

Visual Arts in the Kingdom of Morocco

Samir El Azhar

In this volume, *Visual Arts in the Kingdom of Morocco*, Moulim El Aroussi traces the history and evolution of modern and contemporary art in Morocco. It is presented as a resource for artists, academics and researchers. The author asks a series of pertinent questions about the beginnings of Moroccan visual arts, their relationship to the European painting tradition of depicting non-Europeans and their environments (Orientalism) and their departure from it. This review is devoted to finding answers to the problematics raised at the beginning of the book; notably, what do we mean by Moroccan visual arts? Who can be named as Moroccan artists? Is it only those born and bred in Morocco or does it include expatriates raised and educated abroad? What are the stages that Moroccan visual arts went through? What were the art movements that influenced Moroccan visual arts?

The volume comprises three chapters: 'Beginnings: History and Evolution'; 'Foundation: Beginning of Modernism (1950–1970)'; and 'Rooting'. Each is divided into three sub-chapters. I will outline the book's main arguments and ideas in an attempt to introduce its contents to the Anglophone readership (only published in Arabic at present). I hope that this provides another perspective on Moroccan visual arts as perceived by a Moroccan critic, and in so doing questions some ideas related to Orientalism in particular. I also hope that this review will trigger more translation into English of this kind of critical writing.

BEGINNINGS: HISTORY AND EVOLUTION

Orientalists in Morocco

Since the arrival of Eugene Delacroix in 1832 as part of a diplomatic mission to Morocco, shortly after the French conquered Algeria, Morocco witnessed successive visits of European and Western painters known as Orientalists. These artists painted different aspects of Morocco, including its natural scenery, social life, customs, traditional festivals, architecture and landscapes. Eugene Delacroix confessed that after his visit to Morocco he had undergone a complete change. He came to Morocco to look for new, strange, and fantastic topics that would relieve him of the monotony of art in France and Europe. Not only did he discover these new topics but also a new technique. While painting natural scenes in Morocco, Delacroix noticed that the shadows of the things he was painting were not necessarily black, as it was formerly believed, but were in fact composed of different colours.

Orientalist painters believed that Morocco was still a 'virgin land' that preserved its natural and 'savage' state of being, the only Arab and Muslim state that, according to them, was not 'stained' by the Ottoman Turkish culture. Writing to one of his friends, Delacroix described Moroccan people 'as a thousand times nearer/closer to nature'.¹ Attracted by these assumptions, Orientalists flocked to Morocco to explore this country that was perceived to be not yet affected by Western civilisation. These painters included Stefano Ussi from Italy, Mariano Fortuny and Mariano Bertuchi from Spain, Hercules Brabazon from England, Robert David from Wales, Tiffany from US, Pavel Fedotov from Russia, and Antonine Blanchard, Eugene Delacroix, Horace Vernet, Renoir, Alfred Stevens, Henri Matisse and Jacques Majorelle from France. Most, if not all, of the Orientalists were essentially interested in discovering the primitive and 'savage' aspects of Moroccan life that Delacroix painted in the nineteenth century, and which he brought home with

him. Driven by this strong desire to paint an 'exotic' world, some of these Orientalists painted the natural, architectural and social life of people outdoors in public places and traditional markets. However, the major challenge they faced was that Moroccans did not allow these Orientalists to come inside their home and paint either portraits of themselves or of their women. Therefore, in some cases, these Orientalists created scenes, far from the reality of daily life, which appealed to the fantasies of Europeans, of the Harem, populated by women, especially dark skinned and half naked.

