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book review of

Printing Arab Modernity: Book Culture and the American Press in Nineteenth-Century Beirut by Hala Auji

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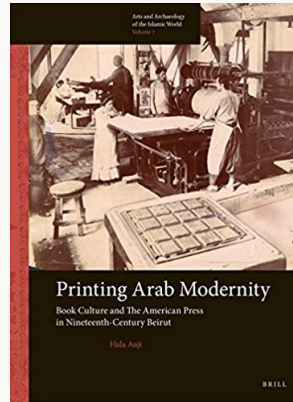
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Hala Auji,
Printing Arab Modernity: Book Culture and the American Press in Nineteenth-Century Beirut.
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Printing Arab Modernity: Book Culture and The American Press in Nineteenth-Century Beirut reveals how a fully contextualized, joint consideration of press and product together can provide a wealth of information about a past book culture not accessible through other sources. In the case of nineteenth-century, multi-confessional, cosmopolitan Beirut, book culture in particular experienced a temporary but sustained moment of plurality when both hand- and machine-manufactured codices enjoyed their share of market demand. *Printing Arab Modernity* offers a well rounded study of early printing at a time and place where local and global book industries intersected and where traditional and modern processes, standards and expectations manifested in the materiality of books—laying bare their communicative potential as objects of study.

As a case study of the Protestant American Press operating in Beirut, a crossroads of regional and global interests, itinerant scholars, and beliefs, *Printing Arab Modernity* considers the material and visual components of the Press's products (including both secular and religious titles) as well as the history of its activities within greater regional bookmaking practices. Through a careful consideration of archival materials including internal reports, letters, and memoirs from the Mission and its governing body in the United States, Auji reveals the Press's changing objectives as well as the logistical idiosyncrasies of establishing and operating a press in a foreign land. The products struck off the press, on the other hand, stand as the material evidence of the Mission's goals, priorities, and aesthetic preferences as well as the "visual and textual negotiations" dictated by a host of shifting variables (3). In this way, Auji skillfully triangulates the inextricably codependent domains of press, product, and audience in order to locate the Press's publications within the greater landscape of nineteenth-century book production in the Arab world. This method of approach also serves to illustrate the ways in which the American Press contributed to the nascent print culture of Beirut's growing scholarly community while also articulating the ways in which the existing scribal and print practices affected the American Press's own output.

Printing Arab Modernity is organized both logically and chronologically. The book progresses from a substantive first chapter that navigates the field of early Arab printing and introduces the questions relevant to the current study to a second chapter outlining the history of the American Press in Beirut as well as broader regional bookmaking practices. Grouping the Press's output by publication date, each of the subsequent three chapters are dedicated to examining the design qualities of the books as they change over the course of over three decades of activity. This structure facilitates a concentrated investigation into the choices in content and form made by press and author while also considering current affairs and shifting notions of what constitutes a modern book. Furthermore, this approach, as Auji notes, "provides an opportunity to carefully trace the changing materiality of the Arabic works produced at other regional presses, and the varying ways in which such presses responded to local socio-political developments through their publications" (17).

In the Introduction (Chapter 1) Auji elucidates the significance of the region and period. During the nineteenth century Beirut developed into an important port city with a growing merchant class and multi-confessional population. Regionally, state-sponsored Arabic printing presses began emerging in cities such as Cairo and Alexandria at this time as scribal book production methods continued to dominate the market until the 1870s or roughly speaking, at the dawn of the celebrated *al-nahḍa al-carabiyya* (the Arab renaissance) period (1). For these reasons, she identifies the decades immediately preceding the *nahḍa* as a correspondingly significant "experimental moment" in the history of Arabic printing whereby both traditional scribal practices as well as new print conventions coexisted—the latter borrowing from the visual standards customary to the former (2). Auji follows this period overview with a detailed outline of her methodology which, in addition to applying the methods of visual analysis developed in the disciplines of art and design history, implements a tri-disciplinary approach to examining the American Press and its products by drawing from the methods of bibliography, literary studies, and history (6).

Chapter 2, "The American Press and Its Legacy" provides the early history of the Press and contextualizes its activities in the history of the region. The American Press was established as the printing apparatus to the Syria Mission founded by the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions (ABCFM) based in Boston. In 1819 this Protestant organization attempted to settle its new regional branch in Jerusalem but difficulties establishing residency in the area forced the Mission to reconsider their location. Their second attempt at establishing a mission, this time in the multi-confessional region of Mount Lebanon in 1823, also eventually met with failure when the Protestant missionaries' conversion tactics were met with resistance by local Maronites, eventually leading to their "eviction" and subsequent relocation to neighboring Beirut (21). With its diverse spread of religious groups, growing urban population status as a significant port city, and the influx of traveling people and ideas, Beirut proved to be a more welcoming venue for the establishment of a foreign-operated mission and its press.

