

# STEP

INSIDE DESIGN

## THE TYPE ISSUE

ONLINE  
TIPS

CHOOSING  
THE RIGHT  
TYPE



DIDOT, F.



PUTERSCHEIN'S  
BEST AND  
WORST

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FORBIDDEN  
FRUTIGER-  
SELLING  
LINGERIE  
IN SAUDI  
ARABIA



CASSANDRE, A.



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DESIGN FROM THE INSIDE OUT

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# Perdu project

melding fonts, lingerie, and Saudi culture

BY MARGO CHASE

IN THE NEARLY 20 YEARS THAT I HAVE BEEN RUNNING MY CREATIVE SERVICES AGENCY, ONE OF THE THINGS I'VE LEARNED IS THAT WHENEVER THE PHONE RINGS, A DOOR CAN OPEN. ONE OF THESE MAGICAL CALLS DELIVERED A TRULY CHALLENGING PROJECT. THE PERSON ON THE OTHER END, EHAB MASHAT, WANTED US TO CREATE THE BRAND IDENTITY FOR A NEW LINGERIE STORE IN JEDDAH, SAUDI ARABIA.

THE CHALLENGE CAME ON MANY LEVELS. THE BIGGEST PART WAS CONCEPTUAL—HOW DO YOU BRAND A LINGERIE STORE IN A COUNTRY WHERE NO IMAGES OF WOMEN CAN BE SHOWN? NOT AN EYE, NOT EVEN A SQUARE INCH OF SKIN—I COULD NOT THINK OF A PRECEDENT. YET MASHAT KEPT INSISTING THAT HE WANTED HIS STORE TO BE LIKE VICTORIA'S SECRET.

AT THE SAME TIME, THERE WAS A HUGE LEARNING CURVE LOOMING FOR MY TEAM AND ME. MOST OF US KNEW VERY LITTLE ABOUT ARABIC CULTURE.

## WHAT'S IN A NAME?

First we had to find a name. Because the client's goal was eventually to expand the brand, we needed a name that could be used internationally. Mashat also wanted it to sound French or exotic. We came up with Lingerie Perdu. *Lingerie* is feminine in French, while *Perdu* is the masculine form of "lost" or "hidden." This worked because one of the themes we were developing was the suggestion of what is hidden underneath. *Perdu* being in the masculine form also suggests that it is the man who is lost when he is faced with beautiful lingerie.

Since no images of women were permissible, we chose to use type, color, and language to communicate the sensual and alluring nature of the products.

## BILINGUAL CHALLENGE

Next came the logo, which had to be bilingual. The characters under the word *lingerie* spell the Arabic word for *perdu*. As is usual for us, the typography we created for this client is custom-designed. The letterforms in the logo guided our development of a bilingual typeface. Any Latin-based typeface can be multilingual among European languages with the addition of a few diacriticals, but Arabic/English is an entirely different deal. The basic character shapes had to be compatible with both English and Arabic, even though the Arabic reads in the opposite direction. Fortunately for us, we have a native Arabic speaker on staff. The typeface is single weight, all lowercase.

We did a lot of research into Saudi Arabia's culture, discovering that the language of Arabic poetry and music is seductive and sensual. While you can't show a suggestive image, it is permissible to talk about sex. To go with the sexy copy, we made the shape and forms of the alphabet graceful and sensual.

I created the English characters first, then drew the Arabic letterforms using other Arabic typefaces as reference for the basic shapes. Our translator checked my letterforms to make sure they were clear, legible, and read well when set in words and phrases. It's an interesting challenge to draw characters for a language you don't know. In a way it's better: I wasn't distracted by meaning, so I could focus completely on the flow of the type.



THESE CUSTOM-FROSTED PVC GIFT BAGS HIDE THE EXACT NATURE OF WHAT'S INSIDE WHILE ALLOWING COLORS TO SHOW THROUGH.



LINGERIE PERDU'S LARGE CENTRAL DISPLAY WALL WITH SEASONAL BANNER GRAPHICS IS SEEN FROM THE STREET THROUGH THE 27-FOOT-HIGH GLASS FRONT. THE BANNER CONTAINS EXCERPTS FROM SENSUAL ARABIC POETRY, AND THE WALL IS ESPECIALLY STRIKING AT NIGHT WITH A DAZZLING BRIGHT GLOW.

This project's most difficult aspect was thinking backwards. Since Arabic reads from right to left, the letter shapes had to flow in that direction while working in harmony with the English letterforms, which go left to right.

For the content we turned again to Arabic poetry, which is explicit, erotic, and much more suggestive than photography is allowed to be in this culture. Since we could not show sexual imagery, we talked about it with pieces of this wonderful literature and poetry.

#### SAUDI CHALLENGE

Another challenge was dealing with the level of sophistication in the Saudi Arabian market. Many women there are wealthy—they frequently travel to Europe to shop, and they understand fashion. We needed to create a brand that looked and felt authentically European, without violating the laws and customs of Saudi Arabia. (Wealthy Saudi women traveling to Europe often change clothes in the restroom on the airplane. They go in wearing the traditional all-covering *abayah* and come out in upscale western clothes, so when they land in Paris they blend in.)

We also had to accomplish this with the understanding that Saudis tend to view their own businesses as provincial and offering lower quality products. Mashat wanted to separate his store from this attitude by creating a brand that looked and felt foreign, while addressing the needs of his customers like no foreign brand has.

The font and visual representations led the design of the mannequins, hangers, store fixtures, signage, custom furniture, counters, and lighting. Everything related to the look and feel of the alphabet, resulting in a store that created the experience Mashat was seeking.

#### POLITICS AND WAR

Yet another obstacle was political. Just as we were in the process of shipping everything to Jeddah, the 9/11 disaster occurred. All shipping to the Middle East came to a halt, and we had several crates of materials held up in Zurich. They were literally out on the tarmac with no way for us to retrieve them. Eventually we were able to have them shipped back to the U.S., where they were unpacked, inspected, and reshipped. They could not go to Jeddah this time, but were shipped to Riyadh—on the other side of the country—and finally trucked to their destination.

Another result of the 9/11 attacks, with political tensions intensified, was that the Saudi government became more cautious about foreign imports. Our super-stylized mannequins, which we had carefully designed to hold lingerie beautifully while not bearing much resemblance to women, were held in customs in Riyadh for six months while officials discussed whether or not they were too suggestive.

#### BIG RISKS=BIG SUCCESSES

Mashat took a big risk opening a lingerie store on this scale. It is a tribute to his courage and his belief that changes need to happen in Saudi Arabia to allow the country to compete with the rest of the world. Lingerie Perdu's prosperity suggests that our design successfully solved his numerous and complicated concerns while being sensitive and respectful of both the cultural issues and his business objectives. And we thought the two could never meet.

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LINGERIE *perdu*  
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TOP: INTERIOR VIEW OF THE DOWNSTAIRS LOUNGE AREA AND CUSTOM-DESIGNED DISPLAY FURNITURE. DURATRANS SECTION DIVIDERS CAN BE SEEN IN THE BACKGROUND. CENTER: ONE OF A SERIES OF LINGERIE PERDU BUSINESS CARDS. BOTTOM RIGHT: TWO OF THE DURATRANS PANELS USED TO SEPARATE SECTIONS OF THE STORE. BOTTOM LEFT: BILINGUAL STORE LOGO.