San Jose State University

From the SelectedWorks of Jo Farb Hernandez

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“Francisco del Río Cuenca.”

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Despite great beauty, a long and illustrious cultural history where for centuries three of the world's great religions intertwined, and a palpably fierce sense of pride that resonates throughout the Iberian Peninsula, Andalucia is one of the poorest regions of Spain. Century after century, its citizens were demeaned as innocent pawns in high-level deals played out by government administrators, clerics, or merchants who manifested complete disregard for the long-term economic or cultural sustainability of these practices. Families watched helplessly as their lands were appropriated by monarchs Fernando and Isabel in the fifteenth century to pay off nobles who had helped finance the re-conquest of the Peninsula, ending the 800 year reign of the Muslim caliphates.
They waited anxiously as their men sailed on Spain’s overseas expansionist mercantile adventures but then saw the riches of those voyages diverted from their homelands to service Hapsburg wars in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries and line the pockets of the nobility. The people of this region also grieved as their sons were conscripted to fight for Franco’s Nationalists during the Spanish Civil War without regard to their political sympathies or domestic obligations. The general lack of regional industry and commerce caused over 1.5 million Andaluces to emigrate in order to find work during the ‘years of hunger’ of the post-Civil War and World War II decades; even today, unemployment is still higher in this region than in any other part of Spain.

It is therefore not surprising that within Andalucia people adopted a strategy of adapting what was available to address what was needed. Sometimes materials were recycled in unusual ways, taking on new functions and meanings; although such materials might include discards or natural substances free for the taking, the methods and manners of this usage were typically clever and even ingenious, as well as often aesthetically striking. One unusual, but surprisingly extensive style of ornamentation, consists of covering building façades with seashells. The majority of such architectural embellishments are found near marine environments where a variety of shells are available, usually solely from the effort of gathering them from the beaches. Perhaps in most cases the use of shells by a compulsive creator to adorn a building or a garden may be interpreted as different only in degree from some fairly typical decorative objects – shell-covered picture frames or mirrors, shell figurines, shell-covered boxes, etc. – that are found in seaside towns all over the world.

In rare cases, however, such ornamentation does go far beyond the ‘typical’. It is particularly intriguing if the site is located far from the sea, and furthermore, as in the case of Francisco del Río Cuenca’s (fig. 1) Casa de las Conchas – the Shell House – if the shells cover not only the façade, but the garden patios, including not only the walls but the floors, the ceiling, the stairs, the flowerpots, and even the trees. This small property in southern Spain, located over 120 miles from the sea, now visually vibrates with a surface casing of some 116 million shells from all over the world.

Francisco, known by his family and friends as Paco, was one of six children born to Rodrigo del Río and his wife, subsistence farmers living in Algarrarin, a small village slightly southwest of Montoro, to which Francisco later moved and where he built his masterpiece. The family was so poor that all six children shared the same double bed as they were growing up; Francisco – quite small in stature, no doubt due at least in part to the nutritional privations of that time – and his sister shared space at the foot of the mattress. Although he attended a few years of school at a local convent, he never really learned to read or write, as the schools closed down with the onset of the Civil War. As Franco’s Nationalists moved up from Córdoba, first massing on the banks of the river just opposite from where, years later, del Río was to build his wondrous Casa, and then bursting across the waterway to claim the entire southern expanse of Spain up to Madrid, they forced the families to toil for them, appropriating the meager products of their farms and drafting even younger
children to help the war effort however they could. The families stayed silent and attended to their tasks, although this area had been known as the la parte roja (the red part): supporters of the left-leaning Republicans. More than seventy years later del Río remembered that Franco promised to pay them for their labors, but he never did.

After all of the years of war came the 'years of hunger'. Franco's policies of closing Spain's borders to maintain an illusion of cultural purity and economic self-sufficiency were exacerbated by the United Nations-led trade boycott and further aggravated by severe cycles of drought and flooding that affected agricultural production at even the most macro level. Del Río, by then living in Montoro, located approximately 25 miles northeast of Córdoba, the provincial capital, relied on his abundant knowledge of local plants to help provide food for his family, and worked a variety of low-paying jobs, both here and abroad, in his attempt to earn money and provide for his family; these positions included working in a candy factory in Germany and as a cook for a family in Ibiza.

