

## Postcolonial Graphic Design: Dismantling Western Visual Domination in Arab Design Systems A Reading in Redefining Identity through Local Fonts and Symbols

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### Abstract

This research paper examines the postcolonial dimensions of graphic design in the Arab world, focusing on how contemporary designers are challenging Western visual hegemony through the reclamation and reimagination of local typography, symbols, and visual languages. The study investigates the complex interplay between colonial legacies and indigenous design traditions across the Gulf region, North Africa, and the Levant, analyzing how designers are developing decolonial approaches that assert visual sovereignty while engaging with global design discourses. Through qualitative analysis of rare and previously unexplored case studies, including the Syrian Design Archive,

40MUSTAQEL studio's Arabfuturism, and emerging typographic innovations, this research identifies key strategies employed by Arab designers to dismantle Western visual domination. The findings reveal how the development of authentic Arabic typefaces, the revival of cultural symbols, and the critical rejection of orientalist design clichés contribute to a growing movement of design decolonization. This paper argues that these practices not only represent aesthetic choices but constitute political acts of resistance against cultural erasure and homogenization. By documenting these emerging practices, this research contributes new knowledge to the field of graphic design by highlighting how postcolonial design approaches in the

Arab world are creating alternative modernities that challenge the universalist claims of Western design paradigms while fostering cultural hybridity that honors local visual traditions.

**Keywords:** postcolonial design, Arabic typography, visual sovereignty, cultural hybridization, decolonization, Arab graphic design, visual identity.

### \* Introduction

The landscape of graphic design in the Arab world has been profoundly shaped by complex historical forces, including colonialism, globalization, and the ongoing struggle for cultural identity. For decades, Western design paradigms have dominated visual communication across the Gulf region, North Africa, and the Levant, often marginalizing indigenous visual traditions and imposing foreign aesthetic standards. This hegemony has manifested in various ways: from the privileging of Latin typography over Arabic scripts in multilingual contexts, to the perpetuation of orientalist visual tropes that exoticize and essentialize Arab cultural expressions. The result has been a visual environment that frequently fails to authentically represent the rich diversity and nuanced realities of Arab societies.

In recent years, however, a significant shift has occurred as Arab designers increasingly challenge these imposed visual hierarchies through innovative approaches that reclaim and reimagine local design languages. This emerging movement represents more than merely aesthetic experimentation; it constitutes a form of cultural resistance against the lingering effects of colonialism in visual communication. By developing design practices that center Arabic typography, indigenous symbols, and local visual traditions, these designers are engaging in what can be understood as a process of visual decolonization—a deliberate effort to dismantle Western visual domination and assert cultural sovereignty through graphic design.

This research paper examines this phenomenon through the theoretical frameworks of visual sovereignty and cultural hybridization. Visual sovereignty refers to the reclamation of control over how a culture is visually represented, challenging external definitions and stereotypes. Cultural hybridization, meanwhile, acknowledges the productive tensions that emerge when different visual traditions interact, creating new forms that neither simply reject

nor uncritically adopt Western influences, but rather transform them through local cultural lenses. Together, these frameworks provide a nuanced approach to understanding how Arab designers navigate the complex terrain between tradition and innovation, resistance and engagement.

The significance of this research lies in its focus on an understudied aspect of contemporary Arab visual culture. While considerable scholarly attention has been devoted to postcolonial literature, film, and fine art from the region, comparatively little academic work has addressed how graphic design functions as a site of decolonial practice in Arab contexts. By documenting and analyzing emerging design approaches that challenge Western visual paradigms, this study contributes new knowledge to both design history and postcolonial studies, offering insights into how visual communication participates in broader processes of cultural reclamation and identity formation.

Furthermore, this research addresses a critical gap in design scholarship by focusing specifically on typography and symbols as key elements in the decolonization of Arab visual culture. Typography, as

the visual embodiment of language, carries particular significance in a region where script has historically held profound cultural and religious importance. Similarly, symbols function as condensed carriers of cultural meaning, capable of communicating complex identities and histories. By examining how contemporary Arab designers are reimagining these fundamental elements of visual communication, this study illuminates the specific strategies through which postcolonial graphic design operates.

The paper proceeds as follows: First, a review of relevant literature situates this research within existing scholarship on postcolonial design theory and Arab visual culture. Next, the methodology section outlines the qualitative approach employed to analyze selected case studies. The findings section presents detailed analyses of innovative design practices from the Gulf region, North Africa, and the Levant, with particular attention to rare and previously unexplored examples. The discussion section synthesizes these findings to identify key strategies of visual decolonization and consider their broader implications. Finally, the conclusion reflects on the contributions of this research and

suggests directions for future inquiry in this rapidly evolving field.



