

**Le Maroc Médiéval: Un Empire de l'Afrique à l'Espagne**  
**[Medieval Morocco: An Empire from Africa to Spain]**

Musée Mohammad VI d'Art Moderne et Contemporain  
Rabat, Morocco  
March 5–June 3, 2015

reviewed by Ashley Miller

When an exhibition travels from one venue to another, which elements should remain the same—to impart a sense of consistency and continuity—and which should change—to acknowledge the audiences, spaces, and significations that vary with each exhibitionary context?

When “Medieval Morocco: An Empire from Africa to Spain” left its initial home at the Louvre in Paris to arrive in Rabat’s new Musée Mohammad VI d’Art Moderne et Contemporain (MMVI) in March of 2015, expectations for the impact of the show on Morocco’s rapidly changing museum landscape were high. Developed by a binational team of museum experts and scholars led by commissioners Yannick Lintz of the Louvre and Bahija Simou of the Royal Library in Rabat, the exhibition was the first product and poster child of a cooperation agreement between the Louvre and Morocco’s National Foundation for Museums. An emblem of diplomacy and reform, “Medieval Morocco” was poised to realize the Foundation’s mission of raising the practices of Morocco’s museums to “international standards” and making those museums “accessible to all Moroccans, so that they can take possession of their own culture.”<sup>1</sup> The exhibition offered many Moroccans the first chance to see a significant assemblage of objects that had until now been dispersed in private collections or foreign institutions, thereby presenting the local population with an unprecedented opportunity to engage with important material artifacts of its own cultural heritage. But what did the exhibition actually *do* to engage this local audience? How did the exhibition change in the move from one institution, one continent, one cultural context to another?

Written in Arabic, Tamazight, and French, the introductory wall text for the show in Rabat announced the exhibition’s Moroccan

context. Beyond this nod to Morocco’s national language politics, however, little else in the show outwardly addressed its new audience. Certainly, for those who had seen the exhibition in the Louvre, the Rabat show felt like an abridged—and in some ways lesser—version of the Paris iteration. Despite adjustments to the exhibition’s color palette, from the Louvre’s indigo and cream to a deep red ochre and gray taupe, and the relocation of certain objects to accommodate the museum’s physical space, the aesthetics of the exhibition changed little. The Rabat show also maintained the general thematic and organizational structure developed by curators Claire Delery and Bulle Tuil-Leonetti for the Louvre, although the connection between these themes and the

**1** Upon entering the exhibition space, visitors encountered a large panel announcing the exhibition’s title in Arabic and Tamazight. The introductory text and all the wall text that followed in the exhibition employed Arabic, French, and English.

**2** As at the Louvre, the exhibition presented a chronological narrative with galleries divided according to major dynasties, from the Idrisids to the Merinids. The gallery dedicated to the Almohads, pictured here, occupied the central and largest space in the exhibition. Two thirteenth-century glazed ceramic wellheads from Al-Andalus stand in the foreground.

*All photos courtesy of the Fondation Nationale des Musées Marocains*





3 Visitors entered the exhibition from the museum's central atrium through two pair of bronze and cedar monumental doors from the 'Attarin madrasa (ca. 1323–1325) (left) and the Qarawiyyan mosque in Fez (ca. 1136) (right). Instead of the massive Almohad chandelier that had dominated the exhibition's entrance at the Louvre, a smaller chandelier from the Qarawiyyan constructed from a medieval church bell (ca. 1333–1337) greeted visitors of the Rabat show.

exhibited objects was sometimes unclear due to the reduction of informational text panels in the Rabat show. Where the two exhibitions differed most noticeably was in their material content. Less than 50% of the objects exhibited in Paris appeared in Rabat. Among those absent were several key pieces, including the *minbar* from the Kutubiyya mosque in Marrakech, too tall to fit in the MMVI's inner galleries; most of the textiles that evidenced artistic exchange between Morocco's medieval artisans and Christian churches in Europe, such as the twelfth-century Shroud of St. Exupéry chasuble; and the Almohad chandelier from the Qarawiyyin mosque in Fez that had so dramatically marked the entrance to the exhibition at the Louvre. While photographs of some of these missing objects were displayed in Rabat, their physical absence from the show, in combination with certain technical defects in installation (such as occasional lighting malfunctions, transposed dates on object labels, and uneven wall panels), reduced the dramatic visual impact of the exhibition and at times disrupted its complex historical narrative. Ultimately, however, a critique of the first major exhibition in a first-of-its-kind museum in Morocco on the basis of its failure to meet the technical standards of one of Europe's greatest cultural institutions is neither fair nor interesting.

Instead, what deserves critique are the curatorial decisions, or lack thereof, that left visitors with the impression that the exhibition was simply a piece of the Louvre exported to Morocco. While presenting the MMVI as an extension of the Louvre may support the underlying political and diplomatic motivations behind the collaboration agreement, it does not help to convince members of the larger Moroccan community that the nation's

new museums, and the exhibitions they organize, are truly *for* them. Indeed, when I asked one Moroccan colleague what he felt had changed between the Paris and Rabat iterations of the exhibition, he answered, "Nothing, nothing has changed at all."

