

AHMED YACOUBI: The Occidental Tourist



In Paul Bowles's acclaimed 1949 novel *The Sheltering Sky*, the primary characters, Port and Kit Moresby, journey through Saharan Africa as if navigating a dissociative dreamscape: the familiar is slightly askew; contemporary and ancient become indistinguishable; Occidental logic slowly slips into hallucinatory detachment.

In 1947 the New York City-born Bowles had taken up residence in Tangier, a city whose exotic allure similarly captivated Francis Bacon, Tennessee Williams, and William S. Burroughs. A polymath composer, writer, and expert translator, Bowles consumed the cultural and psychic landscape of Morocco, delving deep into the country's hidden recesses. Methodically, he made audio recordings of native tales preserved through the oral tradition, translating them into English from Maghrebi.

Bowles first encountered Ahmed ben Driss el Yacoubi in Fez in 1947. The young Moroccan, born in 1928, was descended from a family that practiced the healing profession of *f'qih*. Although forbidden by religion from depicting idols, Yacoubi secretly drew figurative images in ink and, in 1948, was introduced to paint by Jane Bowles, Paul's wife. Yacoubi's ensuing canvases were colorful, densely abstract

compositions packed with energy; heavily layered surfaces were smoothed through a process that Yacoubi likened to alchemical transformation.

With the young Yacoubi under his wing, Paul Bowles wrote to Betty Parsons in 1951 to advocate for “a young Arab painter from Fez, a natural abstractionist, as is to be expected when there has been no tradition in the culture save that of absolute abstraction.” The following year the Betty Parsons Gallery staged an exhibition of Yacoubi’s work, and soon after he made the acquaintance of Peggy Guggenheim, who purchased several of his paintings. Concurrently, Paul Bowles translated several of Yacoubi’s stories into English, including the play *The Night Before Thinking*, which was eventually published in the *Evergreen Review* in 1961.



In 1966, Yacoubi departed his native Morocco for New York City, where he painted in a downtown loft. Yacoubi was illiterate; his frequent and enduring correspondence with Bowles was read and transcribed by friends, including a 1979 letter in which Bowles cautiously offers an introduction to Yacoubi’s painting from the perspective of a writer, rather than art critic.

Like Bowles, who had largely escaped his roots to become a permanent expatriate in Tangier, Yacoubi embraced the United States as an artistic catalyst and place of exotic fascination, dying in New York City in 1985 at the age of fifty-seven. Bowles lived until 1999 as both a tremendous presence in the literary landscape and an elusive voice embedded within the ancient rhythms of the human condition.

2117 Tanger Socco,
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Dear Ahmed and Carel:

Thank you for your letter of the second of December. I suppose I should have replied sooner, but the holidays, together with a spate of proof-correcting (the Spring Antaeus, Choukri's book on Tennessee, and an interview) managed to interrupt my normal letter-writing routine, and now I owe about thirty letters.

As you realize, I know little about painting, and am not an ideal choice to make if you want an intelligent comment on the work. But I'm sure you're very aware of this, and are not expecting me to pass judgment. Last night I wrote the following paragraph:

We know that ethnic and geographical origins determine viewpoint. Then we reflect that Yacoubi passed his formative years in the bosom of a strictly traditional Moslem family in what was then the medieval city of Fez. His attitude toward his art recalls the attitude of an alchemist with regard to his discoveries. In his professional life he has always shown a ferocious (and wholly justified) determination to guard his procedural secrets. This particular viewpoint, removed in time from that of other contemporary painters, has much to do with what a given picture eventually contains, and explains the characteristic intensity of his art.

That's all I can do, really. I know it's short. But I haven't the right to say more. That's for the critics, who always resent outsiders inviting themselves in to what they consider their party. Everything is very quiet here, although cigarettes, alcohol and gasoline (as well as butagaz) have all gone up again, as of the first of the year.

Right now it's warm and sunny. Not that it will continue.

all my best,

Paul