

Algerian Painters as Pioneers of Modernism

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A century and a half after Eugène Delacroix painted *Women of Algiers in Their Apartment*, the London-based Algerian artist Houria Niati (b. 1948) deconstructed his “masterwork” in her 1982 installation *No to Torture* (Figure 10.1). Five oil paintings rendered in an abstracted style – plus drawings, photos, a soundtrack, and live performances – reflect, distort, reject, and invent anew the *Women of Algiers*. The glaring primary colors, twisted shapes, and unambiguous title send the clear message that contemporary Algerian artists are deconstructing European art on their own terms.¹ Niati’s work represents a dominant trajectory in the Algerian art of the last century: a generative confrontation with European art. New forms are created not by simply rejecting models but by recombining and transforming them. As the highly influential Algerian artist and critic Mohammed Khadda (1930–1991) argued, European influence on the art of the Maghreb, as the countries of northwestern Africa are known, has been “complex, mutilating and enriching at the same time.”²

Regrettably, even Algerian scholars have largely remained ignorant of the place of modernist painting in the art history of Algeria. The National Museum of Fine Arts in Algiers, the country’s capital, houses a stunning collection of these works, and paintings by Algerian artists are now found in galleries and museums around the world. While in many aspects the development of modern Algerian art is similar to that of its “sister” countries of the Maghreb, Morocco and Tunisia, and in some aspects to that of its “cousin” Egypt,³ Algeria’s long colonial history and violent struggle for decolonization has shaped its art in unique ways. The gradual loosening of French hegemony and strengthening of local agency can be traced in the history of painting in Algeria. This essay will examine Algerian and diasporic painters who have made a significant contribution to the development of modern art both locally and internationally.

In 1832, Delacroix traveled to North Africa as part of a diplomatic mission and returned to France with a multitude of sketches and watercolors and a sense of wonder at all he had seen.⁴ He did not observe any paintings hung on walls and North Africans



FIGURE 10.1 Houria Niati. Painting from the installation *No to Torture, After Delacroix' Women of Algiers, 1834, 1982*. Mixed media on canvas, 188 × 270 cm. Reproduced with permission from the artist.

regarded his activity as a curiosity, which led him to remark on indigenous “prejudices” against painting.⁵ Indeed, almost a century passed between the arrival of European artists in North Africa and the first generation of Maghrebi artists who adopted easel painting and began to exhibit their works in the early twentieth century. The absence of a pictorial tradition in the Maghreb has been attributed to injunctions against the representation of living beings in the sacred writings of Islam.⁶ But in North Africa indigenous artists who represented humans and animals on a painted surface do not seem to have been censured by their compatriots. Rather, from the French invasion of Algeria in 1830 to Algerian independence in 1962, it was the “prejudices” of French colonialism that kept the European settlers and Muslim Algerians in separate political, economic, social, and artistic spheres.

Under that system, indigenous Algerians had little exposure to modern art and limited access to formal art education. Some artists and intellectuals of Muslim and *pied noir* (European settler)⁷ origins collaborated, but the majority of Maghrebi artists struggled to gain autonomy and recognition for their work. Muslim patrons were scarce and the general public was not made to feel welcome in galleries or museums. Unlike in Egypt, where national artists were writing manifestos and creating a specifically Egyptian art as early as the 1920s and 1930s, the Maghrebian art scene was monopolized by Europeans for decades longer.⁸ Schools, galleries, salons, and intellectual circles were slow to open to indigenous artists.

However, during the last decades of the colonial era, painting developed into a medium that lent itself to producing “authentic” Algerian artforms. In the struggle for national and artistic autonomy, forms of nonfigurative painting emerged.

The country's independence in 1962 then paved the way for an indigenization of the arts infrastructure. Today oils or acrylics on canvas remain the dominant medium in North African contemporary art, although sculpture and photography are also widespread and video and installation art have become part of contemporary artistic practice.

French Colonialism and Its Impact on Algerian Art

France's colonization of Algeria, lasting from 1830 to 1962, had devastating human, economic, and social consequences. As many as three million Algerians were killed resisting the conquest in the nineteenth century, and the war of independence that lasted from 1954 to 1962 claimed the lives of perhaps a million more. The colonial economy was structured to benefit the French while indigenous Algerians were dispossessed of their lands and impoverished. Colonialism's impact on Algerian arts was equally dramatic. Culturally, the system alienated Maghrebis from their own past and promoted a model of French supremacy. Access to education became restricted and French replaced Arabic as the language of instruction. The local cultural environment was devalued, when not annihilated to make way for European needs. Throughout the colonial period, most European settlers, and the French administrators, thought of their own art as superior to the art produced by local peoples. French academic art was the privileged model and easel painting the favored genre, while "indigenous arts" were considered "crafts," "decorative art," or "minor arts."

By 1900, the arts infrastructure in Algeria – art schools, museums, galleries, publishers, exhibitions, prizes, and fellowships – was geared almost exclusively toward the European settlers and expatriate visitors. Europeans organized themselves into societies and associations, held annual salons and exhibitions locally as well as in Europe, awarded prizes and scholarships, and helped educate the settlers about European and Islamic arts. The first formal drawing school in the Maghreb opened in Algiers in 1843, becoming the *École des Beaux-Arts* in 1881. During the colonial era, it was led by French directors and staffed by French instructors. This art school is still in existence as the *École Supérieure des Beaux-Arts* (ESBA). Other art schools were opened in the Algerian cities of Oran and Constantine (the second and third largest cities) in 1930. All these schools were created to prepare Europeans to continue their studies in Paris. The National Museum of Fine Arts in Algiers, which remains among the largest art museums in Africa, dates from 1897. It houses an impressive number of classical, Orientalist, and modernist masterpieces by European artists, but, from 1930 to 1960, only 55 works in its collection were by artists of Algerian heritage. After independence aggressive efforts were made to collect more pieces of Algerian modern art.

Until recently, the history of North African art was written predominantly by European, and particularly French, scholars. European Orientalists – archaeologists, anthropologists, and historians – assisted colonial administrators in gathering documentation and publishing articles and books on the "Muslim arts." In the twentieth century, European art critics slowly began to take an interest in the rare indigenous painters who were singled out for attention. Some critics gave thoughtful analyses of the artwork, while others expressed their views in paternalistic terms.

