

Arabic Typography.

Writing as drawing,
word as image

أفضل أغنية

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Unlike Western writing, in Arabic calligraphy the image of the written word has priority over the drawing of the individual letter, hence its evocative power is in the force of the calligraphic image that issues from the ensemble, reinforced by including ornamental images. It is a quality with which many contemporary designers have been able to approach modernity. On the other hand, the peculiarities of Arabic writing, besides contextual causes such as religious ones, have made it difficult to translate into typographic characters without succumbing to a “latinising” of its forms. For that reason the current renaissance in design of Arabic fonts must be approached from the understanding of the calligraphic origins and their cultural transcendence.

Key words: typography, Arabic calligraphy, writing, image, drawing, signs, design

What was first, voice or writing?

The need to communicate through signs is as old as the need to establish some form of lasting record.

Enduring registry and oral expression have been linked from remote times. Writing and speech are activities that function in parallel and refer to the overall scope of language and its meanings.

Most of the world’s great religions confer the verb the capacity of creation.

According to David McLagan¹, the different myths that try to explain the act of Creation in the different cultures coincide in giving the word, speech, and verb creative force.

In the Hebrew alphabet the letters are associated to the human being since it is considered that they, the letters, have body, soul and spirit. The kaballistic tradition maintains that the Hebrew alphabet served to create the world and in their names, their graphic shape, their numeral value and their position within the alphabet (alef-Bet) find their reason for being. Its twenty-two letters are also called “bricks of Creation.”

Indubitably language makes it possible for us to “create” and “illustrate” concepts represented in an abstract manner under the form of words in our mind.

The text is the record of oral language. The first written signs arise with the need of establishing some type of record, a memory aid. Speech has the power to evoke meanings that are different from those evoked by writing. The latter has, with the passage of time, gone further than

being the mere record to become the pictorial representation through calligraphy, a development of writing that is much more than being the speaker of a sound signal. It could be said that, although in a slightly unorthodox way, that music is to speech as calligraphy is to writing.

To write is to “illustrate” concepts through words, a way of “creating” and evoking images through the text. In fact, poetry, as a literary genre pursues this end. Different artists and writers have experimented with objects and texts to create poetic relationships (see some of Joan Brossa’s examples of visual poetry) or have played with the composition of the verses with the aim of creating graphic representations (as per the experiments of some artists, such as Joan Salvat-Papasseit or Junoy, of the historic vanguards). It should be recalled that the word “poetry” comes from the Greek *poietes*, which means “he who creates or makes something.”

In writing, calligraphy means elevating the idea of the message to the status of “poetic image”, of artistic image. The word calligraphy, from the Greek *kallos* (beauty, good) and *graphein* (writing, stroke), exactly defines this idea. The Andalusí sage, Ibn Al-Sid from Badajoz (1052-1127) defined calligraphy as the “procedure that allows transmitting language by means of writing, following a number of techniques whose end is to achieve clear, solid and beautiful writing”². For the calligrapher Claude Mediavilla, calligraphy is just the “Art of writing beautifully”³.

Relationship of calligraphy and typography

The calligrapher Wan Hsi Chih establishes a distinction between writing (handwriting) and calligraphy: “Writing needs the meaning, while calligraphy expresses itself above all through form and gesture; elevates the spirit and illuminates the emotions”⁴. In this sense, as Mediavilla affirms, calligraphy is revealed to be closer to painting than to literature.

In our Western culture handwriting and calligraphy have been displaced by the force of typography⁵. Typography has evolved independently, straying from the idea of the continuous and fluid stroke, although it has taken calligraphic forms as reference. This has not happened in the same way in other traditions, as is the case of the Arab culture.

Arabic writing, as opposed to that of Latin tradition, has retained this inseparable relationship of handwriting and calligraphic writing throughout the centuries. While in the

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MACLAGAN, DAVID: *Mitos de la creación*. Madrid, Debate, 1977, p. 29.

