Coffee drinking took hold of Europe during the 17th century. The Western versions of coffee vessels differed increasingly from those of the Islamic world, which had been the original prototypes. Some European companies have consistently gone back to the roots of the habit, including Villeroy & Boch, which was always open to inspiration from the Ottoman empire.

The coffee pot above has much in common with an Ottoman vessel like the 19th century silver example (left) in the Islamic Arts Museum Malaysia. As with most functional Western adaptations of Islamic wares in the 19th and 20th centuries, Villeroy & Boch tended to avoid calligraphy. Shapes and designs were easier to copy and less likely to cause offence if they were exported back to the Middle East. Less predictably, artefacts from the Islamic world sometimes included calligraphic inscriptions with little apparent meaning. The IAMM Ottoman coffee pot has a repetition of words that were seemingly incorporated for their decorative quality.
Pair of albarelli. Laterò ceramic, Italy (13th century).
The allure of the albarello has continued into the 21st century. Contemporary potters have preserved a form whose roots lie in the Middle East and Islamic Spain, combining it with the lustre technique that was revived in the mid-20th century by Alan Caiger-Smith. His son Nick has developed this approach further using wood-fired kilns and a variety of lustre finishes.

The design on the albarello (left) is based on the tree of life. The theme of ‘life’ is appropriate for albarelli because of their long association with medicine. Archaeological evidence suggests that they have been used as apothecaries’ storage vessels since their shape was first devised. This is usually thought to be 12th century Syria but might be 100 years earlier in Iran.

When Europe adopted the concept of Islamic hospitals and medical treatises, the albarello was not forgotten. Its waisted form made it easy to grasp on shelves that were crammed with similar vessels. This was as sumptuous a medium of ceramics as Europe had ever seen. From Italy its brilliance travelled to the rest of Europe. This shape became common in England too, where Nick Caiger-Smith is continuing a tradition established centuries ago. His lustre glaze owes more to Islamic Spain than to the bright primary colours of Italian maiolica that spread throughout Europe.

England’s place in this international trade is uncertain but may have started in the 16th century with the arrival of specialist potters from Antwerp. There have been lively exchanges between scholars on the subject. Large numbers of albarelli were excavated when laying the foundations of London’s building boom in the late 19th century. In 1905, C.H. Wylie wrote: “Mr Henry Wallis in his latest work, ‘The Albarello’, boldly and unhesitatingly claims for them an Italian origin. He further goes on to say: ‘The Italian writers on maiolica will smile when they hear that these particular albarelli were labelled in English museums and collections ’Lambeth Delft’.” Wylie then shows how they were indeed from London, although not necessarily from Lambeth.

Lustre basin, circa 15th century.
Lustreware has been a source of fascination in Europe for centuries. Perhaps the most famous reviver of an art that found its greatest expression in the Islamic world was the 19th century English potter William De Morgan. From his southwest London workshop, this friend of William Morris is credited with recreating the lustre technique that had been lost for several centuries. In fact, the shiny metallic finish was still being produced during the 18th century in Spain. Valencia, near the medieval lustreware capital Manises, had lost some of its Hispano-Moresque magnificence by this time. Although the definitive historian Alice Frothingham referred to the output as “folkcraft”, the shimmering effect caused by the exchange of alkali and metallic ions remained as eye-catching as ever. The 18th century Valencian lustre basin (previous pages) in the Islamic Arts Museum Malaysia is valuable for its transmission of earlier forms, many of which have been lost.

Lustreware has continued to be an inspiration for potters around the world. Alan and Nick Caiger-Smith, who brought the tradition into the 21st century, have looked extensively at the Persian contribution. The image of a figure on a horse (left) uses a copper oxide that is close to the Spanish palette, but the subject matter is from the Iranian world. Equestrian themes were inevitable among a people with a proud nomadic past. The Caiger-Smith Persian nobleman is very similar to the 13th century IJAMM bowl above, including the dappled horses and scrollwork background.

It is still common for artists of the Islamic world to use geometry as the basis of their paintings, but there are few non-Muslims who have taken the same path into the 21st century. The American artist Thaddeus Beal is among the more-acclaimed exponents, consciously using mathematical principles and incorporating modern concepts such as 'chaos theory'. His quest for the infinite took a new direction after being inspired by a visit to North Africa in 2002.

The Egyptian Mamluk doors (left) from the Metropolitan Museum of Art display the same concern with the infinite. Many of Beal’s works in colour rival the rich, sculptural qualities of these doors, which are made from wood with ivory inlay.

While Beal’s paintings and prints appear close to disorder, the geometry of the 14th century woodwork is a masterpiece of control. Despite their strict precision, the doors still have a timeless, dynamic quality.
Gregor Schneider’s Cube Venice 2005 (above) is the most visible interpretation of Islam’s holiest site by a contemporary Western artist. As the title of the work suggests, it was intended to be displayed in Venice. This seemed the most appropriate setting, as for many centuries “La Serenissima” provided the entry point into Europe of so much Islamic culture. The cube was supposed to convey what Schneider described as, “the awe inspired by such an enigmatic and impenetrable volume.” The artist intended, “the project to show where the modern Western world is based and connected.”

The Ka’aba also exerted an indirect influence on Russia’s most renowned 20th century artist Kazimir Malevich experimented ceaselessly with black cubes in his paintings and other works, believing that they represented the “Fourth dimension.”

In an Islamic-art context, images of the Ka’aba are found in numerous media. Most often they were used for illustrating literary works such as the Dala’il al-Khayrat wa al-Shawariq (“Indications of blessings and rising lights in mentioning the prayer on the chosen Prophet.”) The illustration (left) shows the Ka’aba at its simplest.

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1. Gregor Schneider, personal correspondence, November 2007