

A textured oil painting of a Moroccan landscape. In the background, a tall, reddish-brown minaret stands against a pale sky. Below it, a row of low, dark-roofed buildings stretches across the horizon. In the foreground, there are trees with green and yellow foliage, and a path or riverbed is visible. The overall style is impressionistic with visible brushstrokes.

JACQUES MAJORELLE's MOROCCO

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musée
YVES SAINT LAURENT
marrakech



Jacques Majorelle while painting

In the first exhibition in Morocco dedicated to Jacques Majorelle (1886-1962) since his death, some forty works bear witness to the passion that the painter had for this country, a passion that, as in the case of Yves Saint Laurent, so inspired him. *Jacques Majorelle's Morocco* includes paintings of Marrakech, discovered by Majorelle in 1917, meticulous depictions of High Atlas kasbahs painted from the 1920s, and hymns to women and to his superb botanical garden that he created at the beginning of the 1930s. It is a tribute to this orientalist painter who captured and celebrated the beauty of Morocco during the first half of the 20th century.

Curator: Félix Marcilhac

Exhibition design: Christophe Martin



Bâb Agnaou, 1918
Oil on canvas, 250 × 390 cm
Collection Chambre
de Commerce et d'Industrie
française, Casablanca
MEAE, on loan at the
residence of the general
consul of France, Marrakech

MARRAKECH

Jacques Majorelle was born in 1886, son of Nancy cabinet-maker Louis Majorelle who founded the École de Nancy with Emile Gallé. After three years of architectural study and a diploma from the École nationale des Beaux-arts in Nancy, Jacques Majorelle decided to concentrate exclusively on painting which he had already studied with Emile Friant in Nancy. He continued his training in Paris at the Académie Julian, where he enrolled in 1906.

It was as an experienced painter, enriched by the results of his research into colour and light developed during his study trips to Spain (1908), Italy (1909) and Egypt (1910-1914), that Jacques Majorelle approached his discovery of Morocco. He arrived in Marrakech in October 1917 at the invitation of General Lyautey, who was also from Nancy. This military man was interested in the arts and enjoyed surrounding himself with artists to encourage the artistic heritage of the Cherifian Kingdom. As a privileged and attentive witness to a traditional society being brutally dragged into the modern world, Jacques Majorelle scrupulously and realistically transcribed in his paintings the daily activities of its inhabitants, the incredible harmony of the colours of the landscapes and the architectural confidence of the Atlas Kasbahs.

Fascinated and seduced by the beauty and authenticity of Marrakech where its medieval aspect enchanted him, Jacques Majorelle first lived in a small house in the medina that he renovated himself in traditional style, buying what was immediately necessary in the neighbouring *kissaryia* (auction market) to live there for two years. His 'little Arab box', as he referred to it disparagingly, was located in the Si Ben Salah district, not far from the mosque, the small market place and the souks.

Modest though it was, this first house was entirely decorated in Arab style, showing the interest that Jacques Majorelle had for traditional Moroccan arts. This was also the case at Dar Ben Daoud that he rented between 1919 and 1923, an ancient palace not far from Bab Doukkala, where he came across the refinement of ancient decoration.

Happily living closely with his neighbours in the *derbs* (small, dead-end lanes leading to homes) from his arrival in Marrakech, the artist delighted in participating in the life of the district. Such bustling activity was an inexhaustible source of inspiration as we see in the imposing painting of *Bab Agnaou* (1918) in which the painter depicts the teeming life of the inhabitants of the quartier with its colourful crowd, the snake charmer sitting on the ground and the hawkers in their familiar poses, each repeating the gestures that others before them have always made and that they will perpetuate in turn. At the same time, he painted scenes of souk life, such as *Le marché aux dattes* (1921), and the activities of the artisans and traders who worked there. The people in these picturesque scenes are touching in their simplicity, as are the veiled women who walk casually in the covered markets of the souk, as in *L'entrée des souks de Marrakech* (1949).

