


The Magic of Signs and Patterns in North African Art

Works of Art



Essay

North Africa, or the Maghrib, comprises Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia, and Libya. Art of the Maghrib is distinguished by a mystical quality drawing on the region's symbols and signs that originate in pre-Islamic Berber motifs and a rich Islamic heritage introduced to the region by Arabs in the seventh century. From the Fezzan and Tassili petroglyphs in Libya and Algeria to the Neolithic paintings of Morocco, North African artists have a large reservoir of art that continues to influence their work. One example of such influence is found in the engravings of Tunisian artist Gouider Triki  (born 1949) with suggestions of the supernatural found in ancient rock paintings.

Artists also make use of traditional signs and symbols as a metaphor for colonial policies that imposed foreign languages and cultures and the subsequent curtailment of liberties in the postcolonial era. An imaginative discourse of signs often undercuts, disrupts, and subverts the rational dictum of language that has become a forbidden medium for free expression. For example, letters take on new meaning in the work of Algerian artist Rachid Koraïchi (born 1947), who draws on poetry in an illegible Arabic script using reverse mirror imagery; having fled persecution in his native Algeria, Koraïchi turns the alphabet into a symbol of protest. Koraïchi and other North African artists explore the formal dimension of signs, symbols, and the Berber alphabet, invoking their aesthetic qualities, using them in structural compositions or expanding on their mystical properties by synthesizing new symbols from old forms.

Traditionally, symbols and signs are found in pottery, textiles, carved or painted wood, leather works, jewelry, amulets, and tattoos. Algeria's Kabyle women paint with their fingers on pottery and upon the walls of their village homes; many of their shapes and symbols have a marked resemblance to Neolithic pottery found in the region. Believed to carry healing qualities or to embody magical attributes that guard against misfortune and the evil eye, these signs and symbols assume new forms and meanings in contemporary art. By combining signs with magical numbers

or stylizing traditional symbols, contemporary artists tap the unconscious to create abstract work that references the past and present. On several visits to North Africa, German artist Paul Klee was inspired by these mystical shapes and incorporated signs, number, and letters into his work; his interpretation of line and color would in turn influence several Maghribi artists.

Islamic art and architecture flourished in the Maghrib, where some of the earliest examples are found in Fez, Qairouan, Meknas, and Algiers. With the exception of Morocco, and to a lesser extent Tunisia and Algeria, by the mid-sixteenth century Islamic art centers were concentrated in non-Arab countries. In the twentieth century, Moroccan artisans continued to preserve traditional crafts with distinctive Andalusian influences. The Moroccan craftsman is referred to respectfully as *mu'alim*, or master artisan; his skills are valued by modern artists who borrow freely from traditional crafts, reformulating old techniques and incorporating them into their work.

Farid Belkahia ☞ (born 1934) represents a movement in Moroccan art that questions modern artistic references. He relies 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. The stretched irregular or shaped surfaces of skin form the background to gargantuan drawings of signs and symbols of an archaic language. In particular, Belkahia uses magical numbers such as five or *khmasa*, representing the hand of Fatima (the Prophet Muhammad's daughter), a protective symbol against the evil eye. Other commonly used signs and symbols are lozenges, crescents, stars, diamonds, triangles, dots, and odd numbers or their multiple.

Ahmed Cherkaoui ☞ (1934–1967), one of the foremost abstract artists in Morocco, combines the repetitive Islamic style with abstract signs and symbols, and uses bright colors of greens, red, blue, and yellow to contrast with the white background. Similar brilliant colors are used by many self-taught artists of the Maghrib, now considered to have produced the most accomplished naive art in the twentieth century. For example, Algerian artist Baya Mahieddine ☞ (1931–1999), whose dreamlike imagery is based on mysticism and magic, used stylized fish and grapes to celebrate a cycle of life in which women live with imaginary animals. The art of North Africa's self-taught artists is neither strictly traditional nor Western in style; rather, there is a fusion of elements transcending time and place.

The dense repetitive geometric patterns typical of North African ceramics is infused with new significance in the installation *Four Generations of Women* by French-born Algerian artist Zineb Sedira (born 1963). Representing a generation of North African artists born in France and living in the West, Sedira examines the shifting of identities and questions preconceived notions of East and West by challenging both Western and Islamic perceptions of gender and Islamic art. Within what might initially be construed as mundane repetition of Islamic geometric designs are faces of women entrapped in a pattern that forms a matrilineal chain incorporating human figures within a predominantly nonfigurative Islamic aesthetic.

Glossary

Berber—Generic name given to the indigenous tribes of North Africa by the Greeks, who referred to all North Africans as “barbarians” or foreigners. The diverse indigenous people of North Africa refer to themselves as Amazigh (pl. Imazighen), meaning “noble ones.” Ethnically Caucasian, they are close to the Semites. Their language, Tamazigh, of the Afro-Asiatic group, uses Arabic, Hebrew, Latin, or Tamazigh letters. The Berber live in ten North African countries, including the Maghrib nations and Egypt. Most Berbers converted to Islam and adopted Arab/Islamic traditions. The majority of Berber live in Morocco and Algeria in the regions of the Atlas Mountains and the Sahara Desert.

Kabyle—Berber tribe originating in the rugged northeastern mountain region of Algeria. They speak the Kabyle Berber dialect.

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Further Reading

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Additional Essays by Salwa Mikdadi

Mikdadi, Salwa. "Egyptian Modern Art." (October 2004)

Mikdadi, Salwa. "Modern Art in West Asia: Colonial to Post-colonial." (October 2004)

Mikdadi, Salwa. "West Asia: Ancient Legends, Modern Idioms." (October 2004)

Mikdadi, Salwa. "West Asia: Between Tradition and Modernity." (October 2004)

Mikdadi, Salwa. "West Asia: Postmodernism, the Diaspora, and Women Artists." (October 2004)
