CHAPTER THREE

The End of Romance
A new century doesn’t always mark a new era. The Victorian age ended before the death of the Queen-Empress in 1901, and the image of grim-but-eminent Victorians had always been a myth anyway. This was especially true of Victoria herself, who was apparently a fun-loving woman before widowhood gave her a different mission in life.

The Belle Epoque had begun in the late 19th century, embodied in the liberated look of Art Nouveau. The part played by Islamic art in this was significant but less obvious than the presence of Japan. While the Islamic world continued to influence artists and aesthetes, most of the glamour lived on in popular entertainment. Theatres and cinemas in the West acquired names that evoked the Arabian Nights and the sensual mystery of the harem.

In many parts of the world, the Islamic heritage was returned to its people, repackaged but recognisably connected with the past. In Malaysia, Kuala Lumpur’s central railway station was designed by a British architect in a style that has been described as everything from Moorish to Mughal to Neo-Saracenic. In the same neighbourhood there are still shop-houses embellished on the outside with tiles that have a distinctly Moorish/Mughal/Neo-Saracenic look. Most of these were exported from England or Italy in the early 20th century and owe more to the inspiration of William De Morgan than to the direct intervention of Islamic design.

At the other end of the cultural spectrum, Islamic art began to attract serious scholarship in the twilight of the 19th century. ‘Persian’ no longer meant anything that might have had a Muslim provenance. Most of the early academic input came from the Germanic parts of Europe, where art history in general was being developed. Vienna was at the centre of this movement: ‘It is hard to recapture now the heady flavour of
that school in the years around 1900. The names of great Islamic-art historians became more widely known at this time, although little of Creswell’s and Kuhnel’s academic fervour was transmitted to artists and designers. Most members of the creative community were oblivious to the antiquarian happenings at museums and universities. They were, however, aware of the pioneering exhibitions that were happening in Europe at that time.

There is no overall consensus on when the first ‘Islamic-art’ exhibition was held. For one thing, that term was not used a hundred years ago; it was either ‘Moslem’ or ‘Mohammadan’ art. Most observers in the early 20th century saw the turning point as being the 1903 ‘Exposition des Arts Musulmans’ at the Musée des Arts Décoratifs in Paris. Organised by the French scholar Gaston Migeon, it attracted artists, many of whom were affected by the experience. Henri Matisse was the most famous of these visitors, although he was so impoverished that he had found work as a handyman at the same venue a couple of years earlier preparing another exhibition. Matisse, like the other visitors, would never have seen such a large assemblage of Islamic artefacts before. Seven years later there was an even larger exhibition, this time in Munich, and once again it was credited with changing the outlook of the mainly German and Austrian artists who visited.

These exhibitions altered the perceptions of everyone who experienced them. The 1910 Munich show went further than anything before it by discarding as much as possible of the Arabian Nights mystique. The display was in the Modernist mode of the time, with white walls and few distractions from the artefacts. Commercial interests were getting in on the act, too. The New York dealer D.K. Kelekian modified his style of advertising after this promotion of 1899: “To visit Kelekian’s is to live an hour in the enchanted atmosphere of the Arabian nights.” By 1910 the approach had been transformed into extolling artistry rather than romance: “My object in selecting the specimens which make up my collection has been to establish the right of the Persian potteries to be regarded as one of the powerful artistic impulses of all time.”

In the pre-1914 years of the 20th century there were at least three major exhibitions of Islamic art. This interest continued over the following decades, but slowly wound down in the 1950s. An informal survey of the amount of attention given to the subject was conducted by the art historian Basil Gray in 1984. By analysing the extent of the coverage given to Islamic art in the pages of the Burlington Magazine, Gray established that in the preceding 30 years there had been only four articles. In contrast, there were 62 articles in the first 30 years of the century, Gray also used his writing to engage in the scholarly pursuit of disparaging other writers.

