# *Local Content: Teaching Visual Narrative in the Gulf*

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The European Conference on Arts and Humanities 2014
Official Conference Proceedings

**Abstract**
Visual communication is a global activity and often demands using visual language that will be understood across cultures. Lack of place specificity is often considered desirable in design. But the trend toward visual globalization can have the disadvantage of taking students in many regions away from the visual language they are familiar with, leaving them, visually, speechless. For my students in the Gulf region, this often results in appropriation of only partly understood signs, symbols and images, resulting in problematic visual communication.

In effect, not only do I ask students to use a verbal language, English, that may be their second or third one, but I also ask them to use a visual language that my derive little from their own visual experience. If we apprehend the world primarily visually as Arnheim argues, the ability to use one's personal visual vocabulary is necessary for effective visual communication.

The paper will discuss the development of locally based narratives in animation, film, and graphic novels in the context of the UAE. Students make use of locally sourced textual and visual information. Once subject matter is grounded in a familiar locale, appropriation from other cultures becomes less problematic.

Some student produced narratives are illustrated texts, while others begin with visual information around which a narrative is formed. The paper will propose that emphasis on local narratives and imagery can play a small part in transforming the region from content consumer into a net content creator.

Keywords: Education, visual narrative, illustration, Arabian Gulf, teaching. creativity

## 1. Introduction

In his book *Visual Thinking* Rudolph Arnheim argued that any distinction between perception and thinking is false; that in fact perception is a precondition to thinking and cognition:

> I shall suggest that only because perception gathers types of things, that is, concepts, can perceptual material be used for thought: and inversely, that unless the stuff of the senses remains present the mind has nothing to think with. (Arnheim, 1997)

In its purest form visual communication is just that; communication effected partly or entirely visually. For educators working in the Gulf region it is worth asking what sort of visual information our students have at their disposal and where it comes from. How are our students culturally accustomed to think about visual information and image making in particular?

The class Visual Narrative has grown out of my interest in teaching illustration and narrative in the unique context of the UAE. In this class students develop a story with image and text, or sometimes exclusively with images. In subject matter and materials used, the topic is by nature cross-disciplinary. This paper will outline cultural factors relevant to the class, and the pedagogy of teaching observational drawing in a region where the practice has been considered to be somewhat or absolutely prohibited.

*Figure 1:* American University of Sharjah

## 2. Figurative art in an Islamic context

Throughout the nearly 1500 year history of Islam, figurative art, or the visual depiction of living things and especially of people, has been a topic of debate, concern, and often of prohibition. Religious injunctions against the making of idols

are common; the Book of Exodus contains a clear prohibition against image-making for purposes of idolatry:

> Thou shalt not make unto thee any graven images or any likenesses of anything that is in heaven or that is in the earth beneath or that is in the water under the earth. (Exodus 20.4)

But the Koran contains no similar injunction (Criswell, 1946, p. 159). In the Arabian peninsula where Islam developed there is little history of figuration; what images do exist from pre-Islamic times consist mainly of somewhat stylized images that appear in textiles, metal objects and pottery. It is reported that the Prophet was familiar with figurative painting in the region. In one story, when Muhammad first entered the Kaaba in Mecca (629–630 A.D) he ordered paintings on the walls to be destroyed, except for one; a painting of Mary and Jesus. (Criswell, p. 160) Otherwise it is unclear whether existing visual likenesses were particularly important to the Prophet during his lifetime. (Grabar, 1987)

In the two centuries following the death of Mohammad, the formative religion was further codified by the Hadith, or body of Traditions derived from the Prophet's close followers and from local stories assembled from conquered regions west and east of Arabia. It is in the Hadith that the first clear pronouncements regarding figuration appear. This quote from the Hadith dates from the second half of the eight century A.D.:

> Those who will be most severely punished on the Day of Judgement are the murderer of a Prophet, one who has been put to death by a Prophet, one who leads men astray without knowledge, and a maker of images or pictures. (Grabar, 1987, p. 82)

Grabar and others proposed several possible concerns that inform these prohibitions. First, Islam developed in a region where paganism and idol worship were common. In the first generations after the birth of the Prophet, Moslems were in a minority in Arabia and had a history of paganism to contend with. The rejection of idols, usually figurative, was a way of ridding Arabia of the outward signs of the competing local paganism. Secondly, Moslems in other areas, especially in the Levant, were surrounded by the highly developed, emotionally powerful art of the Byzantine church. In such an environment, to quote Grabar (1987, p. 86), followers of the new faith "[saw] images as one of the most dangerous weapons the Christians possessed" Grabar continued:

> It is indeed very likely that the sophisticated Christian milieu of Jerusalem had tried to win to its faith the rather uncouth invaders. And it is a well-known fact that eastern Christianity had always liked to use the emotional impact of music and the visual arts to convert “barbarians.” That such attempts may have been effective with the Arabs is shown in the very interesting, although little studied, group of accounts dealing with the more or less legendary trips of Arabs to the Byzantine court in early Islamic times, or sometimes even before Islam. In most cases the “highlight” of the “guided tours” to which they submitted was a visit either to a church where a definite impact

> was made by the religious representations or to a court reception with similar results. In the pious accounts of later times the Muslim always leaves impressed but unpersuaded by the pageantry displayed. One may wonder, however, whether such was always the case and whether the later stories should be considered, at least in part, as moral stories intended to ward off defection. That the danger of defections existed is clearly implied. (1987, p. 61)

Whatever the reason, in the first two centuries of the new religion a complex set of rules and prohibitions developed around figuration. Figurative art continued to decorate the private homes of the aristocracy but disappeared from public places, replaced by decorative pattern-making based on floral or geometric themes. There developed a complex regulatory structure for the use of images. According to Grabar, although images were "permissible in hallways, floors, or baths, they were forbidden elsewhere; in some legal texts headless figures were allowed." (Grabar, 1987, p. 83)

*Figure 2:* Student drawing of figures with no facial features

*Figure 3:* Drawing from a photo by the
Saudi artist Jowhara Al Saud, 2008 (Issa & Krifa, 2011)

This rigorous expurgation of images continued across the Islamic world and a consistent style in design and architecture featuring repetitive decorative elements

became nearly universal in Islamic regions. These formal qualities define Islamic style in art and architecture.

Figurative art was revived in Egypt during the Fatimid era in the later eleventh century. (Baer, 2004, pp. 250–73) Fatimid art exhibits a move away from art for the aristocracy and toward one that depicted the common man and everyday life. Fatimid paintings and ceramics exhibit a trend toward individuation and even in some instances caricature. Later, in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, Persian painters created portraits of individuals painted from observation. Figurative painting was popular in the Moghul courts. Style and subject matter in Moghul painting has been linked to developments in the east and especially China (Baer, pp. 25-50), rather than to any known antecedent in Arabia or the Levant.

In the Ottoman empire human images gradually disappeared by the end of the thirteenth century. But beginning in the fifteenth century, portrait painting became popular, at least partly due to interaction with the West. (Baer, p. 51) As in Egypt and Persia, a local style of figuration from observation developed although to Western eyes the images from all regions appear strongly stylized and not particularly realistic.

In these later years it was not uncommon for Muslim rulers to commission art which contained images of the Prophet for their private collections and for public display. (Leaman, 2014, p. 191) Where such images do exist, it is no longer common for them to be put on public display, for fear of offending sensibilities.

Reluctance to draw living things, especially the human figure, continues to be an obstacle in teaching the arts in Arabia. Although most students say they are comfortable with the process of drawing people from life, it often appears that my students are flirting with the boundaries of their cultural norms. In student work, faceless figures, or figures without any heads at all, are common.

In contrast to the drawn image, photography has been accepted, even embraced, in the region. Photos of the rulers hang in every public building and in many private ones such as my college. Like students everywhere, my students post images of themselves, their friends and families on social media. Even so, there are cultural and legal restrictions regarding who and what may be photographed. Taking photos of strangers without consent is not allowed. Our photojournalism students complain that their options are limited; most photography students confine their work to the controlled environment of the photo studio. The art director for the Times of Oman reports that his photographers need to be circumspect when taking photos for publication; content is reviewed by censors for approval before it is published. (Durado, 2012)

### 3. Art and Design in the Gulf

Universities following the western model are a relatively new phenomenon in the Gulf region. It was not until after the Gulf states were established in the 1960s that the first western universities were started up in the region. Although the western arts of oil painting, sculpture, and photography had been practiced in the Arabia for decades, western style universities have been instrumental in introducing these arts to a wider

cross section of the population and have served as centers of artistic activity and training.

