

Applying Arabic Kashida to Latin Letters in Display Typography

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Abstract— Arabic, like Hebrew, is a script that was extensively used visually because of religious purposes. In Islam, as in Judaism, the visual representation of saints, prophets and holy people is not allowed. However, the desire and the passion to create images were stronger than the fear of blasphemy. Figure 1 has three word-pictures: the first is a Masoretic illustrated text written in Hebrew¹ and the other two are animals drawn with Arabic letters: the bird is written in Turkish² while the tiger is written in Persian³.

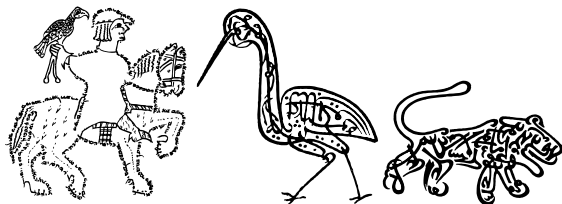


Figure 1. Words as image

Today, people using Arabic letters are linked to many centuries of visual words, a heritage that can be transformed into display typography. It is pointless to keep reminiscing on the splendors of great eras. Artists and designers should rather look inward yet forward and produce new visuals. This paper explores display typography through the kashida, the soul of Arabic writing. Applied to Latin letters, the kashida gives flexibility to the composition and when inspired by Chinese and Japanese cursive and vertical calligraphies, the kashida opens new horizons.

Keywords: Kashida, Arabic and Latin letters, Japanese calligraphy.

1. INTRODUCTION: THE KASHIDA

When typing the Persian word “کشیده” (kashida) in Google translator, the English translation is “long”. Kashida is a glyph elongating the distance between Arabic letters by connecting them. Described by Andrew Robinson⁴ as a consonantal alphabet, Arabic inherited the connectivity of letters from another consonantal alphabet: the Syriac. Syriac is considered by some scholars as a dialect of Aramaic, and by others as a language of its own. Both Arabic and

Syriac scripts were developed from Aramaic. Figure 2 represents one sentence written in Syriac and in Arabic⁵. The similarities between the two scripts are evident.

يا ايها الابناء اطيعوا اباكم في ربنا

Figure 2. Syriac and Arabic letters

The Kashida replaces the letter space used with Latin letters. Furthermore, it improves the appearance of justified text by visually lengthening words rather than increasing the blank between the letters. Interestingly, the Kashida can be stretched unevenly in one word, serving aesthetics needs.

نو تشكا
تشانكار
نو تشكا
تشانكار
نو تشكا
تشانكار

Figure 3. Flexibility of Kashida

Over the centuries, Kashida was the core of beauty in Arabic calligraphy. It gave this Arabic art its flexibility and creativity. Figure 4 is a *Basmala* written by the master Ibn al Bawwab in the eleventh century⁶. The kashida connecting the second letter “س” to the third letter “م” of the first word “بسم” is 52.8% of the entire work. Note that the Arabic is a Semitic script and hence its direction is right to left.

بِسْمِ اللَّهِ الرَّحْمَنِ الرَّحِيمِ

Figure 4. Length of a Kashida

¹ The word as image, p.50

² Atlas of Arabic Calligraphy, p.245

³ Arabic script, p.152

⁴ The story of writing, p.199

⁵ Atlas of Arabic Calligraphy, p.83

⁶ The splendor of Islamic Calligraphy, p. 116

Figure 5 shows the letter “و” shaped through the extensions of the Kashida⁷. It is the work of the Iraqi calligrapher Hassan Massoudi.



Figure 5. Kashida in art

2. APPLICATION OF THE KASHIDA TO LATIN LETTERS

Typographers often Latinize Arabic letters. For instance, some typographers detach Arabic letters depriving Arabic writing from its most original characteristic: the connectivity through the kashida. Latin letters were detached in typography mostly for printing purposes, however, the connected Latin letters survived through handwriting simply because it is faster to write connectedly. In October 2005, and during two workshops conducted by the author in Lebanon, thirty-four students from the Académie Libanaise des Beaux-Arts and from the University of Balamand (hereafter referred to as ALBA and UOB) were asked to write a paragraph in French or in English. Thirty students (90%) wrote in attached letters while only four wrote in detached letters. Connecting Latin letters triggered a direct inspiration/application of the work of Hassan Massoudy (Figure 5) on Latin letters: between the lines.