02 PUERTA VILCHEZ, JOSÉ MIGUEL: *La Aventura del Cálamo*, Edilux, Granada, 2007, p. 223.

03 MEDIAVILLA, CLAUDE: *Caligrafía*. Valencia, Campgràfic, 1996.

04 Quoted in: MEDIAVILLA, CLAUDE. *Op cit.*, 1.

05 Taking writing as a generic concept, we distinguish different forms of writing: handwriting, calligraphic writing and typographic writing, depending on whether it is personal, with no other purpose than to make a note or register a message (handwriting), writing pursuing an aesthetic end (calligraphy) or with the use of combinable, movable types (typography).

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PELTA, RAQUEL & MÉNDEZ, CARMEN: «Zapf. Elogio de la Arquitectura», *Visual*, n. 111. 11-2004, Madrid

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Here it is necessary to distinguish calligraphic script as handwriting from that which means to transcend the message and in which the calligrapher's subjectivity contributes an essential value.

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The Arabic writing system developed in the Arabian Peninsula, belongs to the family of Semitic languages and originated from the Phoenician alphabet just as our Latin alphabet. It developed in the IV Century evolving from the Nabat alphabet.

According to Hamid Safadi (en *Islamic Calligraphy*. (1978), London, Thames & Hudson), the late development of the Arabic alphabet, as opposed to other alphabets, is due to the nomadic condition of the Arabs who continued to rely on oral tradition as the best way of retaining information and of communication. The expansion of Arabic script is parallel to that of Islam. The Koran was the first book written in Arabic and it contributed to establish the language and a system of writing that became a sacred link to expanding the Faith. In this way, other cultures used Arabic script not only as a religious expression but as a system of representing their own language. Historically, several languages have been written with the Arabic alphabet, as was the case of the Romance languages spoken by the Mozarabs in the Iberian Peninsula and which gave place to the texts called Aljamiados. Currently among the languages that use the Arabic alphabet are Persian (Iran), Paxtu, Dari (Afghanistan) Urdu (India and Pakistan) Kurd (Iraq), Javanese (Indonesia) and Uigur (China). The Arabic alphabet was also used to write Turkish until Kemal Pasha Atatürk took power in 1923, when he promoted the use of the Latin system for writing in all of Turkey.

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See note n. 20, in PUERTA VÍLCHEZ, JOSÉ MIGUEL: *Op. cit.*, p. 218.

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PUERTA VÍLCHEZ, JOSÉ MIGUEL: *Op. cit.*, p. 42.

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There are several calligraphic styles through which Arabic writing expresses itself, but the main six are: Thuluth, Naskh, Muhaqqaq, Rayhani, Riqa' and Tawqi'. The list could be enlarged to include Maghribi developed in North Africa and in Al-Andalus (in the Andalusian variant).

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PUERTA VÍLCHEZ, JOSÉ MIGUEL: *Op. cit.*, p. 268.

West, with the printing press, writing evolved towards the representation of the letters based on the principle of modularity, thus understanding the letters as separate units, the Arabic writing never abandoned the idea of a whole in the manner in which letters are combined to form words. This is a characteristic trait — a fundamental one — that the transition to typography has endeavoured to maintain.

From our Western point of view, typography and calligraphy are different disciplines. Knowing calligraphy affords a good foundation for designing alphabets, but it is not an absolutely necessary condition. The typeface designer is not necessarily a good calligrapher, and conversely, a good calligrapher will not necessarily design good alphabets. Rarely do we find calligraphers that have successfully entered the world of typography. We could point out Hermann Zapf as an exceptional case. For him calligraphy is the basis of all typography⁶.

Those who have delved in both fields are aware that they are very different things. Although, doubtlessly, having some knowledge of calligraphy will help understand the logic of some forms in the letters, especially for drawing letters of classic style.

Calligraphy pursues the quest of formal beauty in texts through the expression of the handwritten stroke. To the contrary, in typography the expressiveness lies in the design of each letter individually, conceived as a combinable unit. In typography, the result of a given combination of letters does not depend as much on the ability of the typographer (once the font, type and composition has been determined) as on the existence of a typeface that a font designer conceived and designed prior to its use. Calligraphy is a direct act, an "interpretation" of the text in the strictest literal sense⁷, while typography bases its reason for being in the repetition of combinable models (types).

