

Tendency or Trend? The Direction Towards Modern Latin-Like Arabic Script

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Abstract

The past few decades have witnessed an aesthetic trend in the Arabic Writing System and its well-known calligraphic arts, which have exploited features of other writing systems, including Latin and Chinese scripts. Although there are great differences between almost every aspect of the Arabic and Latin scripts, this trend has blended certain characteristics of Arabic script with some features of Latin script.

This study examines this trend and its experiments and transitions, from the moment it first emerged until the present day. It investigates the motivations underpinning the trend and analyzes its artistic and linguistic characteristics, in which the researcher visually analyzes all possible details and disassembles both orthographic items and calligraphic features into their basic essential scripts. The findings reveal an aesthetic and linguistic trend that is substantial and significant, based on linguistic, cultural, and sociocultural factors, including increased levels of communication, culturalism, advances in technology, transportation, migration, and globalization. Script tools and features are used to divide the main trend into three sub-trends: 1) Script switching, where scripts are interchanged at word-level; 2) Script fusion, where scripts are altered at letter-level; and 3) Faux fonts, which dissolve certain features of Arabic script to mirror Latin script. All of the techniques used to make Arabic script match Latin script have been shown to be culturally-induced and linguistically informative, rather than merely aesthetic. The findings of this study also indicate that this new phenomenon is likely to be in the early stages, with further developments expected to unfold in future.

Keywords: Arabic script, Latin script, script switching, lettering, Arabic calligraphy, typography.

1. Introduction

There is a growing aesthetic trend that anyone interested in the Arabic script and its artistic variations cannot be unaware of: the exploitation of foreign decorative characteristics, particularly those derived from the Latin script. This study explores the trend from its early days to the present. It investigates the stages and transformations of the trend, investigating its characteristics and exploring the factors that caused it to begin and evolve, as well as associated linguistic and artistic problems.

Arabic differs from Latin script in almost every aspect. Latin script is the most commonly employed set of graphemes; it is used to write a large number of languages around the globe, including English, French, German, and Spanish. The “Arabic script is the second most widely used segmental script after Roman” (Eviatar & Share, 2013, p. 132). It is employed in numerous languages, such as Farsi and Urdu, with variations specific to each writing system (Daniels, 2013). While orthography denotes the qualities of script that are concerned with its basic foundational structure, calligraphy indicates features that are more of aesthetic elements of the script. In its very identity, Arabic script contrasts with Latin. Many orthographic, visual, phonological, and aesthetic components are different. There are significant variations in writing direction, cursive writing, letter shapes, letter dots, and sound-letter correspondences. English is an alphabetical writing system, which runs left-to-right; it can be written either cursively or non-cursively and makes little use of letter dots. By contrast, Arabic is a consonantal writing system, which employs letter dots and diacritics extensively; it is written right-to-left, only in cursive.

These fundamental differences make it difficult to implement linguistic or artistic switching/fusion. The present study does not explore the question of writing spoken Arabic in Latin letters, known as Romanization, Arabizi,

or Franco, or its reverse—in which foreign languages are written in Arabic script. These writing choices have realistic causes and have already been intensively researched (e.g., Yaghan, 2008; Farrag, 2012; KAICA, 2014; Alotaibi, 2017; AlShehri, 2017; Ali et al., 2017; Alghamdi & Petraki, 2018). The aim here is to explore a new aesthetic approach that combines traits of both Arabic and Latin scripts. This trend does not reject the essential scriptorial differences or their cultural implications. This study investigates the characteristics of this trend, asking how it can be linguistically approached. The following sections outline features of the Arabic Writing System (AWS), explore the trend in question, and analyze several examples, detailing key results.

2. The Arabic Writing System

In contrast to Latin-based scripts, AWS must be written or typed cursively, connecting the letters in each word. The script consists of 29 letters including, alhamza (Alkadi, 2015), each of which represents one consonant, apart from three letters (i.e., <ا>, <و>, and <ي>) that correspond to three long vowels: /a:/, /u:/, and /i:/. The latter two also represent the consonants /w/ and /j/, as well as the diphthongs /aw/ and /aj/, respectively. Normally, the AWS uses optional diacritics to indicate short vowels, such as <َ>, <ُ>, and <ِ> for /a, u, and i/, respectively. In addition to the standalone form, each letter has different letterforms, depending on its position within the word (i.e., initial, middle, final) and its connection to or disconnection from the previous/following letter. Letter dots differ from diacritics, which are obligatory, being structural parts of letters. Fifteen letters have one, two, or three dots in different places; the dots are used to tell similar letters apart, for example, <ح>, <ط>, and <ث>.

Every writing system has basic rules that organize the way the script is written; these rules maintain legibility, regardless of speed and handwriting differences (Sassoon, 2004). Unlike Latin script, Arabic script does not have different letter cases; punctuation marks are relatively new and used to a limited extent. Arabic words are handwritten in a cyclic movement, continuously from the point of entry to the end of each word. Letters are formed in cursive, from top to bottom vertically and from right to left horizontally. In other words, Arabic is written as if it were being drawn—the letters are roundish, overlapping, and calligraphic (e.g. هـ, ح, ق), while Latin script favors geometric letters (e.g., W, F, L, A) (Goodnow, Friedman, Bernbaum, & Lehmma, 1973).

