Théodore Deck shows his eclecticism once again with a basin (previous pages) that is a composite of different examples of Mamluk metalwork. The roundels on his ceramic copy alternate between the figural imagery of the Baptistère de Saint Louis and the floral decoration of Sultan Muhammad ibn Qala’un’s basin, illustrated by Prisse d’Avennes (left). The large inscriptions are very much in the spirit of the latter. The Baptistère has almost no writing on it; instead there is a wide array of courtiers and horsemen. The equestrian theme was carefully reproduced by Deck, who shows a hunter whose lance has found its target in a small but no doubt hostile animal.

As Deck had so successfully mastered Mamluk calligraphy in relief on ceramic, it is not surprising that he would have wanted to use some epigraphy on his modified version of the Baptistère.

The Baptistère de Saint Louis is one of the most written-about artefacts of the Islamic world. Opinions are divided about its provenance and date, which is thought to be late-13th to mid-14th century. The eminent scholar Rachel Ward has suggested that it was intended for a European patron, in which case it ended up in the right place. Used for the baptism of certain French royal infants, the basin’s silver fleurs-de-lys were added in the 19th century. Deck has included this suitably patriotic heraldic device, along with other decorative features from the original.

The Baptistère was once thought to have been brought back to France by Saint Louis, who died in North Africa. Its royal connections were first written about in the 18th century. By Deck’s time, the local market would have taken an interest in this artefact as it had been moved in 1856 from the Louvre museum to the cathedral of Notre Dame for the lavish baptism of the heir apparent.

Contemporary accounts reported: “the emperor and empress...followed by a human river shimmering with silk and gold.” In 1870 the French monarchy came to an end with Napoleon III’s exile and the loss of Deck’s native Alsace-Lorraine region to Germany.

Théodore Deck's debt to the Islamic world is most visible in his Iznik and Mamluk wares. Despite using the word 'Persian' to describe many of his works, he did not often look so far eastward. One of the occasions on which Deck fixed his gaze — and glaze — firmly upon Iran is represented by a large bowl in the collection of the Islamic Arts Museum Malaysia. As with so many of his ceramics, the colour is innovative. In this case it is a shade of green that reflects the elusive tone of the tinned-copper 'badlye' that inspired it.

The shape and decoration of Deck's bowl are taken directly from Safavid metalwork of the 17th century. The size is not; at 27 centimetres in height, it dwarfs the prototypes that inspired it. The originals are usually in the range of 14 to 20 centimetres. The 19th century tinned-metal bowl (left) in the IAMM collection is 47 centimetres high. Although the shape of the bowl is reminiscent of badlye, the foot is far more pronounced.

The decoration on the Deck bowl features a profusion of scrolling palmettes and five-lobed flowers. The main difference between this and the original is the absence of calligraphy on the French version. Almost every Iranian badlye has a band of nastaliq writing around the neck. Deck's artisans were virtuosos with Arabic calligraphy, but they might have been less accustomed to Farsi inscriptions. The French solution was to use another band of floral decoration instead.

Deck's bowl would have been too large for the original badlye purpose. Although 'wine bowl' is the usual description, it seems that they were also used for more sugary concoctions. The following quatrain from a similar vessel in the Victoria and Albert Museum, translated by Souren Melikian-Chirvani, is thought to be about lemonade.

This bowl which is a mine of sweetness
For the sake of the sugar-lipped ones that move sweetly
May it be continually filled beneath the bowl of heaven:
That sugar syrup is better than the winter of life.

The Samson dynasty was a great innovator in the field of ceramics. Most of the works by Edmé, Émile and Léon Samson consisted of direct copies of Oriental originals, with Iznik wares being a favourite. The covered pot by Samson (left) is an unusual shape. It does not conform to any of the standard Islamic wares that the family's workshop near Paris imitated—often with such success that there was confusion about which items were the originals and which were copies.

In this case, Samson has clearly not tried to follow any of the well-known Iznik prototypes. Instead, the company has created an object that appears to have more of a practical than a decorative application. It was almost certainly made for the European market. The French bourgeoisie, in particular, sought out similar artefacts to those on display at the new museums of Sèvres, Cluny and the Musée des Arts Décoratifs.