In my college of architecture, art and design, the curriculum begins with two semesters of observational drawing in foundation year. For most of our students, this is their first introduction to individual image making outside of taking photos. Since the Arabian peninsula has little history of image making, our students necessarily fall back on what visual resources they can find; images, techniques and styles copied from photos or appropriated from other cultures. But in teaching, our objective is not to produce graduates who mimic work done elsewhere, but rather to develop an indigenous visual culture connected to and emanating from the region.

A flood of foreign content, both verbal and visual, pervades the arts practiced in the Gulf today. In architecture, the urge to preserve traditional culture exists side by side with the rapid globalization that is transforming the region. The result can appear to be somewhat schizophrenic: while the old neighbourhood of Bastikiya in Bur Dubai has undergone an extensive restoration, other older neighbourhoods have been bulldozed to make way for mammoth construction projects such as the current world's tallest building, the Burj Khalifa, set within "New Dubai," a city within a city. The mini-city of New Dubai exhibits architectural cues from a wide range of cultures; Moghul domes and archways, imitation Masharabieh (carved wood balconies), Andalusia-style fountained courtyards, and narrow, twisting passageways reminiscent of the souks of Cairo or Damascus. The overall result is that of a vaguely orientalist architectural fantasy-land located within an entirely man-made topography including a lake in what once was desert. The trend toward "self-orientialization", often results in what Butheina Kazim refers to as "the hybrid orient: a comfortable Arab experience" for expatriates and tourists. (Kazim, 2012)

*Figure 4:* New Dubai

Other creative fields exhibit similar tension between tradition and modernity. In cinema, international films depict Dubai and the UAE in general as emblematic of the Gulf region's newness. The film *Syriana*, partly filmed in the UAE, takes place in a modernizing Gulf country that is the locus of international forces and intrigues beyond local control. The film *Mission Impossible 4: Ghost Protocol* starring Tom

Cruise uses the Burj Khalifa and Dubai as a super-modern backdrop for its action story line. As Alia Yunis says,

> The idea of rich, shiny Dubai, highlighting its 21st century skyline, is the positive stuff of Western portrayal of the UAE. Indeed the main character in Dubai is the Burj Khalifa, not a human being. We do not meet any locals or even expats living in the city. Given how Gulf Arabs usually fare in Hollywood films, perhaps this is for the best. (Younis, 2012)

Depiction of the culture by local filmmakers is more nuanced and less clear, partly because the UAE, a nation for only 41 years, has not yet established a clear national identity or narrative. Locally made films tend to involve few characters and concentrate on family relations and traditional rural life. (Younis)

Book publishing and purchasing are growing in the UAE. According to a 2013 survey, on a per capita basis the value of book purchasing in the UAE is among the highest in the middle east, and several times higher than book purchases per capita in Brazil for example. English language books account for more than 60% of books sold in the UAE. (Wischenbart & Jarrous, 2013) As with other fields of content creation, the Arabic language faces an uphill struggle to gain market share in the region.

Given the state of the arts in the UAE and the fluid nature of what is considered to be "the local" it is not surprising that teaching illustration, and visual narrative in particular, has been challenging. Although the majority of my visual narrative student have grown up in the UAE, particularly Dubai, others come from a wide range of nationalities across the Middle East, Africa and Asia. Rather than starting from a clear local style, as I encountered in my previous schools in Singapore and the US, it soon became clear to me that my students come from a variety of visual cultures and bring with them a range of visual languages, most of them imported.

Fortunately there is a growing body of work generated in the region that I can point to as examples of visual narrative that can capture a global audience. All my students are familiar with the *Persepolis* series of graphic novels by Iranian author Marjane Satrapi, either having seen the animated film based on the book or, more rarely, having read the originals. Students are also familiar with the UAE-produced animated television series *Freej* by Mohammed Harib, and with other locally-produced animations. The existence of a small but growing regional industry in visual narrative encourages students to consider themselves potential content creators rather than perpetual consumers of content created overseas.

Unfortunately the majority of graphic novels, films, and animations set in the region continue to be imported. In part this is due to local restrictions; for example, the animated version of *Persepolis* was produced in France since the book is banned in Iran. Similarly, graphic novels such as Egyptian Magdy al-Shafee's graphic novel *Metro*, critical of Mubarak-era Cairo, was banned in Egypt and the Gulf until recently. Besides the dampening effect of local sensitivities, the genres of graphic novels, comic books and animation have only a brief history in the Middle East. New initiatives in the book publishing and animation industries that encourage local content creation are only beginning to have an effect.