Gray’s statistics give a fair impression of the interest that society— and artists— have taken in Islamic art. For the 20th century, almost all of the influence was during the first few decades. It was the decorative arts that continued to feel the full benefit of Islamic inspiration. Among ‘fine’ artists the impact was less visible than in the previous century, and that

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1. Robert Hillebrand, Magazines, Volume I, Leiden, 1991, p.23. The author emphasised the difference of these days with “…there was no need to contend with the dead weight of established authority.”
4. Basil Gray, Islamic Art at the Burlington, The Burlington Magazine, London, 1986, p.484. Among his victims is Edgard Blochet: “The editors could not have foreseen that he would use this opportunity for the first of his many derogatory attacks on Muslim manuscript illumination.”
was already quite limited. Matisse is the most prominent European painter to have acknowledged a debt to Islamic art. His long-time rival, Picasso, as usual chose to take the opposite route. Although raised in Spain, it is hard to find much evidence of Islamic awareness in Picasso’s work. Some of his painted pottery shares characteristics with early Persian ceramics, but these are hardly the Islamic wares that he would have been exposed to.

So, while Matisse kept moving south in search of sun, sensuality and inspiration, Picasso headed north and happily left behind whatever Moorish roots he may have started with. After Matisse’s second major encounter with Islamic art, at the 1910 Munich exhibition, he travelled to southern Spain. The new Islamic elements in Matisse’s work are not immediately striking. The subject matter is often a continuation of that old Orientalist favourite, the Odalisque. Some of his paintings have the quality of a Persian or Mughal miniature but the link is tenuous, as is the suggestion that the artist created a harem-like rapport between himself and his sitters.

The missing ingredient that Matisse added to the Orientalist formula was a new approach to decoration. Colour become more intense and pattern flatter. Islamic textiles and ceramics appear not only in his work but are a mirror to his technique. Later, when he was pioneering his paper cut-outs, the similarities with the tessellated tilework that he had seen at the Alhambra became unmistakable. The use of positive and negative space has much in common with the Nasrid approach.

The time that Matisse spent in Spain and Morocco changed him permanently, but these were not the first alien influences in his paintings. In 1912 he had worked in Moscow, absorbing some of Russia’s icon traditions. These remained with him to some extent, but it was his contact
with the Islamic world that transformed Matisse into Picasso’s only true competitor for the crown of 20th century art.

One of the few other great European artists of the 20th century to have admitted his link to Islamic art was also a visitor at the 1910 Munich exhibition. Wassily Kandinsky was living in Munich at the time and was inspired by the miniature paintings he saw at the exhibition, as well as at the Kaiser Friedrich Museum in Berlin: “In these breathtaking compositions, everything that art needs, even today, is treated freely, purposefully, while the superfluous is set aside with equal freedom, simplicity, and naturalness.”

Whilst it was the freedom and exuberance of Islamic designs that made such a deep impression on Matisse and Kandinsky, the Dutch artist M.C. Escher found another dimension entirely. After visiting the Alhambra, he came away fascinated by the symmetry and mathematical ingenuity. The works he created, based on these principles, are among the most absorbing of the 20th century and stand entirely in a category of their own. Recently, the same principles have been exciting mathematicians. Marcus du Sautoy’s Finding Moonshine has become an unlikely bestseller, using his examination of tile symmetry at the Alhambra. After a long search within the Islamic palace, du Sautoy managed to find every one of the seventeen types of possible symmetrical transformation that exist in two dimensions.

Within the community of artists, rather than celebrity mathematicians, it is the romantic associations with Islamic art that have been the most inspirational. Orientalist painters of the Victorian era...

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continued their work well into the 20th century, almost all continued to paint in an entirely Western manner. Among the exceptions are artists who were only borderline Orientalists anyway, such as Matisse, Kandinsky and Paul Klee. The number of Muslim artists who ever joined the genre is extremely small. By far the most significant of them was Osman Hamdi Bey, an Ottoman aristocrat who combined painting with formative efforts as a museum curator and preserver of heritage. His work was very much in the Western style, although he did make use of more original subject matter than his European and American counterparts. His most famous painting is The Tortoise Tamer, in the Pera Museum, Istanbul. Fascinating though the composition is, it doesn’t appear to have started any new trends in the West.

