MOROCCO'S SPELL

FOR THE NEW ISLAMIC GALLERIES AT THE METROPOLITAN MUSEUM OF ART, ACHVA BENZINBERG STEIN, FASLA, BROUGHT A TRADITIONAL MOROCCAN COURTYARD INDOORS—AND DOWN TO SCALE—WITH 1,000 DRAWINGS AND THE HELP OF SOME VERY SKILLED HANDS.

BY JULIE LASKY / PHOTOGRAPHY BY MICHAEL MORAN

PREVIOUS SPREAD
A sunburst detail enlivens a carved cedar wood door displayed in the Patti Cadby Birch Court.

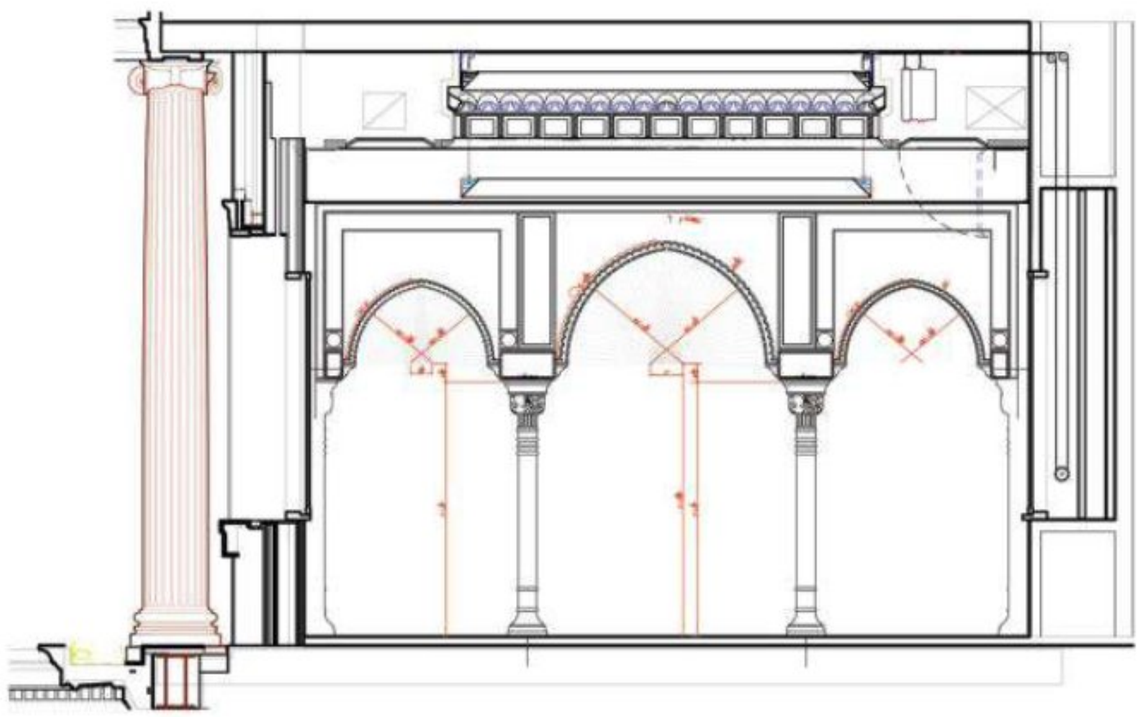
THIS SPREAD
The court is in a gallery devoted to 13th to 16th century Iran and Central Asia.

HERE ARE MANY PLACES to stop and wonder among the Metropolitan Museum's newly reinstalled collection of Islamic art. The wing officially called the New Galleries for the Art of the Arab Lands, Turkey, Iran, Central Asia, and Later South Asia offers polished ceramics and jeweled armor, lush carpets and hammered brass, viny calligraphy and miniature landscapes.

One place, however, furnishes an unparalleled opportunity to stop and rest. It's the Patti Cadby Birch Court, also known as the Moroccan Court: a 21-by-23-foot interior space that invokes the courtyards of medieval North Africa and Spain.

Here visitors are invited to sit on benches, surrounded by walls adorned with mosaic tiles and intricately carved plaster. A low marble fountain burbles an aqueous concerto. Light flows evenly from a decorative ceiling. If one feels transported seven centuries back to the southern Iberian Peninsula, or across the Straits of Gibraltar to the Maghreb, it is thanks to the legerdemain of an art historian, museum curator, and landscape architect who began two and half years ago with nothing but a concrete floor. (The architect was Garry Leonard of Kevin Roche John Dinkeloo and Associates.)

