https://openaccess.leidenuniv.nl

License: Article 25fa pilot End User Agreement

This publication is distributed under the terms of Article 25fa of the Dutch Copyright Act (Auteurswet) with explicit consent by the author. Dutch law entitles the maker of a short scientific work funded either wholly or partially by Dutch public funds to make that work publicly available for no consideration following a reasonable period of time after the work was first published, provided that clear reference is made to the source of the first publication of the work.

This publication is distributed under The Association of Universities in the Netherlands (VSNU) 'Article 25fa implementation' pilot project. In this pilot research outputs of researchers employed by Dutch Universities that comply with the legal requirements of Article 25fa of the Dutch Copyright Act are distributed online and free of cost or other barriers in institutional repositories. Research outputs are distributed six months after their first online publication in the original published version and with proper attribution to the source of the original publication.

You are permitted to download and use the publication for personal purposes. All rights remain with the author(s) and/or copyrights owner(s) of this work. Any use of the publication other than authorised under this licence or copyright law is prohibited.

If you believe that digital publication of certain material infringes any of your rights or (privacy) interests, please let the Library know, stating your reasons. In case of a legitimate complaint, the Library will make the material inaccessible and/or remove it from the website. Please contact the Library through email: OpenAccess@library.leidenuniv.nl

Article details

Sijpesteijn P.M. (2019), Review of: Osborn J.R. (2017) Letters of Light: Arabic Script in Calligraphy, Print, and Digital Design, International Journal of Middle East Studies 51(2): 338-340.
Doi: 10.1017/S0020743819000199

J. R. Osborn, *Letters of Light: Arabic Script in Calligraphy, Print, and Digital Design* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2017). Pp. 280. $40.00 cloth. ISBN: 9780674971127

Reviewed by Petra M. Sijpesteijn, Leiden Institute for Area Studies, Leiden University, Leiden, the Netherlands; e-mail: p.m.sijpesteijn@hum.leidenuniv.nl
doi:10.1017/S0020743819000199

Letters of Light tells the story of the development of the Arabic script from its first appearance preceding the birth of Islam in the 7th century until today. Although Osborn has not made a career in Arabic philology or Islamic history—he is a specialist in communication, technology and design at Georgetown University—his book covers an impressive span of territory, including the varied applications of Arabic script and the political, academic and technical circumstances in which it was produced, and how these conditioned its visual appearance.

His specific aim is to guide future designers and typographers in their choices regarding the application of new techniques to the production of Arabic script by understanding the historical developments and past practices that shaped it (introduction, Chapter 1). These designers and technologists do not necessarily have to be Arabic-speakers or users, as technology, application, consumption and use are intertwined but not necessarily shared characteristics. As such, the book is a laudable exercise, applicable beyond the field of Arabic, in explaining why current and future specialists of design should familiarize themselves with the background and history of the specific tradition and writing system in which they operate. In this case, however, the book also has a very clear message specific to the case of Arabic: the calligraphic tradition of written Arabic, which was developed in the 10th century and further advanced in the age of great Ottoman calligraphers, with its subtle relationships between letters stacked on top of each other and the visual forms thus created, was destroyed and literally flattened when it was rendered in movable type, especially as applied by European (inspired/trained) printers. A group of innovative designers and computer technologists have recently been able to "restore" the multilayered calligraphic writing system allowing for, as the author and these designers steadfastly believe, a reconstitution of the "traditional" aesthetic norms which were removed or even stolen from Arabic writers and speakers in the Arabic-speaking world. This premise, which underlies the whole book, is an impressive attempt to demonstrate the aesthetic sophistication of traditional Arabic calligraphy, and Osborn's keen sensitivity to this tradition and his commitment to what he sees as its recovery are among the most winning qualities of this book. They are not, however, entirely without their problems.

To begin with, the writing that Osborn is concerned with is the elite calligraphy of the court and luxury markets. But this is only one, fairly narrow, tradition, and by no means representative. It takes no account of the extraordinary diversity and inventiveness of more everyday written production across a wide range of genres and domains, from sign-writing to documents, letters, handbills and other ephemeral, quotidian material. Although these tended to have fewer overtly artistic aspirations, they nevertheless involved their makers in aesthetic choices and constitute a vibrant tradition in their own right. It is by no means clear, moreover, that such choices were made with reference to the "guiding" innovations of a small coterie of elite writers at the center, just as those

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. Walaeus Library LUMC, on 26 Sep 2019 at 12:54:01, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0020743819000199

writers were by no means passively succumbing to influences originating from outside the Arabic-speaking world.

This emphasis on the highest, obviously culturally very important, layer limits and sometimes even distorts the discussion. The development of the "well-balanced script" (*al-khaṭṭ al-manṣūb*) in the 10th century was indeed revolutionary. For about a century from the beginning of Islam, documents (letters, decrees, legal acts, fiscal lists) and Qurʾanic manuscripts for about three hundred years had been written with all letters following aligned on the base line: the flattened style of the Arabic printed with movable type. In later periods too such "flat" writing is attested in specific circumstances. Similarly, the use of diacritical dots in documents preceded that in Qurʾanic manuscripts, and the use of diacritical dots has since been applied in unequal and idiosyncratic ways in documentary *and* literary handwritten texts. The flat style introduced through the movable type setting has become the dominant style of printing newspapers and all sorts of texts in public spaces. In other areas the stacked, layered calligraphic writing never disappeared: reproductions of handwritten forms are used for wedding invitations and other official writings, the covers of Arabic printed books, and election banners. In other words, Arabic writing has always shown a diversity of styles and forms, with standards based on aesthetic values applicable in every contexts but with different registers producing different effects. To posit one ideal Arabic writing style, based on the elitist activities of the political center is not a restoration of Arabic's true values, but a reduction of a living tradition. The Arabic writing style founded on movable type-setting has created its own realities in the public domain of the Arabic-speaking world, which continues to develop both by top-down and bottom-up initiatives. The introduction of multilayered Arabic writing through computer technologies adds yet another variant.

