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The history of museums in morocco: The French and Spanish protectorate ERA (1912-1956)

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Abstract

This paper examines the development of museums in Morocco during the French and Spanish protectorate era (1912-1956), focusing on how colonial authorities established it to document and exhibit Morocco's diverse cultural heritage, including Islamic, Berber, and Jewish traditions. Major institutions like the Batha Museum in Fez and the Oudayas Museum in Rabat emerged during this period, significantly influencing the preservation and promotion of indigenous arts and crafts. The study investigates the economic and political functions of these museums, emphasizing their influence on regional artisans and the standardization of production for European markets. It also examines the more extensive consequences of colonial cultural policies on Morocco's national identity and heritage.

Keywords: Colonial history, cultural heritage, museums, morocco, national identity

Introduction

Museums, as essential institutions in the international arena, have a crucial role in exhibiting and preserving cultural heritage, fostering education, and promoting cultural exchange ^[1]. In Morocco, Museums have become an essential part of the Kingdom's cultural agenda, showcasing the nation's rich and varied heritage. However, the path to their present eminence has been extensive and noteworthy ^[2]. Between 1912 and 1956, Morocco saw the implementation and development of its first museums, a novel idea for the country throughout the French and Spanish Protectorate eras. This period represented a significant change, as colonial authorities sought to record and exhibit Morocco's distinct cultural fabric, which includes Islamic, Berber, and Jewish customs ^[3]. Prior to their arrival, Morocco did not own any museums ^[4]. The colonial policy aimed to gather, preserve, and exhibit elements that symbolized the essence of the nation, which led to the establishment of such institutions ^[5]. This period not only laid the groundwork for the contemporary museum system in Morocco, but it also fostered major deviations in the process of national identity building among Moroccans during a time of significant political and social changes ^[6].

Museums in Morocco: a colonial invention

As a result of the Fez Convention, Morocco came under the control of French and Spanish protectorate in 1912 ^[7]. The first resident general, Hubert Lyautey (1854-1934), established the "Service des Beaux-Arts et des Monuments Historiques", led by the French architect Maurice Tranchant de Lunel (1869-1932) who had a mandate to categorize, replicate, and advocate for indigenous art, namely the knowledge and skills associated with crafts and architecture ^[8]. The colonial government, specifically the Service des Beaux-Arts et des Monuments Historiques, had the power to determine the representation of national art and the approach of its exhibition, detaching objects from their inherent meaning or intended purpose and placing them under a new framework of significance ^[9]. Consequently, the displayed item acquired connotations that were not inherent but influenced by a fluctuating political, cultural, or social environment.

In 1915, the first museums were opened in strategic locations in Morocco, the Batha Museum in the city of Fez, the spiritual and religious center of the country, and the Oudayas Museum in the city of Rabat, the new capital of Morocco ^[10]. Initially known as the Prosper Ricard Museum, it is now known as the National Jewellery Museum.

"The Oudaïa Ethnographic Museum in Rabat [...] was restored in 1915 for the conservation and presentation of the national collection and now portrays a wide range of the technical and artistic production of traditional life.

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The museum boasts one of Morocco's most harmonious textile art collections ^[11].

The Oudayas Museum showcased objects as both ethnographic and artistic pieces. The Museum employed mannequins, audio recordings, photographs, and brief placards printed in French and Arabic to recreate and display scenes of everyday life.

In 1918, Prosper Ricard (1874-1952), an architect of policy frameworks and tools for the renovation of the craft sector, established the Office of Indigenous Arts Industries ^[12]. The mission of the Office was to collect motifs, shapes, colors, and working techniques for ethnographic museum exhibitions, thereby constituting a sample of prototypes from various production techniques ^[13]. In his battle against fake exoticism, Prosper Ricard primarily focused on uncovering the authentic art of rural and urban handicrafts, which he could then mass-produce and sell on the European market ^[14]. This necessitated the training of a new generation of artisans to produce genuine artisanal items. Subsequently, several museums were established in various regions of the country ^[15]:

Table 1: Museums established new Museums in Morocco (1912-1956)

Year	City	Museum
1920	Meknes	Dar Jamaï
1922	Tangier	The Kasbah
1922	Tetouan	Bab Oqla
1930	Rabat	Archeological Museum
1932	Marrakech	Dar Si Saïd
1939	Tetouan	Archeology Museum

Most of the museums were either archaeological or ethnographic, allowing visitors to observe the results of archaeological excavations at sites such as Lixus or Volubilis.

Indigenous art, crafts, and traditional knowledge, including textiles, jewelry, ceramics, weapons, musical instruments, pottery, dresses, embroidery, saddlery, and wooden trunks, were also on display. These objects clearly illustrate the central theme of colonial cultural policy: authentic ethnographic collections ^[16].

The primary objective of colonial cultural policy was to safeguard creative workmanship and cultivate an appreciation for authenticity while discouraging the production of inferior replicas ^[17]. The aim was to target prospective European customers and primarily to engage the Moroccan population, who had been largely excluded from knowing, valuing, and appreciating creative skills and were not included in the decision-making process ^[18].

Furthermore, in a 1954 article about museums in Morocco, the following goals were stated:

"The aims are to train the taste of the crowd, which has an innate sense of beauty but must learn to know the intrinsic value of an object; to instill in the public a love of the past and to discover, in tradition, new points of departure for the evolution of the arts [...] ^[19].

These objectives are well aligned with the concept of the "civilizing mission" that France, along with other colonial powers, employed in Morocco to legitimize its colonial control, modernize and develop the colonies ^[20].

The target audience included not only craftspeople who had to adapt to the gathered forms and colors, but also prospective buyers and visitors, the majority of whom were

from Europe.

The indigenous arts components were presented in museums, special exhibits in Morocco, as well as international shows such as the 1922 Marseille Colonial Exposition, the 1924 Strasbourg Exhibition, the 1925 Paris Exposition of Decorative Arts, and the Grenoble Tourism Exhibition ^[21]. During these international exhibitions, the French government valued Moroccan crafts at twenty million francs (almost four million euros) ^[22]; hence, museums played an important economic role.

In addition to this economic dimension, museums had a political function, serving to establish and validate French colonial dominance and showcase its superiority ^[23]. The colonial authority held exclusive control over the interpretation of authenticity. Furthermore, the use of prominent locations for museum openings had a critical impact. The Moroccan monarchs' homes, known as Kasbahs or Dar, have lost their original function; instead of serving as the center of authority, they became museums ^[24]. The French colonial power established itself as a dominant force in the present, transforming the Sultan's authority into a museum exhibit ^[25].

Conclusion

Currently, museums in Morocco are of considerable significance, as they are responsible for the preservation of the country's cultural and historical heritage. It is imperative that we emphasize the outcome of years of hard labor and commitment. For this reason, it is imperative that we involve history as a science of change, with the objective of understanding the transformations that societies endure over time. History also functions to provide context for the present, enabling individuals to comprehend the origins of contemporary issues and phenomena.

The introduction of museums, as a European notion, played a pivotal part in the civilizing mission carried out by colonial powers. The documentation and exhibition of Morocco's diverse cultural history, including Islamic, Berber, and Jewish traditions, played a crucial role in safeguarding Indigenous arts and crafts. The colonial cultural policies on Morocco's museum system influenced the autochthon artisans and standardized their production for the European markets, fostering and at the same time shaping Morocco's national identity.

Finally, this paper could serve as a foundational guide for future research that will deeply investigate the specific events and dynamics of the colonial era. Further research may provide a more comprehensive and nuanced understanding of the complex link between colonialism and cultural heritage preservation in Morocco by concentrating on the specific events and policies that impacted this time.

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