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The Past Meets the Future in Arabic Design and Typography Today

2 DAYS AGO by [ALIX-ROSE COWIE \(HTTP://CASIMIRTV.COM/AUTHOR/EDITOR/\)](http://casimirtv.com/author/editor/)



Massira Font by Pascal Zoghbi L: Posters designed by Dries Wiewauters and Hester Keijser using the Massira font. R: Massira in Regular, Ballpoint, and Spray.

In the early 1990s, Huda Smitshuijzen-AbiFares was met with a difficult design brief in her hometown of Beirut. After years of civil war, a downtown area of the city was being rebuilt and she was asked to consult on Arabic typography for new signage. The challenge of finding digital Arabic fonts for the job set into motion a new trajectory for her career; one which saw her set up the [Khatt Foundation](http://www.khtt.net) (<http://www.khtt.net>) in 2004 as a platform for research and critical discussion on design and typography from the Arab/Islamic regions.

In 2010 Smitshuijzen-AbiFares established small publishing house Khatt Books (<http://www.khattbooks.com/>) which continues this educational mission. She says, “We need more publications on Arabic design in order to develop a sound and mature design education in the region, one based on comparative studies between local and international design trends and developments.”

Currently based in Amsterdam, her life and work as a designer and researcher has since been between Europe and the Arab world, only confirming her conviction of the need for cultural and practical exchange between eastern and western cultures, “I believe in promoting dialogue and mutual learning, using design as a tool for cultural diplomacy.”

We spoke with her about what we can learn about civilisations through their design history, and the current state of Arab design affairs.



How is the occupation of 'designer' understood in Lebanon? And in other Arab countries, if you have

knowledge of this?

It is somewhat understood better in some countries than in others. It's often confused with someone who can execute work digitally on computer software, since that is what a graphic designer's job consists of in advertising agencies in the Arab world. However, I feel that with the growing number of universities and art schools that are offering design education in the region, the understanding of design as a profession is improving. There is still however a lack of understanding of the potential of design, its social and economic relevance. It is often dismissed as 'commercial art,' and the level of most design programs is neither up to decent international educational standards nor culturally grounded and responsive to local needs.

Would you say there is a definitive Arab visual language?

Yes, I think the visual language of geometrical and complex arabesques and Arabic lettering can be considered a common Arab visual heritage. However, it is difficult to say that all Arab designers use such language in their work. The Arab world consists of several very different nations with common but also divergent histories and heritage. What ties them together, and is more or less standardised, is the Arabic language and writing, and so that makes Arabic typography the most unifying and transnational aspect of visual culture (in the Arab/Islamic world) — a recognisable cultural emblem.

What are the design trends you've noticed originating from Arab countries?

I can say that there is a growing nostalgic retro-style, a return to Arabic lettering and vernacular arts (old movie posters and such). There is also a preoccupation with uncovering older crafts and reinvigorating them with a contemporary design aesthetic, and modern materials and production technologies. Arabic has had a rich tradition of varied calligraphic styles that can provide a wide range of inspiration for young designers. We are seeing recently typography that is using the style and structure of these older calligraphic styles to create modern typefaces, logotypes, and branding.



The Arabic Design Library by Khatt Books. The series focuses on inspiring design achievements from the Middle East and North Africa.

Much of your work has focussed on translating design terms into Arabic. What makes this a worthwhile pursuit for you?

Seeing its reverberations and influence upon the work of young designers and typographic design work done in the Arab regions. It is a subtle way of changing perceptions on the role and potential of design. I feel

it is important to be constantly concerned about innovating and responding as a designer to society's needs.

It is also important that Arabic design is part of the wider international design scene, and that it is known to non-Arabs. This is a goal that I strive for.

How did you go about researching and compiling information for your first book *Arabic Typography: a comprehensive sourcebook*?

This book was what launched my interest and specialisation in Arabic typography, and design research in general. The idea came from a challenging design commission where I was invited to consult on Arabic typography for a signage project in downtown Beirut which was then being rebuilt. It was in the early 1990s and it was a real challenge to find the appropriate digital Arabic fonts for the project. This frustration led me to look for an answer for this lack in quality and diversity of Arabic fonts, and to start this research which has become a lifetime endeavour.

I looked for books on the history of the Arabic writing system, calligraphy and typography, found mostly in European and private libraries. The amount of information I found was worthy of a book and I was lucky to get a publisher like Saqi Books interested in publishing it. I felt this was a book that would be concise and comprehensive, and that would help people teaching typography in the Arab World. The book was unique then, out of print now, and remains the only book dealing with this topic in such a broad manner (though of course after 15 years the part on technology needs some updating).

