

Visual Art History in Morocco: From Early Influences to the Contemporary Era

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Abstract: This paper examines the evolution of art history in Morocco, spotlighting how museums and cultural institutions have shaped—and been shaped by—the country’s broader social, political, and educational transformations. Beginning with the early European artistic interest in Morocco during the 19th century, the study traces how the French and Spanish Protectorates introduced institutional frameworks and “Indigenous Arts” policies that affected both traditional crafts and emerging modern arts. Post-independence, local intellectuals and policymakers sought to reclaim and redefine cultural governance, leading to the establishment of major art schools (notably in Tétouan and Casablanca) and the adoption of “new museology” principles emphasizing community inclusion and educational outreach. The paper then explores significant contemporary reforms, including the founding of the National Foundation of Museums (FNM) in 2011. Empowered by new legislation, the FNM has overseen the modernization of national museums, introducing unified management standards and international best practices. This institutional recalibration culminated in the opening of the Mohammed VI Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art (MMVI) in Rabat—Morocco’s first major public museum fully dedicated to modern and contemporary works. By linking heritage preservation with cutting-edge artistic production, and by reaching out to diverse audiences, the Moroccan museum landscape has emerged as a vibrant space that marries local cultural identities with global art dialogues. In examining these developments, the paper illustrates how colonial-era legacies, post-independence aspirations, and current initiatives converge in Morocco’s dynamic art scene, ensuring that an increasingly inclusive and forward-looking framework shapes cultural creation and appreciation nationwide.

Keywords: art, art education, cultural policy, history, Morocco, museum, painting.

1. Introduction

Morocco’s art heritage is a complex tapestry woven from centuries of intercultural exchanges and local innovation. This paper aims to examine the historical trajectory of art in Morocco—tracing the earliest Western artistic encounters in the 19th century, investigating institutional changes under the Protectorate, and moving toward the post-independence cultivation of a national cultural identity. Drawing on museological theories—particularly the “new museology”—this study highlights how museum frameworks evolved to address changing educational, social, and cultural missions.

In the sections that follow, we will outline how colonial-era

policies shaped Morocco’s early museums, how post-independence programs revitalized traditional crafts and modern art forms, and how more recent initiatives—led notably by the National Foundation of Museums—have further transformed Morocco’s cultural infrastructure. The paper concludes by demonstrating how Morocco’s art scene has embraced both local heritage and global contemporary art currents.

2. European Artistic Influence in 19th Century

“Painting in Morocco finds its earliest influences dating back to the 16th century, thanks to Moroccan painters who practiced their art in Europe”. [1] European painters were rare in Morocco before the 19th century. Diplomatic and commercial engagements were sporadic, and artists who traveled to the kingdom found it difficult to access inland cities. Some early depictions exist, but overall, Morocco was less visited by traveling Orientalist painters compared to other parts of North Africa. By the mid-19th century, Western artists began venturing more frequently into Morocco. Figures like Eugène Delacroix, who visited in 1832, left an indelible mark on European Orientalism. Delacroix’s sketches and watercolors, done on-site in Tangier and Meknès, later influenced many other painters intrigued by Moroccan cityscapes and cultural traditions. Despite often being filtered through European tastes, these works contributed to shaping global perceptions of Morocco’s landscapes and customs. Tangier became a leading hub for expatriates, diplomats, and artists, particularly by the late 19th century. *“Between 1880 and 1950, there were “127 British painters compared to only 76 French and 37 Spanish. [...] During the same period, 28 American painters worked there, as opposed to 9 Italians, 7 Belgians, and even fewer Russians, Austro-Hungarians, or Dutch, with only 2 to 5 representatives for those nationalities.”* [2]. Favorable diplomatic conditions and a growing winter-resort culture made it the entry point for Western creative figures. Hotels and private residences hosted small exhibitions, giving rise to limited but notable art scenes. This artistic interplay prepared the ground for changes that would eventually come with the Protectorate.

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3. The French Protectorate

The establishment of the French Protectorate in Morocco in 1912 had immediate and far-reaching implications for the country's cultural and artistic spheres. This entailed sweeping administrative, economic, and cultural reforms, initiated by French authorities—and, in the northern region, by Spain—that sought to secure strategic and commercial advantages. Beyond these core objectives, colonial administrators also introduced new structures for cultural and educational oversight, leaving a legacy that would continue to influence Morocco's artistic scene even after independence.