Outside the city walls at Bab El Khemis, the fifth day of the week (Thursday) was market day. Peasants from the mountains, farmers from the plains and artisans from surrounding villages arrived to sell their wares. Standing on a sort of mound formed by age-old accumulation of earth, rubbish and mud, Berber women sold haïks, carpets and blankets that they had woven at home, as in *Les Haïks au souk El Khemis* (1926). These veiled women were such captivating subjects with their charming authenticity, that the painter continued to feature them in his paintings, such as *Femmes berbères au souk El Khemis* (1930).



Les Haïks au souk el Khemis,
Marrakech, 1926
Oil on canvas, 79 × 100 cm
Collection residence
of the French
Ambassador, Rabat



*Porte à la medersa
Ben Youssef, 1921
Oil on panel
55 × 38 cm
Collection Pierre Bergé*

*Le Marché aux dattes,
Marrakech, 1921
Oil on canvas, 80,5 × 99 cm
Serge Lutens collection*

His passion for enthusiastically transcribing in his painting what he discovered of this Berber civilisation with its ancestral customs, as in *Femme berbère* (1921) (today it is presented on the Berber museum at the Majorelle garden), and obviously under the spell of the ancient architecture of Marrakech, his representation of the mysterious half-light of the *Tombeaux Saadiens* (1918) as well the imposing *Porte de la Médersa Ben Youssef* (1921) and the Koutoubia minaret in *El Mansour* (1920), flamboyant in its isolation, all demonstrate his delight in discovering them along with his dedication for depicting them with originality. It was emotion and authenticity that Jacques Majorelle cultivated in his first paintings of Marrakech.

FÉLIX MARCILHAC





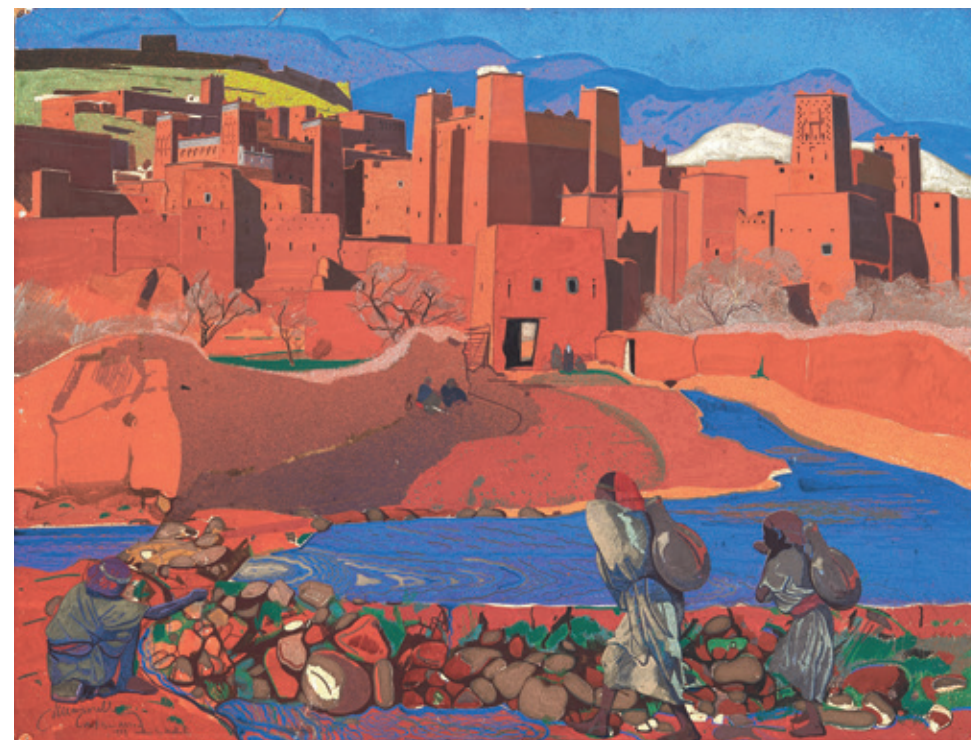
L'Attente du caïd, 1928
Oil on canvas,
66,7 × 99,6 cm
Private collection

