CHAPTER TWO

The Golden Age of Orientalism
The art of the Islamic world was at its most influential when the fortunes of Muslim empires were increasingly impoverished. This is the opposite of the modern experience. Influence is now an outcome of economic or political might. America has ruled contemporary art for the past 50 years; China, Russia and India are now being noticed as they assert themselves in the world.

The seeds of the 19th century’s obsessive interest in the Orient were sown at the end of the 18th century. In 1780 two antiquaries wrote about Spain’s Islamic heritage, and in 1798 Napoleon took Egypt from the Mamluks. By the start of the 19th century, these two ends of the Mediterranean had aroused a passion among collectors that would last more than a hundred years.

Opinions were divided on the merits of these two cultures. John Ruskin, England’s most influential art historian, did not extend his admiration of Islamic architecture to the Alhambra: “I do not mean what I have here said of the inventive power of the Arab to be understood as in the least applying to the detestable decoration of the Alhambra. The Alhambra is no more characteristic of Arab work, than Milan Cathedral is of Gothic: it is a late building, the work of the Spanish dynasty in its last decline, and its ornamentation is fit for nothing but to be transferred to patterns of carpets or bindings of books, together with their marbling, and mottling, and other mechanical recommendations. The Alhambra ornament has of late been largely used in shop-fronts, to the no small detriment of Regent Street and Oxford Street.”

Ruskin was one of the few to resist the romance of the Alhambra.

Although its popularity as an Islamic monument has now been eclipsed by the Taj Mahal, it was at least shortlisted for the recently revised ‘Seven Wonders of the World’ in 2007. One hundred and eighty years ago, its significance was far greater. When Tales from the Alhambra was first published in 1829, Andalusia became as celebrated as the book’s author, Washington Irving. Southern Spain’s dreamy quality captivated audiences as diverse as Irving’s puritan fellow Americans and the Russian romantic composer Nikolai Rimsky-Korsakov.

Irving, who was famous as the writer of The Legend of Sleepy Hollow and Rip van Winkle, diversified into Islamic biography with Mahomet and His Successors, published in 1850. This work perpetuated many of the old accusations of Arab bewildermont at the sight of Persia’s opulence: “The rude Arabs beheld themselves surrounded by treasures beyond their conception; works of art, the value of which they could not appreciate, and articles of luxury that moved their ridicule rather than their admiration.”

Irving had been more impressed by the Arab achievement in Andalusia. He sets the scene for the Alhambra’s Hall of the Ambassadors: “The walls are richly stuccoed, and decorated with arabesques; the vaulted ceiling of cedar-wood, almost lost in obscurity, from its height, still gleams with rich gilding, and the brilliant tints of the Arabian pencil.” It is no wonder that northern Europeans rushed to take a draught of the scented south. Among these pioneers was Owen Jones, who visited the Alhambra in 1834.

Together with the French artist Jules Goury, Jones made drawings

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2. Washington Irving, Mahomet and His Successors, New York, 1850, p.245

which became one of the most important books of the 19th century. The risks in making the original drawings were also considerable. Goury had died from cholera while working in Granada, along with thousands of others. The intrepid artists were 6 months prisoners in the Alhambra and have made without exception the most beautiful drawings of that palace I ever saw in my life."

Plans, Elevations, Sections, and Details of the Alhambra was published in 1842 for a very small readership. Fewer than 200 copies of the first volume were sold. Others were later remaindered. Printed using expensive and laborious new techniques of chromolithography, the book is as much a visual delight now as it was one and a half centuries ago. Photography cannot reproduce the glow of the gold and the richness of the colours. The price at the time was as memorable as the contents.

Although this first publishing venture was a financial disappointment for Jones, it established his reputation and furthered the cause of Islamic art. He went on to write the definitive Grammar of Ornament, which has been a continuous part of design history since its first edition in 1856. Using some of the same drawings as his Alhambra book, Jones roamed more widely in this volume, identifying the essence of different ornamental styles. Moresque ornament cohabit with Greek, Roman, Chinese, Renaissance, Celtic and many more. Indian, Arabian, Persian, Turkish and other Islamic styles are also included, breaking entirely new ground.