If we explore Arabic writing from a modern linguistic perspective, we encounter three hypotheses: 1) the dual-formation basis; 2) core-part increasing; and 3) the single dash hypothesis (Al-Rifaie, 2017). The dual-formation basis hypothesizes that each Arabic letter consists of two parts: the first part is essential, like the dot and tooth in <ب>, the second part is secondary—examples include the preceding dash <ـ> and the curve at the cusp of the standalone letterform <ب>. The basic part <ـ> is present in all enhanced forms and shapes. Although letterforms are divided into essential and secondary parts, this hypothesis acknowledges the basic letterforms, whereby each letter is connected to or disconnected from the previous and/or following letter. By contrast, the second hypothesis considers the essential part of letter to be the whole standalone form, to which secondary enhancements may be added. The third hypothesis sees the single dash as preceding, rather than following, the letter; the actual grapheme is therefore <ـ> rather than <ب> because the “following” dash actually precedes the next letter. The non-connecting letters (e.g. <ا>, <و>, <ي>) support this argument because they have no following dashes by default. This hypothesis thus defines only two letterforms instead of the four (standalone, initial, middle, and final) described above. The letter Baa is therefore represented in the grapheme <ـ> when it is word-initial or word-medial and in the grapheme <ب> when it is word-final or standalone. As a result, this stance decreases the number of letterforms in the AWS substantially. I would argue that this concept is the best way to describe the writing theory of the Arabic system, as it is supported by a wealth of aesthetic items in Arabic calligraphy.

Arabic calligraphy reached its glory moment during the Abbasid era, when it was influenced by a climate of modernization and multiculturalism. Consequently, different calligraphic styles and specific artistic rules came to the fore, developing schools of thought that shaped calligraphy scientifically. The vizier and calligrapher Ibn Muqla and his brother must be mentioned here; they pioneered several calligraphic styles, including Ruq'a and Thuluth (Aljbouri, 1994, p. 116). Both styles and pens have varied greatly ever since; they are called either by the names of the cities where they were developed, such as Kufic, Makki, and Madani; by style prescriptions such as Thuluth; or by their purpose such as Naskhi and Ruq'a. Six styles remain popular today: Thuluth, Naskhi, Ruq'a, Diwani, Farsi, and Kufic (ibid, p. 120).

Writing has been transformed, from a mere recording of speech or thoughts into an emergent aesthetic element, which now constitutes a legacy and literature that is widely accepted in the realm of modern fine art. As Alsaiedi (2016, p. 160) points out:

... the combination of script and drawing in one circle goes back to one origin, that is script is in fact drawing and drawing is script, and each has its own significance, by which these synthetic script drawings

convey certain meanings exceeding the limits of words and reveal precise ideas that are human vehicles to knowledge; hence writing in all states is an aspect of civilization.

Given the findings of AWS theory, we can easily understand the flexibility that the Arabic letter enjoys as an element of beauty, which can be tweaked using dashes that point in different directions: horizontal, vertical, or diagonal.

3. Tendency or Trend?

As Ibn Khaldun has argued, the script is a product of humanity and modernization (Al-Muqaddimah [Ibn Khaldun's Prolegomenon], 2014, p. 880). He insists that urban integrity is a prerequisite for script quality, implying that cultural background of every nation affects its writing modes and styles. For this reason, calligraphic taste is necessarily imbued with the tongue and hand of its culture. This is why a great deal of Arabic calligraphy involves Arabic Quranic and poetic verses and quotations illustrating Arabic wisdom. Intuitively then, Arabic script could not have been influenced by Latin script during the golden age of the Arabic civilization, which coincided with the European Middle Ages. By this, I do not mean to imply that the present influence of Latin script on Arabic script is associated with Arabic cultural decline; I would, however, suggest that the current interest in Latin script has been influenced by the advance of Western nations.

As explained above, the function of letters changed from basic writing into a collective artistic statement of taste, attracting the interest of Arab artists and others from regions as widely separated as Turkey, Iran, and Central Asia, where Arabic calligraphy became a form of cultural art (The Encyclopaedia of Islam, 1997). For this reason, the existence of Arabic-based Farsi and Turkish writing in Arabic painting was not unusual. What may be unusual, however, is the appearance of Latin elements within those paintings, given the vast differences in the linguistic and aesthetic domains described above.

This study does not try to survey chronologically all attempts at infusing Latin into Arabic script in historical and artistic detail; instead, it will sketch the beginning of this tendency in order to study and analyze its outcomes and aftereffects, the main goal of this paper.

3.1 Attempts

Probably the first attempt to infuse Latin into Arabic script in the modern era was made by the Egyptian calligraphist Mahmoud Mahfouz, who invented the "Attaj" (Crown) style in 1930. The invention was suggested by King Fuad I and named after the crown-shaped uppercase Arabic letter used to mark titles and the beginning of each line. The style was a transformation derived from both Ruq'a and Naskh (Figure 1). Attaj faded away, soon after the decline of the Egyptian monarchy (Obaid, 2017, p. 62).

The endeavor must be seen in the context of King Fuad's cultural efforts to achieve a modern Egyptian renaissance in the twentieth century, in part by promoting Arabic calligraphy—he also established a Royal Calligraphy School. In addition, this modernization extended the period of Khedive Ismail, who wanted Egypt to join the developed world and become "a piece of Europe" (Azab & Hassan, 2010). Given that Attaj did not really introduce any new artistic view or method, but merely imitated the changing letter case of Latin-based European writing systems, it was widely objected to by academics and calligraphists, who resisted acknowledging it as a different style with a new name (ibid, p. 434).

