

L'Ecole de Tunis: an introduction

12 November 2018 – 12 January 2019
Unit 23, Alserkal Avenue, Dubai

Elmarsa is pleased to present *L'Ecole de Tunis: an introduction*, a group exhibition of the most influential artists in Tunisian early history. The exhibition brings together a selection of important paintings and drawings by the pioneers of the Ecole de Tunis, an artistic movement from the mid-twentieth century that sought a new alignment with the experience and values of Tunisian society and culture.



Pierre Boucherle
La mosquée de Takrouna, région du Sahel, Circa 1950, Oil on canvas, 81 x 65 cm

The origins of Tunisian painting goes back to the middle of the 19th century with orientalist painting and the travelling painters coming from different horizons to discover the East. Around 1920, Tunisian painters began to move away from the rigorous style of the French *Academie* that was reigning at the time. Through the representation of typical scenes of daily life, Tunisian artists, either native-born or not, were showing greater freedom in their artistic expression and form. Until the independence in 1956, the established artistic styles, mainly narrative figuration, were strongly influenced by the rigorous style of the *Academie*, thus reflecting an idealized image of reality.

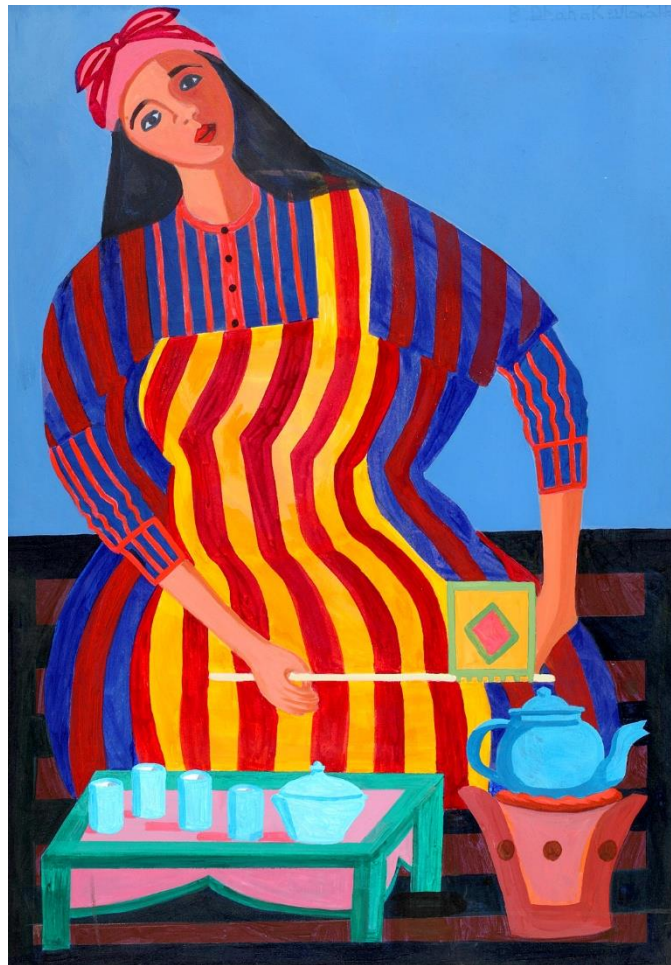
Pierre Boucherle (1894-1988) founded the Group of Four with other painters, which quickly became the Group of Ten, and then evolved into the Ecole de Tunis which held its first exhibition in 1949, including artists **Moses Levy** (1885-1968), **Yahia Turki** (1902-1969), **Ammar Farhat** (1911-1987), **Abdelaziz Gorgi** (1928-2008), **Jellal Ben Abdallah** (1921-2017), **Edgard Naccache** (1917-2006), **Antonio Corpora** (1909-2004), **Jules Lellouche** (1903-1963), **Aly Ben Salem** (1910-2001) and **Hatim El Mekki** (1918-2003). The group was joined shortly after by artists **Nello Levy** (1921-1992) (son of Moses Levy), **Hedi Turki** (b. 1922), **Zoubeir Turki** (1924-2009), **Safia Farhat** (1924-2004), **Aly Bellagha** (1924-2006) and **Brahim Dhahak** (1938-2011).

