

non-latin type design

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I grew up speaking and writing English, becoming proficient in a writing system that I would eventually come to know as the Latin alphabet. I loved English for its wonderful mess of contradictions, but it also had its rules and organizing principles. It is written left to right—something that felt natural and logical. It contained 26 letters, including both consonants and vowels (and one ambiguous “y”). It used capitals and italics and punctuation marks.

Through a love of language, and then of typography, I came to understand and appreciate not just the possibilities of the language, but its limitations, and the creative ways to get around those limitations. Language helped me express who I was.

What a revelation it was, then, to discover that not every language functions like the one I knew—that not every language uses an alphabet, that vowels don’t always take letterforms, that punctuation is optional. All around us are languages that we don’t understand, but that are fundamental to how others see the world.

How has the Latin script shaped the way I understand design and communication? How might different language systems affect the way we express ourselves? How might they alter the way we see the world, and each other?



“Language is a crucial part of our identity, and its written form is an outward expression of that identity. Finding ways to integrate, influence and communicate with multiple scripts is a way to further our multicultural societies by creating positive interactions at those intersections of culture.”

“Language and script have layers of symbolism, histories and hidden narratives, which continue to be more than just marks on a surface. How do symbols and motifs evolve? Do they retain their original meaning or take on new roles depending on the user? How do they fit into the current context of society?”

MUSTAALI RAJ

Arabic, with Mustaali Raj

“Typography is a very tangible expression of design that conveys so much about a people’s history, identity and culture,” says Mustaali Raj, a Vancouver-based graphic designer.

Mustaali describes himself as a “third culture kid”—born in India, an early childhood spent in the Middle East, and then growing up in Canada. He grew up learning Hindi and Urdu at home, and as a Muslim, Arabic as well; meanwhile, English was always around.

“These languages and their corresponding scripts are deeply rooted in my childhood and have always been part of my identity,” he says. It is a “multifaceted sense of belonging” that plays an important role in his design work. “It’s at the merger, the connections, where interesting things start to happen.”

These connections occur at the typographic level as well, and Mustaali often explores multi-script in his design—with Arabic and Latin, and with Devanagari, Urdu and Punjabi, as well as Japanese. “It’s all about practice and familiarity,” he says. “The more time you spend reading, writing and deconstructing the letterforms, the easier it becomes to make those connections.”

“Combining scripts or creating marks that integrate multiple languages can be challenging, but that’s where the excitement is as well. The first step is to find similar touch points. The creative process then takes over as you fill in the gaps and build the rest of the letterforms.”

He has also been seeing a lot of cross-influence between Arabic and Latin scripts: “Western designers are also borrowing elements and principles from Arabic letterforms, such as the use of flourishes for decorative terminals or creating new connectors between Latin letters.”



Arabic is one of the most widely used writing systems in the world, alongside the Latin and Chinese scripts. It is written right to left, and entirely in cursive. Most letters vary in shape depending on their position within a word: as initial letter, final letter or a middle letter, or if they stand alone. Arabic also makes use of a host of other typographic features: dots help distinguish between similar letterforms, and diacritics are used to indicate vowels, as well as absent vowels, doubled consonants and consonant length.

“There is a strong sense of fluidity and flexibility at your disposal when working with Perso-Arabic scripts,” Mustaali says. “The letters and words can be modified to fit layouts, whether they are elongated or shortened. This flexibility makes it easier to integrate it with other writing systems as well. The personality of the type can be altered to great effect while maintaining the overall legibility. It offers more variation within the shapes, the positive and negative spaces, to create something that’s super thick and bold, or sleek and elegant. The diacritics of the script can also be used as graphic elements within the composition.”

“The script allows for a wide range of creative possibilities, which can also become overwhelming. One of the challenges is determining where to start.”