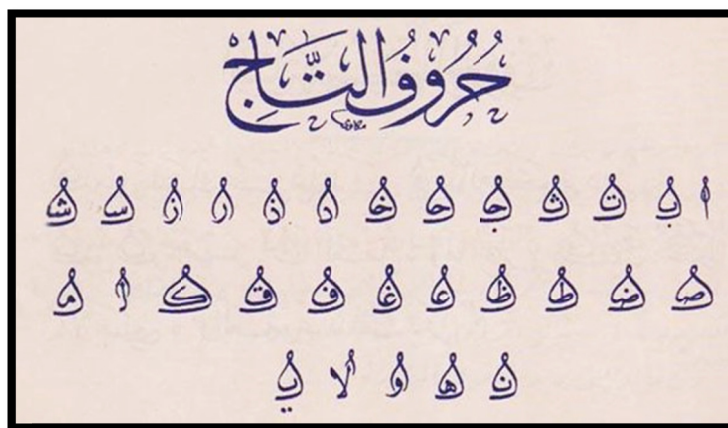


Figure 1. Letters of Attaj Style (Ashour, 1932)

This seems to have been the main attempt—perhaps the only attempt between the nineteenth and twentieth centuries—to mix Arabic script with Latin characteristics, resulting in new allographemes with a “taj” (uppercase form) for each letter in the set. The Egyptian Ministry of Education at the time had an announcement read for students across the country to bring their attention to the King's desire which included these lines (Ashour, 1932, p. 623):

Following modernization processes, His majesty wanted to increase the impact on writing and calligraphy. Hence, His High Will was focused on two crucial matters: 1) the establishment of rules of punctuation marks, 2) creation of (Arabic) letter shapes that are not far from the usual alphabet while they serve as the uppercase letters in foreign languages.

The literature suggests that this was the first attempt of its kind; its promoters sought a deep modification of the Arabic letter structure, bringing it closer to Latin script. The proposed change did not involve any linguistic enhancement, like the minimal alteration of Arabic script (through accented letters and various diacritics: <پ>, <ج>, <ط>) that Urdu required and implemented for phonological reasons. No aesthetic improvements were made by encumbering Arabic with foreign characteristics. Hence, the short life of Attaj was not really unexpected. The era was not ready for a cultural mixing that allowed such modifications. Moreover, the attempt was eccentric, both linguistically and aesthetically. Given the historic events that followed—the fall of the monarchy, the rise of Arabism, nationalism, and the Revolution of Independence—it seems obvious that this calligraphic style had no chance of surviving.

3.2 Transformations

Until the final years of the twentieth century, this tendency did not become a trend. However, the massive scope of cultural interactions among world populations in the aftermath of globalization has chiefly favored Western cultural choices. This changed global reality has influenced the tendency introduced by King Fuad I and Muhammad Mahfouz, transforming it into a shapeless trend, which, as yet, has no particular characteristics or obvious aims.

Technological advances have incorporated revolutionary forms of communication and trade, requiring increased attention and much exposure to Latin script. These have negatively impacted the dominance of Arabic script within the landscape of the Arab and Islamic world. This, in turn, has led to a gradual tolerance for mixing the different identities of Arabic and Latin letters in practical ways. Before globalization, the identity of Arabic script was totally independent; over time, people began to read Arabic newspapers and magazines with Latin letters scattered here and there, denoting product names, new inventions and Western-world news. In particular, technological advances helped to free typography art, which has grown in ways never seen before. A new generation of typographic styles has been introduced by technicians and calligraphists. At the same time, technical computer fonts were bypassing the classical calligraphy styles, such as Ruq'a, Thuluth, Diwani, and Naskh. Modern fonts have originated in a less conservative environment, where creation has been steered toward offering technological solutions for Arabic markets, rather than maintaining detailed calligraphic standards. As a result, letter sizes, shapes, curves, cusps, diacritics, and ways of connecting and printing script within computer applications became the focus of attention.

Alongside advances in computer technology, the trend for “free-style” fonts have widened to encompass handwritten styles. Calligraphists, especially those who had no association with Arabic calligraphy schools or certification, were drawn to aesthetic aspects of the whole process; they began to create and publish their own styles, sometimes with descriptions of their governing concepts. Typographic fonts were then derived from these new styles for technical use. Most of the free styles had a relatively low status within classical artistic environments, which maintained a traditional respect for strict calligraphic rules. Technological calligraphists enjoyed little fame or popularity, in comparison to their conservative classical counterparts.

These developments were accompanied by renewed interest in the aesthetic value of Arabic letters; several artists, who had freed themselves from the framework of classic calligraphy, established different artistic concepts and streams. One prominent wave involved lettering design. Instead of being a mere linguistic and scriptorial unit in artwork, the letter acquired its own abstract value, rich in both decorative flexibility and geometric arrangement.

Within these transformative concepts, the pen was associated with the brush; for this reason, ink remained; frills and asymmetrical lines became aesthetic elements that were no less important than the strict Arabic calligraphic rules. Color was also exploited to change the classic and mostly unicolored landscape of Arabic calligraphic artworks. Soon after this, Arabic artists in the new artistic, international Letterism movement (which focused on the visual as well as the literary aspects of letters) used color to create a new artform that combined classic and modern fine-art methods. When letters meet color in a lettering painting, the impact of the artwork is

strengthened (Figure 2) through “the fine flexibility and continuity of characters and their interconnection with other letters ...in which the color mass with the letter object forms a creative artwork that is difficult to form differently” (Alsaiedi, 2016, p. 162).



Figure 2. Arabic lettering painting (Shawkat, 2018)

It is probably true that the theory of the Arabic Writing System reached its peak with the rising application of the Arabic-letter aesthetic abstract unit, which does not rely on decorations, frames and lines, or even implicated meanings, to deliver its aesthetic message. This abstract trend focused on the letter itself, highlighting all shapes, forms, orientations, curves, twists, and turns—and including all or some parts. The works of Arabic Letterists such as Wissam Shawkat, Mohammed Mandy, Khalid Sebaa, Ali alJak Saeed, Naja Almihdawi, and Ayman Jafar illustrate the departure from the general pattern of Arabic calligraphic rules. Indeed, they themselves intermingled the roles of calligrapher and painter, moving toward a new stage of creation.

