Veneto-Saracenic metalwork of the 15th and 16th centuries is one of the most confusing areas of East-West influence. Until recent decades it was assumed that these superior brass wares inlaid with silver were made by Muslim craftsmen working in Venice. It is now thought that they were made mostly in Syria for export to Venice. Unquestionably, they show a fusion of Mamluk techniques and Italian tastes in ornamentation.

Venice had a longstanding appetite for imported metalwork from the Mamluk empire. Papal prohibitions on these imports were only partially effective and by the mid-14th century the embargo had been lifted. Before this time, Italian artists had been sufficiently inspired by Islamic textiles and metalwork to incorporate them into their paintings. Giotto's Madonna and Child from circa 1320, in the US National Gallery of Art, shows evidence of tiraz cloths and inlaid brass work in one picture.

Brass wares such as the dish (previous pages) in the Islamic Arts Museum Malaysia show the adoption of different Islamic motifs into Renaissance decoration. The arabesque made its mark in Europe during the 15th and 16th centuries. As usual, it was Venice that provided the point of entry. Middle Eastern metalwork was the original model; the arabesque was soon transferred to other media, including ceramics, textiles and bookbindings.

From Italy the arabesque spread northwards, making an important contribution to French art in particular. The palace of Fontainebleau, built in the early 16th century, was admired for being in the Italian style, with work by Francesco Primaticcio and Rosso. The only credit given to the Middle Eastern origins of these designs was the use of the Italian word 'orobesco.' Later writers, including the ubiquitous Owen Jones, made the right assumptions: "Thus in the ornaments taken from the celebrated Etymologiae Magni, printed at Venice in the year 1499, the forms of the ornament...have been evidently based on the style of those Oriental or Byzantine fragments in which Venice was so pre-eminently rich.”

Scientific instruments in the modern world are not the treasured heirlooms that they once were. In the past, they were usually signed by their makers and often named according to their owners. Just as we have the Roiseby Venus, there is the Oriel astrolabe: the miniature planetarium known as an ‘orrery’ takes its name from the 4th Earl of Orrery. The division between art and science was not so well defined as it is nowadays. Those who could afford it would gather round for a convivial evening of quadrants and armillary spheres.

The astrolabe was among the most prized of all astronomical instruments. Although not an Islamic invention, this ancient Greek concept was given its distinctive flat metallic form in the Islamic world. After entering Christendom from Spain in the 12th century, the appearance of astrolabes changed as little as their function. Christian and Muslim use remained much the same except for the presence of tables for calculating prayer times and the direction of Mecca. Among the most prominent early Christian enthusiasts of the astrolabe were the future Pope Sylvester II (died 1003) and the father of English literature, Geoffrey Chaucer: Chaucer’s Treatise on the Astrolabe, written circa 1390, freely uses Arabic terms, including “almicantaras”, “alhabor” and “almurie”, and makes reference to the 10th century Arab astrologer al-Qabisi: “...and so forth unto smale fractions inftyte, as sayeth Alcabucius.”

Star-shaped tiles proliferated in Iran from the 13th to 14th century. Originally with monochrome glazes, they later developed into the complex lustre and cobalt style that is shown here (left). This design did not acquire the same popularity outside Iran. Square or hexagonal tiles predominated in other parts of the Islamic world. Medieval Europe was influenced by Roman mosaics, but individual tiles were almost never as elaborate as this eight-pointed star. During the Renaissance those parts of Europe that had direct contact with the Islamic world, such as Italy, made some use of stars and hexagons.

While it was very rare in Europe to make tiles in the same shape as the Kashan star, it was common to copy this design onto square tiles. The pattern on the 16th century Dutch tiles above shows the influence of Islamic textiles and lustre ceramics, while the outline of the design has probably been taken from Iranian wall tiles. The effect created by the repeat of this design is a distinctive cross shape in the space left by the stars. This may have accounted for its unpopularity in much of the Islamic world. The British designer Owen Jones was similarly unimpressed by this type of Iranian pattern. "Compared with the Arabian or Moresque mosaics they exhibit a marked inferiority," he wrote.¹

¹ Owen Jones, The Grammar of Ornament, London, 1856, p.113
Ottoman tiles (left) have been among the most consistently influential of all Islamic artefacts. Their impact was at its greatest on 19th century Europe, where the vibrant colours and lively patterns were a liberating force. In the Netherlands the influence was felt earlier, as was the passion for tulips that the Dutch shared with the Ottomans. Both groups were also political allies. Dutch Protestants sought the help of Muslim Turks against their Spanish Catholic masters and sometimes used the Ottoman crescent as their emblem, along with the battle cry: “Better a Turk than a Papist.”

Tulips reached the Netherlands in the late 16th century. As far back as the 17th century, Delft was a production centre for tiles featuring tulips and other elements of Ottoman design. Rather than being taken from books of botany, these seem to have been inspired by the more abstract quality of Ottoman tiles. The lobed cartouches and arrangement of the group of four Dutch tiles above have much in common with the Islamic prototype, although the 'cintamani' and floral borders are highly stylised.

The albarello shape has long been associated with apothecaries of both East and West. Although it is generally thought to have originated in the Middle East, there is also a theory that its origins lie further east than that. The concave sides have aroused speculation that it imitates the sections of bamboo that were sometimes used for Chinese medicine. The 17th century Italian version (above) has an exaggerated shape that may have made it less suitable as a drug jar than the smaller, less convex albarello from 13th century Iran (left). In later centuries, the Middle East was itself an importer of Hispano-Moresque lustre vessels.

Instead of copying the lustre effect of Middle Eastern and Andalusian wares, the Italian albarello is in the tin-glazed maiolica tradition. The floral designs are a continuation of the Islamic tradition, taken to a more colourful extreme. These tin glazes provided a less expensive alternative to the Chinese porcelains that were still a rarity in Europe. By the time this albarello was made, the glaze usually covered the entire body. Some earlier examples have glaze only on the side that would have been visible when placed on a shelf. By the middle of the 18th century the discovery of European porcelain had lessened the desirability of tin-glazed wares.
During the early 15th century in Venice, Islamic book bindings altered the course of European decoration. This started with books and was then applied to other media. Until the 15th century, Italian book bindings had been of austere appearance. To own books at all was sufficiently prestigious that they did not need the bonus of looking beautiful.

With the influence of scholarly and religious works from the Islamic world (left), blind stamping and gold tooling became common features of Italy’s centres of learning, especially Florence and Padua. Italian book binders experimented with arabesque designs, usually in a less fluid manner than the originals. Mamluk, Persian and Ottoman techniques were all followed. Bindings also incorporated other Islamic media. The most important of these were the inlay techniques of Mamluk metalwork.

The French book (above) followed the tradition of Islamic bindings, modified with the inclusion of an heraldic shield that has taken the place of a central medallion. During the 16th century, pattern books published in cities such as Venice and Paris enabled book binders to copy arabesques without seeing the originals. There appears to have been no unease about using models as unquestionably Islamic as the Qur’an for book covers in Christendom. One element that Europe did not adopt from the Islamic world was the use of an envelope-like flap, folded to protect the contents.