

**Art in the Service of Colonialism: French Art Education in Morocco 1912-1956, by Hamid Irbouh [book review]**

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Elizabeth Perrill, “Art in the Service of Colonialism: French Art Education in Morocco 1912-1956, by Hamid Irbouh,” book review, *African Arts*. 47, 4, Winter, 2014, 94-95.

[https://doi.org/10.1162/AFAR\\_r\\_00190](https://doi.org/10.1162/AFAR_r_00190)

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**Abstract:**

It is clear that *Art in the Service of Colonialism* fills a distinct lack in the body of art historical scholarship. Irbouh counters the inclination to champion “fine art” as African art history races to document modernisms that are slipping through scholars’ fingers, as archives disintegrate and a generation of independence era administrators and artists age. Many are attempting to both interrogate and preserve legacies of pre- and post-independence modernity. In this moment of intense art historical work, we often focus on archives of national universities, painters living in the metropole, sculptors who shaped national monuments. But, Irbouh reminds us, we must not ignore the sometimes unfashionable world of art education and pedagogy beyond the university. The roots of modernist traditions currently catching our disciplinary attention lay in the colonial programs that formed the visual cultures of incipient nations.

**Keywords:** book review | Morocco | colonialism | art education

**Article:**

**\*\*\*Note: Full text of article below**

Other writers cruise by, pick up the interview like a familiar old backpack, throw it in the backseat, and motor on down that same old art history highway.

In terms of style, I have a strong preference for thinkers who express their ideas in coherent and ordinary English. You may problematize and narrativize; I think and write. The introduction clearly lays out the book's intentions and the questions the editors are asking. The introduction itself would start an interesting conversation in any class discussing field methods and/or the politics and power relationships of art scholarship and exhibitions about Africa. The first essay, Patrick McNaughton's "Talking to People About Art," is a gem. Although McNaughton points out that words can be "clumsy, obfuscating, diffusing tools" (p. 12) when it comes to talking about art, he has used them to craft a perceptive account of his own education as a researcher. Conversations held many years ago with three men—a blacksmith, a hunters' bard, and a masquerade performer—continue to inform his understanding of Bamana art and society. What is remarkable about this autobiographical essay is that McNaughton can explain to us in specific terms just how these men have informed his thinking about Bamana art and how he might have come to a different understanding had he spent more time with other informants. That context matters is a truism, but McNaughton clarifies with concrete examples the many ways context enhances our understanding when we talk about art and culture. He reminds us that art is active, "a flashpoint," and that talking about art matters because "one of art's greatest assets—often ignored by scholars—is that it sparks and nourishes dialogue about society, culture, and history" (p. 22). Because it is written so clearly, I think students would read and discuss this essay with real interest.

Mary Jo Arnoldi's essay, "Who Owns the Past: Constructing an Art History of a Malian Masquerade," makes an interesting companion piece to McNaughton's. The two scholars share the same geographic and cultural space; they are also fellow travelers in time; both look back on over thirty years of research and writing about Mali. This depth of experience gives Arnoldi's piece, like McNaughton's, a richness and complexity that rewards the reader. Research, for Arnoldi, is "a collaborative and cumulative enterprise" (p. 142). The issues she discusses include documenting performance, collaborating with a skilled translator and interviewer, returning to relationships developed over long periods of time, and how societal rules regulating age and gender sometimes constrain her informants and her information. The essay intertwines dual narratives about the history of the youth association masquerade performances and Arnoldi's longtime efforts

to understand and document that history. The pairing of McNaughton's and Arnoldi's essays would be a fruitful starting point for any discussion of field research in art history in Africa, and might also interest those with an interest in Malian art, including collectors and art pilgrims.

Those are the old hands who know the road and can warn us where the curves get tricky; now let's move on to the artists in this collection—they're the stunt drivers. Nigerian photographer Akinbode Akinbiyi drolly and nimbly interviews himself. His mirror interview is both a "slant" commentary on the act of art criticism and a "straight" conversation about the ways his family experiences during childhood influenced his approach to taking photographs.

Curator Allyson Purpura and artist Allan deSouza collaborate on an essay that opens with Purpura as deSouza's straight man giving an account of a conference on contemporary African art at Harvard. A moderator announces that one colleague has not received a visa, so his paper, about the work of deSouza, will be read by deSouza himself. This introduction is a set-up for a performance by deSouza who not only reads but also comments ("I don't remember saying that!"). Allan deSouza admits that the performance "is a ploy, and not an innocent one. I wanted to highlight the fiction and performativity of certain frames of art history—the artist's voice, the scholarly lecture, the conference, the peer review—so that they could become subject to discussion" (p. 166). Thanks to Purpura, we get a front row seat at the performance and a thought-provoking conversation afterward about how art scholarship could break disciplinary yokes to become "undisciplined."

