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

### Origin and research inquiry

*“An aspect of cultural history [is] the realization that printing and especially ‘the book’ as it is hypostatized, have been key factors in historical change.”<sup>5</sup>*

My initial interest behind this research was to rectify a situation that I have observed during my many years of teaching graphic design and typography in the Middle East. Most references on contemporary design came from western (mostly English) publications, and were about western design and designers. This gave the impression that designers simply did not exist in the Arab world, or that their work was considered unworthy of critical inquiry. After completing my first book *Arabic Typography*—on the Arabic script and its evolution into contemporary typography—I felt the need for a sequel publication that will explain the conventions of Arabic typographic design, and how they are applied to contemporary book design and printed publications. This project’s intentions evolved over the years, with a primary aim of contributing to a historical and critical corpus on graphic design in the Arab world.

The goals were to further academic research; highlight the role that design plays in disseminating new ideas to a larger audience and in contributing to cultural and intellectual development; expose the richness and creativity of undocumented design practices (and designers) that have been operating in the Arab world throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries; show the connections of contemporary Arabic design on the one hand to its own older heritage, and the other hand to western and international design history and practices; establish a dialogue between theory and history and the contemporary design education and practice in the Arab world; create a historical reference for critical and practical new design developments; underline the interdisciplinary nature of book design in the way it unifies technology, aesthetics, intellect and social activities; and finally, offer clear and basic information on Arabic book design and typography.

### Research questions

I set out to study Arabic book design in relation to Arab modernity, by asking the following:

1. What is the influence of modern Arabic book design on socio-political transformation of modern Arab nations in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries?

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<sup>5</sup> Robert Kinross, *Modern Typography: an Essay in Critical History* (London: Hyphen Press. 1992, 2004) 17.

2. How has the influence of modernist (western) design been expressed through the medium of the Arabic book, and how has it evolved into an 'Arab' graphic language that merged Islamic and western design conventions?

3. How has page architecture (the inner structures of texts) and aesthetics promoted ideals of modernity at different periods from the late nineteenth century to the present?

Looked at through the lense of modernity and its interpretation at different periods, this thesis exposes a consistent and clear image of what consitutes a contemporary Arab design language. It is difficult to present an absolute and quantifiable proof of the importance of book design in Arab cultural transformation from the late nineteenth century to the present, yet the fact that some design conventions are preserved and cherished to this day proves that the visual aspects of books creates a lasting bond with an imagined (or real) Arab identity, thus flavoring the reading of the text and the intentions of the author with the visions advanced by the editors and book designers.

### **Research methodology**

Undertaking this research required that I get myself acquainted with other fields of study, some directly related to book design and others important for placing design in its historical context. My first readings and sources of investigation where naturally the old Arabic manuscripts. Not only is this most extensively documented, researched, and easily available part of Islamic visual heritage, but it also has immediate impact on the visual aspects of both the Arabic script and the printed book. I had to familiarize myself with the visual and structural conventions of informal manuscripts as well as expensively ornamented ones from different periods and regions. The key publications that have been fundamental to this aspect of my research include the *Art of the Pen* (N. F. Safwat), the *Manuel de Codicologie* (F. Déroche), *L'Art du Livre Arabe* (Quesdon & Vernay-Nouri), *Islamic Calligraphy* (S. Blair), and *Masterpieces of Islamic Art* (O. Grabar). In addition, reading many more books on Islamic art, visiting Islamic art collections in various museum such as the Museum of Islamic Calligraphy in Cairo, the Museum of Islamic Art in Doha, the Musée du Louvre's Islamic Art section, the traveling exhibitions of the Nasser D. Khalili Collection, the Sharjah Calligraphy Biennale, Islamic Art auctions and contemporary calligraphy exhibitions, proved instructive in training my eyes to look critically at Islamic manuscripts. The wealth of calligraphic styles and book designs and ornaments I have feasted my eyes on was both humbling and exciting. I realized that printed Arabic books by comparison were stark in level of invention and sophistication, but this also gave me a solid foundation for further investigation of the printed Arabic book which is the focus of my research interest.

