The ewer and basin seen in the early photograph from the Christofle archives (previous pages) was described as 'Persian' by Jules Brateau, the 19th century French master of decorative art in various media. The set owes much to India as well. The stylised-dragon handle is in the Timurid tradition, which was adopted by many parts of the eastern Islamic world. The prototype is more likely to have been accompanied by a basin than a tray, as these ewers were mainly used for washing hands. The tray is in keeping with a quite different ewer set that won glory for Brateau at the 1889 Universal Exhibition. Also made of pewter, this gold-medal winner was entirely in the Renaissance tradition with classical figures sporting themselves in the Greek manner.

Instead of being intended for export, this 'Persian' ewer and tray are likely to have ornamented the salon of a French aesthete. Brateau's reputation extended much further than his native France. In America, his work was called "splendid", although less encouragingly he was, "best known as a worker in tin."

Despite his success in reviving European interest in pewter, it has never been a popular material in the Islamic world. Similarly, enamelled wares have long been a speciality of China. However, the Qing-dynasty Chinese ewer and basin set (left) has close connections with the Iranian world. Made for the Islamic market, it follows the shape of Persian and Indian wares. The colourful enamel decoration is more in keeping with Chinese floral spontaneity than with the Islamic world's arabesques or trees of life.

China made large numbers of ceramic vessels that copied Islamic metal ewers, mostly for the Persian market. These might incorporate useful features, such as struts to strengthen the spout, or details as superfluous as imitation welding marks.

---

1. Proceedings of the Annual Convention of the University of the State of New York, 1908, p.107
French silversmiths looked to many parts of the world when creating new designs for their growing range of luxury products in the 19th century. In addition to Ottoman, Mamluk and Safavid art, Mughal works were held in high regard. This drawing of a Christofle tea or coffee pot (left) is an eclectic project. The decoration owes much to India; enamelled floral motifs in blue and green were a speciality of the Mughal city of Lucknow.

The covered bowl in the collection of the Islamic Arts Museum Malaysia (above) was acquired by the Earl of Lytton while he was viceroy of India (1876-1880). It was then exhibited at the South Kensington Museum before being installed at the Lytton home of Knebworth House. The bowl continued to excite admiration many years later, when Winston Churchill’s early love, Lady Lytton, mentioned it in a letter of 1948.1

1 “When we were in India I did not see such fine work being done.” Correspondence of Pamela, Countess Lytton, 22 April 1948. Archive of Islamic Arts Museum Malaysia.
Most of the creations of French silversmiths in the 19th century were intended for European consumption. In a different category were objects intended for export. Some of these were commissioned directly by customers in the Middle East; others were destined for the retail outlets that the enterprising firm of Christofle had established within the Ottoman empire. The company’s pen cases with attached inkwells would have been bound for consumers who favoured reed pens. The quill was the writing instrument of choice in Europe, although by the late 19th century, fountain-pen performance had improved.

Pen cases with attached inkwells were common throughout the Islamic world, especially within the Ottoman empire, where they were known as divit. From 1862 onwards the government’s modernising programme led to the Ministry of Public Education handing out writing implements and divit to students to encourage literacy. These Christofle examples in solid silver would definitely not have been part of that welfare programme.

[Image: Drawings of Christofle pen cases, silver, 19th century France. Musée Boulanger, Christofle Paris]

French decorative artists of the 19th century tended to adopt the form of Islamic works without their function. This lamp-stand by Christofle (above) is an exception. Looking slightly incongruous with a paraffin wick lamp perched on top, it actually comes very close to the spirit of the torch stands (mosh'īl) that proliferated in the Iranian world from the 16th century onwards. Although very few of the 'torches' have survived, these metal appliances sat above the torch stand in the same way that the French lamp does.

The original mosh'īl were almost always made of cast brass and their distinctive shape was overwhelmingly popular in Iran. Elsewhere in the Islamic world, candle stands with a narrow neck and wide body were favoured. In the West, it was hanging glass mosque lamps from Mamluk Egypt and Syria that caused a sensation. Christofle took a more original approach with this torch stand, inlaid with scrolling arabesques that match the Safavid original, there are also human figures — a type of decoration that hardly ever appears on Iranian mosh'īl. More typical would be inscriptions of mystical poetry, often with a Sufi theme. Allusions to moths and flames were never far away.
Retailed by Tiffany & Co. in the company’s early years, this ‘demi-parure’ (left) shows an unexpected simplicity. During the 19th century the company was better known for more lavish Art Nouveau jewellery that often incorporated dragonflies. The brooch and earrings from the mid-century have much in common with Central Asian jewellery and were made at a time when that region was being prised open by European powers.

