

Baya, the queen



From 1948 to 1955, Pablo Picasso (1881-1973) lived in the small, scenic and historic town of Vallauris in south-eastern France. A site of clay production since Roman times, Vallauris was renowned for its arts and crafts, and more particularly pottery and ceramic. The Spanish master bought a former perfumery and transformed it into a studio, where he worked productively and created some of his best-known ceramic works.

It was here that in 1948 he met the Algerian artist Baya Mahieddine (1931-1998), who worked in a neighbouring studio. Baya was still in her teens while he was her senior by five decades. This, however, did not preclude both Picasso and Baya from appreciating, and even inspiring, each other's art.

"Picasso nurtured Baya's aesthetic - particularly her use of colour and line, while Baya's cultural vitality served as the creative lifeblood for Picasso," observes an art historian. "It was after this period that he went on to paint a series called *Women of Algiers* in the mid-1950s."

Orphaned at five

Born in Bordj El Kiffan, in eastern Algeria on the Mediterranean coast in 1931, Baya was orphaned as a child at age five and raised by her grandmother. When she was about 10, her talent for drawing and painting caught the attention of a French woman and her husband; they employed her as a domestic help and later became her adoptive parents. A few years later, the director of the Maeght gallery in Paris visited Algeria and chanced upon one of Baya's drawings. Impressed by her precocious talent, he organised an exhibition of her work in 1947 in Paris, when she was only 16.

The exhibition catalogue was penned by three writers, one of them being Andr © Breton (1896-1966), the famous French poet, writer and the founder of the surrealist movement. "And here, profiled on the fabric threads of the future's virgin, the hieratic figure of Baya, lifting a corner of the veil, revealing what the young united, harmonious, and loving world could be," wrote Breton. "I speak not as others have, to deplore an ending, but rather to promote a beginning, and at this beginning, Baya is queen... Baya, whose mission is to reinvigorate the meaning of those beautiful nostalgic words: happy Arabia. Baya holds and rekindles the golden bough."

Marriage & obscurity

In 1952, Baya married Algerian Andalusian composer Mahieddine Mahfoudh and went into domesticity for the next decade. She abandoned painting and raised a family of six children. It was only in 1967 that she returned to painting with renewed vigour, and began exhibiting regularly in group/solo shows in both Paris and Algiers.

Baya, whose rich and opulent paintings combined influences of traditional Algerian art, was completely self-taught. She never learned to even read or

write throughout her life. Painting was her passion and a release from a difficult life. "When I paint, I am happy, I am in another world, I forget everything. My paintings do not reflect the outside world, but of my own world within me... People ask me: why (do you paint) the same thing? I find that if I change, I will no longer be Baya."

Being untrained academically, Baya was not inclined to follow any specific rules or guidelines. Hers was a free spirit and many themes kept repeating in her work. Her preferred medium was gouache on paper; her work often featured women with long flowing dresses, children, birds, fish, flowers, fruit bowls, butterflies, peacock feathers, and musical instruments. Her penchant for bright colours, strong lines, flat background, and non-overlapping figures came out as opulent symbols or fantasies.

Critics during her time tended to see her work as naïve, primitive and surrealist art. Her name was even included in the General Dictionary of Surrealism and Its Surroundings. But Baya resented any kind of grouping or classification; she just wanted to paint things as they came to her in life as memory or fertile imagination.

"Baya's artwork, like Frida Kahlo's, expresses the richness of her own 'native' culture and art," observes Sana Makhoul, academic and curator of contemporary art. "Her paintings express the world around her. She is grounded in an Arabo-Berber culture in Algeria, a land of a multifold history, originally inhabited by native Berbers, followed by a long history of invaders; a complex history of traditions is made of different influences: mystic and pagan, conventional and transgressive, puritanical and sensual. The themes and motifs of Baya's native art are predominant in her paintings; their richly colourful and rhythmic patterns remind us of oriental carpets, traditional textiles, ceramics, gardens, and architecture. Her art is very detailed; her forms are constant, and her expressions are repetitive. Her use of repetition is similar to that of Islamic art; I also see similarities between her work and the tradition of mural paintings which adorn the

houses in North Africa, usually painted by women there."

Evidently, Baya was popular in her country. Some of her works were even featured on Algerian postage stamps. One such painting, *Protection de la mère et de L'Enfant*, which appeared as a stamp depicting a mother embracing her child, was an experience taken away from her by the death of her parents. Up until her death, (November 9, 1998), Baya lived in Bilda, Algeria, where she painted actively. Her paintings are also credited for encouraging dialogue concerning art genres, post- and anticolonial critiques, post-World War II political movements, feminist theories, and psychoanalytic readings.

"Baya Mahieddine, a surrealist painter from Algeria, almost always depicts scenes of encounter," writes literary critic and theorist Ranjana Khanna (*Algeria Cuts: Women and Representation, 1830 to the Present*). "When one attempts to find objects or images located in isolation in her paintings, the eye is constantly drawn to another figure, as if it is the imaginative potential of relationality that should guide our viewing. The figures encountered - human, vegetative, unconscious, animal, musical - open up a lesson in the ethics of reading for an encounter with alterity. This provides for an alternative model of reading paintings, the history of art, and the figure of woman."



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