2.1. The workshops: between the lines

In the same workshops mentioned above, the same students were asked to stretch the Kashida of the letters in a way to trace a shape through the horizontal lines. Subsequently, they were asked to apply the same technique on the same shape but with Latin letters through French or English texts.

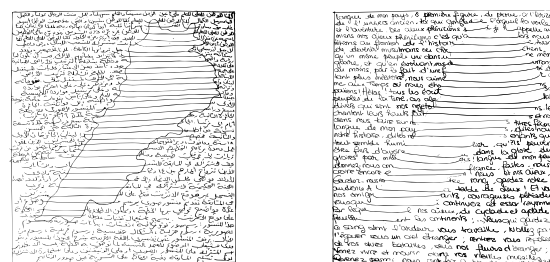


Figure 6. Barbar Marie, ALBA – 2005

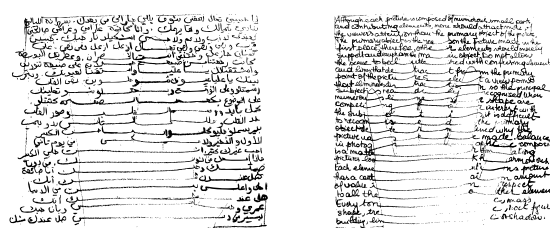


Figure 7. Abdel Wahab Farah, UOB - 2005

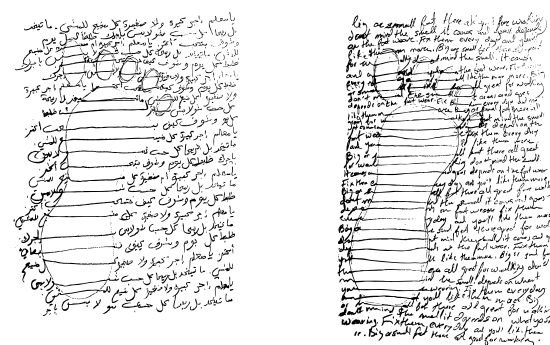


Figure 8. Soufi Waleed, UOB - 2005

The purpose of this exercise was to let the students experiment with the importance of the Kashida and its application to Latin letters. 7 years later, in May 2012, twelve other students from ALBA drew their portrait using the same technique. Figure 9 to Figure 13 are pairs of portraits written with Arabic letters (on the left), and with Latin letters (on the right). The words related to every person are divided by kashidas and the silhouette between the lines is the portrait of the student.