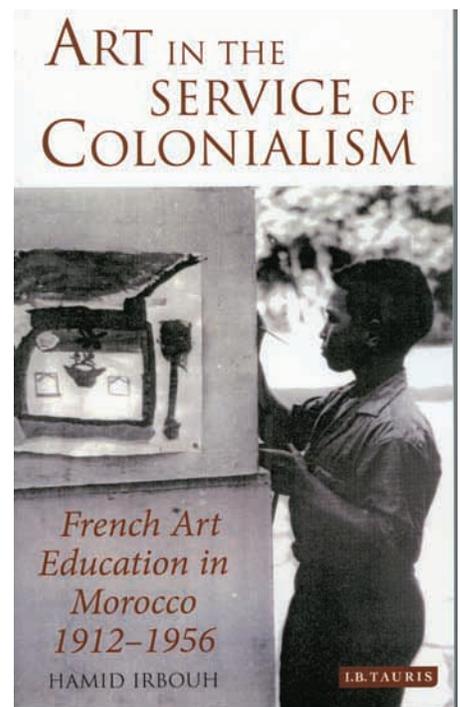
In addition to these essays, Christine Mullen Kreamer's "Framing Practices: Artists' Voices and the Power of Self-Representation" articulately sums up changes in the ways many museums now present African art. Her positive examples demonstrate how social media and the inclusion of local diasporan representatives transform the authoritative museum experience to one that welcomes visitor dialogue and engagement.

Other essays in this collection are by art historians and curators who make use of interviews and conversations in their work. These include Joanna Grabski, who writes about how artists in Dakar continue to be influenced by colleagues who have passed on; Joseph Jordan who writes about identity politics and his thoughts about curating an exhibit of the Moroccan artist Hamid Kachmar; Carol Magee, who interviewed Ndebele women in a "museum village" who were photographed for a swimsuit issue of *Sports Illustrated*; Silvia Forni, who writes about the intrigue, myths, and legends surrounding the identity of the Senegalese

sculptor Seyni Camara; Kim Miller, whose article about South African activist and artist Sandra Kriel is a complex and compelling account of how one feminist artist interweaves art and activism and an excellent example of a scholarly narrative that evolved from interviews; and Andrea E. Frohne, who writes about the politics of building the memorial at the African Burial Ground in New York City.

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## book review



### **Art in the Service of Colonialism: French Art Education in Morocco 1912–1956**

by Hamid Irbouh

London: I.B. Tauris, 2012

(reprint, originally published 2005). 280 pp., 74 b/w illustrations, bibliography, index. \$45 paper, \$100 cloth.

reviewed by Elizabeth Perrill

It is clear that *Art in the Service of Colonialism* fills a distinct lack in the body of art historical scholarship. Irbouh counters the inclination to champion “fine art” as African art history races to document modernisms that are slipping through scholars’ fingers, as archives disintegrate and a generation of independence era administrators and artists age. Many are attempting to both interrogate and preserve legacies of pre- and post-independence modernity. In this moment of intense art historical work, we often focus on archives of national universities, painters living in the metropole, sculptors who shaped national monuments. But, Irbouh reminds us, we must not ignore the sometimes unfashionable world of art education and pedagogy beyond the university. The roots of modernist traditions currently catching our disciplinary attention lay in the colonial programs that formed the visual cultures of incipient nations.

The author’s fine-grained analysis of colonial administrative careers, both male and female, French and Moroccan, in several urban centers occasionally weigh down this text with details that nonspecialists may skim past. Nevertheless, even those unfamiliar with Maghreb artwork will come away with a clear picture of the incremental refinement of colonial pedagogy in the region. Irbouh details the ties that bind the development of French colonial policy in Morocco to France’s previous arts education efforts in Algeria and the Protectorate of Tunisia, how Moroccan administrators attempted to make Morocco a model of colonial policy.

Particularly admirable is Irbouh’s overview of the impact foreign imports had on traditional “craft” and “art” careers. With an eye towards systematic economics, Irbouh’s attention to import/export trends conveys the colonial preoccupation with the degradation of what they called the “native sector.” The crisis cobblers faced following a flood of European imported, mass-produced shoes captivated this reader, despite no previous interest in Moroccan footwear. Irbouh’s objective tone, which steers clear of authorial engagement in the art/craft divide, plays to his advantage. Throughout the book he fluidly incorporates leather-working, metalwork, carpet weaving, broader textiles, ceramics, as well as easel painting into a single analysis of pedagogical art training.