The approval that Jones felt for the styles of Islamic lands was evident: "So much unity of design, so much skill and judgment in its..."
application, with so much elegance and refinement in the execution. In its new environment this elicited, “a degree of attention from artists, manufacturers and the public...” At the other end of the Crystal Palace were the European exhibits, castigated by Jones as, “a fruitless struggle after novelty.”

Jones’ promotion of Islamic styles extended much further than his handbook of design. Eager though the audience was for his published work, the crowds that saw his work at the Great Exhibition of 1851 were very much larger. He was the superintendent of works at the most spectacular display the world had ever seen. Over a period of five months more than six million visitors paid to enter the ‘Crystal Palace’, creating a profit of £86,000 pounds – an enormous sum at that time. Jones’ vision of the Great Exhibition had included a large amount of Moorish inspiration. His use of the primary colours that typified the Alhambra was considered an exciting development by many; others suggested that he should have been locked away.

Interior design had become a more relevant field as bourgeois homes replaced peasant hovels just as the South Kensington Museum (later the Victoria and Albert) was founded to help improve the work of British designers, it was up to Jones and other single-minded aesthetes to turn the Victorian domestic environment into a haven of familial serenity. Books such as The Grammar of Ornament and Christopher Dresser’s Studies in Design offered useful advice to the house proud. Dresser’s book, like Jones’, looked at more than just Islamic ornament but his sensibilities were obviously attuned to the Orient “...gorgeous and beautiful developments of art which have existed, or still exist, with the Persians, Indians, Turks, Moors, Chinese and Japanese.”

Whilst Jones wanted all types of designers to see the ornamental possibilities of other cultures, Dresser focused more on the domestic. His preface to Studies in Design shows how seriously this was being taken in the third quarter of the 19th century: “I have prepared this Work with the hope of assisting to bring about a better style of decoration for our houses. My book is intended to help the decorator and to enable those who live in decorated houses to judge, to an extent, of the merit of the ornament around them. It will also, it is hoped, aid the designer and the manufacturer of decorated objects, by suggesting to them useful ideas.”

Dresser takes a practical approach to the use of Islamic ornament. In one case he describes the design of a ceiling ornament: “Style, Arabian. This would be painted upon the flat surface and not painted in relief.” The following plate shows “Two dado-rail ornaments. Style, pure Arabian. Either would do well as a frieze also, but if the room was high, both would require enlarging. The lower should be considerably larger if the room is more than twelve feet high; and about half as large again if the room is ten feet in height.”

During the 19th century, everyone looked East; it was just a matter of how far East their tastes took them. Queen Victoria was as susceptible as anyone of her era to the exoticism of the Orient. While most of the male style makers of the time looked to the Middle East for their smoking or billiard rooms, the Empress of India preferred her

8. Ibid, Plates XXVII and XXX
interior design to be Subcontinental. This blossomed at her country house on the Isle of Wight, where Rudyard Kipling’s father, Lockwood Kipling, created a flamboyant Mughal room.

While England was breeding a generation of influential art critics, including Ruskin and Jones, there were also the hands-on philosophers. Christopher Dresser, William De Morgan and William Morris made art as well as writing about it. The Great Exhibition of 1851 and other initiatives of the time ended up removing some of the distinctions between fine and decorative art. William Morris, above all, tried to instil quasi-Medieval notions of the artist-craftsman. In addition to creating designs that are still in use today, he toiled personally on labour-intensive activities such as carpet weaving.

The ideas for many of these enterprises came directly from Oriental designs, which were as cherished by Morris as by Jones and Dresser. Arthur Liberty, of Liberty & Co., was also fascinated with the Far East, especially Japan, but invested a lot in promoting art of the Islamic world. He imported works from North Africa, the Middle East and India, as well as creating an ‘Arab tea-room’ at his Regent Street premises.

Away from what some observers saw as the playful fripperies of ornament, Islamic heritage was associated with the more substantial pursuit of architecture. Around the end of the 18th century there had been a shift in emphasis on the old question about the origins of Gothic style. The earlier belief, advocated by Sir Christopher Wren and others, was that Saracen influence had been brought back to Europe from the Middle East by the Crusaders. Historians increasingly gave credit to Andalusia for introducing the pointed arch to its more northerly neighbours; at least one scholar called Norman cathedrals a “poor
imitation” of the Islamic originals in Spain.9

The question of origins was important at a time when people were travelling more than ever. It was not only adventurers who were able to see marvels from other people's past. The British were especially keen travellers who liked to make overseas connections with their own heritage. Spain became an essential destination, filled with evidence of cultures that were picturesquely different from classical Greek and Roman remains. Islamic civilisation was all around, coexisting harmoniously with cathedrals and amphitheatres.