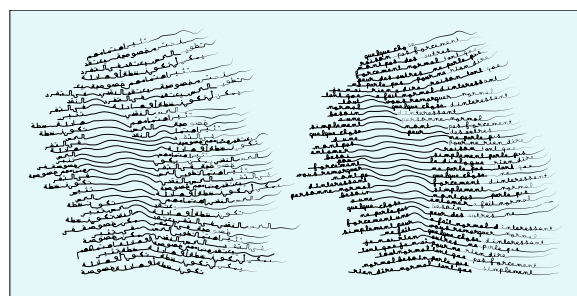


Figure 9. Antonios Lili, ALBA – 2012

⁷ Arabic script, p. 84

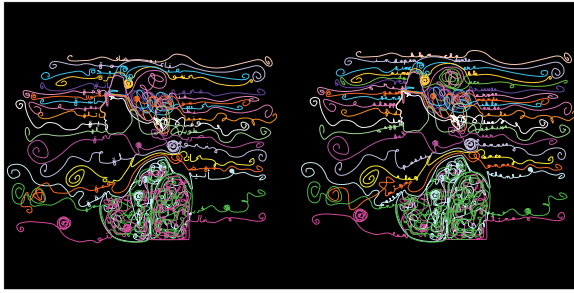


Figure 10. Bohsali Cherine, ALBA – 2012

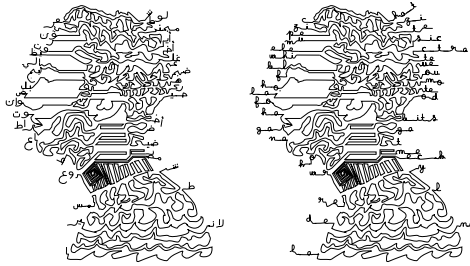


Figure 11. Hitti Karl, ALBA – 2012

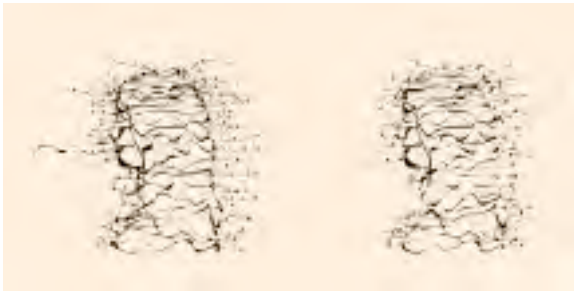


Figure 12. Jabre Pauline, ALBA – 2012

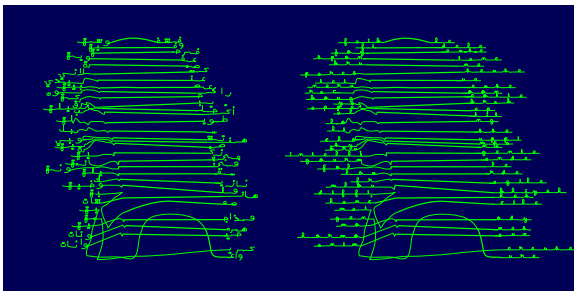


Figure 13. Kassis Florence, ALBA – 2012

2.2. Application on languages in Lebanon

Lebanese people mix languages while speaking. Hence it would be natural and enriching to mix the scripts of these languages when writing. The problem lies in the opposite directions of writing Arabic and Latin letters. Connecting words from these opposite scripts makes them one visual, one unit and the reader becomes guided to read either scripts or none. The meaning becomes complementary linguistically and visually. In 2005, the kashida exercise led to a poster where the student Maya Cherfane drew her portrait by connecting Arabic to French words through Arabic and Latin letters: a visual conversion of colloquial Lebanese.

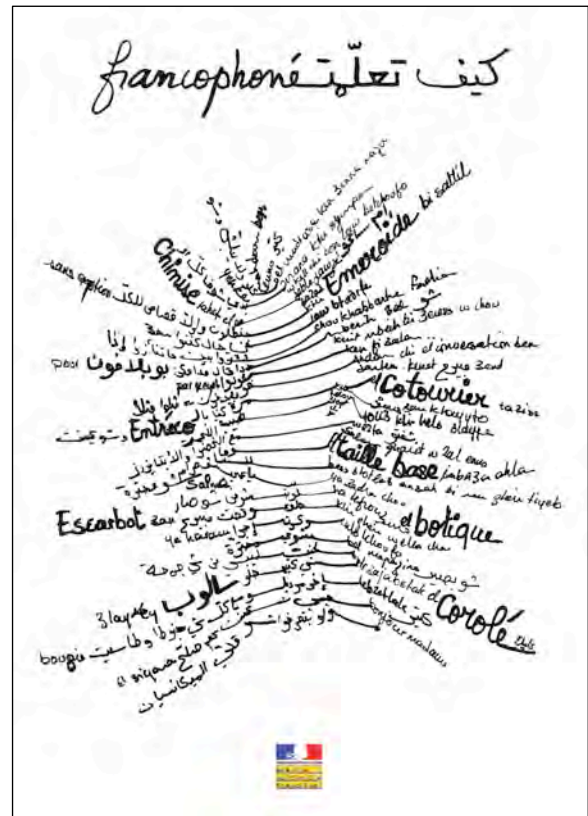


Figure 14. Cherfane Maya, ALBA – 2005

This first poster mixes Arabic and Latin scripts inspired many works to come. Seven years later, Julien Ghandour, a student from the Université Libanaise (hereafter referred to as UL), used the same technique with different expression.

