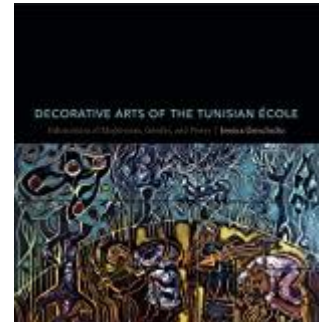


Jessica Gerschultz. *Decorative Arts of the Tunisian École: Fabrications of Modernism, Gender, and Power.* Refiguring Modernism Series. University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2019. Illustrations. xxii + 256 pp. \$106.95, cloth, ISBN 978-0-271-08318-6.



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Published on H-AMCA (August, 2023)

Commissioned by Nisa Ari (Center for Advanced Study in the Visual Arts (CASVA), National Gallery of Art)

In *Decorative Arts of the Tunisian École: Fabrications of Modernism, Gender, and Power*, Jessica Gerschultz presents a momentous shift in artistic values and collaborations in twentieth-century Tunisia. Important to the context of this shift is a history of French colonization and Tunisian independence. French occupation began in the late nineteenth century and lasted until 1956, when the Tunisian Néo-Destour (New Constitution) party, led by Habib Bourguiba, succeeded in establishing a constitutional monarchy and, later, a representative democracy. During the independence movement era from the 1930s to 1956, there was a strong distinction between decorative “indigenous” arts and art typically attributed to European methods, such as painting. However, by the postindependence era of the late 1950s and 1960s, a group of modern artists that Gerschultz terms the Tunisian École (Tunisian School) were endeavoring to shift Tunisian arts away from the artisan-based, colonial modes of the past. Instead, they sought to articulate an idea of Tunisian mod-

ern art that departed from French colonial influence by drawing on traditional Tunisian forms yet infusing them with modern design. By cataloguing the development and influence of the Tunisian École, particularly within three institutional spaces for arts advancement—the École des Beaux-Arts, the École de Tunis, and the ateliers of the Office National de L’Artisanat—Gerschultz demonstrates how decorative arts in modern Tunisia, and the organizational bodies and associated figures that promoted them, were instrumental in the state’s modernization. This book therefore contributes an urgently needed account of the enmeshment of colonial investments, transnational artistic influence, artisans, state power, and gender dynamics in twentieth-century Tunisia to larger histories of global modern art.

Tunisian plastic arts, particularly of the modern era, have thus far lacked scholarly attention. A field around Tunisian art history is coalescing, thanks to efforts from Gerschultz, as well as other scholars writing about contemporary Tunisian art

(in French and in English) and art in the context of the 2011 uprisings, such as Annabelle Boissier, Christine Bruckbauer, Wafa Gabsi, Alia Nakhli, and Siobhán Shilton. However, Tunisian art historian Ali Louati's books *L'aventure de l'art moderne en Tunisie* (1997) and *Artistes de Tunisie et d'ailleurs* (2018) remain perhaps the only other extant monographs with significant discussion of modern Tunisian art. Given this scholarly context, Gerschultz's book is therefore necessarily in conversation not only with scholarship on gender and the modern state in Tunisia but also with a larger field of modern art from and art historical inquiry on the Southwest Asia North Africa (SWANA) region. For example, her inclusion of details that speak to larger ongoing debates within disciplinary art history, such as the use of "Islamic art" as an aesthetic descriptor, specifically demonstrates the relevance of this work to broader scholarly contexts (p. 27). Such semantic and conceptual debates, which emerged in the twentieth century and continue into the contemporary era, are a driving force in the advancement of the art historical discipline. Gerschultz's attention to the formation of such discussions places the book in dialogue with such publications as Wendy Shaw's co-edited text, *What Is "Islamic" Art? Between Religion and Perception* (2019). While Shaw evaluates how visual representation in Islam has dealt with the issue of the image, she also problematizes the colonial hegemony of art history as a discipline. Gerschultz's mentions of Islam are primarily related to context, regarding Islamic law and the Tunisian state, and "Islamic" art as a category in relation to Tunisian arts. However, like Shaw, Gerschultz aims to disrupt the Eurocentrism of art historical canons, which she achieves by illustrating how gender and class were constituted through the Tunisian École, while paying attention to nuance and contradiction within long-standing and emergent power structures in newly independent Tunisia. She draws together sources ranging from political science and sociology to modern art and gender studies in Tunisia and surrounding geo-

ographies to frame her significant archival and primary source evidence. She thus contributes to the decentering of male, bourgeois Europe in narratives of modernism and modern art, while nuancing the shaping of Tunisian modern art as intertwined with the rise of the modern state and in response to its colonial influences, independence era ideas, and transnational networks.