As he delves into the lives of colonial actors, Irbouh highlights the deliberate infiltration of skilled trades, workshops, and domestic life on the part of administrators, as well as the promotional strategies undertaken to standardize, cultivate, and distribute local products. Irbouh does not succumb to the temptation to make overarching generalizations concerning the implementation of educational programs and pedagogy. Instead, he has brought together archival data on a range of teachers, work-

shops, and schools. Irbouh allows for the heterogeneous representation of colonial reality.

Irbouh states in his introduction that he “deliberately chose to write a number of passages in narrative form” (p. 23) but his fluid writing style occasionally makes his own analysis of colonial interactions unclear. For instance, while discussing the role of a *maâlma*, a woman who trains girls as part of a domestic textile workshop, Irbouh writes that by allowing girls to sometimes stay overnight the *maâlma* “transformed her role from that of an instructor and baby sitter into that of an older sister, if not a surrogate mother” (p. 112). As with this passage, subjective evaluations are often stated bluntly and Irbouh then moves on to a new subject in his analysis. Consistent archival voices and sources are cited in association with such comments, leaving this reader to assume many evaluations of this type were made during the colonial era and restated here by Irbouh.

Perhaps the line blurs between archive and author because Irbouh shares an important conceptual philosophy with many of the art educators he studies. He “not only acknowledges but embraces crafts as a major form of Moroccan art production” (p. 8). Irbouh incorporates women’s training and artistic production with far greater detail and attention than many scholars engaging with modernist era art historical overviews. He demonstrates that the preservation of older prototypes and creation of museums of art were used as tools across gender divides to solidify and, at times, stultify the vocabulary of authenticity in Moroccan arts. Moreover, he demonstrates that the “national visual heritage,” established via art educational efforts during colonialism, was subsequently taken up by artists following Moroccan independence in 1956.

By taking a broad perspective on art production, Irbouh is able to incorporate what he labels “populist,” “nativist,” and “bipictorialist” painters in a final chapter on the post-independence era, both inside and outside of traditional university infrastructures. The first two terms are relatively familiar to African art, though Irbouh specifies their roles in the Moroccan context. “Bipictorialists” were those who included the voices of the “self” and “other,” and “played the role of cultural mediators between France, the West, and Morocco” (p. 244). This chapter is worthy of a monograph in itself; it tries to do too much. Though the political dynamics of the three independence-era groups are clear, an art historian will notice that this section, as well as previous chapters, lack a nuance of formal analysis. Though Irbouh attends to the intricacies of historical events and colonial relationships, the precise artistic transformations that occur in workshops and individual careers is less clear. This lack is also evident when one attempts to integrate the book’s many black-and-white

illustrations into Irbouh’s historical accounts. Many of the illustrations are not mentioned in the text and treated as, somehow, self-evident. This typical treatment of art by historians trained outside of art history is regrettably familiar. Unlike his accounts of colonial archival minutia, Irbouh ignores the formal transformation of student work or incorporation of colonial-era canons into independence-era painting. The reader has no access to the precise changes in pattern, color, line, movement, or other formal aspects that might point to transformation or maintenance of norms established during the colonial era.

During his concluding chapter, Irbouh reminds the reader that all independence-era painting factions are touched by the “imprint of metropolitan ideology.” The pervasive struggle either to engage with or reject colonial visual culture is portrayed as integral to an entire generation of painters. It is both odd and disappointing that Irbouh ends his insightful monograph on arts training across gender divides with this very focused concluding glimpse of art production. The radical gender equality he conveys via documentation of women’s, as well as men’s, educational structures under colonialism sets the expectation that women will be present in the author’s vision of the post-independence art world. Certainly, the work of Cynthia Becker on Amazigh women and inquiries into Arab arts by Kirsten Scheid can point the way toward further explorations in the post-independence era.

Scholars interested in colonial-era art production, gendered definitions of craft, arts pedagogies, constructions of authenticity, as well as the commercial exploitation of arts will clearly benefit from a close reading of this book. Irbouh begins a review of his previous chapters toward the final fifty pages of his text and one experiences a sense of looking back at a long journey. The administrators who labored to preserve and construct Moroccan authenticity, the instructors who inculcated students into French lifestyles, and even the students, laboring in rows over textiles or painting in *plein-air*, are all brought to life. The most impressive aspect of Irbouh’s work is his ability to balance the systems he is documenting with the individuals who made them realities. Though the artwork produced during the era in question may still be in need of art historical engagement, this is all the better, for the seemingly impossible task of tracing the historical framework of Moroccan pedagogical development has been accomplished, the groundwork has been laid.

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