Many of Montoro's houses had been damaged or destroyed during the battles and families huddled together, sharing what little they had in spaces that were much too small. Del Río was desperate to have a separate living space for his young family — his wife María Lara Rodríguez and three daughters Francisca, Manuela, and Ana María — and he became interested in a piece of property that had been bombed out during the war, located down the street from where he was living in his sister's house. This was in the oldest part of town, on the oldest street in Montoro. Constructed in the late 1500s or early 1600s, the northern boundary of the property was delineated by the ancient fortification wall of the city, overlooking the banks of the Guadalquivir River. (A small section of the ruins of that wall remain today.)
There had originally been two homes in this space; one collapsed before the Civil War, and the family who owned the other, a carpenter and his wife and son, had defaulted on three years of taxes. After the couple died, the son emigrated to look for work, leaving the second house to slowly deteriorate as well. As the remains of the buildings reverted to the municipality in lieu of payment of back taxes, the mayor approved the removal of the large stones for use in rebuilding the local Plaza de Toros (bull ring),\(^5\) leaving little on the land except rubble. So in 1959 del Río scraped together 13,400 pesetas (the equivalent of 80.50 euros) to make an offer to purchase the property, with an additional 13,400 pesetas needed to file the paperwork. He decided not to seek the required building permits, because even in those days he expected that it would take a minimum of four months to process, and his living situation was already too precarious. And so he began to build his new home, helped only by a single young assistant and occasionally by his father, as he could spare the time. During construction, del Río and his five-member family continued to live in one room of his sister’s house nearby, squeezed in and sharing the common spaces with eight others.

At the time he began building the house, there was no running water anywhere in the village; each family was allowed a single cántaro\(^6\) of water (the rough equivalent of sixteen litres) each day from the village fountain, which had to serve for all of their cooking, drinking, and washing needs. In order to supplement this meager ration, each morning María would get up at 5 a.m. to go down to the river—a rather steep climb—in order to collect enough water so that del Río and his laborer-helper could mix the mortar necessary for that day’s construction. The rocks for the walls, too, as well as sand for the mortar, came from the river, as del Río carried them up by hand, day after day. He paid for the laborer and for those building materials that he could not scavenge—cement and iron crossbeams, bricks, and windows, some of which he had to purchase in Córdoba—thanks to a 13,000 peseta loan (the equivalent of 78 euros) from his mother. The simple two-story house of 3262 square feet\(^7\) has three small rooms on the ground floor of the main part of the house, comprised of a family room to the left of the central small hallway and a small bedroom and kitchen to the right. Upstairs are four additional rooms.

In 1957, at the very beginning of his work on the home site, before much of anything had actually been built, a truck loaded with scallop shells had an accident.
near town, turning over and discharging its load in the gutter (fig. 2). Thinking he would take advantage of the shells in some way, del Río brought some fifty sacks of shells back to Montoro, carrying the big bags on his small motorcycle as he drove back and forth to the accident site. And when it came to finishing the façade of the house, he whitewashed the walls at first, in tune with local custom, but he balked at the thought of doing this as a yearly chore. He thought he could save himself the drudgery by using the collected shells to adorn the exterior. It wasn’t less work, he conceded later, but it was work that only had to be done once. So he took a scraper and scratched off the white surface treatment that he had laid on the previous year. Mixing a cement and sand mortar with a small shovel (later he used pegolan, a white cement with a glue included in the mixture, popular because it promotes rapidity of drying and hardening), he raked the wall surface so that the mixture would adhere, applying it with a small trowel. He then filled a bucket with shells and started layering them on the walls, working quickly to take advantage of the small batches of wet mortar.

Putting the shells on, I would say that I started doing it just because I wanted to, and to not have to paint or whitewash the walls. And, of course, to see if I could actually cover the walls with shells.... Because painting you have to do once a year. But the shells last one’s whole life. And I entertained myself, and I liked to work, and it all turned out well.

