

# CULTURAL IDENTITY CRISIS WITHIN CONTEMPORARY GRAPHIC DESIGN CASE STUDY: LEBANON

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## Abstract

Visual representations of Lebanese culture are rich and diverse. Traditionally, Lebanese culture is a unique mixture of the East and West. However, Westernization jeopardizes this cultural identity in contemporary Lebanese graphic design. Furthermore, today's Lebanese design students commonly refer to Western inspirations and view Middle Eastern influences as conventional. Student designers are integral to the revival of their visual culture. Pedagogical approaches can encourage the incorporation of visual culture into design by embracing change without obliterating the past. Adjustments are necessary in design studies through the modernization of Lebanese visual culture within graphic contexts. The future existence of a Lebanese visual cultural identity is possible through changes in graphic design studies.

## Keywords

Social Responsibility, Graphic Design, Design Education, Lebanon

## Introduction: Lebanese Visual Culture

"Lebanon is situated in western Asia on the eastern shore of the Mediterranean Sea, bordered by Syria on the north and east, and Israel to the south" (Marston, 1994). Lebanese cultural history dates back to a time when the Canaanites, ... "came to the shores of Lebanon from some place to the south around 3000 B.C." (Marston, 1994). The author of *Lebanon: New Light in an Ancient Land*, provides a timeline of the various cultures that have influenced Lebanon throughout the centuries. From the Phoenicians, Greeks, Romans, Islam, the Crusaders, Ottoman Turks to the French, the cultural heritage of Lebanon accumulated from centuries of collecting. There are numerous means in which Lebanese culture can be viewed: from traditional costume, musical instruments, dance, cuisine, landscape,

architecture, written languages, artifacts, art, vegetation, national identity to its currency. Beyond cultural heritage, contemporary Lebanese visual culture evolves into Lebanese nightlife, fashion, urban landscapes and modern media. Yet, this vision of Lebanon is in jeopardy.

In his text, *Visual Culture: An Introduction*, Nicholas Mirzoeff explains that visual culture is not simply part of everyday life rather it is everyday life. The question arises: what if everyday life has excessive influence from an outside culture? "Visual culture is a necessarily historical subject, based on the recognition that the visual image is not stable but changes its relationship to exterior reality at particular moments of modernity" (1999). Lebanese visual culture is doing just that — changing. As it always has, the Lebanese collect from various cultures throughout their history. However, Westernization is taking a dominant stance amongst the multitude of influences.

## Westernization

Westernization is a phenomenon that affects not only Lebanon, but also the entire Middle East. "For the last two or three decades the manifestations of Westernization in the Middle East have literally forced themselves upon the attention of students of the area... it would be a relatively simple task to draw up a long list showing what traditional features in Middle Eastern culture have been replaced in the course of the past 100 or 150 years by what new features introduced from the West" (Patai, 1955). Such Westernization influences various aspects of culture including the visual. The article, *The Middle East Westernized Despite Itself*, explains how the culture and society of the Middle East have been Westernized through: painting, art, patterns, architecture and clothing. Such changes occur as everyday life is modified in the Middle East and more specifically in Lebanon. Visual culture is altered as new Western fast-food chains, mini-markets, coffee shops and restaurants pop up along the main highway or in Lebanese shopping centers. Western products line the shelves in supermarkets and Lebanese kitchens. Western movies, television, magazines, books and advertising attract the youth of Lebanon towards a lifestyle that is no longer Lebanese. Western brands are sold within every possible genre of commodity from fashion wear to cars. With every new import, Westernization threatens the survival of Lebanese visual culture.

## A Disappearance of Visual Culture

The problem of Westernization is further compounded by the Lebanese perception of Western imports. Western brands are commonly seen as superior, more reliable, of higher quality or simply "cooler" than Lebanese or Middle Eastern counterparts. Though the Lebanese market is flooded with Western imports, brands that are Lebanese but

designed to look Western pose an even more significant threat. There are numerous Lebanese brands and visual communications that mimic Western aesthetic and have nothing that visually identifies them with Lebanon.

Graphic designers play a significant role in determining the style of brands and visual communications. Though they are not alone in such endeavors, as clients make their own demands. Designers do have a considerable say in the visual style and conceptual development of the work they create. The potential to change the current status of contemporary graphic design, however, may not rest within the hands of current Lebanese graphic designers. At the core of the profession, student designers represent the future. As visual culture disappears from contemporary graphic design in Lebanon, student designers become integral to its revival.