Tunisian art and its developments expanded in resistance to the then-dominant sociocultural ideology under the French protectorate. The Ecole de Tunis and its founder Pierre Boucherle, gave a new impetus to the art scene. The members of this group of artists, named above as the pioneers of Tunisian painting, were claiming a Tunisian identity based on the representation of daily life scenes, imagery of traditional themes, and new techniques to create artworks that they felt better reflected the realities and hopes of Tunisian society. Building on its predecessors' experience and the diversity of their practice, l'Ecole de Tunis succeeded in the rejection of history and conservative values, thus expanding the boundaries of the arts in Tunisia. Modernism challenged convention by exalting the Tunisian art scene.

At the beginning of the 1960s, the leap to abstraction marks a major change in the pictorial approach at the time, with its initiators **Lotfi Larnaout** (b.1944), **Mahmoud Sehili** (1931-2015), and **Néjib Belkhodja** (1933-2007). This new generation of artists broke away from L'Ecole de Tunis movement, the traditional methods of painting, and had a profound influence on the development of abstract art and modern culture in Tunisia. Innovation and experimentation with form and a tendency to abstraction is then adopted by many artists such as **Ridha Bettaieb** (b.1961), **Rafik El Kamel** (b. 1944) and **Abderrazak Sahli** (1941-2009) and the next generations of artists.



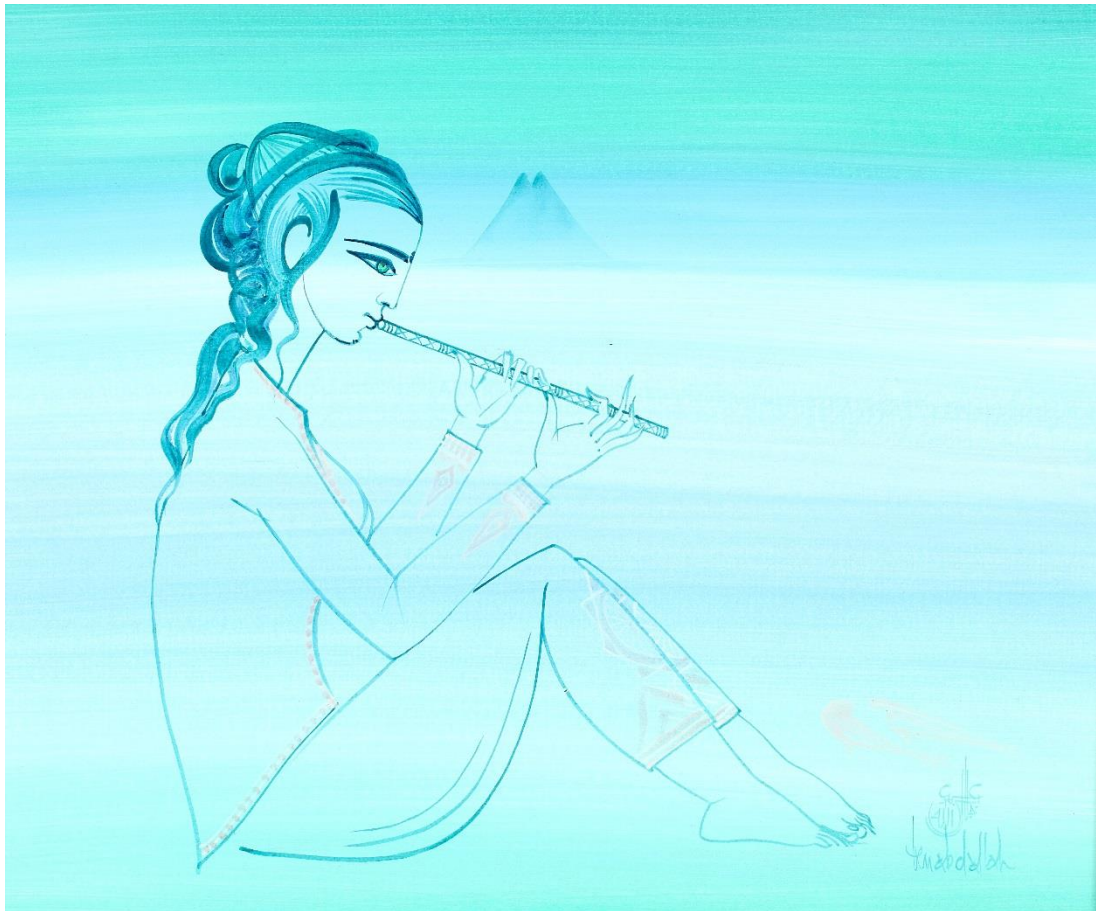
Yahia Turki
Medina of Tunis, 1929, Oil on canvas, 46 x 33 cm



