



مدرسة الدار البيضاء

Ecole de Casablanca

The Casablanca School of Art:
the factory of art and history by Belkahia, Chabâa, and Melehi
Ecole de Beaux-Arts de Casablanca:
la fabrique de l'art et de l'histoire chez Belkahia, Chabâa, Melehi



De gauche à droite: Farid Belkahia, Mohammed Melehi et Mohammed Chabâa

The Casablanca Fine-Arts school: Belkahia, Chebâa, Melehi making history and art

The ideological and artistic foundations of the School

Established in 1945 by the French colonial authorities, the public Fine-Arts school in Casablanca was remodelled in 1964 as a result of the efforts of a small group of artists who shared the same notion of artistic and social reform. The desire to change the structure of the school was seen as an extension of the social emancipation movement, which aimed to achieve progress and develop culture. This was at a time of heightened tension and conflict between civil society and the political sphere. The struggle between these two groups gave rise in 1956, the year of Morocco's independence, to a struggle by civil society to establish its own independence and right to act as a 'producer instead of a mere consumer of political culture'. The public sphere was thus created in Moroccan postcolonial society, leading to a struggle for the democratisation of culture, free from State control. The birth of the new school in Casablanca coincided with this historic moment during which civil and cultural awareness expanded rapidly, and the emergence of ideas on public liberties went hand in hand with the definition of new esthetic thought. Here art was called on to become a new way to share knowledge.

The ideological and artistic contribution of the Casablanca school to these efforts can be separated into two steps. First, education on the social role of the artist (and of art) in building democratic culture, which is crucial in the process of decolonialisation and the renewal of the arts scene. This process was based on understanding and reclaiming shared heritage in order to ensure on the one hand its natural evolution and on the other its contribution to a universal, shared culture. Secondly, the creation through artistic dialogue of the principles of Moroccan artistic modernism. This task involved taking ideological positions something, which was unprecedented in Moroccan history.

It was the first time that artists engaged in the struggle against the antipathy of public authorities towards the management of cultural affairs. They controversially chose to work at on the national artistic scene at a time when public bodies were increasing efforts to get Moroccan art recognized internationally. There was the desire to make a break with the values imposed by colonial ideology and existing prejudices, which fostered belief in the superiority of Western art. It was also the first time that the artist achieved enough social influence to be able to contest the status quo, starting with the pre-established rules of art. An artistic voice could now take part in classification systems and a process of subjectivation, committing to a significant shift away from the previously established norms. By transgressing pre-existing rules, the system of the artistic exception was born. Artists like Farid Belkahia, Mohammed Chebâa and Mohammed Melehi were pioneers of this shift, which saw its zenith in the second half of the 60s. In 1966, they formed the Casablanca group. The same year, they engaged with their responsibility as artists by debating the future of modernist painting through contributions to the leftist intellectual magazine

Souffles, alongside Abdellatif Laâbi, Mustapha Nissaboury, and Mohammed Khaïr-Eddine.

United against Orientalism, naive art, academia, and provincialism, these painters would usher in the end of an era. They advocated for a reevaluation of popular culture and denounced numerous erroneous premises, which were connected with out-dated colonial ideology. They asserted what the Moroccan historian Abdellah Laroui called 'the zero level of historic presence for colonized' people. Amongst these false ideas, was the idea of the 'young' Moroccan painter, which reduced national art to a state of eternal youth, never maturing. There was also the idea of a strong Western influence on art which was assimilated in a passive way as well as the myth of spontaneous authenticity. Their denunciation indictment of the state of affairs included the artistic training provided by the school. They wanted to restructure the Fine-Arts school in Casablanca by giving the programs offered and methods taught a radical overhaul.

¹ Safouhi Babana-Hampton, « Réflexions littéraires sur l'espace public marocain dans l'œuvre de Abdellatif Laâbi, (Literary reflections on the Moroccan public space in the work of Abdellatif Laâbi), chapter 3, « L'architecture de l'espace propre à l'expérience de la revue Souffles: la vision de Abdellatif Laâbi » (Architecture and its own space in the experience of the magazine Souffles: the vision of Abdellatif Laâbi), Summa Publication, 2008, p. 89.

² Ibid.

³ It is a time of great openness towards countries referred to as 'the third world'. Exhibitions of Moroccan painters multiplied around the globe. International events for Moroccan painting took place in the city museum of San Francisco (1957), at the International exposition of Brussels (1958), at the Exhibition of Arab painting organized in Washington (1959), at the Third Alexandria Biennale (1959), at the First Youth Biennale in Paris (1959), as part of 'Two thousand years of art in Morocco (1963 - Charpentier Gallery - Organized by Naima Khatib) and in an Exhibition at the Juan Miro Foundation (1976).