One pivotal initiative was the creation of the Department of Fine Arts, Antiquities, and Historical Monuments, an administrative body charged with conserving Morocco's built heritage and fostering artistic activity. To preserve Morocco's built heritage and organize the arts, the French created the Department of Fine Arts, Antiquities, and Historical Monuments. This department cataloged historical sites, supervised restorations, studied antiquities, and oversaw an array of "Indigenous Arts" (traditional crafts such as weaving, pottery, and woodwork). In practice, French policymakers encouraged local artisans to maintain supposedly authentic "indigenous" motifs, even as they adapted production to serve colonial markets: *"They emphasized preserving motifs deemed authentically 'indigenous' while adapting production to foreign markets. In 1920, the "Office of Indigenous Arts" was transformed into the "Service of Indigenous Arts," attached to the Directorate of Public Education and Fine Arts. This new designation clearly marked a break with the industrial orientation of production previously envisioned by the Office, which had been led for nearly two decades by Prosper Ricard. Its mission was clearly defined:*

"Its mission is to develop museums in such a way as to facilitate, everywhere, the reeducation of adult artisans, and the introduction of younger generations to the country's arts, to identify capable artisans [...] and, finally, to take part in exhibitions of indigenous art both in Morocco and abroad." [3]

These measures introduced a dynamic tension between heritage preservation and the commodification of craft. The resulting debates anticipated what the "new museology" movement would later formalize: a call for museums to embrace social inclusivity, educational missions, and respect for local communities' creative expressions.

In parallel, the Protectorate saw the establishment of several museums designed to highlight Morocco's heritage. Among the earliest were the Batha Museum in Fès, which focused on ethnographic collections, and the Oudayas Museum in Rabat, renowned for its textiles and jewelry. Although shaped by colonial agendas, "they also laid the groundwork for a broader national approach to cultural heritage. By the time the Protectorate ended, Morocco had a foundational—albeit limited—infrastructure for museum-based arts preservation, marking the start of more organized cultural governance. These nascent institutions would eventually serve as stepping stones for post-independence efforts to reclaim and redefine Morocco's museums and artistic identity.

4. Post-Independence Artistic Flourishing

"The 19th and 20th centuries played a decisive role in the political, social, and administrative development of North-West African countries, including Morocco under Spanish influence. In 1767, a peace and trade treaty were signed between Spain and Morocco during the reign of Charles III. This treaty marked the beginning of diplomatic relations that would shape the future ties between the two nations. Spain's main objective was to secure strategic access to both shores of the Strait of Gibraltar and establish important commercial positions" [4]. After Morocco gained independence, the visual arts underwent a significant renaissance, catalyzed by newly established training programs and an energized creative environment. Two prominent schools laid the groundwork for modern Moroccan art during this period. The first, the École des Beaux-Arts de Tétouan, was created under the Spanish Protectorate in northern Morocco. While initially designed to safeguard local artisan traditions, it gradually incorporated European art pedagogy. This fusion of influences enabled Tétouan's students to explore both craft-based disciplines and Western academic approaches, thereby broadening the skill sets and perspectives of emerging Moroccan artists.

Meanwhile, in Casablanca, a different type of experimentation was taking shape. The École des Beaux-Arts de Casablanca, founded in 1950, focused on avant-garde instruction, drawing inspiration from global art movements. According to archival records, under directors like Farid Belkahlia, it became a hub for avant-garde teaching that shaped Morocco's modern art scene. These forward-looking programs encouraged students to venture beyond conventional forms, often integrating elements from local traditions with more radical, international art styles. Through workshops, collaborative projects, and conceptual debates, faculty and students sought to redefine what it meant to create contemporary Moroccan art.

