

THE Museum REVIEW

VOLUME 4 NUMBER 1 - 2019

WWW.THEMUSEUMREVIEW.ORG
ISSN 2574-0296



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www.TheMuseumReview.org

Rogers Publishing Corporation NFP
5558 S. Kimbark Ave., Suite 2, Chicago, IL 60637
www.RogersPublishing.org

Cover photo: Cincinnati Museum Center, Ohio, following a two-year renovation. Reopened 2018.
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Exhibition review: *Journey to the Sources of Art*, the life and work of three women artists in postcolonial Morocco

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Keywords Spontaneity; autodidact; popular culture; expression; plastic art

Abstract Museum Mohammed VI for Modern and Contemporary Arts exhibited and narrated the life and artistic journey of three Moroccan women artists in a temporary exhibition: *Voyages aux Sources de L'Art (Journey to Sources of Art)* from October 23, 2018 - January 23, 2019. A collection of ninety paintings in seven thematic exhibitions narrated a journey of liberation and self-assertion of three illiterate rural women through their creation. The autodidacts shared one passion, easel painting, and embraced this form of artistic expression to represent their unique views of the world around them. Their lack of academic training was not an obstacle since their need and desire to create and express themselves was a priority. In this exhibition, audiences were invited to explore a world of vivid colors and mystic symbols that were deeply rooted in Moroccan traditional and popular culture. Spontaneity and artistic expression as a human need were the main ideas that underlay the whole exhibition. Different themes created a context to highlight a shared cultural identity and collective memory that both shaped and inspired them, and where the works of the three artists were relevantly interpreted and explained.

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This article was published on January 29, 2019 at www.TheMuseumReview.org

Museum Mohammed VI for Modern and Contemporary Arts (MMVI) displayed a selected collection of ninety paintings by three Moroccan women artists: Radia Bent Lhoucine (1912-1994), Chaibia Talal (1929-2004), and Fatima Hassan El Farrouj (1945-2011). The temporary exhibition, *Voyages aux Sources de L'Art (Journey to the Sources of Art)*, was held at the museum from October 23, 2018 - January 23, 2019, to narrate the life, works, and artistic vision of these autodidact painters through both the form and content of their works. Eight display spaces and three projection rooms represented the works of three rural women who shared one passion, easel painting, and expressed themselves in unique, non-academic representations where the academic standards for visual composition gave way to a strong need to create.

The exhibition viewed the three artists as an example of women's struggle for emancipation through art and creation in Morocco in the early twentieth century, and it presented them as

pioneers of spontaneous artistic expression. The introductory label explained that its purpose was not to categorize the artists within a specific art movement;¹ the simple act of creation as a human need and a form of liberation in which memory, reality, and imagination interacted was the focal point. The viewers were invited to explore the exhibition with the idea that these artworks were not to be judged by academic standards nor analyzed according to the institutionalized norms, schemas, rules, and limits of artistic expression. This exhibition offered a journey into a world of artistic creation that was beyond the ordinary.

The varied themes of the display rooms related Chaibia Talal, Radia Bent Lhoucine, and Fatima Hassan El Farrouj, and yet the interpretive labels that accompanied their works highlighted the unique artistic style of each one of them. The labels explained that these artists were inspired by their shared identity and collective memory; they represented scenes from everyday life activities of a rural society, festive scenes, natural landscapes, and many other representations where popular culture, oral tradition, artisanal arts, and traditional signs and symbols predominated. Their works were not simple realistic representations. They surpassed mere narration to reach a transfiguration of reality through the creative use of color, shape, line, and perspective.

Introductory room

This gallery introduced the life and works of the three artists along two separate spaces. The first space briefly presented their biographies through wall labels that were set on a light grey background. This small-sized space was dimly lit, which suggested an aura of uncertainty; it marked a threshold that would lead to a new beginning. The narrow spotlights that focused on every artist's biography created some sort of confinement; they shed light on inspiring artistic journeys that were yet to begin and expand beyond limits. Three illiterate rural women, Radia Bent Lhoucine, Chaibia Talal, and Fatima Hassan El Farrouj, were initiated to the world of easel painting by close family members who were academic artists, like their sons as was the case with Chaibia Talal and Radia Bent Lhoucine or husband in the case of Fatima Hassan El Farrouj. Their fascination with this form of artistic expression and their passion for it transcended their fear of mastery of the technique and the academic rules of rendering a work of art. The act of creation itself and the emancipatory promises it offered led and guided these artists.

In the second space, three different paintings by the artists illustrated their artistic style, and the focal point was the nature of pictorial space in these works. The paintings depicted festive scenes through vivid colors, yet every single work had a special, defining style that the labels interpreted and highlighted. In the work of Chaibia Talal, the characters in the scene stood out; they were depicted through vertical ornamental renderings of different shapes, effervescent colors, and bold lines. The background of the painting had no illusion of depth, and it was of secondary importance to the figures. The background in Radia Bent Lhoucine's painting was emphasized through large horizontal color blocks, and the characters represented stood against the background in sharply defined juxtapositions of line, ornament, and color. On the other hand, the work of Fatima Hassan El Farrouj displayed meticulous work of the ornamental details and geometric shapes, which gave the work density and created little room for the background that was mostly limited to a high horizon. In the three paintings, the figures and shapes extended to reach the edges of the frames. Such expansion of pictorial space suggested the concept of infinity of creation in the imagination of the viewer and

reflected a desire to transcend the frames. This display room clearly and successfully introduced the viewers to the plastic vocabulary of each artist. The audiences could easily recognize the works of each one of the three artists in the next exhibitions.

