

THE MOROCCAN “NEW WAVE”: THE SCHIRN PRESENTS THE INFLUENTIAL ART SCENE AROUND THE CASABLANCA ART SCHOOL IN A FIRST MAJOR EXHIBITION

**CASABLANCA ART SCHOOL
A POSTCOLONIAL AVANT-GARDE 1962–1987**

JULY 12–OCTOBER 13, 2024

PRESS PREVIEW: THURSDAY, JULY 11, 2024, 11 A.M.

Just a few years after Morocco gained independence in 1956, Casablanca became a vibrant center of cultural renewal. The Schirn Kunsthalle Frankfurt presents the unique and influential work of the Casablanca Art School in a first major, long-overdue exhibition. The main representatives of this innovative school—Farid Belkahia (1934–2014), Mohammed Chabâa (1935–2013), Bert Flint (1931–2022), Toni Maraini (b. 1941), and Mohamed Melehi (1936–2020), together with students, teachers, and associated artists—quickly became the central driving force for the development of postcolonial modern art in the region. In realizing their aims, they combined an openness to local history with the new social reality. Engaging with the ideas of the Bauhaus movement, they reevaluated the connection between the arts, crafts, design, and architecture in the local context, fusing Western metropolitan arts with elements of the vernacular heritage that had been undermined during the colonial era. The Schirn will present some 100 works by 22 artists, including dynamic abstract paintings and urban murals, crafts, graphic design, interior design, and typography. Rarely seen archive material, such as film footage, vintage journals, photographs, and prints, complements these displays, revealing a transnational Moroccan art scene.

The exhibition “Casablanca Art School. A Postcolonial Avant-Garde 1962–1987” is supported by Stadt Frankfurt and Hessische Kulturstiftung, with additional support from Fraport AG.

Sebastian Baden, director of the Schirn Kunsthalle Frankfurt, comments: “This is the first institutional exhibition to comprehensively present the Casablanca Art School’s influential legacy. After Morocco’s independence, the school’s teachers and students created a special space and reimagined Moroccan art and arts education. Their collective mission aspired to decolonize and liberate arts and culture, situating their artwork in everyday life and creating paintings, posters, magazines, open-air festivals, and outdoor murals. It is time for a long-overdue appreciation of this international artistic movement. This show expands the previous Western interpretation of the development of modern, abstract painting and provides a significant new international perspective that allows us to make more precise distinctions in the canon of art history.”

According to the exhibition’s curators, Morad Montazami and Madeleine de Colnet (Zamân Books & Curating), “‘Casablanca Art School’ explores a distinctive vision for modern life driven by five influential teachers at the school: Farid Belkahia, Mohammed Chabâa, Bert Flint, Toni Maraini, and Mohamed Melehi. Known informally as the ‘Casablanca Group,’ this legendary collective of artists developed into an international network that spanned generations. This Moroccan ‘new wave’ proclaimed a new art for Morocco that grew out of Afro-Amazigh heritage and sparked an urban, social, and cultural movement that continued into the future.”

TOUR THROUGH THE EXHIBITION

The exhibition, divided chronologically and thematically into eight sections, presents the works and central aspects of the Casablanca Art School artists and their associated positions, supplemented by documentary material. In addition, another room brings together books, films, and a chronology. Three films from the video series *School of Walking* (2023) by the artist duo Bik Van der Pol (Liesbeth Bik and Jos Van der Pol) will also be shown in the Schirn’s publicly accessible rotunda.

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BEGINNINGS

Founded in 1919 during the French protectorate, the École Municipale des Beaux-Arts de Casablanca (later renamed the Casablanca Art School) followed Western pedagogical approaches. The artist Farid Belkahia was appointed the school's director shortly after Morocco gained its independence, a position he held from 1962 until 1974. During his tenure, Belkahia opened the school's doors to Moroccan and female students and appointed like-minded teachers who helped him to reimagine Moroccan visual arts and education. The first room introduces selected works by Farid Belkahia, Mohammed Chabâa, and Mohamed Melehi, who formed the school's core. Influenced by their studies abroad and the interdisciplinary approach of the Bauhaus movement, their new departments merged ideas from art, craft, design, and architecture. Working alongside their students, they began to dismantle the Western styles and methods previously taught at the school, such as easel painting. They encouraged students to research African and Amazigh heritage and led study trips focused on archaeology, pottery, calligraphy, and religious paintings, as well as techniques of weaving, leatherwork, jewelry, and tattoos. Mohamed Melehi taught painting, collage, and photography; Mohammed Chabâa taught graphic design and interior design; and Bert Flint taught visual anthropology. Toni Maraini established the first modern art history course in Morocco and set out the group's shared vision in manifestos and essays. André Elbaz also taught at the school for one academic year.