**Figure 1: 40MUSTAQEL Studio's Arabfuturism poster for Arab Cinema Week, demonstrating a postcolonial approach to Arabic design that challenges Western visual paradigms.**

#### **\* Literature Review**

The study of postcolonial graphic design in the Arab world intersects several scholarly domains, including design history, postcolonial theory, and cultural studies. This literature review examines key contributions to these fields that inform the present research, highlighting both foundational works and recent developments that have shaped our understanding of how graphic design functions within postcolonial Arab contexts.

#### **\* Postcolonial Theory and Visual Culture**

Postcolonial theory provides essential frameworks for analyzing how visual culture reflects and responds to colonial legacies. Edward Said's (1978) seminal work "Orientalism" established critical

foundations for understanding how Western representations construct and essentialize "the Orient," including the Arab world. While Said focused primarily on literary and academic discourses, scholars like Mirzoeff (2011) have extended these insights to visual culture, examining how colonial power operates through what he terms "visuality"—the visualization of history from the perspective of colonial authority.

More recently, decolonial scholars have moved beyond critique to explore possibilities for resistance and alternative visual practices. Mignolo and Walsh (2018) articulate decoloniality as not merely opposing Western epistemologies but creating pluriversal alternatives that honor diverse knowledge systems. In the specific context of design, Tunstall (2013) has developed the concept of "decolonizing design," arguing that design practices must acknowledge their complicity in colonial systems and actively work to create more equitable approaches.

#### **\* Arab Graphic Design History**

Until recently, comprehensive histories of Arab graphic design were notably absent from design scholarship. This gap has begun to be addressed through groundbreaking work by Shehab and Nawar (2020), whose "A History of Arab Graphic

Design" provides the first extensive documentation of key figures, movements, and developments in Arab graphic design from pre-1900 to the digital era. Their research reveals how Arab graphic design evolved through complex interactions with both indigenous visual traditions and external influences, including colonialism and globalization.

Complementing this historical overview, Maasri's (2020) research on "Cosmopolitan Radicalism: The Visual Politics of Beirut's Global Sixties" examines how graphic design in Lebanon during the 1960s and 1970s participated in transnational political movements while developing distinctly local visual languages. Similarly, Atrissi (2021) has documented how contemporary Arab graphic design navigates between global design trends and local cultural contexts, often struggling to avoid orientalist clichés while developing authentic visual expressions.

#### **\* Arabic Typography and Decolonization**

Typography has emerged as a particularly significant site of decolonial practice in Arab graphic design. Boutros (2019) traces how Arabic typography evolved from calligraphic traditions through various technological transitions,

highlighting how colonial influences and technological constraints often marginalized Arabic script's rich visual potential. Chahine (2020) further examines the politics of Arabic type design, arguing that the development of Arabic typefaces has historically been constrained by Western technological standards and aesthetic preferences.

Recent scholarship has increasingly focused on how contemporary designers are challenging these constraints. Gebrael (2023) documents emerging efforts to "politicize Arabic type design" by overturning exclusionary notions of quality and challenging classist gatekeeping within the profession. Similarly, Kulkarni and Ben Ayed (2022) explore "decolonizing typography" through educational practices that disrupt Eurocentric design pedagogies and create space for non-Western typographic traditions.

#### **\* Visual Sovereignty and Cultural Hybridization**

The concepts of visual sovereignty and cultural hybridization provide valuable theoretical frameworks for understanding postcolonial design practices. Visual sovereignty, a term originally developed in indigenous media studies by Raheja (2007),

refers to the reclamation of control over visual representation by communities that have historically been objectified through colonial gazes. Adapting this concept to Arab contexts, Al-Kassim (2020) examines how contemporary Arab visual artists assert sovereignty through practices that refuse both Western stereotypes and nationalist essentialism.

Cultural hybridization, meanwhile, offers a way to understand how postcolonial design navigates between different visual traditions. Moving beyond simplistic binaries of "traditional" versus "modern," Bhabha's (1994) concept of hybridity emphasizes the productive "third space" that emerges when different cultural systems interact. In the specific context of Arab graphic design, Eskandar (2022) explores how designers create "hybrid modernities" that neither reject global influences nor uncritically adopt Western models, but rather transform them through local cultural frameworks.

#### **\* Research Gaps and Contributions**

Despite these valuable contributions, significant gaps remain in the literature on postcolonial Arab graphic design. First, while historical overviews and

theoretical frameworks have been established, detailed case studies of contemporary design practices remain limited, particularly for regions outside major cultural centers like Beirut and Cairo. Second, the specific strategies through which designers challenge Western visual domination have not been systematically analyzed across different Arab contexts. Finally, the role of digital technologies in both constraining and enabling decolonial design practices requires further investigation.

This research addresses these gaps by providing detailed analyses of rare and previously unexplored case studies from across the Gulf region, North Africa, and the Levant. By focusing specifically on how designers reclaim and reimagine local typography and symbols, it offers new insights into the concrete practices through which visual sovereignty is asserted. Furthermore, by examining these practices through the dual frameworks of visual sovereignty and cultural hybridization, this study contributes a nuanced understanding of how postcolonial graphic design navigates the complex terrain between resistance and engagement, tradition and innovation.

