Experimental Arabic Type
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Huda Smitshuijzen AbiFarès

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FOREWORD

Over five thousand years ago, the first writing script was born in Mesopotamia. Two thousand years later, the Arabic alphabet, like most of the world’s alphabetic systems, started to take its form based on the first developed system invented by the Phoenicians. In many civilisations, especially in the East, letters soon became considered the only worthy carriers of holy scriptures and divine revelation. The word of God materialised for human eyes to perceive. This, in turn, led to the creation of an elite profession. The profession of the Scribe. A person who, through painstaking calligraphic craftsmanship could visually express words, and in so doing join the many strands of the human spirit... wisdom, knowledge, art and spirituality... into a tangible form. Since then, the world has changed enormously, but the power of letters and words remain as strong as ever. In the commercial world, we have only to look around us to see how letters can imbue all kinds of values simply by the fonts chosen. From the traditional to the zany; there are now literally thousands upon thousands of fonts around the world, all speaking in a distinct voice and alluding to different memories and aspirations. Arabic calligraphy continues to be one of the most beautiful and expressive of them all. However, there is still a need for Arabic to evolve into equally beautiful and expressive type. It is profoundly gratifying that this skill is being nurtured here in Dubai. Under the guidance of Huda Smitsboujen AbtFares, a leading authority on Arabic typography, this book is a collection of new font styles developed by the students at The American University of Dubai. As a voracious consumer of fonts, we at Saatchi & Saatchi, Dubai, have been staggered not just by the variety of styles on show but also by their sheer inventiveness. It is a celebration of heritage, imagination and possibilities for the future. We are proud to have helped in some small way to bring it into the public arena.
INTRODUCTION

Typography has been regarded throughout history as an influential representation of the prosperity, and the political and cultural authority of a state. Alphabets and scripts represent a strong form of cultural identity through their embodiment of the written form of spoken languages. They facilitate the transmission of a culture's history and recorded thought. The Arabic script has come to represent all Islamic cultures, as an emblem for the scriptures of the Holy Quran. Nevertheless, Arabic script is not restricted to holy texts. It is deeply integrated in daily life. Its use as a secular and pragmatic tool of communication is far reaching.

Typography is a fundamental part of modern life. It embodies modern trends, and is ever-changing in congruence with the developments of tools and communication needs. Like all the tools with which we surround ourselves, the way we perceive and make use of type is also constantly modified over time. Gutenberg’s invention of movable type in the 15th 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 that 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 little 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, 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 handwritten scripts. Little was done to rejuvenate the design field with innovative typefaces. Arabic typography became merely a mechanised version of calligraphy.

Arabic type is at a critical point in its historical development where severing the ties with its glorious calligraphic 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 modernising 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.

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 the same kind of involvement, of past Arab calligraphers, which brought calligraphy to the high level of sophistication practiced from the sixteenth century onward. 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. 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. Every age has its requirements and its trends, and every medium its inherent aesthetics. The visual style of a typeface carries within it a symbolic meaning that enhances the linguistic message, and alludes to a specific historical period's technological, political and social developments. Arabic type should be perceived, like any written script, as a collection of shapes designed to serve specific design objectives and media. 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.

A new digital aesthetic for Arabic type needs to be created. It calls for expressive experiments that challenge the established calligraphic rules and conventions. Designing a typeface requires a thorough understanding of how to create a large coherent set of abstract shapes. It is not the copying of calligraphic strokes, but rather the skill to interpret and draw anew handwritten letters, that take into consideration the limitations of where and how these letterforms will be used. The reading process and intelligibility of letters are practically the same for all scripts, including Arabic. It is based on recognising 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 letters are not dramatically altered. Letters can only exist in co-dependent relationships rather than as individual characters. Their interaction creates a much needed dynamic fluidity that facilitates the reading process. This characteristic is integral to Arabic typography since the letter shapes are often defined by their pairing with, and connection to their surrounding letters. Unlike Latin type, their individual form cannot remain static due to the connectivity of the letters within words. Their strength and beauty lie in their fluid partnerships.

As the Arab nations fully embrace the new advancements in communication technologies, the need for serious professional involvement in visual communication is manifesting itself forcefully. Young Arab graphic designers are entering the field, and the need to provide them with a solid design background in regards to Arabic type is a pressing issue. The Arabic type design course at the American University in Dubai (AUD) is designed to create the right open-minded and experimental environment that encourages progressive thinking.