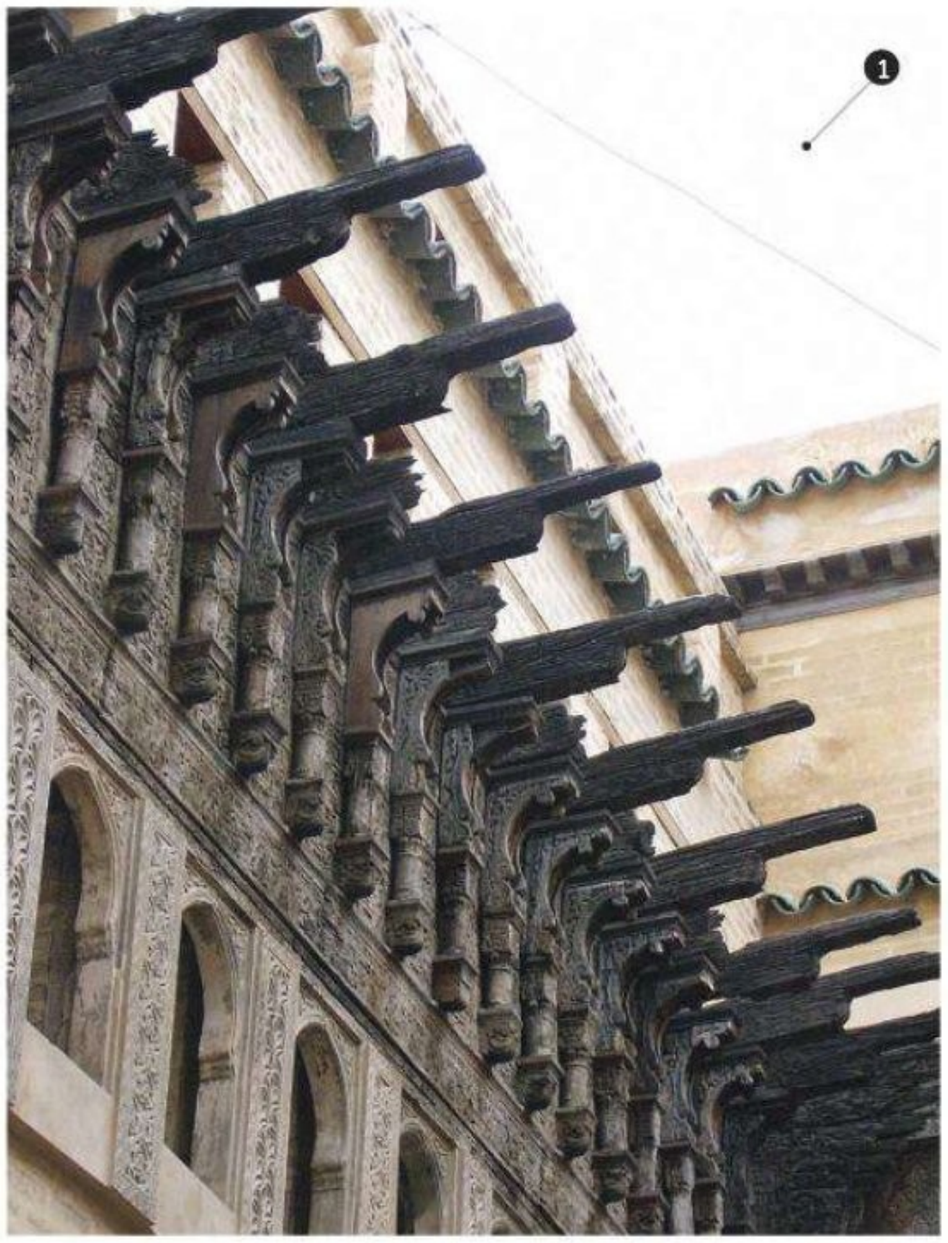
ARCHWAYS
Working from Stein's drawings (right), artisans from Fez carved the archway's filigreed plaster on site.