Daily scenes

In this large exhibition, the lighting was bright, and the works of the three painters were grouped by similarity of content. However, the unique artistic style of each work was always highlighted. Most of the works displayed represented daily scenes and reflected the desire of the three artists to capture movement and create dynamism in their figurative depictions. The paintings were filled with representations of people, animals, and objects in vivid colors. The plastic vocabulary of the three artists mostly included mystic and ornamental symbols used in traditional tattoos, henna, or tapestry and signs from decorative arts; they created and recreated them in different shapes and sizes. Large shapes, bold lines, and bright colors dominated in the works of Chaibia Talal and reflected steady and dense brush strokes, while dense and small-sized ornamental figures in dark colors characterized the paintings of Fatima Hassan El Farrouj. The works of Radia Bent Lhoucine always maintained a special interest in colorful blocks in the background, and they reflected short and light strokes; Lhoucine's stippling technique was also present in most of her works in the exhibition.

Festive scenes

A set of colorful depictions of festive scenes created a special atmosphere in this gallery. The works represented dual dimensional scenes of celebrations where figures and figurines of different shapes and scales rejoiced. The movement and cadence in the works were evoked by a lack of depth. For instance, in some paintings, like *The Feast* (1965) by Fatima Hassan Farrouj, scenes of rural women playing music or dancing transformed the work into a living spectacle, almost sonorous. The meticulous ornamental quality of her works was quite obvious to the viewers, and the lack of perspective in this work created a specific visual effect; it suggested a feeling of levitation, as explained in the interpretive label, to express the collective joy of the figurines.

The ornamental quality of the works in this gallery manifested a rich world of signs and symbols of a culture that shaped the plastic vocabulary of the artists; their collective memory and shared identity were represented through the same form of artistic expression, and yet each artist had a personal style of representation that characterized her works and reflected how she perceived the world around her.

Landscape and vegetation

Another theme that gathered the eclectic works of these artists was landscape and vegetation. The beauty of bucolic settings fascinated and inspired the three artists. In this gallery, both nature and culture were captured in colorful and vivid representations; people and dense vegetation almost merged with each other through color and lack of the illusion of depth, and sometimes distorted proportion created strong juxtaposition to suggest humans' rivalry with nature or their trial to tame it. This technique was mostly present in Radia Bent Lhoucine's works. In the works of Chaibia Talal, scenes of natural landscapes transcended accurate figurative representations and morphed into flat abstract shapes. Freehand gestures of colors suggested trees and plants, while geometric shapes represented buildings and pathways amid nature. Her work *Le chemin de ma maison* (1961) (*The Way to My House*)

accurately reflected her technique. Fatima Hassan El Farrouj, on the other hand, combined the natural and the cultural in dense ornamental compositions; in her works, natural landscape and vegetation were intrinsic to rural life. The urban and the architectural were inseparable from the natural. The mystic symbols and signs of popular culture decorated human figures, buildings, plants, and animals. Representations of human figures, especially rural women in floral dresses, rejoicing in natural landscapes reflected humans' love for nature and their desire to reproduce it and imitate it in the cultural.

The bestiary

As most of the works of these artists depicted scenes from rural life, domestic or feral animals were abundantly present in their compositions. Humans and beasts were represented as living and evolving in complete harmony with each other. In Radia Bent Lhoucine's works, human figures and animals were depicted in total harmony through the use of the same colors and patterns. Distortion of proportion in her works was clearly reflected by heterogeneous silhouettes of humans and animals. The centrality of animals in the works of Fatima Hassan El Farrouj was captivating. In her compositions, animals were yet subject to her creative imagination that drew from her memory and culture. Their bodies were fully-decorated with ornamental signs and symbols that were abundant in artisanal handicrafts such as pottery and tapestry. This combination of the natural and cultural created an imaginary and mystic world where man and nature were inseparable. Such harmony of man and beast was represented in the works of Chaibia Talal in the form of human-animal hybrid, like her work *L'homme oiseau (The Man-Bird)*. Her representations transcended realistic scenes and reached the mythical and the legendary. She expressed her view of the world freely, and all the characters and animals represented in her works were subject to her imagination and creativity. Reproducing reality was not her sole purpose; her perceptions and impulses were a priority.