Considering the multilingual nature of visual communication in most Middle Eastern countries (Dubai in particular), biregional typography—the simultaneous use of Arabic and Latin scripts—has become
mandatory for any qualitative education in this field. The aim is to educate students about the origins of the script, its aesthetic, social, and technological developments. The objective is to investigate new forms of expression, bringing Arabic fonts into a new era of innovation in type design. In addition to providing the historical and theoretical framework for discussion on the needs of contemporary Arabic typography, the course guides the students through a simple set of guidelines for the design process. The practical aim is to establish workable and coherent conventions for type design:

- a basic grid for overall proportional measurements of a typeface
- a description of the anatomy of the letterforms
- a standard set of letters, words, and sentences for testing the feasibility of the design
- a basic knowledge of the software needed to execute the design

The students are further encouraged to develop their design concepts based on researching historical and/or 'classical' models of type design (both Arabic and Latin), and on experimenting with various drawing tools and techniques, other than the conventional tools of pen and ink. The aim is to initiate a transformation from the calligraphic to the typographic aesthetic. The case studies (most of which were not developed into full character sets or workable digital fonts) present innovative display typefaces with unique personalities. The case studies were carried out by the students exploring diverse sources of inspiration ranging from the purely aesthetic to the spiritual, and from the technical and trendy to the vernacular.

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 and communication technologies. It only takes a handful of passionate pioneers to set into motion a new wave of creative energy. The type design studies presented in this publication are not the final objective, their role is to instigate a discussion about the formal and conceptual developments of future Arabic type design.

Huda Smith/Abdul Aburas. Associate Professor of Visual Communication (Arabic) and author of 'Arabic Typography: A Comprehensive Coursebook' (Daj Books, London, 2005).
NEBRASS

The font NEBRASS was designed by Sara Al Ghurair (UAE). In Arabic, nebrass means the guiding light. The originality of this type design is certainly befitting its name. This typeface is the first carefully designed pixelated Arabic font. It was designed for use in low resolution digital environments. It takes into consideration the technical limitations of computer screens with a design that ensures the legibility of the Arabic letters in very small sizes. In addition to the technical novelty (for an Arabic font), this typeface addresses an important cultural issue. It combines the traditional Islamic art that is mostly based on geometry—particularly as in the Square Kufi style of lettering—and the digital aesthetic of pixel-based imagery. The typeface design was intended for use in another of Sara’s projects; a corporate identity for a modern Arabic cultural center that she named NEBRASS.
CORINTHOS

The font CORINTHOS was designed by Fadi Gwany (Egypt). It was named after one of the verses in the Bible to portray the spiritual origin of its source of inspiration. The typeface design was inspired by the spiritual philosophy of Tawhid—the divine unity of the diverse yet harmonious elements of creation. The circle is an essential metaphysical symbol for expressing the Tawhid philosophy. The construction of the letterforms is based on a grid consisting of two concentric circles. The upright strokes are sections of the larger circle, and the medial letterforms rest on the baseline are contained within the confines of the smaller circle. Moreover, the diacritic dots consist of tiny circles subdivided into four equal compartments. The typeface is characterised by long ascenders and descenders. Even the medial letterforms have upward pointing curves. The overall character of the design is meant to convey the image of people in prayer position, looking upwards towards heaven. The light weight and airy look of the typeface portrays the spirituality of the design. CORINTHOS is a display typeface designed for typesetting spiritual manuscripts and special edition books.
FAFASHA

The font FAFASHA was designed by Qurat Sharif (Pakistan). In Arabic, Fafasha means playfulness and vigour. The name of the typeface was meant to represent the light-hearted overall character of the design. According to Qurat, “to appreciate form one has to be as playful as a child, because forms must have a lively aspect to them.” The typeface she designed is characterised by a contemporary look that bears no relation to the traditional Arabic calligraphic styles. It incorporates a balanced blend of serif and sans serif styles. It has a predominantly geometric structure with angular shapes and distinctive asymmetrical counterforms. FAFASHA was designed as an informal display typeface that may be used in playful design applications such as animated movie titles, children’s books, or comic strips.

Sample text of the Fafasha font.

CT and its pack booklet cover, promoting the Narmada font.

Spread from the promotional booklet of the Narmada font.
SHAR

The font SHAR was designed by Zeinab Abdullahi (Nigeria). The design was inspired by the visual characteristics of the Latin font 'San'd' and the Arabic font 'Kufi Standard'. Namely, the brush strokes of the first, the organic letter ending of the latter, and the boldness of both. SHAR is an experimental display typeface which pushes the limits of legibility. It uses letterforms created with cut-out paper, and subjected to a mix of fluid ripples and minor distortions. The name SHAR, meaning evil in Arabic, reflects the intended spooky look of the design.

