

PRESS KIT
EXHIBITION
DESERT
DESIGN

16.06.2019
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CONTEMPORARY RUGS
OF THE ORIENTAL REGION
OF MOROCCO



Arnaud Maurières,
co-curator of the exhibition

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In December 2010, we were exploring the eastern Moroccan desert, a vast plain devoid of trees, shadows and water. It was there, in the middle of nowhere, that we came upon two modest earthen structures: the home of our guide, Lahcen, and his family. Nine people lived within the walls; there was nothing in the unpainted interior that resembled furniture. The only thing we noticed was a pile of rugs in the corner of one of the rooms. As they were unfolded to welcome us, the floor suddenly seemed dappled with vibrant colours, which astounded us. Lahcen told us that all the women of his tribe wove such rugs, and asked if we wanted to meet them. It was how our adventure began.

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The musée YVES SAINT LAURENT marrakech presents its seventh temporary exhibition, **Desert Design**, which showcases the incredible talent of Berber weavers.



Touda HUSSEIN
Photo © Rachid Bouzidi



Photo © Eric Ossart

The exhibition will feature thirty contemporary rugs woven by women of the Aït Khebbach, a tribe found in the easternmost region of Morocco at the gateway to the Sahara. The vibrant colours and modern patterns of the rugs, as well as the recycled material used to make them, bear witness to the remarkable creativity of these Berber weavers, and contrast with the harsh and desolate environment in which they live.

The Desert Design exhibition allows us to travel through a rich spatio-temporal landscape as we discover the unique talent of these women weavers. Their Aït Khebbach rugs, filled with unexpected patterns and bursts of colour, reflect a modernism and freedom of expression, and reveal the genesis of a tribal style that is thoroughly contemporary.

This exhibition at the musée YVES SAINT LAURENT marrakech works in harmony with the exceptional collection of Amazigh carpets and rugs found at the nearby Berber Museum, in the heart of the Jardin Majorelle, and underlines the importance that both institutions place on preserving Moroccan heritage.

Curators of the exhibition: Christine Bouilloc, Director of the Musée Bargoin d'archéologie et des arts textiles in Clermont-Ferrand, France, and Arnaud Maurières / Exhibition designer: Younes Duret

The exhibition Desert Design is co-sponsored by the Musée Bargoin de Clermont-Ferrand / Clermont Auvergne Métropole, France, where the exhibition will travel after Marrakech and be on view to the public from 22 November 2019 through 5 April 2020.