The most exciting realisation for many visitors was that church towers could well have been descended from minarets. A new term emerged when describing the Cheshire home of the Dukes of Westminster; a visitor described it as being, “in a style of architecture called Morisco Gothic.”10 Travellers' tales became a popular genre at this time, preferably set in foreign climes rather than the chilly heart of the English countryside.

The image of the Orient was integral to its appreciation, and this was decidedly romantic. The explorers who led the way for painters to tread the desert sands were a more colourful group than Western traders in the Far East or missionaries in Africa. The most influential of them was Sir Richard Burton. The translator of the Thousand and One Nights, the Kama Sutra and the Perfumed Garden lived life, as well as writing about it. He proclaimed himself to be the first non-Muslim to enter Mecca and get out—alive. His experiences there filled many pages of his self-promoting work, but he was undoubtedly sympathetic to Islam.

In his Personal Narrative of a Pilgrimage to al-Madina and Meccah, he rather fancifully reminds readers that death was the penalty for non-Muslims who had invaded the sacred space. At the same time he appears to have been quite moved by his own pilgrimage.

This possible convert to Islam wrote: “I recognise no man’s right to interfere between a human being and his conscience. But what is there, I would ask, in the Moslem Pilgrimage so offensive to Christians – what makes it a subject of inward ridicule’. Do they not also venerate Abraham, the Father of the Faithful?”11 His final gesture of solidarity with the Islamic world was his grave. He chose to be buried in a stone copy of a Bedouin tent that soars 18 feet high in a suburban London cemetery. The inside of the tent, where Burton lies next to his fiercely Catholic wife, is still decorated with memorabilia of his travels in the Middle East.

Burton fitted in with the anti-industrial sentiment that was inspiring Orientalist painters at the time. The Middle East had acquired a reputation as a place of purity and nobility. A bit run-down perhaps, but still more worthwhile than the sight of desecrated nature and downtrodden industrial workers in the West. The irony was that many of the collectors who bought Orientalist paintings were the very capitalists who were doing the despoiling. They were, however, able to retreat to their Long Island or Belgravia homes and ignore the suffering at home.

The Orientalists depicted their settings with varying degrees of accuracy, and this has been examined in depth. The aspect of their work that has not been explored is how they used Islamic artefacts as props. On the whole, this seems to have been without much consideration to

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9. Henry Hallam, View of the State of Europe during the Middle Ages, London, 1816, p. 419
Mecca's fame during the 19th century was increased by its exclusiveness. As can be seen in this print of 1894, it was a very much smaller city then than it is now.
their true purpose. Especially when it comes to harem life, it is known that male artists had no guide but their imagination. More important, though, is the impression made on viewers of the paintings. Whether or not the artefacts were depicted correctly, their appearance is often faithfully recorded. These images, which could be seen in every major city of Europe and North America, must have made an impression on craftsmen looking for inspiration.

Just as the majority of Orientalist painters came from northern Europe, so did the decorative artists who made the most fascinating contribution to the era. These were not individuals dedicated to recapturing the look of North Africa or the Levant. Most of them never left Europe. Nor did they need to, as their impetus was not desolate places or urban societies in decay. They were inspired by objects from the Islamic world and reinterpreted them in their own way. The Islamic-inspired work of individuals like Théodore Deck and Joseph Brocard has not placed them among the most illustrious artists of the 19th century, and yet their output is significant. Deck did at least receive the double-edged distinction of being called “the greatest of all French potters.”

One benefit of their comparative obscurity is that they have not been dragged into the same Orientalist controversy as their painter counterparts. They have not been accused of disparaging the culture of the Middle East or trying to create the sense of ‘otherness’ that so distressed Edward Said. Most of their oeuvre is in glass or ceramic and is

Left: Villeroy & Boch brought Islamic designs into countless European homes during the 19th century.

established a reputation as true innovators. Morris and De Morgan are
eexemplars of this; revered in England, they were greatly admired in
Continental Europe, where they are seen as progenitors of Art Nouveau.

