

An Interview with Morteza Momayez

Shahriar Sarmast

Design Issues is pleased to publish this interview with Iranian graphic designer Morteza Momayez recently conducted in Tehran by Shahriar Sarmast. Morteza Momayez, Iran's foremost graphic designer, has been active in the field for more than fifty years. When he began his career in the early 1950s, he designed Iranian newspapers and magazines. In the 1960s, he completed a degree in art at the University of Tehran, and did further studies in Paris. Mr. Momayez is the author of numerous books on graphic design in Farsi, and his work was featured by F.H.K. Henrion in his book Top Graphic Design (1983). Shahriar Sarmast is an art director in Tehran, and currently is Secretary of the Iranian Graphic Designers Society. Mr. Sarmast created the cover for the Summer 2002 (XVIII: 3) of Design Issues.

Victor Margolin

Sarmast: Dear Momayez, I would like to begin this interview with something I have always wondered about. Why is it that, when the topic of graphic design in Iran is raised, only one name comes into discussion—yours. I recall my first contact with the American design historian, Victor Margolin. Yours was the one name he mentioned when he made reference to graphic design in Iran. I have had the same experience with several other people. There are several other pioneer designers from your generation with considerable artistic backgrounds. Does your strong name recognition come only from your artistic values, or is it partly because of your social behavior and personality?

Momayez: I don't really know what I can say. I never encountered such a question. But now when I think of it, I believe my personality and social behavior developed very naturally and unconsciously. Honestly, I think of myself as a very ordinary and straightforward person with a plain personality. I always tried to adapt myself to the people and situations around me. I take my work and profession very seriously, and try hard to achieve whatever I believe in. I also try to be frank and straightforward with people. I never planned or designed any personality or behavior for myself. Everything has come naturally.



Sarmast: Undoubtedly, your behavior and approach have brought you success and achievement. This special behavior has been taken as some kind of aggression, and maybe an authoritarian attitude, by some people (if you will excuse my impression).

Please tell me, is this kind of approach related to your nature or is it some kind of strategy you have chosen in order to achieve your own ends? Surely, you have done things that you believed to be right. This can be observed in all of your work.

Momayez: One can easily see decisiveness and explicitness, or some kind of frankness, in my work right from the beginning. These qualities are parts of my nature and character. Pretentiousness or false gimmicks really are a waste of time.

You can sustain a false character for a while, but eventually your real character or nature will show through. I am willing to listen to very harsh criticism about myself. I am always open to suggestions and always consult with others before making a decision, which is why I consider myself a conservative person, at least in social matters. I think this nature comes from my teaching background. A teacher, lecturer, or whomever deals with students should be very patient. That is the only way to discover and develop the latent talents that are hidden inside one's students.

Sarmast: I really can't put these two together, but I gather that you agree with this attitude to your approach. The difference is that you take it as frankness and decisiveness, which is part of your nature, instead of a demonstrative offensive, an approach that helps you fulfill your desires or get whatever you are after. I don't mean personal desires, but mostly social ones in favor of your profession. I also want to recognize a very strong element that runs through your life's work. We can call it global or international. From your earliest projects, one can recognize a visual language that is intended to communicate with a wider audience around the world, rather than a limited one. Despite the old argument about an Iranian visual



Figure1
Logo with Farsi calligraphy, 1970s,
Reza Abbasi Museum.

All figures courtesy of Morteza Momayez.



Figure 2
Self-promotional poster, Morteza Momayez,
designer (calligraphy at bottom, 1970s).

language in graphic design, I feel you that you always have searched for a wider horizon. What do you have to say about this?

Momayez: I think this goes back to my roots. I did not come from a well-off family. What caused others to consult my father, and what made my parents trustworthy within their own circle, was their attitude. My father never thought that success would come through wealth. He strongly believed that real virtue is having a wide horizon and an expectation from life, as well as the capacity to realize that expectation. He believed that you should work hard for whatever you want to achieve, and not settle for second best. This attitude became my guideline, and I still follow it in my daily affairs. Such an attitude also brings magnanimity to a person. To be this way gives me joy.

Sarmast: This also might bring extravagant ambitions if maturity didn't prevent them. But now let me question you from a different angle. In the field of graphic design from the early days up to now, which is the age of high technology and information, there have been some unchangeable bases, essentials, qualities, and skills that any graphic designer would need in order to enter the professional world. These are: a general knowledge of visual art, artistic talent, creativity, academic knowledge, or the understanding of academic rules that include composition, perspective, and color combinations; good drawing skills, and, finally, the ability to achieve a personal style or visual language. In graphic design today, some of these principles and skills have lost their value either because of new technology, such as the computer, or because of new styles and a new logic, which even affects the basic rules of composition, lay out, and good color combinations. What do you think about this?

