

Typography and Education

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Arabic Calligraphy and Patterns

Contemporary calligraphic arabesque

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Abstract: This presentation focuses on the development of Arabic calligraphic monograms that are translated into multiple interpretations of pattern designs. The process opens up many design solutions that are each unique in their visual language.

Through this presentation, I will highlight the progress and work of my typography students at the Lebanese American University in Beirut. I will show the process of the project that culminates in profuse panoply of rich typographic pattern designs.

During the project students are exposed to the anatomy of Arabic letters and the different Arabic classifications such as the Naskh, Nasta'alik, Kufi, Thuluth, Diwani. They understand fundamentals of design while keeping in mind the form, the negative and positive spaces and preserving the basic structure of the Arabic letter. At the initial stage of the course, students are required to design an Arabic calligraphic monogram then develop several motifs derived from their respective calligraphic emblem. With the understanding of arabesque pattern systems and the application of a methodical approach they design various patterns. The repetition of these unique motifs concludes in the creation of an infinite surface of patterns.

This design work couples together Arabic calligraphy and pattern designs. It exhibits repeated motifs in a system that evokes the creation of a new contemporary calligraphic arabesque. Starting from the simple forms of an Arabic letter to the complex combination of dual letters in a monogram to finally complete a multifaceted visual language of pattern designs, that vary in colors and changes based on the understanding of negative and positive spaces.

Keywords: Arabic calligraphy - patterns - arabesque - systems

1. Introduction

Arabic calligraphy is mostly recognized as Islamic calligraphy where the work is fundamentally based on the Qu'ran by the craftsmanship of renowned calligraphers. Today, the use of modern Arabic calligraphy, has developed a secular approach, and became more dominant especially in the fields of modern design such as graphic design. Calligraphers and artists are tackling Arabic calligraphy from an aesthetic and conceptual angle¹. They rely primarily on the composition and the beauty of the letter while delivering a message.

This presentation focuses on the development of contemporary Arabic calligraphy. It presents the influence of traditional Arabic scripts on today's modern art. This new approach will be conveyed in the typographic work and in the progress of my students at the Lebanese American University in Beirut, showcasing the process and evolution of the assigned calligraphic project that showcases the culmination of the profuse panoply of rich typographic pattern designs. The work will be divided into stages, from calligraphic monogram to motifs, from motifs to an array of rich pattern designs.

2. Arabic Calligraphy

Throughout history, Arabic calligraphy has evolved and developed into multiple scripts each recognized by its peculiar style and usage. It reached a spectacular degree of refinement during the Ottoman's period by taking part in the traditional education of the Ottoman sultans.² It was a highly respected art form with hundreds of different styles including a few essential scripts such as the Kufi, Naskh, Nasta'alik, Riq'a, Thuluth and the Diwani. (Fig.1)

¹ Blair, S. (2006) Islamic Calligraphy. Edinburgh University. Press. (p.580)

² Visions of Splendour in Islamic Art & Culture.(2008) Nasser Khalili. Worth Press Ltd.

The Naskh script meaning in Arabic “copy” was introduced by the calligrapher Ibn Muqlah Shirazi in the 10th century. It is the most popular and common script in the Arab world. It is recognizable by its balance and its plain clear forms.³ Its proportions are respected and measured by the dot system: Nizam al Nokat or by the diameter system: Nizam al Da’irah. (Fig.3) Nowadays, this script is used primarily in print.

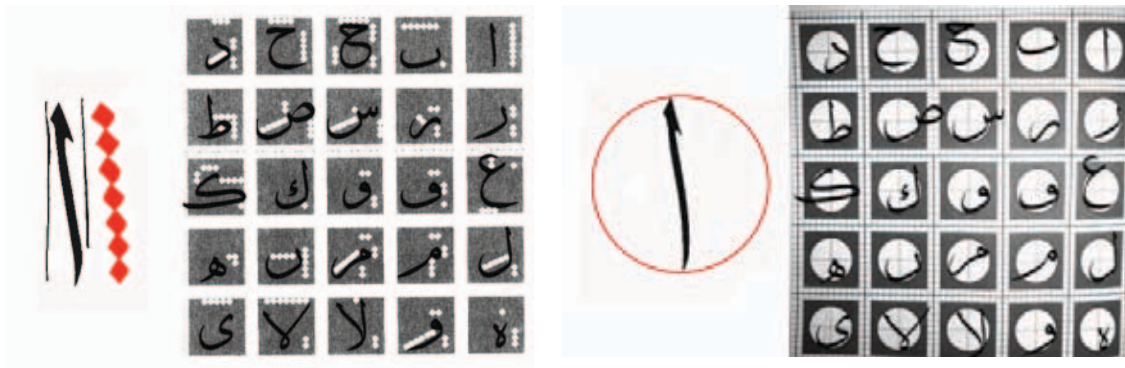


Figure 3. Arabic letters measuring systems.

