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## **The Modern Arabic Book: Design as Agent of Cultural Progress**

Abi-Fares, H.

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# The Modern Arabic Book

Design as Agent of Cultural Progress

## Proefschrift

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geboren te Beiroet, Libanon  
in 1965

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Dr. Geoffrey Roper, (Independent scholar, Wellingborough, Northamptonshire)

In memory of my father

Samir Tawfiq Abi Fares (1926–2011)

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### On Arabic Transliteration

This table here below has been used for transliterating all Arabic words and names appearing in the text with the exception of the names of renowned persons and places. These will appear in the manner they are commonly spelled. Another exception has been made for spelling names and titles as they appear in published sources, in printed or digital form, in the bibliography and footnotes, unless the source is in the Arabic language.

Arabic	sAts	Arabic	sAts	Arabic	sAts
ا	a, ā	ط	ṭ	ى	a
ب	b	ظ	ẓ	ي	ī
ت	t	ع	‘	و	ū
ث	ṭ̣	غ	ġ	ة	a, ah, āh, at, āt
ج	ġ	ف	f	َ	a
ح	ḥ	ق	q	ُ	u
خ	ḫ	ك	k	ِ	i
د	d	ل	l		
ذ	ḏ	م	m		
ر	r	ن	n		
ز	z	ه	h		
س	s	و	w, u		
ش	š	ي	y, i		
ص	ṣ	ء	’		
ض	ḏ				

## PREFACE

### **The Arabic Book: realities and choices**

*“Texts are products of human agency, composed by individuals and copied and processed by a variety of technologies, all embodying human crafts and decisions.”<sup>1</sup>*

The role of the ‘Arabic’ book today vacillates between veneration of the handmade and handwritten manuscripts and generally total neglect of the printed everyday books. Arab and Muslim culture has been propagated by the power of the book: a sacred text and a celestial book. From the ninth century onwards the increased availability of paper led to the widespread production of books, which widened the reach of knowledge and helped develop a growing number of literate and educated people. Books were written, copied, preserved in private libraries of rulers, mosques, educational institutions and individuals, in the form of *waqfs* that were open to scholars and students in a similar fashion to our present-day public libraries. The occupation of booksellers (*warrāqūn*) encompassed many of our present-day separate professions in the book production industry. They were sometimes themselves authors and scribes, or commissioned copyists.<sup>2</sup> They produced books in sufficient quantities to meet market demands, promoted, distributed and sold them at a profit. Books were highly valued not only for their content and reading value, but also for their value as objects of beauty. Book printing has come late to the Muslim world mainly for two reasons. First because of the high reverence towards the beautifully handmade and calligraphic codex, and second because many of the educated classes were implicated in the traditional manuscript production and trade, and were reluctant to make a change that would cause them to lose their authority and source of income. In addition, the early printed books were too primitive in comparison to the high level of sophistication and refinement that the calligraphic manuscripts had reached, thus making the switch all the more difficult. It took some hundreds of years and an enlightened ruler like Egypt’s Muḥammad ‘Ali for printed books to be developed and disseminated on a wider scale, ushering in a new and modern cultural era.

Discussing the Arabic book, one would naturally revert to the first ever written Arabic book, the Holy Qur’ān. However, this is no ordinary book, and certainly one that is not considered to be ‘written’ but rather ‘penned’ by the hands of the privileged and select group of talented and pious calligraphers. These books are not the topic of this research which aims to cover mainly secular texts and everyday communication. In my opinion, only in such books can there be a discussion

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<sup>1</sup> Michael Felix Suarez, Ed., *The Oxford Companion to the Book* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010) 156.

<sup>2</sup> George N. Atiyeh, Ed., *The book in the Islamic World* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1995) XIV.

of a writer's/publisher's/designer's creativity influencing the message. Moreover, only in such secular books can the relationship between text and image be discussed since the use of images in religious texts is prohibited.

