Iridescent glass bottle, 10th-12th century
Inv. JMM 2003.48

Glass bottle, 12th-13th century
Inv. JMM 2007.2.11
Iridescence on Islamic glass was an unintentional source of inspiration to Western decorative artists. Although the mother-of-pearl effect was not part of the original finish, it filled 19th century European collectors with delight. Persian glass, such as the medieval bottle (page 184) in the Islamic Arts Museum Malaysia, remains among the most collectable types of glass ever created. This accident of silica accumulation due to weathering was equally intriguing to glass-makers, who were encouraged by popular demand to become more adventurous in the second half of the 19th century.

The Islamic world became a favourite muse for glass makers. Louis Comfort Tiffany was the most well-known exponent in America. After developing a new form of surface decoration obtained by immersing glass in metallic oxides, he named his innovation ‘Favrile’ and patented it in 1894. Among European ateliers, Vilmos Zsolnay was the closest rival to Tiffany. His ‘Eosin’ glaze was a remarkable, albeit less well-marketed answer to the demand for iridescence.

The vase (left), named ‘Spirit of the Sea’, was intended as a tribute to Japanese art, recalling the grandeur of Hokusai’s ‘Great Wave’. However, the surface treatment is in the tradition of Islamic archaeological finds, an area that fascinated Zsolnay. His great passion, as with every designer of the late 19th century, was lustre ceramics, along with the obligatory interest in Alhambra vases. Lustre was another interest. At the 1889 Paris exhibition he was dazzled by the metallic glazes developed by Clément Massier for ceramics. Within a few years he had developed an equally rich effect on glass at his workshop in Pécs, Hungary. Before this, he had been collecting Kashan lustre tiles from the Istanbul bazaar, as can be seen from his correspondence of 1887.

The Hungarian’s contribution to Art Nouveau in Europe was immense. He consciously sought out influences from the Islamic world, although he attributed almost every artistic achievement to Persia, unaware of the Ottoman achievement that existed in his own homeland.

1 Vilmos Zsolnay letter of 3rd November 1887, Archives of Janus Pannonius Museum
J. & L. Lobmeyr was Austria’s leader in glassware inspired by the Islamic world. While some of the company’s output was exported to the Middle East, its main market was in Europe. The company’s Arabic inscriptions were very accurate and often accompanied by a German translation on the base. The glass drinking vessel (left) in the Islamic Arts Museum Malaysia is written in Turkish, rather than Arabic, and does not have a translation. It was probably made for a patron in the Ottoman empire, Austria’s ally during the First World War.

Along with Lobmeyr’s main rivals, the French firms of Brocard and Imberton, the re-creations of Islamic vessels often had little in common with Islamic originals apart from their spirit. Shapes and decoration were tinkered with extensively. The IAMM Lobmeyr glass conforms to no particular prototype, but the calligraphy suggests Mamluk origins. The effect of white on gold is reminiscent of Qur’anic surah headings and medallions (above). It is also similar to a Mamluk-revival art form that was popularised in the late 19th century. The Ottoman art of cut-out calligraphy led to the creation of works in which gold paper was cut so that the paper below made the words show up as white on a gold background.
Western aesthetics have been influenced less by the Malay Archipelago than by most other parts of the Islamic world. When Javanese art reached a north-western outpost of European culture in the late 19th century, it was through an indirect route. One of Glasgow's greatest architects and designers of the Art Nouveau era was Charles Rennie Mackintosh. Famous for his buildings and furniture, his less-celebrated career as a textile designer is represented by the furnishing fabric (above) printed by William Foxton in the 1920s.

In Mackintosh's Glaswegian circle was Jessie King, who introduced the batik technique to Scotland. Her approach, however, was pictorial, including complete panels with medieval themes. Another influence on Mackintosh was the Dutch artist Jan Toorop. Born in the Dutch East Indies of mixed Javanese and European ancestry, Toorop brought Southeast Asian culture to the Symbolist movement that was so prominent in Europe during the late 19th century.

After leaving Glasgow, Mackintosh briefly turned his diverse talents to the field of textiles. His commissions came mainly from two companies: William Foxton and Selton. Using roller-printing techniques, the company retained the look of block-printed cloths such as Javanese batik (left).

From 1917 to 1920 Mackintosh created designs that made full use of his ability with rhythmic abstraction and colour contrast. He was not the only European fabric designer to adapt the look of batik. Getting right to the source was Marie Gudme Leth, who lived in Java during the 1920s and brought this textile experience back to her native Denmark.
From 1912-1928 Raoul Dufy provided designs for the Lyons-based textile manufacturer Bianchini-Ferrier. This collaboration had been suggested by Paul Poiret, France’s leading couturier at the time. Poiret admired Persian miniatures and encouraged the bold colours and styles of Middle Eastern textiles, along with turbans and other Orientalist accessories. Dufy produced some of his most spectacular works at that time, although these are overshadowed by his paintings. Textiles were a novelty for the artist, but he grasped the medium immediately. His inspiration came from many sources, including China. In addition to using Chinese characters as part of his designs, he took much from the Islamic world. Geometric tilework features prominently, as do elements of Persian brocades and Central Asian ikats.

Commentators have written about his love of exuberant colour and floral motifs, but many of his designs are quite muted. He took his role as a fabric designer very seriously: “The composition of a textile design cannot be hurried...in a small drawing as with a large one, all the components must be organized, precisely calculated, working with one another.”

1. Raoul Dufy, translated from Le Roman des Tissus, Homleuer, 1993
Louis Comfort Tiffany was enamoured of the East. In 1881 he was described as a "very clever painter of oriental phenomena."

Although he never travelled as far as India, his friend Lockwood de Forest did. De Forest brought back many examples of Islamic art to add to the collection Tiffany had begun to form on his own travels.

