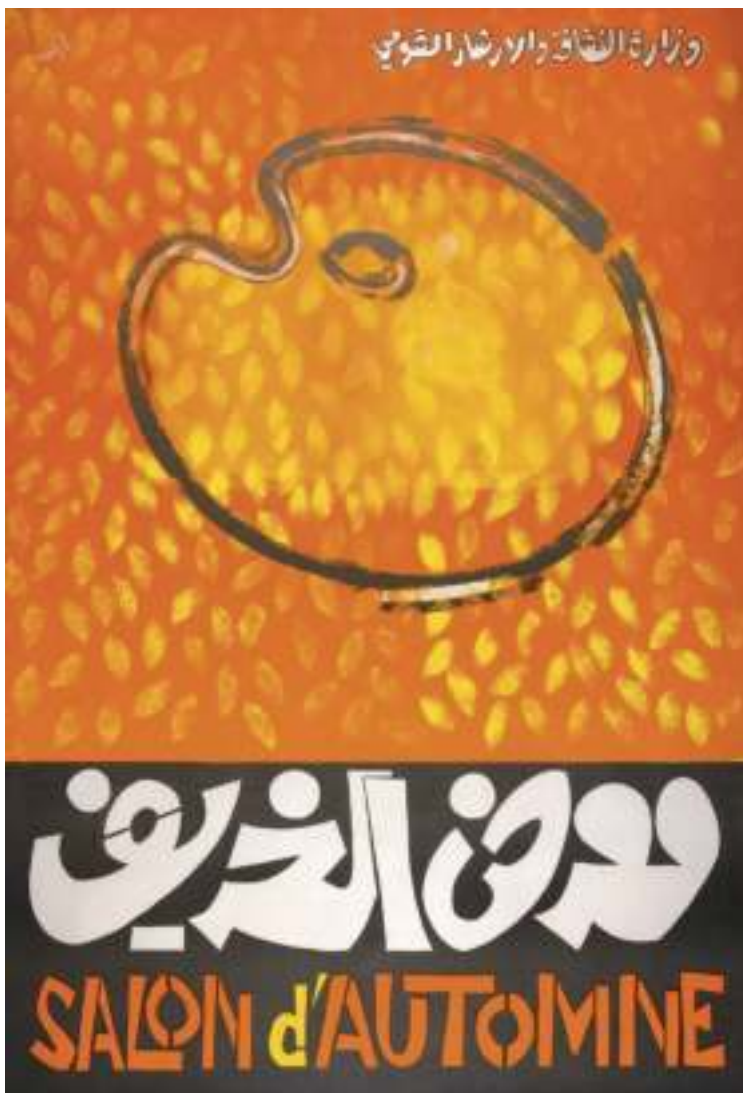




# Khatt Books' Arabic Design Library: a fresh perspective on Arabic design

► Khatt's series on Arabic designers now includes monographs on the Iraqi master Dia Al-Azzawi and the Syrian polymath Abdulkader Arnaout



Courtesy Khatt Foundation/Khatt Books



**Nick Leech**

Aug 21, 2017



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On June 18 1980, just a few weeks after the launch of a new TV station called Cable News Network, the catastrophic eruption of Mount St Helens and the release of Irvin Kershner's much-anticipated *The Empire Strikes Back*, a now relatively forgotten exhibition opened at the Iraqi Cultural Centre in Central London.

The *Third World Biennale of Graphic Art* was not, as its name suggested, the latest iteration of an international exhibition dedicated to graphic design but a show whose exhibits were drawn from nations in Asia, Latin America, Africa and the Middle East that were, in the context of the ongoing Cold War, broadly neutral aimed at designers looking to develop a new perspective on the struggles that were then defining international relations.

One of the driving forces behind the exhibition was an Iraqi exile, Dia Al-Azzawi, who had been living in the British capital since 1976 and who was also instrumental in mounting the 1978 *Arab Graphic Exhibition* in the same venue.

At the time of the exhibition, Al-Azzawi was just one of many members of the Iraqi creative diaspora who had assembled in London, seeking refuge from Saddam Hussein's murderous Baathist regime.