He would work in his fields during the day, but in the evening or when it would rain and he could not work outside (fig. 3), he would come inside and add shells to the walls. At night, I worked with the electric lights, and from the light from the street, and by the light of the moon. He completed the upper floor of the street-front façade in six days of thirteen to fourteen hours each. After the shells were set, he used a non-glossy varnish to help seal them and to help reduce the loss of color that would naturally occur due to their long-term exposure to sun and rain.

Moving on from the street-front façade, he continued with the small interior hallway that served as a direct central connection from the street to the areas behind the house (fig. 4). He worked on the ornamentation as much as he could during the first twenty-four years, while also preparing, seeding, weeding, and harvesting from his fields and handling any needed additions and changes to the main body.

![Figure 4. Shell House interior](image)
of the house, including modifying a sitting room upstairs in order to make another bedroom. As he worked, he realized that the shells not only helped to preserve the wall surfaces, but with the pockets of air that they enclosed, they served as insulation, reducing both heat and cold from penetrating the outside walls. In fact, he wanted to put shells on an interior wall on the second story as well – an area that would be off-limits to the public – because he had found them to be such good insulators. Following his retirement from farming, he began to work more or less full time on the ornamentation of the exterior patios and walls.12

FIGURE 5. One of three patio areas

When he first began using the shells, María was extremely upset. She worried that people would laugh at them for having a house covered in shells and would think that her husband was crazy. One day they argued so strenuously that he took his mortar and just threw it away, outside on the unused land behind the house, and decided that he would work no further.13 That day they ate their main mid-day meal together in silence. But, by the next day, he reconsidered and decided that he would start again; when she questioned him, he told her that he would continue to work and that she could do what she wanted, but this was something he was going to do. He did defer to her desire to leave most of the interior rooms and furniture uncovered by shells, however, as he concurred that they could be easily broken. As he persisted through the years, finishing the façade, the hallway, and half of the first outdoor patio immediately to the rear of the house, tourists began to visit, most drawn to the village for Easter Week.14 Their positive reactions helped to validate his labors and assuage her concern about public response; in later years she had not only resigned herself to the ornamentation of the house, but was happy about it, not only for the pride she
had learned to take in her husband’s work, he said, but because she did not even have to clean the walls: the rain took care of that for her.

Although he had done drawings as a child in school, del Rio never sketched out what he was going to create on the Casa de las Conchas. Neither did he use a level: ‘esto es todo a ojo (everything is all done by eye),’ he said. ‘You can see... I look a little to one side and then to the other, and I fix it a bit if I need to, and that’s how it stays.’ He taught himself carpentry at the age of fifteen or sixteen, carving little flowers, boats, trains, festival objects, and more, using a variety of woods, including the very hard olive. (He has also crafted other objects such as cut and folded paper frames, something he learned while in the military, although he described this as ‘prison’ work.) The tools he used, for the most part, were those that he was familiar with from working in the fields: a pick, an adze, trowels, shovels, scrapers, and buckets; mostly tools that he would have had on hand from working in the garden.

Del Rio continued to elaborate the surfaces of his home, soon pushing beyond the footprint of the house itself to create a series of three interconnecting patios, each of different dimensions, each eked out one by one from the barren terrain behind his house all the way to the property line, with every surface ornamented, and most of these ornamented surfaces themselves covered in shells (fig. 5). The street-front façade and hallway leading from the front door directly to the back patios are painstakingly encased in thousands of scallop shells, with additional ornamentation around the window and door openings, and, in the case of the hallway, a spare floral design on the ceiling. Both are somewhat reminiscent of oriental-style carpets, thanks to the intricacies of the motifs and the interlocking designs. But, it is not until one reaches the exterior patios that del Rio’s true horror vacui kicks in, with layers upon layers of embellishment that form an incrustation of movement and texture everywhere one looks.

