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# Constructed Memories: A Study of how the Arts and the National Museum Operate Within Power Structures and State Interests in Postcolonial Morocco

Evan Antonakes  
*SIT Study Abroad*

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### Recommended Citation

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**Constructed Memories: A Study of how the Arts and the National Museum Operate  
Within Power Structures and State Interests in Postcolonial Morocco**

by

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Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for  
MOR: Multiculturalism and Human Rights, SIT Study Abroad, Fall 2021

Rabat, Morocco

December, 2021

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**Abstract**

The Moroccan national museum as an institution has a long and complicated history. A product of colonialism, the state has historically used the museum, and the art housed within it, to construct narratives of progress and images of modernization. Doing so is largely at the expense of contemporary artists who have long been neglected by the state and failed by the museum. This paper will communicate how museums, art, and the state intersect in postcolonial Morocco. The paper will examine the inner workings of the Mohammed VI National Museum for Modern and Contemporary Art in Rabat, attempting to contextualize the space into this larger narrative of state power structures in relation to the arts. The paper, grounded in anthropological theory and ethnographic fieldwork, will convey the lived experiences of people with whom this topic is central to their lives.

## Acknowledgements

*I would like to extend my deepest gratitude to all of my collaborators throughout this project. Whether we talked briefly or are still in touch right now, I thank them for their insights, patience, kindness, and help throughout this endeavor. I hope the contents of this paper do this topic justice. I would like to thank Youssef Amine Elalamy for his support and guidance during this period.*

*Additionally, I would like to thank my academic director, Professor Taieb Belghazi. I feel very fortunate to have met and befriended such a kind, wise, intelligent, and generous man. I thank you for everything over the past three months, including helping us with our dramatic and stressful departure. I will always cherish the time spent in and out of the classroom with you.*

*Finally, I am forever grateful to my friends in this program who supported me throughout this time and made my experience in Morocco all the more better. I'm very thankful for all the wonderful people I have met over the past three months and the friendships which have been built. I wish you all the best in your future endeavors.*

— Evan Antonakes

Rabat, Morocco, 2021

## **Introduction**

On a cold and dreary day in November of 2021, Ali El Majzoub, a Moroccan artist and actor, is in Rabat for the day doing research with artists and visiting the Mohammed VI National Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art. In this short anecdote which he later conveyed to me, Ali arrives at the museum and becomes hesitant and unsure whether he should enter. Upon arriving he is taken aback by the scale and intricacy of the building. He paces outside the building for a few minutes thinking whether or not he should go in. Eventually he decides to try entering the building. He is let in, everything proceeds smoothly, and he spends the afternoon in the museum. This brief experience may well appear trivial, though the questions that arise from it are not. Why would a professional artist hesitate in entering an art museum? Why would Ali think it was not his place to be there?

I first began contemplating an ethnographic research project centered around this topic about a month after I came to Morocco. I quickly became aware of the vibrant art scene in Rabat and the significance of art on display throughout the city. Though it wasn't until I began going to various different art museums throughout the city and the country that my interests began to expand and crystalize. Moving through museums as a cultural outsider provides one with a unique experience of being able to observe with fairly unassuming eyes the ways a country narrates and performs their own culture and history. This, coupled with attending a lecture of colonial and postcolonial art, as well as my own research, remained of great interest to me throughout my time living in Morocco.

The more I studied art and museums in Morocco, the more I came to see that this matter was deeply entangled in the country's colonial history. I wanted to learn how art, museums, colonialism, and the state were connected. I wanted to learn how such connections manifested

themselves and what it meant for Moroccan people and artists. Little by little, I got the sense that this topic was a very complicated one, going far back into Morocco's past. I wanted to conduct a project where I could begin to examine these structures closely enough that I could start putting together an idea of what the larger picture looks like.

I began formulating foundational questions centered around these topics. They are undoubtedly acutely relevant to Moroccan culture, politics, and the themes of this program. It goes without saying that studying the arts is critical to understanding any culture. However, I believe that through examining the intersections between art, museums, and state interests in contemporary Morocco, the relationship comes to reflect the social issues and historical growing pains present in a postcolonial Morocco.