At the turn of the third millennium and in the aftermath of the Arab world's historical moment of long-awaited change and sociopolitical reform, many sub-issues surface when the book as a tool for Modernity, and Arabic book design as a medium of cultural production, are examined. The book becomes not only an 'agent of change'<sup>3</sup> but also a mirror to the spirit and ideals of the context and moment of its creation. First, it is important to define what constitutes an 'Arabic' book: is it merely books written with the Arabic script, or those written in the Arabic language? Do we focus on classical or vernacular Arabic, or should we include both? Second, do we include all books published within the Arab regions, or focus on the two main centers (with the longest history) of publishing in the Arabic language? Tracing the development of such a topic requires a geographical choice. The main urban centers of publishing in the Arab world have been Cairo and Beirut, at different times, and shifting depending on the political climate and the level of freedom of expression allowed in these urban centers. Both, having had a long history of exchange, collaboration and competition, offer a rich narrative on the history of Arabic book publishing, its ever-changing sociopolitical context, and its role and influence on cultural production in the Arab world. Coincidentally, both the Lebanese and the Egyptian societies have been the cradles of writing since and have experienced a wealth of change, a wealth of different cultures and centuries of cultural confrontations. Third, what type of books should be studied? Books are the result of the interaction between intellectual thought, aesthetics, innovation, and reproduction/techniques. Every well-crafted book is a reflection of its textual content, but also of the collaboration between various people with varied skills, at a certain moment in time. Secular books in the Arabic language offer the most diversity and freedom for design experimentation, which inevitably makes them a more complex topic to study.

This research focuses on books where the ideas of modernity, in both form and content, were advocated. These are books where the ideology and editorial program of the publisher influenced the selection of both authors and designers, which were clearly portrayed in the structuring of the visual design elements. Popular tales, literary works, and educational publications, roughly from the late nineteenth to the early twenty-first centuries, written in the Arabic language, printed and produced in the Arab world, are examined and analyzed in this research. This type of book can best illustrate, in Edward Said's words, "the connection between texts and the existential actualities

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<sup>3</sup> Elizabeth L. Eisenstein, *The Printing Press as an Agent of Change Communications and Cultural Transformations in Early-modern Europe : Volumes I and II*, 14th Printing ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009).

of human life, politics, societies, and events. The realities of power and authority—as well as resistances offered by men, women, and social movements to institutions, authorities and orthodoxies—are the realities that make texts possible, that deliver them to their readers, that solicit the attention of critics.”<sup>4</sup> The goal of this study is to advance some recommendations on how to continue with designing Arabic books (printed or interactive e-books) that best reflect the needs and spirit of today’s multicultural and globalized third millennium.

### **The travails of writing on Arab design history**

Writing about modernity’s representation in Arabic book design poses several problems. First there has been to date no serious published research on the history of design in the Arab world. Second, there is no proper archiving of the material I aimed to study; often books in libraries are organized according to their subject matter, and many of the popular literature is missing in serious libraries that are often connected to institutions of higher education. Third, the field research led me to interview publishers directly, only to discover that their archives are not transparent or easily accessible, and usually, most seem to have little interest in the visual aspects of their books (except for the design of their book covers), and a sketchy knowledge about the design and production of their books. Fourth, the design profession was until the last two decades in Beirut and Cairo in the hands of visual artists, intellectuals and amateurs—in the book production, technicians and printers can be added to this list. The book design simply evolved not through specialized design innovation but rather along the slow evolutionary path from traditional conventions originally inherited from manuscript production to modern western design and typesetting conventions.

As a book designer, typographer and design educator, I believe that it is of supreme importance to rectify this gap in Arab cultural history, and to start critically writing about and documenting Arab design history, in the hope that it provides insight and useful lessons to future generations of Arab graphic designers, and contributes specifically to the development of a sound Arabic book design practice for the years to come.

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<sup>4</sup> Edward W. Said, *The World, the Text, and the Critic* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1983) 5.