The first patio behind the house, which is partially covered by an overhang at the level of the second floor, is particularly rich in the displays of numerous found objects and mementos, affixed to the walls and ceilings as well as placed on shelves, tables, and around a small well and pond (fig. 6). All three patios have become fantasies of texture and visual complexity, enhanced in some areas with the addition of a deep, rusty red pigment to color the cement, in order to contrast the background with the light colors of the shells. With the exception of the floors, which are ornamented in

Figure 6. Adorned walls of patio
an abstractly-floral *trencadís* pattern from broken ceramic shards recycled from the
construction of his kitchen and bathroom, every other surface is covered with shells,
and, at times, with more than one layer of shells or other adornments. These additional
materials might include ceramic plates and tiles, deer antlers, bull skulls and
horns, religious figures and imagery, flowerpots, tools, gourds, stones,
plastic toys, starfish, and more. Many
of these were found objects, but some
were created especially for the walls:
either by admirers, such as a portrait
of the creator in ceramic tile (signed by
the artist A. Rivas) or a poem written
out in flowery cursive writing; 16 or
those that he created himself, like the
butterflies, snails, and even a bull’s
head modeled in pegolan. Although he
had never sculpted before, the first time he tried it, he said it turned out well, so he
continued to create little figures and ornaments for his walls. Yet despite the variety
of affixed objects and the density of their placement, the overall emphasis remained
on the shells themselves even as they came to serve, in some areas, as an ornamental
substructure to the multiplicity of eclectic materials uppermost on the façade. He
spoke lovingly about the shapes and colors of the shells, and it is clear from his efforts
that his meticulous craftsmanship paralleled his fierce and almost baroque aesthetic.

Notable, too, are the many inscriptions on walls, floors, and ceilings that express
his pride in his creation and his appreciation of his visitors. Although other artists’
environments may include didactic axioms, moral exhortations, or philosophical
maxims, del Rio’s written messages were chosen solely to confirm and accentuate
his authorship and the sense of place of the site. His name, the name of his town,
and the year he began the ornamentation are found repetitively in all areas of the
site, as are the names of his daughters and their families, and those of special visitors
who had brought him shells or provided publicity for his efforts. He included the
names of the current Duke and Duchess of Montoro, another means to signify and
highlight both his pride and his connection to his home ground.17 And although the
inscriptions are relatively numerous, underscoring his earnest efforts to record and
communicate his creations and his connections, some of them ratio-
particularly
those gracing ceiling areas – must be simultaneously read from all four sides,
from right and left and both directly and as the mirror image, as the letters are
haphazardly oriented, although still carefully crafted and set. He was unapologetic
about his near illiteracy or about his need to seek help with writing to ph ysically
memorialize his thoughts. One inscription on a patio wall proudly proclaims, with
several spelling mistakes reflecting the Andaluz dialect, that ‘esta casa a sido construída
por un canpesino (this house was constructed by one who works in the fields)’ (fig. 7).
He celebrated and honored not only his own work with this notation but, by extension,
the entire working class: Look what peasants and fieldworkers are capable of, without
education, without money, and without a patron, his inscription proclaims.
As Montoro is so close to Córdoba, which served from the eighth to the eleventh centuries as the caliphate capital from which the expansive Islamic lands of Spain were governed, it is not implausible to suggest that del Río would have been at least generally familiar with the forms of Islamic architecture that are common throughout Andalucia, reaching an impressive apogee in the provincial capital. Certain similarities may be thus postulated between the grand aesthetic of the Muslim Al-Andalus and the Casa de las Conchas, particularly in terms of the intensity and complexity of the decorative surfaces. Beyond this, however, is the fact that although the modest front façade of the Casa, along Calle Criado, was the first surface that del Río ornamented with shells, begun immediately following the termination of the actual house construction, the most elaborate adornments are found in the enclosed patio areas to the rear of the house. This mirrors the rather introverted form of the typical Islamic-style house in southern Spain, with greater concern not only for the creation of open interior spaces, but for the adornment of such interior elements as the façades of courtyard walls, rather than for the public face that is presented to the street.