Sources of Moroccan Visual Art

In an attempt to investigate the sources of Moroccan visual art the author finds it necessary to refer to the Moroccan craftsmen who produced objects for everyday use rather than artistic forms for contemplation and artistic enjoyment. Some of these handicrafts would inspire both the early Moroccan painters as well as the contemporary ones later on. The following examples show that the transition from handicrafts to visual art was smooth because Moroccan craftsmen possessed the techniques as well as the competence to embark upon a new artistic experience. Firstly, Moroccan architecture included specific motifs and colours. This kind of architecture was mostly characterised by the Andalusian heritage that Moroccans inherited and developed. It is distinct from its counterparts in other Arab countries that were influenced by the Ottoman Empire. The Moroccan mosaics took specific forms and colours that decorated the surface of a wall or floor. Secondly, books and manuscripts were decorated with beautiful designs and calligraphy. Moroccan calligraphers displayed their talent and skill using different colours and shapes to make these books attractive. Thirdly, jewellery included engraved symbols and signs that were not merely seen as ornaments but also carried social and sometimes metaphysical messages. Fourthly, metal and wooden objects and utensils were utility objects but often embodied beautiful shapes and designs. These objects were often used either for religious purposes, for profane everyday use or on special occasions; all deliberately or inadvertently highlighted the craftsmanship and experience of Moroccan engravers. Fifthly, Moroccan handmade carpets were created in a variety of styles, designs and colours. Each region, tribe or ethnic group possessed and continues to have its own motifs and symbols. Women who made these carpets were usually inspired by the traditional tattoos and henna designs they put on their hands and feet. Finally, primary and secondary school books were illustrated by pictures drawn by well-known artists such as Mohamed Chabaa in the Arabic books and Jean Gaston Mantel in the French books. These illustrations influenced some school boys and girls and inspired them to pursue an artistic education.

Transition from Traditional Crafts to Easel Painting (Naive Art and Popular Culture)

According to El Aroussi, artistic production in Morocco, in the fullest sense of the word, may have started when the first painting was made for entertainment and personal taste. All of these drawings, paintings, designs, motifs and ornaments already referred to in the previous chapter began as traditional handicrafts, ordinary items with utilitarian uses designed to look attractive. They were not intended for aesthetic enjoyment in and of themselves. In this respect one should identify what was the first independent painting in Morocco that was produced purely for artistic appreciation rather than utility or other functions.

If Orientalist painters were related to Morocco by virtue of their subjects and had been affected by the country's natural, human and physical environment, there was a group of Moroccan artists who practiced painting either because of their repeated encounters with these Orientalists or because they directly assisted them. These Moroccan painters neither had any formal schooling nor any artistic education or culture. Most of them were unable to read and write and were mostly from the lower social classes whose parents were servants in European households. Others were sons and daughters of Moroccan citizens collaborating with the colonial powers in Morocco. For example,

Maryam Amezian's father was an officer in the Spanish army. Hassan Laglaoui's father was a traitor who helped France to dethrone the Moroccan King, Mohamed V Farid Belkahia's father was a clerk in the French administration who opened his house to European artists visiting Marrakech.

Out of this social and historical context Moroccan visual arts were born. There is reason to believe that the first Moroccan artist to sign his paintings was Mohamed Ben Allal from Marrakech when he worked as a servant for the French painter Jacques Azema (1910–1979) who encouraged him to paint. In this regard, Jacques Azema stated:

Mohamed Ben Allal was a gallant man who came from the south of Morocco. He embodied all the values of the Saharan society. I detected in his eyes a desire to express his feelings through art, especially when he saw me paint. I felt that this rebellious soul was looking for freedom. But Islamic traditions which forbade drawing did not allow him to do so. I bought him some paint and papers and asked him to express his emotions and to take no heed of traditions. He did not paint in my presence. However, after I had come back the following day, my surprise was great when I found some masterworks devoid of pretentiousness and free from education.ⁱⁱ

Similar to the experience of Ben Allal were those of Moulay Ahmad Drissi and Chaabia Tatal who were initiated to painting by their European colonial masters. These Moroccan painters perpetuated the fantastic and ethnographic themes that these Europeans were interested in. More important than these early works was the emergence of the naïve artistic tradition whose practitioners came from the lower social classes and from the production of traditional handicrafts. They found it easier to adapt their skills and talent to easel painting. Regardless of its themes and its relation to foreigners, the naïve trend is believed to be a truly indigenous product and central in understanding Moroccan intellectual and artistic history.