Brahim Dhahak
La préparation du thé, 2001, Acrylic on canvas laid on panel, 95 x 67 cm



Aly Ben Salem
Figure Composition with women, Circa 1945, Gouache on paper. 79 x 57.5 cm



Jellal Ben Abdallah
Femme à la flute et le Bou Kornine, Circa 1965, Gouache on paper, 45 x 55 cm



Hatim Elmekki
L'athlète, 1954, Oil on canvas, 65 x 54cm

About the artists

Pierre Boucherle (French/Tunisian 1894-1988)

A native of Tunisia, Pierre Boucherle was a well-known figure at the forefront of the art scene in Tunisia during the French Protectorate. Starting at a young age with satiric illustrations in Tunisian newspapers, Boucherle achieved a strong and important body of work throughout his long career. He developed his unique style specializing in nude, landscape and still life paintings. Reminiscent of the Cubist aesthetic, his paintings are distinguished by the simplicity, accuracy and the rigorous bold outlines of his drawing.

Mobilized during the First World War, he then went to Paris. During the inter-war period, he met the painters Modigliani and then André Derain, Moïse Kisling, and the poet Guillaume Apollinaire. In 1923, he received his first scholarship to go to Spain to study art. He was a student at the École des Beaux-Arts in Tunis. Boucherle lived between Tunis and Paris, where he participated regularly in major exhibitions such as the Salon d'Automne, Salon des Tuileries, Salon des Indépendants. After World War II, he returned to Tunisia and in 1936 founded the Group of Four with artists Corpora, Moses Levy, Jules Lellouche, which quickly became the Ecole de Tunis in 1949, representing the avant-garde in the arts in Tunisia.

Yahia Turki (Tunisia, 1902 - 1969)

Born in Istanbul to a Turkish mother and a Djerbian father, Turki was the first Tunisian artist to exhibit in the Salon Tunisien in 1923 and is considered to be the father of Tunisian art. He studied at the Centre d'Art de Tunis before going to Paris from 1926 to 1928 and again from 1931 to 1935, when he frequented the studios of artists like Matisse and Derain. He was a member of the Groupe des Dix, a founding member of the École de Tunis in 1948, and assumed the presidency of the art school in 1956 after Tunisian independence, where he influenced younger artists in his quest to reconcile Tunisian national identity within an inherited system of artistic practices. Turki's paintings portray Tunisia through scenes of quotidian life, architectural spaces, landscapes, still lifes, and portraits.

Brahim Dhahak (Tunisia, 1931 – 2004)

Brahim Dhahak was a Tunisian modernist and member of the prestigious École de Tunis. He is renowned for his woodcuts and paintings and is considered to be Tunisia's first wildlife artist. Dhahak frequented the École des Beaux-Arts in Tunis from 1950 and met the artist Hatem El Mekki, and also found guidance in Pierre Boucherle, the founder of the École de Tunis. In 1957, Dhahak won a scholarship to study at the Académie des Beaux-Arts in Rome. While there he visited two Italian members of the École de Tunis, Moses Levy and Antonio Corpora. Dhahak also traveled to Ravenna to study mosaics, ceramics, and printmaking at the Institut d'Art Romain under the supervision of the illustrator Macari. Upon his return to Tunisia in 1961, Dhahak concentrated his work on printmaking. He is widely regarded as the first Tunisian artist to excel in this medium. Dhahak authored three artist books, including "La Geste Hilalienne (The Hilali Epic)" in 1973 while at the Cité Internationale des Arts in Paris. In 1965 Dhahak traveled to Switzerland for a series of exhibitions. With this success, he moved in 1966 to Sidi Bou Saïd, where he was based for the remainder of his life. His work has been described as evoking Tunisia's "tribal" identities and African heritage. Yet, this mythology has enduring appeal, and Dhahak is a celebrated Tunisian modernist who captured the "soul" of Tunisia. Dhahak participated in the Salon Tunisien and annual École de Tunis exhibitions from 1950. After Tunisian independence in 1956, he exhibited widely in Tunisia and abroad. Dhahak's work is located in numerous private collections in Tunis, Rome, Paris, Milan, Lausanne, Tokyo, and the United States. In 2005 Elmarsa Gallery in Tunis staged a retrospective of Dhahak's prints and paintings.

