Arabic Typography: Call for a Cultural Rebirth

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Typography is one of the most widely spread forms of visual communication. It is so integrated into all aspects of our daily lives that we simply take it for granted.

Four years ago, I embarked on a journey to rediscover what I have taken for granted all my life, Arabic Letterforms. I was invited to act as an Arabic type consultant on behalf of a renowned Dutch design studio. However, my professional education and training in the US, as well as my years of experience in Europe and the Middle East, had ill prepared me for the problems I was about to encounter. The design commission consisted of bi-scriptural signage for the reconstructed area of Beirut’s Central District. Surprisingly, finding and selecting an Arabic font that is visually and technically appropriate for the design, became a daunting task. Firstly, the few fonts available on the market were either badly crafted or simply not befitting the visual style required by the design. There was no font that could harmoniously match a sans serif Latin type, and that was simple enough for use on large-scale signage. Secondly, the use of the fonts was limited by the typesetting software. I discovered that not all Arabic fonts can be used on all Desktop Publishing programs. Third, there was little information available regarding the historical background of each design, which often justifies the use of a particular typeface for a specific design application. I was faced with a frustrating situation, the like of which I had not previously encountered. I decided to turn this experience into a positive one.

I set about compiling a helpful guide and concise sourcebook on Arabic typography. Three years of research of a number of global resources and contacts followed. The book was finally published at the beginning of this year (fig.1). I trust that it will fulfil its ultimate goal, that is, to facilitate the work of designers practicing in the Arab world, and that it will serve as a source of inspiration for the new generation of type designers in the Middle East. The book has marked my call to

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1 Huda Smitshuijzen AbiFarès, Arabic Typography: A Comprehensive Sourcebook (London 2001); Saqi Books have kindly given permission to reproduce material from this book.
educate design students, and encourage them to attempt new design approaches for Arabic type.

I shall later outline the educational model I follow in the Arabic type design course I teach, and will elaborate with examples of the resulting case studies.

Typography is the Embodiment of a Culture’s Identity.

Typography has been regarded throughout history as an influential representation of the prosperity, the political and cultural authority of a state. Alphabets represent a strong form of cultural identity through their embodiment of a culture’s language, history and recorded thought. Their degeneration represents the degeneration of the culture itself. Like the Romans before them, the Arabs have seen their culture diminish in power and leadership, and that is clearly manifested in the state of the visual representation of their script. However, unlike the Romans, the Arabs have not seen their script evolve visually along the developments in printing and typesetting. Arabic calligraphy did not move forward after it was standardized in the tenth century. During that period many innovative designs followed, with the aim of beautifying the script to boff the Holy message it was meant to carry. Generally speaking, Arabic type today does not seem to be designed to meet the needs of contemporary design trends. It often conservatively emulates the past and alienates the younger generation of Arab designers.

The Problem with Emulating the Past.

When we limit our discussion of Arabic typography to historical facts, and we dogmatically follow the well-tread paths of the old masters, we are simply declaring the culture extinct. This is a far cry from the realities of design in the Arab world of today. Both design and the culture are very much alive, though their creative efforts are in a budding state. Clearly there are lasting lessons to learn from the past; however constructive discussions need to be concerned with the present and the future.

Visual culture has been stagnating in the Arab world for several centuries, owing to lack of enforcement of copyright laws, and lack of appreciation and funding of the visual arts. In addition, the suppression of freedom of expression strongly manifests itself in all forms of visual expression. The legacy of this long state of stagnation is a loss of confidence in the culture and all its identifying characteristics. Young designers in the Arab world shy away from their own culture because it fails to represent their complex modern identity. It is seen as repressive. It limits rather than fulfills their aspirations. This situation needs to change. It will only do so, when we assume the responsibility of taking creative risks that challenge the rules of the old establishment; of recognizing present realities of contemporary design and visual branding; of being ready to constantly question what we take for granted; and of setting the stage for constructive discussions around the subject of Arabic Type.

The ultimate emblem of Arabic culture.

