

Baya: An Algerian Original

Posted on [December 3, 2014](#) by [Charles Michael Brush](#)



“Untitled”

One of Algeria’s best examples of creativity is an artist named Baya Mahieddine. Her art was something like an North African take on the work of artists like Picasso and Matisse. But she not only was influenced and for a time worked with Picasso, she also influenced him. In trying to create sometimes child-like designs Picasso found a muse.

Born in 1931 in the Algerian town of Bordj El-Kiffan, Baya was a very unique artist. Being orphaned at an early age, she was raised by her Grand Mother. Having never attended formal school, she was introduced to art at a young age while working in the house of Marguerite Benhoura, a French artist. Baya would later say that Marguerite was like an “adoptive parent”.

This provided her a disadvantage, as in her time lower class women were not often welcomed as artists, but entering into an upper-class world she was enabled the chance.

The French artist took note of Baya’s natural talent in sculpture and introduced her to painting. By age 16 she was having her first art exhibit in Paris which was arranged by her adoptive mother. Around this time she

also met Picasso.

She was commonly referred to as a surrealist and embraced by many of the movement like Andre Breton, but really Baya created her own regional form. This misinterpretation is due to Westerners viewing her work through their respective lenses.



“The Dancer in the Red Dress”

Her art often features child-like depictions of women, children, animals, flowers and musical instruments shown through odd, rhythmic shapes inspired by her youth. Her work was not bound by any rigid shapes or forms. Her pieces often dealt with the idea and depiction of the mother.

She was often embraced by Western art circles; she was courted by the Surrealists but also branded a naive artist. Her work does play almost like naive art, but she had had formal training which goes against such a categorization as that.

She was even invited to move to France at one point, yet Baya always asserted her Algerian heritage was the most important aspect of her work.

She was so committed to Algeria and its cause for independence that she stopped creating for a time during the revolution.

Her work exhibits very beautiful compositions that don't bother too much Western perspective, or try at all to look realistic. The people in her pieces are often drawn in very wavy shapes and forms. Her work exhibits much repetition which is an aspect of Muslim art. Some mind find her work reminiscent of work by Matisse, Picasso, or perhaps even Gauguin, but she created a world all her own. She depicted the world she was familiar with, she dealt with very personal themes like mothers and children. Baya was a true iconoclast.

It is great to know that she is so highly regarded in Algeria; her work has even been printed on stamps there. It is just so disappointing that she is barely known in the Western art world.

Sources:

<http://djamelmoktefi.blogspot.com/2007/09/baya.html>

http://www.jadaliyya.com/pages/index/18413/baya-mahieddine_a-profile-from-the-archives