

Chaïbia Tallal

Chaïbia Tallal (1929, 2004) was undoubtedly the most famous painter of 20th century Morocco. She was considered one of the greatest painters in the world, on the same level as Miro, Picasso and Modigliani to name a few. She is the only Moroccan painter whose paintings are quoted on the stock market.

Chaïbia Tallal was born in 1929, in the little town of Chtuka, near el-Jadida to a peasant family in the heart of rural Morocco, at a time when education was still the privilege of high-class children. Illiterate, nothing indicated that Chaïbia would one day be an internationally renowned artist whose works would grace collections throughout the world.

As a child, she was responsible for looking after the chickens and their chicks. Whenever she lost a chick, she hid in the haystacks for fear of her mother's anger. This period marked the blossoming of Chaïbia's imagination. She made flower crowns with which she covered her head and body. When she was at the sea, she made sand houses that had doors and windows, even though she had never seen a house before; she lived with her family members in a tent.

During numerous interviews throughout her career, she explained that she painted «all that»: the vastness of the fields, the freshness of the rain, the smell of wet hay, and above all her incommensurable love for the sea, the earth, the rivers, the trees, the flowers, particularly daisies and poppies. Due to this love, her fellow villagers nicknamed her *mahbula*, the holy fool. Nobody behaved as she did in Chtuka. Far from regretting her originality, she asserted throughout her life that it was important not be afraid of being different.

At the age of 13, Chaïbia Tallal was married to an older man who had previously contracted six marriages. This union lasted only two years: Chaïbia's spouse died in an

accident, making her a widow at the age of 15 and responsible for Hossein, their one-year old son. To support herself and her child, she spun wool and worked as a housekeeper in several French households. The long working hours did not undermine Chaïbia's determination. She wanted to ensure her child would never experience the scar of analphabetism, a scar from which she suffered all her life long, which neither glory nor wealth managed to heal.

Similarly, poverty did not undermine Chaïbia's decision of never remarrying; she rejected several marriage proposals. On one hand, she wanted to protect her son from any stepfather's potential mistreatments, and on the other, she wanted to live freely, even in a house without electricity. Hossein Tallal, her son recalled studying by candlelight as a youth until he left to study abroad, before returning many years later as a recognized painter.

Chaïbia Tallal kept working as a housekeeper while her son built up his career as a painter. Whenever she saw her son all covered with paint she would reprimand him, explaining that she was tired of washing that kind of filth. Little did she know that one day their roles would be reversed. In light of these experiences, Chaïbia was convinced that one's destiny is traced in front of themselves. One only needed to read life's signs in order to know where to head. Two events enabled her to see the direction that she needed to take. First, she met a holy man in the *zawiya* of Moulay Bouchaïb who predicted that she, the *mahbula*, would be the *baraka*, the grace of her village. Secondly, in 1963 she had a dream: she dreamt that she was in her bedroom. The door was open, showing a row of lit candles that stretched all the way to the garden. The entire colour spectrum was vibrating in a perfectly blue sky. Then, several men all dressed in white walked into

the bedroom. They gave her canvas and brushes, explaining, «These are your bread-winning tools. » When she woke up, she knew that the dream had to come true. Two days later, she bought paint and brushes and started painting. This was how the day came about that her son returned home to see his mother all covered with paint.

In 1965, Hossein invited Ahmed Cherkaoui, a Moroccan painter, and Pierre Gaudibert, an art critic and director of the Museum of Modern Art in Paris, to come over to his mother's house in order to eat a real couscous. Without any preconceived ideas, Chaïbia spontaneously showed her paintings to her guests. Pierre Gaudibert admired her nascent talent. He would go on to help and encourage her growth as a painter.

In 1966, she held her first three first exhibitions; one at the Goethe-Institut in Casablanca, another at the Solstice Gallery in Paris, and the third at the «Salon des surindépendants» in the Museum of Modern Art in Paris. These were followed by exhibitions all over the world. Chaïbia's success was both immediate and lasting. Chtuka's holy fool had seduced the public worldwide in major cities, such as Copenhagen, Frankfurt, Ibiza, Tunis, Rotterdam, Barcelona, Auckland (New Zealand) and Beverly Hills.

Great art critics have consecrated Chaïbia as one of the major painters of the 20th century, with reason: Chaïbia's paintings juxtaposed those of Miro, Picasso and Modigliani, to name a few. In addition, she was listed in the «Larousse de l'art dans le monde» in 1971 and to the reference dictionary «Bézénit» in 1977.

Paradoxically, as much as the Western public and art critics admired Chaïbia's talent, her Moroccan colleagues despised her work. According to them, her artistic production could at best be reduced to naive art. Yet, art critics seem to agree at least on

the point that Chaïbia's art did not correspond to naive art. If one had to classify Chaïbia's style, critics leaned towards «brut art»: an esthetic ideal pursued by the European movement Cobra in 1945, according to which art needed to be free of any savant, cultural and historical influences.

In truth, Chaïbia's style was unique. Late in her career, one would say, «This is a Chaïbia» as one said, «This is a Picasso»..., but also as one sells «a Picasso»: Chaïbia was the only Moroccan painter to be listed in the stock market with collectors ready to pay upwards of one million dirhams to acquire one of her paintings!

Chaïbia Tallal died in 2004 from a heart attack in Casablanca at the age of 75. Chaïbia left to posterity an abundant artistic production. Her paintings are part of numerous states' collections, among which include France, Italy, Japan, Switzerland, India, Haiti, Australia, Great Britain, and United States to name a few. Also, her paintings are part of numerous private collections, among which include France, Italy, Lebanon, Egypt, India, Canada, Spain, Switzerland, Holland, Belgium, Haiti, Japan, Sweden, Denmark, Germany, Australia, United States, Great Britain, New Zealand, South Africa, and the Moroccan king's collection.

Osire Glacier

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