## Design Studies

Lebanon has numerous colleges and universities, several of which include graphic design programs. "Education is one of the biggest enterprises in the country..." (Marston, 1994). A hand full of reputable universities in Lebanon with design programs are: LAU (The Lebanese American University), AUB, (American University of Beirut), ALBA (l'Académie Libanaise des Beaux-Arts), AUST (American University of Science and Technology), NDU (Notre Dame University) and USEK (Université Saint-Esprit De Kaslik). Though Lebanon has a reputation for excellence in Higher Education for the Middle East, many of its universities are based on American or French educational systems. Problems arise as the content and structure of Lebanese design programs are based upon Western ideals. This dilemma is not only apparent in Lebanon.

An example of a similar predicament in Doha, Qatar is addressed in an excerpt from the book, *Design Studies: Theory and Research in Graphic Design* that states, "We can only praise Qatar's investment to develop its first design education program. Their commitment to high quality is apparent in their seeking an 'American' university degree program. However, the establishment of this design college in Doha was approached with the buy-an-American-university-degree-program-bring-it-home-take-it-out-of-the-box-and-plug-it-in mentality. The main objective was to have 'on-site' an American design curriculum...The result is the teaching of an American design program..." (Bennett 2006).

Design programs are not the only problem. Design faculty, often develop design projects with no relevance to Lebanese culture. It is common to find Western faculty teaching within Lebanese design programs. Many faculty members are not finding means of inspiring and

encouraging students to create culturally significant design.

Furthermore, students commonly do not take initiatives to integrate Lebanese culture into their work. Students are typically resistant to working in Arabic typography, finding it far more challenging than either English or French. There is not the same abundance of Arabic fonts as there are Latin fonts. The nature of ligatures in Arabic makes the manipulation of letterforms more constrained. Because of the bi- or even tri- lingual nature of most Lebanese students, their Arabic tends to be weak making design work in Arabic extremely difficult.

Besides Arabic type, Middle Eastern or Lebanese influences are not perceived as "cool" to the majority of Lebanese design students. This new generation of design students commonly and eagerly refers to Western design and culture for inspiration. Even though, in Lebanon cultural studies at the university level are standard, there is a disconnection between such liberal arts courses with design studios. Students frequently fail to make associations between their traditional cultural studies and contemporary design work. Furthermore, they frown upon the incorporation of designing for the community. Though a handful of Lebanese design students do tackle local social design problems, many steer away from such projects when given the option. However, there is potential for change within Lebanese graphic design studies.

## Change Through Creativity, Modernization and Uniqueness

"Visual culture exists both outside and within us; [with] cognitive and emotional impacts..." (Morra & Smith, 2006). Therefore, a means of embracing visual culture must be recognized on both a cognitive and emotional level within design education. One method of inspiring design administrators, faculty and students to integrate Lebanese visual culture into design is through connections with: creativity, modernization and uniqueness.

"If you talk to most creatives, they're always striving to be original. They're striving to create something that is unlike anything else" (Bennet, 2006). Lebanese graphic design students and faculty are no exception. They too strive to create something new. Unfortunately, that "something" is often overly influenced from the West and therefore lacks originality. However, there is potential for originality through the creative process. "Creativity is a state of mind in which all of our intelligences are working together. It involves seeing, thinking and innovating...[creative people] make unique connections often unseen by others" (Craft,

Jeffrey & Leibling, 2001). One method of formulating such unique connections is through the juxtaposition of opposites. Lebanon provides an excellent basis for the union of opposites. Opposites exist within almost every aspect of Lebanese life. The various visual cultural influences in Lebanon cause it to be a combination of the East and West as well as the traditional and contemporary. By looking for links that bring Eastern influences into modern design contexts creativity has the potential to flourish.

Through modernization within Lebanese graphic design it is essential that Western influxes do not take a dominant stance, nor should they be disregarded. Also, out-dated traditional visual clichés should not be implemented nor, should the past be entirely ignored. As written in *Visual Culture: An Introduction*, "...the success or failure of visual culture may well depend on its ability to think transculturally, oriented to the future, rather than take the rear-mirror anthropological approach to culture as tradition" (Mirzoeff, 1999). Lebanese can be successful in sustaining their visual culture through transcultural and future-oriented graphic design.