"The main artists of the Casablanca School include Belkahlia, Mohammed Chebaa, and Mohammed Melehi, whose actions and commitments marked a break with classical academicism. Other artists who moved in the same circles, such as Ahmed Cherkaoui, Jilali Gharbaoui, and André Elbaz, also helped shape this modernist movement. The period immediately following Morocco's independence is analyzed here in particular with regard to the role these artists played in constructing a postcolonial national culture. Toni Maraini, an art historian associated with the Casablanca School, describes this modernity as "more than just a style, [it was] a spirit and an attitude." (5) By the 1960s and 1970s, several influential figures—among them Farid Belkahlia himself, Mohammed Melehi, and Mohammed Chebaa—guided significant reforms aimed at emphasizing abstraction, indigenous motifs, and sociopolitical engagement. Their initiatives helped spark new artistic associations and collectives, providing a platform for painters, sculptors, and multidisciplinary creators alike. Many of these artists pushed boundaries by blending subtle references to calligraphy, architecture, or folk culture with modernist techniques such as geometric abstraction or gestural brushwork. This cross-pollination advanced both technical innovation and

critical dialogue, thus ensuring a lasting impact on Moroccan art. Through the momentum they generated in pedagogy, community-building, and exhibitions, these schools and their leading figures firmly anchored modern Moroccan art in an era of post-independence flourishing.

5. Associations

After Morocco's independence, the cultural landscape became more structured through the establishment of several artist-led associations and unions. Initially formed to safeguard creative rights and encourage collective projects, these groups quickly took on broader roles in promoting and professionalizing the arts. Two of the most prominent organizations were the Association Nationale des Beaux-Arts and the *Syndicat des Artistes Plasticiens Marocains*, each contributing to a more coordinated and collaborative post-independence art scene.

Through workshops, training sessions, and shared exhibitions, these associations offered emerging talents not only a space to display their work but also an essential support network for legal and financial matters. As highlighted in various historical records, these groups supported young talents, organized shows, and lobbied for better cultural policies. This advocacy opened doors to grants, sponsorships, and official endorsements, ensuring that practitioners could access funding and resources previously unavailable under colonial rule.

Meanwhile, as government institutions began asserting the importance of a distinctive cultural identity, private initiatives also gained momentum. An embryonic network of commercial galleries emerged, principally in Casablanca and Rabat, showcasing both modern and contemporary artworks. These galleries collaborated closely with the newly formed associations, assisting them in organizing curated exhibitions that placed Moroccan art in dialogue with global currents. Collectively, these efforts reinforced the visibility and prestige of Moroccan artists, allowing them to engage with wider audiences at home and, increasingly, on the international stage.

6. Visual Art in the 1980s and 1990s

During the 1980s and 1990s, Morocco's artistic landscape underwent a phase of revitalization in which younger painters and sculptors felt increasingly free to break with tradition and experiment in new ways. According to several art-historical surveys, a younger generation of artists, often graduates of Casablanca or Tétouan, brought novel media and bolder experiments. These emerging creatives not only explored more conceptual avenues—such as installations, performance, or mixed-media collages—but also began engaging with broader social and political themes. In doing so, they reinvigorated the local art discourse and cultivated fresh audiences curious about avant-garde production.

Commercial galleries played a decisive role at this juncture, expanding beyond the handful of institutional venues that had previously monopolized formal art exhibitions. Building on the networks established in Rabat and Casablanca, gallery owners

increasingly sought to attract collectors. As noted in contemporary records, Collectors, both institutional and private, started investing, fueling a fledgling art market. Their patronage enabled some artists to secure financial stability, opening space for more ambitious long-term projects. Meanwhile, local critics and curators began to place Moroccan artwork in a global context, often inviting international collaborations or presenting in foreign shows and biennials.

“The 1990s herald a new phase, marked by the emergence of numerous talents and innovative artistic approaches. These artists strive to invent forms of expression that are both aesthetic and thematic. This period is characterized by the coexistence and blending of various currents, to the point where it can sometimes be difficult to distinguish between abstract and figurative art.

They explore diverse disciplines such as painting, sculpture, and photography. Their approach stands out for its determination to abolish artistic boundaries and surpass conventions. *“Creation becomes an intimately individual undertaking, fundamentally oriented toward the artist's own interiority and referencing nothing outside itself. [...] The exaltation of subjectivity is in itself a form of protest in a sociocultural environment marked by the rejection of individualism.”* [6]

Amid this wave of dynamism, artistic practices revealed a spectrum of approaches. Some practitioners stayed committed to traditional motifs—integrating calligraphy, religious symbolism, or architectural references into modern forms—aiming to guard and reinterpret cultural heritage within a contemporary idiom. Others engaged with global trends, introducing pop-infused aesthetics or postmodern conceptual themes that addressed technology, identity, and cross-cultural dialogue. By weaving together deep-rooted Moroccan influences and global currents, these artists positioned themselves at the heart of a new and exciting era for the nation's visual arts.