“Parsimonious” Inclusion of Algerians in the Colonial Arts Scene

In the early twentieth century, certain colonial administrators began to recognize the irreparable damage done to Algeria’s culture and sought to reform policies. These included Charles Jonnart, Governor General of Algeria (1900–1911), who worked to preserve Islamic monuments, commission administrative buildings in a “Moorish” or “Arabizing” style, and create ethnographic museums. Jonnart also tried to “modernize” and regulate local craft industries in order to assert their dominance and to “protect” them from further “deterioration” as a result of competition with cheaper manufactured goods imported from Europe. Practices that had been transmitted through families for centuries were replaced by larger-scale production models proposed by French administrators.⁹

Arts education for indigenous North Africans had as its goal “to train perfectly qualified craftsmen to restore historic monuments, maintain or resuscitate them in their authentic original forms and thus contribute toward the preservation of the national heritage,” according to Mohamed Serghini.¹⁰ Serghini was the first Moroccan to study at the School of Art founded in 1946 in Tetouan, in Morocco, and he became the school’s director in 1956. Several Algerian painters in the early twentieth century received their early training in craft workshops. The attention to pattern, architectural detail, geometry, floral designs, and calligraphy apparent in the works of the miniaturists discussed below is representative of the Islamic art traditions that were preserved, or reinterpreted, in the colonial era.

A few rare Algerians held position in arts administration in Morocco under the French protectorate which began in 1912. The painter Abdelhalim Hemche (c.1908–1979) became an arts inspector in Morocco in 1929. Azaouaou Mammeri (1886–1954), also born and educated in Algeria, was also a teacher and then arts inspector in the 1930s and 1940s. He founded the Museum for Indigenous Arts, Dar Si Said, in Marrakesh. Hemche and Mammeri joined Moroccans such as Ahmed Sefrioui (1915–2004), the son of an artisan and a pioneer of French-language writing in Morocco, who helped preserve historic monuments, served as curator of the Museum of Fez and published essays on Moroccan arts and crafts. While the idea of creating a synthesis of Western-style painting and North African “indigenous” arts in an individual work was still at an embryonic level in this early period, these Algerian art administrators helped to valorize both types of art.

The colonial system at all levels of education did little to expose indigenous North Africans to European or international art. Scholars have often described art education for Muslims in colonial North Africa as being dispensed “parsimoniously.”¹¹ As noted, during its first 80 years the *École des Beaux-Arts* of Algiers excluded non-European students and it was only from the 1920s that courses began to be offered for Muslims, in special sections labeled “indigenous” or “Muslim” arts.¹² A few Algerians taught in the “Muslim arts” sections led by Europeans. Art education saw a gradual opening of opportunities to Maghrebi students from the 1940s. Independence, in particular, paved the way for radical changes in the curriculum, administration, faculty, and student body of schools. The national infrastructures for arts education in the Maghreb have faced strong demand, with a population explosion and the tightening of visa regulations since the 1990s that have made study in France more difficult.

North Africans with specialized training in art history are a relatively recent phenomenon. Of the few Muslim students in the fine arts academies during the colonial period, even fewer were permitted to study art history.¹³ Even today few institutions in the Maghreb offer formal art history courses. So Maghrebi art historians are often trained in Europe or the USA and they usually write in French (although some write in Arabic as well). The current generation of North African scholars of Maghrebi arts includes a greater proportion of women than was the case in the years directly after independence, and recently women have served as director of the Museum of Fine Arts in Algiers and as the Algerian minister of culture.¹⁴

The First Algerian Painters, 1920s and 1930s

Painting in Algeria prior to the arrival of the French had mainly been used to illustrate or illuminate sacred books. In fact, their writing itself constituted an artform. Calligraphy based on the Arabic script was a highly respected artform in Algeria as in other Islamic societies. Illuminated Qur'ans and architectural inscriptions were part of the national visual heritage. In the early twentieth century, calligraphy and illumination were still practiced by Algerians in their own workshops, but more and more in centers organized through the colonial government. Other religious paintings were made on panes of glass, and sometimes acted as souvenirs of pilgrimages. Scholars believe that painting on glass was introduced in Algeria and Tunisia by the Ottoman Turks who ruled much of the Muslim world in the nineteenth century, but there is scarce documentation on its practice.

The first Maghrebi easel painters began to be active in the 1920s. Some were from artisan families and studied in the “indigenous arts” sections created at fine art schools or in special workshops. Some studied in Paris where they visited museums and galleries and were exposed to contemporary art movements that did not exist in their home countries. They were introduced to networks of intellectuals and political activists when they traveled abroad in Europe or in other North African countries. Other Maghrebi artists were self-taught, encouraged by the Europeans for whom they worked. Some recent studies have argued for a nuanced understanding of the complex relationship of North African artists to European Orientalist artists and educators.¹⁵ There is a need for a systematic study of the mutual influences of Algerian painters and their *pied noir* counterparts.

Azouaou Mammeri (1886–1954) is considered to be the first Algerian to create oil paintings. In a *plein air* style that emphasized nuances of natural light, he depicted mosques, monuments, landscapes, and North Africans in outdoor settings in Algeria as well as in Morocco (a French protectorate since 1912). Mammeri was a school-teacher in the Algerian mountains when his paintings were admired by French artists and colonial officials such as Prosper Ricard. His first exhibition was in 1917 in Paris. Soon after he became a drawing professor in Rabat, Morocco, where his cousin worked for the royal family. Easel painting was an emerging art in Morocco in 1918, when an exhibition at the new Excelsior Hotel in Casablanca included paintings by Mammeri and European Orientalists.¹⁶ With a scholarship from the colonial government in Algeria, Mammeri studied at the Casa Velazquez in Spain in the 1920s. In 1955 he was posthumously awarded the Grand Prize for Arts of the City of Algiers, and his paintings appear in several European and Middle Eastern museums.¹⁷ Mammeri's work has been viewed as an emulation of Western art but, according to a

study by Roger Benjamin, “the way Mammeri’s work is now being rediscovered by art experts from the Arab world encourages a reading of his work as containing grains of resistance,”¹⁸ seen especially in “his effort to prove that a North African could excel at the colonizer’s mode of expression.”¹⁹

Abdelhalim Hemche followed a career path similar to that of Mammeri and explored similar subject matter. He studied decorative arts at the *École des Beaux-Arts* in Algiers and received art scholarships from the colonial government. Like Mammeri, by the late 1920s he was teaching drawing in Morocco, where he also became an arts inspector. He studied, and later taught, at the *École des Beaux-Arts* in Paris. His brightly colored artworks, full of vivid complementary hues, were featured in exhibitions in Algiers (1927, 1930) and Paris (1948) and his illustrated manuscripts were displayed in the Algerian pavilion during the 1937 Universal Exhibition in Paris.