Given the variety of the population in the UAE and the wide range of cultures that AUS students come from, the task of developing a pedagogy in visual narrative is still in its early stages. There is no clearly definable Emirati design or illustration history or style that one can point to. There is a nearly complete absence of the practice of figurative drawing in the region.

## 3. The Text

Visual narrative students are asked to bring to the first class a story idea for development through the semester. Choice of story is critical for successful outcomes from the class. Clearly, fictional works by another author present several problems, including copyright. A related problem, not immediately apparent at first, is that the English language includes many dialects that may not be not well understood. One student chose to illustrate the short story "The Telltale Heart" by Edgar Allen Poe, but struggled to make sense of passages in pre-Victorian English such as this:

> Presently I heard a slight groan, and I knew it was the groan of mortal terror. It was not a groan of pain or of grief—oh, no!—it was the low stifled sound that arises from the bottom of the soul when overcharged with awe. (Poe, 1843)

After several weeks of struggle, the student re-wrote the story in her own words. The result was an understandable story in comprehensible modern English and the resulting illustrated short story turned out well.

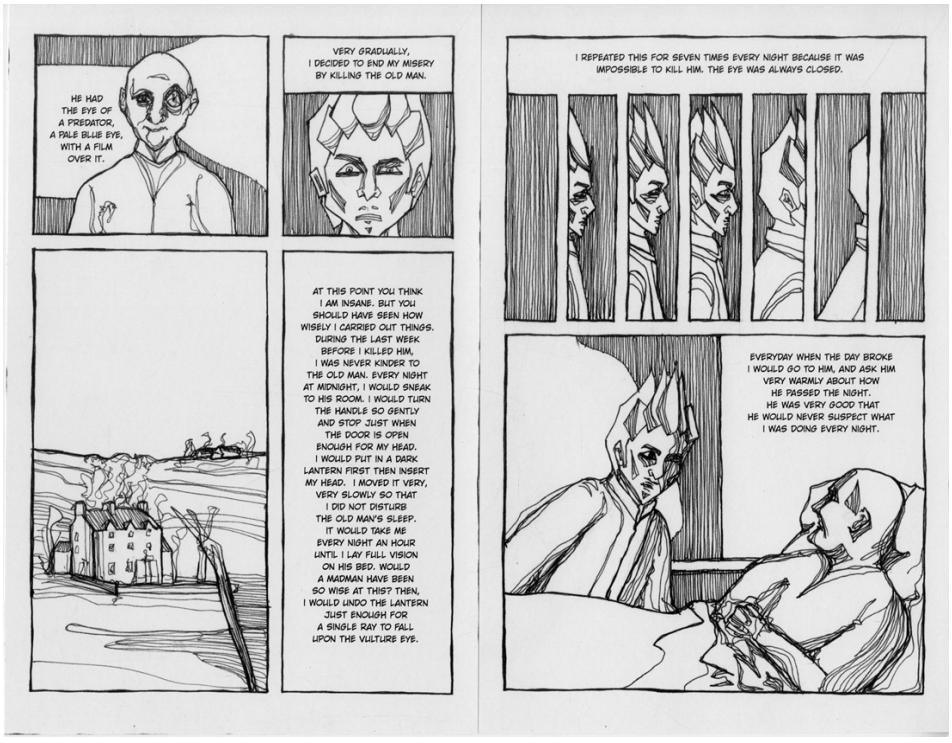


*Figure 5:* Edgar Allen Poe's "The Telltale Heart," re-written in modern English by the student.

This and similar struggles with language have led me to institute a class rule that working texts should be written by the student. This helps to ensure that meaning and

narrative structure will be clear to that student. Stories that take place in past or, sometimes, in the future, are allowed, but students are encouraged to base the visuals on reference that is readily available to them. Narratives that have worked well in visual narrative class span a wide range but often are based on local traditional tales and fables. Local legends involving Jinn (genies or djinn) have been a popular choice and often lead to good outcomes. Jinn stories are especially well suited because they are most often not written, but are passed down orally, so students are free to record them in their own words. The innate linguistic flexibility of traditional oral tales is useful in a class where command of the English language varies widely among individuals.

