Holiday Powers

657 words

**Casablanca School, The/** École des Beaux-Arts of Casablanca

The École des Beaux-Arts of Casablanca was founded in 1950 by the French, during the protectorate era in Morocco (1912-1956). It has stayed open constantly since its opening, and is a municipal school, unlike the art school in Tétouan, Morocco. The first Moroccan director of the school was Maurice Arama (1960-1962), who was succeeded by Farid Belkahia (1962-1974). Under Belkahia, the school was a significant landmark in the history of Moroccan modernism. As well as a new modernist style in their personal work, member of the faculty were known for advancing a pedagogy that focused on rooting modernism in local visual culture. The school turned away from the inherited French model of easel paintings and still-lifes, and instead highlighting Moroccan visual culture and architecture. Faculty taught students in multiple media, including painting, sculpture, and ceramics, as well as in graphic design. Each year, for a final project, the students would work together on an urban space that would stay open for three months for public visits.For example, in the final year project for 1968, rather than a typical art school showcase, as the faculty described it, the students were asked to treat the architecture of the gallery in such a way as to highlight the broader materials, plasticity, and space of the gallery itself, trying to integrate and synthetize arts of multiple disciplines and techniques.

The pedagogy of the art school was closely linked to the artists’ broader activities. With artists Mohammed Melehi and Mohammed Chebaa (both of whom taught at the school), Belkahia formed the Casablanca group, which first showed together in Rabat in 1966. In 1969, these artists – along with three other professors from the school, Mohammed Ataalah, Mustapha Hafid, and Mohammed Hamidi – held the *exposition manifeste* in Djemaa al-Fna in Marrakech, an open-air exhibition that sought direct contact with a larger public outside of official arts spaces. Later that same year, a similar exhibition was held in the Place du 16 Novembre in Casablanca.

During Belkahia’s tenure at the school, visual arts faculty included Mohammed Melehi, Mohammed Chebaa, Mohammed Hamidi, Mustapha Hafid, Mohammed Ataalah, and Andre Elbaz. Art history faculty included Bert Flint and Toni Maraini, and focused on both the history of international modernism and the history of art in Morocco. The school was also closely linked to the cultural journal *Souffles* (edited by Abdellatif Laabi)in the first years of its existence, and had relationships with other cultural institutions in Casablanca, such as the municipal theatre directed by Tayeb Saddiki.

Students at the school gained entry for three years based on a competition (a “concours”) to show aptitude in artistic disciplines. There were no scholarships, although entry fees were low and the school provided students with all artistic materials. Students were required to be at least 15 years old, and to have reached the fourth year of secondary school in either a high school or technical school. The school at this time was small, and in 1969 there were 40 students, including 9 female students.

**References and further reading**:

Ataalah, M., Belkahia, F., Chebaa, M., Hafid, M., Hamidi, M., and Melehi, M. (1969) ‘action plastique: exposition jamaâ lfna. marrakech.’ *Souffles* 13-14: 45-46. (This is the artists’ original statement on their exhibition in Djemaa al Fna in 1969.)

Belkahia, F. (1965) *Ecole des Beaux Arts, Casablanca Maroc*, Casablanca: Ecole des Beaux Arts. (This is a short booklet published to showcase the activities of the school from 1962 to 1965.)

L’Opiniondes Jeunes(1969) ‘Entretien avec … un apprenti-peintre de l’Ecole des Beaux-Arts de Casablanca.’ *L’Opinion* 1346: 4. (This is a brief interview with a student at the school that described the specifics of classes and facilities.)

*Souffles* (1968) ‘Elèves de l’école des beaux-arts de Casablanca: exposition annuelle juin 1968’ 10-11: 57. (This includes information on the 1968 annual exhibition, as well as descriptions by the faculty of their pedagogy.)