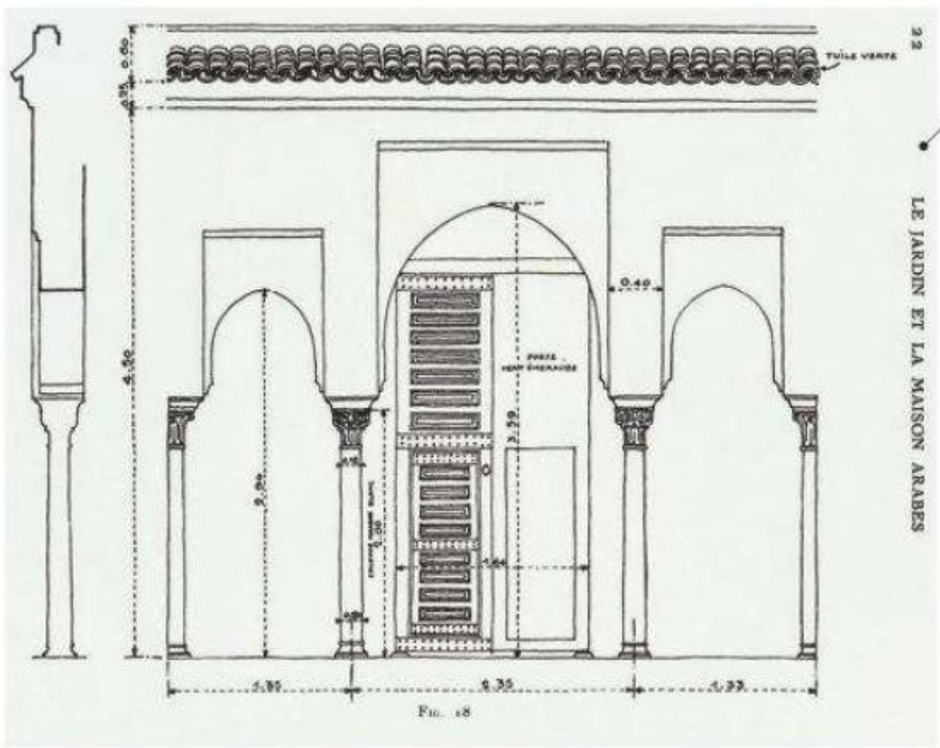


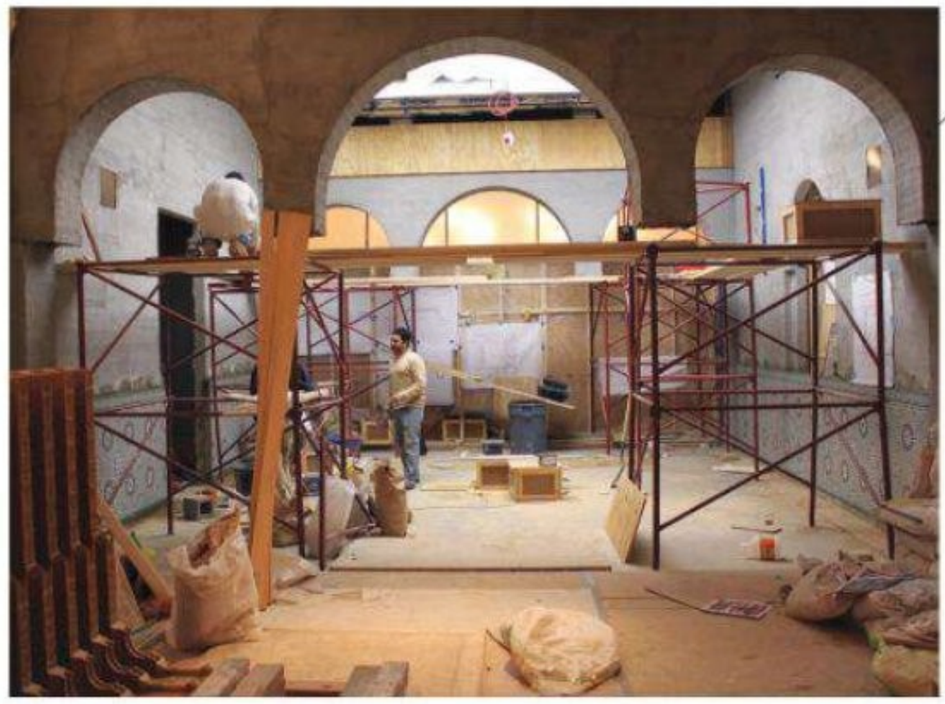
The Moroccan Court is among the rare Met installations to have been built from the ground up. Its only vintage elements are four Nasrid Period (1232–1492) Spanish columns that demarcate the area from neighboring galleries. The rest of the décor—mosaics in sea blues and greens, plaster chiseled into filigrees so delicate they look as if they could shatter with a ferocious glance, Atlas cedar carved into lattices or decorated with zoological and botanical motifs—were produced by contemporary artisans from Fez, Morocco. Members and employees of the Naji family spent six months at the museum carving stucco and configuring 70 individual mosaic tile shapes into interlacing eight-point stars. "The heart leaps at the sheer joie de vivre of it," wrote the historian Peter Brown in the *New York Review of Books*. "It is a delicious condensation of the insistent beauty that has pressed in around us throughout our journey [through the wing]."

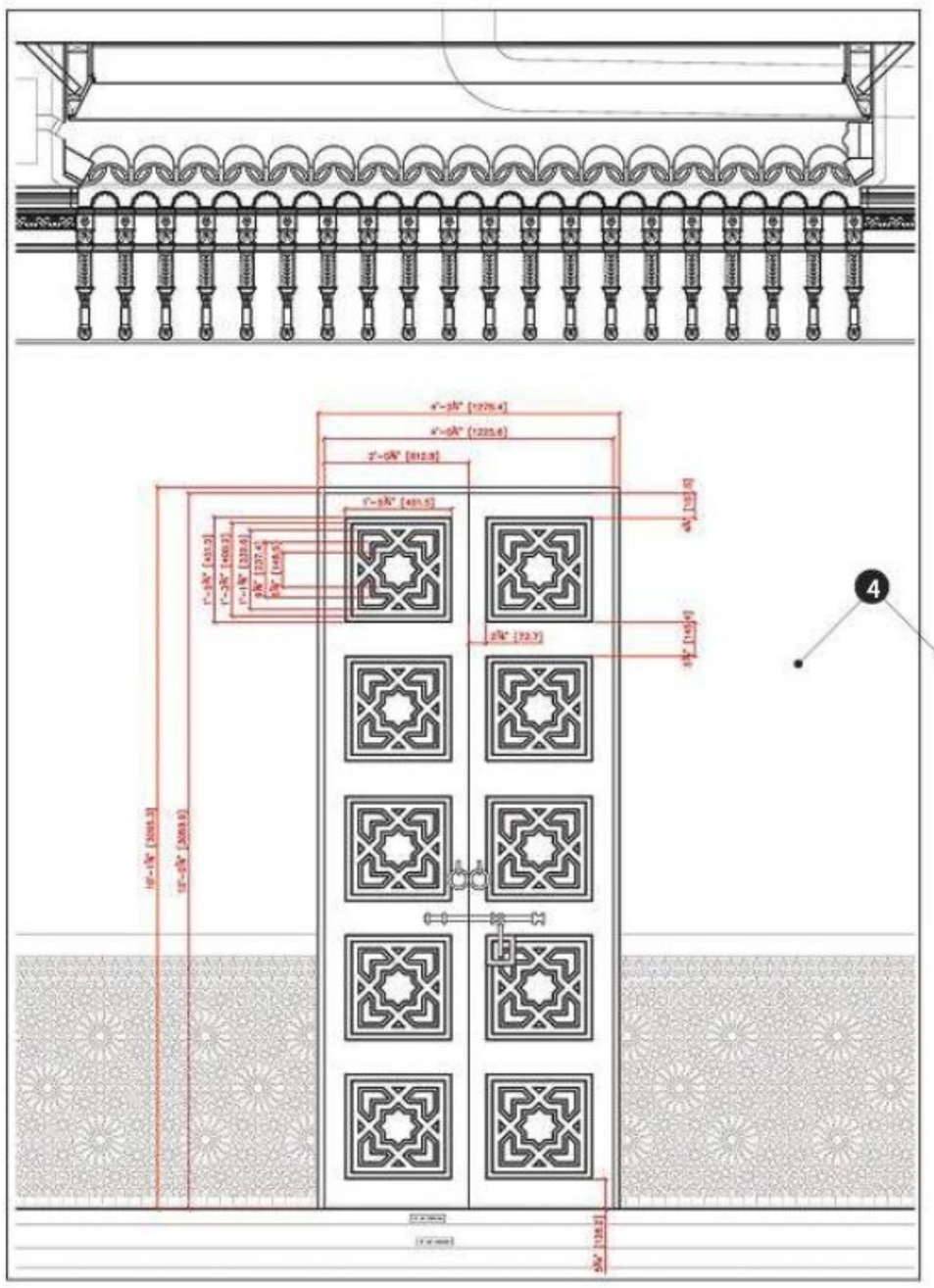
Condensation is the word. The triumph of the Moroccan Court lies not merely in conveying authenticity through the labors of modern artisans practicing thousand-year-old skills but also in creating the feeling of a generously scaled, skylighted space in a confined museum interior.