The Racims and Miniaturist Painting

Miniature painting was a genre imported to the Maghreb from the east, particularly from Persia. While its ultimate source was in the manuscripts of the Byzantine world, it had been reinterpreted by Islamic artists for centuries. In Algeria, the term “miniature” refers to framed calligraphy of the sacred Arabic script, which can be combined with – or “illuminated” by – decorative images, and small-scale portraits and scenes based on book illustrations. Algerian artists who practiced this form of painting inspired appreciation of it by European painters who visited the Maghreb, such as Henri Matisse and Alexandre Roubtsoff.

Mohammed Racim (1896–1975) the most highly acclaimed of the Algerian artists emerging before the 1940s, was particularly involved with this painting tradition. He and his brother Omar (1884–1959) came from a distinguished family of artists of Turkish descent. Their father sculpted and painted wood frames and coffers, illuminated manuscripts, and worked in copper. Mohammed was trained in state workshops and became the first Muslim artist to receive Algeria’s Grand Prize for Arts in 1933 and a scholarship to study in Paris. During his eight years in Europe, he became interested in Persian miniatures, developing his own style by combining their stylization with Arabic calligraphy and incorporating a three-dimensional perspective and modeling borrowed from Western art. Racim also collaborated with *piet noir* artists who were interested in the “decorative arts” and in the aesthetic traditions of the Maghreb, working with Etienne Dinet on the book *The Life of Mahomet* and with Léon Carré to illustrate an edition of *A Thousand and One Nights*. Richard van Leeuwen, an Islamic studies scholar, has argued that, through their illustrations of the Arabian Nights tales, modernist artists “closed the gap” between Orientalist and modernist painting: “the two components merged to such an extent that Orientalism became a regular aspect of the modern artistic expression, and that artists incorporated Oriental influences into their own styles.”²⁰

Although his work was later criticized by some Algerian nationalists for not portraying colonial exploitation or contemporary suffering, it has been celebrated by the postcolonial regimes who have seen in it visual confirmation of Algerians’ strength in the precolonial era. In 1975 the Museum of Fine Arts of Algiers received a collection of 65 of Racim’s works. Recently art historians have revisited Racim’s case to show that, while he was encouraged and promoted by the colonial regime, at the same time he conveyed subtly subversive messages about Islamic splendor and pride in indigenous artistic traditions.²¹

Some of Racim's paintings depicted a mythical universe of aristocrats in an Algerian age of glory. *The Rais*, a 1931 gouache painting with gold leaf that is less than a 30 cm square, depicts a seventeenth-century Algerian sea captain in elegant robes and a turban, standing near ships in a port, with cannons by his feet and a drawn dagger in hand. This image recalls the important role played by such mariners during the expansion of the Ottoman Empire. Another of Racim's portraits features the emir Abdelkader, a nineteenth-century warrior and political figure who, because of his resistance to the French, is considered a national hero in Algeria. The painting depicts the Sufi leader looking grave and dignified, dressed in rich clothing with a white shawl draped around his head, holding a dagger in one hand and prayer beads in another. Enclosing the portrait is a series of frames painted in geometric, arabesque, and floral motifs.

Racim is credited with helping organize a path-breaking exhibit with the Franco-Muslim Circle in Algiers in 1944, *Young Muslim Painters and Miniaturists from Algeria*, where 13 artists were represented, including several of the Racims' protégés.²² The public recognition the artists received encouraged them and inspired others. Both Mohammed and Omar Racim influenced numerous Algerian artists in their role as professors at the École des Beaux-Arts in Algiers where they taught illumination and miniature painting. Their instruction and inspiration were evident in Algerian art for decades.

Other Algerian Miniaturists

Among the many important Algerian artists to study with the Racims, Mohamed Temmam (1915–1988) is known for his ability to synthesize Western and Islamic arts. Drawing on themes from Algeria's cultural and historic heritage, he produced miniatures, illuminations, calligraphy, and oil paintings. He began studying ceramics at age 13 and studied in the "indigenous arts" section at the École des Beaux-Arts in Algiers. In the 1930s he received a scholarship from the colonial government to attend the National School of Decorative Arts in Paris and worked as a designer at the famous porcelain factory in Sèvres, France. After independence he returned to Algiers where he taught the art of the miniature at the École des Beaux-Arts and was curator of the National Museum of Antiquities and Islamic Arts for a quarter century. In 2007, 80 of his works were shown in a retrospective exhibit at the Museum of Fine Arts in Algiers.

In the postindependence period the masters of miniature painting and illumination have been criticized as "aristocratic" and "feudal,"²³ for reflecting a nostalgic view of the ancient glory (of the upper class). Overall, however, North Africans appreciate the accessibility this figurative genre offers and perceive it as culturally authentic. Today Algerian artists such as Farida Hamza (b. 1959), and Zakaria Morsli (b. 1964) continue this legacy with their floral and "arabesque" motifs and detailed depictions of "traditional" clothing and activities.

Algerian Artists and European Orientalists – 1940s

A number of Algerian artists in the 1940s were influenced and encouraged by European Orientalists who had popularized easel painting. Some were formally trained, including by indigenous teachers such as the Racims, while others were self-taught. Although their works rivaled European Orientalist paintings in their technical proficiency, and are often superior in their ability to evoke a specific landscape, the artists merit more recognition for their personal contributions to the genre than they have generally received thus far.

Ahmed Bensliman (1916–1951) was a native of Bou Saâda, a popular winter resort in Algeria where numerous Orientalist painters came to work and live. Several of them encouraged him to study at the *École des Beaux-Arts* in Algiers. He is known for his still lifes and landscapes depicting oases, sunsets, the port and old city of Algiers, and for his portraits of anonymous Algerian women.