Colour was what excited Tiffany most about the Islamic world: "The Orientals have been teaching the Occidentals how to use colours for the past 10,000 years or so." This was demonstrated most vividly in his glass wares. In comparison, the earrings above are an exercise in restraint from a time when Art Deco dictated a more pared-down approach. Even in India, the commissioning class was getting used to platinum settings and other subtleties of the modern age. Similar earrings were made 30 years later by another New York jeweller, David Webb, for the Islamic-art-collecting heiress Doris Duke.

Although the Tiffany earrings are reminiscent of Chinese jewellery of the early 20th century, they have more in common with Mughal jewellery. The stones are jadeite, rather than emeralds, but the setting and the shade of green come closer to Indian tradition.

---

2. L.C. Tiffany, talk given to Rembrandt Club, Brooklyn, 1917
Cartier of Paris, London and New York was a significant arbiter of taste in the early decades of the 20th century. Louis Cartier’s love of Islamic art was kindled by the 1903 exhibition at the Louvre, which was also visited by Henri Matisse. Both artists retained an interest in the subject. In 1931 Louis Cartier was one of the lenders to the Royal Academy’s exhibition of Persian art. China and Japan were other influences, along with ancient Egypt after the discovery of Tutankhamun’s tomb in 1922.

Cartier products of the late 1920s and early 1930s often have Persian or Mughal roots, usually derived from brocades and other textiles. The design and colours of the cigarette case above are taken from Kashan lustre tiles (left), acquiring an equally shimmering look with gold and enamel. The motifs include rabbits and leaping gazelles from other sources, along with the floral arabesques that Cartier usually avoided.

A music box with a similar design started on the drawing board with Persian inscriptions around the side. This ambitious exercise in epigraphy seems to have been abandoned on the finished item.

---

1. This exhibition made a lasting impression on Paris, as expressed by the art critic E. Blochet: “The exhibition...afforded an opportunity such as is rarely given of studying the art of the Moslem nations.” Burlington Magazine, London, July 1903, p. 132.
Unlike some of the more literal reworkings of Iznik wares, Jean-Jacques Lachenalet his imagination loose on this dish (left). It features a frieze-like procession of animals in a pursuit formation that is found mostly in Persian art. The large beast at the centre of the dish creates a look that is different from both Persian and Ottoman menageries. The British Museum flask above, on loan to the Islamic Arts Museum Malaysia, shows an informal hunt scene in colours that are the reverse of the Lachenalet dish. Blue floral devices are a prominent feature of the later work, echoing very similar Iznik motifs that appear in white and red. A human-headed simurgh provides an unusually Persian touch to the Ottoman work. The king from the Parliament of Birds is absent from the 20th century French version.
Smoking was a habit closely associated with the Middle East. After the languid pleasures of the huqqa, cigarettes became an integral part of fast-moving high society in the early decades of the 20th century. Turkish tobacco maintained the association with the Islamic world. The easy-going approach that had made 19th century 'Arab-style' smoking rooms a popular male retreat is also reflected in the Chaumet cigarette case above.

In the 20th century women acquired the habit too, and they needed cigarette cases. These became highly personalised accessories. On the Chaumet case, the figure on the left is wooing a lady not with a professed cigarette but with music. The setting follows the romantic whimsy of later Persian art, which is also apparent in the Qajar tile (left) in the Islamic Arts Museum Malaysia. The princely individual in a flower-filled garden may be all alone in this part of the tile panel, but love is in the air.

During the 1920s numerous Islamic themes emerged among Europe's suppliers of expensive accessories. These included crescents and stylised palm leaves, which were popularised by Princess Stirbey, the Romanian arbiter of taste. While other influences came from China and Japan, it was Islamic art that provided an enigmatic glamour. The enigma led Western interpreters into confusion with details such as the Maghribi battlements and horseshoe arch imported into an Iranian setting on the Chaumet cigarette case.
Symmetry Drawing 625 by M.C. Escher, 1939.
Copyright M.C. Escher Company B.V.

Set of four tiles, underglaze-painted Iznik.
Toledo, Spain, circa 1475-1525. RMNH 2004.12.11.
During the 19th century, the Alhambra revolutionised Western thinking on Islamic art. By the 20th century its impact had been lessened considerably. The modern artist who was most consistently influenced by the work of Andalusia was Maurits Cornelis Escher. The Dutch draughtsman's name may often be overlooked but his work is to be found everywhere, especially on posters and calendars. His interest in representing the infinite led to a fascination with the tilework at the Alhambra.

Escher's first visit to southern Spain was in 1922. The impression this made on him was significant. The drawings known as 'Regular Division of the Plane' show the importance of the mathematical principles he had analysed at the Alhambra. He often gave credit to the inspiration he found there but was intrigued by what he believed to be an absence of figural motifs: "This does not detract from the beauty and ingenuity of their creation...it is important to discover whether there are actually reasons why figurative representations are not found anywhere."

He was only half right in this assumption. Although the tilework is non-figural, the Alhambra has a wide variety of figural images, from birds and boars to human beings. There is also an abundance of knot work that has hardly been examined by Islamic-art historians, or by Escher. His great interest was tessellations - shapes repeated without gaps or overlapping. These are grounded in mathematics and were created in greater abundance at the Alhambra than almost anywhere in the Islamic world.

Other geometrical forms also fascinated Escher. The group of four tiles from Toledo in the Islamic Arts Museum Malaysia displays the same advanced geometry that inspired Escher with new ways of dividing the plane. Despite incorporating animals into his never-ending tessellations, he has kept the fluidity of the originals from Islamic Spain. He also maintained that culture's love of geometry: "I often seem to have more in common with mathematicians than my fellow artists."

1. M.C. Escher, Regular Division of the Plane, 1957, p.162