This paper moves through these questions and topics. I am not a student of art history but rather a researcher trained in anthropological theory and ethnographic fieldwork. My background, as well as the questions and methodology of this project, allows for this paper to center around the lived experiences of certain individuals with whom these topics are central to their lives. This project studies two distinct spaces: national art museums and alternative spaces outside the confines of the traditional museum where the public can engage with art. The paper works to accurately and thoroughly convey the perspectives of Moroccan artists and museum workers. In doing so, the intention of this project is to better understand the complexity of this topic by engaging with the people who are at the forefront of it. This paper is about the role of contemporary museums, how the state interacts with the arts, and the role of the artist in the process of decolonization.

The Mohammed VI Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art which Ali visited opened in 2014, representing one of the newest national museums in Morocco. I argue that this new art

museum, while making some progress toward aligning more so with the public's interest, is still largely entrenched in the patterns and norms which have defined Moroccan national museums since independence. These patterns and norms of the national museum, birthed from colonialism, serve the interests of the state, while neglecting the interest of middle and lower class Moroccans, and failing Moroccan artists.

The history of the Moroccan national museum demonstrates that the functions of the institution during the colonial period lingered in significant ways after independence. Directly following independence up until present day, Moroccan artists have demanded reforms to the national museums and greater support for the arts from the state. These calls for reform have largely been neglected. Following independence, there was a newfound and refreshed spirit in the Moroccan art world, seeking an avenue to engage with the public. I argue that this post-independence energy and excitement was not thwarted or smothered by the political, social, and economic realities, rather it manifested in the artists' creation of alternative museums, continued attempts to reach the public, and the artwork that came out of these times. I believe this phenomenon, though taking on different forms, still very much exists within Moroccan culture today.

### **Literature Review**

For the most part, there is very little literature available on the topic of museums and their relationship to state interests within Morocco. As I see it, the seminal and most comprehensive study of this issue came from Katarzyna Pieprzak, a professor at Williams College who spent several years doing fieldwork throughout Morocco. In 2010, her book, *Imagined Museums: Art and Modernity in Postcolonial Morocco*, was published. Her book is an in-depth ethnographic

study on the tangled politics of art and modernization over the past century within Morocco. She examines the museum as a modern institution, as a theoretical concept, and as symbolic monuments to modernity. Furthermore, she argues that with the decline and shortcomings of these museums in the eyes of the Moroccan public and artists, the museum as a concept is being rethought and reimagined. As a result, alternative spaces begin to emerge where new narratives and performances of art, memory, and identity can be available to the people. This work has served as a foundation with which to build my own research on these topics. Pieprzak's analysis provides bearings for the exploration of a topic that is largely unstudied and deeply woven into the social and political fabric of Morocco.

In studying the relationship between the arts, museums, and the state in Morocco, two primary areas need to be explored: national museums where the influence of the state can be felt, along with alternative museums, existing independently from the confines of the traditional model. The context in which Moroccan national museums are situated will then put into better perspective the meaning of actions taken to engage with art outside of these institutions.

The museum, as it is understood in modern western thought, first emerged in Morocco in the early 20th century under the French Protectorate. Fes and Rabat were the first cities to be endowed with museums whose purpose was to preserve Morocco's cultural heritage, and in doing so create an image of the country for interested Europeans (Rharib 2006: 98). Their initial purpose was also to bolster the economy. The Protectorate museums were intended to revive Moroccan popular arts and use them as a means of developing the economy. (Pieprzak 2010: 5). As was the case in many instances of colonial museal projects during this time, the museums were tasked at creating a certain kind of image. As Pieprzak notes, "The museums also functioned as a cornerstone for another nascent industry: a new culture industry that marketed

and sold Moroccan heritage to eager tourists wanting an authentic Moroccan experience” (Pieprzak: 8). The significance of the museum during the colonial era is critical to understanding the role it took on after independence. When the French left, the museums remained, making the politics of representation and memory exceedingly complex.