Photo © Eric Ossart

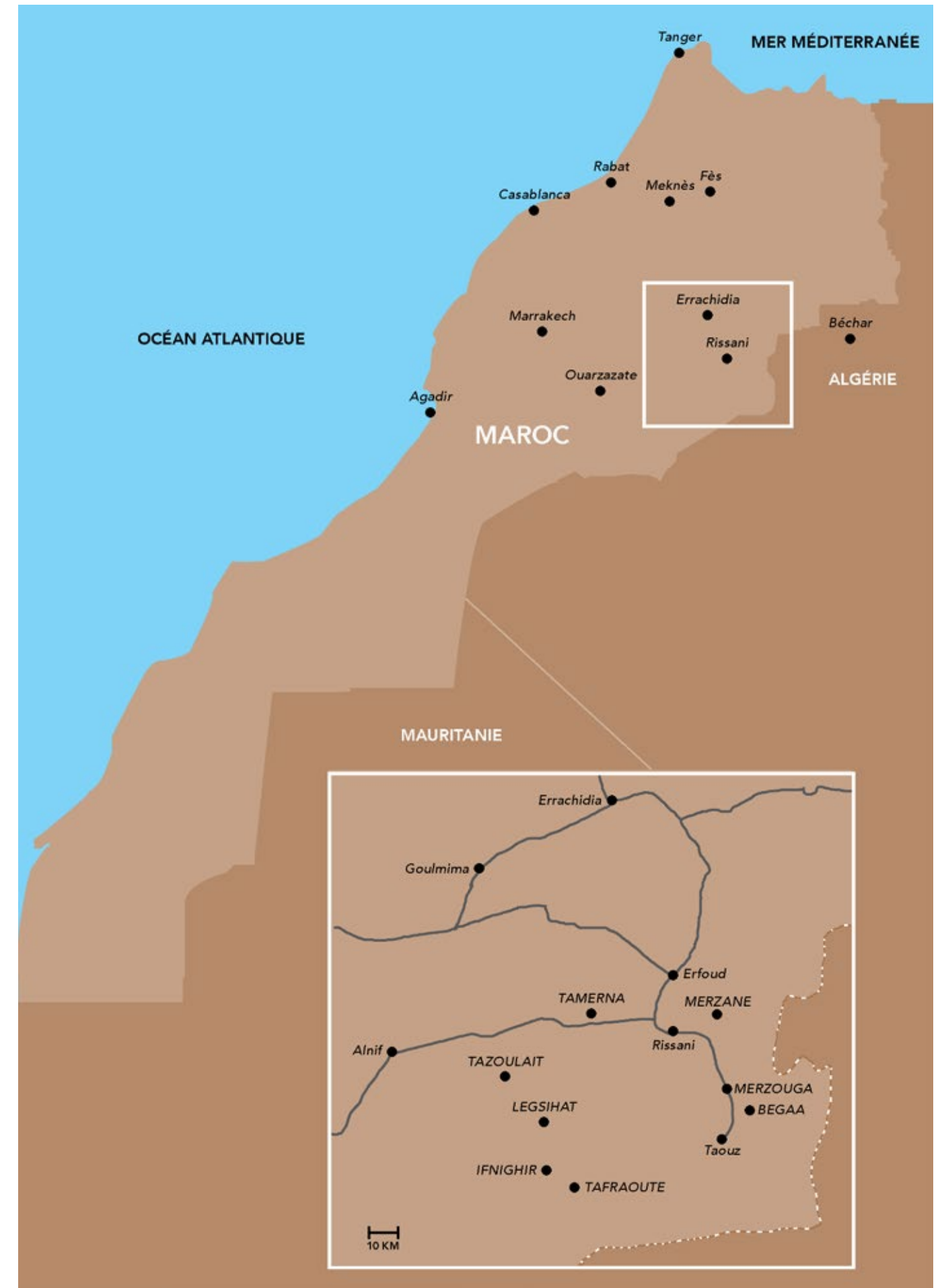
DESERT DESIGN – A guide to the exhibition

THE AÏT KHEBBACH

The Aït Khebbach is a Berber tribe, part of the Aït Atta confederacy, based in Oriental, the easternmost region of Morocco. The city of Rissani is the economic center of the region, and the dunes at Merzouga are its main tourist attraction. For four centuries, the Aït Khebbach people led a nomadic existence in the vast Saharan plain reaching from the Tafilalet oasis in Morocco to the Béchar oasis in Algeria. In 1956, a frontier was drawn between French Algeria and the Cherifian Kingdom, and the Aït Khebbach lost two-thirds of their territory. They regrouped on the Moroccan side of the plain, a region known as the *Kem-Kem Hamada*.

SETTLEMENT AND CREATIVITY

Beginning in 1924, French intervention in Moroccan affairs drove the Aït Khebbach to become more sedentary. A half century later, in the early 1970s, a drought forced the last nomadic herders to abandon their ancestral way of life and to establish villages near ancient, fortified granaries, or near oases and underground sources of water. Maintaining their nomadic crafts, the women wove tent awnings, blankets and clothing. Their sedentary lifestyle led them to also weave rugs to be used as bedding by their families. The thirty-year period from approximately 1980 to 2010 was a particularly creative one for these weavers. The more talented among them gained recognition, and their patterns were widely copied, resulting in a style unique to the tribe.



NO LONGER ANONYMOUS

Anonymity is a mythology that seems to have been formulated in the nineteenth century, during a time when “scientific reason” supplanted all other forms of reasoning. Since then we have tended to confuse things. Mix up words. This confusion is not a trivial matter. It conveys the attitude behind our way of seeing, or how we judge things. But how can one be anonymous, unless one is considered as such by those who egotistically imagine themselves the guardians of all that is true?
– Simon Njami

This collection of Aït Khebbach rugs allows us, for the first time, to identify the women who wove these everyday objects. We met them, interviewed and sometimes photographed them.