Miloud Boukerche (1920–1979) began his career as a designer at a silk company, but he also attended the *École des Beaux-Arts* in Paris. His work was influenced by Delacroix and Dinet and he specialized in idealized or even stereotypical portraits that catered to the tastes of his patrons. The typically Orientalist subject matter of other works is evident in their titles: *Berber Woman near the Oasis*, *Elegant Girl on the Terrace in Algeria*, *The Goat Market*.

A self-taught artist, Mohamed Zmirli (1909–1984) first earned his living painting images on wedding trunks. His first easel painting, a still life, was executed in 1930. From 1935 on he participated in many salons and collective exhibitions, including the first Salon of Independence in 1962. Zmirli is known for his still lifes, landscapes (especially of the port of Algiers), floral paintings, and portraits in pastel colors. Another self-taught artist, Hacene Benaboura (1898–1970), recipient of Algeria's Grand Prize for Art in 1957, painted automobiles before taking up easel painting in the mid-1940s. He was influenced by Orientalist artists whom he had watched paint in his childhood.

After independence, works by these early Maghrebi artists were avidly collected by North African museums and private individuals. In addition to their aesthetic appeal, they remind Maghrebis of their pride in local landscapes and revive their nostalgia for traditions, costumes, customs, and festivals that are no longer features of daily life for most Algerians. Furthermore, these artists represent North Africans' early engagement with an internationally recognized art medium. In recent years, paintings by North African artist from the first half of the twentieth century have fetched high prices through auction houses such as Christie's and Sotheby's and Moroccan companies like the *Compagnie Marocaine des Œuvres et Objets d'art* (CMOOA).

The impact of these twentieth-century painters may still be seen in contemporary Algerian art. A number of artists make a living from copying Orientalist works or creating their own versions of nostalgic images of a simpler or more glorious past. One artist who stands out for his skills is the self-taught painter Hocine Ziani (b. 1953). His works share the subject matter of Orientalist art including horse cavalcades, reclining odalisques, and beautiful Kabyle women carrying water, but also include heroic figures such as the legendary Tuareg queen Tin Hinan. In the 1980s he donated two large-scale (200 × 400 cm) paintings to the Military Museum in Algiers that depict scenes of the Emir Abdelkader's nineteenth-century victories. They bear a striking resemblance to battle scenes painted by European artists a century earlier, but with the key difference that the Algerians are portrayed as the victors.²⁴ Like many other artists of his generation, Ziani moved in the mid-1990s to France where he enjoys patronage and acclaim.

Female Algerian Artists

Only a handful of women artists were recognized in the Maghreb in this early period and were rare even until the 1980s. Women had fewer opportunities to travel, even less access to formal education than men,²⁵ and their artistic production was limited



FIGURE 10.2 Baya. Untitled, 1947–1950. Paint on paper, 74 × 99 cm. Photograph by Jean Genoud SA, courtesy of the Collection de l’Art Brut, Lausanne.

to certain fields such as weaving and embroidery, ceramics, murals, and body arts (such as henna painting and tattoos).

The most famous Algerian woman artist was known simply as Baya (1931–1998). Orphaned at age five, she was raised by her grandmother and later taken to Algiers by a French woman who encouraged her to make art; she had no formal education. Her clay figures and gouaches were admired by the French collector Aimé Maeght who invited her to exhibit in his gallery in Paris in 1947. The preface to the catalogue was written by André Breton who exclaimed, in a burst of enthusiasm for this “Arab primitive”: “Baya is queen. Baya, whose mission is to give new sense to these beautiful, nostalgic words: ‘Happy Arabia’; Baya who holds and revives the Golden Bough.”²⁶ Her work (Figure 10.2) also appealed to Picasso, when both artists worked with the same ceramics studio in southern France in 1949. The positive reception of this untrained artist’s work in France was due in part to the concept of “*art brut*,” promoted by the French artist Jean Dubuffet in 1945. Baya’s vividly colored gouaches of girls, flowers, fish, birds, and animals were celebrated for their “wild,” “primitive,” “naïve” creativity.²⁷ The dreamlike quality of her works also led Europeans to label her work “surrealist,” believing that she was drawing upon a collective unconscious.

Yet Baya’s work was clearly informed by her Algerian cultural heritage in both style and subject matter. In this sense her aesthetic joins that of highly educated academic artists such as Mohammed Khadda and Rachid Koraichi, who incorporated precolonial Algerian artforms in their work (discussed below). Some of her abstracted faces

and figures appear to display tattoo patterns and Baya exhibited with Denis Martinez, Choukri Mesli, and other artists of the Aouchem (“tattoo”) group who drew on an ancient local heritage.

Very few Algerian women artists were academically trained until the twenty-first century. One exception was Kheira Flidjani (1912–1991), who studied in Paris and returned to Algeria to become the only female member of the National Union of Plastic Arts in 1963. She is known for her portraits and for nudes, which did not please some of her compatriots, but she was not apologetic about depicting the female body.²⁸ Another was Djamila Bent Mohamed (b. 1933), whose somber works focus on myths and legends; she studied in Algiers, Amsterdam, and Paris and taught at the École des Beaux-Arts in Oran, Algeria. Unsurprisingly, several female artists were politically active. Myriam Ben (1928–2001) was a well-known Jewish Algerian writer who joined the communist party and fought for Algerian independence. Her abstracted paintings date from the 1960s until her death. Aïcha Haddad (1937–2005) was a miniaturist, high school art teacher, and anticolonial activist. One of the first women to join the National Liberation Army, she was arrested and imprisoned by the colonial forces. In the early 1970s she began to exhibit her paintings, whose subject matter includes women of the Kabyle region, Tuareg warriors, and folk festivals. An exhibit hall at the Museum of Fine Arts of Algiers is named after her. Leïla Ferhat (b. 1939), who was trained at the Écoles des Beaux-Arts in Oran and Algiers, is known for her semi-figurative works, often featuring the color blue, such as the painting “Message of Freedom.”