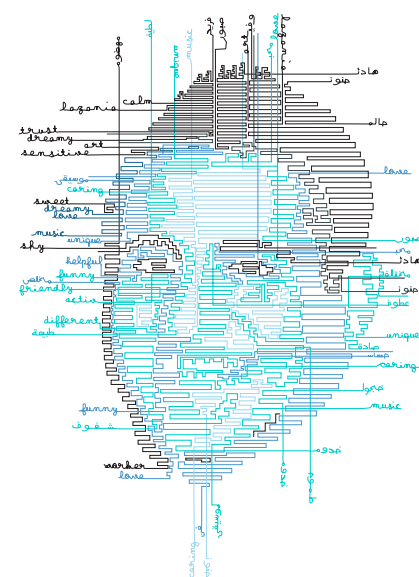


Figure 15. Ghandour Julien, UL – 2012

In November 2012, twenty-one students from the UL started writing their names with an uncut wire. Thenceforward, they transferred the wired work to the computer as in the two examples in Figure 16 and Figure 17.



Figure 16. Kanaan Michel, UL – 2012

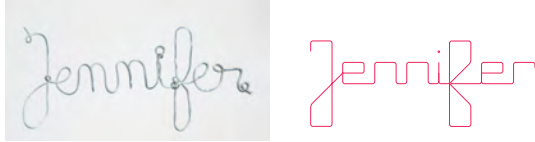


Figure 17. El Cid Jennifer, UL - 2012

Starting with the wires, the students experimented with the kashida physically thus mastering it better when designing on the computer. In a second series of exercises, students applied the connections of the kashida to situations rather than ordinary portraits.

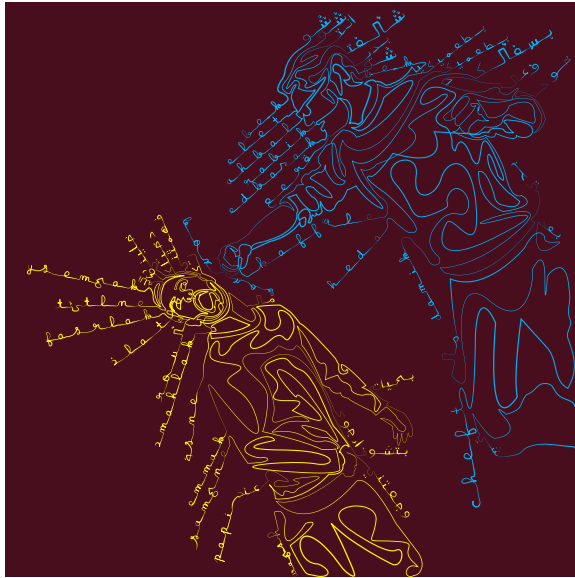


Figure 18. Ibrahim Alain, UL – 2012



Figure 19. Gerges Nathalie, UL – 2012



Figure 20. Mrad Georges, UL – 2012

In another application, William Rizk from Notre Dame University (hereafter referred to as NDU) combined his knowledge of design with his scouts background: he attached *Disconnect* in English to *tawasol* (continuity) in Arabic with a scout knot.

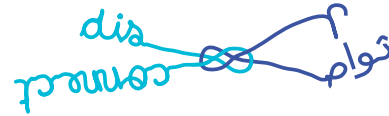


Figure 21. Rizk William, NDU – 2011

Similarly, he tied the two expressions “come” and “don’t come” with another scouting knot.