The value of image in Arabic calligraphy

Arabic writing⁸ is cursive by nature, since all its forms are the result of the movement of the pen and the gesture of the hand. The fluid stroke is one of its main characteristics. The image of the written word has priority over the drawing of each of the individual letters that make it up. This does not occur with the Latin alphabet in which the drawing of each character determines the image of the whole. Since Arabic calligraphy emphasises the form the word takes, it is capable of modifying the aspect of the individual letters to accommodate them to the unitary image. This leads to the development of different solutions for each one of the letters of the alphabet according to their position in the word (initial, middle, final or isolated).

Besides, some letters can have alternative forms independently of their position.

The evocative power of Arabic writing lies in the calligraphic image that depends on how the symbols are joined, as it happens in some Asian writings. This image is strengthened by the inclusion of symbols that are not linguistic but whose function is essentially ornamental and are used to fill in and balance compositions affording

rhythm to the composition. Thus, the practitioner of Arabic calligraphy has a number of resources to use with a single end: the visual representation of the word and, with it, the image that this word represents and symbolises.

Al-Asyadi considers that the "elegance of the calligraphy lies in its uniformity, its embellishment, its shape, its splendour, in the harmonisation of white and black and in its beauty in maintaining the difference within the whole"⁹.

The value of representation given to writing, over other practices not allowed by religion, enormously enhanced the role of calligraphy in the Islamic culture. As José Miguel Puerta explains, "Renouncing the use of images to transmit the various messages of the Revelation in the places of worship made calligraphy the art, par excellence, of those places. Calligraphy was responsible for marking beautifully, with the solemnity and holy aura of the sacred text, the most outstanding buildings and all types of objects."¹⁰ Thus, calligraphy manages to waive the difference between abstraction and representation, being the text itself the element which evokes sacred images, and so, writing becoming a vehicle of Faith.

Calligraphy has been used in architecture, not only as a decorative and ornamental element, but as a resort to give a sense of transcendence and sacredness to places through the "represented" text. The straight, geometric strokes of the Kufic calligraphic style have been the most used in decoration¹¹. It was in this same Kufic style that the first copies of the Koran were written, which made it one of the favourites in architectural ornamentation for its symbolic value.

This sense of unity, mentioned above, characteristic of Arabic calligraphy is reflected in its architectural application through a perfect integration of elements, in combination with other ornamental ensembles and with the architectural forms themselves. In the Alhambra of Granada we can find splendid examples of calligraphy applied to decoration which are exemplary of this unitary sense.

This same idea of unity is also present in some calligraphic compositions such as the calligram, in which a clear figurative purpose is expressed. The pictorial and figurative possibilities of the letters of the Arabic alphabet — alifato — are carried to extremes in the calligram. Although we find examples of it in the Middle Ages, the calligram acquired special importance in the beginning of the XIX Century, within the Ottoman calligraphic tradition, and with it, the resort of symmetrical unfolding of the calligraphic image through the effect of a mirror image. During this time calligraphy "acquired new artistic autonomy, understood as a picture in itself and as having a specific form with infinite possibilities."¹²

The value of the letter as an image, widely exploited as a resource in the Latin typographic and calligraphic tradition, could not be relegated to a second place in the Muslim cultural scope. Given the importance of the written letter, as we have indicated, the graphic designers of the Muslim countries have used and valued the calligraphic signs themselves as image. Far from limiting the use of typography, the great Muslim poster artists and graphic artists have worked with calligraphy in their graphic compositions, as opposed to Western graphic designers, who

have used typography almost exclusively (as image or vehicle for the message) to solve communication problems. The work of graphic designers such as Reza Abedini (Iran), Farhad Fozouni (Iran), Tarek Atrissi (Holland), Nja Mahdaoui (Tunisia), Sam Moshaver (Iran), Mohamed Nabil Labib (Egypt) who have known how to carry calligraphic tradition to modern times meeting the needs of contemporary communication.

