An Exhibition Full of Troubling Charms: The Aït Khebbach Carpets at Musée Bargoin, Clermont-Ferrand, France

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“Morocco, Desert Color” was the title of an exhibition held from April 30–August 24, 2014, at the Musée Bargoin of Clermont-Ferrand.² The exhibition displayed strange and beautiful Moroccan carpets from the Mergouza region. A visit to this exposition provoked not only strong emotions but also an insistent reflection.

The exhibition followed the French government’s purchase of a collection of carpets collected by Arnaud Maurières and Eric Ossart, both introduced as “ethnologists and collectors.” They may be qualified as investigators and collectors, but surely not as ethnologists: living in a foreign country alone does not suffice to become an ethnologist. Indeed, what was sorely lacking in this exhibition, and surely also in the circumstances of its realization, was an ethnological perspective on the relationship between foreigners and the local population. In fact, as can be seen on their websites, Maurières and Ossart are botanists and landscape experts, tour operators, and probably, self-styled architects.² But ethnologists, no, not by any means!

The exhibition may have offered an original and attractive collection of carpets; however, this understanding was merely implicit, hidden by the silence kept on the actual conditions under which these innovative carpets were made, the possible influence or role that (foreign) collectors and tourists have had on the evolution of their production, the circumstances under which this private collection was made, and the conditions by which it emerged on the international art market and was acquired by a French public museum.

A first mystery is that the production of colorful carpets by Aït Khebbach inhabitants to furnish their own homes started suddenly, some thirty years ago, in a few villages, where previously they only wove large, brown, sheep-wool tents. Was it a sort of spontaneous innovation out of thin air? Difficult to imagine in our times! One would, thus, wish to understand the phenomenon. And if, one fine day, an ethnologist witnesses such an unexpected social innovation, before taking it to the international scene, he should make efforts to seriously document it.

The Musée Bargoin claimed to have collected many “elements permitting [us] to understand and appreciate the context or background of the creation,” but visitors to the exhibition did not have access to this information. By obscuring the conditions under which this “innovation” appeared, was “discovered,” and was transferred to the museum, the Bargoin Museum left its view of its role with respect to its visitors open to question. Like simple tourists, they were invited to accept fugitive artistic emotions without further thought. Some of them, however, have an interest that goes far beyond exoticism, far beyond aesthetics: they want to understand how what they see was made possible, they want to share some knowledge and feeling with people who are at the same time so close and so different.

This splendid innovation was, we were told, “discovered” by outsiders—the curators of the exhibition—who are by no means specialists in either woven crafts or the development of local communities. Exhibition visitors could not even ask how and why these discoverers engaged in such an adventure of foreign investigation, acquisition, and exhibition. It was soon clear that their role went far beyond the patient construction of local relationships of confidence, and eventually friendship, with the female carpet weavers. In fact, they acquired the very first carpets made by certain weavers—something which is very interesting, of course—as well as carpets that these women (and their daughters) wove during the following two to three decades. Visitors to the exhibition might have assumed that these carpets had been produced for domestic use and preserved for thirty years by these families, and that therefore what they saw was an innovation that was not aimed for display on the world art market. But no, on the contrary: the curators bought the carpets to introduce to the commercial network, most probably as soon as they discovered them. It is therefore evident that, from the beginning, the curators played a considerable role in the evolution of the production of these carpets, perhaps in the shape of the innovation itself, and, who knows, maybe also in the innovation’s very inception.

These questions about the origins of an innovation, followed by its immediate commercialization, are even more apparent and crucial when the exhibition catalogue¹ reveals that 1) the first carpets by the first generation of weavers were the most interesting and most original pieces, the most spontaneous—an obvious analysis supported by ample visual arguments, and 2) the carpets of the first generation of weavers are much more appealing than those woven by their daughters. In other words, the introduction of carpet weaving into Aït Khebbach produced its most successful results in the first generation, while later pieces were not as interesting or unique as the ones produced in the early period. The visitor couldn’t help but ask, what happened? What can explain the degradation of the qualities of freedom, of creativity, which characterized this production in its formative years?

Among the hypotheses that might occur to people who have followed the evolution of art forms under the pressure of tourism is the suspicion of external influence through increasing celebrity fomented by tour operators, foreign tourists, and visitors, whose critiques and tastes—and purchasing power—quickly determine the evolution of local production, so that the business perspective of selling carpets becomes a new and irresistible motivation. It so happens that two out of three of the itineraries proposed by the travel agency owned by the exhibition curators pass through Merzouga, with lodging arrangements at the weavers’ residence.

Must one assume it merely a coincidence that the collectors of the Musée Bargoin intervened at the best possible moment—just before the deterioration of the carpets’ quality—or rather, worry that, one way or another—for example, by the modalities of their intervention—they themselves contributed to this decline?

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Finally, would the fortuitous discovery of this mysterious island of creativity, whose trigger the discoverers apparently did not try to comprehend, more likely have aided the women and their villages to benefit sustainably from their innovation—which would seem to have been the discoverers’ duty—or would it rather have helped the collectors and/or curators of the North grab the best of local creativity? Could this innovation have provided a sustainable source of income for the women and their daughters and families? Or was it only a golden opportunity for the collectors to exploit a local innovation, due to the fact that the weavers are inevitably pushed by the need to get out of the situation of extreme poverty? In brief, was the main result of this external intervention merely to benefit the collections and visitors to a public museum in the North? Does the exceptionally innovative production that happened at a certain moment in a given region in the end leave the local population as poor as they were before, perhaps even more impoverished in their creative capacities?

The exhibition of the recent Aït Khebbach carpets was a great opportunity to present and discuss such questions: the educational role that one expects generally from museums would have found rich material. By limiting itself to a superficial, if not adulterated presentation of the conditions under which this exhibition had been realized, the Musée Bargoin seems to have ignored an exceptional opportunity. Accompanying the exhibition with events to attract tourists (the presence of two women weavers from Merzouga during the first week), selling some carpets as by-products, etc., is the common trend, at the cost of all consideration of the role of the interventions from the North in the world’s global disorder.


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