Almost directly following independence, what had formerly been European institutions and colonial products had become Moroccan national museums. According to Pieprzak, the institutions which were a product of colonialism simply took on a different identity, continuing with many of the functions imposed by the French:

“After Morocco gained independence in 1956, the museums did not lose their function as monuments to modernization but were entered into a discourse of Third World development by the Moroccan state. By keeping these architectures in place, the Moroccan state used them as symbols of modernity playing directly into world prestige politics. Protectorate museums of premodernity thus made the transition to national monuments to the modern, and a new usefulness of memory they housed was defined through the symbolic discourse of modernity” (Pieprzak: 16).

Like with the French colonists before them, the Moroccan state used the museum for their own benefit, often not aligning with the interest of the general public. Images were being created, narratives were being spun, and the state was deciding which memories were useful at that particular point in time. In the decades immediately following independence, and especially during the years of lead, the economic, social, and political reality of Morocco was far from the values of its proclaimed modernity. The economy was still developing, there was widespread protesting, and the politics of the new state were shaky and at times violent. With the reality of the situation diverging from the image the government was hoping to create, the state “resorted to symbols and symbolic gestures in order to attest to its allegiance to modernization.” These symbols and representations of western industrial modernization “for the purposes of acquiring

international prestige extended into all areas of official discourse, including the arts” (Pieprzak: 20). This is precisely where the institution of the museum reappears in Moroccan society and history. Pieprzak’s analysis of the historical moment demonstrates the significance and role of the national museum from the birth of the independent Moroccan state. It demonstrates the state’s understanding of what the museum could be used for going forward as well. The politics of memory have much to do with the forming of national and cultural identities; especially in a country grappling with the trauma of colonialism. Therefore, the “ability of the institution to imagine the past and the future serves the interests of a state that does not want to dwell on the present” (Pieprzak: 20).

To fully understand the function of Moroccan national museums in the 60s and 70s as symbols of modernity, it is necessary to examine them in the context of western tourism. The image that the Moroccan state was interested in claiming was created for the purpose of the tourism industry, as well as international prestige. In a sense, the state was trying to advertise Morocco to the western tourist, in hopes of boosting the struggling economy. The selling point, as Pieprzak maintains, was beauty: “the Morocco being sold was one that combined the ancient and exotic charm of another world with the same convenience of Europe and the United States” (Pieprzak: 23). The state needed Moroccan culture to appear exotic, to the extent it could attract money from Europe and the United States. It also needed it to appear modern, in order to gain trust from other modern nation states and join a global community. By constructing national and cultural narratives through museum exhibits, juxtaposing the modern and the traditional aspects of Moroccan culture, the contemporary and the ancient aspects, a neatly packaged image to showcase to the rest of the world was produced. As Pieprzak states, “national museums in

Morocco were not intended for a local public as much as they were for the rest of the world” (Pieprzak: 22).

A closer look at the functions and inner workings of the museum will further contextualize this topic. Tony Bennett, who has written extensively on the modern museum and its cultural meaning, wrote a book in 1995 entitled, *The Birth of the Museum: History, Theory, Politics*, in which he goes into detail about the specific functions of the modern museum. The institution of the museum is ultimately about claiming modernity. Bennett argues that from its origins in European Enlightenment society, the museum has existed as a certain technology of culture. He claims that the “superimposition of the ‘back-telling’ structure of evolutionary narratives on to the spatial arrangements of the museum, allowed the museum - in its canonical form - to move the visitor forward through an artifactual environment in which the objects displayed and the order of their relations to one another allowed them to serve as props for a performance in which a progressive, civilizing relationship to the self might be formed and worked upon” (Bennett 1995: 180).

With Bennett’s work demonstrating how the museum can be used as a technology of progress, it is necessary to also consider how certain aspects of culture can be used by the state, with help of the museum, for their own political goals. David Fowler’s work, *Uses of the Past: Archaeology in Service of the State*, speaks to this very point. Fowler argues that archaeologists have long been “immersed in, and conditioned by, the economic, political, and governmental institutions of nation states,” and they have often “analyzed and interpreted the past to fit the ideological requirements of those states” (Fowler 1987). My research has demonstrated significant similarities with the archaeologists Fowler speaks of and the museum curators and Ministry of Culture directors I have spoken with.