The patio's small garden areas (fig. 8), including citrus and flowering trees and succulent and cactus plantings, (fig. 9) as well as larger tree forms whose (now dead)
trunk and branches are scaly with their shell encasing and perennial shell flowers, (fig. 10) are complemented by a variety of columns – most covered in shells, but some in flat rocks – supporting planters, statues, ceramic jugs, or found objects. They are anchored in the two rear patios by four prominent architectural structures with a variety of assorted doors, windows, and openings, which squeeze up against the lateral borders of the property. In the middle patio a four-level, chapel-type building with open upper stories and rather square in footprint, rises above a small enclosed room in which del Rio keeps assorted tools and materials. Pushed up towards the rear right side (looking away from the house and outward towards the river), the upper levels include images of the Virgin and the Crucifixion, and the uppermost level – at approximately twenty-nine feet high – is topped by a cross encased in shells. The shield of Epora – Montoro’s name during Roman times – decorates the lintel above the wooden ground floor door. This structure is paired on the left by a smaller three-level tower of relatively square rooms, each progressively smaller than the one below; it is topped with a purchased metal windmill and guarded by two saints placed as corner finials.

The rear of the third patio has a three-level building on the left side with a triangular footprint, whose top level remained unfinished during my visits; large locally produced earthenware storage containers were placed inside both semi-enclosed levels, as were assorted tools, tiles, and small plantings being nurtured within plastic Coke bottles that were repurposed to serve as tiny individual greenhouses. On the right is a tower comprised of a series of platforms set on rather spindly legs, ornamented with flowerpots and saints’ statues on the interior levels and topped by a windmill.
A small prefabricated sculpture of Don Quijote is affixed to the top platform, leaning out towards the garden, although it has been said that rather than an homage to La Mancha the windmill scene references the island of Ibiza, home of one of del Río's daughters, where similar windmills are also typical (fig. 11).

Elaborately sheathed walls and portals separate the patios, and sculptures of the cross as well as popularized images of Christ and the saints appear throughout. Del Río was not particularly pious, so the popular religious iconography scattered around the walls, within the architectural structures, and mounted on columns within the garden patios may be assessed as standard imagery common to an area where the last 700 plus years of socio-cultural history has been rooted deeply in Catholicism.

But, because shrines are never placed in the landscape for solely aesthetic reasons, these may be, in a very real sense, a perhaps subconscious effort to make these private spaces more communal — or at least more community-oriented — by utilising conventional images that need no explanation within an idiosyncratic space that pushes the boundaries of what is commonly understood as ‘normal’. This is particularly true given the integration of secular items alongside of the sacred figures, thus simultaneously enriching the worldly encounter of nonbelievers as well as providing succor for those drawn to a more spiritual experience.18

The fee to visit the house is one euro per person; del Río knew that it was muy poquito (very little), but he enjoyed being able to host families as well as individuals, and with this modest fee even large families were encouraged to visit (fig. 12). Although his initial stimulus for sheathing his home and gardens in shells may have been personal and functional — to eliminate the annual need to whitewash the house exterior — over time and after years of solitary labors, the site indubitably evolved into a destination whose very essence became entwined with the public, offering visitors the opportunity to enter and experience it personally. And, once entered, its complexity and intensity demand one’s complete attention and a desire to extend one’s personal link with its force; the family helps to accommodate that desire by selling a few post cards and having guests sign a registry. Some visitors have been so impressed with the site that they mailed del Río packages of shells after they returned home — some addressed simply ‘Casa de las Conchas, Montoro, Córdoba’ — and he returned the favor by lettering the names of the cities from which some of the shells came on the walls of the patio. With the money he earned from tourist visits, del Río and his wife were able to supplement the vegetables they still grew in their
small field, and also could buy cement and sand for his continuing labors as well as pay the young assistant that in later years helped him carry the heavy loads (although del Río stressed that even into his mid eighties he still could carry very heavy loads himself). In fact, he said, they bought everything with the money they earned from the tourists; everything, that is, except shells.