With the decorative arts, a wide range of Islamic-inspired material continued to be made in the 20th century. Art Nouveau was the dominant style until the First World War, which meant that the classic ‘whiplash’ curve of Ottoman art survived for a while longer. Luxury goods companies were often the prime movers, with names like Cartier and Chaumet becoming as important to style in Europe as Tiffany was in America. After Art Nouveau was replaced by Art Deco, these companies still brought Islamic designs to the inlaid-ebony table.

The proprietors of these noble houses were often dedicated collectors of Islamic art. Just as Louis Comfort Tiffany acquired artworks from all over North Africa and the Middle East, his namesake at the house of Cartier had built up a respected collection of Persian miniature paintings. Louis Cartier’s connoisseurship was publicised in America when his miniatures were sent to New York for a major exhibition at the Metropolitan Museum of Art. At the same time, Cartier was creating a variety of items for the international beau monde. Themes included Chinese, Japanese, ancient Egyptian and Islamic art, all of which were collected as original artefacts as well as in their new form of cigarette cases, vanity cases and swizzle sticks.

Being a collector was a highly competitive activity in the early 20th century, as it had been in the late 19th, and not so different from the rivalry between art-loving hedge-fund managers of the early 21st century. Nowadays the competition for Islamic artefacts is much less visible than for contemporary paintings, but a hundred years ago the super-rich of America fought for prizes such as Mamluk enamelled glass. By the time of the Great Depression there were opportunities for a new generation of collectors, some of whom ensured that Islamic art would influence the contemporary art of their time.

One of the most dedicated collectors of Islamic art in the 20th century was Doris Duke. The tobacco heiress, known in her childhood as the richest girl in the world, collected widely. It is her Islamic works that have become her greatest testimonial, along with the stunning Hawaiian setting in which they are placed. Some of Duke’s acquisitions were made when the newspaper tycoon William Randolph Hearst was forced to sell a large part of his collection in the 1930s. Unlike the Citizen Kane characters of the age, Duke took a real interest in her artefacts and liked to discuss them with art historians, including the leading scholar of the time, Arthur Upham Pope. She was evidently proud of the star attractions: “The high spot, the focal point of the house...is the thirteenth-century

Overshot: The Turkish Room at Doris Duke’s Shangri-La was the perfect setting for more than Ottoman art. A Persian ‘tear vase’ is visible on the shelves to the left. Photograph courtesy of the Doris Duke Foundation for Islamic Art.
luster tile mihrab, which is as important historically as it is artistically. 

Duke's passion for the subject moved her to commission a vast amount of contemporary material to create an appropriate setting for her collection, which exists now under the name of the Doris Duke Foundation for Islamic Art. She had tiles made in India, Iran and Morocco; for more precious things she went to the jeweller Fulco di Verdura. The Sicilian duke, who had relocated to New York, made extraordinary jewellery that included re-workings of Mughal designs. Among his most memorable creations are brooches of warriors on camelback, inspired by Indian chess pieces.

Islamic art was never far from a high-society setting in the early decades of the 20th century. The Orientalist urge made this aesthetic form lot more fun than most of the sober alternatives, and its two-dimensional character encouraged endless couturier possibilities. At the most expressive extreme were the creations of Leon Bakst for the Ballets Russes. These extravagantly Oriental costumes had an immediate effect on society as a whole: for the clothes designer Paul Poiret they provided the impetus for an entirely new approach to fashion. Poiret had already acquired a taste for Persian miniature paintings, which he had seen at the Victoria and Albert Museum. He turned his liberating fashion ideas from the Islamic world into a lifestyle experience, holding parties that were talked about for decades. He reminisced: "People saw me in the back of the room, looking like a white-bearded swarthy sultan, holding an ivory-handled whip."

Poiret's mantle was later taken up by the recently deceased Yves St Laurent. In the 1970s St Laurent used Arab fashion for men and women in the same way that Poiret had done for women only. The burnous was a favourite item. St Laurent had a longstanding interest in North Africa, the land of his birth. His property portfolio included the one-time home of the French artist Jacques Majorelle, who had created a unique garden at his house in Morocco, which also included a small Islamic-art museum.

