

## Mathematical Interpretation of Graphic and Poster Design in Iran

Nahid Tootoonchi  
Art Department  
Towson University  
8000 York Road  
Towson, MD 21252, U.S.A.  
E-mail: ntootoonchi@towson.edu

### Abstract

Posters have long been the primary medium in which contemporary Iranian designers work and these works have attracted international recognition during the past ten years. Most attention has focused on the content of the posters as that often overtly addresses social issues, politics, the environment, and education, and as it clearly reflects the influence of movies, concerts, and other areas of the arts. Few international critics have acknowledged that though this new generation of Iranian designers demonstrates exposure to modern international concepts of design and to contemporary concerns about issues of our time, this art is often grounded in the ancient history of Iran. These modern designers readily borrow the signs, symbols, media, mathematical concept, and literature of the past, as a language in which to communicate with the present, and their posters often challenge the beliefs and conventions of our day via references to the calligraphy, typography, and other artifacts of their Iranian heritage.

### Brief History of Graphic Design in Iran

During the past 15 years, graphic design in Iran has expanded beyond layout and book cover design. Its potential has become increasingly clear to students, universities, businesses and the public. Some Iranian designers' work has been recognized internationally, especially in Europe and Asia [1]. A graphic design major is now being offered in more and more universities in Iran.

The history of contemporary graphic design in Iran goes back to 1940 through 1950 [2]. The first official graphic design department was established in 1950 at Tehran University's College of Fine Arts by Morteza Momayez.\* Before that, and as early as 1921, graphic design consisted mostly of newspaper layouts and illustrations related to their articles.

In earlier years (1940-1950), most artists, including graphic designers, worked in several areas of art, including animation, cartoon, illustration, painting, set design and film. This meant that one had to study in all areas, and there was no fine line between different art majors.

Illustration, rooted in fine art, is well integrated in a designer's work. Calligraphy and handwriting are the dominant forms of typography; designing type electronically is very limited. Therefore, there are few typefaces available. One can see the use of handwritten Farsi text on many posters and book covers working perfectly in terms of composition and style. Because of nature of the alphabet with many curves and movements, it easily becomes part of the composition in a very expressive form.

Iranian designers have been searching for an identity of their own, and this search has been quite successful in the past 10-15 years. Drawing upon their culture and history, they have found visual forms and memories to build ideas and solutions for communicating with the people of 21st century.

One unique style, called “khatnaqashi,” combines calligraphy and painting, which has historical roots in the arts of Iran. Calligraphers reproduced the works of famous poets and with painters, illustrated books of poetry and religious texts. Iran has a long history of architecture and ceramics in which calligraphy comprises a significant decorative component. This continues to this day, especially in recent years in many graphic designers’ work. However, the approach is different in very abstract and symbolic ways, see computer generated typography (figure 5) and calligraphy (figure 6).

In order to analyze the use of symbolic elements, calligraphy, mathematical elements, handwriting and typography by some of these designers, we need to refer to the creative process of design in contemporary Iran. Also we need to consider beauty, form, and value in ancient architecture, tile work, textiles and pottery.

\* Morteza Momayez, Graphic Designer, 1936-2005



**Figure 1:** N. Safaei, 2006.  
*Tehran My City, Creativity and Innovation, Beautification, Technology, Urban Development, Color Scheme, and Provincial Management.\*\**

This poster was designed to celebrate Tehran. Reflection is the main theme of Safaei’s design. Balance on this poster is based on proportional dividing that is done both vertically and horizontally from the focal point of blue text that is set against an abstract dark shape over the city of Tehran in the background.



**Figure 2:** G. Shiva, 1999.  
*The First International Conference on the Culture Between Iran & West Asia.\*\**

Spirals present themselves in many aspects of our life such as plants, nature’s movements, our galaxy, and patterns in life. The spiral in this design is an Euler spiral or a spiro. It is a curve that its curvature changes linearly with its curve length. The design and image has been painted directly on a piece of rock, photographed and used for the poster [3]. Iran’s ancient cultural relationships with her neighbors inspired Shiva for the design of this poster.



**Figure 3:** *F. Kourkehabadi, 2007. Molavi, the Second Exhibition of Iranian Contemporary Typography. \*\**

The theme of this exhibition is Rumi, who was a thirteenth-century Iranian poet and mystic. He founded the Molavi Order in Sufism. His famous book, *Masnavi*, the largest exposition in verse in the Persian language, discusses metaphysics, religion, ethics, and mysticism and has been translated into many languages [4].

The mathematical element in this poster is repetition of letterform used to create an abstract background. The same letters and strokes have been repeated in one direction as if they are floating in space. This kind of writing (connection of letters without any meaning) is the norm for practicing calligraphy. The straight horizontal text on this poster communicates the message and breaks the floating letters in order to attract the viewer's attention.



**Figure 4:** *M. Asadollahi, 1997. The 5th Biennial of Iranian Graphic Design. Introduction to Asian Graphic Art. Tehran, Museum of Cotemporary Art. \*\**

Based on Asadollahi interpretation, he seeks meaning in design and has never been a mere formalist. “His design is a tree with triangular shape fruits and its branches are masses of small and large pencils that has been formed by rectangles and triangles. He uses triangles as an active and ostentatious symbols. He believes graphic design is very close to the triangle and the shape is very dynamic that moves from within towards and its constantly imposing. A graphic design work is the same. It desires to attract the viewer and audience and leave a definite impression” [5].



**Figure 5:** B. Sayfour, 2003.  
*5th Color Presents; Bouf-E Kour, Typography Exhibition, Sayhoon Gallery, Tehran.\*\**

This poster was design for typography exhibition celebrating Sadeq Hedayat's centennial birthday. Sadeq Hedayat is a highly regarded and enigmatic Iranian writer of the early 20th century. His work has been translated into many languages. Bouf Kour is Hedayat's most celebrated novel.

Typography on this poster, which means blind owl in English, is the most outstanding element of beauty that by glide reflection, repetition and overlapping of solid and outline text has created a complex, sophisticated unknowns that relates perfectly to the content of the novel.



**Figure 6:** M. Ehsaei, 2004.  
*Kindness, Enduring Faces.\*\**

Calligraphy in the center is a symmetrical and repetition of the word "mohabat" (kindness). Iranian have always been interested in calligraphy and its beautification in their books, architecture, poetry, silk, tile, and textile. In Ehsaei's work, calligraphy of word "Mohabat," which is composed of four Farsi letters, has been rotated four times to create four imaginary squares in order to hold itself pleasantly in the golden background square.

\*\*Translation and interpretation of poster text

#### Reference

- [1] R. Abedini & H. Wolbers, *New Visual Culture of Modern Iran*, Mark Batty Publisher, p. 11, 2006.
- [2] J. He, *Vision of Design: Reza Abedin*, Page One Publisher, 2007.
- [3] Neshan, *Iranian Graphic Design Magazine*, Number 6, Spring & Summer 2005.
- [4] S. Rouzrokh, *Molana Jalal-e-Din Mohammad Molavi Rumi*  
[http://www.iranchamber.com/literature/jrumi/molana\\_rumi.php](http://www.iranchamber.com/literature/jrumi/molana_rumi.php), April12, 2010
- [5] Neshan, *Iranian Graphic Design Magazine*, Number 12, p. 6, Winter 2007.