The Nasta’alik also called Farsi was developed in Iran around the 15th centuries. It is a simple, fluid and rhythmical script with short verticals. It is traditionally the predominant style in Persian calligraphy.

The Ruq’aa script was developed in the mid 18th century. This script is fluid, easy to use and has small short letters. It is utilized in the daily handwriting.

The Thuluth is a cursive script that has large, elongated and elegant letters. It is one of the most difficult writing to master. It is recognized by the slopes that appear on the one-third of each letter thus derives its name that means "a third" in Arabic. This script was invented in the 11th century, however went through an extensive evolution during the Ottoman Empire in the 15th century and onwards. It was mostly used on mosques decorations.

The Diwani script is a cursive script developed during the reign of the early Ottoman Turks. It reached its popularity in the 16th century. It had mysterious rules that none but the master calligraphers of the Ottoman sultan and their pupils knew about. This writing was used in the writing of all royal decrees, endowments, and resolutions. It is cursive, beautiful and harmonious.

<http://www.britannica.com/art/naskhi-script>

³ <http://www.britannica.com/art/naskhi-script>

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These calligraphic scripts (often Kufic or Thuluth) were “projected from the manuscript page onto the surfaces of monuments, to decorate mosques, palaces, tombs and places with religious associations”⁴ imitating the illuminated pages of a manuscript.

3. Contemporary Calligraphy

In ancient times, the importance of calligraphy laid essentially on preserving the word of God and scripting Qu’ranic verses. Today the contemporary calligraphic art form has evolved and developed in different directions. A shift has happened in the new contemporary Arabic calligraphy as professor Sheila Blair describes in her book *Islamic Calligraphy*. “Arabic script has been treated in different directions, that are demonstrated in three major channels: the traditional calligraphy, Arabic script in printing, typography and computer graphics, and the modern calligraphy art that incorporates the traditional style and moving to new forms and media that can shift to abstract pseudo-calligraphy”.⁵ In this paper, the emphasis will be place on the new interpretation of Arabic calligraphy, by current artists creating a new trend in abstracting the Arabic letter and script. They have stretched the aesthetic boundaries of calligraphy by inviting new opportunities for self-expression. The practice of integrating beautiful writing into their arts reveals an endless world of abstracted letterforms aspiring to the creation of unique compositions. This evolution allowed artists to revive Calligraphy without restrictive rules, while expanding new visions and progressive calligraphic artworks.

A good example would be the original work of the Lebanese master calligrapher Samir Sayegh who abstracted the letters and gave them a universal form. “He reinterpreted the Arabic letters in a very avant-garde minimalist and contemporary style, in his continuous pursuit to transcend the aesthetics of Arabic calligraphy into universal forms and signs, beyond the formal boundaries of content and meaning.”⁶ At first glance, the viewer does not realize that he/she is gazing at the stylized letter “Lam Alef” as displayed in Figure 4. This composition seems to convey a modern, well-crafted artistic creation. Thus, Sayegh had successfully interpreted the calligraphic letter into an intense and complete experience, stressing on the aesthetic devoid of the meaning. (Fig.4)

⁴ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Islamic_calligraphy

⁵ Blair, S. (2006) *Islamic Calligraphy*. Edinburgh University. Press. (p.591)

⁶ <http://www.lebtivity.com/event/samir-sayegh-arabic-calligraphy-exhibition>



Figure 4. *Lam Alef*.
©Samir Sayegh 2009

The artist's aim is to immerse the viewer in the beauty of calligraphy while forgetting the meaning and its conventional functionality. He praises primarily the beauty of calligraphy and not its reading. He transcends the Arabic letter "to its highest spheres as an art to read what cannot be read, and hear what cannot be heard and see what cannot be seen."⁷ In his interview with the Saleh Barakat owner of Agial Gallery, Samir Sayegh describes the letter "Alef" as a dancing form that can mutate in many forms. The anatomy of this simple letter renders a humble straight line which can go astray with the help of imagination and transforms into a rainfall, a razor-sharp sword... He describes the flexibility of the letterform and its infinite playful shapes it can perform. Through the understanding of the anatomy of the alphabets, artists can communicate their message in a sophisticated and mature language.

