



musée
YVES SAINT LAURENT
marrakech

JACQUES AZÉMA

UNE AVENTURE POÉTIQUE
27.10.19 - 24.03.20

PRESS KIT

“I love nothing more than a sincere innocence. I settled in Morocco so that I could live alongside it. I admit that my relationships until now have only been with Moroccans of the most humble class, whose lack of culture has preserved this innocence, which, in my opinion, makes them so admirable.”

EXTRACT FROM A LETTER WRITTEN BY JACQUES AZÉMA TO A FRIEND

DATED JULY 28, 1934, MARRAKECH

Travel photograph, Jacques Azéma



The musée YVES SAINT LAURENT marrakech has mounted the first retrospective exhibition devoted to the work of Jacques Azéma (1910–1979), a French artist who made Marrakech his home in 1930.

As a professor of painting in Marrakech, and later at the École des Beaux-Arts in Casablanca in the 1960s, Azéma greatly influenced the Moroccan artists of his time. However, as a figurative painter – and a French one at that – in a Morocco that was no longer a protectorate, Azéma was considered an academic figure by his avant-garde fellow-artists.

Yet Azéma was anything but an academician. An adventurer, he decided at twenty years of age to crisscross North Africa, finally settling in Morocco. He remained in the Kingdom for fifty years before returning to France, where he died. He lived modestly, and shied away from any artistic or social circles. He was not an Orientalist painter, and had instead felt an affinity with the Symbolists, Cubists and Surrealists. The painter’s gaze on his subject – the daily life of humble Moroccans – was able to sift through these influences to leave us a work that is unique, mysterious and sensual.

At a time when we are reevaluating the important role the École des Beaux-Arts in Casablanca has played in the history of art, it is only fair to pay tribute to one of its most unsung, yet leading figures

BJÖRN DAHLSTRÖM

Director of the musée YVES SAINT LAURENT Marrakech

“His small, jewel-like paintings represent a dreamy Moroccan landscape of the unconscious whose pictorial language is closer to that of a true Surrealist in the metaphysical tradition of Giorgio de Chirico.

How wonderful that this exhibition will do justice to Jacques Azéma and to the particular quality of his artistic output; that his long-forgotten work will be rediscovered; and that we will appreciate its modernist underpinnings, as an offshoot of the Parisian avant-garde, which he brought with him to Africa nearly a century ago.”