36 days of type

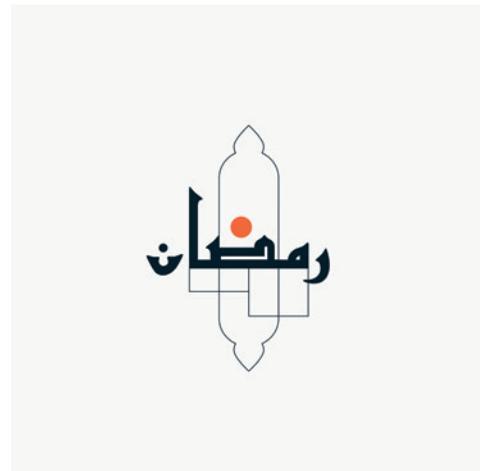
For this year’s @36daysoftype, Mustaali created typographic forms that merge corresponding letters from English/Latin and the Perso-Arabic scripts.

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“To be able to articulate yourself in writing and visual form increases one’s agency in the world. I’m interested in agency for all people, or to put it more precisely, a rather radical form of freedom—not just of self-expression, but also of the individual.”

IAN LYNAM



**Indian Summer Festival
by Mustaali Raj & Minahil Bukhari**

Language is fluid and flowing like water. The word for water in Japanese is mizu. In Hindi, it’s paani. In Swahili, they call it maji. Although these words convey the same sentiment, linguistically they are very different. But there is one word, the only one, which unites most languages phonetically, and that word is “Ma.”

Russian linguist Roman Jakobson explains that the easiest vocalizations for a human to make are open-mouth vowel sounds. Babies can make vowel sounds from day one. They summon their energy to push out that new consonant sound “mmm” and then relax into an open mouth vowel, usually “ah”—which is the easiest. Hence, we get the universal sound “Ma,” describing the entity who gave us the most cherished love in our most vulnerable state. Almost every language recognizes a form

of it. While it’s true that most languages vary when it comes to the formal word mother, the intimate sound “Ma” stays the same.

The sound/letter M (Ma) has a strong connection to both water (river) and mother tongue (language). The letter M is derived from the ancient Phoenician “Mem,” which most likely originates from a “Proto-Sinaitic” (Bronze Age) adoption of the Egyptian hieroglyphic symbol for water.

The final artwork combines and integrates the letter “M” from different languages/scripts across South Asia, Canada and other parts of the world. The design is an abstract pictographic mark, which represents the River of Language (Indian Summer Festival’s theme for this year). It is an amalgamation of the various scripts flowing together into a maze-like structure.

The above graphic translates to “Ramadan.”

ARABIC CALLIGRAPHY

It is common for scripts to be rooted in calligraphy, but with Arabic, calligraphy carries a particular potency. “Arabic was the language of the Quranic revelation, and as the early Islamic civilization started to grow, the oral narrations of the scripture were recorded in writing,” explains Mustaali. “This laid the foundation of Arabic calligraphy, which continued to evolve as emphasis was placed on beautifying the Word of God.” As a result of this intimate connection to the Quran, calligraphy is still regarded in the Arab world as the highest form of art. Still, Mustaali stresses that this link to calligraphy does not limit the stylization of Arabic script: “It doesn’t always have to flow like the strokes from a calligraphic pen.”

Japanese, with Ian Lynam

Japanese is notoriously difficult for English speakers to learn, and is equally as difficult to design. Just ask Ian Lynam, an American designer and creative director living and working in Tokyo. “It has taken a number of years to become comfortable with communicating and designing using Japanese,” Ian says. “It takes a certain amount of language comprehension to be able to typeset Japanese in a way that is nuanced and doesn’t read strangely to Japanese readers.”

Ian has little time for people who design in another language without taking the time to learn the language themselves, an attitude he calls Orientalist. “I wish that folks would think before they coopt aesthetics and visual languages that they come to from outside of a culture.”

Ian first travelled to Japan while on tour with a band in 1998, then kept coming back. “I was enamoured with the visual culture of Japan and wound up with the opportunity of actually moving here due to running my own business and some other entanglements,” he says.

Perhaps the most striking thing about Japanese is that it makes use of three scripts—*hiragana*, *katakana*, and *kanji*—often used in combination.