Although he never received any monetary support for his labors from the municipal or regional governments, there is at least some general sense that del Río’s labors could constitute a tourist attraction—particularly since several commentators have described it as the ‘seventh wonder of Córdoba’, that city of many wonders. The municipality has helped to publicize it with several street signs, and in 1996 del Río was named ‘Monteñero del Año’ (Montoro’s Citizen of the Year) in acknowledgment of ‘su labor y méritos realizados’ (realization of his meritorious labor). Strangely, therefore, there are but two sentences on the official village website that acknowledges the site’s presence (with an outdated count of the number of shells). Nevertheless, when del Río had arrived at the point that he had ‘almost’ finished covering every surface of his home and three backyard patios with shells, the municipality did permit him to appropriate a small piece of property directly behind the third patio, high above the banks of the Guadalquivir River, so that he could continue to work (fig. 13).

He lined the frontage on the river side with a rather formal series of slender shell-encased columns topped with planters or flowerpots (some themselves sheathed in shell); the floor is covered with an intricate abstract pattern of *trençadis* tiles.

Although del Río began his project with enthusiasm and gusto, an enthusiasm he maintained for over fifty years, as he gathered, washed, and glued in place over 116 million shells—evoking with this accounting the years of time spent and the appeal for visitors to adequately appreciate his efforts—he admitted that he never thought he would finish (fig. 14). But, by the end of December, 2009, it was ‘casi acabada’ (almost done),” he said, proudly and paternally, so that same month he and his wife put the Casa de las Conchas up for sale. It was becoming increasingly difficult for them to maintain it as they aged, particularly with his increasingly debilitating stomach problems.
Rather than set a value for the house, however, they were entertaining offers, in the hopes that a generous purchase price would allow them to move to a more secure and comfortable home with less work: the price is really 'incalculable,' he said, because 'it holds my heart and my soul, and that is difficult to value'.

He dreamt that perhaps the Casa might even be turned into a museum, so that visitors from all over the world could continue to enjoy the environment he created.

Up until his death during Semana Santa (Holy Week) in 2010 Francisco del Río Cuenca continued to work, adding shells and other adornments to those areas that 'todavía quedan vacíos' (still remain[ed] empty). Immediately thereafter, the municipal offices of Montoro, the provincial Diputación of Córdoba, and the Junta of Andalucía indicated that they recognized the value of the home and would do what they could to protect the property. However, as of the time of this writing nothing had yet been done to move towards that goal. In fact, the officials have been backpedaling, saying the acquisition of the Casa had never really been considered. So the family continues to try to sell the house to a private party, while in the meantime, one of Francisco’s grandsons has taken it upon himself to welcome visitors to the home and serve as guide.

As it became a pleasure as well as an obsession for Francisco del Río Cuenca to work, it also became clear that his work came to defy the norms that might otherwise have defined his life: of the socially-acceptable ways of surfacing one’s home; of the common assumptions about how a man spends the hours of his day; both while working
and in retirement; of the general distrust of strangers held in small communities such that they are rarely spoken to, let alone invited into one's home; of the notion that it is necessary to design and plan before building, and follow rules while doing so, rather than improvising based on the materials at hand; and of the fact that the work of a nearly illiterate 'campesino' could become known worldwide. Through his work, del Rio threw off the yoke of the oppressed and docile peasant, reacting to others’ demands, policies, and imperatives, and transformed himself into a liberated and forward-thinking creator, building his own unique universe according to his own desires. In addition, the over-abundance and baroque sumptuousness of his constructions suggests a self-made wealth and splendor that must far surpass any dreams he might have held as a poverty-stricken youth. And although he never mentioned the oft-cited Christian symbolism of resurrection and rebirth in association with shells, surely his decision to utilize so many millions in such creative and compelling ways will serve to enhance his own immortality as his many admirers continue to honor and celebrate his labors even after his death. ‘Everyone in the world does things,’ he declared, ‘and I did this so that I would be remembered.’

Jo Farb Hernandez

1 On-site fieldwork at the Casa de las Conchas was conducted on 18 April and 19 April 2008 and 22 March 2009. All quotes by the artist, unless otherwise noted, are taken from interviews with him on 18 April and 19 April 2008; comments by his wife were recorded on 22 March 2009.