# THIRD WORLD BIENNALE OF GRAPHIC ART 1980



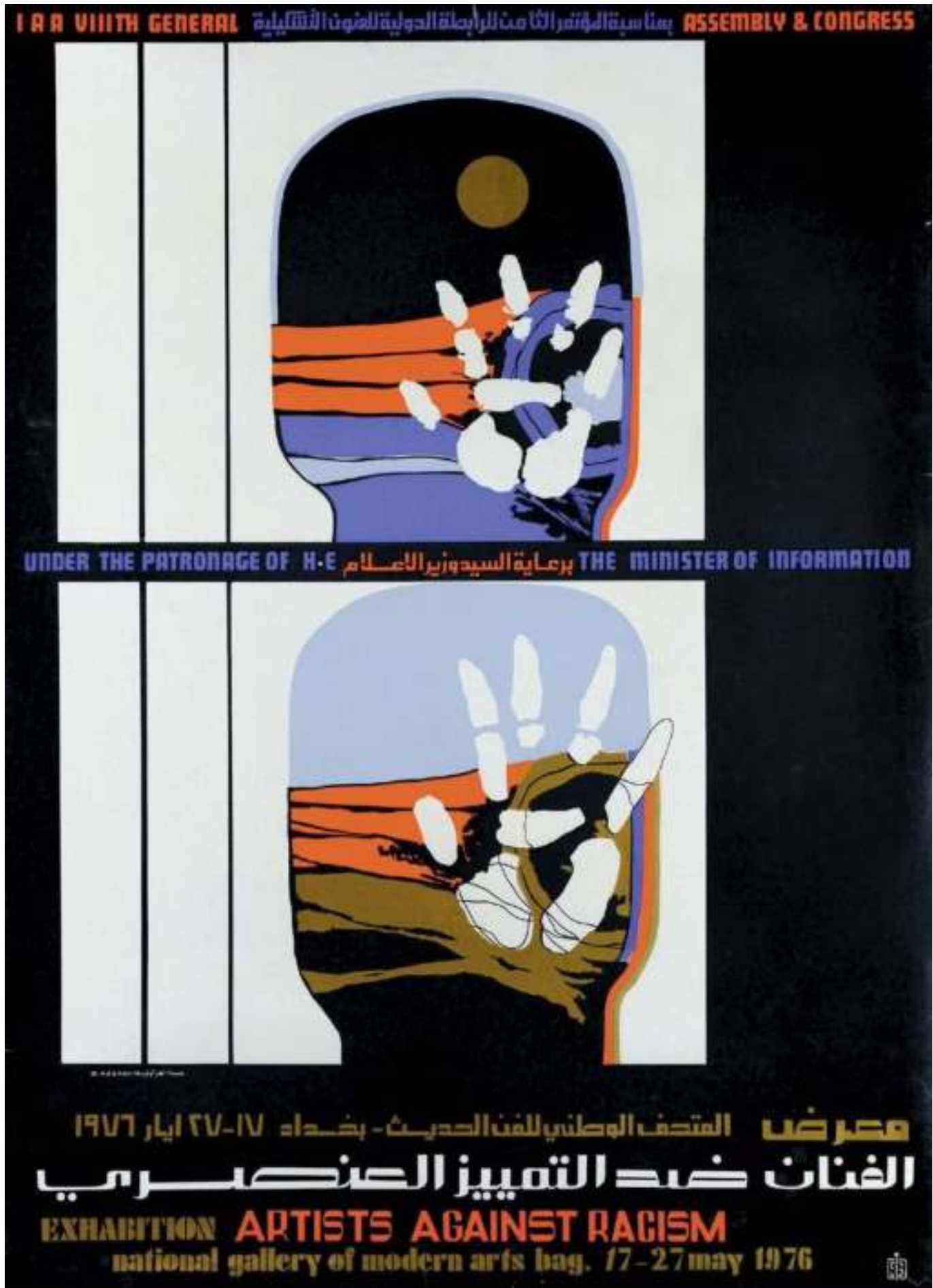
18 JUNE - 12 JULY  
IRAQI CULTURAL CENTRE GALLERY LONDON W 1



Poster for the Third World Biennale of Graphic Art at the Iraqi Cultural Centre Gallery, London (1980). Illustration by Dia al-Azzawi

In the intervening decades however, Al-Azzawi's profile and reputation have rocketed and he is now considered to be one of the most renowned modern artists of the Arab world, the Picasso of the modern and contemporary Middle East, which is why he was the subject of a recent and epic

retrospective, the Catherine David-curated *I Am The Cry, Who Will Give Voice to Me? Dia Al-Azzawi: A Retrospective (from 1963 until tomorrow)*, which was mounted at Qatar Museums' Mathaf: Arab Museum of Modern Art and Gallery Al Riwaq in Doha in 2016.



Silkscreen-printed poster for the exhibition Artists Against Racism, on the occasion of the 8th General Assembly and Congress of the International Arts Association, at the National Gallery of Modern Art, Baghdad (1976).