This book demonstrates how the modern artists of the Tunisian École sought to intervene in the artistic divisions and hierarchies instituted under colonialism, to, as Gerschultz references critic Hamadi Abassi as stating, "reconcile colonial conventions with their own imaginations and memories" (p. 2). "Colonial conventions" here include the structures of plastic arts education and display during the French colonial era, which functioned in Tunisia much as in France at the time. Specifically, the annual Salon Tunisien, dating to the turn of the century, served as a colonizing institution. As Gerschultz describes, "these salons were intended to cultivate artistic ties with French artists and institutions and promote French cultural values. They also served to assert colonial dominion over 'indigenous' industries" (p. 13). Meanwhile, the École des Beaux-Arts, established under the name Art Education Center in 1922, ensured that the Salon Tunisien would be filled with artists trained in the French style.

By organizing the book in a primarily chronological fashion, Gerschultz articulates the significance of events and efforts in the development of Tunisian modern art that built on each other throughout the twentieth century. The book particularly emphasizes the 1960s-70s—the decades of immediate postindependence—when decolonial modernism in the visual arts as well as in broader Tunisian culture was at its height. The first chapter functions as an introduction to the argument. Here, Gerschultz presents an overview of the concept of the Tunisian École, including outlining relevant artists, design studios, and arts schools and their directors and interlocutors, and

the relationships of these components to each other and to the colonial and modern state. She pays careful attention to gender dynamics and their interaction with class and colonization in Tunisia in the modern era, where she introduces such frameworks as state feminism, which she later explores through examples, including women artisans' use of the loom. She also interrogates how gender is often treated in art historical methods. Gender inequality is reproduced and exacerbated, for example, when accounts of modern art champion the decolonization of painting, sculpture, and printmaking, while neglecting art made in "feminized" media, such as tapestry and lace work (p. 10).

In the second chapter, Gerschultz explores how mid-twentieth-century protectorate government financial support for public arts created relationships that helped break down artistic hierarchies, such as between "fine art" and "indigenous craft" (p. 36). In 1948, two founders of the *École de Tunis*, artists Pierre Boucherle and Yahia Turki, urged the state to support decorative programs. Boucherle also served in various arts-related organizations within the protectorate government and was thus able to act as a mediator for collaborations between artists and the state. The resulting One Percent Law of 1950 earmarked 1 percent of a civil building project's budget for artwork, generating murals, tapestries, and ceramic tile panels, for example, which now constitute a visual history of collaborations between artists of the Tunisian *École* and Tunisian artisans across the country. The *Hôtel Jugurtha* in Gafsa, Tunisia, features a painted dining room door by *École de Tunis* member Jellal Ben Abdallah (figure 1). Here, two women weavers wind warp. Gerschultz describes how the brown hues of the paint and the linear composition of the figures and the foreground each recall sand dunes and Gafsa's desert mountains, lending the image a regionality that references the weaving industry. Meanwhile, the women's tattoos and braids parallel the design of peacocks in the background, a symbol of para-

dise. (View figure 1 here: <https://networks.h-net.org/figure-1-jellal-ben-abdallah-painted-dining-room-door>.)

Such initiatives as curricula that emphasized decorative arts and enhanced architectural education at the *Beaux-Arts*, and more closely allied artistic production and industry, created structural support for the integration of such categories as *artisanat* (handicraft) and decorative art into Tunisian arts professionalization programs. Although a discussion of women's positions may seem negligible to a chapter detailing the initiatives of male artists, had Gerschultz included more analysis of the intersections of gender and nation in this chapter as part of a larger discussion addressing the absence of women, the chapter would have been better integrated into the central argument of the book. Such an enhancement of context could have helped set up the exciting developments in such areas that are recounted in the following chapters, which is where the book advances its primary argument.