⁴ The reference to Foucault by Pierre Boulez can be seen as an example of the artistic exception that is placed at the same level as Farid Belkahia, Mohammed Melehi and Mohammed Chebâa. In a text dedicated to the composer, Foucault noted that the history of art in the 20th Century is crossed by a long battle to impose not only the 'formal', but also 'considered work on the system of forms'. This considered, well thought through work was able to impose itself as of a major democratic characteristic and became a core part of the artist who now had to avoid going back to pre-existing forms or art and must invent new forms. The artist is then situated within the social field of the professional exception and enjoyed the possibility of social transgression. It is in this register that the statement of Foucault takes on real significance in regard to the artistic investigations carried out by Farid Belkahia, Mohammed Melehi and Mohammed Chebâa within the Casablanca school. See Michel Foucault *Dits et écrits*, tome IV, text 305, Paris, Gallimard, 1994, p. 222, in Fabienne Brugère, « Qu'a fait la contestation de l'exception artistique? », Noesis [En ligne].

⁵ The creation of *Souffles*, in 1966 by Abdellatif Laâbi represented an unprecedented event of deep significance, which is unparalleled in all the countries of the Maghreb. With contributions from a group of young poets (Mutapha Nissaboury, Mohammed Khaïr-Eddine, Abdelkebir Khatibi, Mohammed Loakira, Abdelaziz Mansouri and Bernard Jakobiak, including Tahar Ben Jelloun later on), the magazine represented an effort to make their voice heard which had never been done before in Morocco. See Abdellatif Laâbi, « Prologue », *Souffles*, number 1, 1966, p. 3.

⁶ Art studies in Morocco were the work of French researchers until independence. They focused more on the need to classify and create an inventory of art rather than the rigor of esthetic analysis. Their work was often based on a dogmatic approach and normative judgements. The works of Henri Terrasse and Jean Hainaut represent a convincing example of cultural colonialism. See Henri Terrasse and Jean Hainaut, *Les arts décoratifs au Maroc* (The decorative arts of Morocco), Editions Henri Laurens, Paris, 1925, which is cited by Abdellatif Laâbi in Abdellatif Laâbi « L'idéologie coloniale et l'Art marocain » (Colonial ideology and Moroccan art), *Souffles*, number 7-8, 1967, p. 11.

⁷ Abdellah Laroui, « L'histoire du Maghreb » (The History of Morocco), Maspero, Paris, 1970, p. 351.

⁸ The writings of Bernard Saint Aignan (*Renaissance de l'art musulman - The Renaissance of Islamic Art*, 1954), Gaston Diehl (*La jeune peinture marocaine The Young Moroccan Painter*, 1961), Alain Flammand (*Regard sur la peinture contemporaine au Maroc Investigation of Contemporary Moroccan Painting*, 1983) supports the thesis of the 'young' Moroccan painter and the supposed line of descent from Western masters and Moroccan painters. Cultural colonialism is based on a denial of an individual's esthetic thinking which might lead to a growing awareness in Moroccan society of its own past and its own history. See Toni Maraini *Écrits sur l'art*, « 19 peintres du Maroc. Aperçu historique » (Writings on art '19 painters from Morocco. Historic overview'), Editions le Fennec, Casablanca, 2014 (1990), p. 65 et pp. 99-101.

Teaching at the Casablanca school and its fields of application

The reform in teaching Fine Arts aimed to establish a teaching model incorporating innovative visual education and research into new ways of accessing modernism.

In 1962, Farid Belkahlia became part of school's management, which he would lead until 1974. From 1964, Melehi and Chebâa joined him to create a solid pedagogic team. This team also included Toni Maraini, who was responsible for teaching the history of art, Bert Flint, a professor passionate about popular art, and Jacques Azéma, who was in charge of the design workshop. This team would be enriched by input from artists like Mohammed Ataallah, Mustapha Hafid, Mohamed Hamidi, and Abdelhay Mellakh.

