the official title, *Navarra a sus Muertos en la Cruzada* (Navarra to its killed in the Crusade), the building, erected in 1942, is now controversial, like other Franquist victory monuments, because it immortalizes only the nationalist dead.

Azcona's confrontational art is a striking example of how existing material culture can be used as a contextual foil for symbolic acts, and how art may represent, and rely upon, strong political positions for its meaning. The exhibition inverts the monument's original purpose by making the consecrated host spell out the profane. This also subverts the sensory experience of the host, by putting what should be placed on the tongue on the floor – in itself sacrilege. Representing a strand of Spanish anticlericalism, this act was intended to critique the power of the Church and expose its historic ties with the Franco regime, thereby attacking the conservative Catholic faith of much of the population of Navarra. This temporary installation is a powerful, if not extreme, illustration of

interreligious aesthetics, or more specifically contra-religious aesthetics. Material culture may well follow, or innovate according to artistic conventions that determine its visual and physical forms, but these aesthetic qualities are often invoked to subvert, contest or sustain political power and it intersects – in this case, religious identity.

If mythology serves to sustain religious and political identity in the face of detractors and competitors, material culture provides for the physical and sensory representation of mythologized narratives. Using Navarra as a paradigmatic and welldefined microcosm, we explore further examples of Navarran material culture in order to consider the interreligious aesthetics of competition – the material manifestation of claims and vying counter-claims. Our examples might not be that extreme or provocative as the Azcona's performance, yet they comprise solid and enduring symbols in the public and visual history of Navarra, and, as such, are more representative. Our analysis of this material culture shows how symbolic exchange provides the means for self-definition and contestation, which both represents political and religious positions, and at the same time produces a unique and rich material culture. We suggest that rather than posing a challenge to social harmony, competing claims and narratives represented in the aesthetics of art exhibitions, ritual practices, monuments, sacred sites and museums, enrich both art and society, providing the means by which religious identity may be defined, and giving impetus to the generation and regeneration of material culture in the process.

Material culture and the creation of a collective identity

Navarra, sometimes rendered *Navarre* in English, is an autonomous region of Spain which can trace its origins to the 10th century Kingdom of Pamplona (the present-day capital of the region)². The political, economic and cultural distinctiveness of the region, which

differs significantly from the other, even neighboring Spanish regions, is represented in various monuments and symbols. One prominent example is the monument to Los Fueros ('The privileges'), a statue, completed in 1903 and financed by what nowadays would be known as crowdfunding. This is situated in the heart of Pamplona and personifies the special rights of Navarra in relation to the Spanish state, representing its historical claims, including fiscal autonomy, dating back to the 13th century that became of renewed political importance in the 19th and 20th centuries. The central column is surrounded by five pillars symbolizing medieval administrative units or merindades, topped with effigies of personifications of Work, Peace, Justice, Autonomy and History. Above them are coats of arms of the *merindades*, one for Pamplona together with one for Navarra. Both are topped with closed crowns and the one of Navarra has a chrismon as a base, emphasizing the importance of Christianity for the people of Navarra. The column is crowned with a female statue that symbolizes Navarra, wearing an open crown on her head and holding a broken chain in her right hand, and the Charter of the special legal autonomy of the kingdom (Ley Foral) in the left. To perpetuate the memory of the fight for the maintenance of the charter main squares of many Navarran cities and towns are called Plaza de los Fueros (Charter Square). The chain, an enduring symbol of Navarra, represents the creation of the Kingdom and the victory of the battle of Las Navas de Tolosa in 1212 (see below).

Navarra is contested as a geographical region, with a proportion of the population identifying as Basque. Basque protests in Pamplona frequently demand the Basque language (Euskara) to be treated equally with Spanish, and some regularly petition for national independence from Spain along with the rest of the Basque Country. During the Spanish civil war (1936-1939), as opposed to the republican Basque country, Navarra was loyal to Franco, and memories of this conflict, including the suppression, internment and

execution of Basques and republican sympathizers within Navarra adds further complexity to the contemporary social and political background. This conflict and contestation over its present-day representation is also manifest in material culture. Unofficial plaques in the streets of Pamplona show the homes where executed Basques lived, and for many Basque nationalists and independentists, Franco-era religious buildings, such as Pamplona's Monumento a Los Caídos symbolize the power of the Church in the post-war police state, sometimes attracting republican or anti-clerical graffiti. The name of the square where the war memorial is located was changed in 2016 from Conde de Rodezno (a minister of justice in Franco's first government) to Liberty Square. An interesting example of sociocultural-artistic contestation of the remains of this chapter of Navarran history is the fate of one of the noble palaces in the historic center of Pamplona, the Palace of the Marquess of Rozalejo. This palace that belonged to a well-known friend of Rodezno has been occupied by members of a leftist Basque movement known as abertzale, who organized there am unofficial civic center and decorated the emblematic building with political slogans, including a graffiti version of Picasso's Guernica. (This famous picture has strong political resonance in the region as it depicts the Nazi bombing of the eponymous Basque town during the civil war).