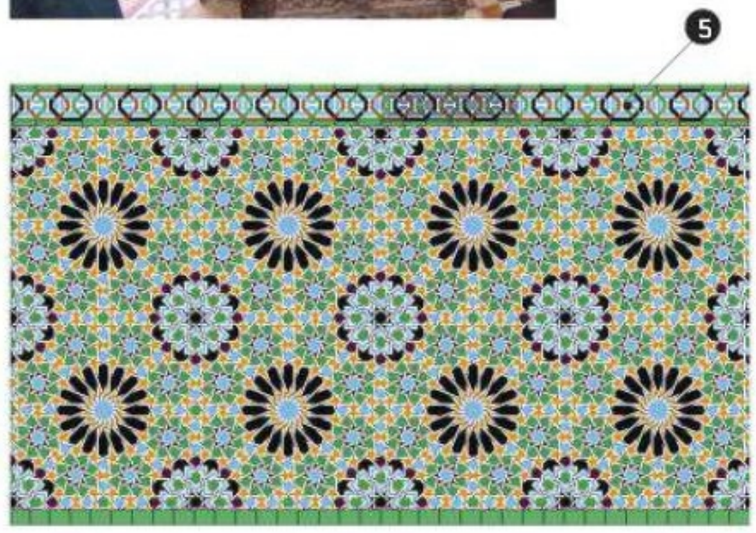
The gallery is a veritable doll's version of the medieval courtyards in Fez and Granada, Spain, that inspired it, says Achva Benzinberg Stein, FASLA, author of the book *Morocco: Courtyards and Gardens* and the landscape architect on the project team. Stein designed the room's artifacts and patterns, but had she simply shrunk proportions to fit the new environment, details of tile, plaster, and wood would have been lost. "You can't re-create these intricate patterns, and so they had to be redesigned," she says. Working with Navina Haidar, a curator in the Met's Islamic Department, and Nadia Erzini, a historian at the Museum of Islamic Life in Tétouan, Morocco, Stein painstakingly translated objects and motifs from scale to scale. In the end she produced more than 1,000 drawings.











OPPOSITE
The archway's Nasrid-era (1232–1492) columns are the only vintage elements in the court.