A curtain has been lifted: We recognize now that they are anything but anonymous.

IMAGINATION AND INSPIRATION

Until the beginning of the 1980s, the Aït Khebbach did not own rugs and were not associated with any distinctive textile tradition. Their first compositions, free of any stylistic constraints, revealed a rare freedom of expression; appropriation and inventiveness led to the weaving of unforeseen rugs. The crafting of artisanal objects by new hands, using different materials, and produced in a different context, resulted in fertile ground for personal interpretation, while the creative impulse remained subject to various influences and technical constraints. The weaver's choice to either seek inspiration from other rugs or to create her own patterns reveals much regarding her inner character or her frame of mind at that particular moment. In this manner, every rug contributed individually to the building of a collective, tribal heritage.

THE HANDING DOWN TO A NEW GENERATION

The pioneering Aït Khebbach weavers are now in their 70s and 80s. Their diverse output went hand in hand with the discovery of new materials, colours and patterns. The weavers' daughters work within a more limited range of the more standardised patterns, those which are easier to reproduce; these weavers, who are around fifty years old today, can be said to have defined the Aït Khebbach style. The granddaughters of the ori-

ginal weavers reproduce their mothers' rugs, but often with less talent. Whereas they outnumber the first generation of imaginative weavers, who were several dozen at most, they seem less creative. Nevertheless, their rugs convey the unique style of the Aït Khebbach, and add a contemporary



dimension to Moroccan cultural heritage, beyond the trends imposed today by commercial channels of distribution.

ART AND MATERIAL

The transition from a nomadic to sedentary existence resulted in a decline in livestock. Natural wool, which once was easy to obtain, became increasingly rare. As a result, the Aït Khebbach weavers searched for other materials to make rugs. Although several were fond of natural colours, most preferred a more vibrant and contrasting colour palette. Without the means to buy multicoloured skeins in the marketplace, the women “deknitted” second-hand sweaters to obtain dyed yarn. At first, they used their own old clothing, which introduced coloured patterns to their natural wool rugs. Over time, they began buying cheap sweaters from second-hand shops in Rissani, which led to the production of rugs that were entirely polychromatic. The weavers became true designers, particularly talented in combining a wide range of source materials and improbable colours.

INCARNATION

How should we approach, study, and present the rugs woven by these women? The eternal question regarding the status of an artist or artisan is asked once again. The former grants himself or herself a more abstract and intellectual dimension, whereas we assign the latter the technical production of utilitarian objects...the same can be said for work from the design world, artifacts at once aesthetic, practical, and grounded in their utility. Should we approach the rugs woven by Aït Khebbach women in the same manner?

Let us return to the source, to basics, to this embodiment that imposes itself. Every piece collected should be incarnated, given human form; what they are should be made flesh, as well as what they say, what they do, and who we are. Could we take this idea further, and propose that every rug made by Rquiah Aït Khouya, Adjo Hamchichi, Touda Afounas, Fatima Ouhaya, Aïcha Idir or Zahra Orcham is the embodiment of our pluralistic and emotional humanity? I believe so.
– Christine Bouilloc