Contestation and the projection of political narratives through material culture is not limited to contemporary history. The material representations of an older conflict are also germane to the forging of religious and regional identity. Like the rest of Spain, a key moment in the political and historical narrative of Navarra, recurrent in its material culture, is the *Reconquista* – the process of returning the Iberian Peninsula to Christian rule that lasted from 8th to 15th centuries. The Navarran Reconquista of the early 12th century is memorialized in many Navarran churches with one of the imageries of James the Greater,

the patron of Spain, known as Santiago Matamoros (St James the moor killer), slaying a Muslim, such as to be found in a reredos of a side chapel in Pamplona Cathedral (Photograph 1). This ubiquitous image is perhaps the most brute possible of any interreligious aesthetic, the Christian saint mounted on a white horse sword raised, the Muslim trampled underfoot depicted exotically, with oriental pattern on his helmet and a distinctive scimitar. This is no interreligious dialogue, but interreligious extermination. However, it is sensory and visceral symbol. The victory over the caliphate personified and attributed to divine power, placed among the whole panorama of heavenly saints made present in the rich guilt ornamentation of provincial Spanish baroque³. It is at once fantastical and commonplace – just one of many religious narratives symbolized in this style overlaying the gothic infrastructure of many historic Navarran churches.

INSERT PHOTOGRAPH 1 ABOUT HERE

Photograph 1: St James the Moor Slayer in the Chapel of St Catalina in Pamplona

Cathedral (1687).

The Reconquista has a more local, common but oblique reference in the Navarran coat of arms which can be found on all kinds of material objects from drain covers and official documents, to public buildings and commercial advertisements. This symbol comprises diagonal and Latin crosses made of or chains on a gules background with an emerald at the central intersection. Most versions also depict a closed crown, and in the Franco era the emblem was enshrined in a laurel wreath redolent of the classical empire. According to tradition, the cross, the chains and the emerald symbolize one of the most important events of Navarran mythology: the victory of Sancho el Fuerte (Sancho the Strong), king of Navarra over caliph Muhammad an-Nasir at the battle of Las Navas de Tolosa in 1212⁴. As part of a wider Christian coalition, Sancho el Fuerte – so called

because of his legendary height of two meters – led a Navarran force that penetrated the Muslim lines to the caliph's bodyguard of slave-warriors purportedly joined together by chains. These chains, and an emerald, were supposedly part of the trophies taken by Sancho el Fuerte which were then, symbolic of this triumph, introduced into the Navarran coat of arms. Actually, this emblem was shaped from a bunch of sticks or arrows in 13th century by another king, Sancho's successor Theobald I (the same who issued the first Charter), while the tradition of the chains is a late medieval and modern legend⁵. What is certain, however, is that it was ultimately incorporated – after the incorporation of Navarra into Castille by Ferdinand the Catholic in 1512 – into the coat of arms of Spain and both the emblem, as well as the legend, persist until today in collective imagination.

The distinctive chains, supposedly taken in the battle, with flat wrought links can be found replicated on much functional and decorative material in Navarra. Pieces of the originals are reputed to be found in several locations. The mausoleum of Sancho el Fuerte in Roncesvalles (a medieval monastery on the Camino de Santiago, visited by numerous past and present-day pilgrims as they pass over the Pyrenees into Spain. Tudela Cathedral (built over the former mosque). And, the throne room of the *Palacio de Navarra* in Pamplona, built as the seat of the *Diputación Floral de Navarra* in 1842 (Provincial Council of Navarra). This is a 19th century palace built as a lavish symbol of Navarran autonomy within the nation state, situated in the center of the Navarran capital. Another fragment is traditionally believed to have been melted down to make the iron fence of the chapel of Las Navas in the cloister of the Cathedral of Pamplona. The ongoing use of these original (independently whether they are authentic or not) artefacts, as well as their numerous reproductions, says much about the implicit relevance of Christianity to the Navarran identity. They also serve as potent examples of the role of contra-religious