An earlier fashion legend who had looked to many different cultures was Mariano Fortuny. Islamic textiles and ceramics were his prime sources of inspiration, which was almost inevitable for a designer who worked in Venice. Originally from Spain, Fortuny's exposure to Moorish patrimony came early. His father, a famous painter, had bought one of the most illustrious early Alhambra vases for a large sum and later donated it to the Hermitage Museum.

Another dynastic name that has enjoyed enduring popularity is Carlo Bugatti. The father of Ettore and Rembrandt Bugatti -- the car manufacturer and the sculptor -- Carlo was one of the most original furniture designers of the late 19th and early 20th centuries. His inspiration was mainly Islamic, but not in the imitative, ivory-inlaid way that was popular in Europe at the time. He avoided copies and pastiches; instead he incorporated elements of Islamic design into his work, such as muqarnas effects and horseshoe arches, often using unusual materials. Vellum was a speciality. Unlike so many artists throughout history, he was not a collector. Nor did he travel, although he did engage in occasional reluctant networking at trade fairs.

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6 Doris Duke, quoted by Sharon Litten, Doris Duke's Shangri La, Honolulu, 2002, p.39
7 Paul Poiret, En habillant l'Exposition, Paris, 1930, p.74

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It is a mark of how pervasive the motifs of the Islamic world were at Bugatti's time that he could absorb them without any conscious
effort. They had become universal by then, and this ubiquity must have lessened the sense of adventure that they once stirred in the fettered hearts of the European bourgeoisie. From the middle of the 20th century, the genre became as outdated as the music halls with increasingly irrelevant names like the Alhambra or Granada. When creative souls found inspiration in Islamic art, they were not looking at the recycled grammar of ornament.

For an architect like Le Corbusier (Charles-Édouard Jeanneret-Gris), it was something more spiritual that he acquired on his travels around the Mediterranean and India. The Blue Mosque in Istanbul made a lasting impression: “Stambul was burning like a demonic offering, I heard them in their poignant mysticism before Allah, such hope! And I adored everything about them: their muteness and rigid expression, their supplication to the Unknown, and the mournful credo of their beautiful prayers... Immense domes enclose the mystery of closed doors, minarets soar triumphantly skyward against the whitewash of high walls dark green cypressals... facing the Blue Mosque.”

With these thoughts in his mind, Le Corbusier set about designing one of the most admired churches of the 20th century: Notre-Dame-du-Haut at Ronchamp was completed in 1954 and follows the same principles of light and space that he had observed in Istanbul. It was a unique experiment for the architect whose usual style was deliberately mechanical. As with the Blue Mosque, however, he found the setting at Ronchamp charged with a divine power that he could not overcome.

There are almost no other household names of the 20th century who owe much to the Islamic world—albeit for a short time in the case of Le Corbusier. Paul Klee’s colour grids are probably relevant, as are some of De Kooning’s arabesques, but as usual it is the applied arts that have maintained an enduring union with the past. Potters such as Alan and Nick Caiger-Smith have kept traditions such as lusteware alive. Glassmakers have also delved into the treasury of the Iranian past to revive techniques that were, in many cases, descended from classical antiquity. Book binders look to Islamic examples as much as they did seven hundred years ago.

The link between the fine arts and the Islamic world looks as weak as it always has done. The difference now is that Muslim artists are creating art that the Western world can recognise as ‘fine’. The ‘Orient’ is not the economically imperilled entity that it once was, and there is a growing market for works from the Middle East in particular. A hundred years ago, Osman Hamdi Bey was just about the only Muslim artist working in a Western medium. Nowadays, almost every Muslim artist is working in media that would increasingly have to be considered global. Perhaps there will eventually be celebrated painters and sculptors from the Islamic world who win over the West in the same way that their anonymous artisan ancestors once did.


