

# Cultural Considerations: Arabic Calligraphy and Latin Typography

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Lively motion and massive solidity are clearly opposites. One animates and the other remains static. They exist in a tension with one horizontal, the other vertical; one connected, the other separate. East and West Arabic calligraphy and Latin typography. These oppositions offer an opportunity not for privilege, but for an encounter without judgment or preconception.

The purpose of this article is not to discuss possible practical ways that Arabic and Latin typefaces can be used harmoniously together side by side, top to bottom, back to front, or in any other polar relationship. Designers have found ways to select typefaces, weights and styles so that the two languages appear compatible. They have configured layouts to allow the languages to operate individually while juxtaposed. Strides have been made toward improving the technical aspects of non-Latin typefaces and, in particular, the problems created by the calligraphic aspects of Arabic.<sup>1</sup>

Instead, the purpose here is to explore the underlying ideas that contribute to the aesthetics and thinking behind these two languages in order to find new approaches to their application and use. Typography is more than legibility, and more than aesthetics. It is the search for greater power in the written word. It is the embodiment of a culture's identity. It is the celebration of humanity.

"...During the nineteenth and twentieth centuries an assumption had been made that the Orient and everything in it was, if not patently inferior to, then in need of corrective study by the West."<sup>2</sup> This vision of reality promoted the differences between the familiar (the West) and the strange (the East) that then resulted in a polarization and the limitation of the human interaction between different cultures including their writing systems.

In order to work effectively within these writing systems, it is necessary to understand and accept their differences. Personal predilections and prejudices may interfere with the understanding of the perspectives of their respective practitioners. Only through an understanding of their richness and recognition of the benefits of their differences and variations, can we appreciate these writing systems.

The East and West hold different worldviews. The West is deeply committed to the idea that the real world is external to the observer and that knowledge consists of recording and classifying data as accurately as possible. The East has retained the belief that

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1 Huda Smitshuijzen AbiFares, *Arabic Typography: A Comprehensive Sourcebook* (London: Saqi Books, 2001), 202–203.

2 Edward Said, *Orientalism: Western Conceptions of the Orient* (London: Penguin Books, 1995), 40–41.

the real world is almost totally internal to the observer. Arab artists do not imitate the forms of the world that surround them, but instead express an idea in the mind; an ideal to become manifest; and a concept in which complexity, symmetry, and perfection are superior to nature.<sup>3</sup> Each of these orientations of the world permeates the respective languages and the forms in which they are written.

Languages themselves reflect their cultures and histories. Since Arabic has a sustained calligraphic tradition, predominantly used for religious purposes, its forms can be characterized as linear, musical, rhythmic, fluid, dynamic, decorative, individualistic, contemplative, mystical, and asymmetric.

Arabic calligraphy expresses the significance of timelessness with a marked sense of rhythm, and with endless repetitions and decorative patterns. The primary purpose of the pattern is to transform matter so that it loses its solidity and heaviness. The abstract nature of the designs is more significant than the material aspect.<sup>4</sup> Complexity is created to hold the reader's attention. Contemplation is encouraged; the reader delights in the intricacy. The illusion extends to infinity and the surface is seemingly dissolved. The surface of a page can have a transcendent quality which achieves a desired spiritual essence. The beauty of the world is ephemeral; and ornamentation is used to define and emphasize the functional which links the inside and outside.

Latin letters can be perceived as formal, impersonal, rigid, separate, symmetrical, static, grey, geometric, vertical and mechanical. Most of these characteristics complement technology and its more commercial applications. On the other hand Arabic calligraphy can be traced through an unbroken chain of masters each of whom labored countless hours in patient imitation of their predecessors.<sup>5</sup> The resulting elegance comes through this repetition in which a nearly mystical attachment binds the writing to the religion of Islam despite distances and cultures. Latin instead reflects Western thinking, with an emphasis on the individual, and with rewards for innovation and diversification, as well as concerns about efficiency, progress, profit, and production. It is concerned with legibility and clear communication. It was not until the early twentieth-century that Latin typography began to be used as a means of expression in which letters served as images and forms, independent of their linguistics.

Arabic uses letters as forms of great beauty, but also to communicate meaning. The formal content takes precedence over the meaning of language in such a way that distortions of the letter-forms rarely effect legibility. In Arabic, the reader understands first, and then reads.

The real differences between the two scripts are in their technical and cultural developments in relationship to visual communication. Latin type made a clear separation from its calligraphic

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3 Raphael Patai, *The Arab Mind* (New York: Charles Scribner and Sons, 1983), 68–70.

4 Jonas Lehrman, *Earthly Paradise: Gardens and Courtyards in Islam* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1980), 23.

5 Yanni Petsopoulos, *Tulips, Arabesques and Turbans: Decorative Arts from the Ottoman Empire* (New York: Abbeville Press, 1982), 169.



Figure 1  
The meme logo was designed by George Deeb and Joanne Maouad for the end-of-year exhibition of the graduating graphic design students at Notre Dame University, Zouk Mosbeh, Lebanon in 2000. The intention was to combine the two languages which the

students use daily, and which they decided was a *meme* of their culture. Since *meme* begins as an unfamiliar word to most people, the students took the liberty to integrate the Latin and Arabic. The Arabic equivalent of m is substituted for the Latin e, combining the two alphabets to create this logo. A series of

posters, signage etc. also substituted the Arabic m for the Latin e to help the public to read and understand the play of letters, which literally would then be mmmm. Reprinted with kind permission of George Deeb and Joanne Maouad. © Copyright 2000.



Figure 2  
Sayyev was the logo for the Lebanese American University (Byblos Campus) created by Mia Baz for the graphic design exhibition in 2002. Here the students are playing on their idiosyncratic pronunciation of "save." They emphasize the vowel that is similar to a long

e, and which reflects the way they say the word. In order to preserve readability, they kept the spelling of "save" the same as the English, but added the "ya." If this type combination were continued, it might evolve to eventually eliminate the silent letters such as the ending "e."

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Figure 3  
This is a very convincing combination of the two languages that are read in both directions simultaneously. It reads CNN in Arabic. Because the logo is recognizable as such, it does not take viewers any time to decode the

Latin, thus enabling complete comprehension at once. © 2003 Cable News Network LP, LLLP. An AOL Time Warner Company. All rights reserved.

The CNN Arabic logo developed by TBWA/RAAD Middle East/ Dibai under the art direction of James Rammal. Reprinted with kind permission of CNN Arabic.com. © Copyright 2002.



Figure 4  
Wadi is a display face designed by Halim Choueiry of Lebanon for the magazine *Comma*. He used aspects of an existing Arabic typeface as the basis for the Latin, which intentionally retains its Oriental influence. Reprinted with the kind permission of Halim Choueiry. © Copyright 2000.

tradition that permitted typography to develop on its own, along with the technological advancements of each era. Arabic calligraphy however, did not evolve into typography. Due to continued resistance, the spirit of creative experimentation has been ignored. Technical and aesthetic developments have been minimal and slow, resulting in Arabic typography as a mechanized version of calligraphy.<sup>6</sup> These contrary traditions could serve as obstacles that dictate that Arabic must follow the technical development used by the Latin or they might suggest freeing them from one another in order to allow them to work together in new ways to accommodate the needs of today's society—a society of mass consumption and commercialism.

Examples (figures 1-4) of recent work that were used in Lebanon illustrate fresh ways that Latin and Arabic can begin to integrate English and Arabic in interesting directions. Obviously, these are not useful for all applications but they offer some innovative directions that could begin to liberate us from our self-imposed limitations.

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6 Huda Smitshuijzen AbiFarés,  
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