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# Visual Communication & Typography: Study in the History of Hebrew Letterforms and the Work of Israeli Designer, Yaakov Stark

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# Visual Communication & Typography:

# Study in the History of Hebrew Letterforms and the Work of Israeli Designer, Yaakov Stark

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ABSTRACT:

The article reviews the history of letterforms and typographic design by discussing inventions in scripts, tools and technology which impac the evolution of visual language and writing systems. Principles and elements of typography are analysed using the Hebrew alphabet as an example in letterform design by exploring the work of Israeli designer, Yaakov Stark, who as an Israeli immigrant from Eastern Europe projects centred on Hebrew typography and the hybridization of Ashkenazi and Mizrahi scripts. Through an archive of work produced while a student at the Bezalel Academy of Art, Jerusalem in 1906, Stark has influenced generations of Israeli designers, but is not discussed within the standard American university design curriculum. The article aims to explore the history of letterforms and the study of typography through an alternative perspective by examining the work of a lesser known designer whose text and image subjects and processes represent a non western nationalism, symbolism and writing systems.

Keywords: Typography, Design, History, Hebrew, Visual Language

Typography is a means by which an idea is written and given visual form. It has evolved from prehistoric pictograms and ancient alphabets to anatomically structured designs intended to provide message comprehension and readability for a viewer. The history of visual communication stems from pictorial images representing an idea, thing, and/or sound. Prehistoric cave paintings were drawn by a *Shaman*, a spiritual leader within the tribe, who, through ritualistic processes, used organic materials to visually communicate daily narratives. Later, semiotic language systems evolved to Petroglyphs, haphazardly placed pictographic forms carved into stone with a sharp object.

Prior to the invention of the Phoenician alphabet (1000 BCE), the two major systems of writing were Hieroglyphs, originating in Egypt, and Cuneiform, developed in Mesopotamia. Hieroglyphs used pictographic shapes and were an extensive script consisting of 750 characters, each communicating a thing, idea, or sound. Hieroglyphic symbols, which were aligned with precision in columns and rows, could be written right to left, left to right, or downwards and rotated right or left when representing a different concept.

The Sumerian Cuneiform, written on clay slabs with a thin stylus, was structured within a grid pattern in which individual markings, signifying a sound, thing, or idea, were joined within a cell to create a shape that described a total concept. Similar to Hieroglyphics, Cuneiforms consisted of hundreds of forms communicating an idea or sound. Characters were initially written top-down in columns, but over time came to be written in rows from left to right. Cuneiforms were

used from 4000–100 BCE but disappeared with the increase of other language writing systems.

In 1000 BCE, the Phoenicians invented the first 22-character alphabet. Written from right to left with no spacing between words, each letter form represented a specific sound, which could be placed next to another sound character(s) to create a word. The word and/or group of words communicated an idea or thing. By eliminating the complex pictographic writing system, the alphabet was simple to write and easy to comprehend, and the invention signified a cultural shift when different language-speaking populations within the Middle East and Mediterranean began using the writing method. This included the Semitic and Greek alphabets and scripts.

The Aramaic alphabet was developed around 1000 BCE by the Arameans, located in present day Syria. As the original Semitic language, Aramaic influenced both the Hebrew and Arabic language alphabets, and gained prominence in 900 BCE by the Assyrian Empire who adopted Aramaic as the official spoken and written language. Spread by the Assyrian Empire, and, later, the Babylonian and Persian Empires, the language and alphabet influenced the Jewish population living in Babylon during the exile. Prior to the exile, Jews living in Jerusalem wrote using a Hebrew alphabet known as Paleo-Hebrew, an alphabet of 22 characters similar in design to the Phoenician alphabet. However, admiring the fluidity of written Aramaic letterforms, which had softer, curvier lines, Jewish scribes living in Babylon during the exile developed a Hebrew script utilizing elements from both Paleo-Hebrew and Aramaic, known by scribes and scholars as the "Assyrian script."

TYPOGRAPHY

Typography, the design and study of alphabetic characters used in written language, relays the history and advancement in writing techniques and scripts throughout civilization and human necessity, science, and technology. In a language alphabet, a typographic character defines a sound that, by linking letters to create a word, describes an action, idea, and/or object. A word, when placed together with additional word(s), creates a sentence and/or paragraph defining the context and concept. As phonetic images, letterforms develop a connection between seeing and comprehending a message.

When working with letterforms, one is attuned not only to the positive shape of the alphabetic form, but also the negative shape that evolves through the placement of letterforms next to, above, and below. This spacing is measured in type through the layout and margining of content. Should a text be extensive, the layout must be adjusted accordingly to allow for readability and comprehension.[1] "The lines should be long enough to get complete thoughts into them and there ought to be enough space between them to be able to finish reading one line before your eye gets distracted by the next."[2] Leading is the space between lines of type in which an invisible line (baseline) is located above and below the text. Spacing between letterforms is significant as it allows a reader to easily follow and comprehend the text. While most readers take word and sentence breaks for granted, these breaks are as important as the positive character. French Philosopher Jacques Derrida wrote that "although the alphabet

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1 E. Spiekermann and E.M. Ginger, Stop Stealing Sheep and Find Out How Type Works (Mountain View, CA: Adobe Press, 1993).