Furthermore, Loring Danforth's book, *Crossing the Kingdom: Portraits of Saudi Arabia*, expands upon these ideas, specifically his chapter "Archaeology in Service of the Kingdom." In it Danforth claims that it is all too easy for powerful segments of society to exploit archaeology and other scholarly disciplines like linguistics, folklore, history, and art history to "advance their own political goals...archaeology is particularly well suited to facilitate the process of nation building by providing the raw materials necessary for the construction of national cultures and histories" (Danforth 2016: 7). In terms of constructing national cultures, histories, memories, and identities, I believe artwork can serve a similar purpose in this context. Again, this all connects back to the museum. Decisions made by the state to support and shape museums that exhibit certain objects from certain periods, and not others, "shape in crucial ways the versions of the past that become known to the public. Museums, therefore, are sites for the negotiations over who will control the history and the identity of a nation" (Danforth: 8).

Tony Bennett, shortly before the publication of the book discussed above, wrote a piece entitled *The Political Rationality of the Museum*, in which he analyzes the political significance of the museum in the western world. The term *Political Rationality* was first coined by Foucault. Foucault claimed, as Bennett explains, that modern forms of government came with certain technologies, aimed at regulating the conduct of its people. Bennett goes on, paraphrasing Foucault in saying that these "technologies are characterised by their own specific rationalities: they constitute distinct and specific modalities for the exercise of power, generating their own specific fields of political problems and relations, rather than comprising instances for the exercise of a general form of power" (Bennett 1990). One of Foucault's primary examples is the prison. The prison, with its rehabilitative rhetoric, has been subject to endless calls for reform for years, yet the political rationality of the prison "lies elsewhere - less in its ability to genuinely

reform behaviour than in its capacity to separate a manageable criminal subclass from the rest of the population” (Bennett 1990). I believe this analysis of prisons is important to consider when discussing the significance of the modern-day museum, specifically its political rationality.

People in positions of power have the ability to display and arrange objects within a museum, creating monuments of culture and power. As a result, there comes a paradoxical reality in which the institution of the museum operates. The traditional model of the museum is “fuelled by the mis-match between, on the hand, the rhetorics which govern the stated aims of museums and, on the other, the political rationality embodied in the actual modes of their functioning - a mis-match which guarantees that the demands it generates are insatiable” (Bennett 1990). This point by Bennett is key to understanding the frustrating history of national art museums in Morocco. Because the political rationality of the museum (the construction of images and narratives of modernity and globalization) differs from the stated aims of public art museums, and even the role of the arts in society in general, reforming Moroccan museums remains insatiable.

The so-called decay of the national art museums in Morocco, along with the repeated and often neglected calls for reform, can be contextualized and made sense of by using Bennett’s understanding of Foucault and political rationality. Returning to Pieprzak, she amplifies the dissatisfaction with museums throughout Morocco from independence to today. Complaints came from artists, educators, and everyday citizens:

“They initially emerged in the immediate post-independence period and were the first signs of dissatisfaction with triumphant discourses of post-independence nationalism. They reveal discontent that the colonial infrastructures remained in place after independence and that, although the nation-state used Moroccan arts and inherited museums symbolically as signs of the nation’s commitment to culture and modernity, there was little actual investment in their development.

Rather, museums created by the French Protectorate Fine Arts Administration as sites for the collection of authentic cultural prototypes turned into stagnant depositories and did nothing to reflect the post-independence energy and excitement to reassert and redefine what it meant to be Moroccan” (Pieprzak: 3-4).

With the public’s interest in the arts and museums so clearly diverging from the political rationality and the state’s interest in them, these sentiments arise in all corners of Moroccan society. Many of the people I have spoken with, artists and otherwise, have voiced their understanding that Morocco has no museums at all; that the institutions claiming to be so are nothing more than instruments of the state, still existing in the shadow of colonialism.