The Shift from Calligraphy to Typography

Gutenberg’s invention of movable type in the fifteenth century, and the mass-produced books that resulted from this invention facilitated the dissemination of knowledge. It sparked a cultural revolution that transformed Europe; liberating creative energies and advancing every area of intellectual expression. This invention also marked the birth of typesetting and the shift from calligraphy to typography in the printing arts. Historically speaking, the concept of the modern implied an inevitable break with the past. For Latin type, this meant a clear dissociation from the calligraphic past had to take place, in order for typography to flourish in its own right. Latin type has since been visually evolving along with the technological advancements of each era.

This same shift from calligraphy to typography has yet to happen for Arabic type. The belated introduction of Arabic typographic printing into the Middle East has had no effect on the visual representation of the Arabic script. It is only natural that the first cut types would be modelled after fine examples of calligraphy — as can be seen in this comparison of Gutenberg’s fifteenth century Fraktur font used for the 42-line Bible, with Granjon’s sixteenth century Arabica Grande font cut in 1585 for the Stamperia Medicea in Rome (fig.2).2

Yet Arabic calligraphy did not eventually evolve into typography. In fact, the technical and aesthetic developments were minimal and slow. Led by Western manufacturers, Arabic type became an unimaginative copy of fine examples of

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2 Details of illustrations from Arabic Typography, a Comprehensive Sourcebook (London 2001), 48, 128.
handwritten scripts. Little was done to rejuvenate the design field with innovative typefaces. Arabic typography became merely a mechanized version of calligraphy.

Arabic type is at a critical point in its historical development where severing the ties with its glorious past is unavoidable. Arabic type is still stubbornly maintaining the values of its master calligraphers. It is not the copying of letters and aesthetic rules that need to be retained from the past, but rather the spirit of creative experimentation, and the pragmatic design solutions that show affinity with materials and media. With the technological possibilities available today, it is highly tempting to carry on emulating the past and to ignore issues of modernizing Arabic type design. Unfortunately, this is detrimental to the creative nature of typography, for the creative act is, by nature, an act of rebellion and adventure.

Twentieth Century Attempts for Reforming the Arabic Alphabet.

In the 1930s, and following the cultural Arab renaissance, a conference was held at the Academy of the Arabic Language in Cairo, with the agenda of reforming the Arabic language and its visual representation. Several proposals were submitted concerning the adaptation of the Arabic script to the modern means of typesetting.

The proposals were many and ranged from the outrageous (fig.4), to the more pragmatic solutions of reducing the character set to its absolute minimum (fig.5).

In fact this latter principal, though not officially adopted by the Academy, was later implemented for the Arabic typewriter keyboard. A similar Arabic keyboard, with minor modifications, is now applied to most PCs. Though a computer’s keyboard resembles that of the old typewriter, it has become capable of triggering complex commands that enable us to use a far larger set of characters than what can be visible on the keyboard itself (i.e. the Unicode character sets which can contain thousands of glyphs). Economy of space is no longer an issue for type design today; it is the aesthetic reform that demands attention.

3 The proposal of Yahya Boutenshe uses the Latin characters to represent the Arabic letters. Naori Khattar’s proposal is to create an Arabic alphabet that uses one shape variation per letter. Both proposals advocated non-connected Arabic letterforms, with the aim of simplifying the script and making it easier to learn (much like the Latin alphabet). Ibid., 73, 75.

4 The proposal of Ahmad Lakhir Ghazal was to reduce the amount of characters for typesetting without sacrificing much of the traditional letter shape variations. The system was named ASV-CONDAR (Arabic Standard Voyelle–Codage Arabe) the standard vocalized Arabic encoding systems for typewriters and typesetting machines. Ibid., 77.

The Educational Model for Arabic Type Design.