MAKING ART PUBLIC

In a defining moment for Moroccan art history, in 1969, the Casablanca Art School teachers organized two open-air exhibitions of paintings and murals titled "Présence Plastique". By now, three other artists had joined the teaching staff—Mohamed Ataallah, Mustapha Hafid, and Mohamed Hamidi. This section shows works by the six participating artists. The exhibition's staging was a protest against the state-organized Salon du printemps (Spring Fair). Moroccan artists, more than ten years after independence, still struggled to find spaces or galleries to exhibit their work. In May 1969, "Présence Plastique" opened in two public squares: Jemaa el-Fna, Marrakech, and a few weeks later, Place du 16 Novembre, Casablanca; in 1971, it also traveled to two secondary schools in Casablanca.

CREATING COLLECTIVELY

The annual Casablanca Art School exhibition at La Coupole gallery in the city's Parc de la Ligue Arabe in 1968 launched Moroccan "new wave" art, characterized by a synthesis of Afro-Amazigh influences and modernist forms of expression and style. The Schirn is showing works by some of the school's most pioneering students—including Malika Agueznay, Abdellah El Hariri, and Houssein Miloudi—that were created and exhibited in collaboration with their teachers.

GRAPHIC DESIGN

The Casablanca Art School artists used graphic design to bring art into the public sphere, expanding traditional mediums like painting in their workshops with new approaches and strategies borrowed from other fields. Tutor Mohamed Melehi, for example, combined painting with collage and opened a photographic studio, while Chabâa taught the decorative arts, scenography, and neo-calligraphy. The Schirn presents posters and books designed by Melehi and Chabâa, as well as issues of the journal *Souffles*, which they co-designed. In a blend of poetry, literature, and cultural critique, the journal aspired to decolonize and democratize Moroccan arts and culture. During Morocco's decolonization period, several complex historical developments motivated solidarity with other countries and movements. Thus, the exhibition also features posters in which art and cultural and political activism merge, such as those in support of the Chilean people, who rose up against the Allende regime; the people caught up in the violence of the Angolan Civil War; or in solidarity with the Palestinian people. On display also are issues of the journal *Intégral*, which Mohammed Melehi founded in 1971 and which played an important role in documenting the modern movement in Morocco from 1971 to 1978.

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DESIGN FOR THE EVERYDAY

To inject art into daily life, the artists of the Casablanca Art School, together with architects and a wider network of collaborators, created a vision for public art and the regeneration of neglected public spaces and neighborhoods. One of the most important players was the architectural studio Faraoui & de Mazières. Based in Casablanca and Rabat, they developed a visionary design concept that reached across numerous sites and public infrastructure projects. Between 1967 and 1982, the network designed interiors at Casablanca's National Tourist Office, the National Bank for Economic Development, factories, hospitals, universities, holiday parks, and new-build hotels. The artists and architects regarded the buildings' lobbies, walls, ceilings, furniture, and fixtures and fittings as "plastic territories" awaiting creative intervention, integrating art and craft with architecture. The trio—Farid Belkahia, Mohammed Chabâa, and Mohamed Melehi—collaborated on several hotel projects with artists represented in this exhibition: Carla Accardi, Hamid Alaoui, and Mohammed Hamidi.

AFRO-AMAZIGH HERITAGE

The teachers and students of the Casablanca Art School rediscovered local cultural heritage as a source of inspiration for their art. Inspired by the region's rugs, jewelry, calligraphy, and painted ceilings, they combined abstract art with Arab and Amazigh traditions. The Schirn is showing both historical objects and works by Casablanca Art School artists. Tutor Bert Flint conducted extensive research in the High Atlas and Anti-Atlas Mountains. He incorporated his research on the rural region's most striking rugs and jewelry into his teaching. Also on display are photographs by Mohamed Melehi, who, beyond his work as a painter, designer, and activist in the field of visual arts, often assumed the role of photographer, documenting the complexities of post-independence Moroccan society and the rich visual diversity of its architecture, local arts, and creativity, both rural and metropolitan. He also created a photographic inventory of Flint's research in the Souss region, which included the area's distinctive decorative heritage as well as its painted ceilings. Absent from museum collections, influences from African, Amazigh, Islamic, and Mediterranean heritage, as well as ancient Mesopotamian and Phoenician artifacts, began to surface in the works of the Casablanca Art School artists. They revisited craft traditions that Western art history had disregarded as utilitarian or ornamental and started to incorporate calligraphy, decorative symbols, and geometric patterns with spiritual significance, making use of locally sourced materials such as copper, animal skin (leather), wood, and wool.