By tracing developments in the political centers of the empire—in chronological order: Baghdad, Istanbul, and the Gulf—the author inevitably misses important developments in other major cities, for the later period most notably Cairo, Damascus, and Beirut. The focus on Istanbul from the 16th to the early 20th century probably also lies behind the total absence in the book of the Nahda, the cultural revival movement in Arabic writing of the late 19th and early 20th century starting in Egypt and then moving to the Levant which surely also had an important impact not only on the status of Arabic language and writings but on related fields such as the depiction of Arabic, especially as it resulted in an increase in Arabic printing activities.

The book sets out explicitly to be accessible to non-Arabists and does a great deal to make a wealth of information, alien to most outside the field of Arabic studies and Islamic history, available to new audiences. But it is inevitable that, as a result, specialist elements are skewed or left out. A review such as this one is the place to point these out. The claim that besides Qurʾans, texts were produced on scrolls is a misrepresentation (p. 18): codices had long been the dominant form for literary texts, and even documents (decrees, letters and legal acts) were produced on sheets of papyrus or paper—cut from scrolls but sold as individual sheets. Similarly, the discussion of the use and circulation of protocols is based on a misunderstanding of what these sheets added to the beginning of papyrus scrolls produced in government factories were (p. 20). Containing the name of the (Egyptian) governor and caliph under whose rule they were produced, their writing is indeed difficult to fathom for an unpracticed reader, but that was exactly their purpose: to ensure authenticity through exclusivity. The protocols were not intended to be *read*

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. Walaeus Library LUMC, on 26 Sep 2019 at 12:54:01, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0020743819000199

but to be recognized and as such used by writers and consumers of Arabic texts of all different backgrounds, as they acquired papyrus sheets or scrolls or when they reused the protocol sheets for other writings.

A final observation concerns the use of diacritics throughout the text which the author has explained in a note at the beginning of the book. The result is, however, confusing in places for Arabic-speakers. The undifferentiated use of ʻ for two Arabic letters (*ʿayn* and *hamza*) makes words unfamiliar, while the suppression of long vowels is not consistently applied (*iʿjām* is rendered *iʾjaam* but *tashkīl* as *tashkil*). *Tāʾ marbūṭa* in non-construct form is sometimes rendered with –a (pp. 45, 177, 178 *nuqta*; p. 178 *hamza*), sometimes with –ah (p. 29 *shaddah, kasrah*; p. 23 *ta marbutah;* p. 70 *sittah*). Using single Arabic words as plural in the English text is equally disorienting. For example, the text states, "Some of the earliest Arabic texts, however, do not contain *nuqta*, as these marks were developed" (p. 177). *Nuqṭa* is the singular for "diacritical mark," the plural is *nuqaṭ* or *niqāṭ*. This is not to say that Osborn should have mastered the Arabic language before he embarked on this book, but that a good proofreading by an Arabist would have made the book more readable for specialists.

All in all, this book is a valuable achievement and a commendable attempt to introduce the large and important field of Arabic writing and printing to designers in the West. Contemporary Arabic-speakers, who Osborn identifies as an audience for the book, may be unfamiliar with the different stages of development of Arabic script through the centuries and would stand to benefit from the overview and discussion in this book. To see how these two worlds meet in the 21st century to develop one of the most exciting and beautiful examples of Arabic writing generated on computers is an encouraging exemplar of cross-cultural cooperation and restoration. If technology was responsible for flattening and emptying an indigenous tradition, it is gratifying to see technology making amends. On top of its store of information of different kinds, combining secondary studies with primary texts and material culture, the book is beautifully illustrated with clear and informative tables and images. It is only important to reiterate, however, that Osborn's specialized designers are only one (small, if influential) group of Arabic users and producers. There is a whole other—large—population of Arabic readers and speakers who consume and produce written Arabic texts in many different shapes and forms who barely appear in this book.

ROBERT IRWIN, *Ibn Khaldun: An Intellectual Biography* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2018). Pp. 267. $29.95 paper. ISBN: 9780691174662

REVIEWED BY BRUCE FUDGE, Département de langues et littératures méditerranéennes, slaves et orientales, Université de Genève, Geneva, Switzerland; e-mail: bruce.fudge@unige.ch
doi:10.1017/S0020743819000205

"There are already so many books on Ibn Khaldun that I have been hesitant to add yet another to the list," writes Robert Irwin in his preface, adding that the 14th-century scholar himself held that one of the great impediments to knowledge is an overabundance of books. Irwin does not tell us explicitly what made him overcome his hesitation, but the answer soon becomes evident enough.

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. Walaeus Library LUMC, on 26 Sep 2019 at 12:54:01, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0020743819000199