According to Faris Albyati (Albayati, 2016, p. 166):

... the one-dimension group that broke the rules against creation might have been inspired by the letter sophism and its sacred value. Artists now do nothing but mix between self-giving and rules, so that the outcome would be symbols and visual formats coming out spontaneously, disobedient to ordinary script techniques and conventional concepts; that is when the artist takes the letter to a transformative abstract level, letting go of any documentary purpose and taking on a new status of creation and its implications.

These transformative directions were coupled with widespread Western-derived Arabic wall art—graffiti. On-wall writing has now become an artistic trend of its own, with specific artistic characteristics and tools of expression. Since it first emerged, Arabic calligraphy has made a distinct appearance—it is a crucial element of Arabic graffiti, as can be seen in this street in Cairo (Figure 3). The style used here is a clear reflection of all of those transformations on the one hand, and of the rebellious nature of graffiti on the other.



Figure 3. Arabic Graffiti, Cairo (Nasser, 2016)

Because these transformations had the potential to generate further creativity, based on mixing different items, a new fashion known as Calligraffiti (Meulman, 2017) emerged. More like calligraphy than writing, painting, or drawing, calligraffiti featured diverse handwriting, typing, and on-wall writing styles. This artform was highly influenced by Arab artists, especially Letterists, despite its novelty and disturbed beginnings. Inspired by the letter-unity principle and its aesthetic value, it merged letters into visual structures with different topographical dimensions, which surpassed semantics to create appealing linguistic and artistic landscapes through very large graphical wall-writings, such as Almuallaqat Calligraffiti (The Suspended Odes or The Hanging Poems) shown in Figure 4. Materials and surfaces also vary—ranging from doors, roofs, and car and plane bodies, to the street billboards used by Arab and non-Arab calligraffiti artists such as the Russian Pokras Lampas (Lampas, 2017) and the French Abadi Hafez (Hafez, 2018). Together, they have made different types of great Arabic calligraffiti.

Gradually these Arabic calligraphy transformations have adopted the trend of exploiting Latin-script characteristics for aesthetic purposes, linguistic goals, or both. This happened at the beginning of the twenty-first century; it is still developing, in line with the growing international and Arabic interest in Arabic writing, particularly among those exposed to the globalized (Latin/Western) culture of glamor but relatively confined by technology. The artworks developed during the first decade of the 21st century by Wissam Shawkat and Reza Abedini, who exhibit real and original talent, deserve to be highlighted here. Both artists work in a new style that infuses Arabic script with foreign characteristics of other scripts (mostly Latin), in an attempt to incorporate both related cultures into creative products—magnificent landscapes and beautiful designs.



Figure 4. Almuallaqat on high-rise building, Dubai (Hafez, 2018)

A new style was motivated by this trend, encompassing all transformations that are different in direction, resources, degrees of intensity, cultural and linguistic dimensions, and the extent to which they escape from classical rules. This new style was born far from the Arabic countries, with more boldness, progression, and clarity in challenging the norms; it is the QEII style registered in England by calligraphist and artist Richard-Fouad MacLeod. Earlier attempts were relatively half-baked, despite being typographic, rather than calligraphic. By contrast, this new arrival, described by its creator as “the first Arabic-British script in history” (MacLeod, Queen Elizabeth II (QEII), 2014), likely indicates a new trend turn. The QEII (Queen Elizabeth II) was, in fact, its creator’s Master’s degree project at Sunderland University, derived from a particular cultural background, the Islamic community in Britain, now in its third or fourth generation. Inevitably, the QEII comes with halos of beauty, unified within the personality of the calligraphist and melted down to express a new civilizational identity, which harmoniously and proudly unites Islamic values and British culture—something that Arabic calligraphy has never attempted before (ibid., p. 58). In its artistic characteristics, this style blends a rigid Gothic script, its sharp letter shapes featuring peaks and angles, with the geometric Arabic Kufic style to create an “Arabic Gothic style” (Figure 5).

Almost all of the turns that Arabic calligraphy has undertaken during this journey have truly changed its legacy. This is particularly true of those turns that have been influenced by different cultures, most prominently Western ones. There is a clear trend that has never been seen before; it reflects, not simply individual artistic tendencies, but a streaming direction, motivated by advances in computing, transportation, immigration, and multi-cultural communication. These factors have inspired artists from many and mixed backgrounds, for whom artistic writing and scribing has become a shared industry. In spite of the harmony and coherence of such gathering and productions, this is now a distinct theme of the trend.



Figure 5. Sample of the Royal Calligraphy Style QEII (MacLeod, Calligraphy Style QEII, 2015)

4. Methodology

Following the chronological line of this tendency, which is now becoming a cultural and linguistic aesthetic trend that exploits different (and sometimes contradictory) characteristics of Arabic and Latin scripts, this study explores the following questions: 1) Does mixing Arabic with Latin traits reflect a lost feeling of identity or simply artistic fashion? What is the linguistic reality behind this trend? How can it be methodically described? 2) How can we see and understand these transformations in the context of the AWS theory?

The recent merger of Arabic calligraphy, which is a writing/script art, with graphical fine art, which incorporates typography and computer design, has produced Arabic calligraphic paintings that represent a creative mixture and newly defined product, very new to the script in both its linguistic and artistic domains. Since then, paintings have been read differently—at the levels of writing (word/phrase), graphics (drawings, backgrounds, colors), script (letter/letters, rule-abiding/free, shape, style, original/foreign), and the whole landscape, in which each painting delivers different meanings, depending on the level or reader's background.