M-F GIACOLETTE



Autoportrait dans la foule, gouache on cardboard, 11.5 x 16.8cm, c.1945-1950

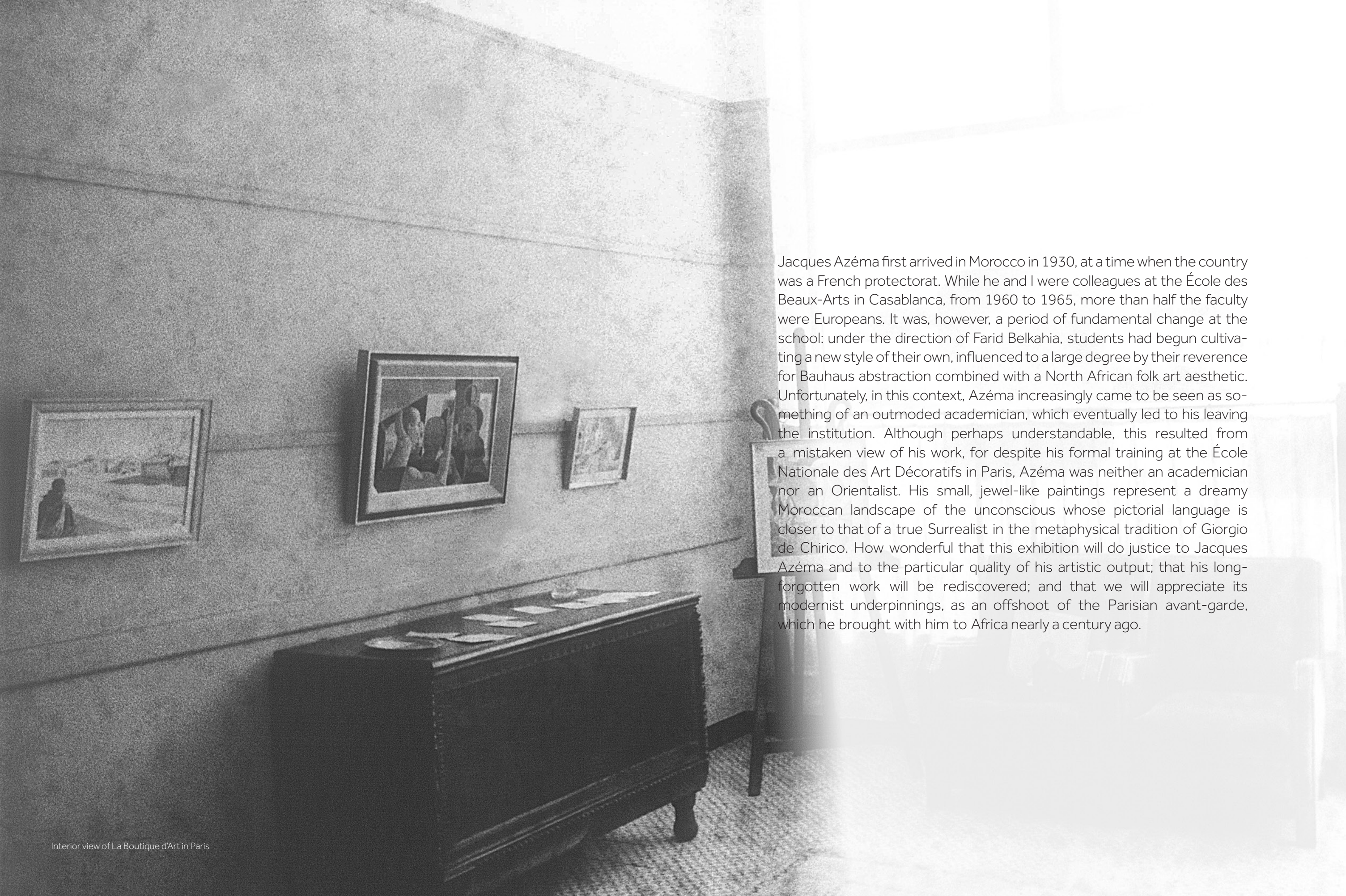
JACQUES AZÉMA: A POETIC ADVENTURE

MARIE-FRANÇOISE GIACOLETTE, CURATOR OF THE EXHIBITION

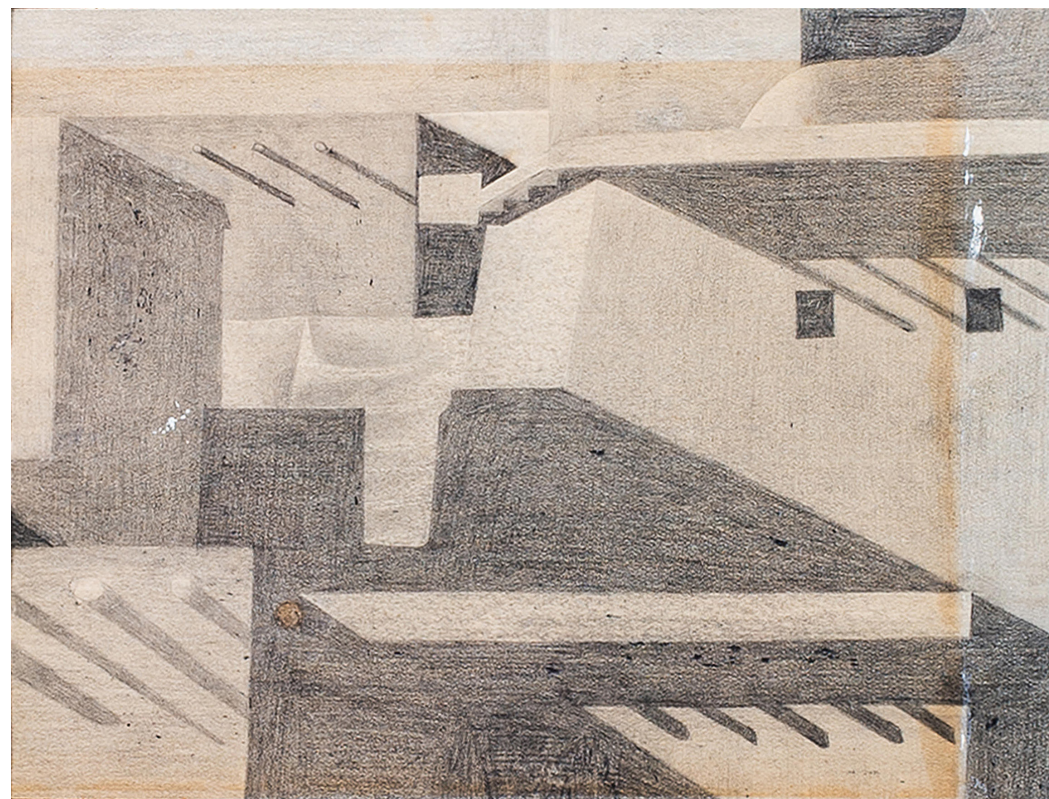
Jacques Azéma spent his childhood in Aulnay-sous-Bois, a suburb of Paris, with his carefree bohemian and free-thinking parents, who allowed him to choose his own literary and artistic path, which was for a long time free from any financial concerns. He completed a course in interior design at the École Nationale des Arts Décoratifs in Paris, and shortly thereafter began a professional career he disliked. He then began artistic and literary pursuits in the vein of the Cubists and the Surrealists, which gave him more freedom. These first efforts brought him to the attention of Michel Leiris, a kindred artistic spirit with whom he would maintain a discreet and affectionate relationship, one in which his own sister Suzanne also participated. Despite being included in a brilliant Parisian circle, and counting among his close friends Robert Verly, René Chansom and André Gide, he soon understood, being painfully shy, that he wasn't really suited to, nor could he afford to live within, the sophisticated Parisian society upon which his success would depend. Influenced by his friend André Gide, who knew Africa well, he decided to leave Paris and embark upon an adventure, discovering the vast Algerian and Moroccan deserts alone on his motorbike. And so, in 1928, he left behind a brilliant Parisian artistic and intellectual circle for a sensual and adventurous Moroccan life. In his self-imposed solitude, his thoughts and vision were stimulated by the local light, space and colors, as well as the shapes and settings of the earthen architecture. In Marrakech, he lived in the deepest recess of the medina, immersed in his recordings of Satie, Debussy and Bach, reading, writing, and musing on the impositions of the Protectorate on a world of infinite poetry.