The Algerian Revolution, Independence, and Modern Art

The Algerian Revolution (1954–1962) was one of the most important wars of decolonization in the twentieth century. In 1954 the Front de Libération Nationale (FLN) issued a proclamation calling for the establishment of a sovereign state of Algeria to put an end to more than 120 years of colonial oppression, segregation, racism, and injustice. For both the Algerians and the French, the long war of independence was unspeakably traumatic. Characterized by terrorism, torture, rape, and chemical and biological weapons, it divided loyalties on both sides and produced many civilian deaths, especially among the Algerians. For the French, who called it a “pacifying operation,” it remained for decades a “war without a name.”²⁹ Starting in the 1950s, painters from around the world mobilized to give testimony to the horrors of the war.³⁰

Algerian artists, in particular, were deeply engaged in representing the causes, traumas, and results of the war. Imprisonment, torture, and massacres were alluded to, and sometimes represented graphically, although rarely in realist modes. Representative works of this era include Mohammed Khadda’s *Hommage à Maurice Audin* (1960), an abstract painting of fractured sticks of turquoise and blood red on a brown and rust background. Audin, a *pied noir* and a university professor, was tortured and assassinated by the military for his anticolonial activities. Choukri Mesli’s 1959 painting *The Bombarding of Sakiët Sidi Youcef* testifies to French military reprisals on a Tunisian border village, an act of brutality that shocked the world. His *Algeria in Flames* (1961) is an abstract work that evokes a chaos of bodies and architectural forms punctuated by fiery red marks. Many of M’hamed Issiakhem’s abstracted works portray the sufferings of women, such as *The Martyr’s Widow* (1968). In one of his “violently expressionistic” works, *To Those Who Wanted to Pass and Remained Behind* (n.d.), a skeletal black

figure, crying out in pain, puts out a hand past barbed wire fences.³¹ Suffering and resistance were major themes in the works during this period of bloody warfare.

A few important exhibitions have documented Algerian and international images of the war. In 1964, the *Art and the Algerian Revolution* exhibit at the Ibn Khaldoun Hall in Algiers featured the works of 80 painters from 26 countries. In 1996 a retrospective at the Palace of Culture in Algiers, *November 1954 through the Eyes of Painters*, commemorated the date of the beginning of armed struggle for national liberation. Forty-two Algerian artists were represented. An exhibition curated by Anissa Bouayed, *International Artists and the Algerian Revolution*, was held at the National Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art of Algiers (MAMA) in its inaugural year, 2007.³²

Postindependence Phase

After independence in 1962, Algeria entered a phase of reconstruction and revival that was both physical and psychological. The scorched earth tactics of the French military and the terrorist bombing by the anti-independence *pied noir* group, L'Organisation de l'Armée Secrète (OAS), destroyed infrastructure and demoralized the population. The École des Beaux-Arts and the National Museum of Fine Arts in Algiers, for example, were bombed by the OAS in 1961. Colonial authorities transferred many of the museum's works out of the country. Later the museum's director negotiated the repatriation of those works and developed the collection of paintings by Algerians.

Independent Algeria, portrayed by the new government as an "absolute rupture" with the past,³³ did bring major transformations to the arts sector. In some respects the shift to artistic sovereignty could be said to be an ongoing quest that continues in the twenty-first century, linked to the pursuit of decolonization itself.³⁴ Algerians took over leadership of much of the infrastructure, as directors of schools and museums and as teachers and students in the academies. They formed artist unions that are still operating today, such as the Union Nationale des Arts Plastiques (UNAP), founded in 1963, which is now the Union Nationale des Arts Culturels (UNAC).³⁵ Many of the Maghrebi artists who began their careers in the 1950s helped transition their countries from nationalist struggles to a postindependence phase that lasted through the 1980s.

Public work projects such as large-scale monuments, sculptures, and murals were commissioned by the socialist governments from 1962 to 1992. Artists were also solicited to design postage stamps, posters, and banknotes to commemorate local heritage, replacing the resented "*République française*" designs. The monopolization of power by the FLN as a one-party state was evident in the promotion of particular artists and styles. Soldier-artists who fought with the FLN were favored and nationalistic works with revolutionary themes were encouraged. Boukhatem Farès (b. 1941), who fought with the National Liberation Army and drew scenes of military struggle, exemplifies this trend. As in the Soviet Union, representational painting was well accepted in the postindependence era.³⁶ Abstract artists, on the other hand, were sometimes criticized by their nationalistic compatriots for being bourgeois, individualistic, uncommitted, and inauthentic.³⁷

As the countries of the Maghreb fought for independence, artists gradually became aware of how much of their own tradition was obscured by the colonial powers. The project of decolonizing Maghrebi art and its history entailed restoring, revalorizing, and sometimes reinventing a precolonial artistic heritage. For artists looking to return

to their roots, finding traces of local art and tradition proved especially challenging in Algeria where so much of this heritage has been systematically wiped out. The colonial models available were rejected as backward-looking and stylistically passé. Algerians felt that Orientalist art was produced by and for foreigners, as were the museums, galleries, and salons organized by its practitioners. European promotion of Algerian “naive” art (Baya’s for example) was seen as demeaning to trained artists with avant-garde or nationalist perspectives.

Modernism in Western art is seen by many scholars as a form of rejecting tradition.³⁸ However, for Maghrebi artists under colonial rule, modernism meant borrowing European painting techniques and materials while recuperating elements of Islamic and African arts. The art historian Wijdan ‘Ali describes a “search-for-identity stage” when indigenous artists throughout the Islamic world rediscovered their heritage, showed nationalist pride through their works, and “develop[ed] an indigenous art language based on traditional elements of Arab art” such as the arabesque, miniature painting, calligraphy, and themes from legends and folktales, while “employing contemporary media and modes of interpretation.”³⁹ On the other hand, again according to ‘Ali,

The majority of Algerian artists who came into their own during the 1950s and 1960s . . . made a complete break from both Orientalist painting and indigenous forms (such as the miniature) and, by doing so, initiated a modern art movement. Through their travels and studies in France they came into contact with the latest trends in Western painting.⁴⁰

Yet ‘Ali goes on to claim that this generation was also searching for ways to express an Algerian identity.

While movements such as the FLN gained momentum, artists explored an increasing range of themes and styles. Some artists depicted their country’s problems through social realism (no doubt influenced by Soviet art) or expressionism. Others, such as the Aouchem (tattoo) group from Algeria, the Casablanca Group from Morocco, and the Tunis School, revisited national heritage. Unlike their predecessors, who selected subject matter that championed indigenous values, they did this by using local materials, architectural shapes, Arabic calligraphy, and symbols, and based on the arts of the Berber peoples (who prefer to refer to their cultures as “Amazigh”) – all in abstract formations to create hybrid modern artforms.