Furthermore, by creating graphic design work that is an aesthetic, creative and contemporary vision of Lebanese culture; it will therefore be unique. Uniqueness is practically non-existent within Lebanese graphic design. Moreover, throughout the Middle East there is very little happening in terms of contemporary culturally relevant and significant graphic design. The only Middle Eastern country recognized in having culturally significant graphic design is Iran. This is primarily due to their creation of contemporary designs integrating Arabic typography and calligraphy. If Lebanese designers could also find their own uniqueness within modern graphic design, they may also be recognized both locally and globally. However, to initiate this change action must first be taken by design program administrators, faculty and students.

### **Change Through Design Programs, Faculty & Student Learning**

Change can be initiated within graphic design programs through the:

- Integration of culturally significant projects within studio courses
- Adjustment of preexisting course titles, course descriptions and/or introducing entirely new courses

One course that serves as a basic example of integrating culture and design is given at The Cambridge School of Visual & Performing Arts, in their BA Graphic Design & Illustration program. The course, Graphic Design and

Illustration Critical and Cultural Studies, is described as follows:

"This module aims to encourage students to see critical and cultural studies as a vital tool for further innovative and well-informed practice, and particular attention is given to the analysis of ideas that specifically relate to students' own work. The module provides students with the opportunity to make an in-depth examination of one of a range of theoretical positions that inform recent and contemporary practice and to use such debate to reflect critically upon their own work and to locate their practice within the context of historical, social, cultural and professional currents. The module examines recent and contemporary graphic and illustration design against the backdrop of various issues such as gender, decoration, multiculturalism, media and ecological issues" (www.ceg-uk.com, 2009).

Another worthy course proposal that combines culture and design does so through an interaction within local communities. Titled: *Off the Page and into the Streets: Communication and Activism*, this course "provides a forum for students...to consider and expand their roles as members of a community...participants in our culture" (Heller, 1989). The course is divided into three sections: Public art and/or design: an overview, Public Service and Studio work. It involves many readings, which are also divided into categories, which include: Memorial and Place, Culture in Action, Activism Through Ideology, Advocates for Change and Methods of Dissemination.

Such examples indicate that it is not only the Lebanese in need of implementing culture into design. However, before making program changes design faculty must be willing to make their own modifications. The following is a list of possible amendments to current teaching methods that can be made by both foreign and Lebanese faculty:

- Use the juxtaposition of opposites to spark culturally creative design solutions
- Inspire students to modernize their culture by combining influences from East and West
- Encourage the creation of unique culturally significant design
- Recruit faculty/workshop hosts with specialization in Arabic calligraphy/typography
- Incorporate culturally specific workshops, lectures and seminars
- Introduce and teach new design/cultural courses
- Modify existing projects to be culturally specific
- Modify projects to be interactive with the local community

The means in which this list can be implemented has endless potentials. For example: modernization can be through new media and technology in design. Eastern and Western influence could be formulated from combinations of materials, production techniques, images, typography and/or messages. Culturally specific workshops, lectures and seminars can create culturally significant connections between Lebanon and the West. The potential topics of

discussion and platforms for projects are endless. Active and innovative faculty members have the ability to inspire and instill great change within students. The traditions of Lebanese culture can be seen as an open and underused platform for creativity in contemporary graphic design.

Website: <http://www.ceg-uk.com/en/csvpa/art-design/bagraphics-modules/#graphillstud2>) 2009

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## Conclusion

The Lebanese are commonly prideful when asked about their country, traditions and culture — however, this bond with culture has become disconnected to contemporary graphic design. Within Lebanese design studies there is a potential to harness this pride and make changes in the overly Westernized graphic design of Lebanon. Through faculty development and program changes, Lebanese graphic design students can have a positive impact on the future of visual culture in Lebanon. Integral components to spark such changes exist in creative approaches and unique outcomes through the modernization of Lebanese visual culture. If students come to understand and make culturally significant design as part of their everyday design practice, the contemporary graphic design of Lebanon will change. Visual culture would be sustained, furthermore; the graphic design of Lebanon would be worthy of local and global recognition.

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