aesthetics in the sustaining of political and religious narratives. They make an emblematic statement about the territory of Navarra as Christian, and by it, of the legitimacy of present political power, independently from its orientation and worldview – the descendent heir of a historical and historic victory mythologized by historiography, public history and popular imagination. Behind the throne in the Palacio is displayed a tapestry of the battle of Las Navas de Tolosa, above it, fragments of those chains from the battle, suspended as though they should bestow some kind of blessing on its incumbent. Likewise, in the church in Roncesvalles, the battle is displayed in stained glass which bathes the nave in impressive colored light. These material objects and their related aesthetic properties, not only represent the Christian victory against Islam, but point to deeper metaphors. Chains are archetypal symbols of oppression, broken chains of liberation (note the already mentioned monument to Los Fueros). Thus these aesthetic records of the mythologized historical event, but also have the deeper significance of the spiritual victory of good over evil. They not only mark the victory over Muslim-rule, but also support the truth-claims of Christianity, and moreover, the claim that the land and people of Navarra are Christian. That for many years there were no, or very few, Muslims in Navarra is not important in the continued use of these symbols. The construction of contra-religious aesthetics are not concerned with real engagement with out-groups, but on the consolidation of in-group identities.

The material culture of the Franco era echoes some of the mythological symbology of the medieval period. During the Spanish civil war, the nationalists received the support of the Church, and atrocities took place on both sides along religious lines. Thousands of priests and religious were murdered, while in nationalist areas those suspected of supporting the republicans were also executed, such as several members of Pamplona's city

council⁶. The conflict was often couched in religious terms – a second Reconquista or crusade against atheist communism. At its end, large-scale Christian symbols were erected nationwide, including *Valle de los Caídos* (Valley of the Fallen) close to Madrid, in which Franco's body was interred, and in Navarra, the aforementioned monument where one of his most important supporters was immortalized. The architecture of these monuments usually blends neo-classical motifs and Christian symbolism, such as Pamplona's consecrated war memorial, built in the shape of a cross, its interior displaying murals of the Navarran Jesuit Saint, Francisco Xavier, personifying the Navarran (Catholic) spirit. Throughout Navarra, Christian symbols from the post-war era are visible on skylines, such as the *Monumento al Corazón de Jesús* (1942) which commands Tudela, built upon the hill which holds the ruins of the Muslim stronghold and a Christian castle of the city⁷.

Public art is not the only way material culture stakes religious claims and sustains group identity. Of note in Navarra are striking large-scale festivals which engender wide participation and unique sensory experiences. During the San Fermines festival in Pamplona (similar festivals are held all over Navarra in summer) all the city dresses in white and red to symbolize the martyrdom of the 3th century *Saint Fermine*, who was a bishop in Amiens in northern France and was martyrized by being dragged through Pamplona's streets during a bout of anti-Christian violence⁸. Celebrated in literature by Ernest Hemmingway, the modern festival comprises a whole range of rituals, some old, such as the famous *Encierro* (running of bulls), some innovations, such as the festival's opening ritual of *Chupinazo* (the lighting of a rocket from the balcony of the city hall in the presence of wine-drunk crowds). Although present-day marketing separates the religious activities of the festival from concerts and other events, religious rituals, such as the procession of the statue of San Fermine through the city streets produce salient aesthetic

experiences which again make claims about the city's Christian status. In preparation for this public parade, attended by thousands, San Fermine is venerated throughout the year in the 18th century part financed by the city hall and – again – crowdfunding⁹. Thus, perhaps only implicit, or even unknown to the many international tourists to the city, the bull running and carousing are presided over by a Christian saint – an identity marker emblazoned on all kinds of festival paraphernalia, from red *pañuelos* (neck scarves) to beer mugs (Photograph 2).

INSERT PHOTOGRAPH 2 ABOUT HERE

Photograph 2: The image of San Fermine (St Fermine of Amiens) on a red pañuelo (neck scarf) worn by a reveller during the annual festival. Between the drinking and bull running a statue of the saint, hand raised giving benediction, is processed through the city streets (2016).