As well as helping to organise the *Third World Biennale of Graphic Art*, Al-Azzawi also designed the Biennale's poster and logo, a fragment of Islamic geometry, work that would now fall under the rubric of branding but was then considered as little more than a part of the printing process.

Now so redolent of the time, Al-Azzawi's biennale poster followed important designs for the 1978 *International Exhibition for Palestine* at the American University of Beirut and the 1976 *Artists Against Racism* exhibition at the National Gallery of Modern Arts in Baghdad, one of the last Iraqi shows Al-Azzawi participated in before leaving Iraq.

# المعرض التشكيلي العالمي من اجل فلسطين

## INTERNATIONAL EXHIBITION FOR PALESTINE

Arabic University of Beirut 21 March to 5 April 1978 نيسان ١٩٧٨ جامعة بيروت العربية



Organised by Unified Information, Plastic Arts Section, PLO

اعداد قسم الفنون التشكيلية الاعلام القومي - منظمة التحرير الفلسطينية

Despite David's inclusion of Al-Azzawi's design among the 500 works that were exhibited at the Doha retrospective, designers and academics such as Lina Hakim, Yasmine Nachabe Taan and Huda Smitshuijzen AbiFarès insist that it represents something more than a footnote in the history of art.

It is also, they insist, a key part of a history of Arabic design that also needs to be written, and more specifically a history of Arab creativity that should be written by Arabs for themselves.

"One of the reasons why we insist on seeing and talking about [figures such as Al-Azzawi] as designers and not as artists is because design, in general was and is under-valued," explains Smitshuijzen-AbiFarès, the publisher and designer of Lina Hakim's [Dia al-Azzawi. Taking a Stand: Activism Through Graphic Design](#) (2017), the latest addition to [Khatt Books'](#) Arabic Design Library.

"But when you look at these artists they engaged in design as a form of activism, as a way of reaching out to the general public and engaging them intellectually," the Amsterdam-based Smitshuijzen-AbiFarès insists.

"There's also nothing wrong with a European or a foreigner talking about Arabic design, but it does always mean that we see ourselves through somebody else's eyes and we believe that it's important that we talk about our own culture and that we look at ourselves in a critical way," she adds.

"Not in a way that's apologetic or not to say that we are better or worse but to really be critical because that's not something that's very prevalent in Arab culture."

A designer and academic in her own right, Huda Smitshuijzen-AbiFarès founded the [Khatt Foundation](#) in 2004 as a platform for research and critical discussion about Arabic design and typography and then set up her own imprint, Khatt Books, in 2010.

Both organisations take their name from the Arabic word, *khatt*, which relates to the act of writing and calligraphy, and both were established to use design as a means of promoting dialogue, mutual understanding and what the Lebanese designer describes as "cultural diplomacy."

ما زعماء لغنا على الشراة  
 أقول لأصحابي أرفعوني  
 كوني في فهمهم  
 يقنن من بين  
 وعندما يطلب منه ان يبعث مرة اخرى برفع اصبعه  
 ويا يلقي السؤال في وجودكم  
 على الطفل فلنقتله  
 سؤال

اعزفوا... اعزفوا  
 اني وطن  
 ايها العالم  
 جراح الفيل ان الخيمة  
 المنعيبين الذين كسونا وديننا  
 صياء الترابي  
 يوسف الخياط

Silkscreen-printed poetry poster for al-Mirbad poetry festival in southern Iraq by Dia al-Azzawi Courtesy Khatt Foundation/Khatt Books



For the UK-based designer and academic [Lina Hakim](#), the Arabic Design Library was also born out of the need for texts that address histories of design and students that have largely been ignored.

"The fact that we are all teachers is really important because it's when we are teaching that we really get a sense of why this matters," the Kingston University academic says.