The second phase of the research proved to be the more complex. Studying the history of printing in the Arab East is a task I had begun in my first book *Arabic Typography*, and though some sources and authors were familiar to me, I was already narrowing down my search by looking at the specifics of book layout and typographic structure. In addition, looking at the book as a cultural artifact expanded my area of inquiry into book history, publishing history, media and social studies. I needed to chart the design developments in parallel with socio-political and cultural transformations that were taking place in the centers of Arabic publishing (and book design). A few seminal published works have provided me with the initial broad lines, books such as *Middle Eastern Languages and the Print Revolution* (E. Hanebutt-Benz, D. Glass, G. Roper, eds), *The Printing Press as an Agent of Change* (E. Eisenstein), *The Book in the Islamic World* (G. Atiyeh, ed.), *The History of the Book in the Middle East* (G. Roper, ed.), *Tārīḥ Fann al-Ṭibā'a fī al-Mašriq* (History of the Art of Printing in the Arab East. L. Cheikho), *Maṭba'at Būlāq* (The Būlāq Press. Ḥ. 'Azb, A. Maṣṣūr, eds.), and *Tārīḥ al-Ṭibā'a fī al-Šarq al-'Arabī* (History of Printing in the Arab East. Ḥ. Šābāt). The books on the printed Arabic book focused primarily on the early presses from the nineteenth century and the material rarely discussed the book design aspect of the production of these presses. The closest discussion on design often addressed the printing types and the various production techniques. From these sources an image of cultural and technical collaboration emerged, and this in turn launched me into further inquiry into the idea of modernity in the Arab East as a negotiation of boundaries between eastern tradition and western progress.

From this point onwards my research method has included the use of various sources simultaneously. I began reading on the history of publishing in the Arab East, its relation to the emerging independent and liberal press, and the implications of the press on readership, on contemporary Arabic literature and the development of new 'modern' genres of writing. These were fields clearly outside my speciality but were necessary for me to familiarize myself with in order to place my design inquiry in its proper context. This was not meant to be exhaustive in any way, and so I looked at various introductory sources on topics such as the history of the Arab East and specifically the cities of Beirut and Cairo, on literary and cultural movements, and the history of the press, and the history of contemporary and independent publishing in Beirut and Cairo. The research became further focused on the Arabic novel (and narrative texts, fiction mainly) because this was the 'modern' genre of Arabic literature. It was also the most standardized genre of books in terms of design with set 'modern' conventions for page architecture, format, paper, and use of typefaces and typographic hierarchy.

In addition, reading on literature and the history of publishing in the Arab world, led me to consult some works on the history of publishing. This included a few unpublished doctoral

dissertations such as *Al-Ḥaraka al-Adabiyya fi Lubnān Bayna 1935-1945 min Ḥilāl Ġarīdat al-Makšūf* (The Literary Movements in Lebanon Between 1935 et 1945, Through the Journal of al-Makšūf, by S. Abu Jawdeh. AUB, 1997), *Le Livre et l'Édition au Liban dans la Première Moitié du XXe Siècle. Essai de reconstitution d'une mémoire disparue* (The Book and Publishing in Lebanon in the First Half of the twentieth century. Attempt to Reconstruct a Lost Memory, by H. Bizri. Université de Versailles Saint-Quentin-en-Yvelines, 2013), and *Between Script and Print: Exploring Publications of the American Syria Mission and the Nascent Press in the Arab World, 1840-1860*. (by H. Auji. Binghamton University, SUNY, 2013). Other instrumental publications included *Le Livre et La Ville* (The Book and the City. F. Mermier), *Tiğārat al-Ḥarf al-Maṭbūʿ, Našr al-Kitāb fi Lubnān wa Twazīʿuhu fi al-Ālam al-ʿArabī* (The Commerce of the Printed Letter, Publishing the book in Lebanon and Distributing it in the Arab World. M. H. Istfān), *Al-Našr al-ʿĀilī fi Mišr, Dirāsa Taʿšīliyya* (Family Publishing in Egypt. A Genealogical Study. S. Dāwūd), and *Ḥarakat Našr al-Kutub fi Mišr fi al-Qarn al-Tāsiʿ Ašar* (The Book Publishing Movement in Egypt in the nineteenth Century. ʿA. I. Nuṣayr).

Contemporary Arabic book design is not thoroughly documented and required first-hand field research. I began collecting old and modern literature books, and examining old books in private and semi-private collections (library archives, private collections, books fairs and bookshops). Photographing and scanning some of the striking examples I collected, I placed them in chronological order and collated them into a picture-book (*Inner structures: The 20th Century Printed Arabic Book*) which I produced in 2012. This collection gave me a sense of the visual trends of each period and helped me select the most important publishers, or landmarks of Arab publishing, for a deeper investigation. That same year I organized a panel discussion at the Abu Dhabi International Book Fair 2012, with a number of presentations by designers on various aspects of Arabic book design, and an open discussion with attending publishers ensued, and further informed my research on contemporary publishing practices.