Other artists such as Chaouki Chamoun incorporated calligraphy into his paintings creating a pattern that evokes mysticism. In 1991, he started experimenting with words on paper to search for a new aesthetic alphabet. In 2009, he completed his series of calligraphic painting which was part of a touring exhibition titled "Written Images". In this work, he liberated himself of all boundaries related to the laws of writing, and delved into a personal expression of visual language.

⁷ <http://www.muraqqa.com/samir-sayegh.html>

“In the Beginning was the Search for the Word represents the chaotic bewilderment in the moment before one finds verbal expression for some new emotion.”⁸ The artwork displays three concentric circles inside each other referring to an eye. This entire canvas is crammed with haphazard words that are indecipherable, the viewer yet interprets the conceptual message behind it. This repeated message translates to a mantra that recurs over and over mirroring the idea of the eternal search.

In his art, Chamoun intentionally used abstracted handwritten calligraphy that appears like scribbles suggesting a personal journey of spirituality and mysticism. (Fig. 5)



Figure 5. *In the Beginning was the Search for Word*
© Chaouki Chamoun 2011

The Persian artist, Parviz Tanavoli, famous for his sculptural representation of the letter “Heech” meaning in Persian “nothing”, used the letter solely to reflect a multifaceted philosophical concept of the meaning of nothingness. He states that he “gave calligraphy up and only used one word”.⁹ He moved away from the Islamic connotation of Islamic calligraphy and explored a self-expression in three-dimensional calligraphic form. The “Heech” suggested a mystical condition beyond the nothingness. However, Tanavoli was mainly fascinated by the calligraphic shape of the letter due to its resemblance to the human body. In his book *Jewelry*, the artist affirms that if the resemblance between the

⁸ <http://artasiapacific.com/Magazine/WebExclusives/WrittenImagesContemporaryCalligraphyFromTheMiddleEast>

⁹ Tanavoli.P. (2008) *Jewelry*. Bon-Gah Publications. Tehran. (p.9)

“Heech” and the human body did not exist, he would have never involved himself in making it...”¹⁰

“Heech” has been integrated into the anatomy of his sculptural letter many times each time with a new concept presented in different scales. The artist explored large sculptural monumental scale of the “Heech” as well as a tiny scale that could be worn on a ring, a bracelet or a pendant. He expressed political views through his work, as seen in his sculpture “*Heech in a Cage*” where he articulates the conditions of the American-held prisoners at Guantanamo Bay detainment camp. (Fig.6) The Calligraphic letter became his mean of expression.



Figure 6. Heech in a cage.
© Parviz Tanavoli 2006

Moreover, the Iraqi master calligrapher Hassan Massoudy uses words and phrases in the work. His inspiration is driven from proverbs, poets and philosophers throughout the centuries, ranging from St. Augustine, Virgil and Ibn’-al-Arabi to Baudelaire and Rousseau. Massoudy modernized the traditional Arabic calligraphy giving it a fresh outlook. He is known for the generous letter based sweeping forms that are central to his composition. His signature technique is to highlight the prominent word from a poem or a quote,

¹⁰ Tanavoli.P. Jewelry. Bon-Gah Publications. Tehran. 2008. (p.10)

accompanied by smaller scripture of the saying placed at the bottom of the composition, “like a thin lace attached to the world”.¹¹ (Fig.7)

His calligraphy provokes emotions that are transmitted through the dynamic movement of his strokes, the lines, the transparency of the ink flow and the proportions and balance between the large-scaled calligraphy and the smaller scaled quote.



Figure 7. "He who doesn't progress each day regresses each day" - Confucius.
© Hassan Massoudy 2002

4. From letters to monogram to patterns

At the American University of Beirut, I have introduced in my typography class an exercise that aspires to understand Arabic Calligraphy. Hence, by exploring the Arabic letters then creating modern monograms to be at the final stage manifested in a complex assortment of a lavish visual language.