The decoration is pure Iznik, apart from the red outlines around the groups of flowers. The arrangement of hyacinths is a perfect match with a dish (above) in the Islamic Arts Museum Malaysia.
This lustre vase from the Clément Massier atelier was created under the direction of Lucien Levy-Dhurmer. This Algerian-born artist maintained an interest in Islamic art throughout his life, and went on to become a well-known painter in the Symbolist and Art Nouveau genres. The Massier atelier was celebrated for its ceramic glazes, of which the vase (left) is an elaborate example. Inspired by Hispano-Moresque lustre wares, it takes a new direction with a deep-red glaze over a black, dimpled ground. As with so many Orientalist ceramics, references to the wing-handled Alhambra vase are inescapable. However, the Massier work is more innovative. The inscription does not follow the usual Alhambra-style Arabic honofnics but repeats the cryptically egalitarian “No master and no leader”. The shape, apart from the handles, is reminiscent of bidri wares (above) from India. These had been displayed at the Paris Universal Exhibition of 1878 under the British Indian section. The handbook of the event enthused: “Bidri, the highest art in India after enamelling...” The geographical origins of this shimmering metalwork would certainly not have put off Symbolist artists, who above all were under the spell of the distant Orient.

The Art Nouveau movement looked mostly to Japan for inspiration, but a substantial debt was also owed to the Islamic world. In France, where the tiles above were made, the source was often found to the West rather than to the East. The work of William Morris, William De Morgan and Christopher Dresser had already put Islamic design into the English artistic subconscious. This was absorbed by the French, who by the mid-19th century had plenty of first-hand material to study as well. Iznik ceramics with their distinctive saz leaves (left) were a useful source for the sinuous S shape that gives life to works of the late 19th and early 20th centuries.

Iranian and Indian textiles and ceramics were also muses for Art Nouveau designers. They provided different types of floral motifs (left) that worked well on two-dimensional surfaces, including tiles — a decorative medium that became extremely popular in Europe at this time. Floral motifs and arabesques were not the only Islamic designs to be admired during the Art Nouveau period. Strong diagonals (left) were another favourite for tilework. The tiles above show an acquaintance with the drawings of Eugene Grasset, a Swiss-born artist who visited Egypt in 1866 and later published an influential book on floral designs.1

1. Eugene Grasset, La Flora et ses Applications Ornamentales, Paris, 1896, plate XXXI.
The passion for Art Nouveau tiles in the late 19th century was met above all others by Villeroy & Boch, based in the disputed Franco-German territory of Saarland. The company was a leader in the production of tiles that followed Iznik designs. Being in the florid spirit of the times, these were not mere imitations. The Villeroy & Boch tiles (left) feature a revolutionary colour palette. Instead of the vigorously contrasting hues of the Ottoman tile above, the panel of four 19th century tiles has a warmer, more feminine feel. Pink, which was popular at Villeroy & Boch, would never have been seen in the days of Iznik. Similarly, the Saarland ceramicists used enamels and low relief, while the Ottoman originals were entirely two-dimensional, keeping all the decoration under the glaze, although the bold red can appear to be raised.

Wall tiles became a vital part of the 19th century hygiene revolution. Villeroy & Boch went beyond the mundane in ensuring that cleanliness did not have to exclude creativity. In addition to seeking out traditional Islamic designs, the company commissioned numerous contemporary artists, mainly from the Arts and Crafts movement. This was not its greatest commercial triumph. By the 1930s, Villeroy & Boch was working with the avant-garde Bauhaus movement.
Detail of 'eye-face' cypher from the blunderbuss of Tipu Sultan.

Flintlock blunderbuss from Tipu Sultan's armory.
late 18th century, Seringapatam. I.AMM 2000/123.
Tipu mania swept Britain from the late 18th century until many decades later. The most popular form was the variety of prints showing his defeat by General Sir David Baird at Seringapatam. Less directly, the influence of Tipu Sultan was felt in the use of tiger imagery. The ‘Tiger of Mysore’ had created the infamous Man-Tyger-Organ, showing a British soldier being savaged by Tipu’s eponymous beast. While on display at the East India Company Museum, this automaton attracted considerable attention, which it continues to do at the Victoria and Albert Museum.

Staffordshire pottery capitalised on the notoriety of the musical device by creating ceramic figures that showed an incident in 1792 when the son of Tipu’s old foe, General Sir Hector Munro, was killed by a tiger. According to the young man’s companion, Captain Consar: “I heard a roar like thunder, and saw an immense royal tiger spring on the unfortunate Munro.” After an appalling ordeal, Consar concluded: “Mr Munro was an amiable and promising youth.”

The flintlock blunderbuss in the Islamic Arts Museum Malaysia is part of the armory that was dispersed after Tipu Sultan’s death. These weapons confirmed his image as a romantic warrior figure. The popular writer Sir Walter Scott was convinced that he owned the sword that Tipu had been holding at his defeat. Scott made him a key figure in the 1825 novel The Surgeon’s Daughter: “At noon precisely, a discharge of ... matchlocks and of small swivels, carried by camels, (the poor animals shaking their long ears at every discharge,) announced that Tippoo had mounted his elephant.”