As the Arab nations fully embrace the new advancements in communication technologies, the need for serious professional involvement in type design is manifesting itself forcefully. Young Arab graphic designers are entering the field, and the need to provide them with a solid design background with respect to Arabic type is a pressing issue. At the dawn of every technological development, a need for setting new standards arises. This is never the work of one sole individual, but of a group effort of professionals sharing a common goal. It is precisely this degree of involvement, of past Arab calligraphers, which brought calligraphy to the high level of sophistication practiced from the tenth century onward. The tools of pen and ink, and the traditional dedication of calligraphers to their old masters, are no longer useful for type design; in fact, they may prove to be more of an obstacle. Arabic calligraphy is no longer sufficient for contemporary communication needs, or indeed appropriate for modern tools and media. Arabic calligraphic styles would not have developed, had the calligraphers not been progressive and experimental in adapting their script to the technological developments of their times. Every age has its requirements and its trends, and every medium its inherent aesthetics. Arabic type should be perceived, like any written script, as a collection of shapes designed to serve specific design objectives and media (fig.6). Arabic type should not be merely concerned with traditional book design; it should also find a way to retain its aesthetic livelihood on unforgiving computer screens. Arabic type needs to be adapted to the low-resolution limitations that require clarity and formal simplicity.

The reading process and intelligibility of letters are practically the same for all scripts, including Arabic. It is based on recognizing the skeletal shape of letterforms and interpreting them within a specific word context. This explains why people can read a text regardless of the type style, as long as the skeletal shapes of the letters are not dramatically altered (fig.3). Letters can only exist in co-dependent relationships and not as individual characters. Their interaction creates a much-needed dynamic
fluidity that facilitates the reading process. This characteristic is essential to Arabic letters, since their pairing with, and connection to their surrounding letters often defines their shapes. Their individual form cannot remain static due to the connectivity of the letters within words.

A new digital aesthetic for Arabic type needs to be created. Designing a typeface requires thorough understanding of abstract shapes, and the skill to interpret handwritten letters into drawn forms. It is not the copying of calligraphic strokes, but rather the drawing anew, that takes into consideration the limitations of where and how these letterforms will be used. There is a need for expressive experiments that challenge the established calligraphic rules and conventions. The academic environment is traditionally a fertile arena for such experimentation.

Considering the multilingual nature of visual communication in most Middle Eastern countries, bi-scriptural typography — the simultaneous use of Arabic and Latin scripts — has become mandatory for any qualitative education in this field. A course on Arabic type should be designed to create the right open-minded and experimental environment that encourages progressive thinking. The new educational model should not stress abiding by the absolute rules of the old masters, but should instead encourage learning through personal research, questioning and critical analysis. It should stress the importance of the physical experience of creation and self-expression.

On the practical level, it should provide students with a simple framework for the design process. First, a theoretical framework for discussion of the needs of contemporary Arabic typography, and the ways to investigate innovative design solutions, through:

1. a historical overview of the origins of the script, its aesthetic, social, and technological developments.
2. a discussion on the relation between aesthetic freedom and technical limitations.

It is equally important, to establish a set of practical guidelines and conventions for type design, such as:

1. a description of the anatomy of the letterforms (fig.7).  

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7 This nomenclature of the parts of Arabic letters is not an accepted convention since the calligraphic terms may be slightly different and far more detailed. Ibid., 181.

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2. a basic grid for overall proportional measurements of a typeface (fig.8).
3. a set of rules on the formal modification of letterforms for legibility in low-resolution digital environments.
4. a standard set of letters, words, and sentences for testing the feasibility of the design.
5. a basic knowledge of the software needed to execute the design.
6. a new type style classification based on functional applications rather than historical calligraphic models.

The students are encouraged to develop their design concepts based on researching examples of type design (both Arabic and Latin), and on experimenting with various drawing tools and techniques, other than the conventional pen and ink. The aim is to initiate a transformation from the calligraphic to the typographic aesthetic.

