The Ottoman ceiling panel in the Islamic Arts Museum Malaysia (previous pages) is part of a complex era of cultural cross-fertilisation. From the 18th century, the Ottomans sought out European art and crafts as avidly as Europe enjoyed ‘turqueries’. By the 19th century, almost all the influence was heading in an easterly direction. A hundred years later, visitors were constant in their criticism of the empire’s capital: “Arroios baroque draperies or colour-blind colour schemes.”

The IAMM ceiling panel combines elements of Italian embroidery with classic Islamic design. At its centre is an eight-pointed star accompanied by other elements of geometry. All around are floral motifs. The colourful and exuberant nature of the work is in the tradition of Ottoman interiors, which were seldom sparing in their opulence. Ceilings tended to be the focal point of these rooms. Nowadays they receive a different sort of attention; the services of conservators are often required, as the nails and rivets used to attach different wooden components are prone to corrosion.

In the transmission of cultural influences, the IAMM ceiling panel has played a unique role as the model for a quilt that has gone on to win numerous awards in Europe, America and Australia. Titled 'Renaissance Revival' by its creator, Mariya Waters, the quilt took 17,000 hours to make. It was the multi-layered nature of the original work that inspired Waters. Incorporating embroidery, appliqué, couching and quilting the textile re-creation has almost as three-dimensional a quality as the ceiling panel, which is made of lacquered wooden panels. The sizes of both works are similar, at approximately 220 centimetres square.

Islamic art has continued to exercise a fascination over the widest variety of artists and craftsmen. A 21st century quilter, such as Waters, has been as open to the possibilities of Moresque tessellations as the great Dutch artist M.C. Escher was in the 20th century. This heritage of exchange goes back to the earliest years of Islam and seems likely to continue in some unexpected ways.

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1. Harrison Griswold Dwight, Constantinople Old and New, New York, pp. 15 and 251. The American visitor was kinder about another ceiling that he saw in an older house along the Bosporus: “This ceiling is the most precious thing of its kind in all Constantinople, if not in all the world.”
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