The combination of angular silver or silver-gilt plates and coloured stones is typical of Turkoman jewellery, which was among Central Asia’s finest in the 18th and 19th centuries. The Turkomans tended to favour red stones such as agate and carnelian. Along with other regional groupings they also used turquoise—a shade of blue that has been Tiffany and Co’s trademark for 150 years. This was once an expensive material. A certain Mr Fraser in 1825 visited a turquoise mine in the Elburz mountains, avoiding belligerent Turkomans on the way; ‘The Turkomans... plundered a caravan from Toorsheer, taking the whole party prisoners, whom they sell as slaves at Bouchara and Khyvish or Khiwa.’

The rugged allure of Central Asia must have seemed a heady draught for the prosperous and increasingly sedentary citizens of mid-19th century New York.

In addition to the shapes of Islamic artefacts, it was their ornament that excited 19th century European manufacturers of products de luxe. Even silversmiths, working in a fairly monochromatic palette, prepared their designs with attention to the colour and pattern theories that were formulated by the English designers Owen Jones and Christopher Dresser. In France a similar revolution was underway. Before Prisse d'Avennes' celebrated survey of Arab decoration in 1877, the architect Jules Bourgoin worked with him, initiating the theme with a publication in 1873. Bourgoin wrote: "The Orient is the native soil of all art, as it is of all religion."

Christofle and other designers in silver paid attention to the new direction in aesthetics, which was not limited to 'Arab' art. Ottoman and Persian works were also being studied at the same time. Collinot and Beaumont's 1859 book of designs for art and industry looked at a variety of Islamic art forms. Adding to the interest were three Ottoman pavilions at the 1867 Universal Exposition in Paris, visited by Sultan Abdulaziz.

Christofle was present with wares described as being 'Persian', which at the time was just as likely to mean Turkish or Levantine.

While the Ottoman empire was trying to modernise itself, European artists were looking back to the empire's golden age. Iznik ceramics were consistently the greatest influence, although Ottoman textiles also had their day. European manufacturers admired the rich floral motifs and lavish colours of Iznik and other wares from the Ottoman empire. The dish (left) shows some of the elements that the West adopted. The semi-abstract carnation motif went down well at Christofle, which adopted it in the drawings for items such as bonbon holders (previous pages).

The interest that Christofle took in Ottoman designs was a heartening sign in the supplier of silverware on board the Orient Express. However, the effort of being a pioneer at the more exotic end of its field was not always rewarded: "[Christofle's products] are often produced at a loss even – the manufacturer depending on an indirect profit rather than a direct."

1. Émile Prisse d'Avennes, Jules Bourgoin et al. The Decorative Art of Arabia, France, 1873, p. 13
Mamluk mosque lamps have long proved irresistible to Western collectors and copyists. While most of the other vessels at that time were filled with figural imagery, mosque lamps mainly featured inscriptions. They are distinguished from lamps in secular locations by their ineffectiveness as a source of light.

Venice sent its own versions, usually without inscriptions, to Cairo and the Ottoman empire in the 15th and 16th centuries. In a report written for Grand Duke Ferdinand I of Florence, circa 1592, the volume of glass exports from Venice to Constantinople and Egypt was recorded as being 10,000 and 5,000 ducats respectively.

During the 19th century, European and American collectors fought over Mamluk works. J.P. Morgan, the richest man in the world at that time, gave the example shown here to the Metropolitan Museum in 1917. Such was the demand for mosque lamps, in particular, European glassmakers became prolific imitators. After much effort, the copies were almost identical to the originals.

European mosque lamps were also made for export. These were needed after the removal of valuable Mamluk lamps from their original settings in the 19th century. Newly built mosques also required illumination. There is some uncertainty about who provided this. It seems that the Italian company Salvati received a commission from Khedive Ismail in 1869. The khedive's grandson Abbas Hilmi also ordered Austrian and Bohemian mosque lamps, one of which is in the Khalili collection. It is dated 1328 AH (1910 AD) and is very similar to another lamp in the Islamic Arts Museum Malaysia. The inscription on this, also dedicated to Khedive Abbas Hilmi, was so well executed the enameller showed the ability of a native Arabic calligrapher.

Similar confidence is visible in the calligraphy of the ceramic mosque lamp (left), although the inscription is barely comprehensible. The purpose of this lamp, which is one of a pair, is also ambiguous. Undoubtedly made in Europe, it is opaque. The absence of suspension loops precludes its use as a mosque lamp. Being glazed inside and out, it would have made a fine flower vase.

1. Vincent Israel, Renaissance Vision from Spectacles to Telescopes, Philadelphia, 2007, p.121