

Baya

Baya Mahieddine: An Arab Woman Artist

by Sana` Makhoul

In 1947, Picasso took the sixteen year old Baya by the hand to his country home at Vallauris to watch her knead the clay and bring to life child-like shapes and figures. (1) Picasso, who stated that he spent his entire life learning how to paint like a child, was fascinated by the art and spontaneity of the Algerian woman artist, Baya Mahieddine. However, later on, in 1954, Algerian women became his exotic subjects in his series, *Women of Algiers*. I chose to undertake my research on Baya Mahieddine, an Arab woman artist of the twentieth century, for several reasons.

Baya was born at Bordj el-Kiffan in Algeria in 1931, to a poor family, and she never attended school. Canonized and conventional professional art making required some formal training. Similarly, class was a vital factor: professional art making was an accepted accomplishment for women from privileged upper-class families, but rarely for those from poorer families, who found it necessary to pursue more financially profitable professions. Poor women were and are making art, but not in the sense of being professional art makers; it is more often part of their daily life tradition and a tool to earn money for survival, and their work is usually considered craft rather than art by institutionalized definitions.

Baya, a poor servant and self-taught artist, produced a body of work that can be understood both from the perspective of class and her lack of formal education. Western colonizers directed art schools in Arab countries in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. In the early stages of modern Arab art movements, to aspire to become an artist was to learn the vocabulary of forms taught by Western artists who were the principal teachers in these schools. Despite the Arab world's own multi-layered artistic heritage and

traditions, this faculty consisted of European artists who taught the history of Western art beginning with the Renaissance. Students enrolled in these schools were taught by their European instructors to recognize and emulate the different styles of Western art, such as the Algerian artist, Mohammed Racim, who studied at L'Ecole Nationale des Beaux Arts d'Alger. Some Arab artists went to Europe in order to receive art training there, and came back to their countries as strong proponents of Western styles and aesthetics, such as the Syrian artist, Tawfiq Tariq, who studied in Paris. This type of training produced a first generation of Arab modern artists whose works followed the different "isms" of the West, including Orientalism. Yet, some Arab artists did not follow the Western art tradition; instead, they adapted their own native artistic traditions, and Baya was among them.

At age five, Baya lost both her parents, and her grandmother took care of her. In 1936 Marguerite Benhoura, (2) a French woman, fled to Algeria to escape World War II. Algeria was then a French colony. Marguerite met the ten-year-old Baya in her village, Bordj el-Kiffan, and offered Baya a room in her house. Baya refers to her as her "adoptive parent." (3) Being adopted into an upper-class family one can raise the question: why was not Baya sent to school? This mystery was resolved when I met Yoyo Maeght at the Maeght Gallery in Paris in January 1998. Yoyo told me that Baya worked as a servant for Marguerite. It is a reliable source, because Marguerite was Yoyo's godmother.

Baya started making animals and human figures out of clay before joining Marguerite's household. Marguerite was fascinated by Baya's art, and introduced her to gouache and watercolors. Baya spent most of her time painting with colors. In 1947, sixteen-year-old Baya mounted her first solo exhibition which was arranged by Marguerite. The exhibition took place at the Galerie Adrien Maeght in Paris. Baya's work was praised by the "pope of Surrealism," André Breton: "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... It is

undeniable that her gear of wonders, ...secretly takes part in extracts of perfumes from *Thousand and One Nights*... Baya, whose mission is to recharge with meaning the beautiful nostalgic words: *The Happy Arabia*." (4) Beyond the ostentatious "surrealist" essay of Breton on Baya, one can sense in his words the nostalgia for a certain Orient: not the actual existing Orient, but the imaginary, transformed by the eye of the Westerner, who can see only the "corner of the veil" lifted to reveal "*The Happy Arabia*," and "fairy tales" filled with "extracts of perfumes" from "*Thousand and One Nights*" that haunted the Orientalist's thought for a long time. Like Frida Kahlo, Baya Mahieddine was categorized as a surrealist artist, and her art was interpreted by the surrealists as a fantasy and fairy tale of unreal reality. They went as far as to include her name in the "*General Dictionary of Surrealism and Its Surroundings*." (5)