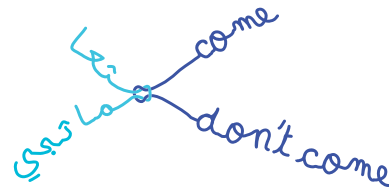


Figure 22. Rizk William, NDU – 2011

These two scout knot examples show the flexibility of the kashida not only horizontally, but also in different directions. The next part is about the vertical kashida.

3. A PARALLEL BETWEEN JAPANESE AND ARABIC SCRIPTS: VERTICAL KASHIDA

The examples to this point were all horizontal connections: the kashida is spread horizontally connecting two letters in one line. However, the challenging part of attaching Latin to Arabic letters is through the verticality: combining one letter of a line x to another letter of the next line $x+1$.

Arabic is seen as a linear writing system through typography, its current basic way of writing and communicating. However, like Chinese and Japanese scripts, Arabic is drawn around a central or a vertical

line while Indian scripts hang from an upper line and Roman types march, like roman soldiers, along a baseline. Figure 23 is the work of the Turkish calligrapher Abdel Kader⁸. The stems in black show some letters (through the kashida) extending on three lines. The sinuosity of the letters on one hand and the upright stretching on the other hand make the composition as vertical as it is horizontal.

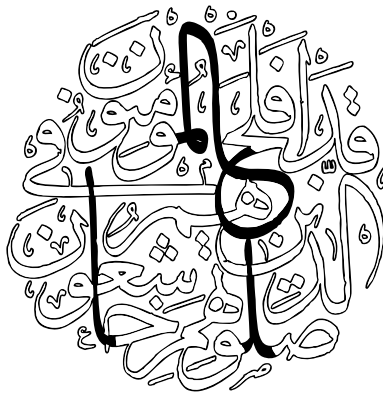


Figure 23. Vertical elasticity of kashida

Figure 24 comprises two examples of vertical connections. The two students wrote their names connecting Arabic letters of the first line to the Latin letters of the next line. The flexibility of the kashida balances the composition. The second example is an application of the Arabic Geometric Kufic calligraphy to both scripts.



Figure 24. Zouein Lama, Ziade Christine, ALBA – 2008

3.1. Kana: the unbroken vertical line

Connecting letters vertically is a new idea for most but not for Japanese language. In fact, the traditional way of writing Japanese is the *tategaki* (縦書き), or vertical writing. The Japanese –and Chinese– calligraphy became a major inspiration for the vertical connections. “連綿体”, spelled *Renmentai*, literally means “unbroken line”. Though essential for writing *kana* (かな), it also marks the cursive and semi cursive style of Japanese calligraphy: 草書 and 行書. The *kana* style of writing hiragana (the Japanese phonetic syllabary) originally started with women who were not able to write in kanji. Though it had a feminine connotation

until the middle of the Edo era, today it is a form of calligraphy practiced by both genders. Figure 25 shows some examples of hiragana connected vertically⁹. The five words, respectively spelled “mugi”, “fude”, “kaze”, “shirabo” and “chikara”, respectively mean “wheat”, “pen”, “wind”, “white seal” and “power”.

む ぎ	ふ で	か ぜ	し ら ぼ	ち か ら

Figure 25. Vertical elasticity of kashida

The *kana* writing style was a stimulating visualization of vertical connections. The vertical link between the Japanese syllables inspires the balance in the vertical connections. Figure 30 contains examples of vertical connections of Latin and Arabic letters.


Latin/Arabic		Arabic/Latin	
			

Figure 26. Vertical elasticity of kashida

The Japanese believe that writing vertically from up to down, or *tategaki*, is the easiest way to write as it follows the flow of the hand. For Semitic people using Arabic, Hebrew, Aramaic or Syriac, writing from right to left is the easiest. For others, especially people using Latin script, the most natural direction is the left to right. The vertical connections are about combining these three directions of writing.