Photograph of a painting (Jacques Azéma Archives), before 1930





Jacques Azéma first arrived in Morocco in 1930, at a time when the country was a French protectorat. While he and I were colleagues at the École des Beaux-Arts in Casablanca, from 1960 to 1965, more than half the faculty were Europeans. It was, however, a period of fundamental change at the school: under the direction of Farid Belkahia, students had begun cultivating a new style of their own, influenced to a large degree by their reverence for Bauhaus abstraction combined with a North African folk art aesthetic. Unfortunately, in this context, Azéma increasingly came to be seen as something of an outmoded academician, which eventually led to his leaving the institution. Although perhaps understandable, this resulted from a mistaken view of his work, for despite his formal training at the École Nationale des Art Décoratifs in Paris, Azéma was neither an academician nor an Orientalist. His small, jewel-like paintings represent a dreamy Moroccan landscape of the unconscious whose pictorial language is closer to that of a true Surrealist in the metaphysical tradition of Giorgio de Chirico. How wonderful that this exhibition will do justice to Jacques Azéma and to the particular quality of his artistic output; that his long-forgotten work will be rediscovered; and that we will appreciate its modernist underpinnings, as an offshoot of the Parisian avant-garde, which he brought with him to Africa nearly a century ago.



Architecture berbère ou Kasbah, graphite on paper, 13.5 x 18cm, 1960

The exhibition Jacques Azéma: A Poetic Adventure will gather forty drawings and paintings, organized around themes that are central to the artist's work: Morocco, landscapes, portraits, geometric research, scenes from everyday life and the hammam.