It is not surprising that artists have long resented being used as tools to construct a veneer of modernity. Throughout the postcolonial period, the majority of Moroccan artists have felt abandoned by the government. With so little state support for arts infrastructures and the national museums being oblivious of local needs, “artists turned to the immaterial, to discursive spaces they could control and fashion without major monetary interventions and spatial considerations” (Pieprzak: 92). Realizing that support and genuine spaces were not going to come from the state and the national museums, Moroccan artists created their own spaces, where their own agency would be intact. These spaces, which are still very prevalent and significant today, gave artists the ability to be visible to the public and to allow the public to experience their work. In this way, Moroccan culture, identity, memory, and modernity could be disseminated independently from the state’s discourses and interests. This relocation was done “not merely to dismiss or mock the contents of such discourses but rather to diminish the authority of dominant discourses by inscribing their own narratives” (Pieprzak: 93).

Additionally, to better understand the significance of the contrasting models of Moroccan museums, traditional western ones as well as alternative spaces which challenge the colonial

framework of the latter, it's applicable to bring Mary Louise Pratt's theories on *contact zones* into the discussion. Pratt defines *contact zones* as "social spaces where cultures, meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in contexts of highly asymmetrical relations of power, such as colonialism, slavery, or their aftermaths as they are lived out in many parts of the world today" (Pratt 1991: 35). Pieprzak argues that the attempts of Moroccan artists to take art to the streets and form ephemeral outdoor museums represent a certain kind of contact zone. However, I view the Mohammed VI National Art Museum in Rabat as a kind of contact zone in its own right. With artwork from both the colonial and postcolonial periods housed under the same roof, the museum itself becomes a sort of contact zone. There's a long history of contemporary Moroccan artists being neglected or ignored by these museums. Where there are legacies of subordination, "groups need places for healing and mutual recognition, safe houses in which to construct shared understandings, knowledge, claims on the world that they bring into the contact zone" (Pratt: 40). This is precisely why alternative museums appeared and continue to appear within Morocco.

### **Methodology, Ethics, and Positionality**

Let me start by mentioning my thoughts on the ethics of a short term project like this one. For the most part, I had three weeks to undertake this research. Three weeks to do fieldwork, conduct interviews, do participant observation, review literature, and write this paper. Although I do believe that I have accomplished much in these three weeks, and that the insights in this paper will reflect that, I was left wanting far more time to do research. This is not to say that research shouldn't be undertaken when there is limited time allotted, my point is simply that one must be mindful of how such a situation will limit the findings. I needed to tailor my research to these realities and ground it in the proper ethics.

I personally think it unethical to commit oneself to a large-scale project with such a limited amount of time allotted for research and fieldwork. This topic is one that has interested me for a long time. I originally wanted to do a large and in-depth research project on it. In realizing just how little time I had to conduct research, I came to the conclusion that realistically and ethically, I couldn't produce a body of work as large as I would've wanted. In a way, I forced myself to scale down the breadth of this project. Attempting to complete a large-scale ethnographic fieldwork project in just three weeks would undoubtedly lead to superficial bonds with collaborators, insufficient time for fieldwork, and a rushed analysis of findings.

I began to look at this project more as a starting point; an opportunity to build a strong and tangible foundation on these topics. One way in which I have reckoned with the limits of short term research is my plan to expand upon this project in the future. I will go into more detail about plans for future research as the paper progresses. The overarching point I want to make here in terms of ethics and methods is that I approached this project with an awareness that there were significant limitations which could not be avoided and that I wouldn't be able to fully answer all of my questions. Rather than claiming to definitively answer a question, this paper is poised to wrestle and move through a series of related questions centering around the subject of arts, museums, and state interests in postcolonial Morocco. This was precisely my mindset over the course of the research period. With everything I did, I kept in mind that scholarly and ethically, the amount of time I had to work with was a major factor.