2 Spiekermann, 1993.

represents sound, it cannot function without the silent marks and spaces. Typography

manipulates the silent dimensions of the alphabet, employing habits and techniques that are

seen but not heard."[3]

According to Ellen Lupton, Designer and Professor of Visual Communication, the first typefaces

were modelled from calligraphic form, and thus, the history of typography is a "tension

between hand and machine."[4] Following rules developed for typographic design, designers

who create and use letterforms in their work will consider systems of typographic hierarchy

based on letterform shape, size, and style, as well as basic grid structure and the spacing

between lines, words, and individual letters. The designer's goal is to create legible text

without sacrificing an aesthetically pleasing design that visually communicates a message to a

specific audience.

Readability and comprehension are standard components in the formation of typography and visual

language. The systems that designers attribute to forming comprehensible linguistic content include

grid structure, margin and column size and spacing, typographic hierarchy, baseline and line spacing,

letterform x-height and cap-height, line width and weight, font sizing, leading, tracking, kerning, color,

styling of letters, and choice of letterform. Lupton states, "a grid can be simple or complex…it's all

about control."[5] The grid defines the measurement and structure of a page, in which a designer

organizes the surface through columns and rows, creating a symmetrical or asymmetrical layout for

3 Ellen Lupton, Thinking with Type: A Critical Guide for Designers, Writers, Editors, & Students (San Francisco: Chronicle Books, 2014).

4 Lupton, 2004.

5 Ibid, 2004.

content within the space. Margins are used to space text from the edge of the page, top/bottom, left/right, and establish column sizing, width, and height.

Each typography letterform is developed via letterform anatomy. The anatomy of letters breaks down each part of a letter: such as the "h," where the letter contains a *shoulder* (curved line), connected to a *stem* (line) and an *ascender* (a stem ascending above the x-height). This allows type designers to focus on a specific area in isolation when modifying the complete character. Sizing the height of a letterform is done by establishing a) the baseline, the imaginary line on which the character sits; b) the mean line, the imaginary line that sits upon the top of a lowercase letter; c) the x-height, defined as the height of a lowercase letter; and d) the cap height, or the distance between the baseline and capital letterform.

The commonly naturalistic approach to language and design, dating back to the 17th-century Enlightenment, where printed materials were produced using centre-aligned, one column layouts with elegant serif text, was shredded when 20th-century European modernity witnessed an "anarchy in design" through publications such the Dada Manifesto and *Merz*. Previously, printed work "rigorously observed the rule, which required that typographic composition for the page [layout]…be determined by a central axis."[6] As one of Dada's goals was to work against the sociocultural establishment in Europe at the time, members sought to develop images and text that shattered the artistic and literary rules defined by academia and the cultural elite. Experimenting with new technologies and methods in visual communication aesthetics, Dada utilized performance, literature, and two- and three-dimensional design strategies, including photomontage, collage, typography, printmaking, and publication, to communicate concepts in a visual context.

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6 W. Safran, "Language and nation-building in Israel: Hebrew and its rivals," Nation and Nationalism 2, no. 1 (2005): 43-63.

The study of typography is interdisciplinary, as it incorporates multiple subjects such as sociology, linguistics, psychology, and aesthetics. There is one major goal for typography and the visual design of writing, to draw the attention of the viewer and allow for interpretation of communication. Typography allows for the exchange of information between author and reader. Designer and scholar Haken Ertep wrote, "Typography is the main means of expression for those who intend to create a visual representation consisting of the elements of writing…typography has a very fundamental and contemporary place in everybody's world."[7] Lupton defined typography as "a tool for doing things with: shaping content."[8]

When working with text in an effective document structure, a designer presents information through hierarchy, derived by stylizing type in size, weight, color, position, and contrast. The purpose of typographic hierarchy is to present written information for ideal viewer readability and usability. Often overlooked as mundane, the choice of typeface, stylizing, and spacing between letters and words often determines a successful design through exhibiting clarity in the message. Typographic letterforms are anatomically structured through a system of measurement and shape relative to the language alphabet in which the character(s) is formed. For instance, comparing Latin letterforms, used in Romance languages, modern block Hebrew text is designed with similar proportions in width and height with measurements sized by the same x-height and cap-height. However, Hebrew letterforms hang slightly from the baseline, while Latin letterforms sit on the baseline.

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7 Haken Ertep, "Typography as a Form of Cultural Representation," The International Journal of the Arts in Society: Annual Review, 6, no. 3 (2011): 45-56.