ROUTE OF THE KASBAHS

During the first years of Majorelle's stay in Marrakech, the French military authorities would not allow foreign civilians to travel beyond a certain limit around the city, and Jacques Majorelle spent his days within the city searching for new subjects. His gaze scanned the rooftops, terraces and ramparts, searching the horizon across the plains to the looming mountains of the Atlas, while he imagined being able to venture there. Eventually obtaining permission to travel from the Pacha in the summer of 1921, Jacques Majorelle and his wife Andrée left Marrakech on 2 August, accompanied by an escort, for the High Atlas, Glaoua country, and the valleys of Telouet, Ounila and Rezaïa, on a journey lasting four months. Bringing back a large number of paintings from this first visit, Jacques Majorelle organised an exhibition in January 1922 at the Georges Petit Gallery in Paris, called *Cent tableaux du Maroc et de l'Atlas (région Glaoua)* (One hundred paintings of Morocco and the Atlas (Glaoua region)), which was very successful. All the paintings exhibited had in common a concern for graphic accuracy and authentic architectural depiction, with no stylised deformation or any kind of fanciful interpretation.

Enchanted by his experience, Jacques Majorelle dreamed of returning to the Atlas, and in June 1922 he undertook a new journey to the high valleys of N'Fiss and of the river Souss. Falling very ill, he was only able to bring back about fifty paintings from this second trip, for which he kept a diary that his father published in Nancy under the name *Carnet de route d'un peintre dans l'Atlas et l'Anti-Atlas (1922)* (A Painter's Journal in the Atlas and Anti-Atlas (1922)). Having painful memories of this second trip during which he almost died, it was not until December 1926 that he and his friend Maurice Robin organised a long journey, visiting Mogador (Essaouira) and travelling as far as Agadir along the Atlantic coast, then returning towards Marrakech along the southern slopes of the Atlas in Goundafa country, and passing through the Taroudant region, as can be seen in *La mosquée d'Ounila* (1927), in which the subtle composition of its size and colours in flat tints demonstrated his new way of painting.

After a stay at Moulay Idriss in the spring of 1928, seen in *Djebel Zerhoun, le moulin à huile*, Jacques Majorelle set off once again for the Atlas and produced a whole series of paintings of the Ounila valley: *Les passants*, *Anemiter*, *La Kasbah d'Anemiter*, and of the Souss valley: *L'attente du caïd*. The following year he was again in the deep valley of the Souss, as in *Maisons à Taourirt*, *Ouarzazate*, and the Mellah valley, as in *La séguia*, *Aït Ben Addou*. The precise lines of these paintings show the rigour of an architectural drawing, and the bright splashes of colour in flat tints give them a timeless quality. The depth of the colours is more or less intense, depending on the time of day chosen to paint them; the artist using only a little colour that invades the canvas boldly: a flamboyant red, an intense blue, a luminous yellow and a bright green. The 1930 publication of an album of thirty plates, *Les Kasbahs de l'Atlas*, reproduced around twenty paintings of this new series and entrenched this work which was so eloquently presented. The exhibition at La Renaissance Gallery in November of the same year firmly established Jacques Majorelle as 'the painter of the Atlas' and defined him as an undisputed talent, securing his work in the collective unconscious. **F.M.**



*La Seguia, Aït ben Addou,
vallée du Mellah, 1929*
Gouache, distemper,
mixed media on cream
paper board with
highlights of silver metallic
powder, 55.5 x 73 cm
Private collection



Villa Bou Saf Saf, vers 1930
House built by Jacques
Majorelle, early 1920's © DR

Jacques Majorelle's Art deco
Villa in Marrakech
Paul Sinoir architect, 1932
© Fondation Jardin Majorelle
Marrakech / Nicolas Mathéus



GARDENS AND NUDES

Having decided to stay permanently in Marrakech, in the autumn of 1922, Jacques Majorelle set his heart on a plot of land outside the walls of the Arab town in an area on the edge of the palm grove. Poplars (Saf Saf) grew on the property where the artist built his house (Bou), which he called Bou Saf Saf. The property was enlarged with two parcels of land in 1928. This new extension allowed him to plant and manage an enormous garden.

