

# Square Kufic Calligraphy in Identity Design

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In Identity Magazine "Best of the Best 2006" International design contest for logos, trademarks and corporate identity, Mamoun Sakkal received First Place Award for logos for non-profit organizations and events category. His winning logo design for Lusaka Islamic Society was based on Square Kufic calligraphy in the form of a mosque. Editors of the magazine were intrigued by this style of Arabic calligraphy and asked Dr. Sakkal to write an article about his work in this area and the use of Square Kufic in identity design. This is the article submitted by Dr. Sakkal which was translated to Russian and published in the Autumn issue of the Magazine.

Square Kufic calligraphy is a well-defined style of calligraphic design developed originally for architectural applications with a history of at least seven centuries. Its simple, geometric lines and shapes appeal to designers and observers alike. Its enigmatic, puzzle-like compositions seem to fascinate people of all creeds and tastes, and the mystery of its designs continues to appeal to both those who can and can't read and decode them. I was attracted to the ambiguity, beauty, and simplicity of Square Kufic in the 1970's and used it to design calligraphic panels for use on buildings. I also explored possibilities to use Square Kufic in my fine artwork, often adding depth to the compositions and producing what I call "Cubic Kufic" calligraphy (fig. 1). However, the most prominent use of Square Kufic calligraphy in my work is in the realm of identity design, where I use it for both corporate and individual clients.

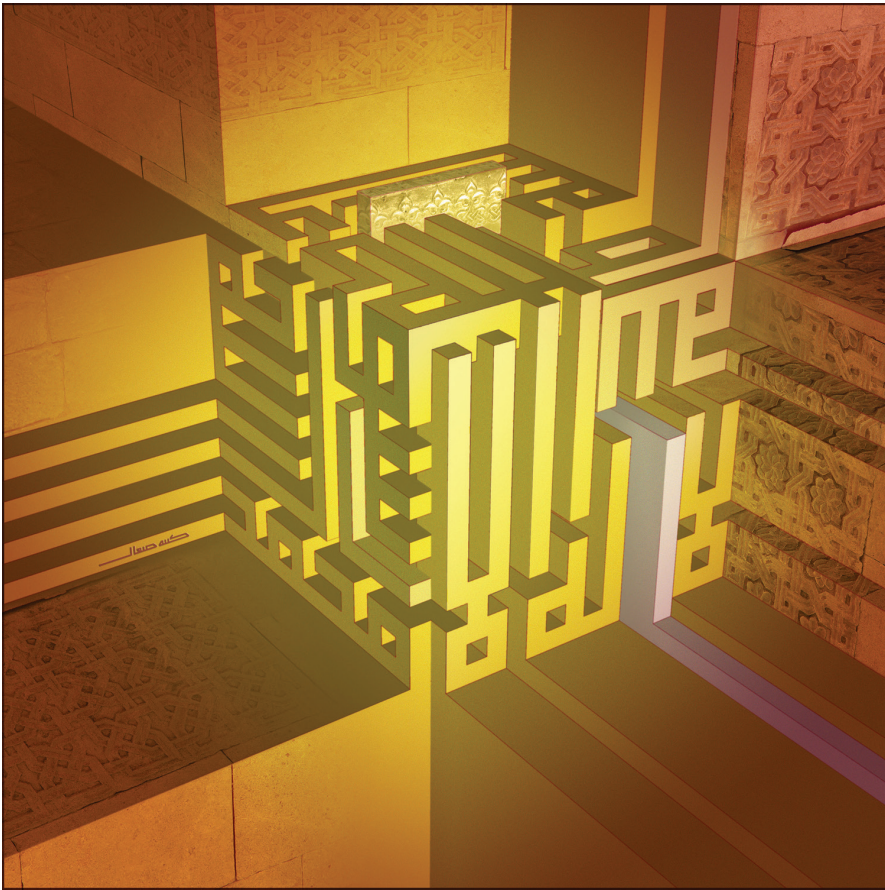
I will present in this article a brief review of Square Kufic calligraphy and the Arabic script used in it, as well as a glimpse of the history of Arabic calligraphy and its main styles. Then, I will explore in some detail why Square Kufic calligraphy is used more and more nowadays in identity design. Throughout, I will present a few examples of my work to illustrate many of the ideas and show a range of possible designs based on this remarkable style of calligraphy.