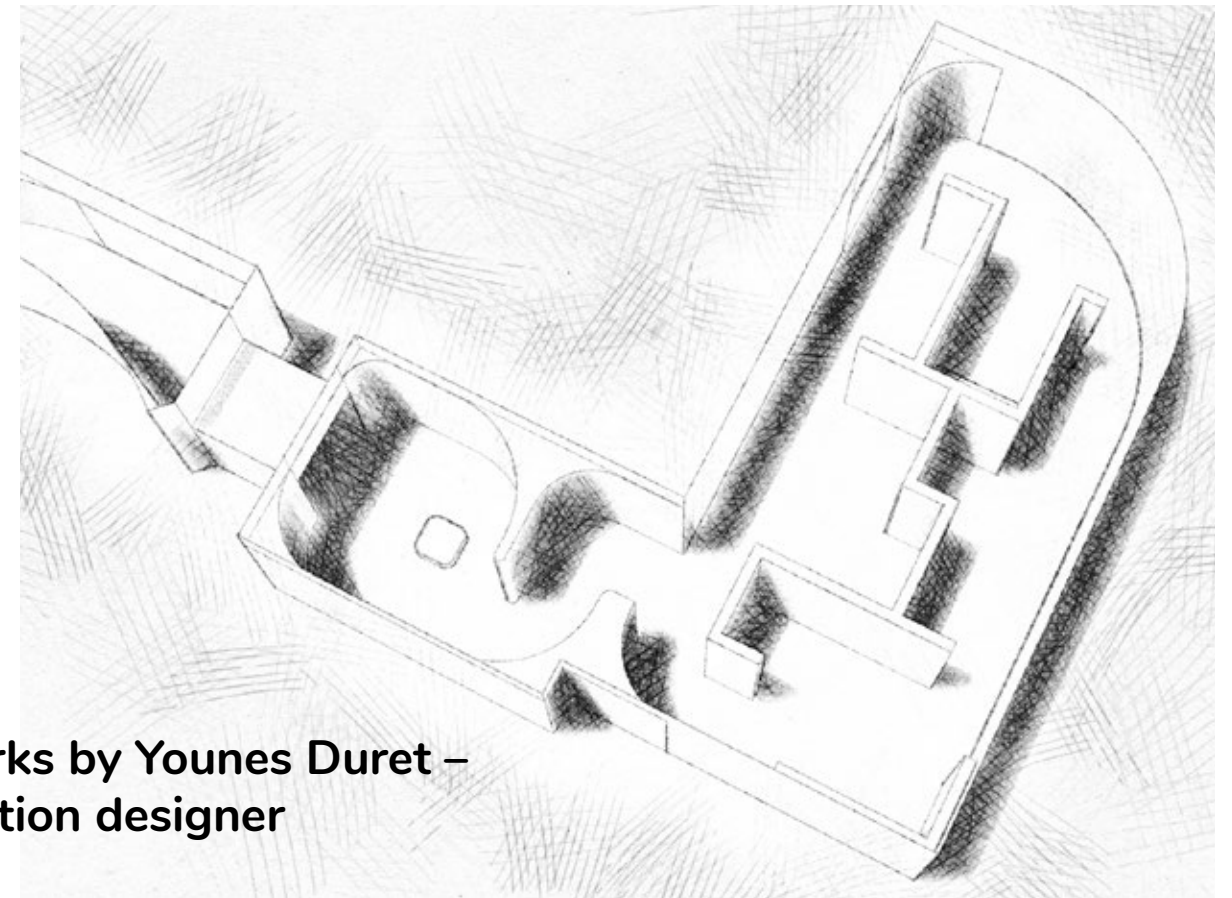
Mama BOUMSHOUL. Photo © Rachid Bouzid
Rugs in the foreground Ito TAOUACHT. Photo © Rachid Bouzid

Christine Bouilloc,
Co-curator of the exhibition

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It is the light that first seizes us when we behold the desert plains of southern Morocco. Blinding at midday or gentle at dawn, it constantly modulates the monochromatic subtlety of the landscape [...]. Who could thus imagine the profusion of color that fills the interiors of these homes?

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Drawing © Younes Duret

Remarks by Younes Duret – Exhibition designer

The words of Christine Bouilloc on the opposite page reflect the same surprise felt by the exhibition curators when they unexpectedly discovered these multicolored rugs in a monochromatic desert. The exhibition design is loosely inspired by this emotional aspect. As one tours the exhibition, one should experience a contrast of meanings, whose differences have been emphasized. This approach, at once disturbing and startling, is meant to transport the visitor to an emotionally charged vortex where, at times, visual points of reference have been lost. As beliefs are suspended, we enter a mysterious realm of discovery that animates us all.