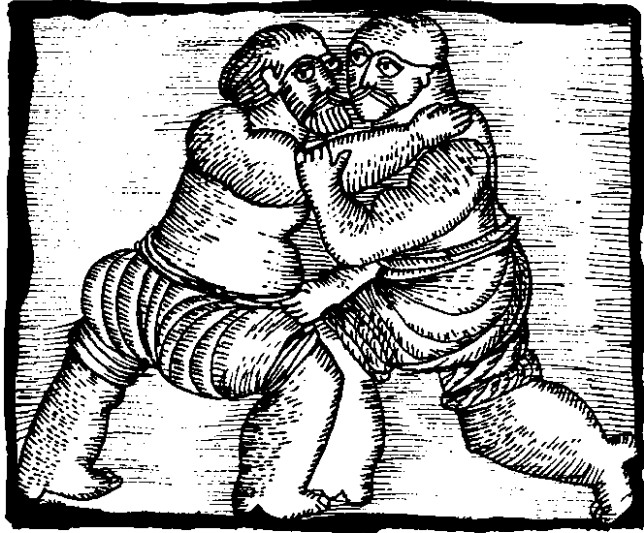
Momayez: Of course, new ideas and media establish their own grounds. Along with this, new progression, the old meanings, terms, and tools gradually lose their power and some of their ability to meet the new requirements of the contemporary world. This relates to mankind as well. Being unable to understand time, and today's visual language and tools, makes it difficult for people to move ahead. This doesn't mean farewell to the past. The old values and achievements have survived through centuries and remained as a stable ground for new achievements. No one can move ahead unless they rely on, and make good use of, past experiences.

Sarmast: Sorry to interrupt. I understand that you take the old rules, principles, and tools as some kind of capital to invest in new achievements.

Momayez: That's right. You see, people and things continually change all the time. This is because no one and no thing is ever

Figure 3

Editorial image for an article about traditional wrestling in Iran, early 1960s.



perfect or absolute. That goes for the younger generation as well. Young people are more up to date, energetic, and sometimes more talented than their elders, but soon they become part of the more experienced and mature past and new people take their place. This happens all the time and occurs so fast that the young people don't realize it. (Maturity and experience are good values, but they don't always provide what we need for the present. Still, I evaluate the present by the values and guidelines that belong to the past. This attitude at least helps me to maintain to some kind of optimism toward the new generation and new rules and values.

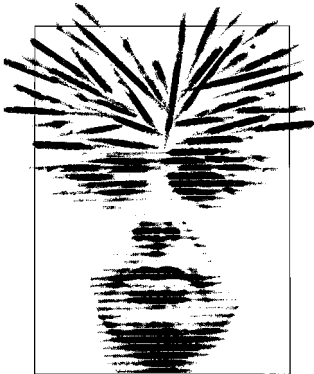


Figure 4

Illustration for a book cover, *anti-memories*, late 1960s.

Sarmast: Dear Momayez, the best I can say is that you answered part of my question, but gladly enough you also mentioned a few other points that clearly demonstrate your attitude to the world around you. My next question relates to your current professional activities. It seems that you have changed your creative language in the last few years. You always have been creative in different ways, but in recent years you replaced your direct artistic creation with some kind of indirect creation. You have been spending your time and energy on projects that not only affect a limited audience, but affect the society of artists and designers as a whole. You have planned and organized nationwide exhibitions and biennials, and other cultural movements and happenings, and most important you have engaged in beneficial activity for the design profession in Iran. You established the very first professional organization for Iranian graphic designers, for example. Such moves are not only creative, but also beneficial for the present and future of graphic design in Iran. It is undeniable that this recognition of graphic design in Iran and the considerable growth of the Iranian Graphic Designers Society are partly because of the considerable time, effort, and energy that you did put into these activities. What is the reason for this change, and what do you have to say about it?