3.2. Renmentai, the Japanese Kashida

“連綿体”, *Renmentai*, gives Japanese characters the vertical suppleness, just like the kashida gives Arabic the horizontal elasticity. That is why it could be called a Japanese kashida, or a vertical kashida. Figure 27¹⁰ is a Japanese greeting for New Year. The glyphs of the *Renmentai* style stretch the Japanese characters vertically. The original work is in the

⁸ Atlas of Arabic Calligraphy, p. 164

⁹ *Kana no lesson*, p. 16, 20

¹⁰ *Kana no lesson*, p.26

middle while in the first example it is squeezed and in the third it is stretched. In the three examples, the size of the letters is the same and only the connective glyphs vary in length. This vertical application of the kashida is of great value to the vertical connections.

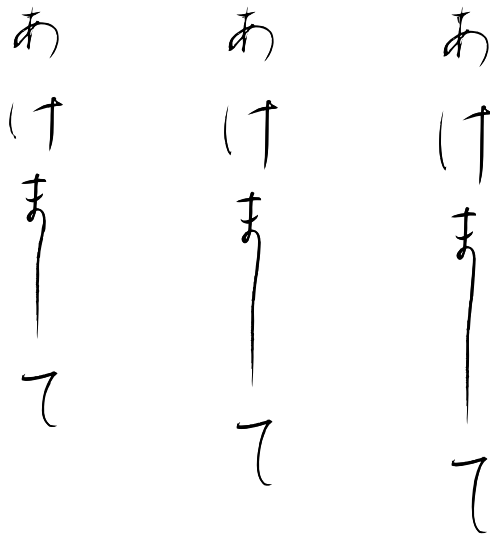


Figure 27. Renmentai variations

“The brush dances, the ink sings”¹¹. Chinese and Japanese calligraphies are divided into four different styles of writing: regular, clerical, running and cursive. Despite the fact that the easiness of character recognition degrades from the regular to the cursive, the interesting styles for this research are the running and mostly the cursive styles, 行書 and 草書. Both styles mark a speed of writing, thus the brush barely leaves the paper (or does not leave it at all). This creates vertical joints between the characters, which are very similar in spirit to Arabic writing: continuity.



Figure 28. Cursive calligraphy

The three examples of **Figure 28** are details from longer artworks¹². The purpose of inserting these

examples is to show the vertical fluidity between the Chinese characters. The vertical connections of Latin and Arabic letters imitate the organic shapes of Chinese calligraphy. The joints between letters are not horizontal anymore. The vertical kashida balances the composition and imposes the reading of either scripts or none.

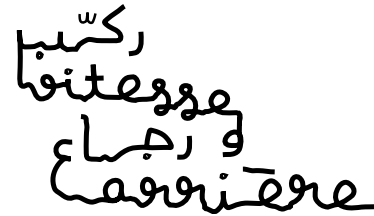


Figure 29. Vertical connection

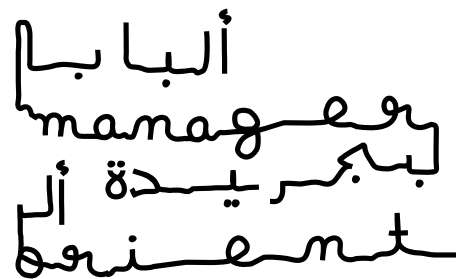


Figure 30. Vertical connection

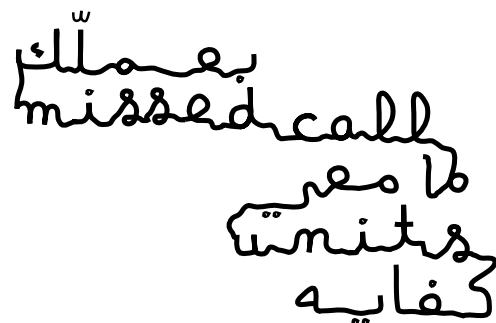


Figure 31. Vertical connection

In Figure 29 to **Figure 31**, the hand of the writer goes back with one script and forth with the opposite script. The resulting inscription resembles the path of an ox that draws a plow across a field and turns at the end of each row to return in the opposite direction, like a boustrophedon. However, instead of flipping letters to return, the opposite directions of Arabic and Latin letters facilitate flow.