Aspects of modern artworks unrelated to script are beyond the focus of this study. As this is a linguistic study, it focuses on the linguistic aspects of all items and levels. Using a visual analysis, it qualitatively describes a number of script-based creative products that represent its core interest. Several representative examples associated with this trend are outlined below, selected out of a very large sample; these provide enough evidence to fulfil the purpose of the study. Individual examples are studied and classified; their linguistic and aesthetic effects are then explored, in relation to AWS and its developments.

5. Trend Features: A Deep Look

A careful study of numerous attempts to exploit Latin script in Arabic calligraphic artworks (whether explicitly or implicitly) enables us to classify these artistic productions into three sub-trends: script switching, script fusion, and faux fonts. Each of these sub-trends has its own writing tools and script techniques.

5.1 Script Switching

This sub-trend involves writing with different scripts at word-level within the artwork. Handwriting or/and typing are used here, as shown in Figure 6. Note the existence of two different words that are not repeated in the two languages (Arabic and English). The first word is “LOVE”, written in Latin uppercase letters, while two hanging Arabic slang words are written in Arabic Farsi style. This artwork has three consecutive layers, against a

black background. The first layer superimposes all of the dots on top of the other layers; then the first letters of both Arabic words appear before the remaining Arabic and Latin letters play interchangeably between the two remaining layers.

Using Farsi style, with stretching lines, enhances the interchanging play between the second and third layers. The artwork is easy to read, particularly as the first and last Arabic letters appear in a free space beyond and along the sides of the English word, as if the Arabic letters both cover and run through “love.” The message appears to request a lifting of the cultural taboo around love; the dots are positioned above the whole artwork, as if pinned to the foreign word and not just the Arabic. Was the calligraphist in a state of foreign love? Or did his love feel foreign to him? Is there something about this love that must appear once and then be hidden again? The exposed is covered and apparently hidden at the same time. There is an anxiety associated with this state that needs to achieve stability.



Figure 6. Artwork in Arabic and Latin Scripts “Love is not shameful”

Many commercial name signs, logos, and seasonal greeting cards are included in this sub-trend for obvious reasons; it gives logos and commercial names an international gloss, as well as providing a non-Arabic Islamic background for seasonal greeting cards. One example is the logo in Figure 7, which illustrates a design by the Bahraini calligraphist Ibrahim Ja’far. The Arabic appears to be handwritten, but the English is a typeface in a sans-serif font. The dots are aligned vertically, and the letters hang like golden medals. While the Arabic script does not belong to a particular classic or free style, the Latin script evades the center, leaving the spotlight to the wavy design of the Arabic script. The sans-serif Latin script seems to fade away into a simple closed ending, as if the main purpose of the Latin script were to serve the Arabic design by translating it into an internationally legible language. The trademark appears to spark mysteriously but clearly, allowing the Arabic writing to show off its glowing curves and swings. The Latin text transliterates the whole, ensuring that the logo’s message is delivered.



Figure 7. Logo of Kear غير by Ibrahim Ja'far (ONE-BH, 2013)

The Syrian artist Muhammad Fareeq created this painting for the blessed Islamic day Ashura (Figure 8). It is full of both Arabic and Latin typography, with hand-applied minimal design touches at different aspects. It was presumably designed using the script-switching technique for its Islamic subject to produce an international religious message. The artwork involves a partially unified Arabic and English script. The same script-switching technique keeps both scripts at word-level, although the script elements are all integrated and seem to look alike. The focus of the artwork lies between the two parallel horizontal lines; the Arabic design structure provides the foundation that the English is built upon. Although the overall mode is more Latin-like, from the first Arabic letter <ع> until the final letter <ء>, both texts resemble the Latin letter <S>. There are several scattered dots, which are genuine Arabic bound graphemes, although they are introduced here primarily for aesthetic reasons and visual balancing. All in all, the new style uses the two scripts to create a harmonized whole, as if they were one language written in one script. The artist appears to be saying that the origins are Arabic but the message is international.

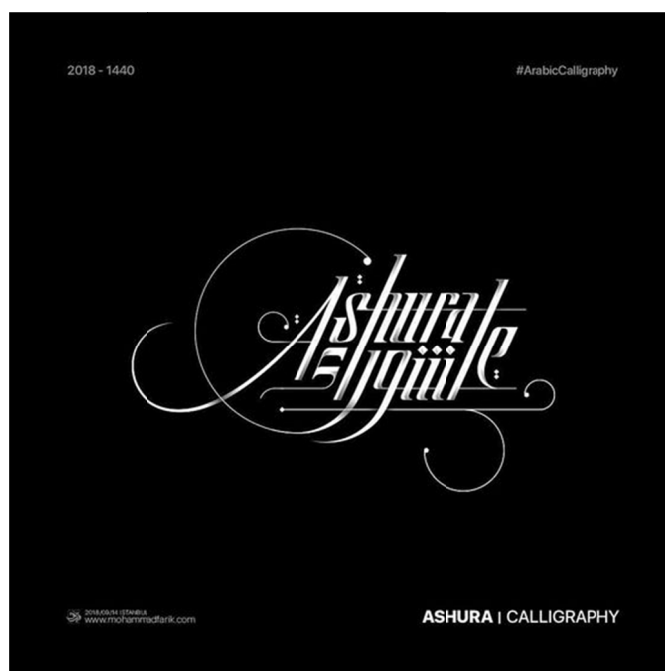


Figure 8. “Ashura” in Arabic and Latin scripts by Muhammad Fareeq (Fareeq, 2018)

5.2 Script Fusion

This sub-trend uses the technique of script fusion to fuse scriptorial letters/characters in lettering artworks. Unlike the previous sub-trend, which is concerned with words, it works at the level of letters. In the present case, it merges Latin and Arabic letters within a word, with letters in each script replacing each other. Although this technique exists in both calligraphy and typography, the latter seems to dominate creativity within this sub-trend.