Aly Ben Salem (Tunisia, 1910 – 2001)

Born in Kalaa al-Kebira, Ben Salem was the first Tunisian to attend the Tunis School of Fine Arts. He received the Government Prize of Fine Arts in 1936 and received funding from the Ministry of North African Affairs to go to Paris between 1937 – 1940. He returned to Tunisia for the next decade before migrating to Sweden in 1950, where he would spend the rest of his life. Adapting miniature painting to Tunisian visual culture to create his unique figurative style, he is associated with the École de Tunis, the generation of artists who came of age during Tunisia's struggle for independence and expressed their patriotism through their art. His work has been shown in Tunisia, Sweden, the United States, Norway and Germany and he received multiple national awards in Sweden, France and Tunisia including Officer of the Swedish Royal Order in 1973, the Mérite National des Lettres et Arts de France in 1976, and Officer of the Tunisian Republic in 1980.

Jellal Ben Abdallah (Tunisia, 1921 – 2017)

Born in the picturesque Mediterranean town of Sidi Bou Saïd, where he is still based, Ben Abdallah studied in Tunis and his early illustrations appeared in the first Tunisian feminist periodical Leïla in the 1930s. He participated in the Salon Tunisien in 1942 and 1945, and established an atelier in Montparnasse in Paris in 1952. Associated with the École de Tunis, he adapts miniature painting to create finely detailed representations of quotidian life, idyllic women, surrealist imagery, horses, marine creatures, and ethereal seascapes. From 1950 he also received state commissions to make decorative ceramic tile panels for civic buildings. Ben Abdallah has exhibited in Tunis and abroad since 1939 and his contribution to Tunisian art was celebrated by a solo exhibition in 2010 at the Galerie Atrium in Carthage entitled 'Femmes, je vous aime!'.

Hatim Elmekki (Tunisia, 1918 – 2003)

Born in 1918 in Indonesia to a Tunisian expatriate father and an Indonesian mother of Chinese origins, Elmekki spent his childhood in Djakarta before arriving in Tunisia in 1924 where he would work and live until his death in 2003 in Carthage. During the 1930s, he studied at l'Ecole Nationale des Beaux Arts and worked as an artist and illustrator in Paris, where he would be introduced to the politically-engaged members of the Parisian creative community including Albert Camus, Gaston Bachelard, and Gertrude Stein. His works have been exhibited widely in Egypt, the USA, the UK, Germany, Korea and China and he was commissioned to make 450 postage stamps for Tunisia and a few other countries. Considered as a pioneer of Tunisian avant-garde modern art, Elmekki paved the way for many Tunisian contemporary artists.

About Elmarsa

Elmarsa was founded in 1994 in Tunis and expanded to Dubai in 2015. Specialized in both modern and contemporary North African art, it represents recognized 20th century artists as well as mid-career artists. Elmarsa participates in several international art fairs in Dubai, Abu Dhabi, Paris, London, Marrakech, Miami and New York.

Represented Artists

Abdelaziz Gorgi, Abdelkader Guermaz, Abderrazak Sahli, Abdulaziz Ashour, Ali Tnani, Aly Bellegha, Aly Ben Salem, Ammar Farhat, Asma M'Naouar, Atef Maatallah, Baya, Brahim Dhahak, Feryel Lakhdar, Gouider Triki, Halim Karabibene, Hatim El Mekki, Hedi Turki, Jellal Ben Abdallah, Khaled Ben Slimane,

Mahjoub Ben Bella, Nabil Saouabi, Nejib Belkhodja, Nja Mahdaoui, Omar Bey, Rachid Koraichi, Thameur Mejri, Thilleli Rahmoun, Yahia Turki

Gallery Information

Opening Hours: Saturday – Thursday, 10am – 7pm

Location: Unit 23, Alserkal Avenue, Al Quoz 1, Dubai, UAE

Gallery Contact

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