

Meet Bazaar Art Cover Star: The Iconic Baya Mahieddine

By [Seloua Luste Boulbina](#) Jun 20 2019



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According to the great [Algerian](#) writer Kateb Yacine, Baya Mahieddine marked the first steps of Algerian Modern art. At first glance, Baya's story seems like a fairytale. How did a (female) Algerian orphan become a master of modern painting? Fatma Haddad was born in a poor family in Fort-de-l'Eau (currently Bordj-el-Kiffan), near Algiers, in 1931.

After she lost her parents when she was five years old, she lived with her grandmother who worked as a housekeeper in a colonial horticultural farm. Here, she grew up in a natural environment, observed the birds, saw the flowers blossoming, tasted delicious fruit. She was 11 when the owner's sister, Marguerite Caminat Benhoura, proposed to take in this sensitive young girl at her place in Algiers, probably as a young servant. Soon after, in 1942, Benhoura adopted her.





Baya Mahieddine. Femme au paon. 1947. Gouache on paper. 62.8x 47.7cm

It was there that Baya was provided with her first art materials and home schooling. This Frenchwoman, married to a *cadi* (judge), worked as an archivist at the Muslim Bureau of Charities. Her real passion, however, was painting, and collecting artworks. Benhoura's personal art collection included works by Georges Braque and Henri Matisse, Pablo [Picasso](#), and her close friend, Joan Miró.

For her mentor, Marguerite Caminat, Baya was a wild child who created fascinating female and animal figures out of dirt. She was also a shy person but she became an asserted painter determined to realise her painting dream.



Baya Mahieddine. Musiciennes. 1975. Gouache on paper. 80.5 x 148.5 cm

As a self-taught artist, Baya's gaze was doubly educated: on the one hand by nature, on the other by art, especially by Matisse. But Baya herself thought she was born an artist. In such a colonial situation, her talent was undoubtedly recognised, while at the same time, she was subalternised as an "indigene", as a teenager as well, and categorised immediately as a naïve painter characterised by a 'child-like' style. From this perspective, Baya resembles the 'naïve' Haitian painter Hector Hyppolite. Breton loved both.

Visiting Haïti in 1945, he bought multiple paintings by Hyppolite. In his 1947 essay entitled Baya, he writes: "I speak not as others have, to deplore an ending, but rather to promote a beginning, and at this beginning, Baya is queen. The beginning of an age of emancipation and of agreement, in radical rupture with the preceding era, one of whose principal levers for man might be the systematic, always increasing impregnation of nature." Indeed, Baya's narrative was strongly influenced by her race and her gender. It was also, at the time, largely considered through the indigenous prism. She was sometimes classified among the Surrealist artists.



Baya Mahieddine. Femmes et oiseaux. 1975. Watercolour and gouache on paper. 100 x 150 cm

Today, Surrealism might (also) be regarded as a way of including extra-European artists into the art history. Furthermore, when Dubuffet discovered Baya's works in 1947, he acquired many of them, as if they were Art Brut. Baya's work also seems outside of history, mostly because of implicit norms on which founded the idea of a ([European](#)) history of art. Despite her success in France, Baya appears to be a supernumerary artist: her work could be found both in France and in Algeria.

Because she lived in an artistic environment, and in a [French](#) colony, she had opportunities to meet French visitors, like the art dealer Aimé Maeght, who was enthusiastic about her paintings and organised her first exhibitions in Paris in 1947. Staying true to her artistic self, Baya chose to go by her painterly name, Baya, and signed it in a personal and unknown scripture. As the artist said later: "If I change my paintings, I will no longer be Baya. When I paint, I am happy and I am in another world."







Baya Mahieddine. Femme à la coupe de fruits. 1976. Gouache on paper. 92 x 73 cm

During the late 40s, Baya made ceramics and coloured gouaches. An obsessive pattern consistently reappears: women. Donning colourful traditional dresses, surrounded by flowers and rich vegetation, these hieratic-like figures are always painted with almond eyes and fleshy red lips. These women haunted the artist's imagination. They are women encompassed into lianas, plants, flowers, sometimes accompanied by pets, birds in a cage or huge seductive fowls, inspired by traditional pottery and, more broadly, Algeria's visual culture.

Baya's work is hybridised. It's a creolisation of Kabyle, [Arabic](#) and European heritage. The confluence of various cultures enriched her pictorial universe. On both sides of the Mediterranean, she allowed for something new and sparked the interest of great names. During her first exhibition in Paris, Behind the Mirror, Maeght gallery's journal included texts by Peyrissac (who lived in Algiers and introduced her to Maeght), Dermenghem, Kober and, last but not least, Breton, who wrote "It's undeniable that, in her bag of marvels, love potions and spells, rival extracts of perfumes from the Thousand and One Nights [...] Baya, whose mission is to recharge with meaning those beautiful nostalgic words: Arabia Felix."







Baya Mahieddine. Nature morte aux oiseaux. 1985. Gouache on paper. 65 x 49.8 cm

Her succès fou (wild success) was partly based on this Orientalist misunderstanding. Nevertheless, Baya refused to define herself with the terminology of the [Western](#) canon. She was in between, in a third space—in her own space.

It was due to the encouragement of the then director of National Museum of Fine Arts in Algiers, Jean de Maisonseul, that Baya began to paint on large formats. She also introduced new objects into her paintings: musical instruments, especially stringed instruments. They appeared as a metaphor of women, the ultimate living musical instruments. Baya's paintings are all—paradoxically—still lifes, even though they include women. This point has been largely underestimated. Far from portraits, closer to archetypes, Baya's women seem frozen in time. They dance in another life away from the darkness of this world. Real life is elsewhere for Baya.

To read the full article, pick up the Summer 2019 issue of Harper's Bazaar Art