Noteworthy that script fusion is one of the techniques most commonly used by letterists, who apply different fonts and scripts, sometimes including symbols that are not real letters but mimic them. Because some of the wider variations fall outside the focus of this study, we are here concerned specifically with the interaction between Arabic and Latin scripts in artworks.



Figure 9. Artwork “مهران” using the Script Fusion technique, Arabic and Latin (Abedini, Posters, 2018)

Figure 9 above shows an artwork by a well-known Iranian letterist, Reza Abedini, who used typographical fonts to write “Mehran Zamani/ مهران زمانی” in a fusion of Latin and Arabic letters. Abedini has created a number of paintings using this approach since the beginning of the millennium. He normally gathers letters that convey either a direct meaning (as in the example above), or implicit speculations. Most of his artworks fuse Arabic-based Farsi typographical script with Latin-based English letters, in vertical, horizontal, or unsettled directions.

When Abedini was in Iran, he tried to gather a number of talented young designers for a specific purpose: to compile a thorough knowledge of the Farsi language and its writing system. He found a different audience when he moved to Europe and tried to bridge the gap between his own design language and the European landscape (Sorbello, Interview Reza Abedini, 2012). According to him, there is a “civilizational problem” between the East and the West because of miscommunications, which leads to misunderstanding; he believes that this new trend will help to minimize this problem (ibid.). His technique is directed consciously towards supporting cultural communication between the two worlds. It is not an aimless or fruitless artistic trend. Moreover, it solves the problem of typography. Although handwritten and graphical Arabic script is superior, typographical script still lags behind.

Among various efforts to strengthen Arabic typefaces within Western contexts, this artwork for an Arabic-Latin script design (Figure 10) was produced by two establishments working cooperatively: the Arabic “Zeyn” and the French “Pascal Zoghbi” (Baboukhian, 2014). The artwork represents the marriage between Arabic and Latin scripts and the cultural meeting between two different civilizations.



Figure 10. Artwork using a mix of Arabic and Latin typographical characters (Baboukhian, 2014)

Clearly, typography is dominant for both scripts in this artwork. In both scripts, each character is attached to another, with no clear phonological or graphemic relationship, as if the typographical assortment indicates a vague relationship at the beginning of civilizational communications between two different cultures. This difference is expressed through typographical interfaces. All of the letters suggest sharpness; they are interchangeably outlined and black-filled and each row contrasts with the next. Directionality is lost, so that the artwork can become an independent entity, with no imposed Arabic (RTL) or Latin (LTR) directions. Instead, it depends on a directionless matrix. It is possible to look at this image from different directions: vertically top-down and bottom-up; horizontally right-to-left and left-to-right; and diagonally from the top-right corner to the bottom-left corner and vice-versa. Several scriptorial items and cultural mirrors seem to have met and lined up suddenly, or found themselves in a shape, with no shared relationships or directions. Did all of the variations and contrasts melt away and their own identities vanish?

All of these artworks and their script items have philosophical underpinnings. This reveals the linguistic reality on top of the artistic façade. As the Arab letterist Marwan Imam says, “you don’t have enough letters to make this noise” (Panović, 2018, p. 79). In his chanting logo shown in Figure 11, Arabic letters, diacritics, Eastern Arabic numbers, and dots, in addition to the large designed letter <ح> in Thuluth calligraphic style, are fused with Latin letters to create one word; the meaning of the whole is: “I am Tahrir/التحرير.” Imam carefully chooses dots, putting two at the beginning, on the left-hand side of the English word, in front of the Latin letters, to express identity or a starting point. There are two other dots under the English <I>, which harmonizes with the sound of the Arabic <حي> /i/, as if he were shouting in two languages and using all possible scriptorial capacities for expression.



Figure 11. Artwork “I AM TAHRIR/التحرير أنا” using the Script Fusion technique with two different scripts (Imam, 2018)

Panović (2018, p. 71) includes Imam’s design, pointing out that, “[I]nstead of <H>, a stylized, larger than life Arabic letter <ح> was interlaced through ‘Tahrir.’ Taking over the entire logo, yet leaving everything readable, it made Arabic speak, if not chant, through English.” The use of this specific letter was not random; as Panović notes, he chose the voiceless pharyngeal fricative /h/, represented by <ح> to be the icon of the design “both aurally and visually.” Instead of the usual options, and with no real phonological effect, the consonant length <َح> (shadda) is placed inside the <ح>, visually completing the landscape and highlighting the guttural sound of the chanting crowds, as if their voices and screams were continually repeating and doubling over and over again.

5.3 Faux Fonts

The third sub-trend is chiefly concerned with typography. It disguises one script and makes it look like a different script. Artworks that use this technique have become increasingly popular; they differ in their degree of disguise, as well as the typefaces used for both Arabic and Latin scripts. Arabic fonts masked with Latin attributes have been developed by both Arab and non-Arab artists. One British artist known for having made many such fonts is the designer and calligraphist Ruh Al-Alam, who designed the Arabic font below, basing it on the traditional French font Didot; the resulting blend is the “Arabic Didot” font (Figure 12).

The characteristics of this font seem distinctively contradictory, as its very fine lines move horizontally and rich, thick sketched lines and curves move vertically. A number of Arabic names are embedded in the artwork: from the top, Fatih فاتح, Omar عمر, Salam سلام, Hamza حمزة, and Maryam مريم, all are written in a style that resembles a well-known Latin script in different typefaces, such as Bodoni MT. The similarity between the developed Arabic script above (particularly the letters <ة>, <م>, <ف> and <س>) and the Latin letters <O>, <M>, and <g> in Bodoni MT font is very obvious.