3.3. Kashida and Renmentai

The Arabic and Latin letters are linear horizontal writing systems and hence the eyes are used to reading these scripts horizontally. When attached vertically, these letters create a new attraction for the eye. The two examples of Figure 32 are the work of the Lebanese calligrapher Nassib Makarem¹³. The first example, a two-word composition “يا رب” (Ya Rab), starts at the right corner. This is a classical and logical way

¹¹ *the art of calligraphy in modern china*, p. 15

¹² Example 1, *tradition and experimentation the second Chinese calligraphy 2001*, p. 187. Example 2 and 3, *2003 Chinese calligraphy tradition and experimentation*, p. 187 and p.78

¹³ *Sheikh Nassib Makarem*, p.15

to evolve the composition upwards. The second example¹⁴ is another two-word composition: “يا رحيم”. The two examples evolve around two perpendicular axes. The first axis is horizontal (the conventional direction of writing Arabic) and it comprises of the first word of the two examples: “يا”. The second is a horizontal axis rotated at an angle of 90 degrees, ultimately forming a vertical axis, as it is the case with the word “رب” of the first example and the word “رحيم” of the second example. Though it looks vertical, the composition is actually a horizontal rotation.

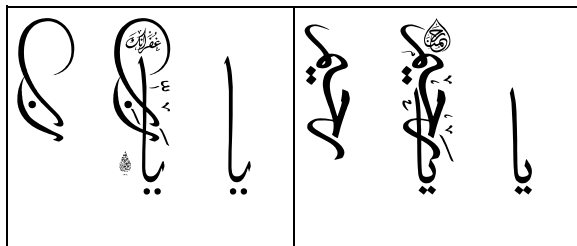


Figure 32. Vertical calligraphies

In Figure 33, the designer Hajime Tachibana connected numbers instead of characters: an obvious application of Japanese calligraphy. The first four digits of the example are 5463. This original work, the Japanese Renmentai and the Arabic vertical composition (Figure 32) inspired the second and third examples of Figure 33 (the name *Anthony*, designed by the author). It is written through a vertical alternation of Latin and Arabic letters.

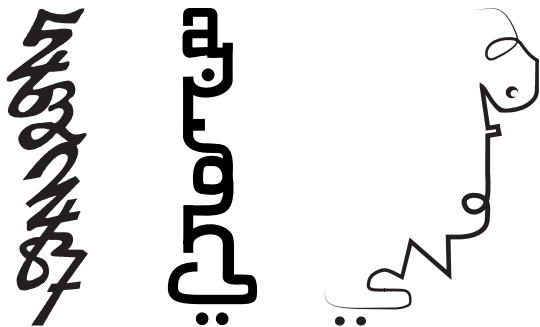


Figure 33. Vertical connections

In 2006, inspired by the same work (*Anthony*, Figure 33), Meriem Hajem, a Tunisian student, designed a postcard using the same technique, alternating Arabic and Latin letters vertically to write the word “taqtol”. This word means, “she kills” and it is Tunisian slang. The satiric idea behind it means that the women is so ugly that her ugliness kills.

¹⁴ Sheikh Nassib Makarem, p.38



Figure 34. Hajem Meriem, ISBAT – 2006

The poster of Figure 38 is also an example of the phonetic use of vertical connections. It is a composition where the sentence “flush the toilet” is spread over four lines written with interchanged Latin and Arabic scripts.

