

Dialogue



Covers and a spread from Neshan, the Iranian graphic design magazine



the Iranian flavor of calligraphy and typography contributes to the construction of a very unique identity for the graphic design tradition in Iran. Nonetheless, this tradition has also been influenced by other variables, such as the aesthetics of Western design.

For instance . . . Iranian designers came in contact with Western traditions after the constitutional revolution of 1906. The confluence of the two traditions allowed for the establishment of modern institutions of education, such as the Fine Art Faculty of the University of Tehran, which had various departments: architecture, graphic design, painting, sculpture. The school's graphic design department was established through the late Morteza Momayez's persistent efforts after he returned from studying in Paris at the École Nationale Supérieure des Arts Decoratifs. The curriculum was based on its Parisian counterpart, supplemented by courses in calligraphy and Farsi typography. The Iranian graphic design tradition is therefore a composite of vernacular Iranian and Western aesthetics and influence.

You are a co-founder and editor of Neshan, which is (I presume) Iran's only design magazine. How did it get started? And how has it been able to continue? The idea started to take shape about ten years ago in a group of six, including Momayez. He participated in our first few meetings, but his deteriorating health prevented him from staying with the group, and he left us to our own devices. This was our first experiment in publishing a graphic design journal, so we proceeded through trial and error till we

East Meets West

The Iranian designer and editor Majid Abbasi on political liberties, Western influence, and moving to Canada

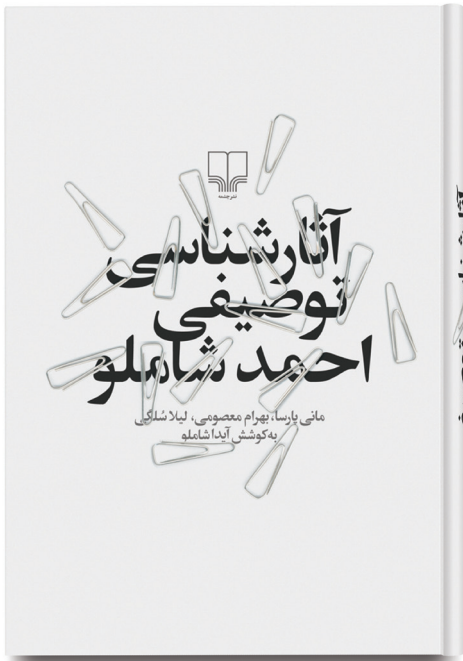
By Steven Heller

A giant of Iranian design, Majid Abbasi began his career drawing caricatures, making architectural sketches, and copying comics. In 1979, when Abbasi was 14 years old, the Shah fell and the young designer turned to drawing portraits of revolutionaries. He hoped to study architecture in Tehran, but the universities were closed after the revolution, so he began designing covers for his own music cassettes instead. Later, he created logos, posters, and brochures from his studio in Tehran, and was a lecturer at the Fine Art Faculty of the University of Tehran. A co-founder of the splendid Iranian design magazine *Neshan*, Abbasi now lives in Toronto.

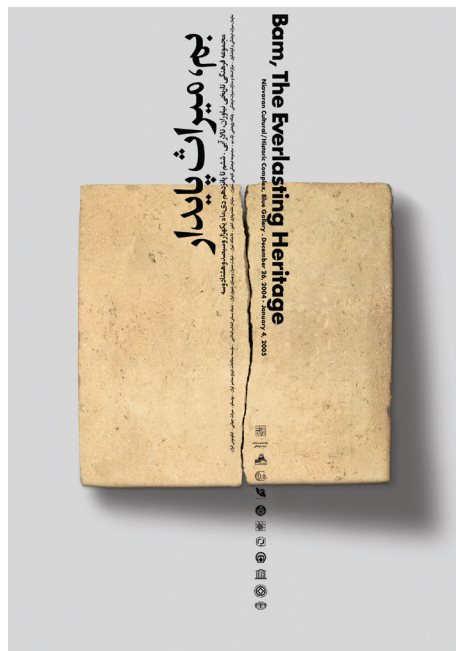
How is being a designer different in the Middle East and the West? The most striking

difference is the social, political, and cultural stability of the market here in Canada. Yet the fluctuating gas prices tell a similar and familiar story about the economic conditions in both Tehran and Toronto.

The Iranian design aesthetic builds on Persian calligraphic traditions. Is that your reference point? Yes, but this is not the whole story. Iranian calligraphy is part of the Islamic tradition of calligraphy practiced in the Middle East, India, Afghanistan, and part of central Asia. Iranian calligraphy, in conjunction with the national culture and visual identity, has acquired its vernacular flavor through the years. We have to account for the influence of years of experiments with page layout, book design, and illustrations in Iran. Without a doubt,



Abbasi's designs for (clockwise from top left) a book on the poet Ahmad Shamlou; a book series called Old Text; and a poster commemorating the 2003 earthquake in Bam, Iran.



The scarcity of political choices in design in Iran is due to the limitations the designer encounters.

got to the current point, where we are still fighting for publication of the magazine with personal funds.

What is the circulation? On average we produce about 3,000 copies of every issue. Our audience consists mainly of graphic designers, teachers, and students of graphic design and other fine-arts departments of various universities.

From a design standpoint, how do you balance Eastern and Western sensibilities? Knowing the various elements of the tradition of design, learning the local techniques of calligraphy, and acquainting oneself with the classical music, poetry, and literature of Iran are almost a prerequisite for the Iranian graphic designer. A thorough understanding of the bases of Western design tradition and various elements of contemporary global visual

culture comes after. It is only then that a conscious molding of the two together can produce a harmonious and individual style.

There appears to be a vital graphic design community, at least in Tehran. Who are the primary clients? Not all graphic design graduates are immediately absorbed by the market, but some of them start working for newspapers and magazines, advertising studios, and companies or personal studios. Their main contracts come from larger commercial enterprises, which constitute their largest source of income. Advertising companies employ artistic managers and graphic designers, which is another promising choice for a young designer.

I have not seen much in the way of political design coming out of Iran. The scarcity of political choices in design in Iran is due to

the limitations the designer encounters. Work on general subjects—social dilemmas, war and peace, the environment, natural disasters—does exist, some examples of which were exhibited in New York in 2005 as part of the exhibition “Design of Dissent,” by Milton Glaser and Mirko Ilić.

You live in Canada now. Why did you emigrate?

It seems like emigration is the only way we can assure a better future for our children these days. Canadian society is very inclusive, and because of its relative economic stability and its ability to fulfill the social needs of its residents, it has become an attractive destination for the citizens of Third World countries. The majority of immigrants to Canada come from countries in which basic human needs like education, social and political liberties, health and social insurance, and the like are not easily accessible.

Was it hard for you to leave your home?

Having to leave one's motherland is not to be envied. It is extremely hard to have to leave all of your cultural, national, and social attachments and affinities for another place that is all but unfamiliar to you.

How much of your design culture translates to your new home?

I think it comes through naturally and automatically. I am now designing posters for a series of speeches in Farsi for a book club in Toronto, on topics such as the poetry of Iran. Farsi/Persian typography has a significant role in the production of these posters. Another project of mine was organizing an exhibition last year of Iranian poster designers—called “Persianissimo”—in the Iranian Art Festival in Harbourfront Center in Toronto. This was the first exhibition of works by Iranian graphic artists of different generations that caught the Canadian community by surprise. ■