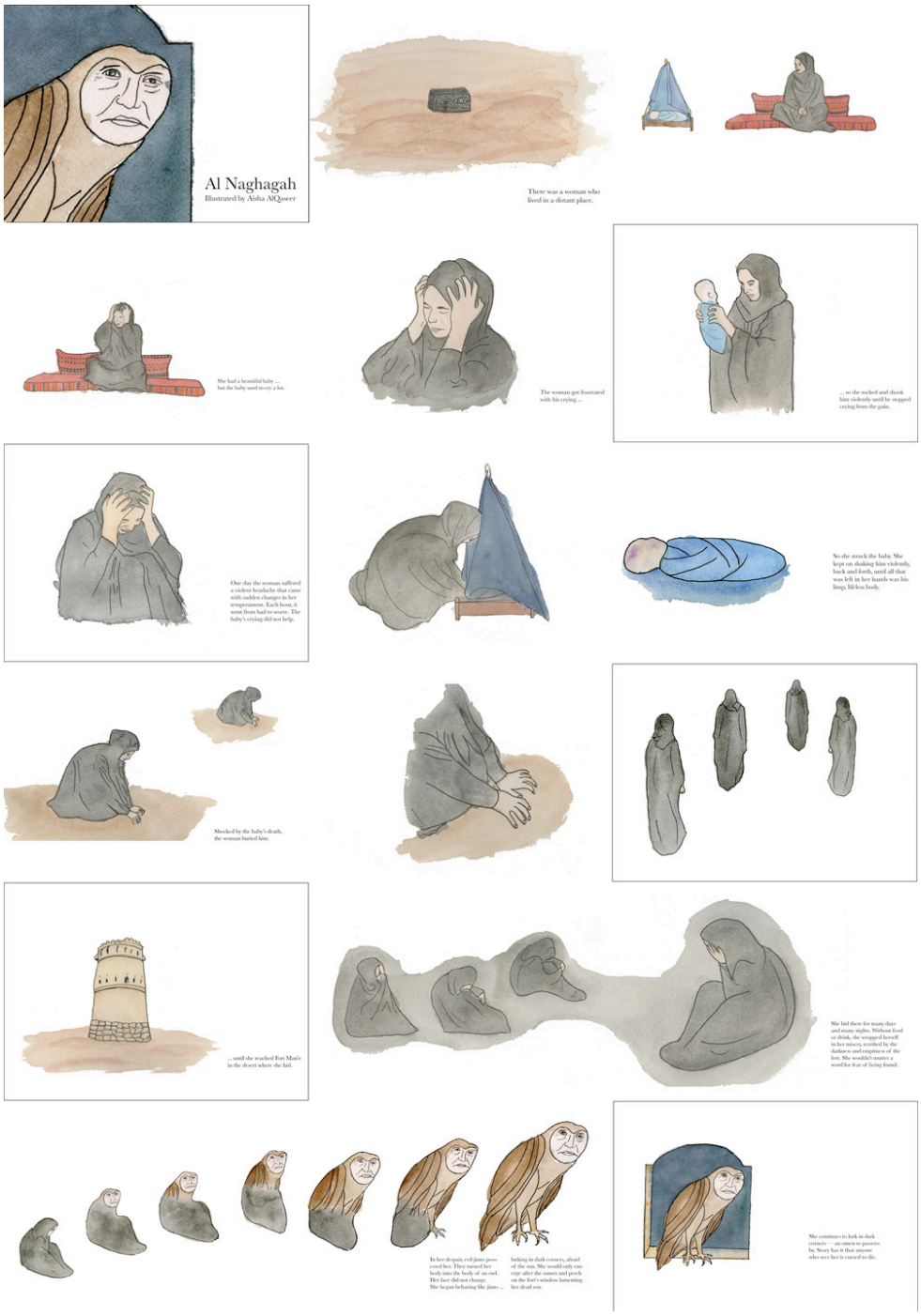

*Figure6: Al Nagah*, a traditional Emirati tale of a young woman who kills her newborn and becomes a Jinn. In the story she takes the form of an owl with a human face; those who look at her face will die.

Some student writing involves research and narration of more complex stories. In one example, a student chose to re-tell the story of Raya and Sakina, a pair of mass murdering sisters who are well known in Egypt. After a series of robbery-murders, the sisters were eventually caught and hanged, at the time an unprecedented instance of death by hanging of women in modern Egypt.