## **Arabic Script and Its Calligraphy**

Arabic is an ancient language and its script derives ultimately from the Phoenician alphabet through Aramaic and Nabatian scripts. It has twenty-eight letters, three of which can be used as vowels, while the balance of the letters is all consonants. Arabic is written from right to left in a cursive manner, where the letters are

connected to each other and their form changes depending on their position in the word; five letters do not connect to the following letters even if they occur in the middle of a word. Several letters share the same shape and are distinguished from each other only by the number and placement of dots over or under the shared base shape.

After the rise of Islam in the seventh century A.D., Arabic calligraphy evolved rapidly and acquired an important position in the visual arts of Muslims because it was used to write the holy book, the Quran (or Koran). There are two main groups of traditional Arabic calligraphy styles. The earlier is the Kufic group which was used for writing the Quran from the seventh to the tenth centuries, and the later is the Cursive group which replaced Kufic as the preferred script to write the Quran. Since the eleventh



century, the use of Kufic calligraphy is limited to decorative treatments in manuscripts and to epigraphic uses in architecture. In addition to the continued development of the earlier Kufic styles, a new and unique style evolved in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries where calligraphy was adapted for use on the surfaces of buildings using the patterns created by laying bricks or mosaic tiles. Nowadays we call this style Square Kufic.

### Square Kufic Calligraphy

The early origins of Square Kufic seem to be in Iran and Afghanistan. Its use quickly spread fast into the surrounding regions of Central Asia, the Middle East, and Anatolia. Thus we find buildings with Square Kufic calligraphy scattered in many countries of this region. We even find Square Kufic on Islamic coins from the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries (fig. 2).

While over the centuries the regular Kufic calligraphy continued to become more

complex to the point where some designs were difficult to recognize, Square Kufic was an exception to this trend because of its absolute simplicity. Since its early days, Square Kufic had three main characteristics that distinguished it from other calligraphic styles: all its lines were straight lines, all its angles were right angles, and all the lines and spaces were of equal thickness in order to fit onto a regular square grid. This simplicity of form does not reveal the difficulty of making a good design because of two additional requirements: All the letter forms must be kept legible and balanced, and specific text areas should be filled completely without leaving gaps or creating overlaps. This is often quite challenging if one wants the text to still be readable and in proper order. The unique qualities of Square Kufic calligraphy can be demonstrated in my winning entry to "Identity Best of the Best 2006 Competition" which was designed for the Lusaka Muslim Society and initiated the idea of this article.

Let us look at some sample text in the different calligraphic styles. Arabic calligraphy known for its cursive script is shown in figure 3.a that spells the name of the organization. In addition to the base letters of the name, vowel marks and other decorative devices are used to complete the design. However, these marks are never used in Square Kufic calligraphy, as shown in figure 3.c. Here, the letters are all written using straight lines at right angles, and spaced regularly so that the lines and spaces are all equal, falling on a regular square grid. This is clearly a more severe and rigid style compared with regular Kufic calligraphy, shown in figure 3.b. In the example of the name in Square Kufic (fig. 3. c) all the letters include the necessary dots that distinguish different letters that sharing the same base shape. The same phrase is modified according to established rules in figure 3.d, and the dots are omitted so that the composition is more compact. The removal of dots is accepted in

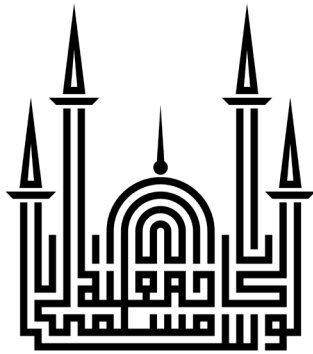
1. Shahada Cube, Mamoun Sakkal, 2005

2. Madrasa of Ulugh Beg, Samarkand, 1420, and gold coin of Ilkhanid ruler Abu Said, 1333



3 a  
 3 b  
 3 c  
 3 d

جمعيۃ مسلمي لوساكا  
 جمعيۃ مسلمي لوساكا  
 جمعيۃ مسلمي لوساكا  
 جمعيۃ مسلمي لوساكا



3 e



5



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Square Kufic because in the early decades of writing in Kufic calligraphy, writing was actually done without dots.