Before proceeding with the required assignment, the typography students are required to grasp the influence of Islamic calligraphy on contemporary designs. They learn the basic anatomy of Arabic letters while understanding the fundamentals of design. Briefly the project is to initially design an Arabic calligraphic monogram that is based on each

¹¹ <http://www.fatcap.com/article/interview-of-hassan-massoudy.html>

student's respective initials using any Arabic script of their choice: Kufi, Thuluth, Naskh, Nasta'alik, Diwani, Ruq'a and Farsi. However, they have to always keep in mind the form, the proportions and the space that will emerge out of their monograms. The design process entails intersecting, interweaving and fusing the two letters. Students draft many options to finally reach their preferred unique monogram. (Fig.7-8).



Figure 7. Monogram of the letters: kaf and ya' (ك ي). Ilat Knaiz. LAU 2010

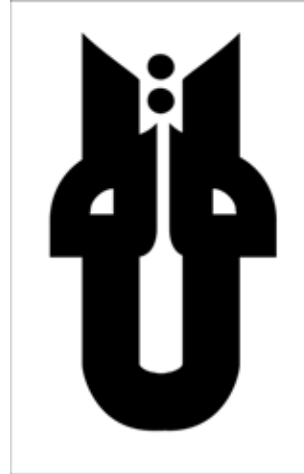


Figure 8. Monogram of the letters: t and t (ت ت). Tala Temsah. LAU 2009

After polishing their calligraphic emblem and converting their hand drawn sketches into vector graphics, they start exploring the different possibilities of how to combine and multiply the monogram to generate various motifs. By multi layering, overlapping and flipping the form they develop several motifs that will be utilized as the repetitive element in the pattern design process. (Fig.9a- 9b) These motifs will be combined methodically proposing a singular pattern design.



Figure 9a. Monogram of the letter: R and K (ر ك)
Rami Kanso. LAU 2011

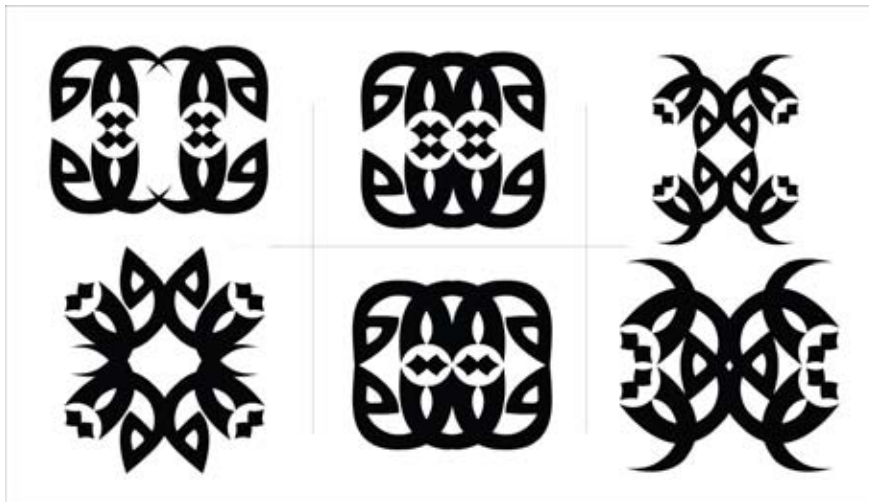


Figure 9b. Six motifs
Rami Kanso. LAU 2011

With the comprehension of arabesque patterns systems and the development of their intricate treatments of motifs, students progress with the creation of black and white patterns. They then move forward with the implementation of colors that will be added to the same visual layout.

The flexibility of using multiple scale motifs also equips them with the opportunity to dive into the endless world of space, forms and lines while grasping the sense of negative and positive spaces. Hence, creating the panoply of never ending contemporary calligraphic arabesque. For instance, G. Marçais refers to the art of arabesque as “the essential element, which may itself constitute the whole decoration, and which controls the design and the rhythm. It is the band, the ribbon of constant width. To trace the design which the band is to follow, to compose it as a whole, simultaneously intricate and balanced, luxuriant and coherent, a design in which the eye can willingly lose itself and find itself again - that is the primary concern of the creator of the arabesque”.¹²