GEOMETRIC STUDIES

In his work, Azéma explored geometric forms, mixing curves, straight edges and freely-drawn lines, shapes and colors. He executed many studies as a form of

relaxation, which he would later incorporate into finished works to enhance or add a mysterious element to a surreal, symbolic, or theatrical composition. Although he never produced a film, cinema was an integral component of Jacques Azéma's creative process. His journals include several quite advanced outlines for screenplays, and time and again we sense a deep longing somehow to transcribe the same lyrical atmosphere of his paintings into movie form. From this we can assume that Azéma was far more interested in visual poetry, in representing pure beauty in motion on the screen, than in any sort of conventional narrative. Through his ties with Michel Leiris and the Surrealists in Paris we can envision his unmade films as virtually plotless, like Buñuel and Dalí's *Un Chien Andalou*. Indeed, another one of Azéma's ideas for a film we find in his journals, one of the few not set in North Africa, is strongly suggestive of *Ballet Mécanique* of 1924, by Fernand Léger and Dudley Murphy.

"An attempt to show the strength of the workman alongside the power of the factory, to depict the closeness of their relationship, a relationship on which their very existence depends. To make us experience this inextricable bond through which each informs the other of his own being:

Man mechanized by the factory.

The factory humanized by man."



Paysage Bab El Khemis, gouache on cardboard, 25 x 31.4cm, 1978

LANDSCAPES, PORTRAITS, DRAWINGS

It was at the 1954 or 1955 Salon d'Automne that I first noticed his work. There they were in a corner, four little landscapes so different from the other works on view. These images presented an innovative approach and a way of viewing Moroccan scenes that was more complex and mysterious. The choice of subject, stylization and overall manipulation of perspective, which destroyed any kind of naturalism in the transition from three dimensions to two, recreated the dreamy atmosphere he had discovered in Marrakech.

SCENES FROM EVERYDAY LIFE

In Morocco and in other Arab countries the street and the marketplace are very spontaneous places of personal expression. Anything goes to attract attention and seduce. The constant novelty is lively and unrestrained, and the vivid colors seem drawn from Pop Art. Many artists have exploited this in "Orientalist" genre scenes with varying degrees of success, but Azéma has little in common with them. His small, theatrical pictures of orange sellers under their tents, domino or card players painted in Georges de La Tour-style chiaroscuro, the matte studies done in gouache – such a difficult medium – the superimposed perspectives, manipulated light effects and his marvellously subdued palette punctuated by sudden bursts of color, are all a far cry from the Orientalism still sadly being practiced, even today.

Place de village animée, gouache on cardboard, 60 x 50cm, c. 1960



HAMMAM

The ritual of the hammam allows people of the same sex from all levels of society to gather nude, or in a state of seminudity. The hammam's extreme heat and humidity, the semidarkness and steam blur precise outlines and create a setting for languid movements, an intimate and sensual atmosphere where everything is unhurried and intimate. The water and the reflections on the bodies and the floor lend a special pictorial quality to the scene. Some hammams in Marrakech or Safi are bathed in an oblique light entering through high windows; the sun's rays transect the hammam and bathe it in a quivering, golden mist.



Hammam à quatre, gouache on cardboard, 18 x 24cm, 1977

JACQUES AZÉMA'S INVISIBLE CAMERA

FATIMA-ZAHRA LAKRISSA

Of the thousand and one ways to access the work of Jacques Azéma, there is one that leads us to the intersection of two approaches – one pictorial, the other cinematographic – and two actions: that of representing, which is essential to painting, and that of revealing, which is inherent in the mediums of mechanical reproduction. The two respond in a dialogue that seems to adhere to the conditions and rules of play of cinematography, whose mise en abyme and staging are the recurring manifestations in certain works by Jacques Azéma. Take for example a set of small-format gouaches in which we see the preponderance of cinematographic language: the isolation of certain elements of the composition according to editing techniques, in order to present them in a fragmented state; and the dislocation of their relationship to life by placing them in a scenic apparatus. This set of work is presented as a series of lyrical pages¹, characterized by the deployment of numerous representational strategies that give these images a poetic, even phantasmagorical dimension.

One can begin to understand the way these works by Jacques Azéma and the cinematographic image echo each other if we think of cinema as an evocative art, which, depending on the painter's sensibilities, promises more than it reveals, and which invites us to reconstitute a totality from its fragments. We could then evoke the experience of perception, understood in its temporal and narrative dimension. This connection between the artist's work and film is all the more relevant since we know that Jacques Azéma was particularly interested in the perceptual methods used in cinematic and photographic production:

¹ Particularly appreciated by Jacques Azéma, gouache was often applied by the painter to small format works; each was considered a constituent part of an ensemble. They should be seen both in their relation to each other and to the series. See the letter dated 1 June 1943, written by Azéma at Arset el Mesfioui, Bab Rhemat, Marrakech-Medina, Marrakech. It should be noted that the works referred to here do not represent a series identified by the artist. The author has presented them alongside one another since their composition and aesthetic approach have affinities with the language of cinema.