The exhibition was designed as an immersive voyage, offering the visitor a rich sensory experience. One by one, we discover a sequence of rug-paintings, whose abstract patterns evoke a symphony of colors.

The adventure does not stop there. Imagined as an ode to the creative spirit, the exhibition creates a space where we meet the woman weavers of the

Aït Khebbach tribe, and where their souls seem to vibrate in unison.

Born from a feminine freedom of expression, their rugs manifest both craftsmanship and design. Their innovative quality is found in the weavers' sourcing of second-hand material while reclaiming the means of production, namely the art of weaving. A genuine design approach is behind these commonplace items, which were created using ordinary and recycled factory-made products combined with traditional material.

From nothingness springs creativity; from the desert, design is born.

Our gaze, continually aroused by the exhibition design, leads us to interact with the rugs and grasp the artistic gesture linked to the material and originality of the patterns.

We leave the exhibition somewhat initiated in the creative process.

An extract from the Desert Design exhibition catalogue. Text by Simon Njami – Author, curator, essayist and art critic

Anonymity is what defines that which is without name or reputation, in other words, the state of a nameless person or thing whose identity remains unclear or unknown.

Anonymity is a mythology that seems to have been formulated in the 19th century, during a time when “scientific reason” supplanted all other forms of reasoning. Since then we have tended to confuse things. Mix up words. This confusion is not a trivial matter. It conveys the attitude behind our way of seeing or how we judge things. Artists from Africa and elsewhere, whose work is proudly displayed in anthropological and ethnological museums worldwide, were anonymous. But how can one be anonymous, unless one is considered as such by those who egotistically imagine themselves the guardians of all that is true? We are all somewhat like those who, incapable of discerning what for others is obvious, declare that there’s nothing there because we believe that only we can make things happen.

It is what François Jullien refers to as “unthought”: “I call ‘unthought’ that from which we think and from which, in the same way, we don’t think. To ‘take a detour though China’ is therefore to withdraw from the contingencies of one’s mind, or to take a step back from one’s mind, while being tested by an external thought; in this way clarifying the ‘we’ – only ideologically, but also involving categories of language and thought – that is always implicitly at work in the ‘I’ that so superbly says: ‘I think’...” (*L’écart et l’entre*, Paris, Galilée, 2012).

Anonymity is a phenomenon, meaning as understood by phenomenology: in other words, a sign waiting to be activated and charged with meaning by our gaze. It would be a matter of possibility taking root, a nothingness which, depending on how it is interpreted, would tilt towards one or another linguistic or social register. In the meantime, it is only a signified possibility searching for meaning. But what meaning can we apply to a silent object, one without language? Furthermore, what basis

should we rely on in order to give meaning to that which is foreign? We invest it with our own fantasies, thereby risking arriving at a misinterpretation against which the object of interest cannot defend itself. Let us focus for a moment on this atopos [that which is strange or unclassifiable], in other words at an object without an identified locality. In order to consider it for what it is, and not for what we would like it to be, this heterology [lack of correspondence] undoubtedly represents the most reliable tool at our disposal: that which would prevent us from missing its uniqueness: “The basis of an ethnographic task, this heterology is ‘an art that involves acting in two places at once,’ a way of judging what exists in one place and is missing in another. Heterology inhabits an intermediate space, a reversible platform where the last word doesn’t necessarily belong to the first subject enunciating it, and where criticism doesn’t spare the person pronouncing it, who is hit by a ricochet. Heterology is a realm of experimentation and assumes the risk of a liberated discourse and the resulting boomerang effect.” (*L’absent de l’histoire*, Paris, Marne, 1973). Consciousness and our acceptance of this boomerang effect allow us to retain in our mind the idiomatic distance that exists between us and the other. Our gaze is not neutral. It is what, according to Merleau-Ponty, is at the center of time. Therefore, there exists a radical and unsolvable anachronism when viewing things outside our field of vision. Of course, an anonymous person has a name. He or she has a life, a family, and adheres to rules corresponding to the society in which he or she evolved. It is only we who see the person as anonymous. It is noteworthy that, once something involves our own “tribe,” our vocabulary evolves. And so the soldier buried beneath the Arch of Triumph is not someone anonymous, but rather someone unknown. An unknown who escapes anonymity because we see him as one of us.