New representations of past interreligious relations

While Navarra is replete with examples of contra-religious aesthetics (that is symbols, objects and practices that make a claim of one religion over another), a further dimension is added to the region's material culture by the celebration of non-Christian religions' historic presence in the region. As with the Reconquista and the civil war, this more recent political project is in keeping with the trend in the rest of Spain which has sought to re-market its heritage as multicultural, as opposed to solely Christian. For example, Toledo or Cordoba are touted as 'cities of three cultures' on account of Muslim and Jewish communities that inhabited them together with Christians. In Navarra a similar move is apparent in the branding of Tudela, which was, for some years, on the borderland between Christian and

Muslim states, and home to several notable medieval writers and scholars, such as Benjamin of Tudela, known for documenting his travels all over the Middle East¹⁰.

The aesthetics of interreligious co-existence represent a material manifestation of a multicultural pluralism endorsed by wider European integration. This ideological development from the nation building projects of previous centuries has had two ramifications for religious material: the reinterpretation and marking of existing material culture, and the creation of new monuments that reinterpret the past. In regard to the former, perhaps the Camino de Santiago represents the most obvious example. The historic medieval pilgrimage route that runs across Northern Spain from France to the Cathedral of Santiago de Compostela in Galicia was endorsed in 1987 as the first European Cultural Itinerary route. The number of pilgrims walking through Navarra, usually starting in Roncesvalles, or Saint Jean Pied de Port the other side of the Pyrenees, has since steadily increased year on year to well over a quarter of a million annually. Part of this popularity is the re-branding of the pilgrimage as open to those of all religions and those of none – mythologized globally in several works of literature that stress the interreligious, or rather, pan-religious relevance of the pilgrimage, such as the new age philosophy of Paulo Coelho¹¹. Studies show pilgrims come from a range of backgrounds, and not necessarily identifying with the historic purpose of the Christian pilgrimage to venerate the relics of St James¹². The ritual act of walking engenders a physical, aesthetic and emotional experience that binds diverse walkers together. Evidence of this spiritual tourism are impromptu symbols placed by pilgrims inviting interreligious encounter through sensory interaction – the most obvious being the placing of stone markers, and the writing of graffiti (Photograph 3). Some of these reinterpret the historic infrastructure that still remains, contesting its Christian identity and proposing it as more universally spiritual. Other symbolic statements

reaffirm its Christian character. Together this contestation forms a perpetual cycle of individual symbolic acts which overlap and promote the formation of religious positions and interactions among walkers.

INSERT PHOTOGRAPH 3 ABOUT HERE

Photograph 3: Contesting religious and political symbols, and personal votive offerings, made by pilgrims on the official infrastructure of the Camino de Santiago. The shell, an ancient symbol of the Santiago cult, was adopted by the European Cultural Itinerary and given the double meaning of an arrow towards Santiago Compostella. Pilgrims superimpose secular symbols with overlapping new age and Christian meanings (2015).

In addition to the Camino, which brings substantial tourist trade to Navarra, are monuments and tourist orientation designed to celebrate the presence of Muslims and Jews within the region. Tudela is perhaps the most important site for this in Navarra, and is sometimes said to be the Navarran Toledo. The remaining wall dating to Muslim rule in the city is marked with a statue of the caliph Muza's head placed nearby. Although intended to celebrate the Arab occupation, it oddly mirrors the familiar depiction of the beheaded Muslim found in the symbology of the Reconquista. A comparable representation of the Muslim period is suggested by the large mural of a mounted Arab warrior clutching the Holy Qur'an that dominates the approach to the city from the south, painted by Franco Fasoli for the 2016 annual Tudela urban art festival. 'La ciudad de las 4 culturas' (the city of 4 cultures, i.e. the Iberians, Romans, Arabs and Christians) painted on two adjacent apartment blocks, is several stories high and monochrome. The image is impressive, dark, strong, even frightening¹³. In a similarly romanticized and perhaps essentialized manner, the former Jewish quarters are identified by distinctive street signs bearing caricatures of

Jewish iconography. A more enigmatic monument to religious coexistence can be found in a park in the city suggesting both the Arabic numeral '3' (for the three Abrahamic religions that once existed here) and the Hebrew alphabet. This new interpretation makes visible the historic presence of other religions which at one point were deliberately made invisible. For many years the records of Jewish conversions to Christianity (real or apparent) were publicly displayed in the city's Cathedral, in a side chapel turned into a synagogue-looking space, on the so called blanket (*manta*). However, all Jewish artefacts have been removed recently and the chapel has been brought back to Catholic worship.