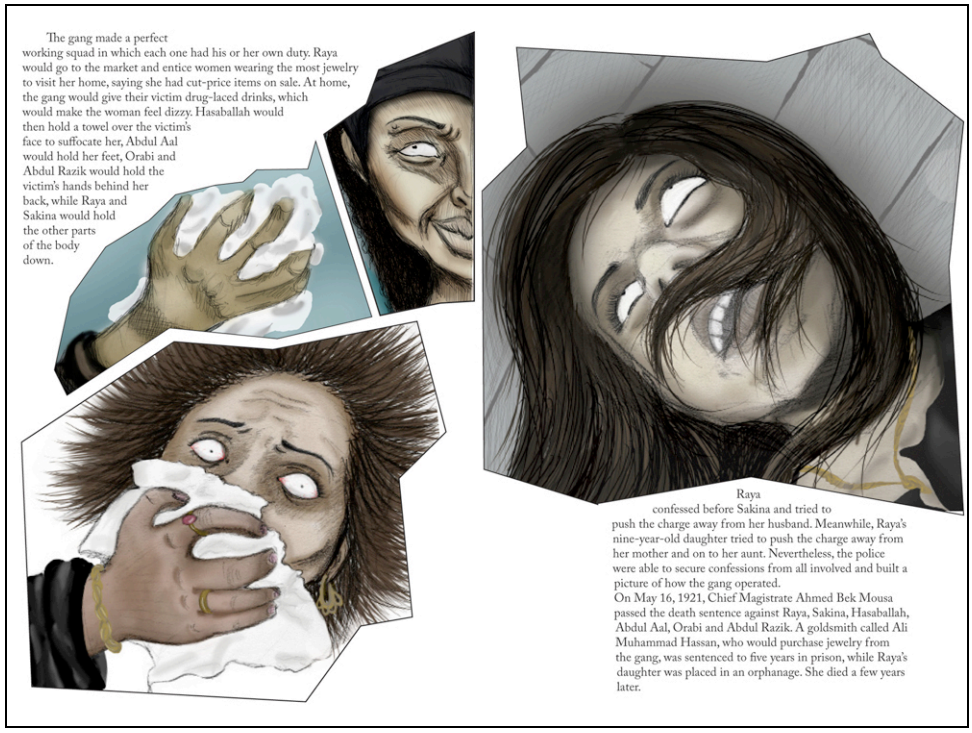


*Figure 7:* Two page spread from "The Murdering Sisters of Cairo."

## 4. The Visual

Students who have lived entirely in one geographic area can find it difficult to visually re-create an unfamiliar environment. For a student who has spent a life surrounded by the flat desert landscape of the UAE it can be challenging to try to illustrate a village in Europe or Iran, or a cityscape older than modern Dubai. All illustration classes at my college introduce the process of researching and drawing from visual reference. But there is a limit to the value of photographic reference in illustration. As Arnheim writes, "a difference between passive reception and active perceiving is contained even in elementary visual experience". (Arnheim, p. 14) Experienced reality contains much sensory information that is stripped from the photograph, leaving only a two-dimensional replica in place of a reality that is seen, smelled, felt, and heard.

In describing what he calls "the intelligence of perception," Arnheim points out that culture plays an active role in determining what is perceived even at the most basic visual level:

> There is considerable evidence to indicate that the graspability of shapes and colors varies, depending on the species, the cultural group, the amount of training of the observer. What is rational for one group, will be irrational for another, i.e. it cannot be grasped, understood, compared, or remembered… Some cultures do not put green and blue under separate perceptual headings. (p. 31)

Besides the problem of coming to a visual understanding of the perceived world through photographs, there remains the lack of a visual cultural heritage to draw on. Attempts to mimic imported visual languages will always be part of undergraduate illustration classes. The popular visual vocabulary of Japanese manga and anime is reflected in the work of my students as elsewhere. In fact, many students are attracted to the topic of visual narrative precisely because manga visual narratives resonate with them in a way that individual, free-standing images or text-only narratives do not. As Neil Cohn argued, visual narratives depend on a grammar made up of mutual interaction between the visual and the verbal:

> Like sequential units of sound in speech or bodily motions in sign languages, sequential drawings ordered by a rule system— a grammar— literally comprise a visual language (VL). Culturally, this visual language combines with written language in comics, manga, bande desinée, etc., uniting their readers and authors in a common (visual) linguistic community. Following this, unique cultural styles of drawing simply become different visual languages, the same way that verbal (and signed) languages differ throughout the world. (Cohn, 2010)

Just as the growing use of English is troubling to many in the region, it is worth asking whether a visual language imported from Japan is adequate to describe and express modern Gulf life. The visual syntax of manga grows out of its unique cultural context, specifically post-war Japan. In my experience this syntax is only partly understood or translated by my students. A comparison of American and Japanese visual narratives reveals differences in meanings, sequencing, and visual grammar, as Scott McCloud has demonstrated (McCloud, 2006). It is safe to assume that existing visual languages will need to be modified in order to develop a workable regional dialect. In a region still defining itself in terms of tradition versus modernity, local versus imported, the challenge is to develop a pedagogy that assists students in developing a visual and verbal language relevant to themselves and their experience.