As with other harbingers of Art Nouveau, Morris and De Morgan
made their contribution through an understanding of Islamic art. At the
heart of this was nature. Not in the European tradition of pursuing
realism; instead the focus was on stylisation that worked well in two
dimensions. The practical application of these concepts made them
appropriate for designers of tiles, textiles, wallpaper and other media that
were gaining prominence during the 19th century.

Islamic designs from Persia and the Ottoman empire were
characterised by a floral emphasis. This would easily have won the hearts
of English artists with a strong attachment to gardens. Unlike the more
rigid horticulture of the Continent, the Anglo-Saxon love of controlled
spontaneity in their floral displays found its match in the Islamic arabesque
and other motifs. English aesthetes were able to see the originals for
themselves when these artefacts began to be put on public display. The
South Kensington Museum was the most important repository of
decorative art from around the world in the middle of the 19th century.
An aggressive buying policy was supported by gifts from states that
wanted to promote their wares. The Shah of Iran was a donor; and
presumably after some persuasion, so were his government ministers.

In France, too, a number of museums and temporary exhibitions
ensured that artefacts from the Islamic world could have a wider
audience. Much of what had previously entered Europe was kept in royal
collections with little visibility. Republican – and sometimes Imperial –
France led the way in creating accessibility. Prisse d’Avennes gave a French
flavour to the art of Egypt, continuing a tradition started in that part of the Islamic world by Napoleon's conquest and the subsequent book Description de l'Egypte.

The Suez Canal maintained the French presence in the Middle East, while archaeology was increasingly controlled by the French, especially in Iran. This caused much displeasure among rival nations. The British minister in Tehran complained to Lord Salisbury in 1896 that the continuation of exclusive deals struck between France and Iran, "seems unfortunate in the interests of antiquarian knowledge." Meanwhile, French auction houses created a market for Islamic art. The sale of super-dealer Albert Goupil's collection at the Hotel Drouot in 1888 offered exceptional opportunities. In addition to being a formative collector of Islamic art, he was the brother-in-law of Jean-Léon Gérôme and had accompanied the famous Orientalist painter to Egypt and Palestine.

With the new openness of the 19th century, decorative artists could find inspiration in ways that would once have been impossible. Sometimes they could even acquire the treasures of other cultures for themselves. The French ceramist Théodore Deck supposedly obtained a broken Iznik tile. As technical progress was the key to success in the decorative arts - just as it often was with fine art - his shard was a useful item. He had already seen a collection of Iznik ceramics at the Musée de Cluny, where Medieval and Islamic art were harmoniously combined.

Bringing together his understanding of glaze technology with the dazzling colours of the Ottoman empire, Deck was in some ways the embodiment of his century. There was the right mixture of exoticism and practicality to create a profitable market. The elevation of the decorative arts to a more respected position meant that Deck could conduct experiments with credible artists. His reinterpretations of Islamic forms, which had at first seemed so bold, eventually became formulaic. They were still interesting enough to entice the South Kensington Museum. Among the objects bought by the museum at the 1867 Paris Exhibition were "four specimens of pottery by M. Deck".

Before that, the museum had bought more of his ceramics. Needless to say, an Alhambra vase was among them. This had become the definitive symbol of Islamic art in the first half of the 19th century, just as the Alhambra itself had. For the next fifty years or more, the distinctive shape with the winged handles was copied by countless ceramicists and appears in numerous pictures. The French writer Pierre Loti can be seen in a late 19th century photograph, resplendent in full Arab dress with an Alhambra vase in the background of his heavily Orientalised home.

Deck followed the same pattern as countless other artists of the 19th century. With his love of Islamic art undiminished, he turned increasingly to Japanese art as well. This had become common in Europe since the opening of Japan in 1854 and was to be the other decisive influence on Art Nouveau, along with Islamic art. Deck did not, however, really become part of the movement, which might explain why the company that had once done so well only managed to stagger into the 20th century before closing.

