

Can the Modernist Canon Please Make Room for a Woman?

“Baya: Woman of Algiers” highlights the work of a twentieth-century trailblazer

[Hannah Stamler](#) March 14, 2018



“Femme au panier et coq rouge (Woman with a basket and a red rooster)” (1947) © Galerie Maeght, Paris

Picasso, Dubuffet, Braque: The circle of avant-gardists in Paris during the first half of the 1900s is so mythologized within the history of art, that its members have become mononyms. Baya Mahieddine — an Algerian artist who inspired all three of these men, and whose early gouaches are at the

[Grey Art Gallery](#) — seems, in this sense, ready for entry into the Modernist canon. Throughout her career, she went by her first name only, and her biography, too, is the stuff of lore.

Born Fatma Haddad in 1931 near Algiers, Baya was orphaned at five and sent to live with her grandmother on a farm belonging to the Benhouras, a wealthy Algerian family. She displayed an early aptitude for art, and often drew and sculpted in the sand — a habit that caught the attention of Marguerite Benhoura, who, the exhibition's catalogue notes, remembered Baya as a "wild and barefoot child making fascinating small animals and strange female figures out of dirt."



Baya at the Galerie Maeght in Paris during her exhibition, 1947 © Galerie Maeght, Paris

The French-born Marguerite Benhoura was an avid art collector with close ties to Paris and encouraged Baya to take up painting, later adopting her and introducing her to prominent gallerists and dealers. In 1947, at just sixteen, Baya showed work in Galerie Maeght's "Exposition Internationale du Surréalisme," curated by André Breton. Later that year, the same gallery mounted a solo exhibition of her gouaches and ceramics. Its success prompted the Madoura ceramic studio to invite Baya to Vallauris, southern France, to work as a summer artist-in-residence alongside Picasso. She spent the summers of 1948 to 1952 there; in 1953, a year

before the Algerian War of Independence, Baya returned to Algeria and married El Hadj Mahfoud Mahieddine, a musician thirty years her senior. She began making art again in the 1960s, and continued exhibiting in North Africa until her death in 1998.

“Baya: Woman of Algiers,” curated by Natasha Boas, is the artist’s first exhibition in North America, and is admirable for attempting to find her a suitable place within the well-trod narrative of Modernism — one that can feel stultified and remains, despite recent interventions, largely Western- and male-dominated. The twenty-odd paintings on view — all from the period around her Paris debut — prove that Baya was an artist of exceptional vision. Her images of bright, bold, swirling women would pair nicely with works by Braque, Dubuffet, and especially Matisse. And they hold their own beside — and in fact, surpass in quality — several Picasso ceramics from the Grey’s permanent collection, included here to suggest the work he did with Baya at Vallauris. (Baya’s own ceramics are, unfortunately, not displayed.)



"Femmes et orangers fond blanc (Women and orange trees on a white background)" (1947) © Galerie Maeght, Paris

But is such loose juxtaposition the best means of capturing Baya? Movies have the so-called "[Bechdel Test](#)" to affirm whether a filmmaker has met minimum feminist criteria. While there are many Bechdel variants one might propose for curating an art exhibition, leaving "Baya: Woman of Algiers," I wished particularly for one with a Modernist spin. Call it the "Baya Test": Can an exhibition on twentieth-century art reference at least one female artist, and can it elevate her work without showing how it "inspired" that of a male Modernist? "Baya: Woman of Algiers" passes the first part with flying colors — literally, if one considers Baya's spectacular patterns and palettes. But in featuring Picasso so prominently it falters in the second. All the more so given how assiduously Baya seems to have avoided any hint or trace of men in her artwork: With the exception of one landscape, all the paintings in the exhibition are of female subjects, alone

or in pairs, their serpentine bodies curving majestically from the edges of the canvas. Not a man is in sight. Instead, the figures are often surrounded by natural motifs. *Woman with a basket and a red rooster* (1947) shows a young woman flanked by a black butterfly and a rather flamboyant, peacock-like rooster. In *Women and orange trees on a white background* (also from 1947), a mother and daughter frame a cross of orange-dotted branches.



"Femme attablées (Women at table)" (1947) © Galerie Maeght, Paris

Although each of Baya's women looks distinct, they share a set of basic, stylized features: lips of two conjoined squiggles, turned up into a haughty smile or down into a swollen pout, masses of hair in different hues that ooze from the scalp like inkblots, and darkly lidded, narrowed almond eyes. They also all wear long dresses inspired by Algerian Kabyle textiles, suggesting that Baya wished to paint a world in which specifically Algerian

women — that is to say, colonized women — could move and gesture freely.

Telling a story of twentieth-century art without male Modernists is hard. (As hard as trying to write a review without them.) It is rather like being asked to tell a story without any prepositions, or conjunctions, or adjectives. Especially so when the story in question is an introduction, for which some measure of context and familiar background is needed. A bit of Picasso is forgivable in this initial glimpse of Baya, but one hopes it will not set a precedent. Though Picasso, Braque, Dubuffet, and others wished to claim Baya for their own, in the end, Modernism may be a wrong — or at least, unnecessary — lens for “Baya-ism,” as she liked to call her style. Could we give Baya an exhibition that, like the women she painted, seems unencumbered by Western art historical and colonial baggage?

Like any great first encounter — and there is no doubt Boas has, overall, achieved something great — “Baya: Woman of Algiers” electrifies but leaves you wanting more.

'Baya: Woman of Algiers'

Grey Art Gallery

100 Washington Square East

greyartgallery.nyu.edu

Through March 31