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What is the most interesting thing you learned about design and typography in the Middle East and its

history during this process?

That is a very difficult question. For me coming across this information meant that it was all new and interesting. What I found inspiring is that there was always cooperation and competition between East and West and within each culture for printing and typographic design supremacy. Everyone wanted to be better and more successful, and these individual efforts culminated in several innovations and new technological inventions.



Hilmi Al-Tuni | Evoking Popular Arab Culture

What can be learned about the history of a country or culture by studying its history of design? Are there examples you can share of a design movement in the Middle East relating specifically to current affairs?

Studying design history can inform us about a culture's intellectual production, its economic prosperity, its

technological advancements, its political and social concerns. Basically, it gives us an insight into the history of a civilisation through a close look at its material culture and output.

Typography and printed matter are often used for communicating, promoting and documenting this history, and the visual aspect of this printed matter equally informs us about the artistic and technological development of the time where this material was produced. For me the story of typography is emblematic of the progress of human civilisations, it represents our intellectual, artistic and economic developments as a human race.

I think the whole field of Islamic Art is a clear example of empires, their rise and disappearance. Recently, an example would be political graffiti and street art in the Arab world. [There have been two books recently published by From Here to Fame publishers on this topic.] The growing field of graphic novels and comics in the Arab world that deal with social and political matters is another indication of design that serves for the study of cultural history.

What about recording and archiving history is meaningful to you?

Recording and archiving history, and design history in particular is important on several levels. First for making known what has come to pass, we lack this knowledge in design education in the Arab world. Our design education is built according to western models and western design history and so for Arab students design becomes almost automatically western. We need to rectify this. Second, archiving and documenting history allows us to build upon the achievements of those that came before us, so we can progress faster rather than reinventing the wheel over and over again.

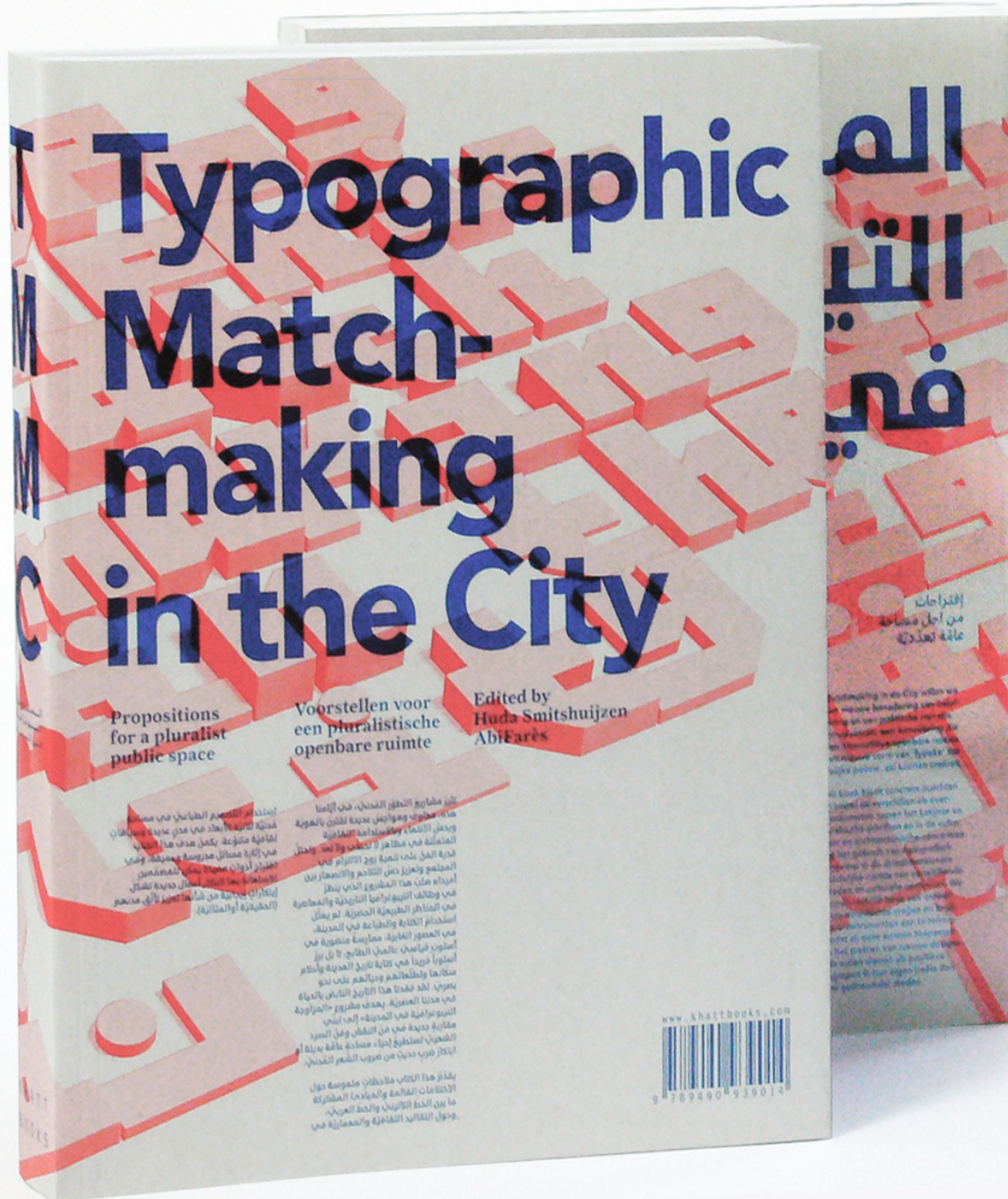
Please tell us about the importance of matchmaking in an increasingly globalised world and in contrast the role that generating new Arabic fonts has to play:

With the advent of the World Wide Web, we have produced machines that have allowed diverse cultures to communicate through a shared channel. Nevertheless, we neither use the same language nor the same scripts, and this inevitably pushes us to find design solutions that make all these scripts compatible with this digital channel. So the need for multi-script fonts that can accommodate multilingual typesetting for various design applications and platforms is growing. The success of multi-script font families depends on

their being created to work together harmoniously.

MOSCHINO® موشينو

Moschino Arabic wordmark adaptation. Developed for Al Tayer Group by Lara Assouad Khoury.



Typographic Matchmaking in the City. Edited by: Huda Smitshuijzen-AbiFares Published by: Khatt Books, Amsterdam 2010
Designed by Carvalho Bernau design

How do you ensure matching Latin and Arabic fonts have the same personality?

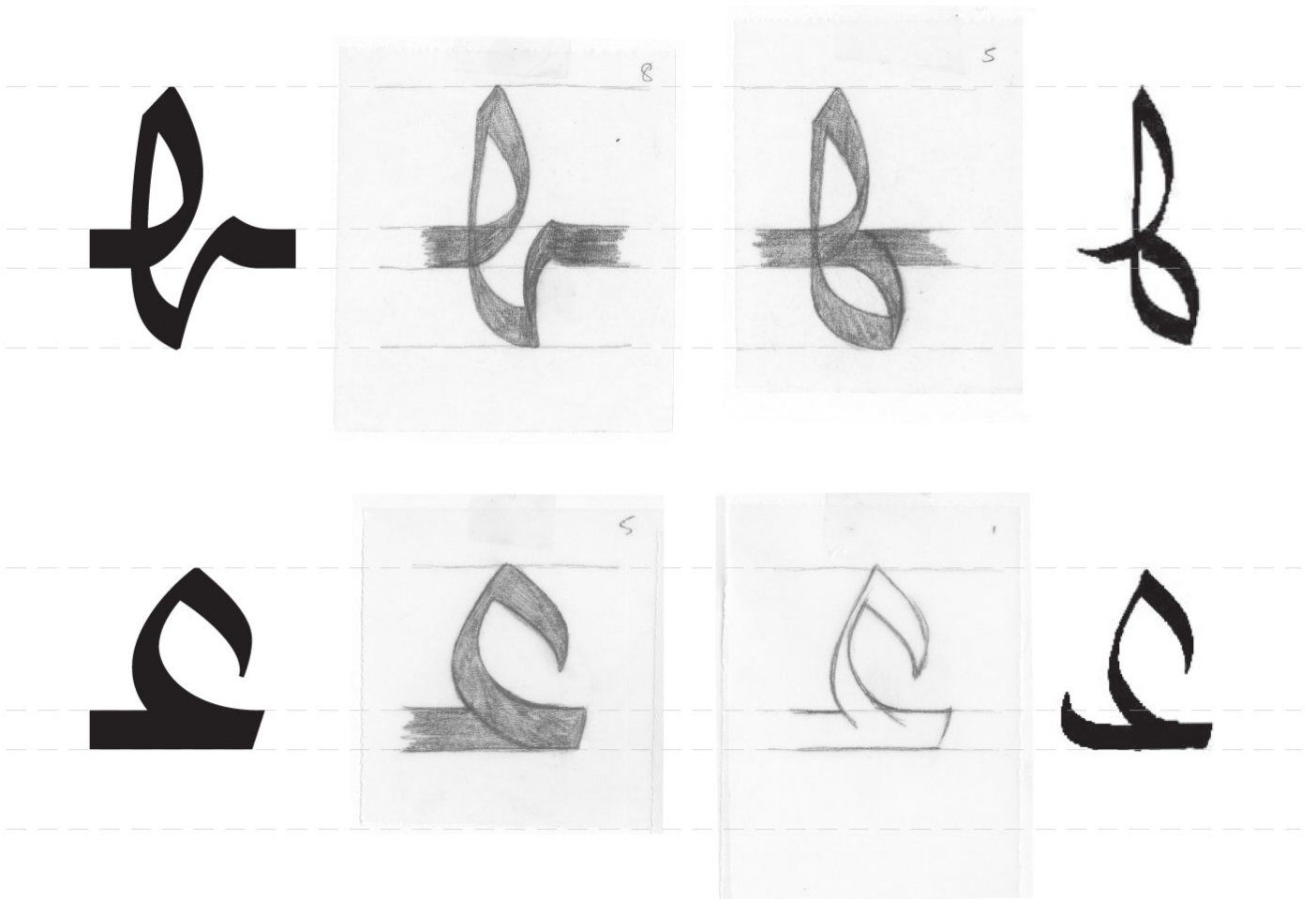
In my Typographic Matchmaking projects I bring designers from different cultural and writing traditions to work together. I ask them to answer this question through their collaboration. The results vary per