But even if little changed between Paris and Rabat *within* the gallery walls, the exhibition's meaning and impact underwent dramatic transformations simply through its relocation to a different cultural, political, and institutional context. In fact, it was this change in context that made the Rabat show interesting and maybe even successful.

First, "Medieval Morocco" moved from the context of one type of museum to another, and this had unintended consequences. The Louvre's encyclopedic collection reaches only up to the mid-nineteenth century, while the MMVI focuses on modern and contemporary art by Moroccan artists. So while the exhibition's historical scope fit well within the grand narrative of Islamic art presented at the Louvre, an exhibition of medieval art was an unexpected choice for Morocco's new museum of modern and contemporary art. Nevertheless, one could go so far as to say that the resulting contrast meaningfully reflected upon the reality of Morocco's physical and cultural landscape today. In this way the juxtaposition of historical and contemporary was productive. To live in Rabat means rushing in a taxi past twelfth-century city walls on your way to work in the city's new high-rise business district; or watching satellite TV in the home you built in the ruins of an eighteenth-century oceanfront battlement. Moroccans already engage with the material remains of their culture's history every day. By bringing these remains into the space of a museum gallery, the exhibition had the potential to draw upon its local visitors' experiences of historical

objects *in situ* and, at the same time, challenge the way they perceive such objects both inside and outside of the museum.

Second, and even more fundamentally, the choice of venue for the Rabat show challenged norms in Morocco's museum culture and, as a result, offered new ways for Moroccans to encounter familiar objects and images. In the context of the Louvre, the presentation of "Medieval Morocco" corresponded with institutional practices for displaying cultural objects as works of art to be enjoyed and studied at an aesthetic level. If anything, the exhibition's approach was unusually ethnographic and historical in comparison to the intellectual content of the Louvre's permanent galleries. In the context of Morocco's museum landscape, however, "Medieval Morocco" represented a radical shift in exhibition practices: the choice to display fragments of architecture and "craft" in the space of a museum dedicated to the "fine arts" was itself an innovation. Recent state-led cultural development projects in Morocco have heavily emphasized contemporary visual arts, as evidenced by the National Museum Foundation's first major project, the construction of the MMVI itself. Yet the public exhibition of "traditional craft" in Morocco is still the domain of colonial-era art and ethnography museums, where visitors encounter historical objects arranged according to outdated systems of categorization or assembled in picturesque vignettes against the backdrop of the ancient palaces that constitute the museums' buildings. "Medieval Morocco" extricated such objects from their usual surroundings to reinsert them within a rich historical narrative and visually isolate them against the monochromatic walls of a contemporary art gallery. In this way, the exhibition invited visitors to approach Morocco's medi-



4 The second gallery, focusing on the Almoravid dynasty, displayed a photographic reproduction of the Shroud of Saint Exupéry chasuble (far right); the Saint-Sernin basilica in Toulouse supposedly used the original twelfth-century silk textile as a shroud to cover the relics of Saint Exupéry beginning in the mid-thirteenth century.

eval arts with the same aesthetic gaze they might direct towards the modernist paintings hanging elsewhere on the museum's walls. And, ironically enough, the relative paucity of both objects and explanatory text in the Rabat show further encouraged viewers to adopt this way of looking, if only because they were provided little else to go on.

In these two ways, albeit unintentionally, the Rabat version of "Medieval Morocco" succeeded: it introduced a Moroccan audience to a new way of looking at historical objects domestically. But more could have been done. By transposing a lived-in history to a museum context, the exhibition offered its organizers the opportunity to celebrate and make use of the unique cultural knowledge and experiences that the Moroccan public could itself bring to the space of the museum. And by bringing

objects that are elsewhere in Morocco considered "decorative" or "ethnographic" into a space otherwise dedicated to an aesthetic and critical engagement with visual culture, the exhibition presented its organizers with an unrealized opportunity to help a relatively museum-illiterate public engage with the material traces of its own cultural heritage in a new way and perhaps reconsider the value and purpose of museums in their country more broadly.

The question remains: did the Rabat show live up to its potential—and its responsibilities—as an exhibition transposed from one cultural context to another? The possibilities for collaboration between museums in Europe or North America and Africa are exciting, but we must ensure that these projects are attuned to the needs, expectations, and, most importantly, potential contributions of its diverse

collaborators and audiences.

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#### Notes

- 1 Mehdi Qotbi, quoted in Zineb Satori, "Fondation nationale des Musées: Mehdi Qotbi veut se mettre vite au travail l'inventaire du patrimoine culturel, la priorité création de musées par themes." *LEconomiste*, December 21, 2011. <http://www.maghress.com/fr/leconomiste/1889779>, accessed May 5, 2013.

5 The exhibition concluded with a gallery dedicated to the Merinid dynasty, featuring architectural elements such as carved wood lintels, panels of *zellij*, and marble capitals. An intricately carved door frame, possibly from the Bu'inaniya madrasa in Fez, stood alone in the center of the gallery.