Kanji (漢字) are characters adopted from Chinese, though they tend to allude as much to pronunciation as to meaning (Chinese characters are strictly logographs, each representing a word or an idea). Kanji are used for basic vocabulary—nouns and verbs. They are also complex and visually dense, and can contain up to 33 strokes.

Hiragana (ひらがな) and katakana (カタカナ) are both syllabary alphabets (meaning the characters represent syllable sounds) and are referred to together as *kana*. Hiragana consist of naturalized Japanese words and grammatical elements, while the more angular katakana are reserved for foreign words and technical writing, as well as for emphasis.

To complicate things further, Japanese can also be written both vertically (*tategaki*) and horizontally (*yokogaki*)—from left to right, as well as, historically, from right to left. “Vertical typesetting suggests that text is more important than left-to-right horizontal typesetting,” Ian says. “There are specific characters that cannot be used in horizontal typesetting, and much nuance is lost in the physical form.”

Vertical text also invites new possibilities for punctuation, as well as for including Latin text, which can be rotated 90 degrees, to be read sideways.

Latin text is used widely in Japanese—*rōmaji*, Latin letterforms, function very much as a fourth script. “You can actually do quite a bit with Latin characters in



Japanese typography,” Ian says. “For example, proper Japanese typography does not include italics, whereas Latin-based typography does, so there is a certain amount of extra nuance and complexity that can be brought into play.” Likewise, Japanese offers its own typographic options, such as the use of small dots placed alongside a run of characters for emphasis.

Japanese design has also retained screamers—“oversized, slanted or tiled exclamation mark characters designed for newspaper headlines that were popular in North America and Europe until around the 1940s,” as Ian describes them. “I love that there is a ghost of America within every Japanese font.”

Calligraphy continues to have a major influence in shaping Japanese typography. Traditionally, Japanese makes use of mincho typefaces, derived from formalized calligraphy, and sans-serif Gothic typefaces—but Ian also describes an explosion in both designers and type design over the last decade, bringing with it “a range of stylistic exploration.” There is also a good deal of collaboration among Japanese, Chinese and Taiwanese type design studios and foundries.

However, design work, Ian says, tends to follow lettering. “Trends in Japanese character design tends to happen in lettering first and in type design afterward, as Japanese type design takes an incredible amount of work—far, far more than the design of Latin typefaces.”

Slanted Magazine

Ian Lynam and Renna Okubo edited and curated issue #31 of *Slanted Magazine* which covered graphic design in Tokyo. “We reached out to a mix of established and emerging designers, writers, illustrators, type designers and folks active in creating vibrant culture across the greater Tokyo region. Our intention was to show both the breadth of design culture in Tokyo as much as how international our fair city has become over the past decade-plus.”

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Gujarati, with Keya Vadgama

“With the advent of the Internet and smartphones there has been an increasing need for typefaces that can serve a global user base, with particular emphasis on underserved languages,” says Keya Vadgama, a Gujarati-Canadian type designer and UI/UX designer from Toronto who is interested in ideas of accessibility.

“There is an abundance of Latin script typefaces, but many scripts, particularly in South Asia and South-East Asia, are lacking in usable typefaces. It would be ideal to give other scripts that same amount of choice.”

Keya took her first typeface design class while studying graphic design in her undergrad. “That class was transformative, because it was the first time I had been told that I could design a script other than Latin, and that there was a whole industry doing it as well,” she says. Soon after, she designed her first typeface—it was for Gujarati.

India is home to hundreds of languages and dialects, and at least 13 different scripts. One of the largest of these is Gujarati, spoken in the state of Gujarat and throughout India, as well as by the vast Gujarati diaspora, with over 55 million speakers worldwide.

Gujarati is a variant of Devanagari, the script used for Hindi, and the fourth most widely used writing system in the world. Gujarati has done without the upper horizontal line connecting Devanagari letters, lending Gujarati—already a non-cursive script—a more open and loose quality.