This eternal misunderstanding is especially propagated by the art world, which has established an entire glossary to use when referring to the other: “primitive”, “popular,” etc; in short, all that does not conform to precise canons when classifying artistic production. But why, after all, would we want to force our narrow classification system on it? Art recognizes itself; it doesn’t issue

decrees. And the person who produces it, if he or she is honest, never says at any moment, “I am in the process of creating a masterpiece.” The person feels his or her way around, questions and experiments, then thrusts what has been produced into an arena where others will judge it. Why should he or she, in the solitude of an art studio, care whether this or that person likes it or not? It is a solitary reflection he or she undertakes, one that is beyond the reach of others.

The master Italian Renaissance sculptor, Benvenuto Cellini, had the modesty of those who are not made foolish by their genius. He would say he was a craftsman, in the same manner as someone who applies his know-how on a daily basis to his occupation, who improves his technique with every piece he produces, and broadens his knowledge of the field he works in. We would not know his name today if, perhaps, we had catalogued him among the anonymous multitude that fills the storerooms of museums worldwide. So let us then abandon this vicious cycle that insists that all production must necessarily be “legitimate.” I think of those men and women who, during ritual ceremonies in Latin American, draw mystical arabesques in the sand that are erased by the first dawn wind that sweeps over them. I believe in gratuitous gestures that have no other function than the act of making them. And in the simple pride in understanding that, once the piece is finished, the work is over. And what does it matter if the work is not destined for a museum? On the contrary: an underlying taint is found in the motivation of those who call themselves artists.

As one can imagine, this in no way takes away from their talent. Yet the moment they find themselves in their ateliers, the work they envision corresponds to precise criteria that are worlds apart from the concerns of someone “anonymous.” Whereas each, in his or her field, seeks what we would call, for lack of a better word, “beauty,” anonymous work reflects a discretion and humility that deeply move us. A person who produces anonymous work is searching, silently and in his or her own way, to answer what Ernst Bloch called the essential question: “This book introduces us to our burgeoning character and unity; their song, already deciphered, is heard on the sides of a

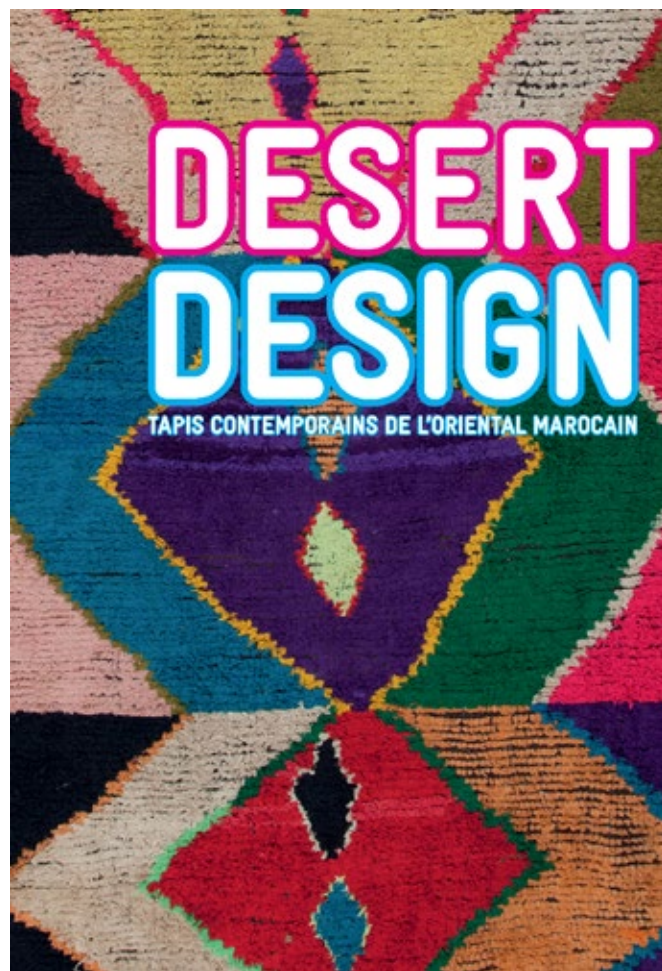
simple pitcher, decoded like the a priori and latent theme of all ‘plastic’ art and the central theme of all the magic there is in music, and which is finally unscrambled in the last possible encounter with oneself, in the suddenly illuminated obscurity of the experienced moment, and which recognizes itself in the question that cannot be formulated, the absolute question: the problem of the We in each one of us.” (*L’esprit de l’utopie*, Paris, Gallimard, 1977).