B. Le Corbusier, Journey to the East, Cambridge MA, 1987, p. 3.
There are many similarities between the Tiffany & Co. coffee pot (left) and the earlier ewer created by Jules Brateau (page 125). America had embraced Orientalism almost as enthusiastically as Europe, and Tiffany understood both. The pattern book entry is “coffee pot, Turkish”, although the style is more Thousand and One Nights. By the time this ensemble was made (1891–1902), Louis Comfort Tiffany’s personal studio was the embodiment of this Orientalist spirit, described in 1884 as, “a dream of Arabian Nights in New York”. The Middle East had made a lasting impression on L.C. Tiffany and on his father’s firm.

The coffee pot was almost certainly made for the domestic market, as American ateliers and retailers were less closely connected than their European competitors to Middle Eastern customers. This tray, unlike the Brateau ewer, has indentations for six cups and was perhaps actually used for drinking coffee.

As a re-creation of Turkish metalwork, the Tiffany material is more plausible than Brateau’s pewter. Silver was popular in the 19th century Ottoman empire, and tombak (gilded copper, as in the covered bowl above) has a much longer history.

1. Charles de Kay, Art and Decoration 3, New York, October 1911, p. 472
"Saracen" cabaret service by G. Paulding Farnham.
Silver gilt with pearl and enamel. 1902-1905, USA.
Copyright Tiffany & Co. Archives 2011.
G. Paulding Farnham is remembered as one of Tiffany and Co’s greatest jewellers. His proudest moment was winning the gold medal for Tiffany at the Paris Exposition of 1889 with his orchid jewel. As with Louis Comfort Tiffany, Farnham was trained by the leading silversmith of the day, Edward C. Moore. Moore’s influence not only extended to different media but to a wide variety of cultures, ranging from Burmese to Viking.

The style on which Farnham worked most closely with Moore was the ‘Saracenic’. This was still a popular term in the late 19th century and was applied with optimism to products such as the ‘cabaret service’ (previous pages). ‘Saracenic’ usually described the sort of Islamic metalwork that Moore bequeathed to the Metropolitan Museum of Art in 1891. His collection of inlaid brass from 13th-14th century Mesopotamia and the Levant became a cornerstone of the New York museum’s superb holdings of Islamic art.

Despite the name, those much earlier wares can hardly be considered a model for Farnham’s interpretation. He seems to have looked more at Ottoman forms, which in the 19th century were heavily mixed with European aesthetics. The set from 1902-1905 shows his origins as a jeweller-designer: it is made from gilded silver with green enamel and interlaced ovals of pearls. The pearls are an especially novel feature. These had long been part of the Tiffany identity and were much loved by American society. Consumption remained conspicuous during the early 20th century and was most visible in elaborate tea parties and after-dinner coffee rituals.

Inspiration for the shape and the name of the coffee pot, which cost a colossal US$775 a century ago, can be found in the Islamic Arts Museum Malaysia ewer (left). This is a rare ‘Veneto-Saracenic’ work with matching dish from 15th-16th century Italy. There was extensive cultural interchange between Venice and the Mamluk empire at this time, leading to sumptuous brass creations with silver inlay. The IAMM ewer is a superior example made from gilded metal.

Vase, gilded and enamelled glass,
early 20th century, Italy. IAMM 1998.2.293

In the later decades of the 19th century, European glass-makers were influenced more by Islamic motifs than shapes. There were exceptions: the Alhambra vase still made innumerable appearances in a variety of inventive forms, and Fatimid rock-crystal ewers were convincingly re-created by Baccarat. Accurate reproductions of Mamluk glass continued to be made, but the emphasis came to be more on following the principles of Islamic ornament.

The Italian vase (left) from the early 20th century is a last flowering of its era. Although there is a hint of the Alhambra about it, the gilded and enamelled surface provides the strongest link with the Islamic world. There is the proliferation of arabesques and the abhorrence of empty space that Western observers believed to be integral to Eastern decoration. Bands of decorative calligraphy are another borrowed element, in this case they are pseudo-calligraphy.

The main inspiration for the Islamic Arts Museum Malaysia vase seems to have been Mamluk. Gilded glass was one of that empire’s most notable contributions, as was the use of heraldic devices within roundels. The brass tray above includes many of the same features.