At the time of her exhibit in Paris in 1947, there was a resurgent interest in non-European arts: paintings, masks, textiles, and architecture. After World War II and Nazism, Europe experienced a deep crisis of civilization felt most strongly by intellectuals and artists. These circles were searching for a universal dimension of expression, but not without some attraction to the "exotic." This was quite obvious in Breton's essay on Baya's exhibit: "there is far away from this old world so-called civilized, this world running out of breath, this dragon with a hundred dried up breasts, this knocked down monster whose scales are decomposing... races, castes were pitted against one another, and the dragon could not stop vomiting the carnage and the oppression." (6) In addition to the national crisis of devastating war was the crisis of European colonialism and imperialism on a global scale, specifically the colonization of Algeria by France. I argue that French intellectual circles took a particular interest in Baya's work not only because of their specific interest in non-European art, but also because she is an Algerian woman. Maybe there is some feeling of guilt that is tangled in her case. Yet, Baya was exoticized by Westerners and was not mainstreamed.

The misinterpretation of Baya's art by Western and Arab art critics is another point that I would like to discuss here. Some Arab art critics echoed and followed Western interpretations of Baya's art as surrealist. Algerian art critic Benamar Mediene writes "...she stands at the heart of surrealism," (7) and Jordanian art critic Wijdan Ali notes that "Baya's style, based on childhood dreams and imagination, incorporated naïve, surrealist forms." (8) The use of Western definitions and terminology by Arab art critics to interpret art production by Arab artists demonstrates the colonized minds and thinking in a Neo-colonial (9) period.

Other art critics classify Baya's work as naïve art. Naïve art is defined as an art produced by self-taught artists who lack formal training. The popularity of Henri Rousseau as a naïve artist refutes this definition because he had some formal art training. We may need to redefine naïve art. Naïve painting may appear to be innocent and childlike, a deceptive perception because Western naïve artists borrow conventional composition and techniques from the history of art. Western modern artists' interest in naïve art stems from their fascination with "primitive" (12) cultures and the unconscious states of mind. Naïve painting is a by-product of "individual psyches rather than communal history." (13)

I argue that Baya's artwork, like Frida Kahlo's, expresses the richness of her own "native" (14) culture and art. Baya's paintings express the world around her, as she sometimes admits. (15) She is grounded in an Arabo-Berber culture in Algeria. Algeria, a land of a multifold history, originally was inhabited by native Berbers, followed by a long history of invaders such as Phoenicians, Romans, Vandals, Arabs, Ottomans, and French. 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 colorful and rhythmic patterns remind us of oriental carpets, traditional textiles, ceramics, gardens, and architecture. Baya's art is very detailed, using fish, fruit, butterflies, birds, flowers, vases, musical instruments,

women and children. Her forms are constant, and her expressions are repetitive with some variations from one painting to another. Her use of repetition is similar to that of Islamic art. Her husband, Hadj Mahieddine El Mahfoudh, a well-known Algerian musician, inspires musical instruments in her paintings. I see also similarities between her work and the tradition of mural paintings which adorn the houses in North Africa, usually painted by women there.

Baya's depiction of human figures in her painting challenges the preconception of a Western onlooker, who assumes that images of human figures are forbidden in 'Islamic art.' (16) I argue that this is a false Western myth about 'Islamic art.' Since its beginning 'Islamic art' depicted human figures, including nudes, in the secular realm, yet in the religious domain human figures were forbidden. Many religions prohibited the depiction of human figures in their religious sanctuaries, but for some reason, this idea is correlated only with Islamic art and became stereotypical of all art production by Muslims. In my opinion, this myth came into existence in order to ostracize the Other, in this case Islam. Even the term 'Islamic art' was invented by nineteenth and twentieth century Western historians.(17) Western thought has replaced restrictive geographic or ethnic terms, which had been previously thought distinct, as "Turkish," "Indian," "Arab," "Persian," "Maghrib," and so forth, with all-embracing homogeneous terms such as "Islamic" or "Muslim/Moslem."(18) Islamic art, as a global term, encompasses hundreds of years and a geographical reach extending at different times from Spain to India and the Far East.

Between 1952 and 1967 Baya stopped painting. These years she spent bearing and raising children at Blida in Algeria. In 1967, she picked up her paintbrush and color again. She has exhibited her work in many solo and group exhibitions in her native country, Algeria, and in France. Removing Baya from her cultural traditions, and juxtaposing her work with the European modernists who took a particular interest in her work, provided not only a new manner of characterizing artistic modernism, but also illustrates

that the ideal of a static East was an important component of a modernism traditionally characterized as an internal European creation. Why do we have to define and categorize artwork from non-Western cultures by imposing on them Western definitions and terminology? Baya rejects classifying her art as surrealist and/or as naïve art. She says it is Baya! Maybe we should call it Bayaism?! •

Note: I delivered this paper at the Women's Caucus for Art session –"Crossing Borders, Mapping Boundaries; Exploring Issues of Culture and Context in Women's Art," at the College Art Association 86th annual conference in Toronto, Canada, 1998. I am grateful to all those who have made my research possible in Paris. In particular, Nadine Ghammache, whose support and invaluable help in translating some documents from French to English enabled me to write this paper. My thanks also to the faculty of the Art History Department at San Jose State University for their support and encouragement, and to San Jose State University for awarding me a travel grant that helped me do my research in Paris and deliver my paper in Toronto.