## Who Gets to Design Arabic Typography?

**Figure 2: Typography as a site of decolonial practice in Arabic design, illustrating the politics of Arabic type design.**

### \* Methodology

This study employs a qualitative research methodology designed to investigate how contemporary Arab graphic designers are challenging Western visual domination through the reclamation and reimagination of local typography and symbols. The research design is informed by critical visual methodology (Rose, 2016) and decolonial research approaches (Smith, 2021), which emphasize the importance of examining visual artifacts within their specific social, cultural, and historical contexts while remaining attentive to power dynamics that shape visual production and reception.

### \* Research Approach

The methodological framework for this study combines elements of visual discourse analysis, case study research, and critical ethnography. This hybrid approach allows for a nuanced examination of both the formal properties of design artifacts and the broader sociopolitical contexts in which they are produced and circulated. The

research is guided by the theoretical frameworks of visual sovereignty and cultural hybridization, which inform both the selection of cases and the analytical strategies employed.

Given the focus on dismantling Western visual domination in Arab design systems, a decolonial methodological stance was essential. This stance acknowledges the researcher's positionality and privileges indigenous knowledge systems and perspectives. Throughout the research process, care was taken to center the voices and interpretations of Arab designers themselves, rather than imposing external analytical frameworks that might reproduce colonial knowledge hierarchies.

### \* Data Collection

Data collection proceeded through three primary methods: -

1- Archival Research: Extensive review of design archives, publications, and online repositories was conducted to identify relevant case studies and visual examples. Key sources included the Syrian Design Archive, Arabic Design Archive, and specialized publications on Arab graphic design. This archival work was particularly important for accessing historical context and tracing the evolution of design approaches over time.

2- Visual Analysis: Detailed visual analysis was performed on selected design artifacts, examining formal elements such as typography, composition, color, and symbolism, as well as contextual factors including intended audience, circulation, and reception. This analysis focused particularly on how these elements relate to questions of cultural identity, colonial legacies, and visual sovereignty.

3- Secondary Source Analysis: Analysis of designer statements, interviews, and critical writings provided essential context for understanding the intentions, processes, and theoretical positions informing the design work. These sources were particularly valuable for accessing designers' own articulations of how their work engages with postcolonial concerns.

#### **\* Case Selection**

Case studies were selected using purposive sampling to identify examples that specifically address the research questions regarding postcolonial approaches to graphic design in Arab contexts. Selection criteria included: -

1- Geographic Diversity: Cases were selected to represent diverse regions within the Arab world, including the Gulf region, North Africa, and the Levant, allowing for comparative

analysis across different colonial histories and cultural contexts.

2- Focus on Typography and Symbols: Priority was given to cases that specifically engage with Arabic typography and/or local symbolic systems, as these elements are particularly significant for questions of visual sovereignty.

3- Innovative Approaches: Cases were selected that demonstrate innovative or experimental approaches to challenging Western visual paradigms, with particular attention to rare or previously unexplored examples.

4- Contemporary Relevance: While historical context is considered, the primary focus is on design work produced within the last five years (2020-2025), reflecting current developments in the field.

5- Theoretical Engagement: Preference was given to cases where designers explicitly engage with questions of decolonization, cultural identity, or visual sovereignty, either in the work itself or in accompanying statements.

Based on these criteria, three primary case studies were selected for in-depth analysis, supplemented by additional examples that illustrate broader patterns or alternative approaches: -



1- The Syrian Design Archive (Levant)

2- 40MUSTAQEL Studio's Arabfuturism project (Egypt/Gulf)

3- Khatt Foundation's Typographic Matchmaking initiatives (Pan-Arab)

#### **\* Analytical Framework**

Analysis of the selected cases proceeded through a three-level framework: -

1- Formal Analysis: Examination of visual elements, including typography, composition, color, and symbolism, with particular attention to how these elements relate to both Arab visual traditions and Western design influences.

2- Contextual Analysis: Investigation of the social, cultural, and political contexts in which the design work was produced and circulated, including consideration of intended audiences, institutional frameworks, and market forces.

3- Discursive Analysis: Examination of how the design work and accompanying texts engage with broader discourses around decolonization, cultural identity, and visual sovereignty.

Throughout this analytical process, the dual theoretical frameworks of visual sovereignty and cultural hybridization provided conceptual tools for interpreting how designers navigate between resistance and

engagement, tradition and innovation.

#### **\* Limitations**

Several limitations of this methodology should be acknowledged. First, the focus on selected case studies necessarily limits the generalizability of findings, though this is mitigated somewhat by the inclusion of supplementary examples. Second, reliance on published materials and secondary sources means that the research lacks the depth that might be achieved through primary interviews or ethnographic observation. Finally, the researcher's own positionality and cultural background inevitably influence interpretations, despite efforts to center Arab designers' own perspectives.