This transition from the creation of utilitarian material culture to producing artwork on the easel took place in different realms. At one level, craftsmen, who had never been to school and were encouraged by Europeans to paint, became artists; for example, Ben Allal, Chaabia, Miloud El Abiad, El Wardiri and Fatima Hassan. A second group were the sons and daughters of parents who collaborated with the colonial powers. This group went to school and were familiar with modern art, and not only the Orientalist art that appealed to the fantastic. Maryam Amazian and Hassan Laglaoui are good examples of this group. The third wave was a group of young Moroccan artists who were acquainted with Europeans that denounced colonialism and advocated their right to achieve independence. For example, Farid Belkahia was a friend to Nicolas De Stael (1914–1955), a French painter of Russian origin who lived in Morocco in 1936, and Jilali El Gharbaoui who studied European modernists.

FOUNDATION: BEGINNING OF MODERNISM (1950–1970)

The 1950s witnessed the emergence of modernism in Moroccan visual arts. Unlike their predecessors, the new wave of Moroccan painters became fully aware that painting was an act of expressing the individual's psychological, emotional and intellectual state. When the painter signed his own painting, he then translated his awareness of his individuality into art.

First Signs of Moroccan Artistic Modernism

Formal artistic education made the second generation of Moroccan artists aware of the differences between themselves and the foreign Orientalist painters who were interested only in fantastic and exotic themes depicting Morocco as a land of sex, blood, brutality and the subordination of women. Political independence went hand in hand with the independence of the individual through art. This

awareness coincided with the start of the first operations of the Moroccan liberation army, and with public demonstrations calling for the independence of the country. In 1953, Farid Belkahia painted his self-portrait in Marrakech. This symbolic artistic act translated his strong desire, on the one hand, to affirm his individuality from the family and the tribe, and, on the other, to express his nation's desire to achieve independence from French and Spanish colonialism. This movement, characterised by awareness of individuality and independence from outside forces, took approximately ten years. Its outstanding figures were Mohamed El Mlihi, Mohamad Chabaa, Saad Ben El Saffage, El Mekki Mghara, Ahmad El Charkaoui and Mohamed Karim.

Artistic Education in Morocco

Two art schools played a crucial role in the transition of Moroccan visual arts towards modernism. Schools in Tetouan and Casablanca made major contributions to Moroccan modern visual arts and encouraged young Moroccan artists to depart from colonial art, to be more creative and to look for new ways to strengthen the Moroccan character of their work. The School of the 'Beaux Arts' in Tetouan was established under the Spanish colonial rule by Mariano Bertuchi in 1945. It acquired a new name after the independence of the country 'the National School of the "Beaux Arts"', and its new premises were inaugurated by King Mohamed V in 1957. The teaching staff was essentially composed of Moroccan artists who had studied in art schools in Spain and had a mission to consolidate Moroccan artistic identity. Moroccan artists who graduated from this school developed and enriched visual arts in Morocco in the 1970s and 1980s.

The second school, the 'Beaux Arts' of Casablanca, was built by the French authorities in 1950, and was administered by the local Council of the city of Casablanca. Under the French Protectorate, both the administrative and the teaching staff were exclusively French. Moreover, access to this school was limited to French and Europeans who settled in Casablanca after World War II. After Moroccan Independence in 1956, a new Moroccan staff, who had studied abroad, was assigned the duty to establish new curricula that stressed the Moroccan culture rooted in Amazigh, Arab, Andalusian and African contexts. A number of Moroccan artists who graduated from this school achieved national and international fame in the 1960s and 1970s.

ROOTING

A Return to Local Materials and Forms

In their attempt to depart from European ways and methods, Moroccan artists returned to the rich and varied experiences of the craftsmen in Morocco. Farid Belkahia used brass, not to make utilitarian objects, but to create new artworks. Also, instead of the traditional paper and paint, he used goat and sheep skins and henna as the medium for artistic symbols and forms. Similarly, Mohamed Lamlihi was inspired by the Moroccan handmade carpets, incorporating their geometry and symbols into his paintings. Some artists were interested in the Amazigh symbols, as a component of Moroccan culture, to which they added sub-Saharan and African symbols to show their multi-dimensional Moroccan identity. Others preferred to deal with Arabic calligraphy and transcended its traditional utilitarian usage making it worthy of artistic contemplation. All of these endeavours gave Moroccan painting of this time a distinctive feature: in their combination of the old and new, these paintings appealed, on the one hand, to the Moroccan audience, who were pleased to identify their own visual culture, and to Europeans who recognised these works as contemporary art.