By applying a rich color palette to the repetitive monochromatic pattern, students transform the original work into a lush visual expression. Introducing again an infinite variety of pattern designs where the eye loses itself. This systematic method allows students to conceive infinite surfaces of patterns each distinct in their visual style. (Fig.10) Adding colors to the design enhance the contrast of forms and shapes. This essential element reinterprets the initial work by offering a fresh approach to the respective calligraphic arabesque. By recognizing and detecting new forms from the original design, students regenerate patterns by filling the distinctive shapes in a rhythmical colorful output. For example in figure 10, the student developed three distinct looks all derived

¹² Marçais, G. (1962) L'Art Musulman, Presse Universitaire De France, collection Quadrige, Paris

from the same motif that is based on the Diwani script. The primary pattern was designed exclusively out of the black and white iconic motif. In the second and third version of patterns, the student exercised colors adding a new layer of complexity and depth to the work. This significant treatment of hues contributed immensely to the vigorous evolution of the visual outcome. (Fig.10a-b-c) She then explored other design structured including a different motif, as displayed in Figure 11. Even though the motifs are extracted from the same monogram, the proposed module affects radically the final result. (Fig.11a-b)

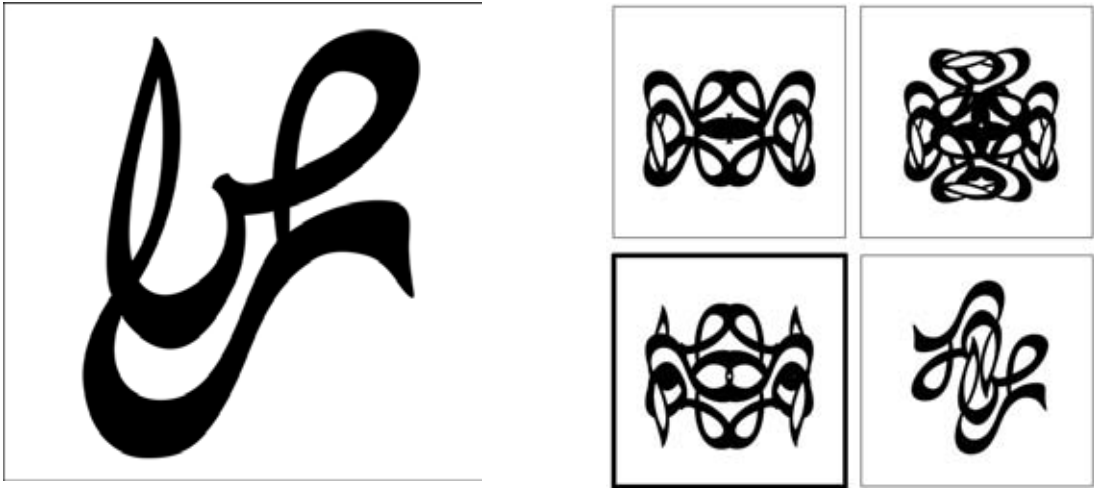


Figure 10 a. From left to right: Monogram of the letters (R + S) (ر + ص).
Figure 10b. Four motif designs. The highlighted motif is the one utilized to create the patterns.