Ruh Al-Alam acknowledges that typography has limitations, in comparison to Arabic calligraphy. When showing examples that he designed using this font, he concludes that they would need considerable structural work to make the shift from typography to calligraphy. However, he continues to work with this technique, producing new fonts such as Arin, Jude, KUFICA, and MODA (Behance, 2018), which are all modern Arabic fonts with Latin features; he has also received many international prizes (Ruh Al-Alam, 2018).



Figure 12. Arabic Didot—A Latin-like Arabic font (Ruh Al-Alam, 2018)

The word “جون” (Figure 13 below) was designed by Ibrahim Ja’far. The artwork is entirely black and white, signaling the Arabic word, which means either sheer white or total black. The typeface transpires from Latin curls of variant letters such as <I>, <J>, <T>, and <G> in the Blackadder font. The artwork maintains enduring fading ends, recalling the Ottoman Tugra style, while the persistent color contrast reflects the meaning of the written word. The font glows with curved edges even beyond the dots, while the whole artwork imitates a rapid, handwritten signature.

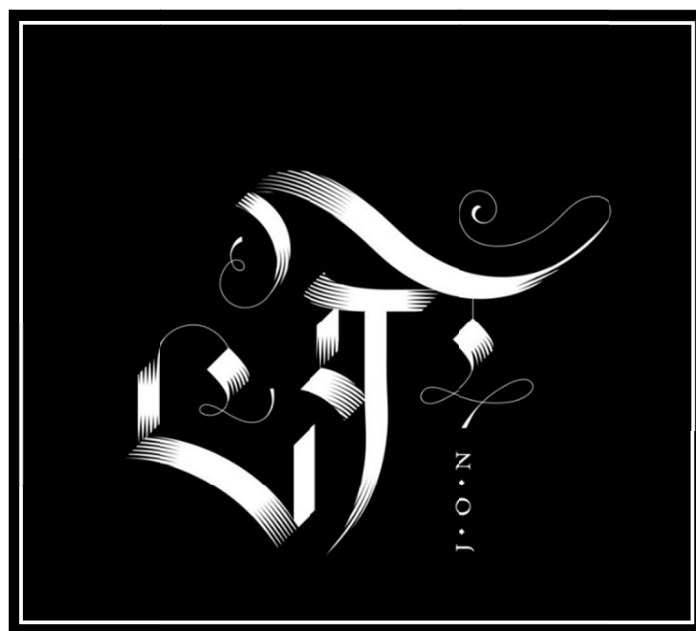


Figure 13. Artwork using the Faux Arabic font technique (eje Studio, 2015)

This approach has also been used in the reverse, to design Latin typefaces that borrow Arabic script features and traditions, exploiting their cursive flow and flexibility. Several artworks that adopt this reverse approach have been created by multi-cultural designers such as Roger Vershen (PageStudioGraphics, 2018). Latin graphemes appear as Arabic-shaped letters; for example, <d> becomes <ط>, <G> <ع>, and <E> <ع>. The disguise sometimes reaches a level at which letters are practically illegible.

One fine example is a calligraffiti by Simon Salids (2018) called *Lucid Dream*, where the two scripts interlace magically, creating a magnificent landscape (Figure 14). The details of this on-wall art show how the typeface itself orchestrates a dance between the AWS characteristics, including the dots and curves of the Dewani style and the Latin uppercase letters, geometric shapes, and squares forming angels that shine in beauty. The artwork seems a bit deceptive at first glance, with details emerging in the tradition of the Arabic script. However, it shows its real self after a few moments, with the Latin letters spelling out “*Lucid Dream*.” The Greek artist, Salids, comes from mixed backgrounds; his calligraffiti works represent a wide range of scripts, in a process he describes as spiritual—linked to the streets and landscapes (Slaidis, 2018).



Figure 14. Calligraffiti work “*Lucid Dream*” (Slaidis, 2018)

As discussed above, these are the main characteristics of this trend, which emerged recently and is still growing. The sub-trends include specific techniques and tools, used to express the artists’ interconnecting cultures, multiple identities, and the harmony they aspire to or conflicts they suffer. From this mixture, they create splendid artworks that may reveal even more linguistically than they do artistically.

5.4 From Typography to Calligraphy

One prime piece of evidence that reveals the progression of this trend is the path that artists such as Lord Richard-Fouad MacLeod have followed, creating brand-new calligraphy styles, as opposed to typography. This is a huge development, in comparison to typography-based artwork. MacLeod specified rules and descriptions for each letter in his new Arabic script, following the tradition of classic calligraphy styles, which have manuals authored by many calligraphists. Although the only other endeavor within this calligraphic trend was probably the unsuccessful attempt made by Mahfouz, during the first half of twentieth century (mentioned in 3.1), MacLeod’s manual is both modern and specific, as can be seen from the structural description of the letter <ه> in his QEII style (Figure 15). The work of this calligraphist seems to be thorough and detailed enough to ensure the successful birth of a new script within the modern context. His manual describes at length his method of constructing letters, from their primary Arabic calligraphic styles to their secondary Latin script effects. The figure below shows his pattern, revealing how the <ه> was constructed using its Naskh style and then formulated to resemble the shapes of Latin Gothic letters <a> and <n>.