Moroccan Abstract Art

Since the first abstract painting by Ahmad El Charkaoui in 1952 Moroccan artists also created abstract art as a reaction to colonial, folkloric, and naïve art. Moroccan contemporary artists justified the choice to reject these art forms in the following arguments. First, expressionism was colonial art that presented a negative and distorted image of Morocco. Second, naïve art was created by the colonial power and its representatives in the country as a tool so that Morocco would remain under-developed. Third, Moroccan contemporary artists believed in a progressive social and intellectual project that would liberate both the country and the minds of the people.

The Generation of the Seventies

Young Moroccan artists who were born in the 1970s and attended either Moroccan or European schools embarked on a new artistic experience in the 1980s. Some of the artists studied contemporary art formally while others possessed little formal education; this group included Ahmad Ben Smail, Hassan Bourkia, El Mahi Binbin, Kanza Benjalloun, Mohamad El Morabiti, Moad El Jabari and others. What characterised all of these artists' work was a combination of all methods and forms. For example, Kanza Benjalloun shifted from abstract art to more daring contemporary art and vice versa.

Photographic Art in the Kingdom of Morocco

Until the 1970s photography was not considered an art form but merely a means used to document private occasions, such as weddings and family celebrations, and used in certain professions such as journalism. However, a turning point in how photography was viewed occurred in 1974. Mohamed Ben Aissa, a former official in the United Nations in New York – who would later become Minister of Culture and then Minister of Foreign Affairs in Morocco – organised the first photography exhibition in Rabat. He displayed a collection of his childhood photos, demonstrating to artists and the public that photos could be used as a medium to tell a story and express aesthetic beauty. In no less than a decade photography became an art that was used not only for documentation but also for aesthetic pleasure in the same way that other visual arts had functioned earlier.

Contemporary Art (1990–2013)

A new group of Moroccan contemporary artists emerged between 1990 and 2013. This group were brought together by their sharp criticism of society and its institutions, and in their belief that any item could be art. From mere electrical cables and stones to technological or medical equipment, all these materials were understood by this group as appropriate for artistic creation. To illustrate the idea several examples are cited of these Moroccan contemporary artists and their sharp social and political critiques. Hassan Eddarssi devoted his energy to drawing people's and the authorities' attention to taking care of one of the Kingdom's ancient zoos. To this end he made a sample miniature of Ain Sbaa Zoo which he displayed in a number of international art venues. This miniature was later acquired by the Centre George Pompidou in Paris. Fouzi Laatriss was interested in the social and intellectual environment from an anthropological standpoint. He asked artists not to take everything for granted but to question everything they see or use. With the rise of conservatism and the risk of suppressing individual freedoms during this period, El Aroussi points out that Kanza Ben Jalloun devoted all her works to advocating for greater freedom.

Visual Arts in the Kingdom of Morocco is a comprehensive book that provides a social and intellectual history of artistic creation in Morocco. It is well-researched and provides critical analysis of the birth and development of Moroccan visual arts, especially pertaining to their relationship to colonialism.

Samir El Azhar is an Associate Professor in Hassan II University in Casablanca, Morocco, and the Coordinator of the Ben M'sik Community Museum. He edited *Crossing Borders: A Transatlantic Collaboration* (2011) and *Ben M'sik Community Museum: Building Bridges* (2012). He co-authored 'Exploring Identities: Public History in a Cross-Cultural Context', in *The Public Historian* (2012) and 'The Ben M'sik Community Museum: Beyond Cultural Boundaries', in *Museums in a Global Context: National Identity, International Understanding* (2013). He has presented papers at several national and international conferences. He presently occupies the post of Secretary General of the Moroccan Association for Cultural Policies.

Moulim El Aroussi, *Visual Arts in the Kingdom of Morocco*, The Arab League's Educational, Cultural and Scientific Organization, 116 illustrations, 298 pp, 2015

ⁱ Moulim El Aroussi, *Visual Arts in the Kingdom of Morocco*, The Arab League's Educational, Cultural and Scientific Organization, 2015, p 18

ⁱⁱ Cited in Moulim El Aroussi, *Visual Arts in the Kingdom of Morocco*, p 88