

The Algerian Teenager Who Painted a World of Liberated Women in 1940s Paris

This is significant because, until the last decade or so, the artist's work had been defined (like so many women artists of her generation) by her relationships with the men who surrounded her. Historically, she's been written about most often as an outsider, child artist discovered by the Parisian modernist art dealer Aimé Maeght and taken under the professional wing of superstar intellectuals and artists of the mid-20th century, like , , and .

Picasso, in particular, has defined Baya's legacy (just as he overshadowed the careers and talents of many of the women who he interacted with). After spending several summers working alongside the Spaniard at the Madoura pottery studio in Vallauris, located in southern France, she was said to have inspired his *Women of Algiers* series.

Thankfully "Baya: Woman of Algiers," curated by Natasha Boas, doesn't dwell on these relationships. Rather, the show foregrounds Baya's own work, suggesting that she resisted her male-dominated milieu, as well as their limiting categorization of her work—as being naïve or exotic—through paintings of a world filled with expressive, assertive women.

As the exhibition catalogue describes, Baya was born Fatma Haddad in 1931, in a small, Muslim town in French-occupied Algeria. She was orphaned at a young age, and throughout her youth shuffled between the homes of various relatives. Eventually, in 1942, she was adopted by a French intellectual and art collector, Marguerite Camina Benhoura (Baya's grandmother was Benhoura's maid). As the story goes, Benhoura was taken by the young girl, in no small part due to the "fascinating small animals and

strange female figures" she made out of dirt and sand.

One gouache on paper, called *Femme fond rouge (Woman on a red background)* (1940), shows an elaborately dressed woman flanked by a extravagant peacock and towering houseplant. The subject nearly fills the composition, a point accentuated by the fact that Baya renders her eyes as little faces. In this way, her presence is tripled. She is three women in one; or, at the very least, one woman who is multidimensional and brazenly expressive.

Eyes are a focal point across nearly all of of Baya's oeuvre. According to Boas, and other scholars like the Algerian writer Assia Djébar, they are also a key to understanding the artist's artistic intentions. In their view, Baya's depiction of the large, uncovered eye—or the "liberated eye," as Djébar has described it—represents a reversal of the male gaze, a prominent element of Western figurative art in the artist's time.

For Djébar, the stylistic (and potentially conceptual) choice also points to a liberation from the sexism inherent in the Muslim society in which Baya was raised. "Baya's woman is equipped with a giant eye, which, agape, avidly desires flowers, fruits, sounds of lutes and guitars," she wrote in a 1985 essay, reproduced in the exhibition catalogue. "Baya, the first in a chain of sequestered women, whose blindfold has, all of a sudden, fallen to the ground," she continues.

Looking at Baya's female subjects, all with large, lively eyes, it's easy to share Djébar and Boas's view. Most of the works in the Grey Art Gallery exhibition date to 1947, when Baya was 16, and were shown in her first solo presentation in Paris the same year. (The exhibition was organized by Maeght at his gallery, and by that time, Baya had already earned fans, including Breton, who included her in his famed "Exposition Internationale du Surréalisme"; and Dubuffet, who began to collect her work, albeit grouping it in his collection amongst art made by children and individuals with mental illnesses.)

In *Femme robe bleue cheveux rouges* (*Woman with red hair in a blue dress*) (1947), Baya depicts a woman in a curve-hugging, flamboyantly patterned dress. What's more, she is without a headscarf, her fire-red hair worn loose and wild. Every aspect of the composition, rendered in undulating lines exudes energy and freedom—especially the eye, with a thick black outline that pushes powerfully through the elaborate composition.