Despite these limitations, the methodology provides a robust framework for examining how contemporary Arab graphic designers are challenging Western visual domination through innovative approaches to typography and symbols. By combining formal visual analysis with contextual and discursive examination, it enables a nuanced understanding of both the aesthetic strategies and political implications of postcolonial graphic design in the Arab world.

## **\* Findings**

This section presents the findings from analysis of selected case studies that illustrate how contemporary Arab graphic designers are challenging Western visual domination through innovative approaches to typography, symbols, and visual language. The findings are organized around three key regions—the Levant, North Africa, and the Gulf—with particular attention to rare and previously unexplored examples that demonstrate diverse strategies of visual decolonization.

### **\* The Levant: Archiving and Reclaiming Visual Heritage**

### **\* The Syrian Design Archive: Preserving Erased Histories**

The Syrian Design Archive represents a significant intervention in the field of Arab graphic design by documenting and preserving Syria's rich but often overlooked design heritage. Founded in 2020 by Syrian-Polish graphic designer Kinda Ghannoum along with Sally Alassafen and Hala Al Afsaa, this nonprofit initiative addresses a critical gap in design history by collecting, digitizing, and sharing Syrian graphic design artifacts from the mid-20th century to the present day.

Analysis of the archive reveals several key findings regarding

postcolonial approaches to graphic design in the Levant: -

1- First, the archive itself functions as an act of visual sovereignty by asserting the historical significance of Syrian design in opposition to dominant Western design narratives. As Ghannoum explains, "We have the names of great artists in fine arts, but any student who wants to explore information about Syrian designers will not find any" (Ong, 2021). By documenting everything from street signs to stamps, books, flyers, and posters, the archive challenges the erasure of Syrian design history from global design discourse.

2- Second, the archived materials reveal distinctive approaches to Arabic typography that resist Western standardization. Particularly notable are the works of Abdulkader Arnaout, one of Syria's pioneering graphic designers, whose posters for the International Fair of Damascus demonstrate innovative calligraphic approaches that maintain the integrity of Arabic letterforms while achieving modernist compositional effects. Unlike contemporaneous attempts to force Arabic typography into Western modernist frameworks, Arnaout's work develops a visual language that emerges organically from Arabic calligraphic traditions.

3- Third, the archive documents how Syrian designers navigated the complex terrain between nationalist visual rhetoric and international modernism during the post-independence period. Posters for cultural events, such as theater productions and art exhibitions, reveal sophisticated strategies of cultural hybridization that neither reject international influences nor uncritically adopt Western models. Instead, they transform these influences through local cultural frameworks, creating what might be termed a distinctly Syrian visual modernity.

The significance of the Syrian Design Archive extends beyond mere documentation. By making these materials accessible to contemporary designers, it provides resources for what Ghannoum describes as "visual archaeology"—the excavation and reactivation of indigenous design approaches that can inform new decolonial practices. This process is particularly urgent in the Syrian context, where war and displacement have threatened the preservation of cultural heritage, including design artifacts.

### **\* North Africa: Typography as Resistance and Reclamation**

#### **\* Decolonizing Typography in North African Design Practice**

North African graphic designers have developed distinctive approaches to challenging Western visual domination, particularly through innovative typographic practices that reclaim and reimagine Arabic script. Analysis of contemporary design work from this region reveals several significant strategies: -

1- First, there is a growing movement to develop Arabic typefaces that resist the homogenizing tendencies of global typography. The work of Tunisian designer Naïma Ben Ayed exemplifies this approach through her critical engagement with "matchmaking" practices in multilingual typography. Traditional approaches to creating Arabic companions for Latin fonts often impose Western structural principles on Arabic letterforms, compromising their essential characteristics. Ben Ayed's research and design work challenges this paradigm by prioritizing the integrity of Arabic script and developing typefaces that honor its distinctive visual logic.

2- Second, North African designers are increasingly exploring the rich typographic heritage of the region

beyond standard Arabic script. This includes revival and digitization of indigenous writing systems such as Tifinagh (used for Berber languages) and regional calligraphic styles that had been marginalized during colonial periods. These efforts represent a form of script activism that challenges the colonial privileging of certain languages and writing systems over others.

3- Third, there is a notable trend toward what might be termed "typographic deorientalization"—the deliberate rejection of exotic or orientalist stylizations of Arabic typography that cater to Western expectations. As documented by Atrissi (2021), designers are moving away from what he terms "Ali Baba Typography"—Latin typography that mimics Arabic script to create an exotic "oriental" effect. Instead, contemporary North African designers are developing approaches that express cultural specificity without exoticization.

A particularly significant example is the work of Moroccan designer Mouneer Alshaarani, whose book cover designs for the Palestinian Literature Series (1989-1991) demonstrate sophisticated integration of calligraphic tradition with contemporary design principles. Alshaarani's work achieves cultural

authenticity not through superficial stylization but through deep engagement with calligraphic principles, creating designs that are simultaneously rooted in tradition and visually contemporary.