Although the governing body of the ABCFM had other presses operating in regional centers like Malta and Izmir, the American Press in Beirut was their only press to print exclusively in the Arabic script and language, which is why Auji rightfully considers this press in particular to be an interlocutor in the formation of the literary and intellectual Arab renaissance that

would begin in the last quarter of the nineteenth century. Other Arabic printing presses (e.g. Christian presses in Beirut and Jerusalem as well as Muslim state presses in Cairo) were also established throughout the nineteenth century and existed alongside the more established, traditional scribal ateliers of Christian monasteries and Muslim *madrāsas*. Auji highlights the importance of these coexisting book producers, both manual and mechanical, in stating that “It is through these earlier encounters between the worlds of script and print that the intellectual movements of the late nineteenth century found expression” (29). Moreover, the American Press also employed local labor of varying denominations to work at virtually every stage of the book production process from type compositors to translators to authors and correctors. In this way, the American Press had access to valuable insight into the nuances of creating books that would appeal to the local and regional audience, which highlights “the ways in which it helped negotiate the interplay of multivalent religious views and social concerns” (30).

Auji directs our attention to the earliest books, booklets, and pamphlets produced by the American Press in the third chapter, “Evangelizing between Script and Print (1834–1840).” Besides operating in foreign territories and in markets where manuscripts were still ubiquitous, the lack of a substantial readership with enough disposable income and interest in purchasing personal copies of books added to the obstacles facing the American Press in reaching its intended audience (35, 36). However, such unfavorable conditions are precisely what make the earliest efforts of this press worthy of study. Here, Auji embarks on a visual analysis of several early titles from the Press, focusing on a series of functional and decorative conventions traceable to either scribal or existing print practices. Many of the early works included elements adopted from the Islamic manuscript tradition such as decorative headpieces, catchwords, and ornamental borders. Similarly, functional elements such as title pages and page numbers were adapted from existing Euro-American print culture. Moreover, Auji also traces several particular design elements to books printed by nearby regional presses, some already a few decades old. In this way, she demonstrates that “Specifically, what is evident when studying the layouts characteristic of early print culture in the region, and what speaks to the truly experimental nature of printing at this time, is the fact that inspirations were culled from myriad sources, both local and global” (45). Auji cites several reasons for such assimilative visual strategies including producing a product that conforms to consumer expectations of what a book should look like and omitting any overt signs of “foreignness” that could deter or distract from the Mission’s objectives (49, 57).

In addition to design choices, decisions regarding textual content were also critical to the Press’s survival. The Press printed works for mass distribution and conversion as well as secular titles for use in missionary schools. Considering the delicate nature of the conversion process and past encounters with failed attempts at proselytizing—including an episode from the 1820s in which Protestant missionaries in Mount Lebanon circulated Arabic Protestant Bibles deemed heretical by local Christian clergy—the Mission veered away from controversy and any signs of overt evangelizing and instead chose to publish spiritual fiction titles addressing issues of ethics and godliness during this time (58, 60). The decisions relating to both form and content reveal that the earliest books from the American Press embody “the material bases upon which the mission negotiated its shifting conversion tactics in light of local prejudices and resistance” (63).

The fourth chapter, “Print for Shifting Alliances and Readers (1841–1851)” uncovers an interesting plot twist. The works produced by the American Press in the decade that follows are simpler in their design, omitting certain decorative elements commonly associated with the scribal tradition such as ornamental headpieces and floral borders. A most vivid example of this change can be appreciated through the Press’s two editions of one title, Nāṣif al-Yāzījī’s *Kitāb faṣl al-khiṭāb fī uṣūl lughat al-icrāb*, an Arabic grammar first printed in 1836 and printed again in 1854. The title page from the 1836 edition is included in the study as well as that of the 1854 edition (47, 66). When viewed side-by-side, the simplification in design layout is immediately apparent from one period of activity to the next. Aside from formal changes, the 1840s also witnessed shifts in the kind of content that was published. For instance, Auji explains that the books printed during the later period were more controversial (such as tracts criticizing the Papacy and Catholic Church) and included more new works, rather than reprinted titles.

Problematizing these changes, Auji commits the chapter to investigating the reasons for these shifts in appearance and content. The arrival of a long-awaited, new and improved typeface as well as a new full-time printer at the American Press in 1841 can partially explain some of the changes in design and layout visible in the books of this period. The increase in controversial, anti-Catholic content published by the Press was a response to the threat Catholic Jesuits posed to the Mission’s operations in the region (77–79). Furthermore, Auji attributes the increase in number of published new titles to the steady demand of a growing readership (73). Noting low conversion rates and the Jesuit encroachment on the Syria Mission’s turf, in 1844 the ABCFM began de-emphasizing the Mission’s focus on teaching (and therefore, printing) to encourage more preaching (84). As a result, an acute drop in publications is perceptible as well as a decrease in the publication of secular titles (including those used at schools and seminary) in favor of religious texts even though, according to the sales records, the Press’s secular titles were more popular with the local literati than its religious ones (90).