The oldest of this generation of artists, Bachir Yellès (b. 1921), has been a leading figure in modern Algerian painting. At age 23 he participated in the first exhibition of Muslim painters and miniaturists from Algeria at the Franco-Muslim Circle along with ‘Ali-Khodja, Hemche, Ranem, and Temmam. In the 1940s he was awarded the Prix d’Honneur Beaux-Arts by the colonial government. His early work resembles Orientalist art in its pastel colors and subject matter: odalisques, landscapes, and Amazigh women from the Kabylia region in their regional dress; as an inspector for art and craft in Kabylia, he had a special interest in Amazigh jewelry. From the late 1960s his works became more abstract.

Yellès helped organize the Premier Salon d’Indépendance and was the founding president of the UNAP artists’ union. He became the first Algerian director of the National School of Architecture and Fine Arts in Algiers. For two decades, he helped shape a new curriculum that included architecture, painting, drawing, printmaking, and art history, as well as miniatures, illumination, painting on wood, ceramics,

bookmaking, calligraphy, and mosaics. The various arts were no longer hierarchically separated into “fine” arts to be studied by Europeans and “applied” arts or “crafts” for the Muslims; rather every student was expected to learn all aspects of what constituted art for both traditions.

Yellès was among the postindependence artists who emphasized the importance of connecting with the Algerian public. His works include monuments such as the massive “Sanctuary of the Martyr” sculpture (1982) and the clock in the Arts Center (2001), both in downtown Algiers, as well as murals at the Algerian embassy in Paris. He also designed postage stamps featuring Algerian costumes, carpets, and crafts.⁴¹ His lifespan of more than nine decades has allowed him to contribute to several phases in the development of modern Algerian art.

Like Yellès, M’hamed Issiakhem (1928–1985) studied miniature painting with Omar Racim. He directed the École des Beaux-Arts in Oran in the late 1960s. From an Amazigh family in the Kabylia region, Issiakhem experienced personally the tragic effects of the Algerian war. At age 15 he picked up a grenade that exploded, killing his two sisters and a nephew and causing him to lose his left arm. His work has been seen as a vision of collective traumatism, made acute by the painter’s individual anguish.⁴² As mentioned above, many of his works depicting anonymous archetypical figures reflect the harsh realities of colonization and the struggle for independence. His work has been described as a mix of social realism, expressionism, figuration, and abstraction. His use of collages, thickly layered paint, and earth colors make his paintings easily recognizable. Like the other artists of his generation cited here, Issiakhem’s work embodies the quest for a plural Algerian identity, in opposition to the reductionism of nationalistic discourses. His compositions incorporate “diverse writings, poems, dedications, quotations and signs symbolizing the historical diversity of Algeria, in Tamazight (the language of the Amazigh, or Berber, peoples), Latin and Arabic.”⁴³

The critic Mohammed Khadda is equally well known as a pioneer of abstract Algerian painting (Figure 10.3). A typographer and a self-taught artist, in 1953 he went with Abdallah Benanteur (b. 1931) to Paris, where he was influenced by lyrical abstraction and cubism. Khadda’s mother’s family members were direct victims of colonial violence and he was engaged in the struggle for independence. When he returned to Algeria in 1963, he rejected the politically engaged social realist style of painting that was encouraged by the Algerian state, but he did participate in collective mural painting and designed a “monument to the martyrs.” He was one of the leading members of the School of the Sign that evolved in the 1960s, and was among the first Maghrebi artists to use both Arabic calligraphy and Tifinagh, an alphabet used to write Tamazight. Khadda’s 1971 book *Éléments pour un art nouveau* offered a history of Algerian art, from the ancient petroglyphs of Tassili to Amazigh art from Kabylia, Arab arts, Orientalism, and the new generation of Algerian painters.⁴⁴ Khadda argued that Maghrebi art, from its origins, was a “nonfigurative art par excellence” and that in its abstraction it was modern before its time.

Similar arguments were made by Choukri Mesli (b. 1931) and Dennis Martinez (b. 1941), cofounders of the Aouchem Group in the late 1960s. Aouchem, the Arabic word for tattoo, an ancient art of the Maghreb, conveyed these artists’ desire to rediscover an authentic tradition of the sign. Conceiving of their modern works as having continuity with a long history of indigenous art, they declared in their manifesto:



FIGURE 10.3 Mohammed Khadda. *Calm Noon*, 1983. Oil on canvas, 66 × 53 cm. Reproduced with permission from Najat Belkaïd, the artist's widow.

Aouchem was born thousands of years ago on the walls of a cave in the Tassili Mountains. Its existence continues into our own time, sometimes in secret, sometimes in the open, according to the fluctuations of history.⁴⁵

They thus claimed kinship with the Paleolithic and Neolithic artists who created the rock art of the central Sahara and whose abstract figures were echoed in the Aouchem artists' modern work.⁴⁶ Although the Aouchem Group only lasted until 1971, the focus of its members on signs and calligraphy, their use of unusual materials (leather, copper, sand, etc.), and their affiliation with poets, had a lasting influence on other Algerian artists.

In the early 1950s Mesli helped organize the exhibition *La jeune peinture algérienne* (*Young Algerian Painting*), founded the cultural journal *Soleil*, collaborated with other painters and poets, and won the First Prize of the City of Algiers at the Orientalists' Salon. In the mid-1950s he attended the École des Beaux-Arts in Paris but his scholarship was revoked after he participated in a student strike. After independence he began teaching at the École des Beaux-Arts in Algiers and was a founding member of UNAP. His painting *Algeria in Flames*, an abstract with blocks of red and black, was one of the first acquisitions of the Algiers Museum of Art after independence. Mesli's monumental

works include a 100 square meter enamel-block mural made in the 1980s in Algiers. Although not a figurative work, the mural evokes doves, suns, and hands that float across bold squares and triangles of red and blue. Mesli's bright canvases are covered with abstract forms that suggest dreams and mythological themes.