Typically for his era, Deck did not stop at Islamic and Japanese styles. Chinese, Byzantine, Classical; anything that excited his imagination


By 1882, when this map was published, Cairo had become a popular destination for European tourists, artists and balloonists.
ended up being reproduced in his workshops. Despite being eclectic, Deck did not mix and match cultures. He respected the integrity of each culture, altering it to his requirements but not creating a melange. Some other ceramicists and glass makers were less sensitive. Iznik motifs might end up on a Japanese incense burner and the public would still buy it. Europe’s understanding of Asia had progressed in the 19th century but there was still as much confusion about the difference between Turkey and Persia as between China and Japan – both of whose artefacts were often called ‘Indian’. Clarification was not improved by an artist such as Deck using the word ‘Persian’ to describe Ottoman Iznik ceramics.

Other potters capitalised on Europe’s taste for wares from the Islamic world. Three generations of the Samson family produced copies that were sometimes too close to the originals. Their long experience of repairing ceramics had given the Samsons such detailed technical insight that they could imitate almost anything. Iznik pottery was a favourite at their workshops, as it was throughout France and Belgium. The enthusiasm for Iznik was not shared by English potters, who tended to focus on less colourful wares.

Most of the Islamic influence in Europe was channelled into straightforward imitations. Among the few ceramicists who showed more ambition with his creativity was Théodore Deck. His assistant, Edmond Lachenal, was also an a pioneer within the medium. Having fallen under the spell of Islamic Spain, he made innovative use of lustre and other Islamic techniques.

At the same time, Central Europe began to make a greater contribution than usual to the Continent’s aesthetic development. Among the most creative artists was Vilmos Zsolnay. Based in Hungary, the repertoire of the Zsolnay workshops grew considerably after the 1880s, when Vilmos sent his son to the Middle East on a mission to collect Islamic ceramics. Interest in the Ottoman past had already been building up in the Austro-Hungarian empire, much of which had once been under Turkish control. Just as in Spain, where the Moorish era was being re-created in various media, 19th century Vienna was increasingly open to the empire’s Islamic heritage. Contact between the different artists of Europe was, in the usual way, established at trade fairs. At the 1873 Vienna World Exhibition, Zsolnay saw the work of the leading ceramicists of that era, including Deck and his main competitors, Collinot & de Beaumont. The Ottoman content was extensive.

From this point onwards, Zsolnay concentrated more on Islamic wares, referring to books by Prisse d’Avennes and others to supplement the small sample of ceramics that could be seen in his homeland. As the investigations of Ibolya Gerelyes have shown, the little-researched output of the Zsolnay workshops was pioneering in many ways. Hungarian folk embroideries became entwined with Iznik wares and new techniques such as ‘gold brocade’ were added to the inventory. One wonders whether the Ottomans themselves would have added such a spectacular-sounding ingredient to their Iznik wares if it had been available three hundred years earlier, or whether they were satisfied with the extensive palette they had already developed. A Yildiz porcelain dish with a gilded tughra in the Islamic Arts Museum Malaysia suggests that some Hungarian know-how might have been welcomed by the patrons of Iznik ceramics.

Central Europe’s better-known contribution to 19th century East-
West exchange is glass. Enamelled glass in particular was an achievement that both echoed the Islamic achievement of earlier centuries and also found an eager market in the Middle East. The models for most of these wares were Mamluk. Eight hundred years ago, the enamelling ateliers of that empire created some of the most accomplished glass wares that the world had ever seen. Venice was the main beneficiary of this expertise, using Mamluk technology to create a glass industry that is still important to that city. Copying more than just the techniques, the Venetians used Islamic shapes extensively. Mosque lamps were a favourite many centuries ago, and became indispensable during the Victorian era.

As with Renaissance Venice, it is far from certain which of the 19th century items were for export and which for European use. Hanging lamps that ended up in Middle Eastern mosques were almost certain to have been made for that purpose. Others served quite different, less sacred purposes in Europe. In the same way that Deck had modified the mosque-lamp shape in ceramic to act as a vase, glass-makers did the same in their own medium.

The demand for enamelled Islamic-style glass was enormous during the 19th century, and the quantity that has survived is impressive. Most objects were reproductions of well-known Mamluk works, often copied from books rather than from original artefacts. France was the main producer of these works, with Joseph Bricard, Emile Gallé and J.P. Imberton playing a vital part. Unlike the proliferation of Islamic-style glass reproduced at the time, these ateliers were considered to be true 'artists' in their field. In common with the ceramists Deck and Samson, they signed their work.

The most famous glass-maker of the time, Gallé followed many