Untitled, gouache on cardboard, 16 x 13cm, c.1950-1960

“The cinema must be above all an art of innuendo, which leaves a great imaginative role to the spectator. It is an art that, by means of a tense and consequently concentrated, powerful point of view, transmits to the spectator a condensed emotion, and that, once recorded by the eye of the spectator, is transformed by reproducing itself beyond the generating image.”²

By giving the pictorial work the language of cinematography, Jacques Azéma asks questions related to genre (cinema, photography, painting) and the link that is woven between their languages, a link according to which the work is not reducible to the laws of only a pictorial or cinematographic medium. He also implements an uncommon creative act, that of opening the image to the multiplicity of gazes. It is an act though which the power exerted by the painter on its object of study is suspended, since this power – or “right of gaze” as expressed by Jacques Derrida³ – is shared by the painter, the spectator and the characters, which makes Azéma’s work well-suited for exploring new fictional landscapes.

² Excerpt from Jacques Azéma’s journal

³ See Marie-Françoise Plissart, “Une lecture par Jacques Derrida” in *Droit de Regards*, Éditions de minuit (Paris, 1985).



Fumeur de kif, gouache on cardboard, 16,7 x 16,7cm, 1971



Extract from a brochure published by the Ecole des Beaux-Arts de Casablanca in 1965 (photo Mohamed Melehi)

B I O G R A P H Y

JACQUES AZÉMA (1910-1979)

1910

Jacques Azéma is born in Toulouse, France.

1926

He is accepted at the École Nationale Supérieure des Arts Décoratifs in Paris, in the workshop devoted to decoration.

1929

He works as a decorator in Paris. He meets the poet, Michel Leiris, an important figure in the Surrealist movement.

1930-50

He sails from Bordeaux aboard Le Marrakech and arrives in Casablanca.

He goes directly to Marrakech, where he settles in the medina near Bab Aylan. He then moves to a home adjoining the city walls at Bab Ghmat, which he furnishes in a traditional manner. He begins writing. From Marrakech, he undertakes a long motorcycle trip through the Moroccan and Algerian Sahara. He considers moving to Algeria, but is not taken with the country and returns to Morocco, which he makes his home. While in Marrakech, he prepares exhibitions of his work to be shown in Paris, the Salon d'Automne in Casablanca, and the Salon d'Hiver in Marrakech. At the same time, he teaches drawing and painting at the École Mangin (today the Lycée Victor Hugo).

He earns a living from the sale of his work, which is shown by the antique dealer, Hervé Tarate, at his gallery located on the rue Allal Ben Abdellah in Casablanca. Azéma's work is exhibited there alongside paintings by the Russian artist Ira Belline.

1955

His work is exhibited at the Salon d'Automne in Casablanca, in a group show that includes work by Jacques Majorelle.

1962

The artist Farid Belkahia, whom Jacques Azéma met in Marrakech, invites Azéma to teach at the École des Beaux-Arts in Casablanca and to establish a painting workshop there. At the time, Marie-Françoise Giacometti was in charge of the drawing workshop. Azéma lives with other artists who also teach at the École des Beaux-Arts, in a building owned by the CTM (Compagnie des Transports Marocains) on the Avenue des FAR.

1965

Azéma creates a 500 x 280 cm fresco that is displayed at the end-of-the-year exhibition of work by students of the École des Beaux-Arts, organized at the Parc de la Casablancaise (the Parc Lyautey, today the Parc de Ligue Arabe). The fresco was recently destroyed in a fire.

1968

Jacques Azéma leaves the École des Beaux-Arts in Casablanca. He returns to Marrakech, then decides to move permanently to El Jadida, where he lives above the old Portuguese cistern.

1979

His health deteriorates. Azéma is taken by the Red Cross to Avignon, France, where he dies.



