

Meetings in Marrakech: The Paintings of Hassan El Glaoui and Winston Churchill

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Meetings in Marrakech: The Paintings of Hassan El Glaoui and Winston Churchill, by Touria El Glaoui and Celia Sandys. Skira Editore, softbound, illus., 72 pages, £25 £20.40 from Amazon UK.

By Touria El Glaoui and Celia Sandys

This brochure was published to coincide with an unusual exhibition in January 2012 in London's Leighton House. The title immediately suggests that Winston Churchill must be involved, and a delightful tale unfolds on how he was able to foster the talents of a younger man.

Churchill first went to Marrakech in 1935 and immediately knew that this would be the perfect place for numberless opportunities for painting; he returned there many times.

As Celia Sandys writes in her informative introduction, no eminent foreign politician could arrive in Marrakech without receiving an invitation from the local Pasha, the tribal elder Thami El Glaoui. Churchill and the Glaoui quickly became friends, and they always spent time together during later visits.

The Glaoui's son, Hassan, was an aspiring artist, but his father was not keen on an artistic career for one expected to follow a more traditional path. In those days it was considered a futility, not to say a dishonour, to be a painter when you belonged to the proud tribe of the Glaoua, known and considered in the Atlas Mountains as the most fearless warriors.

When Churchill was convalescing in Marrakech in 1943, the Glaoui showed him some of Hassan's sketches. A good judge of talent, Churchill was impressed, and dissolved Hassan's father's opposition and advised him that his son should certainly be sent to Paris, to study art seriously—which he eventually did. He studied at the Ecole des Beaux-Arts and then worked in Paris (in all, a total of fifteen years).

The paintings displayed at the London exhibition were a combination of two contrasting styles. Churchill's well-known preference for bright colours and bold depictions are very different from Hassan El Glaoui's more subtle skills. which display movement and colour in a space which is undefined and undated: his paintings are therefore serenely eternal. The difference between the two men has been well defined as that between a professional artist and a weekend painter.