However luxurious and comfortable Villa Bou Saf Saf was in its reference to Moroccan style, Jacques Majorelle decided to build a studio on the new land that was much more contemporary. Built in 1931 in the middle of natural surroundings, it was a large white cube. Uniting two living spaces, a long water way was built in front. Narrow and shallow, the pool was filled with waterlilies and aquatic plants and bordered with all sorts of cactus along rectangular paths. In his spacious studio, the painter could work on large compositions on canvas, such as *Les Allamattes* (1931), destined for the editorial boardroom of the journal *La Vigie Marocaine*, or *Le Mousseur* (1937) and *L'Aouache* (1937) commissioned by the municipality for the new Casablanca Town Hall (Wilaya).

Jacques Majorelle decided in 1937 to paint his workshop in the bright colours he used in his paintings. Doors, window frames, balustrades and pots were then covered in colours of unheard-of brilliance: yellow ochre, deep blue and lemon yellow. Strangely celebrating 'the marriage of painting and nature' as Pierre Bergé puts it, pink creepers from Florida and California, multi-coloured bougainvillea from India, yellow and pink daturas and milky white yuccas from Mexico, Chamaerops and other Dracaenas bloomed among the tall Washingtonia palms, palms from the Canaries and Doum dwarf palms, the very decorative Sabal palmetto mingled with banana trees, giant ferns and other wild plants that Jacques Majorelle had encouraged to acclimatise and grow here.

This was a special place for Jacques Majorelle that provided an environment in which to paint a series of new paintings depicting not only plants in strange colours such as *Régimes de dattes* (1930-35), but also singular portraits of men, such as *Le charmeur de serpent* (1935-40), as well as many female nudes such as *Kaltoum* (1933-34) and *La couverture rouge* (1934-35). 'I now want to dedicate myself to the study of the people of this country, not just to draw and paint them, but to represent them', he said to a journalist. Standing, lying, sitting, dancing, walking or sleeping, whether pursued or caught, these young women expressed an intense, natural joie de vivre and suggest sweet, chaste embraces. Their falsely modest poses, their bodies of ebony, bronze and gold with obviously disturbing sensuality, seem to challenge those who had criticised him for a certain dryness in previous works.

Le Charmeur de serpent,
Marrakech (1935-1940)
tempera gouache,
mixed media on black
paper with highlights
of gold and silver metallic
powder, 105 × 76 cm
Private collection





La Couverture rouge
Distemper, watercolour
and gouache, mixed
media on paper with
highlights of gold and
silver metallic powder,
49 x 66 cm
Serge Lutens's collection

This series of works was in a considerably larger format than that chosen for his paintings of the Atlas. Using large-size paper, he covered it with watered-down colours that he nuanced with lively touches of the brush, mixing in metallic powders applied on top with his fingers to give them more depth. Although the backgrounds are usually only sketched in, by contrast the meticulously realistic women's bodies have an intense presence and seem to stand out from the composition where colours, shade and light mix in a warm, gentle intensity. In the same way that he approached his first discoveries in the Atlas with the curiosity and exaltation close to that of an explorer coming upon buildings about to disappear, Majorelle approached the human body in the manner of an ethnologist conscious of seizing the ultimate moment of purity and innocence before civilisation would encroach to change the natural spontaneity.

Bearing witness to his talent, it was as a true artist that he presented himself to the art world and organised a large exhibition in November 1934 at the Charpentier Gallery in Paris. The painter was now fully mature and his talent was expressed to the eye of the art critic with ease and virtuosity in his scenes of streets and countryside, his nudes or his large stylised compositions whose decorative value did not affect the quality of execution. Not wishing to be confined to one specific genre, and putting a sort of full stop to the depiction of nudes, Jacques Majorelle once again left for the Atlas Mountains in 1934 to seek out new sources of inspiration. **F.M.**

Cover: *El Mansour*, 1920

Oil on panel, 33 × 24 cm

Pierre Bergé collection

The works presented here are all from private and institutional collections in Morocco. We warmly thank the generous lenders who have made this exhibition possible

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