Finally, the phrase is composed in a compact composition to form the body of a mosque building, and the vertical lines are extended up to form the shapes of the dome and minaret towers. The final design combines the bilateral symmetry of the upper portion with the irregular forms of the words in the lower part. In this design, a letter from one word overlaps and intersects with another word (fig. 3.e). This is usually not used in traditional Square Kufic in order to avoid the wrong reading of the words and maintain legibility.

### Square Kufic Calligraphy and Identity Design Examples

Square Kufic is the only style of Arabic calligraphy, or any other calligraphy I know of, which allows the designer to cover a two-dimensional surface of any shape and proportion. Usually, calligraphic phrases

lend themselves to band-type designs where the words are arranged more or less in row or band form. With Square Kufic it is possible to turn the direction of the writing at right angles, and continue to write with shapes that are still quite compatible with those of the original line. Because of this quality the graphic designer can make the text into a recognizable shape such as the design I created for the identity designs of a charitable organization and a real estate company, which we will look at in more detail.

KindHearts is a logo for a humanitarian relief and charitable organization in the United States (fig. 4). In this design, I used curved lines in addition to the typical straight lines in order to produce the simple heart shape that incorporates the organization's name. An interesting aspect of the calligraphic treatment in this design is the subtle three-dimensional effect intended to make the heart shape more alive, and give it the volume needed for

an effective treatment of the projected shadows of the heart. The end result is Square Kufic calligraphy of the fourteenth century that is updated to the requirements of the twenty-first century. In addition to the use of curves, it is possible also to use angles or base grids other than square. Figure 6 shows a star design where the lines are organized around an eight-point star with forty-five degree angles.

The name of the real estate company is used to create the shape of a house (fig. 5). The rhythm of the letter shapes in the lower part evokes the feeling of columns or architectural elements, and the closed, colored rectangle resembles a door or a window. In this respect, the Square Kufic calligraphy forms not only the outline shape of the house, but also hints at its details inside as well. The word sections are organized starting in the bottom and moving to the top of the composition as if it is built up like bricks, and the extension of the letter to wrap around the top section

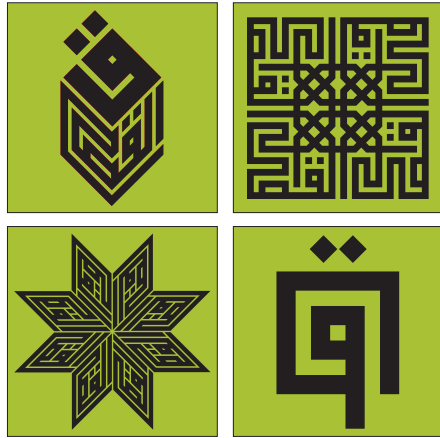
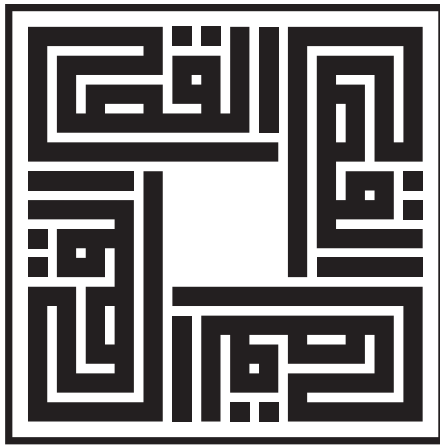
3 a-d. Preliminary typographic ideas for Lusaka Islamic Society logo