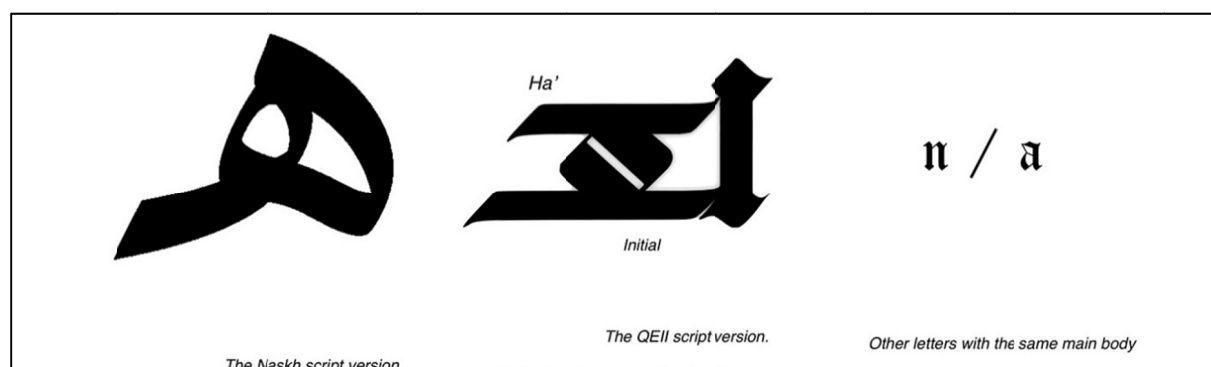


Figure 15. Structural Description of the Letter <ه> in QEII script (MacLeod, 2014)

MacLeod's script moves the trend from somewhat random experiments to the methodological and determined creation of a new aesthetic calligraphy of Latin-integrated Arabic script; the outcome is the Royal Arabic British Script, or (in the current version), the QEII (Figure 16). The characteristics of the QEII can be described as follows:

- 1) Attributes of the Arabic Kufic origin are apparent in the QEII structures. One obvious explanation is that the geometric features of this style merge with the configuration of Latin Gothic script, producing a well-integrated final result.
- 2) Finishing attributes of the Gothic style include angles, lengths, straight lines and arcs, which complete the script in a unique pattern.
- 3) The diamond shape that floats above the heads and down the ends of the letters, despite being a borrowed feature from Latin script, links to and partly resurrects the royal "Attaj" script which, as explained earlier, died long ago.
- 4) The script incorporates fixed Arab characteristics, such as flexibility, slopes, cursiveness, curves, and round corners.
- 5) The balanced build, which gathers the base, dots, size, length of letters, and other features, helps to create a cohesive arrangement.
- 6) The artist uses a shorthand technique to merge some letters into others, create a harmony between the two scripts, especially when a script-switching technique is used. Figure 17 shows the Arabic word "سلام" on top of the English word "Peace." As both words deliver the same meaning, the artist uses shorthand to merge the Arabic <م> into the Latin <P> in a gesture of cultural neighboring and shared peaceful coexistence.

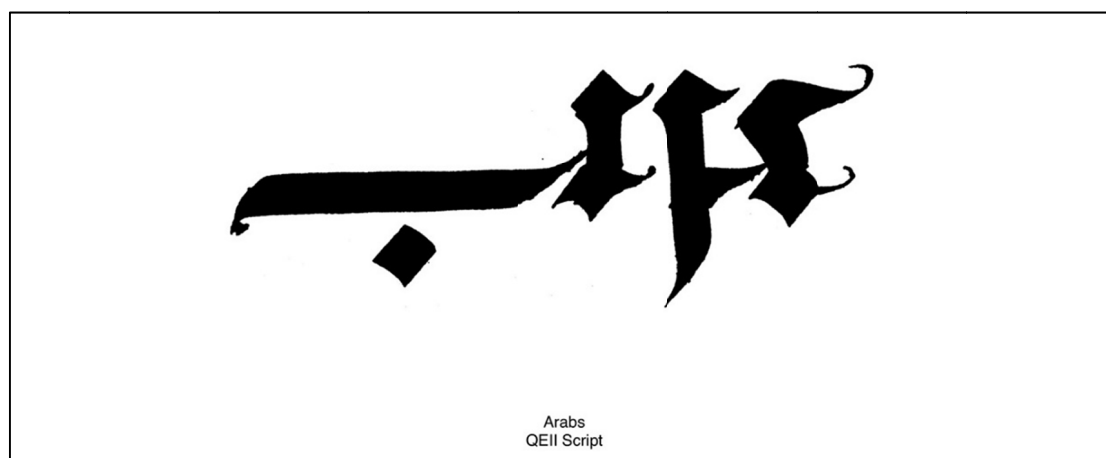


Figure 16. Example of the Royal Arabic British Style QEII (MacLeod, 2014)



Figure 17. “سلام” and its translation “Peace” written in QEII (Fouadisms, 2018)

7. Summary

This study uses a linguistic approach to analyze the aesthetics of Arabic script and recent developments that reveal a clear trend toward adopting Latin features for linguistic, as well as decorative, purposes. Although there are essential differences in almost every aspect of the Arabic and Latin scripts, they did not prevent artists and calligraphists from repeated experimentation, categorized here into three sub-trends: script switching, script fusion, and faux fonts. The last sub-trend in particular has embraced the methodological concept of a new Latin-featured Arabic calligraphy style, focusing attention on the shift within this trend, from typography to calligraphy.

Despite ample examples of artworks and experiments in all three sub-trends, script switching and script fusion techniques seemed more popular for intuitive reasons—the natural extension of aesthetic developments in calligraphy and design, in comparison to typography. These two techniques also appear more amenable and reflexive.

I believe that this is the first study to reveal this trend, divide it into three sub-trends, and describe them comprehensively, using a deep visual analysis of the tools and techniques used by calligraphists in each category. One final task is to answer the question of whether these techniques were used primarily for scriptorial (linguistic) needs, sociocultural reasons, or aesthetic purposes. The above analysis of the three sub-trends suggests that the reasons are more linguistic and sociolinguistic than merely aesthetic. The creators clearly focus more on the structure of the script, letter shapes, cusps, curves, and other script features than on colors, backgrounds, and non-script decorations. This suggests that the phenomenon reflects linguistic and sociocultural changes that are probably still in the nascent stages.

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