In the final stage of my research, I selected a limited number of publishers/printing presses and began looking at their production either in libraries, the publishers' or other private archives. I also consulted their type specimens and/or catalogues, and I interviewed the founders/directors, editors, art directors, and freelance book designers. I collected historical and background information on each publisher through online sources and articles, their own catalogues and books on publishing/printing, in order to support or corroborate their stories that emerged in the informal face-to-face interviews. In the end I edited down the number of publishers to be discussed and classified them in such a way that they help construct a logical narrative about the progress of publishing design trends in the twentieth century, in the Arab East, identifying links

between historical developments and contemporary practice. I avoided making direct comparisons between western book design conventions and Arabic ones except in the cases where that was directly addressed in an interview or where the comparison was integral to the point being made. However, literature on typographic design is abundant in the English western tradition and some seminal works have been used for their insight on modern design and for providing a model on how to structure my analysis of the Arabic works examined. These included the following books: *Modern Typography* (R. Kinross), *The Elements of Typographic Style* (R. Bringhurst), *Thinking with Type, A critical Guide* (E. Lupton), *Shaping Text* (J. Middendorp), *Arabic Typography* (Huda Smitshuijzen AbiFarès), and *Book Design* (A. Haslam).

### **Overview of chapters**

In this research I do not intend to replicate previous extensive studies carried out by scholars on publishing activities in Lebanon and Cairo at specific stages of the twentieth century. Although these studies offer invaluable information on the intellectual production of Beirut and Cairo in the twentieth century, they hardly discuss in detail the design and visual aspects of the books, but rather seem more concerned with the historical facts about publishers and authors—with the exception of H. Auji's thesis which touches on the design aspects of the books of the American Press, and which I discovered after completing my text on this same press. Auji's thesis has supplemented my research with additional technical information, specifically on the American Arabic types, and has confirmed my observations regarding the development of the American Press' book design aesthetics. The purpose here is not to write a survey of this rather long period of over a hundred years, but to select a limited number of case studies that will illustrate various trends in book design, in the specific genre of the printed literary Arabic book. The publishers discussed in this research are selected on the basis of putting forward a new editorial and/or design trend, of instigating change, and of inspiring and nurturing individuals that have gone further to establish some of today's most prominent publishing houses. The selected publishers have been placed chronologically, at their point of origin, starting from the late nineteenth century and extending to the first decade of the twenty-first century.

In order to discuss the design and impact of the Arabic book (and periodicals) on the formation of a modern Arab society, I begin each chapter by drawing an image of each period's particular cultural context. I start by sketching chronologically the major socio-political events that took place during the period discussed and highlight key events that have left a mark on this field of investigation and are relevant to the chapter's theme. For this, I have relied on a few established and reliable sources to collect my facts in order to later build a link between this history and that

of the visual arts and design movements in the Middle East—noting their parallels in and connections to European design.

The printing press and publishing in the Arab world, in the modern sense, flourished with secular and technical/scientific publications, and became a tool for mass public education, cultural reform projects, and economic progress—a tool for building a truly modern society. The first aspects of the printing press, standardization, had technical, aesthetic as well as lasting effects on the Arabic language and culture. In its inherent ability to fix knowledge across a wide geographic (and demographic) spread, through the exact reproduction of content and its dissemination, it unified the classical Arabic language and writing styles, reviving old literary forms and preserving historical accounts and traditional mythologies. By this, it created a sense of a uniform and united Arab community—and ultimately a shared destiny. Printing, and printed books in particular, became the binding agents of Arab culture. The press was first established in the service of the state as a means for publishing educational and technical/scientific texts that helped in the development of a professional class that was instrumental in furthering the reform projects of the state, and strengthening its economic prosperity. In the process, a new intellectual middle class developed, the number of students and readership increased creating a demand for a larger output of printed material. This urban educated class altered the consumption of knowledge from a communal activity to a more individual one, thus paving the way to an individualistic way of reading and learning, and to liberal thinking. The seeds of Arab modernity were propagated through the medium of the printed Arabic book, ideas were promoted through literary works bypassing censorship and reaching far beyond their original national borders. As the publishing industry flourished and eventually became independent from the printing presses and the educational institutions, books for all kinds of readers and topics (textbooks, technical/scientific treatises, literature, social or political criticism, popular science) were produced to meet the needs of the growing educated and urban population.