While chapter 2's content demonstrates the prominence of certain male figures of the Tunisian *École* in the 1950s, chapters 3 through 6 focus on women's participation in a state-supported modernization campaign in the 1960s-70s. President Bourguiba's humanistic, secular, liberalist approach to governance and development, known as Bourguibism, included the introduction of the Personal Status Code, or CPS, in 1956. The CPS introduced major legal reforms, such as women's right to initiate divorce, the outlawing of polygamy, and the requirement of the bride's consent for marriage. However, the dictation of the terms of equality to which women must adhere, described as state feminism, also constrains women. Gerschultz details how state feminism and modernization intertwined in Tunisian visual arts in the 1960s-70s through Bourguiba's efforts to use Tunisian women artisans as a catalyst for state modernization.

In this vein, chapter 3 demonstrates how Safia Farhat, the only woman member of the *École de Tunis*, was a pivotal figure in the Tunisian *École*'s advancement. As Gerschultz states, Farhat “stood at the nexus of the transformations wrought by the Tunisian *École*” (p. 25). In the early 1960s, the newly independent state targeted young Tunisian women to enroll in the *École des Beaux-Arts*, where Farhat became head of decorative design and later assistant director of the school. As part of Bourguiba's campaign of state modernization achieved through women's roles in economic expansion within the textile and artisanal industries, the school's artists collaborated with the state-run artisanal industry to “mold the traditional laborer into the modern citizen, categories embodied by the female weaver and artist-designer” who would “contribute directly to national productivity” (pp. 78, 87). Gerschultz describes a history of Farhat and Tunisian women's early cultivation as artisans while attending to the elite status of the decorative arts students. Considering it within the context of Bourguibist modernism and state feminism, particularly the legal reforms for women through the CPS, Gerschultz constructs a nuanced picture of class and gender within women's participation in artisanal education.

Chapter 4 continues to set forth a deeply contextualized history of gender, class, power, and the state by examining the incorporation of young, illiterate Tunisian women into the nationalist artisanal project. Bourgeois women art students and artist-craftswomen, championed as innovators, designed textiles that were then woven, painted, or both by women employees of the *Office National de L'Artisanat*. A painted scarf (such as that seen in figure 2) exemplifies what Gerschultz describes as individuality in painted scarves that functioned to “elevate women artisans beyond the status of labor” (p. 140). Its arrows, diamonds, and border of geometric animal figures recall women's weaving from the Gafsa region, indicating a particular intermediality at work in this period. The manufacture of fibers and cloth became feminized dur-

ing this period as Bourguibist policies fostered women's entry into the wage-earning economy, leading to strong associations between women's work and the high-warp loom, for example, where previously both men and women had participated in weaving as craftspeople. (View figure 2 here: <https://networks.h-net.org/figure-2-unidentified-artist-painted-scarf-den-den-atelier-ca-early-1960s>.)

Chapter 5 returns to a discussion of the One Percent Law to detail the impact of its 1962 revival on tourism and entrepreneurship in early independent Tunisia. The law, in addition to commissions by Farhat and Abdelaziz Gorgi's design company *Société Zin* (founded 1963), contributed immensely to the enhancement of state offices and buildings in the hotel and tourism industry. In this chapter, Gerschultz also continues to build on the book's themes of gender and labor. Although the *École de Tunis* and the artists who created projects for buildings were primarily men (with the significant outlier of Farhat), she describes depictions of and references to women intertwined with symbols of productivity and labor in many of these designs, such as Ben Abdallah's painted door (figure 1), and contends that these and other arrangements “translat[ed] and incorporate[ed] women's [weaving] designs into monumental compositions” (p. 184). Here, Gerschultz demonstrates that although decorative endeavors are often considered superficial in light of their commercial application, projects achieved through the One Percent Law are central to Tunisia's political and economic history. Using iconographic cohesiveness and cross-referencing, decorative programs made visible the new Tunisian administration's modernization program as enacted through public art and arts industry.