TRANSNATIONAL SOLIDARITY

The first Biennale of Arab Art took place in 1974 in Iraq's capital, Baghdad, at the Museum of Modern Art. Organized by the General Union of Arab Artists, it brought together artists from 14 Arab nations and displayed over 600 artworks. The Schirn presents artworks by Farid Belkahia, Saâd Ben Cheffaj, Mohammed Chabâa, Abdelkrim Ghattas, Miloud Labied, and Mohamed Melehi, who were among the 14 Casablanca Art School artists representing Morocco. Rejecting popular trends in painting, they were seen as the most vibrant and dynamic "new wave," standing out for their lack of compromise with Socialist Realist iconography or Surrealist trends. The artists associated with the Casablanca Art School combined the search for a specific Moroccan cultural identity with international aspirations, as well as artistic and political solidarity between independent Arab nations. The Casablanca artists extended communication with other Arab nations, organizing, among others, the second Biennale of Arab Art in Rabat, Morocco, in 1976.

OPEN AIR MUSEUM

The annual international arts and cultural festival Asilah Mousseem Culturel, co-founded in 1978 by Mohamed Melehi and the politician Mohamed Benaïssa, in collaboration with Toni Maraini, transformed the two founders' hometown in northern Morocco and revitalized the neglected city and its buildings. They organized exhibitions of painting, sculpture, and ceramics, alongside activities for the public, lectures, theater performances, and concerts, as well as workshops for children. Melehi invited artists from the Arab nations, other parts of Africa and Asia, Europe, and

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the United States. Their collective mission was to beautify everyday life, equating art with social progress. On display at the Schirn are historical photographs of the murals as well as a painting by Chaïbia Talal, a self-taught Moroccan artist unaffiliated with any school who was invited to participate in the festival. The annual Asilah Moussem Culturel continues to this day as a legacy of the Casablanca Art School's activism to decolonize and democratize art.

An exhibition organized by Schirn Kunsthalle Frankfurt, Tate St Ives, and Sharjah Art Foundation.

ARTISTS IN THE EXHIBITION Carla Accardi, Malika Agueznay, Hamid Alaoui, Mohamed Ataallah, Herbert Bayer, Farid Belkahia, Mohammed Chabâa, Saâd Ben Cheffaj, Ahmed Cherkaoui, Anna Draus-Hafid, André Elbaz, Abdelkrim Ghattas, Mustapha Hafid, Mohamed Hamidi, Abdellah El Hariri, Mohammed Kacimi, Miloud Labied, Mohamed Melehi, Houssein Miloudi, Ali Noury, Abderrahman Rahoule, Chaïbia Talal

SCHIRN ROTUNDA Three films from the video series *School of Walking* (2023) by the artist duo Bik Van der Pol (Liesbeth Bik and Jos Van der Pol) will be presented in the publicly accessible Rotunda during the exhibition. These films, in conversations with contemporary artists and cultural producers, portray Casablanca as a modern city and creative center in which the generation of artists from the 1960s to the 1970s developed their dreams of a shared future. The protagonists share their different experiences of the city and its history. *School of Walking* was produced as part of the residency program School of Casablanca, initiated by KW Institute for Contemporary Art (Berlin) and ThinkArt (Casablanca) and realized in 2020–2024.

CATALOG *Casablanca Art School. A Postcolonial Avant-Garde 1962–1987*, edited by Morad Montazami, Madeleine de Colnet, and Esther Schlicht, with contributions by Maud Houssais, Fatima-Zahra Lakrissa, and Morad Montazami, as well as a foreword by the director of the Schirn Kunsthalle Frankfurt, Sebastian Baden. German-English edition, 136 pages, approx. 150 illustrations, 19 x 27 cm, softcover, Spector Books, ISBN 978-3-95905-848-3, €29 (Schirn), €32 (bookstores)

VENUE SCHIRN KUNSTHALLE FRANKFURT, Römerberg, 60311 Frankfurt **DURATION** July 12–October 13, 2024 **INFORMATION** schirn.de **EMAIL** welcome@schirn.de **TELEPHONE** +49.69.29 98 82-0 **ADMISSION** €10, reduced €8, free admission for children under the age of 8 **OPENING HOURS** Tues., Fri. to Sun. 10 am–7 pm, Wed. and Thurs. 10 am–10 pm **INDIVIDUAL TOURS** individual or group tours can be booked at fuehrungen@schirn.de **VISITOR INFORMATION** at schirn.de/en/visit/faq **CURATORS** Morad Montazami and Madeleine de Colnet (for Zamân Books & Curating) in cooperation with Esther Schlicht and Luise Leyer (Schirn Kunsthalle Frankfurt) **ASSOCIATE RESEARCHERS** Fatima-Zahra Lakrissa and Maud Houssais **MEDIA PARTNER** Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung **SUPPORTED BY** Stadt Frankfurt, Hessische Kulturstiftung **WITH ADDITIONAL SUPPORT BY** Fraport AG

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