TEXTILES IN MOROCCAN CULTURE.
THE HISTORICAL BACKGROUND TO LALLA ESSAYDI'S PHOTOGRAPHY

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This essay will broadly survey the history of Moroccan textiles created by women, and especially those dyed in henna. These traditions will be examined in both urban and rural contexts. Understanding the greater historical setting for these practices will allow the exhibition viewer to critique the use of fabric in the domestic spaces, whether urban or rural, created by Lalla Essaydi.

Henna Dye: Body and Textile Painting

Henna is "the most ancient and celebrated" of dyes. It is made from a mixture of dried henna leaves that have been ground and mixed with water, lemon, and sometimes eucalyptus oil or black tea.[1] Depending on how it is made and how long it is allowed to set, the color of henna dye can range from reddish brown to a deep black.

Henna body painting is widely practiced in Morocco, for the natural dye is believed to have medicinal powers that protect the body against a wide range of ailments.[2] There are also a number of spiritual rituals associated with henna-painting ceremonies. Henna is also used to decorate the hands and feet of brides, and thus is a way to identify a woman as married. Henna is not only used to adorn the body but also has been used for thousands of years to dye and paint woolen textiles both to wear on the body, and to decorate the domestic spaces.[3]

Moroccan Textiles: Urban Settings

The decoration and design of domestic textiles in traditional Moroccan culture since the early ages of trade with African, Middle Eastern and European countries is tied to its many influences of religion and culture that have grown within its borders. Moroccan textiles bridge the urban and rural spheres, and is primarily an art form practiced by women. Embroidery, or the decoration of a textile (or leather) with needle and thread, was the "only pastime of the upper middle class women" in Moroccan cities who used in their embroidery natural fine silk floss dyed in shimmering colors, derived from both animal and vegetal sources. These women learned to embroider textiles at a young age, and as they grew up used the skills they developed to decorate their marriage trousseaus, or the personal possessions of a bride usually including clothes, accessories, and household linens and wares. Women continued to embroider for their new house once they were married, or in some cases in harems where multiple wives and their

[1] Salah Hassan, "Henna Mania: Body Painting as a Fashion Statement, from Tradition to
[2] Niloo Imami Paydar and Ivo Grammet, *The Fabric of Moroccan Life* (Indianapolis Museum of Art: 2002), 147.
[3] Paydar and Grammet, 147.

children lived together with a single husband. In these such extended families, women learned different techniques and exchanged ideas with the network of women they shared a household.[4]

Even women with lesser means who lived in cities produced embroidered textiles on commission, with their clients paying for the materials. Unlike other artisans in the city, these women would not have been part of a highly organized commercial industry, as they worked out of their homes, often in the company of other women, family members and neighbors. This added to the social dimensions of their activities.[5]

The home, largely the domain of women, was often covered and decorated in various fabrics that would be embroidered: rugs, *tensifa* (wall decorations), *mhedda* (large floor pillows), and curtains translucent enough to let in light and allow women to see out, while obscuring the views of outsiders looking in. Clothing, like swaddling cloth, tunics, headscarves, and even death shrouds were also decorated, meaning that the art of embroidery encompassed life from cradle to grave. There were many different styles of designs not only from city to city but also from other continents and countries as harems often held foreign women that brought their new techniques and skills with them.[6]

Moroccan Textiles: Rural Areas

Embroidery in the more rural areas of Morocco employed rougher, less refined natural threads including animal hair, and was mixed with the dying and painting of fabrics as a decorative form. The range of styles and designs that come from these areas though is just as rich as in the urban cities. Berber tribeswomen of these areas created, according to authors Paydar and Grammet, "specific designs that expressed her identity, her family, religion, customs, and beliefs." These designs were handed down orally from mother to daughter and were considered to possess power. The homes of many of these nomadic or semi-nomadic people were made entirely of cloth, and were woven and assembled by the female members of these communities.[7]

Rural dress differed from the many layered and fine fabrics of Moroccan cities. More simple, draped garments were worn up until the 20th century in rural areas. Using plain white cloth made from wool or cotton these garments would be painted and dyed with natural dyes including henna. Henna designs were used sparingly on such garments, owing to their expense, and thus decoration was usually found around the edges of tunics or more importantly was used to mark the headscarves of brides and married women.

The process of creating henna designs on fabric is time consuming and took many days. Once the henna had been made and the designs carefully laid out with a small stick, the fabric is left to set for three days, or to 'fast'. Then the dried henna is scratched off and the whole operation is repeated several times to set the color as desired. The design is then set with soaked palm frond ash and weighted down on both ends to prevent creasing. This process of henna painting on

[4] Paydar and Grammet, 42.
[5] Paydar and Grammet, 42-43.
[6] Paydar and Grammet, 43-44.
[7] Paydar and Grammet, 131.

textile died out in the middle of the 20th century, but a renewed interest in recent decades has revived the techniques.[8]

The Use of Henna Dyed Textiles in Essaydi's work

Lalla Esssaydi is a Moroccan born artist who often cites her life experiences as having a major influence on her work. Growing up, her home was a space clearly defined for women. She pulls from this imagery to discuss the culture that she lives in, and to contrast it with Orientalist paintings that often fantasize and fetishize the idea of a harem. Essaydi's photographs capture both the urban and rural feel of space that the artist's female subjects interact with, and against.

Essaydi's connection to urban cities and lifestyles is perhaps most clearly evident in her exhibited photograph from the *Harem* series. *Harem #10* displays a reclining woman dressed in vibrantly decorated clothing that blends in with the tile work in a richly decorated urban house. The densely patterned fabrics that cover her body and the *mhedda*, or large floor pillow, that she reclines on call to mind the detailed embroidery that women of the harem would make to adorn their living spaces. We also see this connection of clothing and urban living space in three more of her pieces (*Les Femmes Du Maroc: La Grande Odalisque, Les Femmes Du Maroc* ***#1****,* and *Les Femmes Du Maroc: La Sultane*). In all of these works, which directly pull imagery from Orientalist paintings, there is a feeling of an urban or city setting created by the use of curtains draped across the frame mirroring those that were created by Moroccan women to conceal their living spaces. These curtains are all pulled back and while Orientalism uses that to point to a suggestive nature of a harem girl instead we see scenes closer to the truth: a women plays with her pet bird; a group of women sit in a room talking; and one woman who stares directly at the viewer as if they have disturbed her presence.

Essaydi's works that focus less on creating a domestic space, such as *Les Femmes Du Maroc #10, Converging Territories #10,* and *Les Femmes Du Maroc #21B*, end up instead creating a space reminiscent of the tent like structures of the nomads. The clothing that these women are dressed in is also very similar to the draped garb that rural women wear, with thicker texture and simple design. In *Converging Territories #10* we see the female subject actually painting on the fabric-covered wall in henna, connecting the work back again to the henna designs that the nomadic women worked so diligently on. If we are to consider the long process that it takes for henna to be set into cloth then we see the implied time and care of the painter for not only had she executed her whole robe in henna script, but the walls of her tent as well, a dedication to design that holds power.

Conclusion

The history of Morocco's varied textiles designs is tied to the experiences and cultures of the women who inhabit domestic spaces. These women came from many different lifestyles, mixing arts like henna painting and calligraphy into the fabrics that were eternally present in their daily lives. This is the rich past on which Essaydi builds her work, carefully arranging her photographs to emulate both urban and rural domestic spaces, to examine the relationship between women, their surroundings, and their art forms.

[8] Paydar and Grammet, 267.

Cited Sources and Suggestions for Further Reading

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