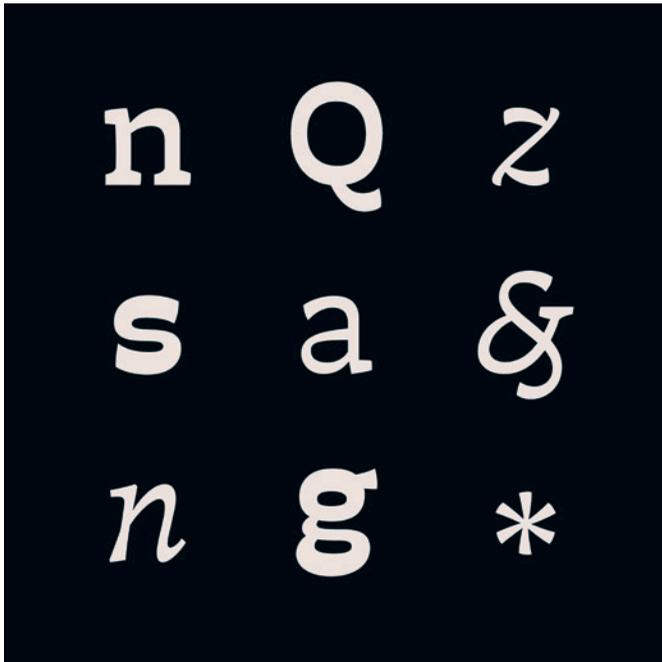
Gujarati is an abugida, rather than an alphabet. Alphabets give consonants and vowels equal weight, whereas an abugida is based on consonants, to which vowels are merely attached—vowels do not, generally speaking, get their own written letterforms, but instead modify consonants through the use of small diacritic marks. A peculiarity of Gujarati is that the most common vowel does not take any diacritic mark whatsoever, and, in an excellent display of efficiency, is simply assumed by its absence.

As a type designer, Keya is interested in working with multiple scripts, and is currently working on a project involving Gujarati, Devanagari and Gurmukhi. “I’ve had the opportunity to explore Greek, Cyrillic, Chinese, Devanagari and Arabic scripts through the lens of both type design and calligraphy,” she says. “Many of these scripts are completely new to me and require a different way of thinking when approaching them from a design perspective.”

Keya explains that although each of these scripts have roots in calligraphy, they all use different writing tools—such as a brush pen for Chinese and a reed pen for Devanagari—which affects the placement of contrast in the characters.

“One of my favourite aspects about working with the Gujarati script is that the contrast, the placement of thicks and thins, is reversed in comparison to Latin,” she says. “Gujarati has strong roots in calligraphy and was traditionally written with a broad nib pen usually cut from reed, but in the opposite direction of what is conventionally used for Roman calligraphy. The reversal of contrast creates beautiful shapes that wouldn’t be possible otherwise. The stroke sequence of certain characters can also create overlaps, called knots, which can be fun to play with and inject some personality into.”

According to Keya, one of the biggest challenges of working with Gujarati comes from the lack of modern design, and the limited design scene. “The challenges, for me, come from the lack of references,” she says. “When it comes to Indian scripts, the industry is even younger [than with Latin] and there aren’t many typefaces on the market. It’s a bit of a double-edged sword because there isn’t as much history for type designers to reference, but this is where the creative possibilities can open up and we have the opportunity to push boundaries and set standards.”



Top

A selection of Gujarati characters across several styles from Keya's unreleased MATD typeface, Mango.

Above

A selection of Latin characters across several styles from Keya's unreleased MATD typeface, Mango.

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“I’ve always had an inclination towards working with other scripts. And I found that I related to the culture behind Indian scripts more than I ever related to Latin. I find type history fascinating, but I get a certain feeling of disengagement when reading about historically privileged European men in design—whereas the comparatively short but modern history of Indian type makes me all the more interested in it.”

“In light of recent events with the death of George Floyd, and the anti-racism discourse that has been happening, there has also been some debate about whether designers who are not native to a script should even be designing for them. The type design industry has not been immune to systemic racism and I believe there is a need to dismantle systems that have allowed for the exclusion of Black, Indigenous, and people of colour in type design, and build the foundation for ones that foster true inclusivity.”

KEYA VADGAMA