designer, or rather per design team, and the design brief. In general, you could look at visual details for creating similar personality, but you could also make sure the thickness and contrasts of strokes (regardless of script) are similar. Sometimes you may attempt to draw the letterforms using similar writing tools... etc. Ultimately, you want to unify their overall heights and proportions, create common traits and common gestures, then let each script behave according to its established and natural structure. You try not to Latinise Arabic nor to Arabise Latin, and eventually when you are successful you manage to create unity between the various scripts without homogenising them.

I've read that limitations in western printing techniques have resulted in a simplified, printed Arabic. Is meaning or nuance lost when communicating in this way?

Early western printing techniques called for simplification and standardisation of script (not only Arabic script). In the case of Arabic's close connection and cultural attachment to its rich calligraphic tradition, the break was more dramatic, but not at the expense of meaning or nuance. If anything it cut away the flourish and made the visual language more scientific and functional. This was embraced by modernist and progressive thinkers as a step forward (as it was in the West).

Ultimately, the basic structure of the letterforms (their skeleton) remains consistent even when their outer contours vary dramatically depending on style. Type design remains a balancing act between legibility on one hand and creative formal design experimentation on the other hand. The challenge of balancing technical, aesthetic, cultural and practical limitations persists to this day and still requires the ingenuity and inventiveness of designers.



Al Tayer type sketches by Lara Assouad Khoury showing steps from calligraphy on the right to digitised lettering on the left. Developed at Landor Associates Dubai.



Sample Arabic typefaces: by Khajag Apelian (L) and Yara Khoury (R).



Sample fonts by Krisryan Sarkis. From L – R: Thuraya, Greta Arabic, Colvert Arabic.

Who have been the major players in Arabic graphic design and typography in the past? And who are the up and coming designers to know about?

In the past the major players for typography were the large font foundries and/or the manufacturers of typesetting equipment. Today, digital technology has reduced the dependance on these large companies and has allowed for the establishment of smaller independent foundries that are run by individual designers who create and market their own typefaces. The older and younger upcoming specialised type designers in the Arab world who have brought about notable novelty to the Arabic type design field include

designers like Mamoun Sakkal, Kameel Hawa, Yara Khoury, Nadine Chahine, Pascal Zoghbi, Lara Assouad, Kristyan Sarkis, Wael Morcos, and Khajag Apelian.

The Khatt Foundation has developed several collaborative research projects resulting in new fresh Arabic and Latin fonts that have helped launch the career of several young designers who are now at the forefront of the Arabic type design field. Creating a community of designers from the region is important to facilitate the sharing of knowledge and experiences, to encourage collaboration across national (and cultural) borders, and to present internationally the face of design/designers from this region.



Fonts and sketches feature the work from a previous Khatt Foundation Type Design workshop at Tashkeel. Typeface designs by Zainab Ahmad, Abir Fawaz, Basma Hamdy, and Ghaya Bin Mesmar.

www.khtt.net (<http://www.khtt.net>)

www.khattbooks.com (<http://www.khattbooks.com/>)

Read more about the goals of the Khatt Foundation and its mission. (<http://www.khtt.net/page/92/en>)

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