

***Reconciliation with the Pain Through Embracing the Past:
Message of Hope and Resilience Via the Ugaritic Alphabet***

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Abstract:

After witnessing my home country suffering through a vicious civil war, this inquiry initially intended to represent Syria in a positive light, as a place of civilisation, differently to what we have been constantly seeing in the news in recent years. However, the research led me to more meaningful discoveries. With the help of Syrian participants, I discovered not only a way to promote the country as a place of peace and prosperity, but also a way to invite the viewer to reconcile with grief and adversity they have experienced by embracing the word 'hope'. In this visual essay, I share an invitation to reconcile with one's self, past and hardship through the Ugaritic alphabet.

Key words:

Reconciliation, Graphic Design, Syrian Typography, Middle Eastern Art, , Ugaritic Alphabet, Projection Mapping

Introduction

This essay weaves my intersectional interests in current events within Syria, Middle Eastern contemporary art, the Syrian ancient alphabet and my work with Syrian people. These threads merge in the essay within the participatory, graphic project intended to voice the suffering and represent the personal experiences of Syrian survivors of war through art (Georges 2016). The citizens of Syria inspired and informed the artworks shared in this essay. While violence in Syria has diminished recently, acquiring essentials to survive has become extremely challenging (McKernan 2020: n.pag). There is a great need to be hopeful and this has been a consistent message from my work with research participants as they were asked to respond to the question: What keeps you going? As I continued to reflect on issues of hope, I realized my research participants' attitudes also reflected resilience, thus, inspiring the artwork for this

essay. The connection between hope and reconciliation promotes positivity and invites the acceptance of one's loss and hardship. The twenty five Syrian participants represented the average Syrian citizen with an average income while living in Syria, their age is ranged between eighteen to seventy years. Almost half of the group are males and the rest are females. Research approach is based on the qualitative method, in which the content and quality of script resultant from the interviews inspire the visual.

When I began to look for a positive visual manifestation of Syria's success and prosperity, I found the Ugaritic alphabet to be a perfect example to help convey a message of hope. I also looked at graphic contemporary artworks by Middle Eastern artists that address political and social concerns such as, Mona Hatoum's installation art (Hatoum et al. 2016), Tammam Azzam's murals (Gaspard 2017) and Bahia Shehab's street art (Shehab 2020). Their art has encouraged me to explore abstraction and graphic approaches in my work with the alphabet. These approaches are important to me because they bring the most abstract ideas to life through conceptual and graphical representations, similarly to what the artwork in the essay attempts to do.

Ugaritic Alphabet

The Ugaritic Alphabet, one of the Semitic languages, is one of the oldest languages in the world (Segert 1985: 7). It represents the rich history, culture, literature and civilisation Syria enjoyed for 3000 years (Buck 2018: 4). Charles Virolleaud, the French Scientist, said, 'the people, who achieved this miracle [Ugaritic Alphabet], deserve our gratitude, and [they have] the right to have a special dignity in the history of the world' (UNESCO 2020: n.pag). The tablet (Figure 1) shows an authentic example of the alphabet where letters are formed using the shape of the triangle. It also shows the impact of using the nail as a tool to carve the letters (UNESCO 2020: n.pag).

In response to my guiding question: What keeps you going?, one of the project participants shared a poetic verse by Al Tughraie capturing a theme of hope: *'Life would have been a squeeze, without the space of hope'* (Georges 2020: n.pag, translation added). This verse became a starting point for the project, and I sought out to graphically represent other inspiring quotes from participants interviews.

Inevitably, sketching and reflecting on the effectiveness of initial designs were integral parts of the creative process in achieving informed results (Hall 2020: 379). I composed the Arabic verse using the Ugaritic alphabet, remaining in this way, true to my participants' current language (Figure 2). This was followed by another experiment (Figure 3) in which I designed Arabic letters inspired by the alphabet and placed the corresponding Latin letters on top, to enable the viewer to pronounce the verse.

Extending into the Public Realm

Taking 'hopeful' quotes by Syrians and making them accessible to audiences in the form of public art shows the viewer how the Syrian people remain hopeful despite living through a venomous civil war. My intention in this project was to promote positivity and hope in others while inviting them to reconcile their own grief and sense of loss.

Using projection mapping technology allowed me to design light-based images and experiment with projections in public spaces. Through this technology I was able to simulate the projection of the Ugaritic Alphabet shape quotes through the medium of light (Figures 4 & 5). The medium of light has relevance for my theme because it symbolises thriving and recovery (Cibelli et.al. 2016: 23). Ultimately, this project forwards the notion that taking ancient Syrian alphabet shapes into the contemporary public domain as public abstract art may inspire greater understanding of Syria's ancient history and culture (Pankratz 1993: 100) while offering hope and starting points for reconciliation.

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