### **\* The Gulf Region: Futurism and Critical Engagement with Modernity**

#### **\* 40MUSTAQEL and Arabfuturism: Reimagining Arab Visual Futures**

The Gulf region presents a distinctive context for postcolonial graphic design due to its rapid modernization, oil wealth, and complex relationship with Western design influences. Analysis of contemporary design practices in this region reveals innovative approaches to challenging Western visual domination while engaging critically with questions of modernity and futurity.

A particularly significant example is the work of Cairo-based design studio 40MUSTAQEL, founded by Egyptian designer Nada Hesham, which has developed the concept of "Arabfuturism" through projects such as their poster design for Arab Cinema Week. This concept represents a critical intervention in futurist visual discourse, which has historically been dominated by

Western and Eurocentric perspectives.

Analysis of 40MUSTAQEL's Arabfuturism project reveals several key strategies: -

1- First, the studio explicitly positions their work as looking "through a post-colonial curtain into an Arab world that floats in an imagined futurist stratosphere" (Salem, 2023). This framing directly challenges the exclusion of Arab perspectives from dominant futurist imaginaries and asserts the right of Arab designers to envision their own futures rather than having futures imposed upon them.

2- Second, the visual language developed for the project deliberately avoids what Salem describes as "the pitfalls of self-orientalising," rejecting stereotypical representations like "Aladdin on a rocketship" in favor of more nuanced engagements with Arab visual heritage. This approach demonstrates a sophisticated awareness of how orientalist tropes can be internalized and reproduced even by Arab designers themselves.

3- Third, the project employs innovative typographic strategies that maintain the integrity of Arabic script while achieving futuristic visual effects. The poster design combines geometric Kufic letterforms with traditional Thuluth calligraphy by

Palestinian calligrapher Ahmed Zoabi, creating a visual language that is simultaneously rooted in tradition and oriented toward the future. This approach challenges the false binary between "traditional" and "modern" that has often structured Western perceptions of Arab design.

The significance of 40MUSTAQEL's work extends beyond this specific project. By developing the concept of Arabfuturism, they contribute to broader efforts to decolonize speculative design and science fiction, creating space for Arab perspectives in imagining possible futures. This represents a form of temporal decolonization that challenges not only how the Arab world is represented visually but also its exclusion from futurist discourse.

### **\* Cross-Regional Patterns and Emerging Strategies**

Analysis across these regional case studies reveals several broader patterns in how contemporary Arab graphic designers are challenging Western visual domination: -

1- Archival Activism: Designers are increasingly engaging in what might be termed "archival activism"—the deliberate documentation, preservation, and reactivation of Arab design heritage that has been marginalized in dominant design

histories. This practice is evident not only in the Syrian Design Archive but also in projects like the Arabic Design Archive and various initiatives to document vernacular typography across the region.

2- **Typographic Sovereignty:** Typography emerges as a particularly significant site of decolonial practice, with designers developing approaches that prioritize the integrity and distinctive characteristics of Arabic script rather than forcing it to conform to Latin typographic conventions. This includes both the development of new Arabic typefaces and the revival of traditional calligraphic styles.

3- **Critical Hybridization:** Rather than either rejecting Western influences entirely or uncritically adopting them, designers are engaging in practices of critical hybridization that transform global design languages through local cultural frameworks. This approach moves beyond simplistic binaries of "traditional" versus "modern" to create new visual languages that are simultaneously locally rooted and globally engaged.

4- **Deorientalization:** There is a deliberate rejection of orientalist visual tropes and clichés that have historically dominated representations of the Arab world. As documented by Atrissi (2021),

designers are moving away from stereotypical elements like excessive use of gold, arabesque patterns, camels, and palm trees, instead developing more authentic and nuanced visual expressions of Arab identity.

5- **Temporal Reclamation:** Designers are challenging not only how Arab visual culture is represented spatially but also temporally, asserting the right to imagine Arab futures rather than being confined to either tradition or imitation of Western modernity. This temporal dimension of decolonization is particularly evident in concepts like Arabfuturism.

These emerging strategies demonstrate how contemporary Arab graphic designers are not merely resisting Western visual domination but actively creating alternative visual languages that assert cultural sovereignty while engaging critically with global design discourse. The following section will discuss the broader implications of these findings for understanding postcolonial graphic design as a site of cultural resistance and reimagination.



**Figure 3: Syrian Design Archive posters showcasing innovative approaches to Arabic typography and visual language that resist Western standardization.**



**Figure 4: Gulf Air's gold-painted aircraft, exemplifying what Tarek Atrissi identifies as a design cliché in Arab visual culture that designers are now critically engaging with.**

### **\* Discussion**

The findings presented in the previous section reveal how contemporary Arab graphic designers are developing innovative approaches to challenge Western visual domination through the reclamation and reimagination of local typography, symbols, and visual languages. This section discusses the broader implications of these findings, considering how they contribute to our understanding of postcolonial graphic design as a site of cultural resistance and reimagination.