Mesli proclaims his affinity with local culture rooted in the African continent.⁴⁷ He participated in the Pan-African Festival organized in Algiers in July 1969 that featured a large exhibition of African and diasporic art from collections around the world. In conjunction with the Second Pan-African festival, held in Algiers in 2009, he held an exhibit entitled *Mesli the African* at the Algerian Museum of Modern Art. Silhouettes of women reminiscent of the Tassili cave paintings, canvases rendered in ochre, red, blue, and yellow and titles like *Dance*, *Twilight*, *Magic*, and *Zebra Stripes* are his poetic homage to an "eternal" Africa. Unfortunately, despite the efforts of Mesli and other like-minded artists, artistic collaboration between the Maghreb and the rest of the continent remains limited. As the Algerian curator and critic Nadira Laggoune recently lamented: "We don't know so much about art made in Africa and artistic exchanges are practically non-existent."⁴⁸

Of Spanish ancestry, Dennis Martinez was born in Algeria and considers himself an Algerian artist, not a *pied noir*.⁴⁹ After studying at the fine arts schools in Algiers and Paris, he returned to Algeria and became a professor at his alma mater. In his works he also explores Amazigh motifs and symbols in Arabic and Tifinagh alphabets.⁵⁰

From the time of independence on, the Algerian government insisted on the Arab and Muslim character of the nation. During a popular uprising in 1980 known as the "Berber Spring," protestors demanded official recognition for Amazigh cultures and languages, which had been repressed by the government in the name of "Arab unity."⁵¹ Through their works, artists such as Issiakhem, Khadda, Mesli, and Martinez helped promote pride in Algeria's Amazigh heritage. The influence of these artists was so strong that "until the 2000's, the recurrent themes in Algerian art remained history, memory, identity, cultural heritage, authenticity."⁵²

An ongoing interest in locally inspired artforms including calligraphy is evident in the more recent works of "cosmopolitan" artists Rachid Koraïchi (b. 1947) and Samta Benyahia (b. 1950) who identify as Algerians, live in Paris, and show their work in galleries, museums, and biennales in numerous countries. Koraïchi and Benyahia both studied at the École des Arts Décoratifs in Paris and work in various media including painting, printmaking, and installation art. Koraïchi's work is inspired by Arabic calligraphy, Tifinagh characters, and talismanic symbols, and he has also worked in ceramics, textiles, and metalwork. Benyahia explores geometrical patterns and architectural motifs drawn from Islamic art. Her work often combines photography and serigraphy.

Artists and the Algerian Civil War 1991–2002

During the 1990s, Choukri Mesli and Dennis Martinez were among the many Algerian artists who fled to France to take refuge from the Algerian civil war, a period of intense conflict between government and Islamicist forces in which as many as 200,000 people were killed.⁵³ The period from 1991 to 2002 became known as Algeria's "dark decade" or "lost decade." Many visual artists, musicians, writers, and journalists were threatened with death or murdered, and intellectuals fled the country. The director of the École des Beaux-Arts in Algiers, Ahmed Asselah, and his son Rabah, who was a student there, were assassinated in 1994. The abstract

painter ‘Ali Silem (b. 1947) left for France that same year after Abdelkader Alloula, a playwright for whom he created costumes and décor, was killed. Artists who stayed in Algeria were driven underground. Galleries closed and patrons – governmental and private – disappeared.

Although there is a rich literary production that deals with this tragic period of Algerian history, most visual artists at the time felt too threatened to treat it directly in their works. It has only been since the end of the civil war in the early 2000s that a younger generation of artists has broached the subject in their photographs, videos, and installations.⁵⁴

Painting and Contemporary Trends in Algerian Art

While relative security was restored to Algeria during the first two terms of Abdelaziz Bouteflika’s presidency (1999–2009), emergency laws were only lifted in 2011 and Algerians remain wary of oppressive forces in the government as well as of Islamists. In the past dozen years there have been hopeful signs for the art world, however, including the reopening of the French Cultural Center in Algiers, the creation of several galleries, and the opening of the new Museum of Modern Art in 2007. Oran began hosting a biennale of contemporary art in 2010. Still, many of the country’s best known artists live and work abroad.

These cosmopolitan expatriates include Hourri Niati, whose 1982 *No to Torture* was described at the beginning of this essay. While that installation is strongly linked to the painterly tradition, her bold use of art historical imagery to refer to the brutality of government oppression (particularly, given the use of Delacroix’s images, colonial oppression) was groundbreaking in Algerian contexts. Other early experiments in installation art were made by Zineb Sedira (b. 1963) who was born in France and resides in London. She is known internationally for her haunting reflections on migration and displacement. Her works include the 16 mm film *Middle Sea* (2008) and a video installation on 14 LCD screens entitled *Floating Coffins* (2000), filmed at the “ship graveyard” in Nouadhibou, Mauritania, where migrants attempt to depart for Europe, on voyages that often end in their death.

Not all digital artworks are produced by artists from the Algerian Diaspora. A recent example of a provocative and celebrated work by an Algerian residing in the country is Ammar Bouras’s (b. 1964) media montage *Tag’out*, exhibited at the 2011 Sharjah Biennale. A former photojournalist, Bouras received degrees from the École des Beaux-Arts of Algiers in visual communication and painting and taught photography there from 1995 to 2006. The work, whose title means “treason,” featured graphic news images from the 1990s that flashed on large screens, displayed in mosaic fashion, incorporating photos of assassinated political figures and artists, and pictures from the artist’s life.

Conclusion

Modern Algerian art emerged in the first decades of the twentieth century and developed between 1930 and 1970 despite, but also thanks to, colonial arts infrastructure including schools, salons, and museums. A number of self-taught artists were

encouraged by their peers and by European artists and patrons. More privileged artists who attended schools and became teachers contributed to the education of new generations of artists. Independence opened a space for dialogue on a more equal footing between Maghrebi and Western painters, and modern art began to develop in myriad forms. The pioneers of Maghrebi modernism continued to exchange techniques and ideas with Europeans while revalorizing their inherited traditions. They also paved the way for today's proliferation of styles and young artists' openness to the international scene. The violence of the Algerian revolution inspired painters to find ways to put that revolt into images, whereas the civil war led artists to flee the country and stifle their reactions.