The final chapter, “Protestant Ideals and Arab Intellectual Ambitions (1852–1867)” explores the independent “job works” published by local scholars in the two decades following the ABCFM’s decision to direct the Syria Mission’s focus away from publishing. By focusing on the Press’s changing role in the community as well as the design aesthetics of its publications, Auji explains the directions in which local perceptions of books and publishing developed. Moreover, as in the 1840s, inter-communal tensions continued to affect local affairs, signs of which were also visible in the American Press’s publishing activities. Interestingly, a visual examination of the “job works” struck from the Press reveals that they all made use of the appealing American Arabic typeface and displayed the simpler, more minimalist aesthetics of the 1840s rather than the ornamental approach of the Press’s earlier years (99). Auji devotes special attention to examples from the oeuvres of Buṭrus al-Bustānī (d. 1883) and the aforementioned Nāṣif al-Yāzījī (d. 1871) not only because they were employed by the press (as translators and correctors) but also because their scholarship was influential in the Arab *nahḍa*. As non-Protestant Christian Arabs writing on secular matters and targeting a multi-confessional audience, they did not necessarily try to associate their work with the Protestant American Press; in fact, none of the “job works” included the name of the press at all (122). When it comes to some of the works that grapple with issues of Syrian Arab identity, social progress and notions of “civilization,” Auji suggests that authors may have regarded the

minimal aesthetic designs of the contemporary books emerging from the Protestant Press as better suited for presenting the new ideas circulated through their “job works.” Accordingly, the design choices made in the production of the mid-century secular books from the Press reflect shifting notions of “what a book should look like” in a social and intellectual environment where beliefs and identities themselves are shifting, becoming transformed and reformed (129).

Printing Arab Modernity includes two appendices, an “Annual Number of Arabic Publications from the American Press, 1836–1867” and “List of Publications Produced at the American Press, 1836–1867.” In addition to these comprehensive lists, which reveal the scope of the works published by the Press, this book includes forty-one illustrations, the first being a map of the major provinces and towns of Ottoman Syria (ca. 1830). The remaining forty images are divided between Chapters 3, 4, and 5. Every one of these visuals are from the pages from early printed books: thirty-four images are from presses located in Beirut and six are from other cities (Jerusalem, Cairo, Malta, Tabriz, and Boston). The American Press’s output in particular is represented through twenty-eight images, the remaining twelve serving the purpose of illustrating comparisons to other contemporaneous printed books. Auji considers at length the ways in which printed books drew upon existing scribal traditions for parts of their graphic inspiration (textual and ornamental). As such, what is missing from these lists of illustrations are any examples hailing from the scribal ateliers of the region. The inclusion of at least one manuscript page would have contributed to completing a non-specialist’s view of the full scope of books available in the region at that time. Nevertheless, these numbers verify Auji’s commitment to regarding books as material objects capable of informing meta-narratives of a wide variety of selective processes. What this book does most effectively is take these illustrations—comprised of largely monochromatic textual arrangements with varying degrees of decorative design elements—and present them to the reader in a manner that encourages an interaction with the books that is itself visual. In this way, Auji invites the twenty-first century reader to approach the “artifacts” of this period with a degree of curiosity that perhaps paralleled those of their original, nineteenth-century audience gaining gradual familiarity with the early printed books of their time.

Printing Arab Modernity transports the reader on a visually grounded journey that is assisted by a clear path of inquiry aimed at revealing the various processes and forces at the heart of determining form and content in early printed Arabic books. In addition to its treatment of visual materials, a great strength of this book lies in its structure. This book’s clear, progressive organization allows for a nuanced account of the American Press’s role in the burgeoning Arab print culture to be constructed. By focusing on one participant in the transforming book culture and its material output, Auji succeeds in presenting a complex narrative of reciprocal exchange unfolding at both graphic and textual levels. Thus, in addition to revealing their “multi-dimensional components, the labor involved in their production, and their history as sites of negotiation between missionary ideals and Arab cultural and socio-political engagements” Auji demonstrates the profoundly dynamic, conscious acts of adopting, adapting, and at times rejecting, certain modes of visually presenting text in print (131).

This book makes a welcome and timely contribution to studies in modern Islamic art and on book culture and printed books in particular which constitute growing areas of inquiry in the

field. Similarly, the nineteenth century as a whole is emerging as a period of interest for Islamic art and modern Middle East Studies precisely because it is a century charged with not only political and economic change, but also technological, intellectual, social, and cultural transformations as well. Art historians interested in East-West encounters, non-Western print cultures and technologies and those specializing in Middle East visual culture would benefit greatly from *Printing Arab Modernity's* methodology and framing of visual materials. *Printing Arab Modernity* connects the interests of various other specialists of history broadly including experts on Arab civilization (e.g. literature, intellectual history, modern nationalisms, etc.), Ottomanists and historians of Syria and Lebanon. Bibliographers, especially those specializing in incunabula, will likewise both appreciate and welcome this work. *Printing Arab Modernity* not only bridges disciplines in its approach and appeal but also mediates different yet related perspectives by joining together the interests and expectations of publisher, author, and reader in a meaningful dialogue. Thus, this book presents the many dimensions of the American Press and its publications while also recreating a visually tangible microcosm of print activity within a greater regional book culture. This is only made possible by Auji's interdisciplinary methodology, bold application of codicological visual analysis, and heightened sense of responsibility to historical and cultural context, which has delivered a focused, multi-faceted study that breathes life into this oft-neglected period overshadowed by the *nahḍa*.

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