7. Museums in the Contemporary Era

Following several decades of incremental reforms to Morocco's museum sector, a truly pivotal development arrived in 2011 with the creation of the National Foundation of Museums (FNM). Instituted by law n° 01-09, the FNM was tasked with modernizing national museums while preserving Morocco's heritage. Unlike earlier administrative bodies that relied on ministries or private patronage alone, the FNM was granted both legal standing and financial independence, enabling it to set up a more cohesive framework for museum governance.

From the outset, the foundation's priorities were explicit. Its architects sought to streamline museum administration by consolidating oversight of key institutions under a unified authority. This reorganization was designed to eliminate redundant efforts and more efficiently allocate resources, whether for collection acquisitions, staffing, or exhibition planning. In parallel, the FNM committed to strengthening the professional standards of art conservation and artifact curation, recognizing that the country's accumulated heritage—spanning

archaeological artifacts, ethnographic collections, and modern artworks—needed greater safeguards against deterioration.

Moreover, accessibility and inclusivity formed core principles of this new structure. By delivering practical support, training programs, and outreach initiatives, the FNM encouraged museums to engage diverse audiences. For instance, some institutions introduced free-admission days or youth-targeted workshops, thus attracting visitors not typically present in museum spaces. As critics have observed, this framework aligns with global museological best practices, reinforcing democracy and accessibility in cultural institutions. By weaving modernized administrative systems with grassroots cultural engagement, the FNM gave Moroccan museums a powerful mandate to rejuvenate their roles as guardians of heritage, engines of cultural creativity, and open forums for civic dialogue.

In 2021, law n°56.20 introduced a regulated “Museum” label in Morocco: This new legal framework defines rigorous standards and cements the professionalization of museum operations, whether public or private.

It builds on Morocco’s decades-long museological evolution, ensuring that future museums meet quality benchmarks and that heritage protection is safeguarded.

In keeping with Morocco’s broader commitment to institutional reform, a significant legislative milestone arrived in 2021 with the enactment of law n°56.20, which introduced a regulated “museum” label. By providing a structured set of requirements for accreditation, “this new legal framework defines rigorous standards and cements the professionalization of museum operations, whether public or private. This move not only ensures that future museums adhere to quality benchmarks but also offers enhanced protection for the country’s diverse cultural heritage. Building on decades of museological development, the label is envisioned as a guarantee of best practices—covering everything from curatorial guidelines and conservation protocols to visitor engagement methods—thus harmonizing the museum landscape under a unified standard.

Another emblem of the contemporary museum era in Morocco is the Mohammed VI Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art (MMVI) in Rabat. Opened in 2014, it marked a turning point as the first major public institution dedicated primarily to modern and contemporary art. Equipped with specialized educational facilities, an auditorium, and restoration labs, the museum transcends the conventional role of static display by serving as a locus for ongoing research and

innovation. The MMVI’s mission statement underscores its ambition: Committed to bridging local art histories with global contemporary dialogues, the MMVI fosters inclusive educational programs, resonating with the FNM’s goals. Through a varied program of exhibitions and events, it regularly draws Moroccan and international visitors, cementing the country’s enhanced visibility on the global cultural stage. This convergence of legal reforms, infrastructural modernization, and curatorial innovation illustrates how Morocco’s museums have taken on new relevance both as repositories of heritage and as platforms for contemporary artistic expression.

8. Conclusion

Moroccan art history reveals a tapestry woven from local traditions, colonial interventions, and post-independence transformations. From 19th-century European impressions to Protectorate-era institutional frameworks, and culminating in 21st-century governance by the National Foundation of Museums, Moroccan art has continually adapted to global and national changes. Contemporary developments—exemplified by the Mohammed VI Museum—demonstrate the country’s commitment to innovating museological and artistic practice.

By embracing both heritage preservation and cutting-edge modern art, Morocco’s museum sector now serves diverse audiences, promotes intercultural dialogue, and pursues best practices in museology. Ongoing research on audience engagement, museum management, and expanded community outreach will further shape how Morocco’s art scene evolves, ensuring that the cultural wealth of the kingdom remains accessible and inspirational to future generations.

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