

What became of young Baya?



Artist Baya Mahieddine's 'Woman with blue hair in a yellow dress' (1947) © Galerie Maeght, Paris

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In 1947, a 16-year-old Algerian orphan named Baya suddenly became a Parisian art star. The dealer Aimé Maeght “discovered” her in Algiers and feted her with a possibly unprecedented one-young-woman show. He was not alone in his devotions. The surrealist guru André Breton, who helped organise the exhibition, saw in her dazzling gouaches the very future of painting. French Vogue published a full-page portrait of the teenager, accompanied by wonderstruck prose; Picasso, Braque, Camus, Matisse and Dubuffet all patted her on the head.

The Grey Art Gallery has assembled 20 of the pieces from the Galerie Maeght show, a recreation that is at once exhilarating and sad. Baya’s exuberantly costumed women, entwined with birds, fish and flowers, wowed the war-buffed Parisian élite with its optimistic vibe. It’s easy to see why. Coiffures rise in abstract blobs, tropical plants sprout eyes, a sun-yellow gown metamorphoses into a golden field of wheat. A “Woman with a Caged Bird” becomes an exotic, brilliantly plumed creature surrounded by a fantastical menagerie. Baya had no use for academic techniques of modelling and perspective, preferring fauvist assaults of pulsing colour. To European intellectuals exhausted by constant calamity, her gouaches must have seemed like packets of Mediterranean joy.

But six years after her explosive debut, she was back in Algeria, the No. 2 wife of a traditional Muslim musician 30 years her senior. She bore him six children; she also bore years of obscurity.

Baya Mahieddine was born Fatima Haddad in 1931 and lost both parents by the age of five. That’s when Marguerite Camina Benhoura, the wealthy and cultured French wife of an Algerian judge, took the talented little girl under her wing. And what a wing! The budding artist had access to education, supplies, and Benhoura’s own collection, which included the most august members of the avant-garde. By the time she was nine, Baya had already developed the vision that made her fleetingly famous. In “Woman on a Red Background” from 1940, a dragon-like peacock perches on the figure’s snaking arm. Little faces peek from the lady’s goggle eyes, and her pointed hair-do sweeps up like a flame, almost fusing with the infernal backdrop and intrusive vegetation.

The show presents Baya as a feminist hero who, for a while, transcended colonialism and sexism

In Paris, she was hailed as a sublime primitive, a miraculously self-taught outsider, though the Grey show makes it clear that

she was no such thing. Breton praised her “childlike” approach and her “purity”, though her pictures are neither innocent nor naive. Jean Dubuffet saw her intricate patterns and bright palette as exemplars of “raw art”, creativity not weighed down by the dead hand of culture. He bought some of her paintings for the museum he founded in Lausanne, La Collection de L’Art Brut, where they resided among the works of prisoners and the insane.

And yet even as a child in Algeria she was already soaking up the visual language of contemporary Paris. A glance reveals the influence of pictures such as Matisse’s “Red Room” of 1908, where a woman seated at a table merges into a pattern of spiralling arabesques. By the time Baya made her entrance, she commanded a style that was at once cosmopolitan and fresh. The grandees of modernism could welcome her into their circle and condescend to her at the same time — a gratifying combination.



Baya at the Galerie Maeght in Paris during her exhibition in 1947

After the Galerie Maeght show, Baya was invited to spend summers at the Madoura ceramic studio in Vallauris, in the south of France. Between 1948 and 1952, she laboured alongside Picasso and ate couscous with him, and it’s easy to see the points of intersection between them: jubilant lines, sensual hues and a playful sensibility. Unfortunately, here we get only one side of the comparison: the Grey dug into its own collection of Picasso pottery but didn’t manage to include any of Baya’s. That’s a shame since Picasso reported that she inspired his 1954 series “Women of Algiers”.

The show’s curator, Natasha Boas, presents Baya as a feminist hero who, for a while, broke away from her culture’s shackles to transcend colonialism, orientalism and sexism. Instead of nudes, dancers or harem girls, she gives us bold women who are robed but not veiled, physical without being carnal, ornamental but not dehumanised. They belong to no class and no nation, surveying the landscape with open eyes, taking in nature and their own place in it.

Yet, despite Baya’s extraordinary trajectory, it’s hard to see her as quite so independent as Boas suggests. Picasso detected in her work the same exotic sensuality and

orientalising opulence he valued in that of Matisse and Delacroix. Baya produced her own repertoire of odalisques, arabesques and intoxicating perfumes with all the sophisticated excitement of a Parisian gentleman.

She was no outsider, no savage spirit, no comet crashing into — or out of — a world of tidy conventions. Instead she was a woman who slid from one patriarchy to the other and back again, producing some luminous art in the process.

To March 31, greyartgallery.nyu.edu

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