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The Modern Arabic Book: Design as Agent of Cultural Progress

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Cover Page



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ABSTRACT

Design whether for new or old media, reflects the *Zeitgeist* and influences our lives. At this juncture in our world history, where cities around the world are closely connected, where an overwhelming amount of knowledge is available (almost for free) and easily searchable (though often unedited and indigestible), where knowledge and new media are capable of moving people to actions of extreme measures (protests, uprisings, revolutions and even wars), it might sound modest to talk about printed matter such as books. Yet the book is not only ‘an agent of change’ but also a mirror to the spirit and ideals of the context and moment of its creation.

This research sets out 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 publications, and were about western design and designers. This gave the impression that design is by definition ‘western’, that designers did not exist in the Arab world, or that their work was unworthy of critical inquiry. As a book designer, typographer and design educator, I believe that it is of supreme importance to rectify this misconception and to start critically writing on the subject and to document Arab design history, in the hope of providing insight and useful lessons to future generations of designers—and contributing, in particular, to the development of a well-founded Arabic book design practice. This study advances a few recommendations on designing Arabic books (printed or interactive e-books) that best reflect the needs and spirit of today’s multicultural society.

Writing about modernity’s representation in Arabic book design required thorough field research, since no substantial published research on the history of graphic design in the Arab world was available. Printed books were collected, documented and organized chronologically and into themes; and interviews were conducted with publishers, editors, designers and book makers in both Cairo and Beirut. This laborious process was supplemented by readings on Arabic calligraphy and the traditional book arts; on the history of printing in the Middle East; on the history of the Arab press and modern book publishing in the Arabic language, and finally on western book design and typography. The primary and secondary sources were examined and analyzed, and this formed the basis for a narrative that spans over one hundred years, from the late nineteenth century to the present, that identified a number of broad themes and landmarks in Arab book publishing—and consequently in book and graphic design.

In Beirut and Cairo, and until very recently, the design profession was in the hands of visual artists, intellectuals and amateurs—in the book production, technicians and printers can be added to this list. 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 (inherited from the early nineteenth century printers). Nonetheless, Arabic printed books have played an important role in instigating social change and contributing to cultural development in the Arab world. These printed Arabic books where the ideas of modernity in both form and content were advocated, are the focus of this study. They are books where the ideology and editorial program of the publisher influenced the selection of both authors and designers, and was clearly portrayed in the book design. Popular tales, literary works, and educational publications, written in the Arabic language, printed and produced in the Arab world—namely in the two major Arabic book publishing centers, Cairo and Beirut—have been selected as case studies. This research examines their formal aspects and investigates how the inner structures of their texts (page architecture, typography, visual design) have promoted ideals of modernity and liberal thought. Through the lens of modernity (and its interpretation at different periods), this thesis paints a picture of a contemporary Arab design language that consists of a blend of Islamic and western design conventions.

This research proves that the visual aspect of books creates a lasting bond with its readership's and becomes a significant part of their perceived (or imagined) cultural identity, as shown by the mere fact that some traditional design conventions have been preserved and cherished to this day. The study also proves that visual design, by imposing the stamp on the book-object of both editors and book designers, does flavor the reading of books and present an interpretation of the intentions of authors. This research also confirms that cultural exchange has contributed to a modern and progressive Arab publishing and book design culture; and that the ensuing (typo)graphic design conventions still resonate in contemporary Arabic book design, and therefore constitute a meaningful foundation for designing the Arabic book of the future—whichever form it may take.