A new generation of designers within the Arab cultural environment has seen the use of calligraphy as a differential element that personalises and gives character to their graphic work. In a global world, the use of calligraphy of Arabic typographic characters has an important role when representing and identifying the design in Muslim countries. We find many multilingual solutions where both writing systems – Arabic and Latin – are used. How easily the designers of Arab origin employ and integrate both alphabetic systems is surprising. In these examples, the modular and slightly geometric character of the Latin alphabet contrasts with the curved fluidity of the Arabic characters.

Value of typography in Arab design

The use of typography in the emerging Arab graphic design is ever more important. To a certain point, due to the influence the West exerts as a technological and cultural protagonist, the need the new generations have of modernisation and also due to their need to position themselves in the global world, typography is, for many designers synonymous of modernity.

This recent interest is due to the late introduction of the printing press in the Arab world, which took place in the beginning of the XVIII Century, although the first Arab books printed with typefaces were published in Europe in the XVI Century⁴³. The purpose of these books was to promote and expand the Christian Faith. There is no need to imagine the scant success achieved if we bear in mind that the function of Arabic writing was to preserve the words of Muhammad, the prophet.

On the other hand, these books printed in Europe could not compete with the exuberant beauty of the handwritten manuscripts carried out by the Arabic calligraphers of the time. The typefaces created by the European engravers were far from producing the results the Arab readers were willing to accept.

The close connection between religion and writing – and calligraphy – is a weighty reason when explaining the late introduction of the printing press in the Arab countries. It also points out the reticence to the use of mechanic solutions as is typographic writing.

Technology is another important reason for the late introduction of typography in the commercial environment. Up to now it has been tremendously difficult to give efficient typographical solutions to the calligraphic characteristics inherent to Arabic writing.

Originally, digital technology developed under Western cultural parameters did not take into consideration the characteristics of writing systems other than Latin. Neither did font design programs consider the com-

plex characteristics of the Arabic writing system. Until recently the Arabic multilingual fonts were a challenge difficult to solve efficiently. Even so, today, there are few typefaces that allow composing texts in Arabic without resorting to a “Latinisation” of forms and proportions. The need to have multilingual fonts that contain more than one system of writing has contributed to the development of more appropriate software. The firm WinSoft has contributed enormously to the development and adaptation of software for self-publishing.

Due to this, the design of Arabic fonts has initiated a timid renaissance in the last few years.

If in our Western tradition, typography and calligraphy have followed parallel but distant roads, in the Arabic tradition typography cannot be understood if not in relation with calligraphy. For this reason the design of Arabic fonts cannot be approached without understanding their calligraphic foundations and the cultural transcendence.

The image of the word as a unit has had to continue prevailing despite the fact that, when it is written with the use of a keyboard, we are assigning the symbols separately. The fluidity of the stroke, a fundamental trait of writing, has to be achieved with good connection among the initial, middle and final forms. The proportions of the Arabic alphabet itself must be maintained even though they are quite different from those of the Latin alphabet. The compatibility between both alphabets – Arabic and Latin – when they appear in the same text should be based upon seeking optimum balance in colour and form, rather than forcing the proportions and structures of one to fit the other. Some Arabic typeface designers have begun to contribute valid solutions to composition of multilingual texts. Not all of them are of Arab origin, in fact, most of them are European. We can point out the work of Fiona Ross, John Hudson and Tim Holloway in the development of the vast Adobe Arabic font; or the fonts designed by Nadine Chahine (Koufiya), Titus Nemeth (Nassim) y Kristyan Sarkis (Thuraya), among others.

In conclusion, it could be said that, in Arabic typography, the value of the word as an image continues being a fundamental element, as it occurs with calligraphic script. The idea of writing as a continuous stroke, a drawing, remains alive even when writing with a keyboard and typographic characters.

Respecting the cultural legacy is a challenge as well as a necessity, in the design of Arabic typefaces.

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The Kitab Salat al-Sawa'i, the first book printed with movable types, was a Book of Hours printed by Gregorio de Gregori in Venice in 1514, and distributed among the Christians of the Oriental Catholic Church Melkite, with the purpose of the unification of the Eastern and Western churches. Francesco Griffo was the engraver of the Arabic typefaces used in the book.