The experience of training abroad confirmed for Belkahlia, Melehi and Chebâa, that harmony between the Western academic model and Moroccan culture was impossible. They felt that since Greco-Roman cultural references appeared incompatible with Moroccan artists, the concept of a hierarchy of genres and the idea of genius were foreign to the national artistic tradition. It therefore seemed necessary to revolutionize the artistic landscape and create new pedagogic teaching principles. To be able to fully grasp how deeply their commitment to resisting the dominant trends in art at the time went, such as the pictorial tradition of the Parisian school, it is important to recognize their complete and nuanced understanding of Western Avant-guard movements. Realising this helps explain why their research was angled towards abstraction, and followed a process that didn't belong to the formalist tradition nor any other pre-existing order.

This challenge of revamping the school involved reformulating the revolutionary radicalism of historic Avant-guard movements by taking into consideration cultural elements from Morocco with its Arab-African origins . This required the artists to free themselves and undergo a process of memory work. Memory work required reconciling two notions of contradictory temporal movement, the 'Avant-guard' (which comes from the present and relates to the future and the demands of contemporary life) and 'tradition' (which comes from the present and relates to the past and the use of traditional artistic techniques) . The foundation of the new school's teaching was based around the need to find theoretical and esthetic solutions for the problems posed by artistic tradition and the role that it should play in contemporary art and society. This quest would result in a re-definition of artistic values, which appreciated cultural heritage and redefined the link between the public and art.

Valuing cultural heritage responded to a desire to recuperate the cultural scene and to carry out a sort of historic renovation. This involved rehabilitating the figure of the artisan (الصانع), [Aç-çanie] by recognising their artistic input to the Moroccan cultural scene. As guardians of Moroccan heritage, the artisan employs a blend of personal creativity and shared tradition. Through his work the artisan opens access to a repository of the popular artistic tradition with everything that it contains including signs, shapes and images. These constitute components of a visual language, which is developed over time . Analysis of popular art, both rural and urban, reveals their internalized artistic force, it exposes different elements of art history which can be described as contemporary art.

By going through this process Belkahlia, Melehi and Chebâa, were able to reconstruct the link between painter and artisan .

The process of bringing together the artist and artisan followed the Bauhaus philosophy, which encouraged a close relationship between both practices. At the Casablanca Fine-Arts school the philosophy could be seen in the way that a rural carpet replaced copies of ancient plasters or the fact that photography became a principle mode of expression replacing oratory. Arabic calligraphy was also taught, as well as traditional arts (carpentry, pottery, jewellery) and Islamic architecture. The multidisciplinary nature of teaching helped raise the question of the relationship between art and daily life. The question manifested itself through a new genre of art, which involved the public arena. Opening up the public arena brought the artist into the street. It came from a desire to find new uncharted territories, which were free from the strict norms of museums or the dictates of the art market that was still heavily influenced by bourgeois tastes for late orientalism.

The public sphere became the analogon of modernist creation. It broke through all of the usual constraints, whatever they may be, either traditionalist, institutional or market based. Artists took part in a form of creation, which was solely linked on direct questioning of the public. The artistic process was integrated into daily life, and produced art that was imagined as a factor in restoring the link with society. Public space was therefore claimed as a free territory. It bridged the gap between two kinds of territories. One was the physical where the wall on the road becomes the place for hosting interventionist art. The other part is a symbolic territory of actions and of words. Here artists and intellectuals argue over their theoretical, ideological and political positions.

Actions in the public sphere brought together different artistic vehicles, which shared the same strategy on visual education and cultural decolonialisation. The art and literature magazine, Souffles was thus created as an embodiment of this strategy, including a certain type of multi-disciplinary experimentation, using new forms of esthetics such as illustration, graphics and calligraphy. The individual or shared practices of integrating works of art into architecture also flourished with the aim of developing fruitful dialogue between art, architecture and daily life. Exhibitions in the urban landscape itself also allowed the direct involvement of the man in the street, uniting art and daily life, outside of any intellectual prerequisites.

⁹ Mohammed Chebâa « Deux périodes de la peinture marocaine » (Two periods in Moroccan painting), an article, which appeared in the Arabic magazine Al Karmel N° 12, Chypre, Bisan Press & Publication Institute LTD, 1984, pp. 217-225.

¹⁰ Toni Maraini, « Situation de la peinture marocaine » (Contemporary Moroccan painting), Souffles, numéros 7-8, 1967, p. 15.

¹¹ T. Maraini, « Considérations générales sur l'art populaire » (General thoughts on popular art), Maghreb Art N° 2 - Art Populaire, pp. 8-9.