Here are some case studies:

1. Select, meaning ‘sharp’ in Arabic, is a hybrid display font that combines curvilinear forms enced in sharp-angled geometric shapes (fig.9).
2. Corinthos was designed for typesetting spiritual manuscripts and special edition books. It was inspired by the spiritual philosophy of Tawhid, using the metaphysical symbol of the circle as a basic structural element for the construction of the letterforms. The light weight and airy look of this typeface portrays the spiritual concept behind the design (fig.10).
3. Cryptic. The name conveys the perception of the Arabic letterforms by the non-Arabic speaking designer of this typeface. Legibility in low resolution digital environments was the main objective for this design. The letterforms were drawn with a minimal amount of detail and generously open counterforms. Cryptic harmoniously combines a contemporary aesthetic with a pragmatic design solution (fig.11).
4. Meganel, named after its designer’s alter-ego, is a free interpretation of the calligraphic Diwani style. It incorporates the multi-level baselines with an oriental

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8 The Arabic type measurements from left to right and top to bottom: the bounding box, the baseline, the loop-height, the tooth-height, the ascender and descender heights. Ibid., 181.
9 Poster illustrating the design process of the Select font, designed by Zena Khalafleh for the Arabic Type Design course (Spring Term 2001) at the American University in Dubai. Huda Smith’s PhD Abiad, Experimental Arabic Type (Dubai) 2002, 19.
10 Sample text of the Corinthos font, designed by Fadi Owanly. Ibid., 11.
11 Sample text of the Cryptic font, designed by Shubba Goemka. Ibid., 16.
brush stroke. The letterforms are constructed on a diamond-shaped grid, meant to enhance the look of a true italic font (fig.12).

5. *Farwash*, meaning ‘playfulness and vigour’ in Arabic, is a playful display font designed for use in animations and comics. It has a predominantly geometric structure with angular asymmetrical counterforms (fig.13).

6. *Nabass*, meaning ‘the guiding light’ in Arabic, is a low-resolution digital font. It is designed strictly for on-screen use (thus the reference to light in its name). It combines the Square Kufi style of lettering with the digital aesthetic of pixel-based imagery. This typeface addresses an important cultural issue by combining traditional Islamic art with a contemporary design aesthetic (fig.14).

These case studies (which were not developed into full character sets or workable digital fonts) present innovative typefaces, with unique personalities, and diverse sources of inspiration. They deviate from the traditional calligraphic model and present a free interpretation of Arabic letterforms. Their ultimate role is to instigate a discussion about the formal and conceptual developments of future Arabic type design. In conclusion, I say, it is high time for Arab typographers and designers alike to share their knowledge; that they collectively assume the responsibility for shaping and promoting their script in a way that is suitable for contemporary design.

Arabic type is the visual branding of the Arab/Islamic culture. It is a cultural disgrace to let the world’s second most used script become so improperly represented in today’s influential communication media. The recent international political conflicts have created an urgent need for rejuvenating Arabic culture’s image. Contemporary Arabic type can shake off the uniform and conservative image, and can promote a multi-faceted and diversified identity that represents more realistically modern Arabic culture. It only takes a handful of passionate pioneers to set into motion a new wave of creative energy. Their creations do represent a specific form of cultural production. It is our duty to facilitate the release of that creative energy; to set into motion a cultural mobilization through a new Arabic typography that will ensure the rebirth of visual culture in the Middle East.

12 Poster promoting the *Magam* font, designed by Melvin Mathew. Ibid., 21.
13 CD and its packaging/booklet cover promoting the *Farwash* font, designed by Qurat Sharif. Ibid., 12.
14 Poster promoting the *Nabass* font, designed by Sara Al Ghurair. Ibid., 9.
Figure 2.

Yahya Boutemêne's proposal for using the Latin alphabet to represent Arabic letterforms.

Nasri Khattar's proposal the Unified Arabic where each letter is represented by a single free-standing distinctive shape.

Figure 3. Various Arabic type styles.

Figure 5. Ahmad Lakhâdar Ghazal's proposal that reduced the Arabic character set to its absolute minimum combined with an ingenious system for ending tails and vocalisation marks as separate characters.
Figure 6. Ziad Kadri’s study based on Ibn Maqshah’s Nizam Al-Tashabuh. The system for bringing unity into a typeface by using similar parts of different letters.

Figure 7. Unconventional nomenclature of the anatomy of Arabic letterforms.

Figure 8. Arabic type measurements. From left to right, top to bottom: bounding box, baseline, loop height, tooth height, ascender height, descender height.