The ornament

The traditional carpet was a predominant motif in this exhibition. The collection displayed in this vast and well-lit space reflected a wide range of mystic and decorative signs and symbols of Moroccan popular culture. Varied signs found in traditional tapestry or used in female henna tattooing made a rich source of inspiration to these artists who rendered them spontaneously, creating a unique and harmonious synthesis of geometric, abstract, and organic shapes. The carpet represented an inspiring space of creation that framed the ornament but did not necessarily limit it. For instance, in some works of Fatima Hassan El Farrouj, the decorative signs that she rendered in earthy color schemes sometimes transcended the carpet in free gestures; the lyrical and organic shapes seemed to grow out of the carpets. They recalled vegetation and related nature to culture. Also, her chromatic palette and labyrinthine and densely decorated representations of the traditional carpet highlighted a long process of meticulous and devoted handiwork. The presence of carpet weavers in some paintings shifted focus from the painter as a creator; Fatima Hassan El Farrouj became an observer whose spontaneous visual documentation of this process highlighted the weaver, an important figure in the scene and a creator.

The act of traditional carpet weaving was also predominant in the works of Radia Bent Lhoucine, yet her style of representation reflected a unique view of the world and a passion for saturated colors and juxtaposed patterns, which suggested dynamism and energy in her

depictions of carpet weaving scenes. This artist created strong juxtapositions of horizontal color blocks and vertical white lines that represented the wool threads of the traditional handloom. The act of traditional carpet weaving in her paintings was depicted as a collective feminine activity and an event that gathered people. The social aspect of this event was captured by Radia Bent Lhoucine through expressive hand gestures of the depicted characters. The background of the paintings seemed to exceed the limits of the traditional frames, which created a feeling of closeness, connectivity, and cooperation. It suggested a dense universe of colors and signs that immersed the weavers, took all their attention and fueled their creativity. On the other hand, Chaibia Talal's works placed the carpet, as a final work of art, in the middle of the painting, leaving much room for empty space around it; this made the carpet stand out against the background and communicate with the viewers through the mystic signs and symbols that it represented. Talal's creative composition of different geometric shapes in the carpets created fascinating kaleidoscopic, almost oneiric, patterns. Some of her miniature representations were grouped and highlighted by means of space. The grouping recalled fragments of a jigsaw puzzle where abstract shapes and color compositions did not represent a realistic scene, yet they were cunningly appealing to the eye. Such quality was evident in all her works and was mostly highlighted in the following gallery that displayed quite a considerable number of works by Chaibia Talal.

The portrait

The largest gallery was dedicated to portraiture; it displayed eclectic representations of anthropomorphic figures that inspired the three artists. The portraits, as explained the wall-label, were not based on any models, and the major concern of the artists was the interpretation of the human figure. The artists depended on their imagination and memory to represent figures whose identities were not as significant as were their state of mind, expression, and mood.

The unique style and plastic vocabulary of every artist were evident. Radia Bent Lhoucine's color blocks and ornamented, energetic figures created dynamism and emanated positive energy in the display space. The portraits of Fatima Hassan El Farrouj reflected her fascination with meticulous decoration of both the background of the figures depicted and their garments and bodies. The figures in her portraits were never isolated from specific contexts such as festive scenes or nature outings that gave meaning to their expressions. Large-scale portraits by Chaibia Talal were prevalent in this well-lit and formal exhibition. Her unique and creative composition of colors, lines, and shapes created a fascinating world of sad-looking, melancholic, mysterious, and pensive figures. The expressions of the anthropomorphic characters in her works were artfully captured. The abstract shapes, labyrinthine lines, dazzling swirls, complex patterns, and fascinating compositions in primary colors created a fantastic universe of expressive and disfigured faces and bodies. In her work, *Les pêcheurs* (1979) (*The Fishermen*), a scene of human figures in a fishing boat was transfigured into an oneiric world abundant in dense colors and shapes that seamlessly flew and merged with each other. The expressions of surprise and curiosity that they bore on their faces were successfully captured, and they indirectly projected special feelings on the viewer; the gaze of the figures triggered the imagination and established a close encounter that evoked sailing and drifted the viewers toward the adventure world of the fishermen. This feeling of closeness to the figures was also emphasized through color and shape expansion that liberated the scene from the conventional frame of the painting.

The selected works in this exhibition clearly introduced the audiences to the works of these pioneering artists, interpreted their spontaneous plastic expression, and successfully highlighted and singled out the unique style of every one of them. The themes established a context where the works of the three artists, rural women with no education or academic training in painting, were interpreted and explained; the thematic exhibitions narrated a journey of liberation and self-assertion through creation. This context reflected a shared cultural identity and collective memory that both shaped and inspired them.

Notes

¹ The three artists displayed in this exhibition were not related to any specific art movement in postcolonial Morocco. In the history of Moroccan modern art, the first generation of Moroccan painters (1912-1950's), most of which were autodidact artists like Ben Ali R'bati (1861-1939) and Mohammed Ben Allal (1924-1995), are related to the naïve artistic tradition. These artists were inspired by their encounter with Orientalist painters that initiated them to easel painting in the first half of the twentieth century. They were craftsmen and women that practiced easel painting without any formal education or academic training in the visual arts. They moved from the production of utilitarian and decorative arts to the creation easel paintings for the purpose of artistic appreciation. See Toni Marain, *Ecrits sur l'art* (Casablanca: Le Fennec, 2014), 52. See also Moulim El Aroussi, *Visual Arts in the Kingdom of Morocco* (Tunis: The Arab League's Educational, Cultural and Scientific Organization, 2015).

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