In the first chapter, I discuss the work of the first missionary presses in Beirut, the American Press and the Imprimerie Catholique, and their role in the late nineteenth century in spreading education and liberal thinking. They established the foundations of the educational Arabic printed book, and sowed the seeds for progressive and modern independent Arab publishing. Through their design and technical inventions they brought the Arabic script to a level of beauty and simplicity and set the conventions for typographic and modern book design—conventions that have been engrained in the Arab reader's subconscious.

In the second chapter, the modern era of independent publishing that flourished between the two world wars is discussed in relation to the modern literary movements, the interaction with



modern European cultural movements, and the close connections between book publishing and the press. The role of the publisher changed from producer of the book-artifact to cultural agent. This is illustrated through the work of two publishing houses in Beirut, Dār al-Makšūf and Dār al-Nahār. Both publishing houses originated from a magazine (*al-Makšūf*) and a newspaper (*al-Nahār*) and branched into publishing, thus contributing to the modernization of the Arabic language itself, and playing a role in the development of new genres of literary production—particularly of interest here are new genres of written narrative such the short story and the novel. They displayed the beginning of a break with traditional book production and the slow introduction of artists in the book design process. The role of the publisher became that of coordinator of the book production process, relying on independent artists, and outside typesetters and printers.

In the third chapter, I discuss political activism through publishing or the relation between book design and socialist and Arab Nationalist movements in mid twentieth-century Beirut. Beirut played since the 1950s the role of the liberal Arab city and became a refuge for Arab intellectuals who were persecuted or censored in their own countries. This led to diversity of voices expressed through books among other media. I focus in this chapter on the emergence of a revolutionary and political type of publishing that I illustrate through the work of three publishers: the literary publisher Dār al-Ādāb (who incidentally also originated from a literary magazine by the same name), Al-Mu’assasa al-‘Arabiyya lil-Dirāsāt wa al-Našr, (The Arab Institute for Research and Publishing, a politically motivated generalist publisher), and Dār al-Fatā al-‘Arabī (the first specialized children’s publisher). Each expressed their own version of Arab Nationalist and socialist ideologies through their editorial choices and the visual form of their books. This marks the beginning of a mature Arabic book design profession where the involvement of designers and artists shapes the image of the publishers and at times the content of their books.

In the fourth chapter, I discuss contemporary trends in publishing by focusing on cultural exchange through migration and western/globally networked design culture. I examine the work of publishers who have emigrated from Beirut to Europe and back, from Cairo to Beirut and back, and how each returned with a cultural agenda to contribute to a revival of cultural innovation in their respective native countries. By doing so they brought back fresh ideas and spurred a healthy competition and new trends in publishing by younger publishers. From this moment onwards, the book design profession shows evidence of more varied individualistic voices, helped by the fact that during this same period a more professional design education has developed in Beirut, Cairo and the Middle East. Design (graphic or typeface design) are showing a tangible influence on new design trends and are gradually changing the image of the printed Arabic book—modern Arabic

literature and fiction in particular. These ideas are illustrated through the work of publishers such as Dār al-Sāqī / Saqī Books (Paris-London-Beirut, 1984—), Riyāḍ al-Rayyis lil-Kutub wa al-Našir / Riad El-Rayyes Books (London-Beirut, 1986—), Dār al-Ġadīd (Beirut, 1986—), Dār al-Šurūq (Cairo: 1968-1969, Beirut: 1969-2004, Cairo: 1984-present), Dār Šarqiyyāt (1991—), and Hachette-Antoine (Beirut, 2010–), with a brief mention of Dār Onboz (2006—) and other children's publishers.

In the fifth and last chapter, I summarize my research by discussing the modern trends in Arabic book design and how the conventions have evolved since the early printed Arabic book, in terms of development of Arabic typefaces and typographic conventions, typesetting and page architecture, and the design of book series and book covers. I briefly touch on the implications of book design for online publishing platforms and digital media, and raise questions on the potential influence of new media and the reading patterns they generated and how this in turn will influence designing the book of the future.