With that being said, I formed a plan to conduct research; one which continued to evolve and change as time went on. Based on my research questions and interest, I knew fairly early on that my research would primarily center around one space of study: the Mohammed VI Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art in Rabat. Spaces outside the confines of the traditional

museum where art can be seen, experienced, and engaged with were also spaces of study. I had previously visited Mohammed VI and was confident that it would be the best possible site to conduct research and fieldwork on the role of the national art museum in relation to the state. In terms of the *alternative museums*, some more research was needed to discover the most applicable places of study. I consulted my advisor, did searches online, and I asked local Moroccan artists. I quickly became aware of a wide variety of galleries, independent art exhibitions, street performances, and other alternative spaces where I could do fieldwork, many of which in Rabat. As I will expand upon later, not all of this was possible in the end due to unforeseen and rapid changes.

In terms of my collaborators, at times I was able to make plans with my advisor to contact certain people, and at other times it was far more informal, meeting people in public and building relationships with them, as is the reality of prolonged and devoted fieldwork. While centering around certain themes and questions, I wanted this project to reflect the perspectives and lived experiences of people with whom these topics are important, specifically Moroccan artists. I received the contact information of a few artists and/or people who have worked with national museums from my advisor. Though predominantly, I found my collaborators by meeting local artists as well as museum staff members and building relationships with them. For instance, some encounters included meeting museum directors at Mohammed VI and having multiple conversations with them over time. Others included perchance meetings with artists in cafes; people with whom I built strong connections with. What I learned from these experiences is that there is really no one way to find research collaborators. When immersed in the culture and the questions one is interested in, collaborators can be found in countless different places.

However, once I made the acquaintance of people who would serve as my collaborators, certain ethical questions had to be addressed. Though much of my participant observations and interviewing with collaborators naturally took on an informal and relaxed manner, each time I made clear my own identity and the specifics of my project. I also assured them that I would keep their identities confidential. The people I specifically mention throughout this paper are given pseudonyms in order to protect their identities. As I've mentioned before, I was not oblivious to the fact that I was asking my collaborators to tell me their stories and opinions over a relatively short period of time. In order to convey my intention to build strong and long lasting relationships (when feasible and appropriate) I worked to build friendships with many of my collaborators that went beyond professional exchanges of research. I was also vocal about my plans to continue studying these topics once I leave Morocco.

There of course were further obstacles that had to be taken into consideration. For instance, the language barrier. I was fortunate to meet and build relationships with many people who spoke English quite fluently. In the cases when that was not the reality, I had to find other solutions to the problem, such as having a translator with me or communicating digitally through online translation services. This made errors in communication and having certain statements lost in translation very possible. Each time I was talking with or interviewing my collaborators I made a point to ensure I was understanding them correctly, and that they were understanding me correctly. If I was in a situation in which interviewing became too difficult, because of language or otherwise, I stopped the conversation, thanked them, and moved on. Conducting ethnographic interviews without being able to effectively communicate can easily lead to ethical grey areas. If a more prolonged project was being undertaken, then this issue could be worked through over

time. Though given the time restraints of this project, I sought out collaborators who could share valuable insights, as well communicate effectively with me.

### **Findings & Analysis**

Let me start where Ali's story left off. About a week after his experience at the Mohammed VI museum, I spent a morning there myself. I went on a weekday morning and stayed until the afternoon. Ali was not exaggerating when he expressed the scale of the building and how it can be overwhelming. Compared to the other buildings around it, the museum stands out and appears as a spectacle. Before seeking out people within the museum to talk with I strolled through the entirety of it by myself. The upper level houses what is probably the largest section of the museum and that is a wing dedicated to art from the colonial period (mainly French) and then Moroccan art spanning a great number of years. Below that on the lower level is a wing dedicated to contemporary Moroccan art (what the museum is named for). The collection at the time was assembled as part of a pandemic initiative to aid struggling artists. During the time I spent walking through the museum, there were six other groups there. Of those six groups, five of them appeared to be tourists, speaking either French or English. With the exception of Fridays when the museum is open to the public for free, museum visitors will roughly be of this demographic breakdown most everyday.