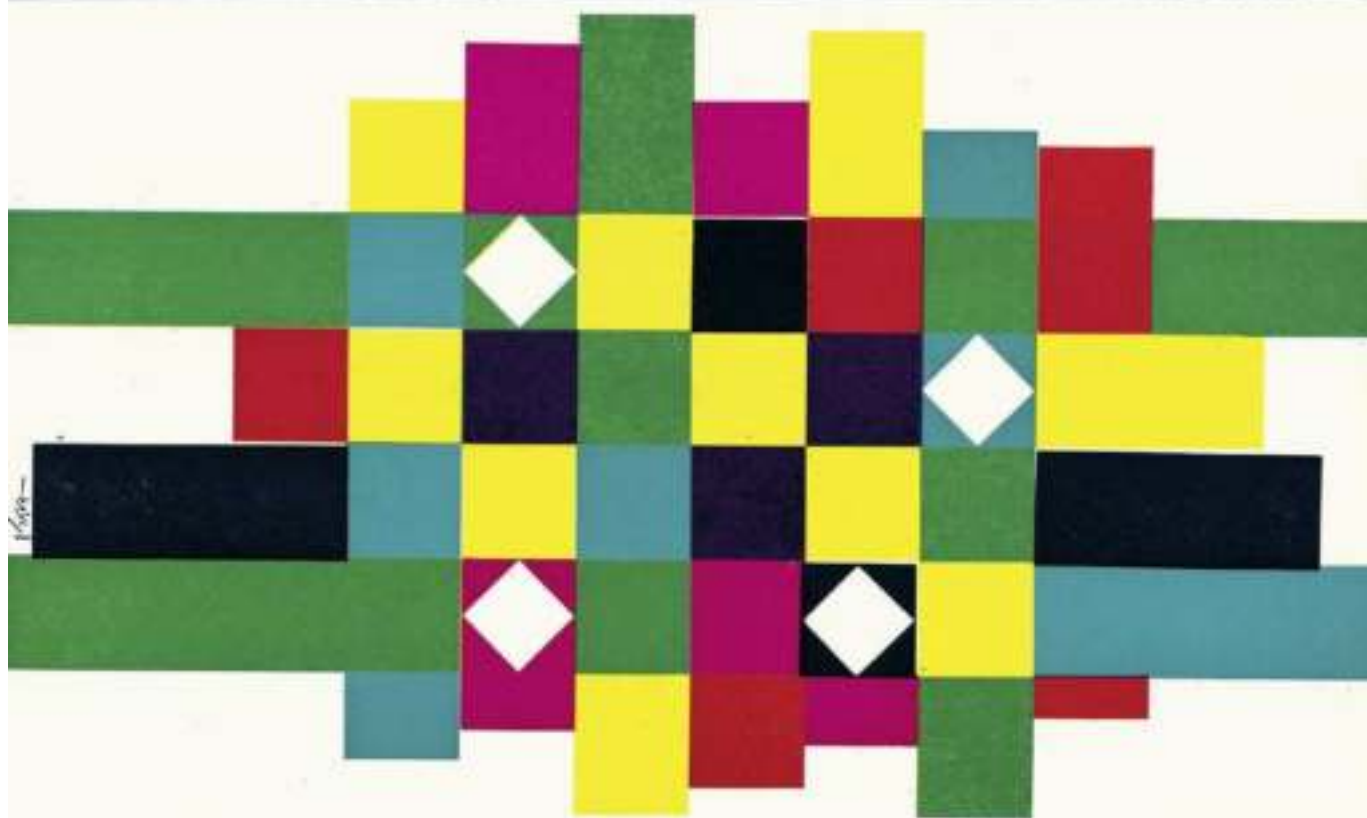
"Al-Azzawi's activism was always about taking a stand, and when you are talking to design students this immediately leads to conversations about what kind of stand they want to take, what kind of history they want to write and what kind of citizens they want to be."

Hakim's book about Dia Al-Azzawi was published at the same time as Yasmine Nachabe Taan's [Abdulkader Arnaout: Designing as Visual Poetry](#), which investigates the pioneering work of the Syrian poet, painter, typographer, and designer, who designed more than 600 posters and around 300 book covers as well as Arabic logos and fonts.

The book is Taan's second volume for the Arabic Design Library following her 2014 publication, [Hilmi Al-Tuni: Evoking Popular Arab Culture](#), which looked at the work of one of the Arab World's most popular and prodigious illustrators and book designers.

وزارة الثقافة والإرشاد القومي

# عزنا الفنون التطبيقية



حفر على الخشب \* ديكور وإعلان \* تصميم غلافات \* تصوير فوتوغرافي  
اشغال يدوية \* حفر على النحاس \* فسيفساء \* قيشاني

في المتحف الوطني - اعتباراً من ٢٩ آذار ١٩٦٢

"The goal of this series is to produce material that will expose generations to come to the work of Arab designers," says Taan, associate professor and chair of the department of design at the [Lebanese American University in Beirut](#).

"We can't blame them for producing imitations of Western work. We teach them in English using European and American books."

