

PAPER

Beyond Printed Manuscripts: New Readings of Arabic Printing in Islamic Art History

SESSION

Historians of Islamic Art Association *Majlis* (Meeting in conjunction)

CONFERENCE

Middle East Studies Association Annual Meeting

DATE/LOCATION

Oct 10-13, 2013, New Orleans

ABSTRACT

In recent years, the subject of printing in the Muslim world has garnered interest amongst a new generation of Islamic art scholars as a serious art historical undertaking. While indicative of a changing landscape in the art historical studies of the Islamic and Arabic book, much of this scholarship tends to examine printed works—such as İbrahim Müteferrika’s aquatinted maps or Qajar-era lithographed editions of the *Shāhnāme*—that clearly include calligraphic designs, color, illuminations and/or illustrations. By comparison, printed Arabic books with unadorned, text-emphasized layouts and typographic compositions—particularly those produced via standard letterpress methods—have received little attention by way of visual analysis. However, these printed objects’ typographic and textual emphases can in fact serve as important markers of changing societal and cultural views on what printed books should look like and how they should be read.

Turning a spotlight on these often-overlooked examples of Arabic printing, this paper examines secular publications produced during the mid-1800s by members of Ottoman Beirut’s intelligentsia on the presses of the Protestant American mission. I closely analyze the design, typographic and material components of such books printed by Arab Christian scholars Nāṣīf al-Yāzījī and Buṭrus al-Bustānī, like *Kitāb misbāḥ al-tālib fī bahth al-maṭālib* (1854) and *Kitāb majma‘ al-baḥrayn* (1856), many of which were also central to literary, secular and nationalist ideas of the fin de siècle Arab Nahḍa. I illustrate how such works, in their organizational methods and minimalist, text-based, graphic conventions, mirrored similar aspects of the American missionaries’ ecclesiastical Arabic publications at the time. I also show how such books by Arab Syrian scholars differed from their counterparts printed at other presses in nearby Cairo, Tabriz and Istanbul, which clearly utilized the visual language of local illuminated manuscripts. In doing so, I demonstrate how Yāzījī and Bustānī, who were committed to emergent notions of a pluralist Arab heritage and political identity, utilized the American press for the physical means of producing books that derived inspirations from this press’s visual language to shape and mold their own works and image as actors in a changing intellectual, religious and political landscape. As such, I argue that different agents could deploy the minimalist, typographic features of letterpress books for divergent sets of purposes. By engaging in a serious study of different manifestations of printed works, and not simply valuing those that clearly emulate or call back to scribal practices, this paper thus strives to contribute a valuable set of analytical tools to the study of Arabic printing and to open up new, unexplored avenues within this emergent subfield in Islamic art history.