After spending much of the morning in the museum I had a conversation with a woman working at the front desk who then referred me to one of the directors of the museum. Aisha Benoun, a relatively young woman who occupies a significant role in the museum, spoke with me for hours. She was genuinely interested and committed to conveying her experiences to me. I

do believe her exceptional willingness to provide me with information was meaningful and significant, though I will get to that later.

This museum is not run for the sake of education, or even for the sake of connecting the public to the country's artwork, it exists within a system, a context, in which political and social matters are the priority. Aisha made it very clear that the national museum as an institution plays a significant role in Morocco and that the people who work there need to be aware of this and work with those goals in mind. I was interested in the exact intention of the state and why the museum appears to be the tool for it. The answer largely has to do with constructing a national image, one which situates Morocco in the global sphere, and then making it visible to the world. According to Aisha, "Western countries have museums, so in order to make Morocco modern and on the same level, the same must be had here." This statement often goes even further though. By building lavish museums, the country can take on a more modern image, yet the actual contents and functioning of the museum can further that endeavor. Pieprzak and Bennett remind us that the museum has power; its ability to construct narratives and market identities is unmatched. This provides a nice transition into the other part of our conversation: if the state has ulterior motives when it comes to the national museum, how much is it actually serving the Moroccan public?

I'm aware that many of these findings echo the contents of my literature review. I kept in mind what I had gained from those sources, though I wanted to hear for myself, from people in these places exactly what *they* thought about the topic. I was in a unique situation at this point. I read multiple times about Moroccans not believing the country had any authentic art museums. I had heard the same sentiments from contemporary artists, including Ali. But now I had the opportunity to ask someone who occupies a significant role in the operation of the Mohammed

VI National Museum of Contemporary Art. I asked Aisha about her thoughts on this topic. She took a long pause, showing somewhat of a discouraged look on her face. She then went into a long explanation. In attempting to contextualize the question she argued that, “after independence museums were so linked to French colonialism, along with there being no arts infrastructure either in education or the public sphere, Moroccans (specifically the middle and lower classes) didn’t see museums as being for them.” This enduring link to French colonialism is crucial in understanding this issue. Not only does it demonstrate how the state is using the museum today in a very similar way as it was used by the French, in the same vein of constructing images of modernity, but it also explains why so many everyday Moroccans understand national museums to have failed them. She went on to claim that with so much Western art in this building, people don’t see the museum as belonging to them. The application of Pratt’s notion of contact zones comes into clearer picture with this statement. With Western art and Moroccan art in the same building, sometimes just meters apart, sometimes Western art literally being on top of Moroccan art, it creates a space where cultures exist alongside each other in a somewhat unnatural way.

Aisha was very clear in telling me that this museum is largely not accessible to the public. The reason goes beyond simply what is inside the museum and how the government utilizes it. She again brought up the fact that there is virtually no interest in the arts in education or public funding. That being said, she said that “if there was interest to bring arts in education and the public, Moroccans would appreciate it very easily and very quickly.” This gets into a whole other conversation about how art is defined in Moroccan culture and what specifically constitutes it. Aisha explained that there is art in every realm of everyday life in Morocco, people just don’t necessarily see it as such.

I will pause here to reflect on a recurring theme, which at this point was becoming increasingly evident to me. Patterns begin to emerge when taking a closer look at how the national art museum operates. Whether it be artists or staff members, the relationship to the state and especially the Ministry of Culture produces certain common attributes. When this museum was preparing to open many local artists were asked to donate works to the new museum. The artists who were approached by the museum and asked to donate works of art did not want to be taken advantage of. They were aware that their works deserved to be bought. However, they also didn't want to risk being excluded from the new museum and thus be excluded from the national memories and identities being constructed. Similarly, Aisha expressed how the museum staff and directors need to constantly find ways of "staying authentic and truthful to ourselves while also aligning to the geopolitical issues of the country." The state has the upper hand here, forcing these people to compromise in ways that often diminish their worth and goals. With time it becomes evident that this topic is largely centered around power structures in contemporary Morocco and how they manifest in this particular environment.