2 This boycott was instituted to punish Spain’s links to the Axis powers during World War II and the recognition that Franco’s regime retained fascist tendencies. The boycott was not repealed until 1953, when the United States, looking for new anti-communist allies during the deepening Cold War, signed agreements with Spain known as the Pact of Madrid, in which funding was provided in exchange for Spain’s willingness to make land available to host U.S. military bases. Even so, international trade did not resume at levels that helped to ease Spain out of its widespread isolation and poverty until 1959.


4 This description pertains to ‘modern’ Montoro; the first evidence of relatively sedentary human occupation has been discovered dating from five millennia before Christ, with definitive remains dating from the later Bronze Age (1100-950 BCE). Phoenicians, Greeks, and Carthaginians passed through the ancient city, until the coming of the Romans towards the end of the third century BCE. The city, then known as Epors, became closely allied with Rome until the beginning of the fourth century CE when the inhabitants converted to Christianity. Following invasion by the Visigoths and two centuries of their rule, the city was in disarray and fell to the Arab forces as they began conquering the Peninsula in the early eighth century. Following five centuries of caliphate rule, Montoro was reconquered by the Spanish crown in 1240 CE.
Montoro's new bull ring was inaugurated in 1951 and built upon the remains of an earlier ring that had been destroyed during the Spanish Civil War. A regular polygon, it has twenty equal sides.

The cántaro, an archaic measurement, took its name from the ceramic water jug that held this approximate fluid volume.


It is unclear as to whether del Río was aware of any other instances of the scallop shell being used as architectural adornment, in Spain or elsewhere. One highly-regarded fifteenth century building in Salamanca — once a palace but now a public library — is also known as the Casa de las Conchas, although in this instance the 300 to 400 shells adornning the exterior are carved stone.

English physician Martin Lister published his first reference book on shells, Historia Conchyliorum, between 1685 and 1692, and from this time shells came to be used artistically, particularly in northern Europe, for decorating pedestals, paths, and grottoes. Although it is unlikely that del Río ever came into contact with this tome, it is possible that somewhere he had experienced or seen images of such use of shells.

‘Para poner las conchas, pues, empecé, diría, por gusto, para no pintar ni blanquear. Y claro, yo digo, pues, ya vería si puedo cubrirla…¡Porque pintar una vez al año. Pero las conchas toda la vida. Pero entretén de mí, y me gusta trabajar, y lo paso bien.’

‘De noche, con la luz eléctrica y con la luz de la calle, y con la luna, he trabajado yo.’

His typical routine was to walk down to the center of town to share a drink at the local bar with friends in late morning for about an hour, and then return to the house, rarely leaving again the rest of the day.

‘It is intriguing to remember that border areas of all kinds — including boundaries between property holders — have been viewed since pre-Christian times as unsafe, a place where demons and malicious spirits resided and, thus, a desirable, if not magical, site for the placement of religious shrines in an effort to counteract any potential malevolence that might be generated in such spaces. It is possible that this might have at least subconscious relevance in terms of the placement of the large architectural structures marking the edges of del Río’s property borders, as each of these structures included representations of religious iconography or imagery.


‘Incalculable, tiene mi corazón y mi alma, y eso es difícil de valorar,’ quoted in Andrés Orgaz, ‘En venta tras una vida entre conchas,’ ABC. 3 December 2009: 46.

Andrés Orgaz, ‘La Casa de las Conchas se pone en venta ante el olvido institucional,’ ABC. 31 January 2011: 45.

Francisco del Río Cuenca, although essentially illiterate, was neither divorced from popular culture nor immune from its temptations. He was familiar with the internet, as there is linkage at the municipal offices, and proudly noted that his site could be found there; too, he declared that his house should be in the Guinness book of World Records, since it has more shells than any other monument cited therein, although he recognized the rigid rules they have for verifying selections.

‘Todo el mundo hace cosas, yo he hecho esto para que me recuerden,’ quoted in Andrés Orgaz, ‘Conchas entre olivares,’ ABC. 30 January 2007: 49.