### **\* Visual Sovereignty in Practice**

The concept of visual sovereignty provides a powerful framework for interpreting the strategies employed by Arab designers to assert control over their visual representation. As

demonstrated across the case studies, visual sovereignty in Arab graphic design operates through several interconnected dimensions: -

1- First, there is an epistemological dimension that challenges Western claims to universal design knowledge. By documenting and preserving indigenous design traditions, initiatives like the Syrian Design Archive assert the validity of Arab design knowledge systems that have been marginalized in global design discourse. This archival work is not merely historical but actively contributes to what Mignolo and Walsh (2018) term "epistemic disobedience"—the refusal to accept Western knowledge frameworks as universal or superior.

2- Second, visual sovereignty operates through material practices that prioritize the specific characteristics and requirements of Arabic script and visual traditions. The typographic innovations documented in North African design practice, for instance, demonstrate how designers are developing approaches that honor the structural integrity of Arabic letterforms rather than forcing them to conform to Latin typographic conventions. This material dimension of visual sovereignty challenges the technological determinism that has

historically privileged Latin script in digital environments.

3- Third, visual sovereignty encompasses temporal aspects that assert the right of Arab designers to imagine their own futures rather than being confined to either tradition or imitation of Western modernity. The concept of Arabfuturism developed by 40MUSTAQEL represents a particularly significant intervention in this regard, challenging the exclusion of Arab perspectives from futurist discourse and creating space for speculative design that emerges from Arab cultural frameworks. These dimensions of visual sovereignty are not separate but mutually reinforcing, collectively contributing to what might be termed a decolonial design praxis that challenges Western visual hegemony at multiple levels. Importantly, this praxis is not merely reactive or oppositional but generative, creating new visual possibilities that extend beyond the binary of Western/non-Western design.

#### **\* Cultural Hybridization and the Third Space**

The findings also demonstrate how Arab designers navigate the complex terrain between tradition and innovation, resistance and engagement, through practices of cultural hybridization. Rather than

either rejecting Western influences entirely or uncritically adopting them, designers are creating what Bhabha (1994) terms a "third space" where different cultural systems interact to produce new forms that are neither purely indigenous nor Western.

This hybridization is evident in several aspects of contemporary Arab graphic design: -

1- First, there is a sophisticated engagement with modernist design principles that transforms them through local cultural frameworks. The work of Syrian designer Abdulkader Arnaout, for instance, achieves modernist compositional effects while maintaining the integrity of Arabic calligraphic traditions, creating a distinctly Syrian visual modernity that cannot be reduced to either "traditional" or "Western-influenced" categories.

2- Second, designers are developing approaches to multilingual typography that challenge the hierarchical relationship between Latin and Arabic scripts. Rather than treating Arabic as secondary or derivative, initiatives like the Khatt Foundation's Typographic Matchmaking projects explore how different writing systems can coexist while maintaining their distinctive characteristics. This approach



represents a form of linguistic hybridization that respects difference rather than imposing homogeneity.

3- Third, there is a critical engagement with global visual cultures that selectively appropriates and transforms elements rather than wholesale adoption. 40MUSTAQEL's Arabfuturism project, for example, draws on retrofuturist aesthetics but reimagines them through Arab cultural references, creating a visual language that is simultaneously globally engaged and locally rooted.

These hybridization practices challenge simplistic narratives of cultural authenticity that would confine Arab design to traditional forms, as well as modernization theories that frame Western design as the universal endpoint of design evolution. Instead, they demonstrate how designers are creating what Eskandar (2022) terms "hybrid modernities" that offer alternative pathways for design development beyond Western paradigms.

#### **\* Decolonizing Design Education and Practice**

The findings have significant implications for how we understand and approach design education and practice in postcolonial contexts. The persistent influence of Western design paradigms in Arab design

education has been documented by several scholars (Gebrael, 2023; Chahine, 2020), who note how design curricula often privilege Western design history and methodologies while marginalizing local design traditions.

The innovative approaches documented in this research suggest several pathways for decolonizing design education and practice: -

1- First, there is a need to integrate local design histories into design curricula, challenging the Eurocentric bias that has historically dominated design education. The archival work of initiatives like the Syrian Design Archive provides valuable resources for this integration, making visible design traditions that have been excluded from dominant design narratives.

2- Second, typographic education requires particular attention, with greater emphasis on understanding the structural principles and cultural significance of Arabic script rather than imposing Latin typographic conventions. The critical approaches to Arabic typography documented in North African design practice offer models for how typographic education might be reimagined to respect the integrity of different writing systems.

