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Swiss tradesmen and the Moroccan script reform: Entangled histories of typography

Abstract

In 1985, the Swiss journal *Typographische Monatsblätter* published a special issue dedicated to the Moroccan typeface reform around Ahmed Lakhdar-Ghazal of the “Institute d’Études et de Recherches pour l’Arabisation” in Rabat. Its author and designer, the typographer Hans-Jürg Hunziker, not only reported on his experiences as a Unesco expert in typography involved in the project, but also gave an insight into how the Arabic script works, its history and its diversity. Over the last two decades, the magazine been exchanged among students and professional type designers and has subsequently served as an authoritative source for several handbooks and stories on Arabic script and typography. However, most of these later works did not receive it as a document of its time. Neglecting Hunziker’s independent field report, they relied on his literature summaries without paying any attention to the sources.

This shallow reception can be seen as exemplary not only for the relatively young field of the history of Arabic typography, but for the historiography of graphic and type design in general. Mainly conducted by practitioners, it is usually done with the intention of justifying or influencing current design practice and focuses on visual aspects. Generally, there is a lack of independent investigation of primary sources and, even in more critical works, the author’s position the context of the material consulted are not sufficiently reflected. Thus, the history of typography is dominated by simplistic narratives and essentialist views on scripts and culture.

Reassessing the Moroccan script reform against the backdrop of an up-close revision of the historiography of Swiss typographers, this thesis reveals a much more complex picture. In a radically changing technological environment, with markets shaken by speculation and crisis, and under complex power relations, a wide variety of Moroccan, Swiss and international actors with different interests competed and collaborated in changing constellations. Following four protagonists—Lakhdar Ghazal himself, the Haas type foundry, the typographer Hunziker, and the machine manufacturer Bobst Graphic—this thesis analyzes how they responded to each other and the situation, how they renegotiated values and concepts, and particularly how they wrote and used typographic histories. Finally, this thesis shows how institutions, companies, nations, and not least cultures and practices are interwoven in a globalized world, and that this entanglement bears narratives that are particularly relevant for us today. Thus, it contributes to a diversified history of Swiss graphic design and Moroccan typography, to the theorization of typographic history, and to the revision of the still widespread image of Switzerland as only a passive onlooker of world history.

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Curriculum Vitae

I am a researcher in the field of graphic design and typography with a keen interest in sensemaking and historiography. I studied visual communication in The Hague (NL) and Zurich (CH), and hold a Master of Arts in typeface design from the University of Reading. Since 2016, I study for a PhD in design history at the University of Bern (CH). As part of the research project “Swiss Graphic Design and Typography Revisited”, I analyze historiographical aspects of self-initiated publications by Swiss designers. Further, I independently investigate the development of the genre of Italic types in the early and mid-16th century.