This question, which is not simply an aesthetic or commercial affair, is the materialization of a life to be lived on a daily basis. The sides of a pitcher, the wind that blows across the dunes, the curve of the side of a body lying on a mat, the memory of a flower’s fragrance: so many events that surpass criticism’s ability to explain them. No book would be able to contain them all, because no book is capable of reproducing the pulsation of their vital energy. It cannot be reduced to a formula; in a way, like those artists who employ the word “untitled” to designate what is inexpressible. And if “untitled” has become a title, then the anonymous state has never been real, but rather a projection, a means of arranging in a box, in a category that has lost all meaning for us. Let us forget for a moment the brutality of our “globalized” world, in which, rather than confronting ourselves in an attempt to reach an ascetic state, we howl our existence at the world. We haven’t invented anything. But we consider things at their beginning. We are poor and no longer know how to play. We’ve forgotten it; our hands have unlearned how to do things. (Ernst Bloch, *ibid.*) Manually putting things together, or taking them apart, are secondary activities requiring no assistance and available to everyone. They contain something joyous and selfless, something generous and playful.

These women who, day after day like forgotten Penelopes, weave their carpets, have not unlearned how to put things together and take them apart. Their steady hands reveal it. They display their names as if they were ornamental plumes, – Mina Badi, Touda Boumrour, Mama Boumshoul, Aïcha Marouche, Fatima Oujil, Rquiah Sagaoui, Ito Taouacht – which they wear with unabashed pride.

As we’ve understood, they are anything but anonymous.

Catalogue de l'exposition – DESERT DESIGN



DESERT DESIGN was a collaborative book project. This edition was published on the occasion of the exhibition, also titled Desert Design, at the musée YVES SAINT LAURENT marrakech from June 16 to October 8, 2019, and at the musée Bargoin / Clermont Auvergne Métropole, Clermont-Ferrand from November 22, 2019 to April 5, 2020.

The rug collection was built between February 2011 and February 2018 by:

- Arnaud Maurières
- Eric Ossart
- Lahcen Aït Khouya

The following people worked together on this publication:

- Simon Njami, foreword
- Arnaud Maurières, text
- Christine Bouilloc, afterword & textile analysis
- Charlotte Croissant, textile analysis
- Nicolas Schimp, location photography
- Rachid Bouzidi, photographs of the rugs
- Chérie Tomate, graphic design and realization
- José Abete, translation from French

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Useful information – musée YVES SAINT LAURENT marrakech



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**Open every day from 10:00 am to 6:00 pm, except Wednesdays.
Last admission is at 5:30 pm**

Arnaud Maurières,
co-curator of the exhibition

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We immediately saw the incredible talent and creativity of these women, whose work exists in the absence of any reference to Western culture. We wanted, above all, to share the emotion we felt with others. For the first time, tribal rugs have been ‘personified’: the weavers have names and they have talent. This essential aspect of our voyage is what the musée YVES SAINT LAURENT marrakech offers us today.

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musée YVES SAINT LAURENT marrakech

Located a stone's throw away 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 preventive conservation center.

The hall used for temporary exhibitions at the musée YVES SAINT LAURENT marrakech was conceived as a cultural and artistic juncture. It is where the museum showcases talent from all over the world, with a special emphasis given to contemporary Moroccan artists.

www.museeyslmarakech.com

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

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