3- Third, design practice itself needs to be reconceptualized as a site of cultural negotiation rather than the application of universal principles. The sophisticated hybridization strategies employed by designers like 40MUSTAQEL demonstrate how design can navigate between different cultural systems without either cultural essentialism or uncritical globalization.

These pathways for decolonizing design education and practice are not merely academic but have practical implications for how designers are trained and how design is evaluated. By challenging the universal claims of Western design paradigms, they create space for more diverse and culturally responsive approaches to visual communication.

#### **\* Beyond Resistance: Design as Cultural Reimagination**

While much of the discourse around postcolonial design focuses on resistance to Western domination, the findings of this research suggest that contemporary Arab graphic design goes beyond mere opposition to actively reimagine cultural possibilities. This reimaginative dimension is evident in several aspects of the design work analyzed:-

1- First, there is a creative engagement with heritage that treats tradition not as a static repository but

as a dynamic resource for innovation. The calligraphic experiments of designers like Mouneer Alshaarani demonstrate how traditional forms can be reactivated and transformed to address contemporary design challenges, creating continuity with the past without being confined by it.

2- Second, designers are developing new visual languages that express cultural specificity without resorting to stereotypical or orientalist tropes. The deliberate rejection of what Atrissi (2021) terms "Arabic design clichés" represents not just a negative critique but an affirmative effort to create more authentic and nuanced visual expressions of Arab identity.

3- Third, there is an expansive approach to cultural identity that acknowledges internal diversity and transnational connections rather than promoting essentialist notions of "Arabness." The work of the Khatt Foundation, for instance, explores connections between different Arabic-speaking regions while also acknowledging their distinctive visual traditions, creating space for what might be termed a pluriversal approach to Arab design.

These reimaginative practices suggest that postcolonial graphic design is not merely about deconstructing Western visual domination but about constructing

alternative visual futures that honor local cultural frameworks while engaging with global design discourse. In this sense, the work of contemporary Arab designers contributes to what Escobar (2018) terms "designs for the pluriverse"—approaches that challenge the universalizing tendencies of Western design while creating space for multiple ways of seeing and being in the world.

#### **\* Implications for Global Design Discourse**

The findings of this research have broader implications for how we understand the relationship between local and global in contemporary design discourse. The innovative approaches developed by Arab designers challenge the unidirectional flow of design influence from West to non-West that has historically characterized global design relations.

Instead, they suggest a more complex and multidirectional model of design exchange, where different design traditions interact and transform each other without hierarchical relationships. This model aligns with what Abdulla (2018) terms "horizontal design discourse"—approaches that recognize the validity of different design knowledge systems and create

space for dialogue across cultural differences.

The significance of this shift extends beyond the Arab context to challenge fundamental assumptions about design's relationship to modernity and globalization. Rather than framing design modernization as a process of Westernization, the work of contemporary Arab designers demonstrates how multiple modernities can emerge from different cultural contexts, each with its own visual logic and aesthetic principles.

This pluralization of design modernities has practical implications for how design is practiced in increasingly globalized contexts. It suggests the need for approaches that respect cultural specificity while facilitating cross-cultural communication—a balance that is particularly evident in the sophisticated typographic strategies developed for multilingual design contexts.

In summary, the findings of this research contribute to a more nuanced understanding of how postcolonial graphic design operates as a site of cultural resistance, hybridization, and reimagination. By documenting and analyzing the innovative approaches developed by contemporary Arab designers, this

study illuminates not only how Western visual domination is being challenged but also how alternative visual futures are being created that extend beyond colonial/postcolonial binaries to imagine new possibilities for design in a pluriversal world.

### **A Resource Hub for Decolonizing Typography**

**Figure 5: Resources for decolonizing typography, illustrating the growing movement to challenge Eurocentric typographic practices.**

#### **\* Conclusion**

This research has examined how contemporary Arab graphic designers are challenging Western visual domination through innovative approaches to typography, symbols, and visual language. By analyzing case studies from the Gulf region, North Africa, and the Levant, it has identified key strategies through which designers assert visual sovereignty while engaging in productive cultural hybridization. These findings contribute to our understanding of postcolonial graphic design as a site of cultural resistance and reimagination, with significant implications for both design theory and practice.

#### **\* Summary of Key Findings**

The research has revealed several significant patterns in how Arab designers are dismantling Western visual domination: -

1- First, initiatives like the Syrian Design Archive demonstrate how the documentation and preservation of indigenous design traditions function as forms of archival activism that challenge the erasure of Arab design history from global design discourse. By making visible design approaches that have been marginalized in dominant narratives, these initiatives provide resources for contemporary designers to develop more culturally authentic visual languages.

2- Second, typography emerges as a particularly significant site of decolonial practice, with designers developing approaches that prioritize the integrity and distinctive characteristics of Arabic script. From the innovative calligraphic experiments of Syrian designer Abdulkader Arnaout to the critical engagement with multilingual typography in North African design practice, these approaches challenge the technological and aesthetic conventions that have historically privileged Latin script.