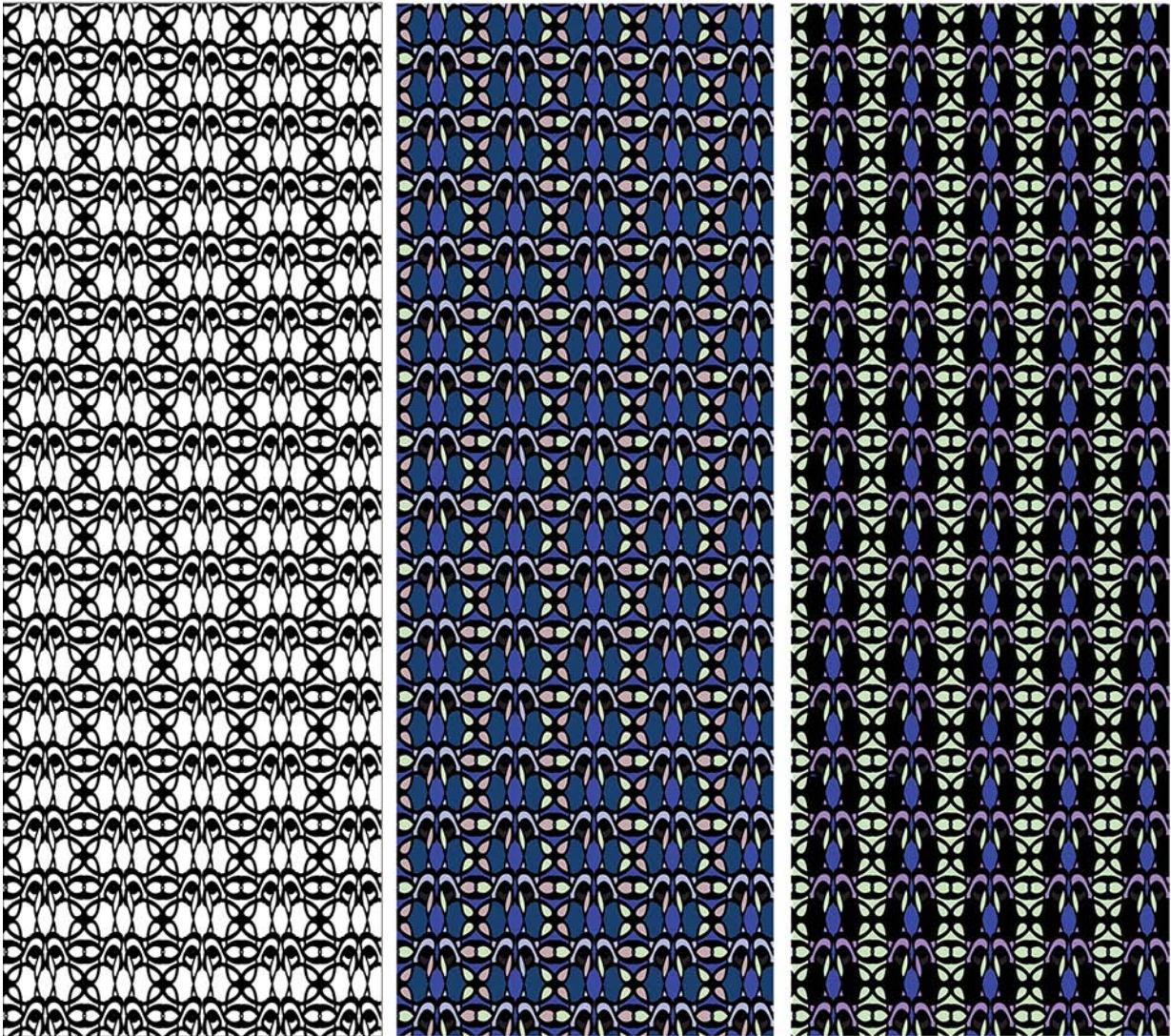
