

The Splendid Handicrafts of Morocco

by Habeeb Salloum

In this rushed 20th century there are not many of us who know that in Morocco there still exists a medieval world of craftsmen who are creating, with their hands, masterpieces of art. Incorporating a synthesis of the Libyco-Berber, Mediterranean, Middle Eastern, African and Andalusian artistic traditions, these artisans have a long and honored history.

Whole families, century after century, handing down the trades from father to sons, have kept Motional fee based on number of nights. Prices and dates for each of the tours are subject to change based on total number of participants. Photo (above right) Rabat,

Mor.occo's artistic traditions alive. The families know-how, always open to contributions from the outside world, are constantly improved without deviating from tradition. New ideas are assimilated, brewed, melted, then re-created to become genuine Moroccan art.

These craftsmen who, in our time, compete with modern mechanical technology, are able to survive and, in fact, prosper. Unbelievably, these Moroccan skilled workmen, unlike their brethren in other parts of the world, have fought against the machines of the modern age and have not lost the battle. With skills inherited from their fathers, they produce, today, some of the finest handmade products in the world.

If one wishes to be transported to a world of ancient oriental splendor, Fez el-Bali or the old section of Fez is the place to visit. Within its walls no automobile is allowed to enter and, as it was in the medieval ages, all work is carried on by man or donkey. The craftsmen, like their forefathers in the days when Moorish Spain and Morocco were one, still turn out superb handmade articles which dazzle the onlooker.

In the same way as they have been for hundreds of years, these artisans are grouped in numerous streets specializing in different crafts. Fascinating to any visitor, the souks not only in Fez but also in the other cities of Morocco, appear to come straight out of The Arabian Nights.

Artistry in Fine Leather

I will never forget the first time I walked down into the heart of the medieval part of Fez and saw artisans working amid shops displaying their colorfully embossed articles of leather.

Green, red, violet, white and yellow, marvelously treated by that city*s celebrated tanners and dyers, leather was being gilded and transformed into dozens of products. Book covers, wallets and purses in all shapes and forms, desk sets, belts, hassocks, photo frames and countless other articles were being decorated with sumptuous motifs comprising geometric designs, arabesques and stylized flowers or stars.

The artistry of these Moroccan craftsmen was dazzling and breathtaking. However, this should not have come as a surprise since the ancestors of these leather artisans have been world-renowned hundreds of years. In the Middle Ages Moroccan leather was so famous that the best leather of that time and Moroccan were synonymous terms.

Brass and Copper

Next to leather products, the craftsmen of Fez and Marrakesh are world famous for their brass and copper utensils. In the shops and homes, gleaming brass and copperware entice the tourist and Moroccan alike. Trays in all sizes, ashtrays, braziers, incense burners, door knockers, kettles, sugar boxes, teapots and other articles decorated with interlacing arabesque designs and intricate floral motifs are produced with hands inheriting the skills of centuries.

Candelabra and lanterns with green, red and yellow glass inserts are in demand by the many visitors Morocco hosts annually. Numerous restaurants and nightclubs make use of them to create for their clients a relaxed aura. The colored lights project to the customers an haunting and romantic atmosphere.

Artistry in Lighting

In Morocco, a room lit with colored lanterns is always complemented with attractive handmade carpets. The oldest of that country's handicrafts, they come in basically two types: rural and urban. However, these are divided into a wide range of many styles.

World Famous Carpets

Rural carpets, known as Berber carpets, are the oldest type and the most common. Some have very thick woolen piles while others have short goat or camel hair piles. In almost all cases, they reflect the colors of the landscapes where they are made. Hence, they come mostly in beige, brown and tan with a few in black, red and white. Some have designs recalling prehistoric inscriptions while others have geometric compositions made up of lozenges, arrows and saw-tooth lines.

Urban carpets are a newer type of rug. They were only introduced from the East into Morocco in the 18th century. Rabat and Sale became the production centers of these rich carpets. Traditionally, the urban carpets have a harmony of seven colors and a multitude of designs. Three bands of unequal width frame a rectangular field with a star-shaped motif in the center. Bands of different colors in geometric or floral designs encompass these and, at each end, there is a kind of mihrab arch. Fine carpet experts indicate that these colorful rugs bring to mind garden paths around a pool surrounded by flowers and pet birds.

In the homes of the wealthy in Morocco the handmade rugs are usually associated with inlaid furniture and other wooden knickknacks usually made from they wood (a type of oak). Essaouira, famous for its marquetry, is where many of these charming pieces of furniture, desks, all kinds of tables, chests and jewelry boxes are made.

Artistry in Woodwork

The city's skilled artisans polish the hard they to a satin finish, then inlay it with cedar, lemon wood, ebony, mother-of-pearl and silver in floral and geometric patterns. By using thin veneers of the same wood in a checkered design, or with chevrons, stars and other forms alternating with mother-of-pearl, ebony and silver they bring out the subtleties of the they wood. The saying that the wood craftsmen of the city combine and harmonize their inlaying to sing a song of beauty has much merit.

In Fez, the craftsmen are well known for their skill in decorating all types of structures with cedar wood, which is abundant in the nearby forests. Ceilings, doors and windows are made attractive with zouak, a type of decor dominated by geometric figures. The city*s artisans, as well as those in neighboring Meknes, also specialize in masharabiehs (screens made of small pieces of cedar wood turned on a lathe and then assembled in clever designs). Delicate and appealing these screens make the windows of the traditional homes attractive.

Ceramics

Alongside the inlaid articles are the ceramics which beautify, besides the homes, fountains, palaces, mosques and public buildings. The tile-makers whose ancestors made Andalusia an earthly paradise still practice their trade in Fez and Meknes. Throughout Morocco, tiled green roofs harmonizing with the surrounding greenery and breathtaking tiled blue, turquoise, white and yellow patios, rooms and hallways are all the handiwork of these master craftsmen.

For the preparation of their food the Moroccans, in the main, employ glazed red or brown pottery. However, enameled ornamental pottery made in Fez, Meknes, Sale and Safi are produced with the finesse of Italian or Spanish wares. Amphoras, dishes, jars, pots and vases are decorated mainly with cobalt blue on an enamel background. Cross-stitch designs, interlaced curves, polygonal stars and geometric or floral designs are then applied in black to these colorful utensils. In addition, in Safi, ceramic artisans produce in darker colors the metallic sheen found in Malaga pottery which itself was initiated by the Arabs.

In all aspects of the handiwork industries, nothing is created hastily. The taste for the superb, along with the passage of time has created perfection. For export, the production of handicrafts is strictly regulated by the Moroccan government which allows only the topnotch products to be exported outside the country. In the country itself, the cooperative shops Coopartim sell handmade goods of guaranteed quality at reasonable prices. Hence, a visitor need not worry about bargaining if he/she is not inclined.

Nevertheless, whether sold in these regulated stores, in the traditional shops, or laid out on the sidewalks or on the bare ground in a country souk, the visitor will find everywhere an extraordinary collection of handicrafts, brilliant in colors and magnetic in appeal.

These handmade products are one of the most fundamental characteristics of Moroccan life. Varied in range from works of art to simple utilitarian articles, they are a living tradition suited for everyday use

even in our modern times. Vivid and alive they are a living testimony to the rich cultural heritage of Morocco.

Habeeb Salloum

58 Langbourne Place

Don Mills (Toronto), Ontario, Canada M3B 1A9

Tel: (416) 445-4558, Fax: (416) 510-2143