



A museum employee poses next to a painting by former British prime minister Winston Churchill titled *The Mosque at Marrakech* at Leighton House Museum in west London as part of the exhibition *Meetings in Marrakech: The Paintings of Winston Churchill and Hassan El Glaoui*.

CARL COURT STR

A friendship forged in Moroccan art

Kate Quill

January 24, 2012



Meetings in Marrakech, The Paintings of Hassan El Glaoui and Winston Churchill, runs at Leighton House, 12 Holland Park Road, London, until March 31; 020-7602 3316, www.leightonhouse.co.uk. The entrance fee is £5 (Dh28)

The paintings of the celebrated Moroccan artist Hassan El Glaoui sit in fine-art collections all over the world, but it was only thanks to a few words from an amateur painter who dabbled in oils as a hobby that he was allowed to study art at all. This wasn't a schoolteacher or an eccentric, artistically inclined aunt, but one of Britain's greatest statesmen: Sir Winston Churchill.

The extraordinary story of an unlikely friendship between a British prime minister and a Berber tribesman is being told for the first time in *Meetings in Marrakech*, an exhibition that opened at Leighton House, in Kensington, London, on Friday. In it, 24 paintings by Churchill and El Glaoui, all completed in Marrakech, hang alongside each other. Together, they form a tribute to the beauty of "the ochre city" and to the power of friendship and art to cross cultural barriers.

El Glaoui was born in 1923 into a noble Berber tribe of the High Atlas. His father, Thami El Glaoui, was the Pasha of Marrakech and exerted a powerful and fearsome influence over the politics of Morocco. (He was known colloquially as the "Black Panther".) The pasha entertained Churchill, who first visited in 1935, on several occasions. He was a flamboyant host: banquets, sometimes featuring more than 100 dancing girls, took place at Meknes, Fez, Telouet and Marrakech.

Despite their striking differences (photographs show the pasha in flowing Arab robes and a burnous standing next to Churchill in a cumbersome British uniform), the two men became firm friends, sharing a love of hedonism, politics and golf.

Churchill had taken up painting late, age 40, as a way of combating bouts of depression. Morocco was one of his favourite destinations to take his easel and oils, and he painted avidly while he was there. He adored its crisp winter climate, limpid light and romantic desert landscapes. It was, he wrote after his first visit, "a revelation".

In 1943, as the Second World War raged in Europe, the 69-year-old Churchill returned again to Marrakech to convalesce from pneumonia. The pasha called on his friend for advice over a troubling family matter: his eldest son wanted to pursue a career in painting — an unheard-of career choice for a boy of his social standing. After seeing some impressive sketches by Hassan, Churchill urged his reluctant friend to allow the young man to follow his desire. Hassan was dispatched to Paris, where he studied at the Ecole des Beaux Arts. His talent and career flourished. By the 1970s he had achieved wide recognition in the Middle East, Europe and America — one of the first North African artists to do so.

Hassan, who is still painting from his home in Marrakech at the age of 88, acknowledges that, without the reassurance of Churchill, his despotic father probably would not have relented: "I am extremely grateful to [Churchill] for whatever influence he exercised on my father," he says. "Without him, I might not have been sent to Paris. I believe I would have pursued painting no matter what but, without the occasion to learn in Paris from great teachers, and to be around other artists, my style would have been different. The art world there was very inspiring for my career."

This show acknowledges that debt. It displays some of Hassan's famous equestrian paintings, but there are also charming, lesser-known works: quiet, quotidian scenes of Marrakech, such as horses resting by their carriages and studies of the palmeraie baking in the desert heat. The colours are muted and the style impressionistic, capturing the olive greens and powdery pinks of Marrakech.

And what of the work of the amateur, many of whom have never been exhibited before? "Churchill's paintings stand up surprisingly well next to the work of Hassan," says the show's curator, Daniel Robbins.



[Add your comment](#) | [View all comments](#)

[More Art](#)

[MOST VIEWED](#)

[ARTS & LIFE](#) | [ALL](#)

1. Justin Bieber's Mumbai backstage demands raise eyebrows