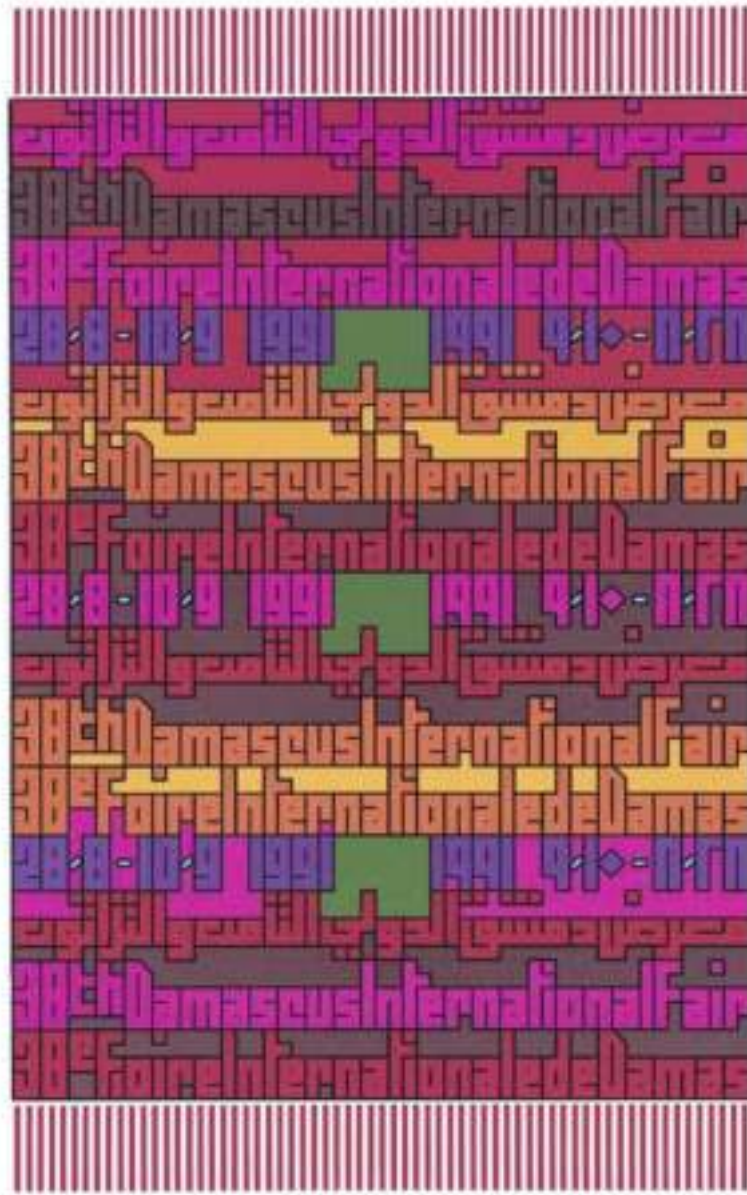
To overcome these biases, each of the books in the Arabic Design Library is bi-lingual and is designed in such a way that the text in both languages is complimentary and is given equal status while images are never repeated.

The other imperative, Taan explains, is to catch up with a fast-disappearing generation of Arab designers who, if they have not already passed away, have bodies of work or archives that are in danger of being lost to posterity.

"We're interested in designers who are in their 70s and 80s and in rescuing material that would otherwise vanish if we don't do the interviews and gather the information," the designer and academic explains.

"Now the primary resources are the oral histories, they are the interviews that we're doing with the designers, if they are living, or with their families and colleagues and students."

In some cases, there is no fear of oblivion. Not only is Dia Al-Azzawi's place in the canon of Arabic art and design history assured, even if these are nascent, but he is well known for being a meticulous archivist, not just of his own work but also of his friends, colleagues and contemporaries. In other cases, however, gathering material on this generation of designers is a matter of literally picking through piles of old magazines and books.



Poster for the 38th International Fair of Damascus, 1991, by Abdulkader Arnaout. Courtesy Khatt Foundation/Khatt Books

“It’s really a treasure hunt, but every book is quite different. The period we are concentrating on is really the 60s, 70s and 80s, which was a time when there was much more cultural unity in the Arab

world” Smitshuijzen-AbiFarès says, clearly enamoured at the process.

“So what’s interesting is that as soon as you speak to one person that often say ‘Oh, you should really look at this other person’s work.”

“A lot of what we write is based on what we dig out and find in various ways but if it’s oral history we can only really rely on that for background knowledge, contacts and tapping into networks,” Lina Hakim adds.

“Ultimately, the only thing we can be sure of is the work.”

For more about the Khatt Foundation and the Arabic Design Library visit [www.khtt.net](http://www.khtt.net) and [www.khattbooks.com](http://www.khattbooks.com)

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[ [Linguistic twist: is the Arabic language in crisis?](#) ]

[ [Latif Al Ani: chronicler of modernity in a now vanished Iraq](#) ]

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ART

TYPOGRAPHY

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