

An Artwork in Detail : 'Main' by Farid Belkahia

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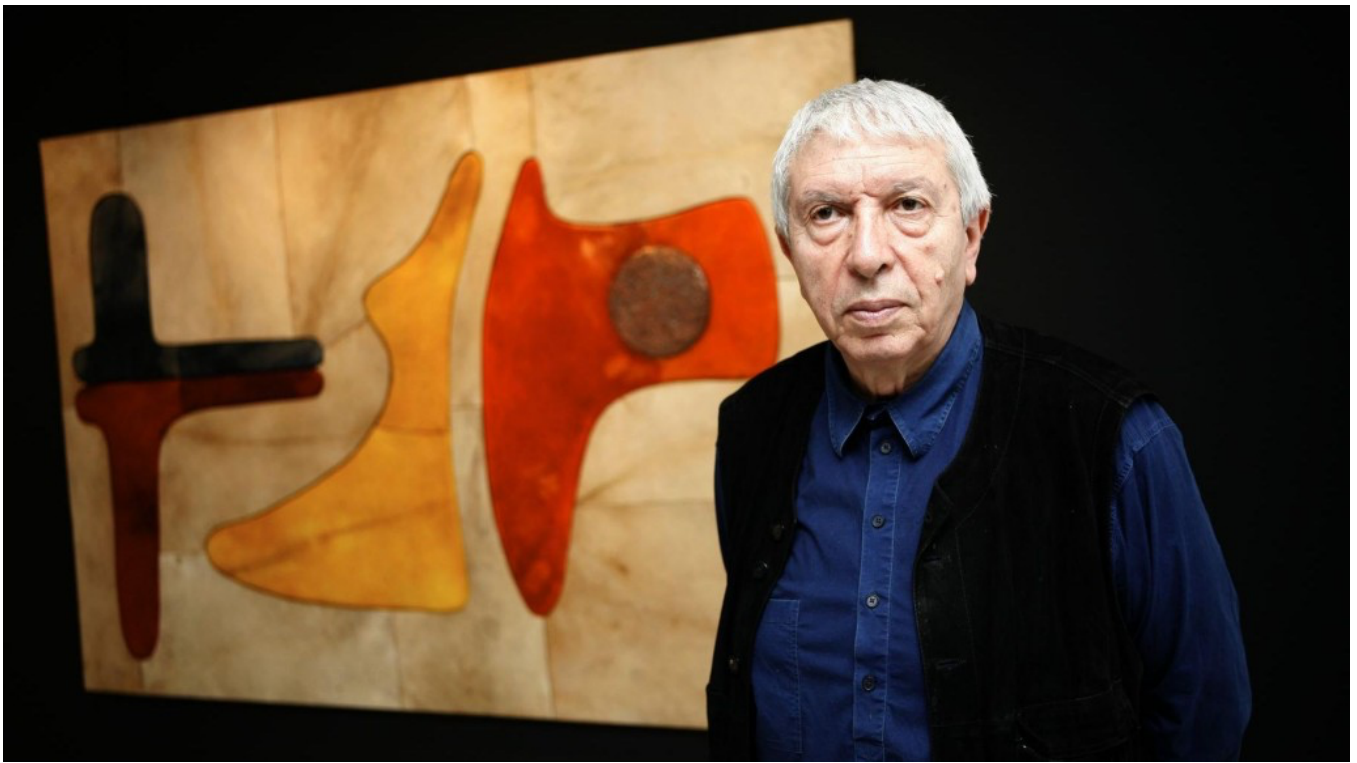
Due to so many questions and requests during the years of people wanting to 'understand' art, wanting to know more about the contemporary art scene or simply recognise some of the most authentic , exclusive, eye opening art works out there. I chose to introduce a new series of posts called 'An Artwork in detail' , where you will discover one artist and one artwork at a time! Get to know when and why they did a certain piece, the details that escapes you at first glance, their emotional , physical and environmental circumstances when they created the work and indubitably, their genius!

I hope you will love these artworks and artists as much as I do!

The Artist: *Farid Belkahia (1934- 2014)*

” Henna, skin, these are my memories, my grandmother, the environment in which I grew up in, I know these smells . “

– **Farid Belkahia**



Farid Belkahia is considered one of the pioneers in contemporary Moroccan art! He represents a movement that is committed to promoting an independent artistic style from the colonial 'Orientalism' and plunges the viewer through a myriad of Berber symbols and motifs that embodies to Belkahia a more authentic Morocco.

