

Is Marrakech ready to become the ultimate cross-cultural art destination between continents?

From art fairs to vibrant galleries, Marrakech is becoming a top spot for contemporary African art, bringing together local talent and global influences



On the night of the galleries of Marrakech, an overly friendly person with wide eyes was gesticulating in the middle of the street, perhaps too briskly, giving directions to the art lovers who had debarked in mass into the modernist neighbourhood of Gueliz.

The reactions of European journalists ranged from curiosity to suspicion. They were probably advised by friends who vacationed in Morocco to shy away from street hustlers. “They would promise to take you to the wonders of installation and performance art, only to lead you by the hand to their uncle’s soap shop five blocks away. If you’re lucky.” Or so went the story.

“It’s beautiful how people participate in contemporary art,” said an African-American collector, though deep down uncertain whether to trust the stranger, as he himself tried to figure out where the galleries were exactly located on his Google maps. The thing is, in the art crowd, you never know if someone is genius and madness, or madness full stop. And the chaotic nature of Morocco is only the cherry topping this ambiguity.

The creative, messy soul of Marrakech is perfectly captured in the aesthetic style of one Belgian-Moroccan photographer, exhibited only a few blocks away in Loft Gallery, a two-storey space in Gueliz.

Walking across the pink walls of the gallery, viewers could appreciate fashion-inspired portraits infused with pop culture references and brand iconography, blending Western clothing and traditional African aesthetics elements, against the naturalistic Moroccan scenery.

The fusion of cultural motifs reflects not only Lamrabat’s own upbringing and mixed identity but one of a country that – through art, design, and architecture - is shaping an aesthetic of the “New

Morocco.” Here cultural stereotypes are remixed, colonialist and European influences are turned on their head, and a pan-African identity is embraced. Everything with a unique Moroccan spin to consumeristic culture.

On an architectonic level, the neighbourhood of Gueliz itself embodies this blend of Marrakech coolness, and that’s why a plethora of galleries have elected it to become an unofficial art district. The colonial roots of this Ville Nouvelle, built by the French in 1921 near the Medina, have been re-appropriated by young creatives that gathers in the area’s cocktail bars and cafés for local and international flâneurs.

Adding to its cultural appeal, the Musée Yves Saint Laurent hosted three exhibitions: one dedicated to the designer’s creations, another to the Jardin Majorelle, and a third to Saint Laurent’s ventures in comic book production. The museum, housed in a modernist brick building, harmonizes with Gueliz’s early 20th-century architecture.

The Art Fair: 1-54 Marrakech

The night of the galleries was artfully organised the weekend that the 1-54 Contemporary African Art Fair opened at both DaDa, a multifunctional space, and La Mamounia. The legendary Grand Hotel, might have been situated in between Guelitz, the Medina, and the Kasbah, but it constitutes a world of its own.

When it comes to art fairs, the setting itself plays a crucial role. Just as Art Basel Paris 2024 thrived in the Grand Palais, 1-54 benefits from its La Mamounia, which by its architecture, notable and less notable guests spanning from Churchill Jennifer Ariston, offers a narrative charm unmatched by traditional white-cube fairs.

In the lush gardens of La Mamounia, just outside the fair pavilion, the guests reveal an international mix—not just European collectors, but also Arabs, Africans, and African Americans.

At the fair, there were a number of galleries from the African continent, a small number of European galleries, like Primo Marella, an Italian gallery that for years has championed African talent in Europe, and of course a number of French galleries.

In terms of Moroccan spaces, many of them hailed from Casablanca, Morocco’s historical artistic hub, home to the famed Casablanca School of Painting. Today, however, Marrakech is drawing increasing attention for its international reach.

“The scene between the two cities is very different,” says Cannelle Hamon-Gillet, director of Galerie 38. Originally based in Casablanca, the gallery recently expanded to Marrakech. “Casablanca has a more established, local art scene, while Marrakech offers greater access to international collectors.”

At 1-54, Galerie 38 not only bridges generations by juxtaposing works from Casablanca School pioneers with younger artists. They emphasize connections between African and Moroccan talent, particularly female artists redefining abstract expressionism.

Meanwhile, CDA Gallery, also from Casablanca but active in Marrakech, highlights artistic diversity across Africa. Their presentation blends traditional painting with AI-generated photography and Zellij-inspired works, reviving a centuries-old craft from Tetouan.

Photography is another key focus of 1-54, especially at MCC Gallery, which has specialized in experimental photography since its Marrakech opening in 2020. Their booth features three artists:

Amine El Gotaibi, Houda Kabbaj, and Malika Sqalli, which offered three different perspectives of contemporary photography, ranging from analogic printing techniques to creating mix-media installations, with photography as a point of departure.

“We love the ‘folie’ of Marrakech,” says Nathan Chicheportiche of Galerie 208. Established in Paris for 20 years, the gallery opened a Marrakech space seven years ago. “We were captivated by the city’s ever-shifting energy,” he says.

MACAAL: A New Era for African Contemporary Art

The 1-54 Contemporary African Art Fair is not the only institution embodying Marrakech’s pan-African artistic ambitions. There is also one private Museum that has thoroughly embraced this mission is the Museum of African Contemporary Art Al Maaden (MACAAL).

After closing for renovations in 2023, the museum has finally reopened, unveiling its permanent collection for the first time. Curated by Morad Montazami and Madeleine de Colnet, the exhibition underscores MACAAL’s mission: not just to showcase African art, but to challenge and expand its global narrative: "In this new configuration, spaces are intentionally considered as individual stopovers, along a cosmopolitan and plural journey," says Montazami. “The DNA structure of MACAAL is that of a pan-African Marrakech-based museum whose mission is to represent African artists."

Seven thematic rooms guide visitors through a century of African contemporary art, tackling decolonization, spirituality, ecological crises, and Afro-diasporic identity. Works by historic figures and big names from contemporary African art, sit next to works by local Moroccan artists, and the theme of each room is introduced by the voices of contemporary intellectuals and thinkers, which create a container of sorts for intellectual reflections.

In some rooms, such as the one dedicated to the theme of colonisation, the structure of the museum itself is challenged. For example, we hear the voice of Ariella Aïsha Azoulay, author of “The Resistance of Jewels” saying that every museum is an act of colonisation.

And it is precisely in this attempt to reconfigure the traditional Western museum setting, MACAAL approaches the presentation of works by not putting captions next to the works, but rather having the artwork dialogue with each other without presenting the authors.

In the space the pan-African narratives are constantly associated with works belonging both to Moroccan modernity and tradition. An example is the work “Dans les bras de la terre” by Rabat architect Salima Naji, which welcomes the visitors in the MACAAL atrium, and reflects on architecture and traditions of building local materials and construction techniques, including adobe and rammed earth, to reassess heritage preservation and sustainability.

“It’s a pity to see Marrakech with a lot of concrete, rather than traditional construction methods,” says Salima Naji. “Think about this: we have been affected by the earthquake, but the traditional buildings were holding up much better, and were also easier to repair. We have a lot to learn by looking at our past, at what truly belongs to us.”

Considering all these different elements contributing to the art ecosystem, a museum, a fair, and the galleries, there are good signs that the city of Marrakech will evolve into a hub for key players in the African, Arab, and European art worlds in the future.

An art capital is always made by a blend of institutional efforts and market appetites, and a good sign is that collectors are more than excited to fly across continents to visit art spaces in the city. As

one collector pointed out as we strolled through Guelitz, with his hands full of soaps bought in a shop a few blocks away: “Buying contemporary African art is fashionable, but buying it in Marrakech is a whole another layer of coolness.”