In the Western model of studio art education it is typical to introduce drawing from observation early in the curriculum. In addition to learning to record what is seen, the practice of observational drawing is an elementary step in the process of developing a visual language, to think using visual information. By third and fourth year many students have developed a workable visual vocabulary and are able to flesh out the minimal information contained in a reference photo. Still, limitations of experience and culture make it difficult for many students to fully realize, in visual terms, an environment that is unfamiliar to them.

One student's version of a castle from a Grimm Brothers fable looked remarkably like the posh new Emirati villas located around our campus. In place of a wooden door hinged over a moat, his castle door was made of frosted glass and decorative cast aluminium in the style of entrance gates seen in the suburbs of Sharjah and Dubai. The end result remained, visually, far from its original place and time.

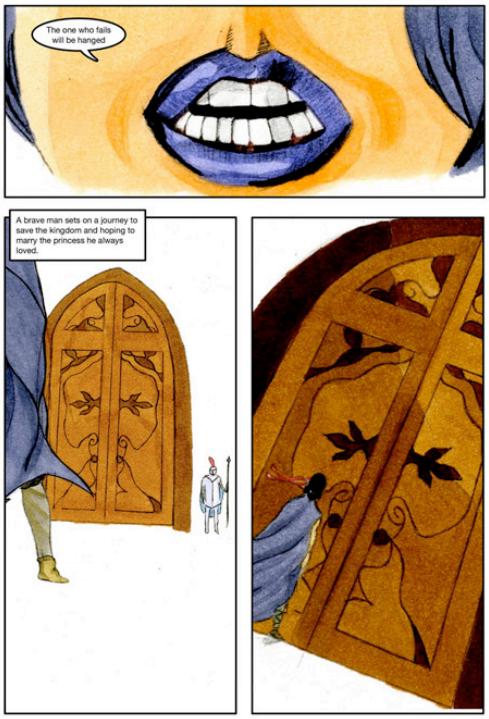


*Figure 8:* Top, student interpretation of the door of a medieval castle and below, a typical villa door in Sharjah. Even after gathering visual research, the student's illustrated door exhibits a modern Emirati sensibility.

It took some time for me to determine the common threads that make up visual vocabulary for students in the Gulf. Many students excelled at fine detailing and decoration over the surface of their drawings, but the underpinnings that my Western eye looked for— perspective structure, sense of visual hierarchy, and an understanding of human anatomy— seemed to be absent in much work.

Narratives are most often about people; in order to tell a story it is usually necessary to draw the human figure in a recognizable way. But in the Arabian peninsula depictions of the human figure, and especially the human face, have historically been avoided. Often, students who are successful at developing characters take a highly decorative approach, concentrating on clothing, colour, and props and minimizing reliance on human anatomy.