3 e. Final design for Lusaka Islamic Society logo, Mamoun Sakkal, 2005

4. KindHearts Charitable Organization logo, Mamoun Sakkal, 2002

5. Logo for real estate company, Mamoun Sakkal, 2006

6. Nasheed band, traditional singing group logo, Mamoun Sakkal, 2005

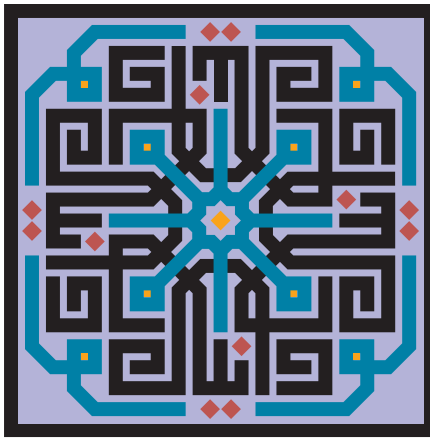


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of the design in the shape of a roof and a chimney is possible because of the cursive nature of Arabic calligraphy.

Because Square Kufic usually incorporates right angles, it lends itself well to creation of symmetric designs based on four rotations, as I did for example in a logo for an investment company in Oman (fig. 6). Preliminary design ideas (also shown in figure 6) for the same project demonstrate other possibilities including a single initial that combines two forms of the letter "Q" in Arabic and Latin scripts, an initial letter combined with the full name in a three-dimensional composition, a four rotation design with a pattern in the center, and an eight rotation design in the form of a star. These ideas represent only a portion of the many variations prepared for this project and demonstrate the possibilities at the disposal of the designer to achieve the right effect for the project at hand. Indeed, just because the word "Square" is part of its name, does not mean that all the identity

7. AlQusai Investments logo ideas, Mamoun Sakkal, 2005



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designs made in this style have to be square shaped.

An example of a free form logo is shown in figure 7. This design relies on contrasting the regularity of the repeated parallel lines with the spiral curve and the sloped cut of the letters ends, which give a triangular shape. This is intended to represent the energy of the traditional singing group for which it was designed. Both in the chosen design and in the preliminary design ideas shown here, the dots are used to provide additional interest and counterpoint through the change in their shape, direction, and color.

In addition to corporate work, I often do name designs for individuals using Square Kufic calligraphy. Figure 8 shows two such examples, one where the first name, Daniel, is repeated four times, and the other where the family name, Juneja, is also based on four rotations. Daniel wanted her name design to use for cross-stitching with

8. Name designs, Mamoun Sakkal. Left: Daniel, 2003, right: Juneja family, 1997

thread on a pillowcase. The name is written in black, the dots in red, and decorative lines in blue. The first and last letters of the name are extended in a spiral form to create a symmetric design that almost looks like a geometric pattern rather than a composition of letters. The Juneja name design also shows how the letters are modified to create a symmetrical triangle form at the corners, while the middle letters break this symmetry and extend up towards the center of the design to form a braided knot pattern.

For a university professor who specializes in the history of Islamic art and architecture of the Middle East, I made his name appear as part of a mosque wall with old, often broken masonry blocks. The mosque of al-Mu'ayyad is one of his favorite buildings in Cairo where he does much of his research and preservation work, and it was appropriate to make his name look like it was built with the mosque in the early part of the fifteenth century, and like the building, show the effects of time (fig. 9).