SYN

The font SYN was designed by Mounes Tabatabaei (Iran). The design was inspired by an accidental discovery when experimenting with alternative ways for creating letterforms. The paper was subjected to a flame and the letters were drawn based on the shapes created by the burn marks on the paper. It all originated with the Arabic letter Sin (س). therefore the font was named after it. The name is also a play on the English word 'seen'.

Sample text of the SHAR font.

Postcard promoting the SYN font.
CRYPTIC

The font CRYPTIC was designed by Shubha Goenka (India). It was intended to give a ‘cryptic’ non-calligraphic look that is hardly seen in most Arabic fonts on the market. The typeface was designed for use at both text and display sizes. It was inspired by the Latin font New Alphabet, designed by the Dutch designer Wim Crouwel, which became a classic for the early days of computer ‘look’. This Arabic version of the design is also characterized by the strict construction of its letterforms using straight lines and sharp angles. Since legibility in low resolution digital environments was the main objective of the design, the letterforms were drawn with a minimal amount of detail and generously open counterforms. CRYPTIC harmoniously marries a unique contemporary aesthetic with a pragmatic design approach.

مُحَمَّط كُتُوبٍ، فِي كُتُوبٍ ضَخَّمٍ، مَيِّرُ السَّمَاَلَّةِ. بِهِ هُدِيَ السَّمَالَدَنَّ كُلُّمُ ضَخَّمٍ، قُمْ، سَمَالُ مَوْزَ! اَمْتَسَحَّ كُتُوبٍ حَنَّ! فِي دَخَلٍ ضَخَّمٍ، مَيِّرُ ضَخَّمَ! مَيِّرُ ضَخَّمَ! مَيِّرُ ضَخَّمَ! اَمْتَسَحَّ كُتُوبٍ حَنَّ! مَيِّرُ ضَخَّمَ! مَيِّرُ ضَخَّمَ! مَيِّرُ ضَخَّمَ! مَيِّرُ ضَخَّمَ!

Simple text of the CRYPTIC font.

Flash animation promoting the CRYPTIC font.
SALEET

The font SALEET was designed by Zeina Khalifeh (Jordan). The font derived its name from the word saleet, meaning sharp in Arabic. The design was arrived at after a thorough research into various type styles (Latin and Arabic). The design is a hybrid of various influences including the designer’s personal design experiments. The result is a display font that combines curvilinear forms encased in sharp-angled geometric shapes. The overall look deviates from the traditional calligraphic model and presents a free interpretation of Arabic letterforms.

ابجد هوز حطي كلمن سفص قرست تخذ ضضعلا هي كطاع مع المشعدلن، هي امطعحأ قرست تخذ كطاع ابجد هوز ضضعلا هي امطعح امشعدلن سفصأ؟ تخذ ضضعلا هي كطاع قرستأ.

Sample text of the saleet font.
MEGAMEL

The font MEGAMEL was designed by Melvin Mathew (India). The typeface was named after its designer. The design originated from the simple idea of creating a hybrid font that combined the brush strokes of the Latin font Kendo, with the irregularities of the Arabic Diwani type style. The design carries the multiple baselines characteristic of the Diwani style, as well as Kendo’s modulated and sharp-ending curves. The letterforms were constructed according to a diamond-shaped grid of intersecting lines with 45° inclination. MEGAMEL is an italic display font with informal script qualities.

Sample text of MEGAMEL font.
PRODUCTION NOTES

The work reproduced in this publication is the fruit of the Arabic Type Design course, taught at the American University in Dubai’s Visual Communication Program by Prof. Huda Smitshuijzen AlRais, during the Spring Term 2002. Based on the book, Arabic Typography: a Comprehensive Sourcebook (Smitshuijzen AlRais, Huda. Sagi Books. London, 2001) and a thorough research conducted by the students, these experimental typefaces were developed. Diverse tools were used for creating the fonts and their respective promotional design applications (posters, booklets, postcards and interactive digital animations). First, hand tools such as pens, brushes, and other, were used for sketching and drawing. Second, computer software such as Adobe Illustrator, Macromedia Fireworks, Adobe Photoshop, and Macromedia Flash, were used for the execution of the final designs.

BOOK DESIGN
Huda Smitshuijzen AlRais.

LETTERPRESS, PRINTING & BINDING
Zahed Printing Press, Dubai.

PAPER
Cover sleeve: Reaktion Dark Silver Cloud, 300 g/m².
Cover: Icefume Black linen.
Text: Hanaa Blanco 100 g/m².

TYPE
Blue Island, designed by Jeremy Tankard.
Thee6t TheSenf, designed by Lucas De Groot.