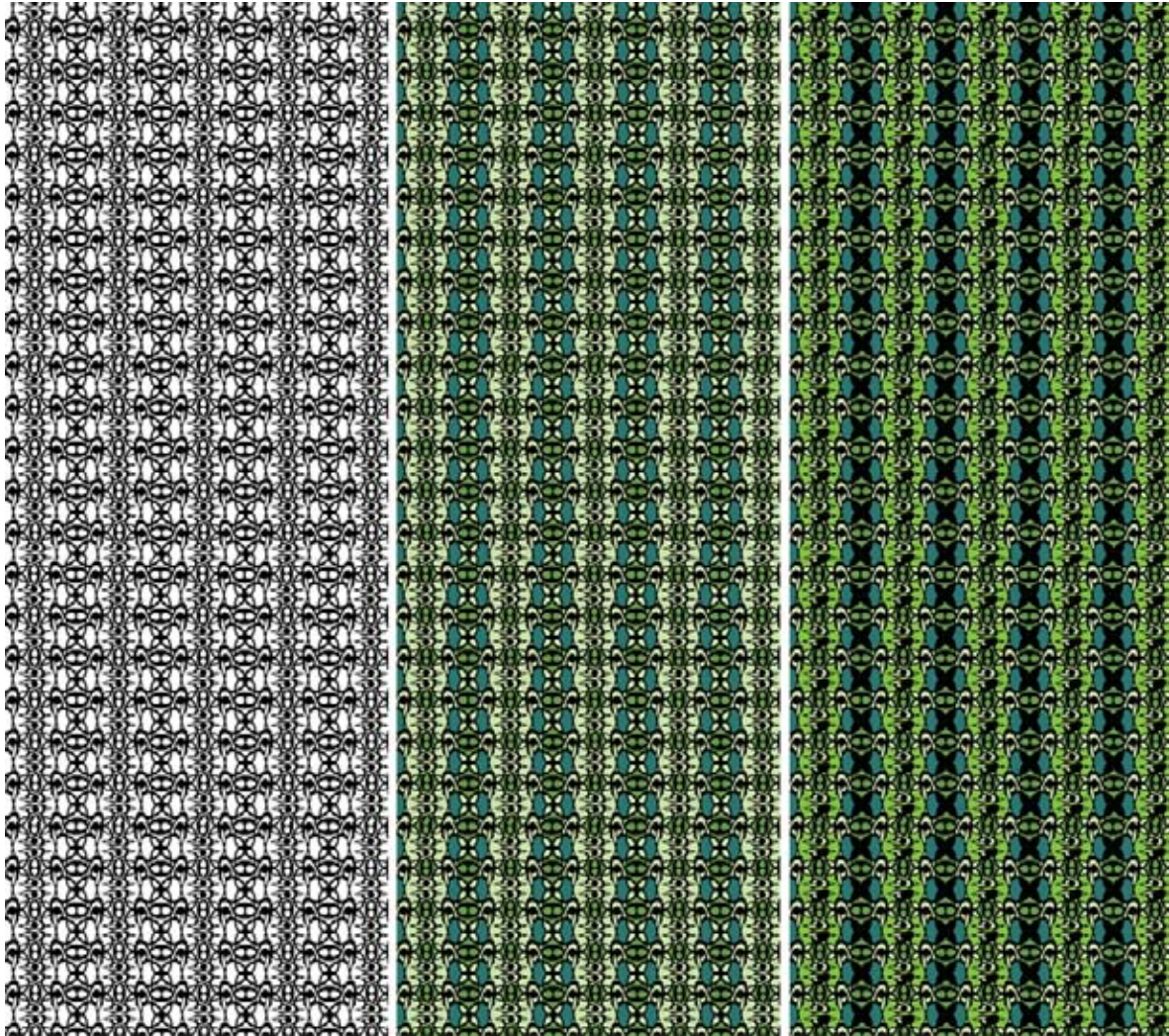