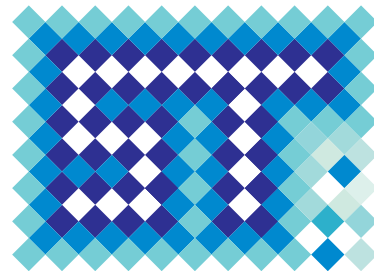
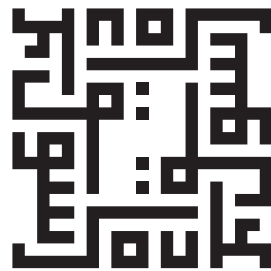
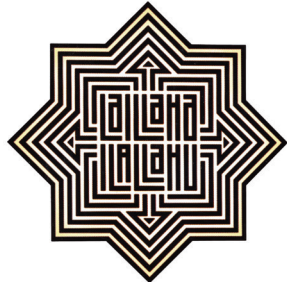
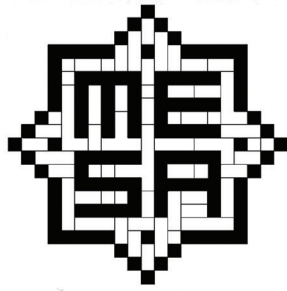
### Square Kufic in Latin Script

Typography based on straight lines and right angles is not limited to Arabic script. There are many Latin fonts based on such design schemes, such as "Epps Evans," a freeware font designed by Marty Pfeiffer (fig. 13). Japanese designers seem to especially enjoy creating logotypes and identity programs based on square designs. It is obvious that many of these designers are not directly influenced by traditional Square Kufic calligraphy, but I believe that learning the principles of authentic calligraphic



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9. Professor Bacharach's name, Mamoun Sakkal, 2003/11



traditions will expand a designer's horizon and provide fresh ideas that can be often surprising and unexpected.

In figure 14 I show an example of a bilingual logotype where I reflected the proportions and graphic treatment of the Latin logo in the Arabic script version. In this project, the Latin script logo was already existing and the Arabic version had to match it so that both will look as if designed together at the same time, and the recognition value that has been established with the Latin logo could be immediately recognized in the Arabic version.

Another bilingual logotype is shown in figure 15 where the same word "Souk," or market is written in both Arabic and Latin scripts and repeated twice to make up the square design. Because of the unified visual character, the two languages harmoniously coexist and reflect the multinational flavor of this unique market in Madinat Jumeirah resort bustling Dubai city.

Traditional tiles of the city of Tashkent, Uzbekistan are transformed into electronic bits representing the city of Seattle, United States (fig. 16). Here we see the connection between Square Kufic calligraphy and the digitized text of the computer age, where all images are represented by pixels. When the pixels are large, they will resemble Square Kufic calligraphy used on buildings as in figure 2, but when the pixels are small, this connection is no longer obvious.

In figure 17 three letters are nested one under another to make a square design where the simple lines of the letters give a solid and monumental image that is further emphasized by the border frame. This example demonstrates the possibilities available to the designer simply by increasing the thickness of the lines and decreasing the space between them. This changes the appearance of the calligraphy from loose lines that float in space into an almost solid area of text.

When a square is duplicated and rotated 45 degrees we obtain an eight-sided star. This shape is quite common for Square Kufic designs and three such examples are shown in figures 10-12, all of which also incorporate the Latin script. John Langdon's logo for Norman and Rina Indictor Library of Islamic Art (fig. 12) is a clever design that can also be read the same way if turned upside down.

Square Kufic calligraphy can be mysterious, dignified, timeless, simple or sophisticated, clear or ambiguous, and many other qualities as designers continue to use it in their graphic projects. The recent revival of this style continues a tradition that started more than seven hundred years ago, and seems replete with new possibilities of expression in the hands of talented designers all over the world today.

More information about the projects as well as instruction on designing in Square Kufic can be found at [www.sakkal.com](http://www.sakkal.com).

10. Middle East Studies Association logo, USA.

11. Cover of the book "Progressive Muslims" by Michael Green.

12. The Norman & Rina Indictor Library of Islamic Art logo by John Langdon, John Langdon Design,

13. Epps Evans, a Latin font designed by Marty Pfeiffer of Scooter Graphics, USA.

14. The Arabic part is an experimental design by Mamoun Sakkal, 1992.

15. Logotype for shopping center in Madinat Jumeirah, Dubai. Designer unknown to this author.

16. Seattle Tashkent Sister City Association logo by Mamoun Sakkal, 2004.

17. Institute for Palestine Studies logo. Designer unknown to this author.