Medieval glass was among the most sought-after forms of Islamic art among 19th-century collectors. As the supply was small and the demand huge, French glassmakers turned their attention to re-creating wares that were otherwise unobtainable. In some cases there was considerable creative licence; in others the copies are almost exact.

A very close match was achieved in this pair of flasks from the second half of the 19th century. The model on which they are based is a flask from Egypt or Syria of the Mamluk era, circa 1300, in the collection of the Museum of Islamic Art, Berlin. The prototype is as lavish as the later copies, with a prominent display of gold and enamel. The subject is an unusually lively and varied equestrian scene. It appears to feature a game of polo, although only one rider is equipped with a mallet.

The combination of subject matter and technique would have made both the original and the later flask as appealing for the knightly class of medieval Europe as for the new rich of the industrialised Western world.
During the late 19th century, Western museums of decorative art became avid collectors of Persian glass. Many examples were contemporary but reflected a tradition that had existed for the past couple of centuries. Among the most popular acquisitions were swan-necked flasks or vases. These distinctive vessels in a variety of colours were probably used as rosewater sprinklers. More romantic theories also exist. The most popular of these involve the storage of tears – either of departing warriors or the distraught who were left behind. The quantity of tears was supposed to indicate the depth of longing.

In some cases it is reported that the flasks, known in Farsi as ashkdan, were buried with the owner.

Western designers needed no such encouragement to see the decorative potential of these vessels. Art Nouveau originators Louis Comfort Tiffany and Arthur Lasenby Liberty were among the aesthetes to pay tribute to these graceful, organic flowerings of Iranian art. Working with plain coloured glass or iridescence, the ateliers of Europe and America produced faithful reproductions of the vases that have become a feature of Western public collections.
Safavid brocade: silk and metal thread.
17th century Iran. 49H 2004 123.
William Morris was one of the most influential designers of the 19th century. His greatest achievements were in the field of textiles, and it was here that he gave most credit to the art of the Islamic world. As a young man, the Persian carpets at the Great Exhibition of 1851 were among the few products that he did not rail against. He later studied the collection at the South Kensington Museum in the hope of creating a new genre of home-grown carpets that could rival the Islamic world in their artistry. He never denied his debt to the East: "To us pattern-designers, Persia has become a holy land, for there in the process of time our art was perfected, and thence above all places it spread to cover for a while the world, east and west."

His knowledge of Persian carpets and textiles, in particular, was so extensive that he became an adviser to the South Kensington Museum on its acquisitions. In 1883 he accompanied a curator to Paris to acquire an important collection of Islamic textiles. His best-known initiative was tirelessly pushing for the purchase of the 16th century Ardabil carpet, which is now a focal point of the Victoria and Albert Museum. He praised its size and brilliance and then made a generous contribution to the public subscription for it.

Morris' personal collection included numerous Persian brocades (previous pages). Upon his death, the pall above the coffin was an Ottoman silk weaving. His carpets borrowed as freely from these sources as from Persian carpets. Known as 'Hammersmith' carpets (left), because of their original place of manufacture in west London, they are the pinnacle of the Arts and Crafts movement. They were extremely expensive at the time and remain so today. His wish to get back to the fundamentals of artisanship meant that he was physically involved in creating works that others at the time would have subcontracted to sweated labour. He used vegetable dyes, decrying the chemical alternatives that had become so prevalent: "a series of hideous colours, crude, livid – and cheap – which every person of taste loathes."

Embroidered woolen shawl, circa 1830. [Source 1: PH 2000/232]
Over the centuries, Islamic dress styles have made a limited entry into Western wardrobes. Among the most important cultural imports was the banyan coat, an essential garment for gentlemen of style during the 18th century. The Kashmir shawl arrived soon after, becoming the most wearable Asian accessory that has ever reached Europe.

The Kashmir shawl received its Continental seal of approval when the Empress Josephine went on a buying spree in the early 1800s. They had been sought after in England before this, but Josephine’s fanaticism for this versatile piece of apparel was a decisive factor in its popularity. She didn’t merely drape them round her shoulders, she also had them cut into dresses.

The cost of the shawls was enormous, as would be expected of a cloth that could take more than a year for three men to make. Demand throughout Europe grew so rapidly that cheaper imitations were made in France and Britain. France was the biggest market for original Kashmir shawls, although they were an integral part of fashion throughout northern Europe. The most famous weaving centre was the Scottish town of Paisley, which gave its name to the pattern incorporating the ’boteh’ motif.

The export market for authentic Kashmir shawls from India was eventually destroyed. At the Delhi Exhibition of 1903, the handbook complained: “The shawl weavers of India look entirely to India as their market and it was perhaps an unfortunate circumstance that they ever established a continental market for their goods.”

The appeal of the original Kashmir shawls lay as much in their design as in the luxurious softness of the fabric. Botan patterns had become a part of the European textile industry before the arrival of these shawls which became an emblem of Oriental exotism. They have continued to influence media as diverse as 19th century wallpaper and American gang bandanas of the 1980s. The legendary paintwork of John Lennon’s Rolls Royce, which was supposedly decorated with paisley in 1967, turns out to be less botah filled than is often reported.

Silk and wool shawl, mid-19th century, France

1. George Watt, Indian Art at Delhi: 1903, Delhi, 1903, p.346
The origins of marbled paper are keenly contested. Some attribute this useful and decorative art to Holland or Germany. It is certain that by 1642 the French had recipes for marbling, without giving credit to anyone else. Before that, the English philosopher and statesman Francis Bacon had given an early description of marbling: "The Turks have a pretty art of chambleting of paper, which is not with us. They take divers oiled colours and put them severally in drops, upon water; and stir the water lightly, and then wet their paper, being of some thickness with it, and the paper will be waved and veined, like chamblet or marble." He was more generous in his estimation of the Ottoman empire's creative abilities than its nurturing of healthy habits: "The Turks are great sitters, and seldom walk."

The art of paper marbling, or 'ebu' in Turkish, is among the Islamic world's most enduring gifts to Europe. The French book (left) was printed in 1867, when marbling had continued to be indispensable for endpapers but was increasingly used for book covers as well. Inevitably, the Great Exhibition of 1851 launched innovative new techniques.

I. Francis Bacon, Sykes Sylvester, 1627, reprinted London, 1826, p. 192.