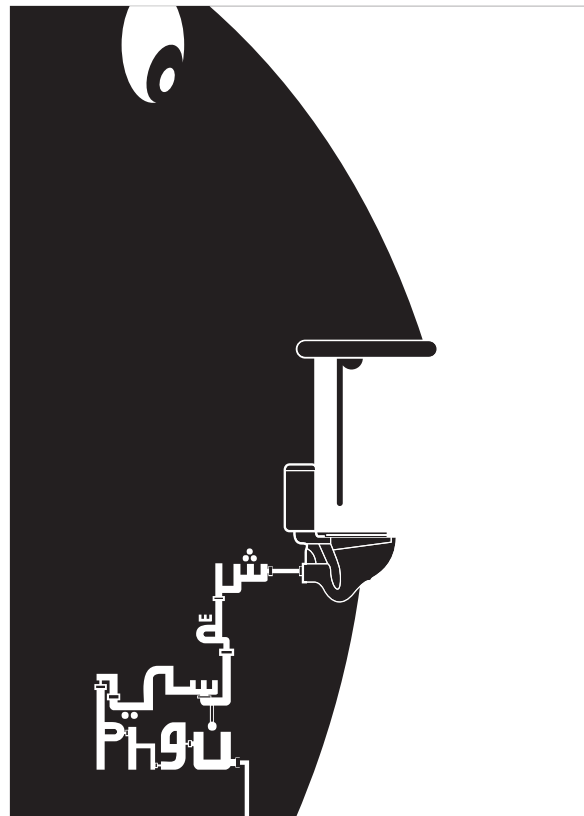


Figure 35. Asmar Guy, ALBA – 2008

4. CONCLUSION: FROM ORGANIC TO GEOMETRIC

The inspiration of Japanese calligraphy engendered organic shapes of letters and connections. These proportions can be applied geometrically to form letters closer to typography than to calligraphy. Passing from the freedom of calligraphy to the rigorousness of typography: art inspires design. The sentence in Figure 36 reads, “I have a strong

migraine”; and the sentence of Figure 37 reads “she went with him hitchhiking from Halate highway”.

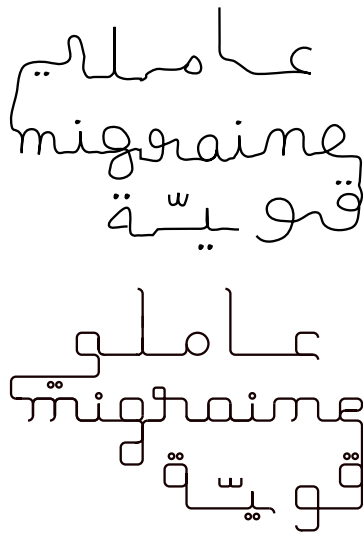


Figure 36. from organic to geometric

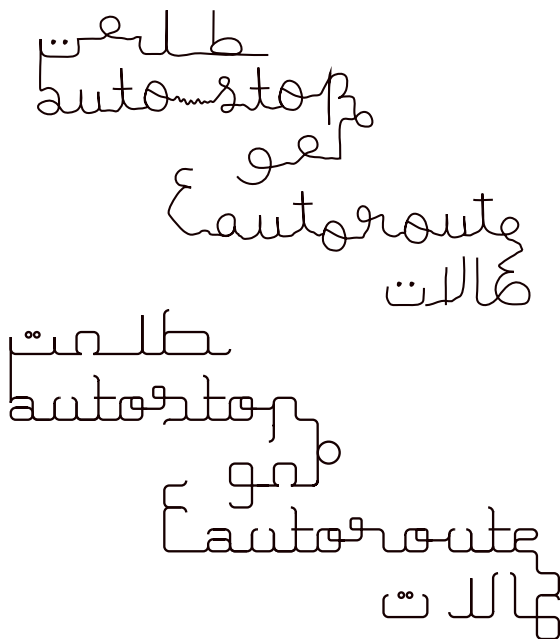


Figure 37. from organic to geometric

The last example of the paper is in homage to Muhammad Ali Clay, the author’s favorite boxer.



Figure 38. Muhammad Ali Clay

5. ACKNOWLEDGMENT

The list of people to thank is long and so I will not mention names. My biggest thanks goes to my students and the Universities that hosted my workshops.

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In Tunisia: Ecole d’Art et de Décoration (EAD), and Institut Supérieur des Beaux Arts de Tunis (ISBAT).

In Brazil: Universidade de Brasília (UNB).

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