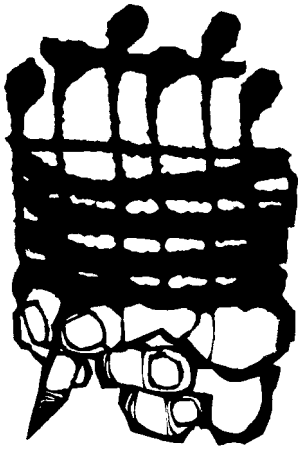


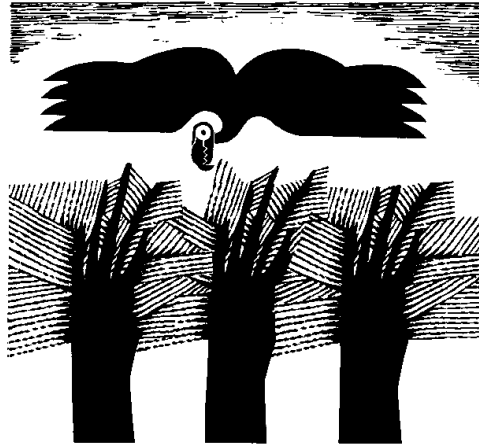
Figure 5
Illustration for book cover, *Links between
Music and Literature*, 1970s.

Momayez: What I never forget to do is to estimate my abilities. These include my ability to understand circumstances and the ability to understand and adapt myself to the present time and to know whether I am asleep or awake. People usually relate age with weakness of mind, sense, and a lack of energy, which adds up to some stage of dumbness (if I may say so). In one word, some people misunderstand age. For many people, getting old means getting weak, but this has another meaning, which is maturity.

When I first entered the field of graphic design, I found it had something of an isolated nature, at least in Iran. It was a profession or way of communication that only covered a limited group of people. That is why I decided to break this line and to address a wider group. I decided to teach, and through teaching, to communicate with a greater audience of students and young artists and designers. This was useful because I had to organize and categorize the knowledge I had in order to pass it on to my students. But after years of practicing, I found out that teaching wouldn't fulfill my expectations from life. Teaching and lecturing are valuable when you can pass on your new discoveries and creations to your students. Otherwise, you get bored. On the other hand, art students are not the only interested and qualified youngsters you can reach. There are a lot of other talented people who can use support. For this reason, I decided to pass on my experience by publishing books. My posters, illustrations, and book covers are some of the works I tried to analyze in order to set forth some theory or academic points in my books. In these books, I tried to reach a wider range of people interested in graphic design. Following this work, I came across another important need for graphic designers in Iran. Staying socially and professionally isolated, and not being recognized through some kind of professional organization, was not the solution. So I stepped forward to establish a design organization with the help of some other colleagues. The Iranian Graphic Designers Society (IGDS), founded in 1997/98, took considerable steps in favor of our colleagues. IGDS is the only Iranian NGO in the design field. Through these years of working hard, we have been able to create a stable identity for the graphic design profession within our society, along with many other achievements. That was not an easy job in a country such as ours. Yes, I also see these initiatives as creative attempts, but they arose from a natural desire and I am glad I undertook them.

Sarmast: Mentioning IGDS brings up the fact that your social attempts in addition to your considerable artistic background put you in a position of custodianship for graphic design in Iranian. The direction and innovation you have brought to graphic design has been successful, and I am glad, as are many other colleagues in IGDS. But sometimes there are some questions. Here is an opportunity for you to describe your reasons for putting so much time, effort,

Figure 6
Key frame picture for an animation film,
1960s.



and hope into this society, which I feel you have taken as the most important social mission in your life. Please tell us more about this.

Momayez:What I can add to what I said previously is that what my colleagues and I have started is somehow an experience related to the local situation and possibilities. It might not be the only way to establish a professional identity for graphic designers, and look after their social benefits and rights as a group.

Now it is up to other designers to step in and try other ways. All these attempts end up improving the position of graphic design and designers as a whole, and not as separate individuals.

Sarmast: I will put aside many questions that I wanted to ask, and will finish this interview with a simple question that may be difficult to answer. I am asking you as a world-renowned graphic designer, who is practicing in a not-so-international society, "What is graphic design?"

Momayez: As you mentioned yourself, answering this question seems to be easy. When you check out "design" in different encyclopedias, you can see how accurately it's explained. But is that enough? I think that each designer has his or her own definition of this word, based on personal experience and field of practice. Their understanding of this word relates to their knowledge in this field. In one of your previous questions, you pointed to a new understanding and a new field of practice in graphic design. That is right, and that's why I think we should expect people to rely on their own understanding of this word. Why not put this question to your readers. Ask them: "What is graphic design?"

Sarmast: Thank you very much for your time.