Painting continues to dominate Algerian art and academic instruction remains relatively traditional. Increasingly, however, videos and installations represent new opportunities for contestation and creation, with artists responding to more recent political and social upheavals rather than to the Orientalist and colonialist discourses that had served as a catalyst for innovation by their predecessors. The international acclaim garnered by the young generation of artists, the restoration of a relative peace inside the country, and the burgeoning art scene in the Diaspora have all contributed to a renewal in Algerian art as Algerians continue to grapple with the multiple legacies of their history.

Notes

- 1 Hassan (1997).
- 2 Khadda (1972, 10–11), translation by Mary Vogl.
- 3 Shabout (2007).
- 4 Arama (2006).
- 5 Dumur (1988, 43); Pouillon (1996, 183).
- 6 Many scholars have nuanced this interpretation. See for example Naef (2004). Also see Ramadan, chapter 7 this volume.
- 7 *Pieds noirs* refers to the colonial settlers in the Maghreb, specifically in Algeria. In the 1950s there were approximately one million settlers of European origin and nine million Muslim Algerians. Most of the Jewish Algerians left for France and a small number for Israel. More than 80% of the *pieds noirs* left Algeria around the time of independence.
- 8 Irbouh (2005).
- 9 Irbouh (2005).
- 10 Cited in Pieprzak (2010, 17).
- 11 Pouillon (2003); Irbouh (2005); Benjamin (2003); Laggoune-Aklouche (2011).
- 12 Khadda (1972); Laggoune-Aklouche (2011).
- 13 Bellido et al. (2003).
- 14 These art historians and critics include, to name a few: Nadira Laggoune-Aklouche, Malika Bouabdella, Dalila Mahammad-Orfali, Zahia Rahmani, and Mohmed Djehiche. Dalila Mahammed-Orfali directs the Museum of Fine Arts in Algiers and Khalida Toumi is the minister of culture.
- 15 Beaulieu and Roberts (2002); Benjamin (2003); Pouillon (2003).
- 16 Benjamin (2003). Jacques Majorelle and Bernard Boutet de Monvel were among the other painters represented.
- 17 Angeli (1955); Benjamin (2003).

- 18 Benjamin (2003, 50).
- 19 Benjamin (2003, 440).
- 20 Unfortunately, he does not mention the importance of Racim's contribution to "closing this gap," and he does not appear to be including Algerians in his description of these "modernists" (Van Leeuwen 2010, 223, 229).
- 21 Pouillon (1996); Benjamin (2003).
- 22 The next collective exhibit of Algerian artists was not until the Premier Salon d'Indépendance in Algiers in 1962 (Laggoune-Akhlouche 2011).
- 23 For example, see Khadda, cited in Pouillon (1996, 194).
- 24 Pouillon (1996, 203–205).
- 25 At the time of the war of independence, less than 5% of Algerian women could read and write. The figure was only 15% for the overall population (Stora and Harbi 2004, 201).
- 26 Baya (1988). Martine Antle also sees in Baya's work "motifs and colors reaching back to folkloric and Arabo-Berber traditions . . . The female bodies and the objects she paints form intricate decorative and repetitive rhythmic patterns reminiscent of Arabic calligraphy, Islamic Art, and oriental carpets" (2006, 10).
- 27 Pouillon (1996); Khanna (2008); Makhoul (1998).
- 28 Rouache (2009).
- 29 Stora (2004).
- 30 Bouayed (2005). For example, Pablo Picasso, the Chilean Surrealist Roberto Matta, and the French painter Robert Lapoujade, through their portraits of Djamila Boupacha, called attention to the celebrated cause of this female Algerian liberation activist who was tortured, raped, condemned to death, and finally granted amnesty.
- 31 Bouayed (2005).
- 32 Bouayed (2009).
- 33 Pouillon (1996, 198).
- 34 Related questions are addressed in the Egyptian context in studies by Winegar (2006) and Omnia El Shakry (2009).
- 35 Yellès, Mesli, Farès, and Zmirli were among the founding members of the Union.
- 36 Algeria benefited from close relations to the Soviet Union during the war of independence and after. The impact of Soviet art on Algerian production merits further study.
- 37 Pouillon (1996, 199).
- 38 For example, Hughes (1991); Weston (2001); Calinescu (1987).
- 39 'Ali (1994, 74).
- 40 'Ali (1994, 93).
- 41 Mahammad-Orfali (2009).
- 42 Bouayed (2005, 38).
- 43 Dorbani-Bouabdella (2010).
- 44 Like many works of that era, the book appeared in French, the language that members of the Algerian intelligentsia used for academic writing.
- 45 Manifesto (2009, 188).
- 46 Magnificent paintings and carvings dating back at least 8,000 years adorn rock walls in the Tassili n'Ajjer mountain range in southern Algeria. See L'Hote (1959); Lajoux (1963).
- 47 "For a discussion of "Africanité" in the Maghreb, see Pieprzak and Winegar (2009).
- 48 Haupt and Binder (2009).

- 49 Becker (2009, 25).
- 50 Becker (2009, 25).
- 51 It was only in 2002 that Tamazight was recognized as a national language and it is still not an official language, as it was recently declared in Morocco. See also Maddy-Weitzman (2011).
- 52 Laggoune-Aklouche (2011, 189).
- 53 Following riots in 1988, the government made political reforms that allowed for the participation of political parties beyond the FLN. However, in the elections in the early 1990s when the Islamic Salvation Front (FIS) appeared to be winning a majority of votes, the army intervened and an armed struggle ensued between the military and radical Islamist groups. Most of the victims of this conflict were innocent civilians, and women were particularly vulnerable to attack.
- 54 Diasporic artists working in new media who reflect upon aspects of the civil war include Kader Attia (b. 1970), Nadia Seboussi (b. 1971), Abdel Abdessemed (b. 1971), and Zoulikha Bouabdellah (b. 1977). Perhaps the most iconic image of the conflict is the photo known as the “Madonna of Bentalha” taken in 1997 by French Press Agency photojournalist Hocine Zaourar (Algerian, b. 1952). In the village of Bentalha near Algiers, more than 200 people were massacred in one night by the Armed Islamic Group. The next day Zaourar photographed a woman mourning outside a hospital. The composition is reminiscent of a Christian pietà, and the image, which was published on the front pages of many newspapers and won a World Press Photography award, helped call international attention to the Algerian tragedy.

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