¹² T. Maraini, Ecrits sur l'art, « Au rendez-vous de l'histoire de la peinture » (Writings on Art 'Meeting the history of painting'), Op. Cit., p. 64. See also « Questionnaire - Mohammed Chabâa à propos de la tradition plastique » 'Questionnaire - Mohammed Chebâa on artistic tradition', in Souffles, nummber 7-8, Op. Cit., p. 39.

¹³ M. Chabâa « Deux périodes de la peinture marocaine » Two periods in Moroccan painting), Loc. Cit.

One of the most memorable acts of protest remains, which brought together the public with contemporary art, was the exhibition in 1969 on Jemaâ El-Fna. It represented a slap in the face for official art and the Spring Salon. During this fair, the artists Mohammed Ataallah, Farid Belkahia, Mohammed Chebâa, Mustapha Hafid, Mohammed Hamidi, and Mohammed Melehi unveiled an exhibition on the main square in Marrakech. It was created thanks to the help of the local student population. It was followed by protests in Place 16 Janvier in Casablanca (1969) as well as in Moroccan high schools.

The features of Moroccan (post) modernism

Through abstraction, both geometric and gestural, Belkahia, Chebâa and Melehi invalidated the established premises of modernist work. In their art, both individual and through their shared experiences, they included a reflection on the spatial and temporal limits of an artistic object. There is one mutual element, which seems to characterize their research, they simultaneously define a dynamic spatial relationship which forcing a dialogue on national heritage and modern innovation.

Belkahia definitively smashed through the limits of pictorial space producing organic bas-reliefs. The compositions of Melehi invoked cosmic drama through the dynamic tension between order and chaos. The works of Chebâa conjured up contradictory spatial relationships pushing the eye of the spectator to go beyond the surface of the painting. Their work launched an esthetic oriented towards the exterior giving their works a centrifugal force able to propel them into spectator's personal space. Murals, the integration of art into architecture and other graphic research found in the magazine *Souffles* are all evidence of the same act, placing art into people's daily life.

Reflection on these public forms of art focuses on the temporality of artwork itself and the traces or presence of the past found within it. This contrasts sharply with the modernist perspective that tries to cut off every link to the past. The artists attempted to offer a way for their artwork to jump from the past and be thrown into the future. Pierre Restany identified their work as being 'recycling tempered with Moroccan references'. It resulted in a hybrid artistic vocabulary, which looked to partner modern esthetic concerns with traces of ancestral memory.

The specific nature of the Moroccan experience can be found in its ability to shift, and re-evaluate the traces of a history, which appears forgotten or hidden. While the discussion of time aimed to create something new, it paradoxically brought their art closer to the postmodern condition. According to Vattimo, postmodernism 'is characterized not only as being novel in comparison with modernism but more radically in its dissolution of the category 'new'. It implies a process of 'overcoming', also know as an 'afterlife for modernism', which includes a rupture with the logical progress of modernism on the one hand, and the assimilation of the limits of modernity on the other.



Exposition Place Jamaa el Fna, Exposition manifeste de l'école de Casablanca, 1969.
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In the Moroccan experience described above, this postmodern condition is reflected in the nature of the epistemological break, which is more of a metamorphosis than negation. It is interesting to note that the work of these three artists simultaneously gave a place for the emergence of new forms of art and public assertions of the exhausted limits of innovation. We can say that the emergence of these new artistic forms led to considerable reflection on the role of art in the production of history. It is a moment when we witness a correlation between the idea of artistic production as a historic act and that of art as producing history itself. At a historiographical level the appearances of news ways of writing Moroccan history would become a seed for a very contemporary process of remixing.

¹⁴ The modern project declared by Baudelaire assigns the artist the jobs [...] of extracting from the present what is worthy of being kept and to become antiquity'. See V. Descombes, *Le raisonnement de l'ours et autres essais de philosophie pratique*, (The reasoning of the bear and other practical philosophical essays) Paris, 2007, Seuil, pp. 176-195.

¹⁵ Chebâa: « Le statut de l'art traditionnel est futuriste » (The status of traditional art is futurist); Belkahia: « La tradition est le futur de l'homme » (Tradition is the future of man)

¹⁶ Gianni Vattimo, *La fin de la modernité* (The end of modernity) (1985), Paris, Seuil, 1987, p. 10, in Sophie-Jan Arrien and François Gauvin, « G. Vattimo, La fin de la modernité; nihilisme et herméneutique dans la culture postmoderne » (G. Vattimo, The end of Modernity; Nihilism and hermeneutics in postmodern culture), *Erudit*, 1997, pp; 233-238.

¹⁷ Ibid.

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150 words
Curatorial intention