1 The roof structure of Bou Inania Madrasa in Fez, above an early drawing [4] derived from it.

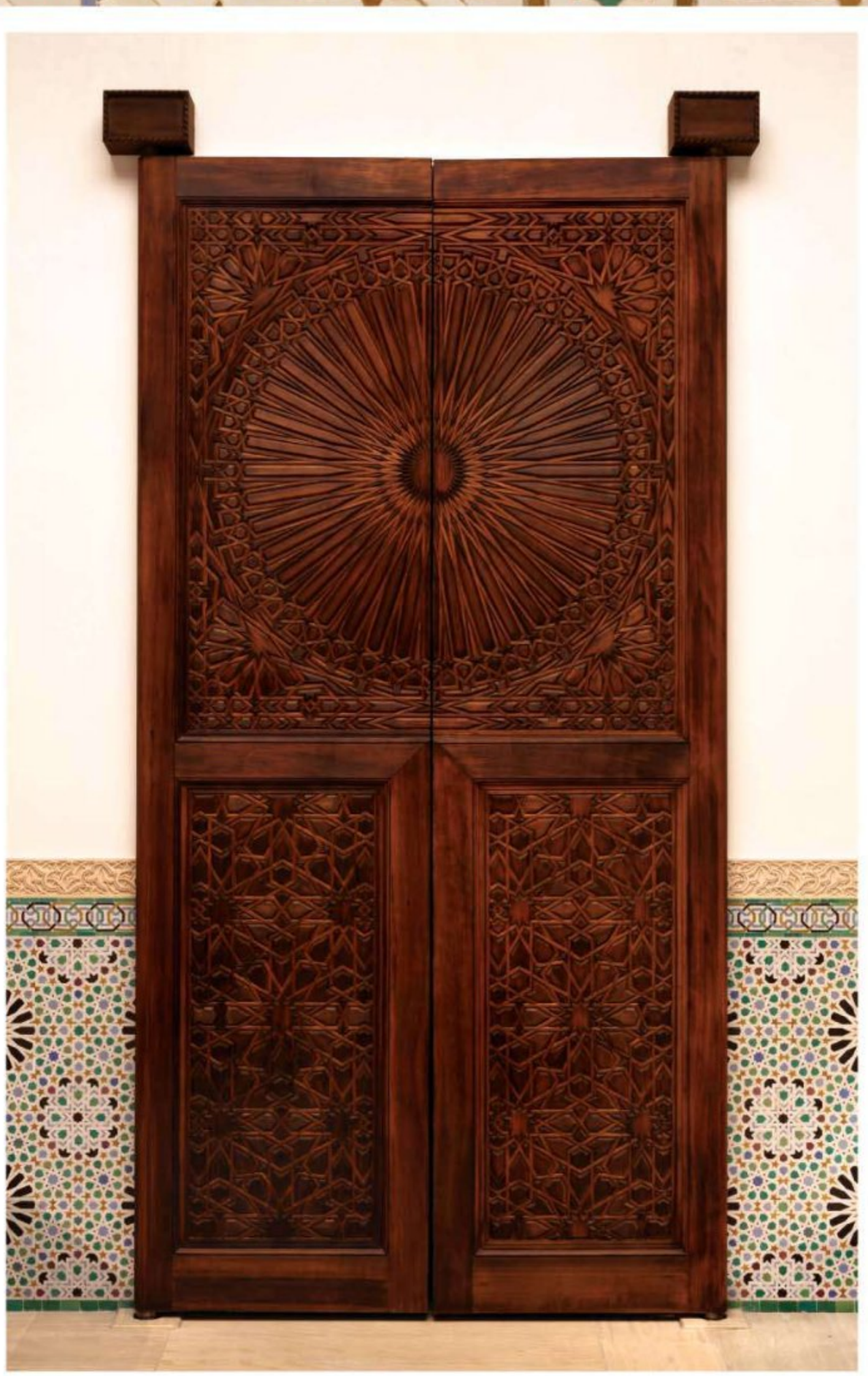
2 A drawing of a carved door from a 1928 French book on Moroccan houses.

3 Constructing the Moroccan Court.

4 A drawing of the carved door, this one based on a model that Stein (shown measuring it) found in Fez.

5 The final design of the wall mosaic.

MOSAIC
The hand-cut ceramic tile mosaic that wraps around the court was adapted from a wall at the Alhambra in Granada, Spain. Like the carved door (opposite), its pattern was painstakingly condensed to fit the room's small dimensions.



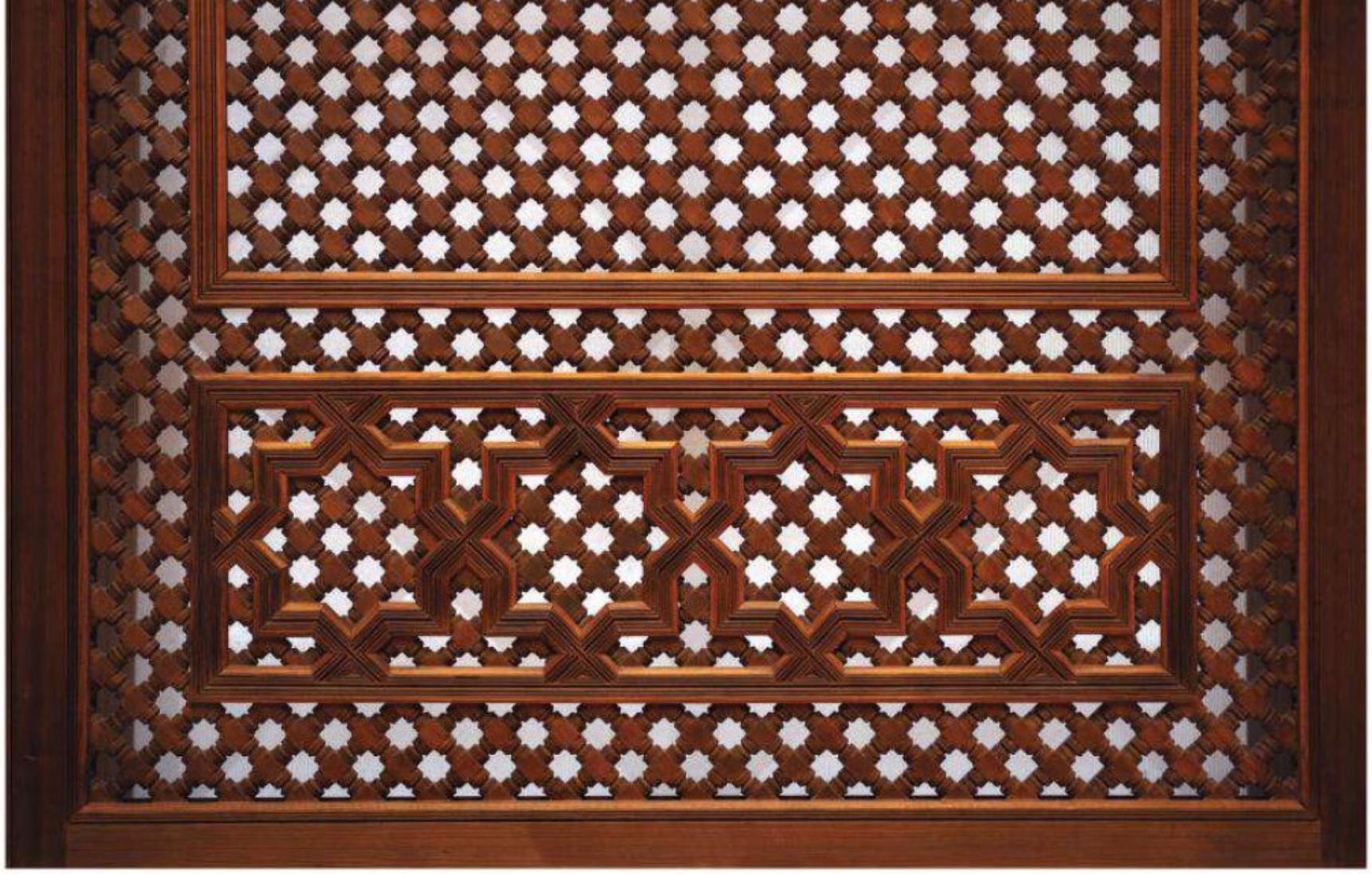
An effusive Israeli-born woman dressed in metropolitan black, Stein gestures toward the project's hot spots from a bench in the Moroccan Court. (She designed it based on an antique Moroccan wedding chair.) "The ceiling should be much, much higher," she insists, thinking of actual courtyards with their sky views and breezes. Instead the illusion of height and openness is created with a ceiling panel lighted by invisible LEDs. The glowing rectangle recedes behind an edging of green ceramic roof tiles and a layer of carved wooden brackets, promoting a sense of depth.