In the absence of a proper museum or center of interpretation of non-Christian religions once present in Navarra, the internet provides a new way of recording their material heritage. A project of Virtual Museum of Sepharad (http://www.sefaradvirtual.com) which is currently being developed and seeks to create a totally virtual space to gather Jewish heritage of Navarra scattered all over its territory is a promising alternative for a traditional museum practices.

Museums provide the opportunity not only to display material culture, but also to interpret and present the past by combining historical narrative with aesthetic experience. The permanent exhibition Occidens: descubre los orígenes (West: discover the origins) in the cloisters of Pamplona Cathedral (http://www.expo-occidens.es/) is a good example of how existing material culture may be used to project and legitimize identity, in this case, that of Christian Navarra as a microcosm of the achievements of western culture, defined as the Christian synthesis of the civilizing innovations of Greco-Roman, Judaic and Germanic cultures14. This historicism brings together material objects guarded in the Cathedral of Pamplona that give a chronological narrative of the rise of medieval Christian culture, and the impact of Christianity in the emergence of the modern period. Indicative of the

conservative positioning that underlies this story of history, the exhibition, which blends spaces and artifacts of a unique in European scale cathedral complex with visual, musical, olfactory and haptic experiences, ends with provocative questions about the next chapter of western civilization, represented in the exhibition as a pink, empty and sweetly scented room with a window that looks back out on the gothic cloister (Photograph 4). This is a visual metaphor for the erosion of traditional Navarran/Catholic values in the postmodern era: the illustrious (and religious) past is juxtaposed with a vacuous, meaningless and bland future. As it is stated at the very end of the tour: "Occidens is not an exhibition, it is a reflection..." At which point the visitor is presented with a mirror with which to view him/herself on leaving the room.

INSERT PHOTOGRAPH 4 ABOUT HERE

Photograph 4: La Modernidad Relativista ('Relativist modernity'). The final room of the Occidens Exhibition in Pamplona Cathedral. The orientation tells us this is an era without depth and without mystery (2017).

Conclusion

Interreligious aesthetics in Navarra is characterized by contestation of one kind or another, drawing on what symbolic resources are available. These messages may sometimes be implicit or dormant, but their subtlety may contribute to their potency in consolidating the identity projects necessary for governance, commerce and social replication and innovation. This is apparent in the mythological origins of the Navarran coat of arms; the representations of the past coexistence of Christians, Jews and Muslims in the heritage industry; the remaking of the pilgrimage on the Camino de Santiago as a global phenomenon; the role of the museum in projecting religious identity; and, in the

contestation of the material religion of the Franco era. These changing political agendas and their associated symbols add to the various strata of Navarran material culture built up over the years. Chronologically, this sequence begins by the making of non-Christian religions as invisible or vanquished at the Reconquista, and then with the formal expulsion of the Jews several centuries later. We see this contra-religious aesthetic in the Navarran emblem, but also in other symbolic displays such as the ensemble of visual and public history in Tudela, or the procession of Christian saints in the streets during festivals, for example. The historical narratives of Christianization were reused to consolidate the victory after the civil war, evident in the religious monuments of the Franco era which are often imposing in scale and style of construction. A third and final kind of interreligious aesthetics is then represented by the self-conscious attempt to represent historical religious diversity – despite the material culture of the preceding two phases being still, on the whole, clearly visible, even perhaps deliberately construed to oppose this agenda as suggested by the Occidens exhibition. Considered together, as anyone could apprehend them today who visits or lives in the region, these contesting interreligious aesthetics constitute a public forum rich in symbolism.

By analyzing interreligious material culture in terms of its political positioning, we have shown how aesthetics may be used in the creation of salient icons which act as claimstakes for territory – human and geographical. Regardless of political orientation, in all examples of interreligious aesthetics we see a reinterpretation and reorientation of physical objects to symbolize political positions, and ideals of how religions should relate to one another. While any individual may disagree with (or assent to), one or more of the various positions represented by aspects of material culture and its interpretation, what cannot be disputed is the importance of such controversies in the formation of this symbolic world,

which gives the contextual frame for debate to take place. In the creation of a symbolic public space, competing claims are aired; in public ritual, these are expressed, even expurgated. The availability and possibility of participation in interreligious aesthetics therefore goes some way in promoting not only dialogue and contestation, but the construction of historic memory and thus social and group identity itself.

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