In the final chapter, Gerschultz explores a theme that she builds carefully throughout the book: the tension in Tunisian women's textiles as both elevated through modernism and subordinated through gender, class, and ethnicity. Focusing

again on Farhat, Gerschultz discusses, for example, the impact of Farhat's tapestry atelier, which she established on her private property in Radès in the late 1960s. Although Farhat herself could not weave, concentrating more on painting and ceramics, this atelier trained an initial five women from various Tunisian regions, who later trained other women on the *saddāya*, or vertical loom. Although loom training provided the women employment and situated them within Tunisian modernism, Gerschultz uses this example to illustrate how the status of the women in the Radès atelier also indicated a stratification within hierarchical structures of modernism, such as the two kinds of fiber produced by the atelier: one hand spun and "traditional," and affiliated with the Office National de l'Artisanat, and another "nontraditional" and akin to industrially produced fibers (p. 200). In this chapter, Gerschultz's discussion of gender dynamics in weaving culminates as she pulls threads from other chapters to clarify the importance of tapestry in mid-twentieth-century Tunisia. It is through tapestry, she argues, that the systems of agency and disparity within which artist-craftswomen contributed to modern Tunisia's identity come into view, inflected by intermeshing structures of colonialism and independence, state power, and state feminism.

Gerschultz's writing is mostly unburdened by specialty terms and conceptual density, making it accessible to undergraduate students and general audiences. Meanwhile, her storytelling and interweaving of historical significance and theories of modern art make captivating use of public and private archives, interviews, and frameworks drawn from feminist art history and postcolonial critique. The wealth of private archives include, for example, the personal archives of the artists themselves and of artists' family members, such as Jacqueline Guilbert Bellagha (Ali Bellagha's wife; both were important actors in the Tunisian *École*), Aïcha Filali (Farhat's niece), and Gerschultz's own photographs of murals, paintings, postcards, and drawings. She also conducted inter-

views with important figures of twentieth-century Tunisian visual culture, including Guilbert Bellagha, Filali, Dorra Bouzid, and Nadia Mamelouk (contemporaries of the *École de Tunis* and experts on twentieth-century Tunisian women's periodicals, such as *Leïla*, *Faïza*, and *Femme*). Conceptual resources, for instance, the theorizing of Sara Ahmed, Iftikhar Dadi, Frantz Fanon, and Albert Memmi, drive her methodologies of social history and critical theory, particularly in relation to modernism, gender, and colonization. Her approaches are also framed by studies of gender and nation both in North Africa and the larger SWANA region, such as scholarship by Lila Abu-Lughod, Sophie Ferchiou, and Anne McClintock, and theorizing of modern and decorative arts in the SWANA region, including work by Clementine Deliss and Nada Shabout. The book contributes to these theories of modernism, modern art, colonialism, and gender by illustrating the interplay and impact of these discourses in a particular temporality. Applying these approaches to a unique field, Gerschultz successfully delineates the workings of modernism and visual culture in twentieth-century Tunisia.

A crucial aspect of the book's approach is Gerschultz's engagement in some decolonial methods, particularly the disruption of hegemonic materials and medium hierarchies. As she states, "I refute the separation of 'art' from the 'indigenous' *artisanat* and challenge neat understandings of the decorative arts by examining the unfurling of this category in a site on the African continent" (p. 31). Yet from a decolonial feminist perspective, information about Gerschultz's positionality in relation to this research and writing, such as her trajectory of interest in and personal relationship to Tunisian modern art, would provide transparency regarding how her own research histories and motivations influence the work. More explication of the author's choices related to scope and methods would likewise allow the reader to understand more about Gerschultz's scholarly investments in this project. Although remaining detached from

personal investment and seeming objective in scholarly inquiry remains the preferred approach in art history as a traditional discipline, decolonial methods urge scholars to recognize that research is neither value neutral nor objective and to be transparent in their approaches and motivations so as to explicitly acknowledge hierarchies between scholar and object(s) of study. The inclusion of more details about why Gerschultz made the choices she did regarding the frameworks, time span, and archives included in the study would more significantly participate in dismantling power structures. However, she takes care to explain her use of terms and concepts through their larger histories and meanings, which creates important nuance both in historical narrative and within the contemporary moment in which she writes. By demonstrating what a study that attends to transnational and sidelined areas can look like, this book exposes how narratives of Euro-American art history often marginalize histories of modern collaboration, including those between Europeans and artists in the SWANA region. Gerschultz's emphasis on decorative arts as a category of art historical analysis performs a critical feminist intervention in the conceptualization and hierarchization of arts materials and forms in the modern era.

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Citation: Anne Marie E. Butler. Review of Gerschultz, Jessica, *Decorative Arts of the Tunisian École: Fabrications of Modernism, Gender, and Power*. H-AMCA, H-Net Reviews. August, 2023.

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