Figure 10c. Designs of 3 patterns (left to right): black and white, and two alternatives of colorful options.
Raneem Sakr. LAU 2011



Figure 11a-b. Motif selected to create a new range of patterns. Designs of 3 patterns: black and white and two colored options.
Raneem Sakr. LAU 2011



Every project transmits a different language and each is based on the preliminary steps acquired. For example in the work displayed below (Fig.12), the student founded her monogram on a modern Kufi script, which later adopted a tribal appearance that was emphasized by the particular use of her selected color palette. The variation in sizes of the proposed motifs, added a new layer to the work by presenting intricate patterns that immerse the viewer in a rhythmical sophisticated milieu of design elements. The motif used to develop the pattern is made out of dozens of monograms combined to create a unique visual expression, as highlighted in figure 12a.

By exploring and experimenting with the letterforms and colors, one realizes the limitless possibilities of creating different visual expressions. The same coordinated set of colors can say vastly different things, depending on how they are assembled and applied.

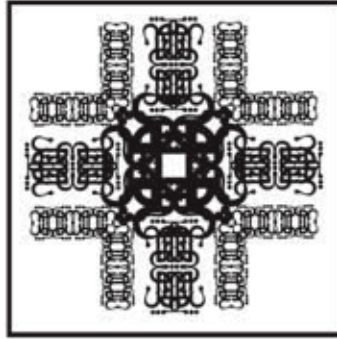
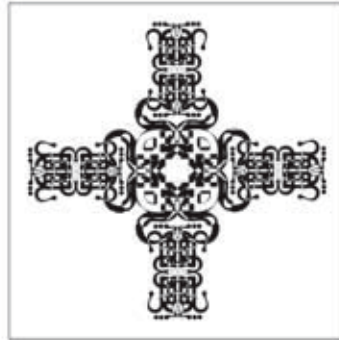
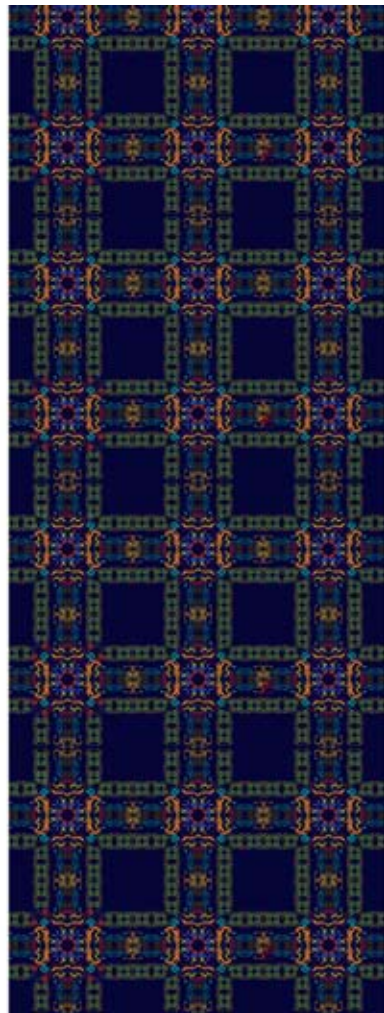
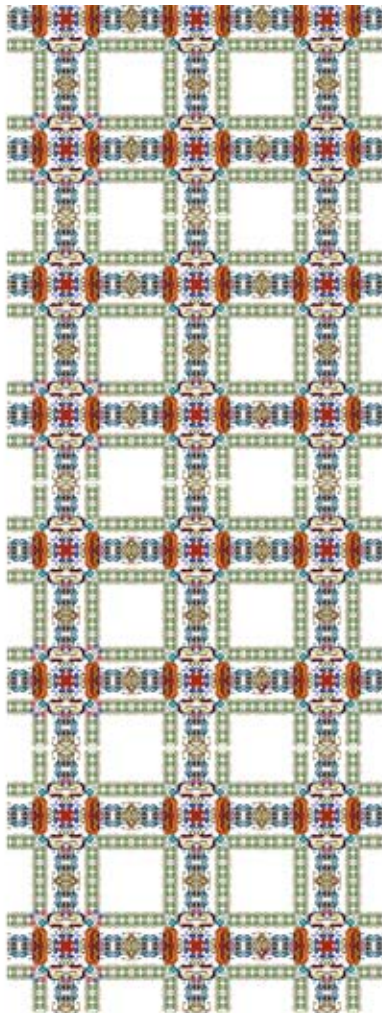
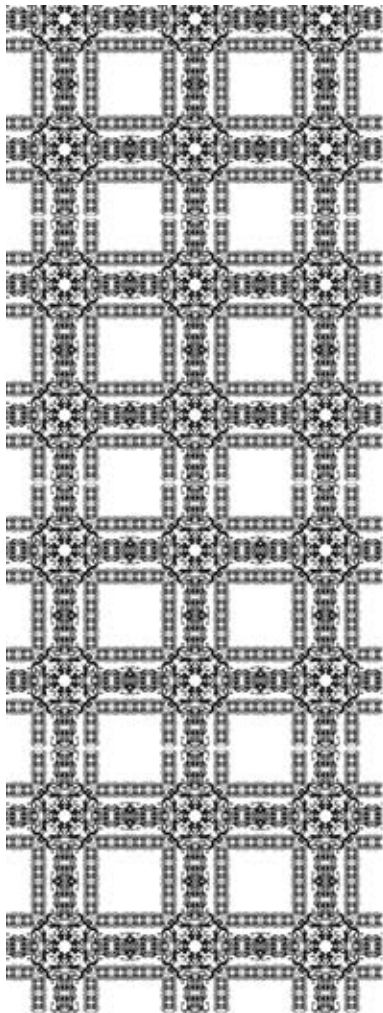


Figure 12a-b. Monogram of the letters (S + K) (س + ق). Four motif designs. The highlighted motif is the one utilized to create patterns. Design of 3 patterns: black and white and two alternative colorful options. Siwar Koraytem. LAU 2011



5. Conclusion

This exercise allows the student to grasp the fundamentals of design while training his/ her eye to appreciate Arabic Calligraphy and its limitless potential. Starting from the simple Arabic letterform, to the complex combination of dual letters in a monogram that finally culminate in a multifaceted visual language of pattern designs, vary in colors and morph as a result based on the understanding of negative and positive spaces.

From the time of the ancient calligraphic traditions to the contemporary modern expression of calligraphy artists and designers always tried to communicate a message, whether it implied religious connotations or a personal expression. Letters have always transmitted a powerful thought or concept. Today, Arabic calligraphy has unfolded new horizons, allowing the artists to freely express themselves without abiding to the restricted rules of ancient writing where the word was confined to religious themes.

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