

The 16-Year-Old Algerian Artist Who Influenced Picasso and Matisse

[Jane Drinkard](#) Mar. 18, 2018



Baya, *Deux femmes*, (Two women), 1947; Gouache on board, 24 3/4 x 18 7/8 in. (62.9 x 47.9 cm); Collection of Adrien Maeght, Saint-Paul-de-Vence, France © Photo Galerie Maeght, Paris

In the 1940s, a 16-year-old girl captured the minds of the art world's elite. The self-taught Algerian artist, Baya Mahieddine (1931-1988) — known as Baya — is finally being celebrated in the first North American [exhibition](#) of her work, at NYU's Grey Art Gallery, through March 31. Baya used gouache as her primary medium, depicting a world without men but full of bright images of women, nature, and animals. The bold patterns in her work are attention-grabbing, but her life story is even more so.



Baya, *Femmes et oranges fond blanc*, (Women and orange trees on a white background), 1947; Gouache on board 18 7/8 x 24 3/4 in. (47.9 x 62.9 cm); Collection of Isabelle Maeght, Paris © Photo Galerie Maeght, Paris

Baya was born Fatma Haddad, in Bordj el-Kiffan, a beachy suburb of the city of Algiers, at the North-Western tip of Africa. Orphaned by age 5, she was adopted as a teenager by Marguerite Camina Benhoura, a French intellectual who noticed Baya's artistic talent from a young age. In her homes in Algiers and the South of France, Benhoura provided Baya with

art materials and access to French and Maghrebi art magnates.

In 1947, when Baya was just 16, she was discovered by Aimé Maeght, an established French art dealer, and André Breton, who included Baya's works in the [Exposition Internationale du Surréalisme](#) at [Galerie Maeght](#) in Paris. Almost overnight she caught the attention of Picasso and Matisse, among other prominent artists, for her colorful, spontaneous and “childlike” compositions. “Her work allows us to question so many different histories,” said curator Natasha Boas. “The outsider. The outlier. The woman artist.”

Boas decided on the title, “Baya: Woman of Algiers,” drawing from three points of inspiration: a book by Assia Djebar, the leading feminist theorist from the Maghrebi region of North Africa, titled [Women of Algiers in Their Apartment](#); Picasso's [The Women of Algiers](#) series (1955) inspired by Baya herself; and [The Battle of Algiers](#), a 1966 film directed by Gillo Pontecorvo, based on events during the Algerian War (1954-62).

Scroll to see images of Baya's work; more info on the exhibition below.



Baya, *Femme à la robe verte*, (Woman in a green dress), 1940; Gouache on paper, 12 3/16 x 9 7/16 in. (31 x 24 cm); Courtesy of Galerie Maeght, Paris © Photo Galerie Maeght, Paris



Baya, *Femme au panier et coq rouge*, (Woman with a basket and a red rooster), 1947; Gouache on board 28 11/16 x 36 in. (72.9 x 91.4 cm); Collection of Adrien Maeght, Saint-Paul-de-Vence, France © Photo Galerie Maeght, Paris



Baya, *Femme robe jaune fond blanc*, (Woman in yellow dress on a white background), 1947; Gouache on board 18 1/8 x 14 7/6 in. (46 x 36.7 cm); Collection of Adrien Maeght, Saint-Paul-de-Vence, France © Photo Galerie Maeght, Paris



Baya, *Femme aux oeufs*, (Woman with eggs), 1947; Gouache on board 18 11/16 x 24 3/4 in. (47.5 x 62.9 cm);
Collection of Isabelle Maeght, Paris © Photo Galerie Maeght, Paris



Baya, *Femme robe jaune et panier*, (Woman in yellow dress with a basket), 1947; Gouache on board 25 7/16 x 19 1/2 in. (64.6 x 49.5 cm); Collection of Isabelle Maeght, Paris © Photo Galerie Maeght, Paris



Baya, *Femme robe à chevrons*, (Woman in chevron-patterned dress), 1947; Gouache on board 25 7/16 x 19 1/2 in. (64.6 x 49.5 cm); Collection of Adrien Maeght, Saint-Paul-de-Vence, France © Photo Galerie Maeght, Paris



Baya, *Deux femmes fond bleu foncé*, (Two women on a dark blue background), 1947; Gouache on board 25 7/16 x 19 1/2 in. (64.6 x 49.5 cm); Collection of Adrien Maeght, Saint-Paul-de-Vence, France © Photo Galerie Maeght, Paris



Baya, *Femme robe à fleurs blanches*, (Woman in a white-flowered dress), 1947; Gouache on board 39 x 30 in. (99.1 x 76.2 cm); Collection of Adrien Maeght, Saint-Paul-de-Vence, France © Photo Galerie Maeght, Paris



Baya, *Femme au deux pots de fleurs*, (Woman with two flower pots), 1947; Gouache on board 36 3/16 x 28 11/16 in. (91.9 x 72.9 cm); Collection of Adrien Maeght, Saint-Paul-de-Vence, France© Photo Galerie Maeght, Paris

“[Baya: Woman of Algiers](#)” is on view at NYU’S Grey Art Gallery through March 31.