Poster project for the Salon d'Hiver, Marrakech, gouache on cardboard, 24 x 19cm, 1953

Marie-Françoise Giacolette was born in Casablanca. Her freethinking parents were civil servants during the Protectorate and later employed by the Moroccan State. Her family lived modestly near El-Hank in the Bourgogne neighbourhood of Casablanca, which at the time was a working class area with Arab, Jewish and Christian residents. This melting pot included destitute Italian, Portuguese and Spanish refugees fleeing Nazi Europe. Many were artisans (painters, masons, upholsterers, glaziers and grocers) who formed strong bonds with their employees, often Berbers. The neighborhood's streets became a meeting place for this multilingual community that lived in harmony, in typical Mediterranean fashion, through good times and bad.

At age 14, Marie-Françoise Giacolette left the Chawki secondary school for young women and entered the École des Beaux-Arts de Casablanca, which at the time was directed by Henri Wacquez, a visionary close to the Bauhaus and the work of Walter Gropius. She later studied in France at the École des métiers d'art de la Ville de Paris located in the Hotel Salé (today the Musée Picasso). At both schools she refined her gaze, and became fascinated with the work of provocative artists such as Egon Schiele, Amedeo Modigliani, David Hockney and later, Sigmar Polke; disciplined architects such as Jean Prouvé, Robert Mallet-Stevens, Charles and Ray Eames, as well as Hassan Fathy, whose unflinching and regional focus on the environment impressed her.

Upon returning to Casablanca, she met Jacques Azéma at the École des Beaux-Arts, where they both held teaching positions. Their friendship developed, fueled by a mutual desire to socialize freely, without prejudice, with the humble, ordinary people in their midst. At the school, they worked together to promote drawing, which until then had been mostly unappreciated, as an integral part of the artistic curriculum. Three years later, she left the Beaux Arts.

Since then she has applied her artistic training by working as an interior designer alongside architects as well as mâalems (master craftsmen; in Arabic, "he who knows"), whose expertise she places at the highest level in her practice. Marie-Françoise Giacolette creates interiors where one moves freely, space is not wasted and there is an obvious connection between the interior and exterior, all the while using construction techniques that are both ecological and durable. In 2019, she was asked to curate the exhibition Jacques Azéma: A Poetic Adventure at the musée YVES SAINT LAURENT marrakech.

The musée YVES SAINT LAURENT Marrakech

Inaugurated in October 2017 and located a stone's throw from the Jardin Majorelle, the musée YVES SAINT LAURENT marrakech is a vibrant cultural center that includes a hall for temporary exhibitions, a photography gallery, an auditorium, a research library, bookshop and café-restaurant. The basement of the building houses the museum's collection and a state-of-the-art pre-ventive conservation center. The temporary exhibitions hall at the musée YVES SAINT LAURENT marrakech was conceived as a cultural and artistic showcase. It is where the museum displays talent from all over the world, with a special emphasis given to contemporary Moroccan artists.

www.museeyslmarakech.com

The Fondation Jardin Majorelle

The Fondation Jardin Majorelle is a non-profit Moroccan institution that uses its own resources to ensure the conservation and functioning of the Jardin Majorelle, the Berber Museum and the musée YVES SAINT LAURENT marrakech. The foundation's resources were used to establish the Berber Museum, inaugurated in December 2011, and the musée YVES SAINT LAURENT marrakech, which opened in October 2017. The foundation's earnings are reinvested in Morocco to finance cultural, educational and social initiatives.

www.jardinmajorelle.com

PRESS INQUIRIES:

presse@jardinmajorelle.com

PRACTICAL INFORMATION

OPEN EVERY DAY FROM 10 :00 am to 6:00 pm

EXCEPT WEDNESDAYS

LAST ADMISSION AT 5:30 pm

Musée Yves Saint Laurent Paris

The Musée Yves Saint Laurent Paris was inaugurated on October 3, 2017, more than fifteen years after the closing of the haute couture fashion house. Located at 5 avenue Marceau, it occupies the same hôtel particulier where for nearly thirty years, from 1974 until 2002, Yves Saint Laurent reigned as a leading figure of the international fashion world. Over 450 m2 at the museum are devoted to retrospectives of the great couturier's lifelong work and theme-based temporary exhibitions, which showcase the impressive collections held by the Fondation Pierre Bergé – Yves Saint Laurent.

www.museeyslparis.com