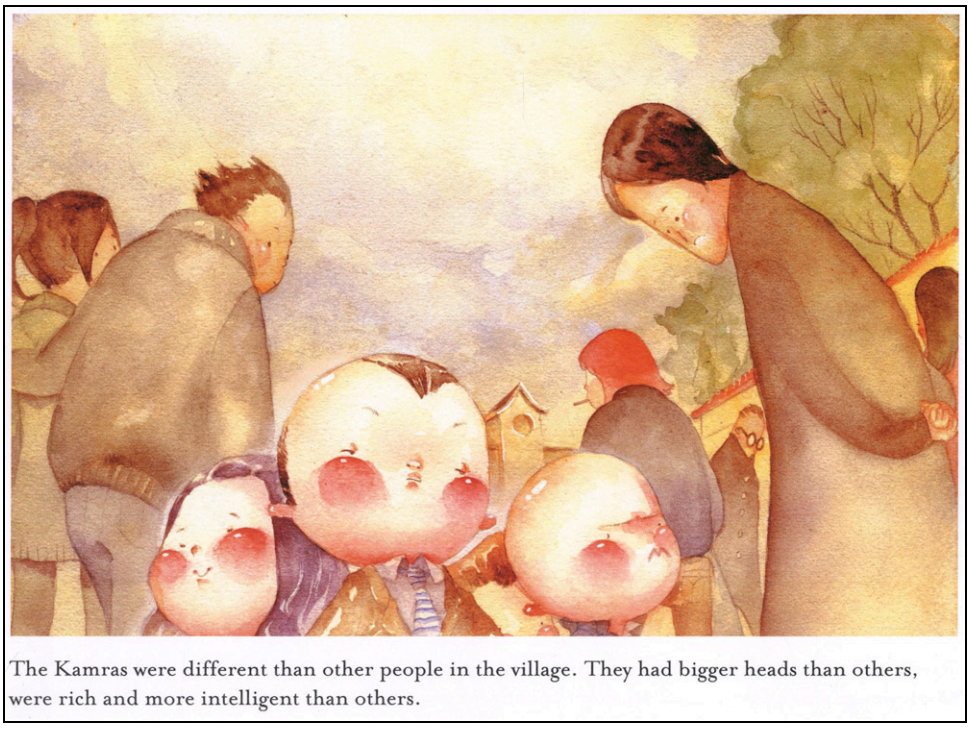


*Figure 9:* Highly stylized characters are common in student work. Illustration by a visual narrative student.

Illustration class assignments often de-emphasize figuration and emphasize setting and externals, such as visual exploration of a trade or craft or a local area. One student explored a local slaughterhouse and produced a series of remarkable paintings showing stainless tables, tools of the trade, and sides of beef in various stages of processing. The human figures were clearly secondary in most images and were treated with much less care than the sides of meat. In another class, a student created a series of illustrations based on the local bird market. The finished illustrations were well done; the only evidence of the human figure is in an arm of a butcher preparing a chicken for market.

*Figure 10:* Illustration of the local bird market.

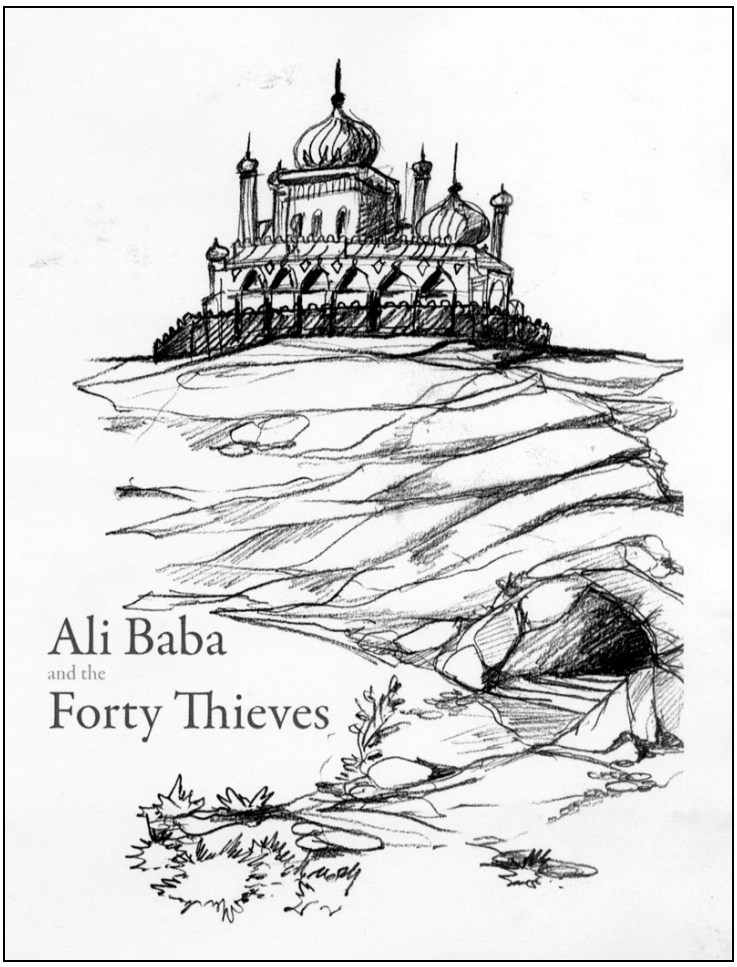


*Figure 11:* Illustration based on local architecture.

The decisions to localize both text and image in this class is intended to help each student find an authentic individual voice, both in use of language and creation of image. Issues of derivation and appropriation of work by others are not completely

resolved, but become less important when each student is required to draw from his or her own verbal and visual experiences.


*Figure 12:* "Fresh Man," the story of a freshman design student set in the school's studios. The student used a classmate and the school buildings for reference.

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