8 Lupton, 2004.

Known as the "Artist of the letter" by his peers and faculty, at the Bezalel Academy of Art, Jerusalem, Yaakov Stark, immigrated to Israel from Galicia in 1903 at the age of 24 and was one of the first 10 students to enter the prestigious Bezalel Academy of Art, Jerusalem, in the school's first year (1905). While at the academy, Stark excelled in typography, designing institutional-printed materials in addition to experimental typography patterning. Displaying design elements favoured by the Bezalel Academy, Stark's work combined European Art Nouveau style with local symbols and text: Islamic Arabesque and Hebrew script. Intended for decorative wall hanging and book beautification, his elaborate patterns of repetitive letterforms were created using a systematic formation of Hebrew letters and vowel characters. Having studied both Ashkenazi and Sephardi scripts, Stark used his knowledge to evolve calligraphic Hebrew characters into decorative imagery. Using one letter for each design, Stark multiplied the letterform using the same -size, line value, and weight. The repeated shapes, positioned next to one another, followed a rectilinear or curvilinear path, resulting in complex compositions of interlacing letterforms. Although Stark's work has been a unique contribution to the history of typography and design, little has been documented on his practice and personal history.

Three years prior to his death, Stark completed his greatest achievement, the ceiling painting of the Andes Synagogue in Jerusalem. Built in 1901, the Andes Synagogue supported the local Syrian population, which had immigrated to Eretz Israel during the 19th century. The rationale for choosing Stark for the project was that as an Ashkenazi Jew trained in the modern Avant-

Garde, semantics, and aesthetics, his work posed a juxtaposition to the traditional Mizrahi-designed interior space. The goal of the project was to combine old and new, inspiring Jewish identity through language and symbolism, which integrated traditional calligraphic Hebrew block script with Hebrew icons.

Mizrahi describes those whose lineage descends from the Jewish diaspora located in the Middle East and North Africa. Having resided in Arabic environments since the fall of the second temple, the Mizrahi communities adapted to the host Arabic culture, influencing Mizrahi alphabetic script, architecture, and fashion. Meanwhile, Ashkenazi describes those of the Jewish diaspora who, having left the Middle East during the Crusades, resided throughout Europe and Russia. Such as the Mizrahi community experienced Arabic cultural influence, the Ashkenazi population, having adapted to European culture, were influenced by their hosts in linguistics, writing, and book making. Depicting modern symbols of Zionism and the new Jerusalem Avant-Garde, Stark's Andes Synagogue project aimed to combine design elements of Syrian Mizrahi and European Ashkenazi aesthetics.

Heavily decorated with dark mahogany arches and moulding, the interior of the Andes Synagogue reflects that of a traditional Syrian synagogue: integrating materials within a large open space, a grand arched ceiling, and a second-floor balcony for women. Positioned on the wall closest to old Jerusalem is the (Torah) ark, made of dark mahogany, extending from the floor of the synagogue to the ceiling. Central within the space is the Bema, the podium where the Torah is read, a circular wooden structure measuring twelve feet high, with a canopy above. Benches and chairs are placed around the Bema; right, left, and back.

Along the walls, shields identifying the biblical Twelve Tribes of Israel were presented with large curvilinear typographic letterforms, spelling out the name of the tribe in Hebrew. Beneath the text, Stark painted the flags and symbols, representing the Tribe as it written about in Torah, but detoured from the Biblical context to astronomy by implying a comparison between the Twelve Tribes of Israel to that of the twelve signs of the zodiac when incorporating the astronomical symbolism within his design. Stark's patterning technique, which he honed at the Bezalel Academy, was used to repeat Jewish symbols, the Menorah and Star of David, in order to form an ornamented, stylized design. The shades of green and blue used in the project flowed with the natural colours of the local environmental signifiers, like palm trees, plants, and animals.

Located on Shiloh Street off Bezalel Street, the Andes Synagogue continues to serve the Syrian community, which has remained since the late 19th century. Stark's work went unnoticed by the public until 2010, when the Andes Synagogue underwent conservation and restoration efforts. Despite Stark's unique contribution to the history of Israeli Typography and Design, little has been documented on his practice and personal history. After graduating from the Bezalel Academy of Art, Stark taught as a faculty member while developing his professional studio practice: working on commissioned projects and selling handmade images to locals and tourists. Despite Stark's extraordinary talent, he was unable to support his family (wife and daughter) with his work, and they lived in extreme poverty in a small apartment near Mahane Yehuda Market in west Jerusalem. He died of tuberculosis when he was 34 years old. Other than the ceiling project, there are no known original works by Stark, and all images that remain

are from photographic reproductions.

## CONCLUSION

The History of Design/Visual Communication canon used within the American university curriculum focuses on the progression of form and techniques that developed over time in Western Culture. The canon, comprised of selected works, defined through a social elite, excludes extensive history and diversity in the evolution of design. Little discourse has been made concerning visual language outside the West, and most studies and processes in typography focus on mono-lingual Latin letterforms. Examining the progression of Hebrew letterforms and the work of Yaakov Stark, offers an alternative perspective in design studies from the introduction of a lesser known designer and his process. As an Israeli immigrant from Eastern Europe whose projects centred on Hebrew typography and the hybridization of Ashkenazi and Mizrahi design, the reader is offered a global perspective in the study of Design and Visual Communication.

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