Since the turn of the twentieth century, viceregal ceramics have been understood as the quintessential ‘Moorish’ medium, since scholarship presumes a certain purity in the design, typology, and taste for colonial ceramics, which links them directly to the arts of al-Andalus. Nevertheless, they constitute a problematic paragon of Mudéjarismo in the Americas. The traditional approach to the study of viceregal ceramics pays little attention to issues of cultural transformation and the development of Iberian and colonial identities and tastes. Scholarship to date has produced a solid tradition of connoisseurship, but has not developed an understanding of the role of ceramics as socio-cultural signifiers in a complex colonial setting. The conventional approach has not placed ceramic wares in the context of viceregal conquest culture, or within wider patterns of conspicuous consumption. This article, therefore, uses the subject of sixteenth-century viceregal ceramics as a heuristic device for cultural analysis.

It is a surprising fact that sixteenth-century colonial ceramics were rarely included in the inventories of well-appointed homes. Rather, the historical documentation reveals a discrepancy between the apparent scarcity of ceramics recorded in private settings, while confirming their presence in the commercial arena. On the other hand, silver services decorated with Renaissance motifs and imported from Europe were routinely mentioned, described, weighed and measured. Towards the end of the sixteenth century, Chinese porcelains also appear in greater numbers than earthenwares, although less frequently than silver pieces. The preference for the latest European and East Asian styles in decorative objects stands against commonly-held notions of early colonial taste, which remain tied to a monolithic paradigm of late medieval aesthetics.

1 ‘Mudéjar’/‘Mudejarismo’ refer to the influence of Andalusi aesthetics upon the arts of Christian Spain, and the artistic styles that were created as a result.
The prominent status of silverware in the inventories implies a discrepancy between modern academic interpretation and the reality of viceregal ceramic consumption during the sixteenth century, as outlined in the archival records. This inconsistency also highlights the artificiality of a Mudéjar category of viceregal consumption that compels an interrogation of the role of Mudejarismo in the development of Iberian identities. An in-depth examination is particularly important in the case of viceregal ceramics since earthenwares identified as Mudéjar since the nineteenth century are not found in the historical documentation.

Generalized affirmations of the continued existence of Mudéjar wares in New Spain speak of taste as a cultural survival, without addressing aesthetic choice as a meaningful social practice. By repeating the tenets of earlier writers on the subject of viceregal ceramics, recent studies have yet to take the subject of Mudejarismo out of a late medieval Iberian construction and into the wider context of European commodities trade, and the reality of Morisco history in the sixteenth century.

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3 The extreme example of this approach is the content of the exhibition catalogue Maiolica Olé. Though published in 2001, Florence Lister states, “the original draft of this manuscript was prepared in 1975–76. Inasmuch as little archaeological or historical research has been accomplished since then, other than our own work, and few relevant specimens have been added to this collection, we feel the date and observations presented in this publication remain current”. While the repetitive nature of recent publications on the subject of viceregal ceramics make her assertion partly true, her treatment of Iberian ceramics and history, especially of the Mudéjar and Morisco periods, belies the author’s unawareness of important archaeological, not to mention documentary and literary, contributions of the past two decades. Lister reiterated that ”during the fifteenth century Christian potteries turned out a wide range of domestic wares…When covered with a thin, tin-opacified glaze and if decorated at all, they bore a band of debased cu [sic] inscriptions…The only special sort of pottery produced by non-Muslims during this period was some cuerda seca or cuenca tiles and plates”. Yet the archaeological and documentary work of François Amigues, for instance, indicates that between the years 1350 and 1429, the very active Valencian pottery workshops saw a marked increase of Christian potters. Indeed, by the mid-fifteenth century, the distribution and commercialization of Valencian pieces rested almost entirely in the hands of Christian merchants. There is no reason to believe that this trend was exclusive to the Aragonese realm. From a traditional museological perspective, Balbina Martínez Caviró also has expressed her belief in the meaningful participation of Christian potters in the production of Mudéjar ceramics. See François Amigues, “Potiers mudéjares et chrétiens de la région de Valence”, Archéologie Islamique 3 (1992), pp. 129–167; Robin Farwell Gavin and Florence Lister, Maiolica Olé: Spanish and Mexican Decorative Traditions Featuring the Collection of the International Folk Art Museum (Santa Fé: International Folk