Stein turns. The decorative wooden door behind her is almost a third the size of its 22-foot-high inspiration—a Moroccan artifact that had been on display in a Kuwaiti museum when it was destroyed by fire in the first Gulf War. All that remained was a photo. Stein adapted the carved pattern, which features a large sunburst spreading over its two panels.

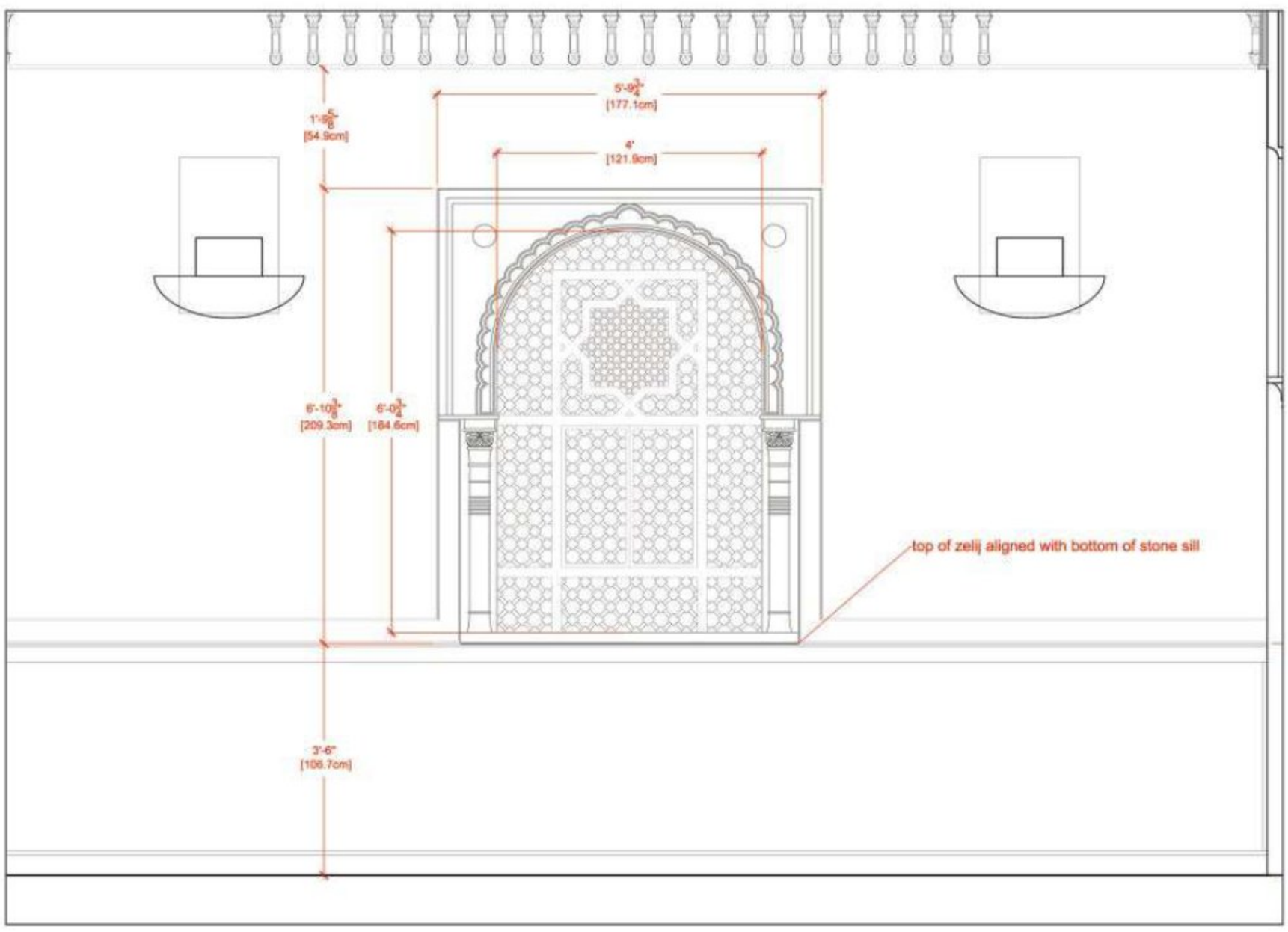
Across the room, a latticed, Byzantine-arched window screen displays four outlines of stars at its base. "There should have been three stars, not four," Stein says. "I added one for proportion."