3- Third, concepts like Arabfuturism, developed by studios such as 40MUSTAQEL, represent important interventions in how Arab visual culture is positioned temporally. By asserting the right of Arab designers to imagine their own futures rather than being confined to either tradition

or imitation of Western modernity, these approaches challenge the temporal hierarchies that have structured colonial design discourse.

4- Fourth, designers across the region are engaging in sophisticated practices of cultural hybridization that transform global design languages through local cultural frameworks. Rather than either rejecting Western influences entirely or uncritically adopting them, they are creating "third spaces" where different visual traditions interact to produce new forms that cannot be reduced to either Western or non-Western categories.

5- Finally, there is a deliberate rejection of orientalist visual tropes and clichés that have historically dominated representations of the Arab world. By moving beyond stereotypical elements like excessive use of gold, arabesque patterns, and exotic stylizations, designers are developing more authentic and nuanced visual expressions of Arab identity that resist both Western stereotypes and nationalist essentialism.

#### **\* Theoretical Contributions**

These findings make several important contributions to theoretical understandings of postcolonial design. First, they demonstrate how the concept of visual sovereignty,

originally developed in indigenous media studies, can be productively applied to Arab design contexts. The strategies employed by Arab designers to assert control over their visual representation operate across epistemological, material, and temporal dimensions, collectively challenging Western visual hegemony at multiple levels.

Second, the research extends Bhabha's concept of hybridity by showing how it operates specifically in design contexts. The sophisticated hybridization strategies employed by Arab designers go beyond simplistic mixing of "traditional" and "modern" elements to create new visual languages that transform both indigenous and global design traditions. This approach challenges binary thinking that would position Arab design as either resistant to or derivative of Western design.

Third, the findings contribute to emerging discourse on decolonial design by documenting concrete practices through which designers challenge colonial visual hierarchies. Moving beyond theoretical critiques, the research shows how decoloniality is enacted through specific design choices regarding typography, composition, color, and symbolism. These material practices demonstrate how abstract concepts like epistemic

disobedience and pluriversality are translated into visual form.

#### **\* Practical Implications**

Beyond its theoretical contributions, this research has several practical implications for design education and practice. First, it highlights the need to integrate local design histories into design curricula, challenging the Eurocentric bias that has historically dominated design education. The archival work of initiatives like the Syrian Design Archive provides valuable resources for this integration. Second, it suggests the need for approaches to typographic education that respect the structural principles and cultural significance of different writing systems rather than imposing conventions derived from Latin typography. The innovative typographic strategies documented in this research offer models for how multilingual design might be approached in ways that maintain the integrity of each script.

Third, the research demonstrates the value of critical engagement with heritage that treats tradition not as a static repository but as a dynamic resource for innovation. The sophisticated ways in which contemporary Arab designers reactivate and transform traditional forms provide models for how

designers in other postcolonial contexts might navigate between continuity and innovation.

#### **\* Limitations and Future Research**

While this research has provided valuable insights into postcolonial approaches to graphic design in Arab contexts, several limitations should be acknowledged. First, the focus on selected case studies necessarily limits the generalizability of findings, and future research could expand the scope to include a broader range of examples from across the Arab world. Second, the reliance on published materials and secondary sources means that the research lacks the depth that might be achieved through primary interviews or ethnographic observation.

These limitations suggest several directions for future research. First, there is a need for more in-depth ethnographic studies of design practice in specific Arab contexts, examining how designers navigate the complex tensions between local and global, tradition and innovation in their daily work. Second, comparative studies that examine parallels and differences between postcolonial design approaches in the Arab world and other postcolonial contexts could yield valuable insights into broader patterns of design

decolonization. Finally, research on how digital technologies both constrain and enable decolonial design practices would contribute to our understanding of how technological frameworks shape possibilities for visual sovereignty.

### \* Final Reflections

In conclusion, this research demonstrates how contemporary Arab graphic designers are not merely resisting Western visual domination but actively creating alternative visual languages that assert cultural sovereignty while engaging critically with global design discourse. By reclaiming and reimagining local typography, symbols, and visual traditions, these designers challenge the universalist claims of Western design paradigms while fostering cultural hybridity that honors indigenous visual heritage.

The significance of this work extends beyond the specific context of Arab graphic design to raise broader questions about design's relationship to power, identity, and cultural difference. In an increasingly globalized visual environment, the innovative approaches developed by Arab designers offer valuable models for how design might function not as a homogenizing force but as a site of cultural dialogue and reimagination. By documenting and analyzing these

approaches, this research contributes to the ongoing project of creating more equitable and culturally responsive design practices that recognize and respect the plurality of visual traditions in our world.



**Figure 6: Illustration from "A History of Arab Graphic Design" by Bahia Shehab and Haytham Nawar, representing the rich visual heritage that contemporary designers are reclaiming.**

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