A native of Marrakech, he wanted to be the living memory that tells " *the path of the Moroccan man through tradition* ". This obsession has led, in the late 1960s, in creating workshops that teach the antiquity of local craftsmanship, from carpets and jewellery to ceramics and pottery.

In this spirit, he formed in 1969 his first 'art street' exhibition in the market square of Jemaa el-Fnaa to convey the idea that "*modernity is perceptible only from old values* ". For this exhibition, he used natural materials such as leaves, red and yellow copper that was folded, hammered and then fixed on wood; breaking the ties permanently with his "expressionist period" of the 1950s marked by his oil based portraits.

His works since then relied exclusively on local materials, replacing chemical paints with natural dyes, and using surfaces other than canvas

such as copper, pottery, wood, handmade paper, and lamb skins. He devoted his practice to the exploration of archaic scripts, Sufi mysticism and, above all, the rich folkloric heritage of Berber culture. He disregarded the standard four sided canvas by stretching irregular surfaces of animal skin on organically shaped frames, incorporated metal and other indigenous materials and techniques in emulation of the Moroccan artisan.

” There is not a single skin that is similar to another. Their biological composition, as in humans, is unique. This, even a very sophisticated paper can not offer it to you ” says Farid Belkahia in the biography written by his wife, Rajae Benchemsi.

Raw and authentic Belkahia imposed his own style differentiating him from others. His approach is a reflection of a philosopher dealing with metaphysical questions , his works are enigmatic but almost familiar . The legacy that Belkahia left to the Arab world and to Morocco in particular is immense : Priceless works and above all a state of mind.

The Artwork: *‘Main’ (Dye and Henna on Skin, 152 x 130 cm)*



What is 'Main' and why is it an important aspect of Belkahlia's work?

“Main” means ‘Hand’ in French and is part of a series of leather canvases, based on the form of large hands created by the artist in the 1980's.

The Hand motif , Hand of Fatimah or *khmasa* (which means five in arabic) represents the five most important women in human history (Eve wife of Adam , Sarah wife of prophet Abraham, Asiya wife of the Pharaoh at the time of Moses , Mary mother of Jesus and Fatima the Prophet Muhammad's daughter) and was originally used to protect women, boost

fertility and lactation, promote healthy pregnancies and strengthen the weak.

It is now mostly valued as a protective symbol against the 'evil eye' in most, if not all North African countries! By having the right palm open, it facilitates the blocking and deflecting of energy from a negative gaze .

What do the symbols and geometric details on the hand represents?

These are a reproduction of the signs and symbols woven by women into [Amazigh](#) (Berber) textiles, tattooed on Amazigh women's foreheads, and painted on Amazigh women's ceramics.

Belkahia expressly incorporated the [Tifinagh](#) script, which is an Amazigh writing form believed to be related to the ancient Punic script and was once commonly used throughout North Africa from Libya to the Canary islands. The script was no longer used in the Maghreb after the 3rd century A.D. but a form of this ancient script survives today among the [Tuareg](#).

Tifinagh letters consist of circles and geometric symbols and are used today by women and blacksmiths to write short intimate messages on jewelry and other household items. Belkahia blended the Tifinagh letters with similar geometric and circular forms, such as repeating triangles, diamond shapes, spirals, arrows and the eye motifs.

He purposefully removed the script from its historical and cultural origins to distance himself from the politics of the Amazigh movement.

What was his inspiration?

The influence of women's artistic production on Belkahia's art can be seen best here, in this form of a large hand. 'Main' is decorated with black, deep red, and orange geometric motifs, reminiscent of Moroccan women's hennah patterns.

In fact, Belkahia stated that he so accurately and meticalously reproduced these designs that Moroccan women were typically shocked that a man, rather than a woman, produced these works!

Where can I see more of his works?

A significant number of his works can be found in private collections, institutions and museums in Morocco and abroad. It is currently on display at the Museum Mohammed VI in Rabat as part of the exhibition “[100 years of pictorial creation](#)” and at the Arab world Institute’s exhibition “[Contemporary Morocco](#)” in Paris.

Bisous x