- 1. Benamar Mediene, "Algeria," in Contemporary Art From the Islamic World, ed. Wijdan Ali (London: Scorpion Publishing Ltd., 1989), 19.**
- 2. Marguerite Benhoura was working as an archivist at the Muslim Bureau of Charities in Algeria.**
- 3. Améziane Ferhani, "Interview de Baya," Algérie Actualités, no. 852, 17 février 1982.**
- 4. André Breton, "Baya," catalogue d'exposition, coll. Derrière le Miroir, (Paris: Edition Adrien Maeght, 1947).**

- 5. Jean de Maisonneuseul, "Baya L'enchanteresse" in Baya, a catalog on her exhibition at Cantine Museum, Marseille (Marseille: Impr. Municipale, 1982), 16.**
- 6. Breton, " Baya."**
- 7. Benamar Mediene, essay on art in Algeria, in Contemporary Art From the Islamic World, 19.**
- 8. Wijdan Ali, "Modern Arab Art: An Overview" in Forces of Change: Artists of the Arab World, ed. Salwa Mikdadi Nashashibi et al. (Washington D.C.: The National Museum of Women in the Arts, 1994), a catalog for a traveling exhibition in the United States of Arab women artists, 92.**
- 9. I use the term 'Neo-colonial' instead of 'Post-colonial,' because I consider the term 'post-colonial' problematic as an indicator to this period. In my opinion, colonialism did not end. Today, it conveys new forms and ways of Western imperialistic hegemony by monopolizing the global economy and knowledge, therefore I call it a Neo-colonial period.**
- 10. Robert Atkins, Art Spoke: A Guide to Modern Ideas, Movements, and Buzzwords, 1848-1944 (New York: Abbeville Press Publishers, 1993), excerpt from the Surrealist manifesto, 203.**
- 11. Atkins, Art Spoke, 203-4.**
- 12. Using a term such as "primitive" implies a bipolar, adversely hierarchical relationship between "primitive" and "civilized." Nevertheless, I use it because I want to address certain commonalities that arise from the impact of essentialized discourse within colonialist discussion. To convey my continued discomfort with the terminology, I awkwardly use this term in quotation marks in order**

to point it out and question its validity, but it does not mean that I agree with its use.

13. Atkins, Art Spoke, 144.

14. Words as "native" or "indigenous" create problematic categories, as I indicate further, the complex history of traditions in Algeria blurs the original meaning of the word "native." But this blend of multicultural tradition is very specific to Algeria's own particular history; therefore we can categorize it as native Algerian culture.

15 In an interview by Lazhari Labter in Révolution Africaine, no. 1199, 20 février 1987, p.61, Baya replies to what do her paintings reflect: "My painting is not a reflection of the outside world, but of my own world within me..." In another interview by Moulay B., she replies that her paintings come "from things that surround me, from music, ...from things in life..."

16. I use the term 'Islamic Art' in quotation marks in order to point it out and question its validity that will discuss further in my discussion.

17. Mohammad Al-Asad, "The Re-invention of Tradition: Neo-Islamic Architecture," Proceedings of the XXVII International Congress of the History of Art (Berlin 1992).

18. Sheila S. Blair and Jonathan M. Bloom, The Art and Architecture of Islam: 1250-1800 (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1994), 303.

Sana` Makhoul is a graduate student in the Art History Department at San Jose State University. Her area of concentration is on images of women, in particular Arab women, in Western art.

Self-Inventory and The Other

- [Baya Mahieddine: An Arab Woman Artist](#)
by **Sana` Makhoul**
- [An Interview with Terry Acebo Davis](#)
by **Victoria Alba**
- [A Hard Rain-An English Ballad](#)
by **Willa Briggs**
- [The Canary and the Art Song](#)
by **Margaret Stanton Murray**
- [The Force of Art: A Catalyst for Change](#)
by **Maxine Solomon**