She rotates again. "You wouldn't believe how long it took and how many people," she says of the mosaic wrapping the room—a hypnotic frieze of interwoven stars within stars borrowed from the Alhambra. Stein repeatedly edited the design in sketches that she passed off to CAD-operating assistants. Erzini, the historian, who could spot an accurate rendition but had trouble explaining what made it so, rejected effort after effort.

Stein pauses in her litany. An art history professor surrounded by students is peering at the illuminated ceiling panel above the marble fountain and commenting on slanted roofs in Moroccan courtyards, the better to funnel rainwater. Stein is quietly outraged. "They did that in Rome, not in Morocco," she says. "There is no rainwater to collect. The interior courtyard



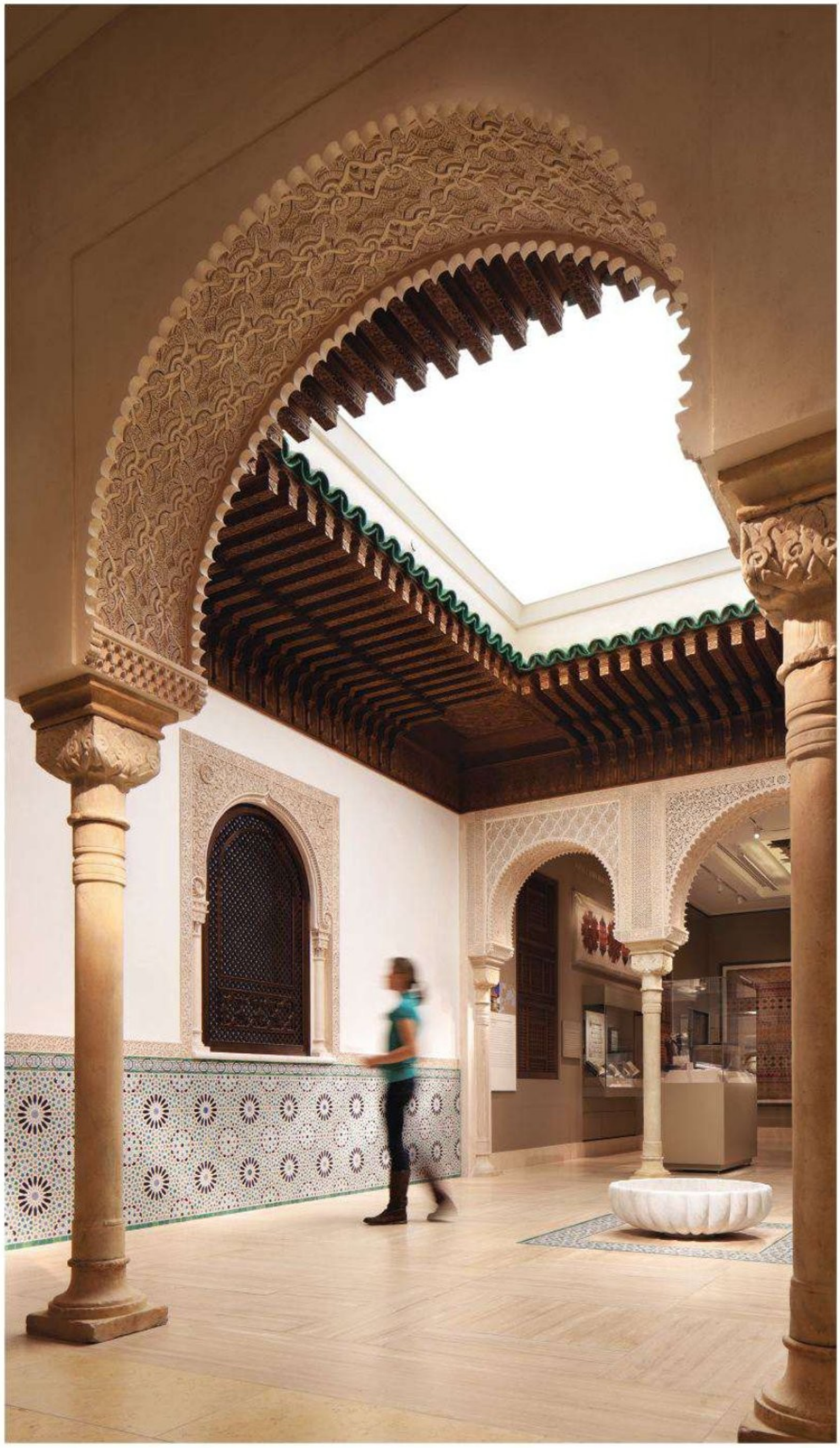
THE INTRICACY OF THE PATTERNS FROM THE ORIGINAL MEDIEVAL COURTYARDS MADE IT IMPOSSIBLE TO SIMPLY SCALE THEM DOWN; STEIN HAD TO RE-CREATE THEM SO THE DETAILS WEREN'T LOST.

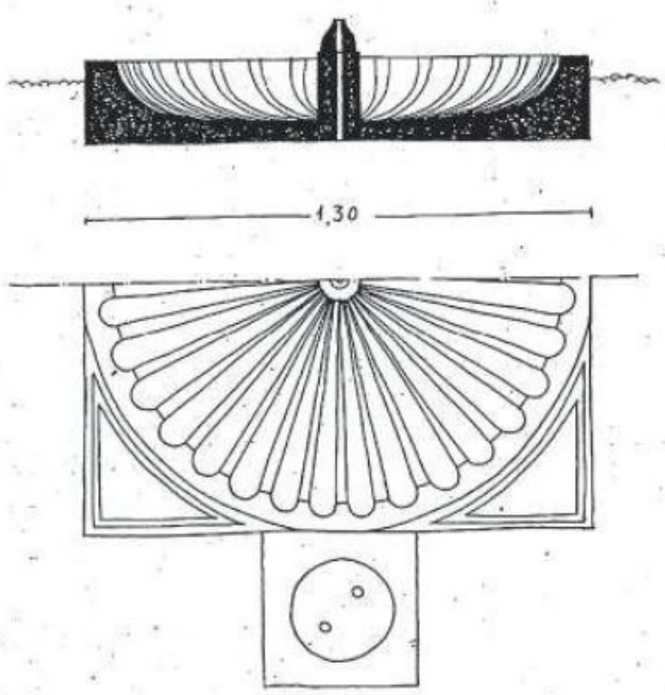


OPPOSITE
The plasterwork was influenced by two 16th-century buildings in Marrakech: a mausoleum for members of the Saadi Dynasty and the Ben Youssef Madrasa.

TOP
A hand-carved window screen (mashrabiya) echoes the court's dominant eight-point star motif.

BOTTOM
One of Stein's many discarded sketches reveals her effort to harmonize the window screen with the room's proportions.





in the desert is not for water so much as for ventilation. Especially in a mosque, this fountain would be for ablution. The sound of water also has a calming effect. "

She has no intention of setting the teacher straight, however, not if it means embarrassing her in front of her class. ("Students are smart enough," she says later. "Sooner or later someone will say something about it.") Stein is herself an academician—the founding director of the graduate program in landscape architecture at the Spitzer School of Architecture at the City College of New York, where she also teaches urban design. Accustomed to working on large community projects (she introduced urban farming to Los Angeles's Watts neighborhood in the early 1990s, when "organic" most frequently modified "chemistry"), she has enjoyed fashioning a little cultural jewel with a generous budget. (Renovating the entire suite of galleries reportedly cost $50 million.)

From her undergraduate years at Berkeley in the late 1960s, where she studied with a stellar landscape architecture faculty led by Garrett Eckbo, Stein says she has been "committed to the course of learning about culture and about how to heal land and work with land." She points out that her name, Achva, is Hebrew for "brotherhood" and "peace." "My father gave it to me with the great hope that it will become reality," she says. "It hasn't. But it should and will."

In the interim, the Moroccan Court will be the calm center of a project to remind the world of the cultural splendors of Islam. ●

JULIE LASKY IS A NEW YORK-BASED WRITER AND EDITOR WHO SPECIALIZES IN DESIGN AND ARCHITECTURE.

OPPOSITE
A marble fountain, whose design was influenced by old Spanish manuscripts, sits below a light well illuminated by LEDs.

ABOVE
Carved wooden ceiling ornamentation features botanical and zoological motifs surrounding an eight-point star.

Project Credits

CLIENT THE METROPOLITAN MUSEUM OF ART, NEW YORK CITY. **FUNDING** PATTI AND EVERETT B. BIRCH FOUNDATION, WILMINGTON, DELAWARE. **ARTISANS AND CONSTRUCTION** ADIL NAJI, MUHAMMAD NAJI, AND HICHAM NAJI OF FEZ, MOROCCO, AND THE CRAFTSMEN OF THE NAJI FAMILY COMPANIES, MORESQUE AND ARABESQUE. **HISTORICAL CONSULTANT** NADIA ERZINI, CURATOR OF THE MUSEUM OF ISLAMIC LIFE AT THE LUQASH MADRASA IN TÉTOUAN, MOROCCO. **DESIGNER** ACHVA BENZINBERG STEIN, FASLA, PROFESSOR, GRADUATE PROGRAM IN LANDSCAPE ARCHITECTURE AT THE SPITZER SCHOOL OF ARCHITECTURE, CITY COLLEGE OF NEW YORK. **ARCHITECT** KEVIN ROCHE JOHN DINKELOO AND ASSOCIATES, HAMDEN, CONNECTICUT (GARRY LEONARD).

THE SPACE WAS A CONCRETE STORAGE ROOM BEFORE ITS UTTER TRANSFORMATION.