Both of the women I spoke with at the museum were relatively young. I went into this fieldwork experience with few expectations, though I did suspect people working there would be more hesitant to criticize the national museums as a whole. That was not the case. Aisha was very critical and was determined to convey as much as she could about the shortcomings of the museum. People like this represent the energy and creative spirit found outside the museum which Pieprzak writes about and I will touch on. Artists who have taken to the streets to escape the rigid confines and neglect of the national museum display a certain spirit and drive to keep Moroccan artwork relevant and available to the public. I believe that people like Aisha, though operating in a far more restrictive environment, have the same intentions: making it so all

Moroccans can engage with art; to recognize the role of the artist in the process of decolonization.

This concept of alternative museums as I call them is discussed at length by Pieprzak. Due to time constraints I chose to focus this project on the Mohammed VI National Museum instead of going into detail about alternative museums additionally. That being said, one cannot do research on national art museums in Morocco without touching on the artistic outcomes of the shortcomings of these institutions. The lack of a physical building and the “absence of an audience haunts artists but does not mean that tactical architectures of art and frameworks of understanding cannot be built” (Pieprzak: 126). This phenomenon arose in the post-independence period while the national museums were still entrenched in the framework of the French Protectorate. Many of these frameworks and links to colonialism are still very much present in the national art museums. As a result, these alternative museums are still very active and meaningful in Moroccan culture.

Through meeting Ali, I was able to learn much about this tradition and understand why it is so important. Before I go on, it’s important to point out that this paper has largely been devoted to visual art found in museums, though in actuality this topic extends to all forms of art within Morocco. I had done limited participant observation at certain galleries in Rabat and Marrakech, though Ali spoke to me in great detail about storytellers who also take to the street in a similar fashion as visual artists. In the same way the painter, or the poet, or the actor goes out in public to share their craft, so too does the storyteller. I understood why so many artists felt that the national museum was not an option to engage with art, though I wanted to learn exactly what these people were trying to accomplish by taking to the streets, by bypassing the museum or any other traditional institution, in order to share their work. Ali, who had participated in many of

these performances, talked about educating, giving a message, shining a light on the political reality, etc. These storytellers or artists or writers are in these spaces to share their work with the public in an open manner. It is a way to pass on stories to people, stories older than anyone alive there. They represent interactive and creative ways to engage and understand politics, economics, poverty, wealth, gender, and many other aspects of Moroccan culture. I heard these same sentiments expressed by painters in Marrakech as well. This all points to the idea of the role of the artist in the process of decolonization. In a postcolonial context, artists are needed to help people cope and reckon with collective trauma and history. In this way new identities can be forged, buried memories can be dug up, and a face can be given to the future.

## **Conclusions**

During the years of lead it became quite clear to artists that despite the recently gained independence, the struggle for a liberated Morocco was only just beginning. Many forms of national culture had been wiped out during the French Protectorate. With the violence and turmoil during the years of lead cultural erasures continued and the past was largely buried. It was in this period that the poet Ahmed Bouanani wrote these lines of poetry: “Their tomblike identity has been erased/for so long/may the red flame of legendary Amazons/live in my heart./May it revive in the midst of our fear/so there are no longer any futures without faces.” This hope is central to understanding the role of the artist in that context, as well as today’s.

The National Museum as a Moroccan institution never truly divorced itself from the framework it was built on during the French Protectorate. During the years of lead this was quite obvious. I argue this is still the case today, only on a more subtle level. From the birth of the national museum during the colonial period, it became clear that this institution could effectively

serve the interests of those in power, intent on constructing an image or an identity for the rest of the world. Today the Moroccan government employs the national art museum to serve as a symbol of modernity; a testament to a constructed national identity. In using art as a tool to push certain narratives, along with genuine interest in the arts being absent from the state's agenda, everyday Moroccans past and present don't see national art museums as being there for them. Contemporary artists, frustrated with the neglect from the state and the repeated failures on the part of the museum to usher in meaningful reforms, continue to seek out alternative spaces to showcase their work and allow the public to experience it.

With any ethnographic research project it is necessary to consider the broader impacts of a given study. I believe this topic to be very important and worthy of continued research. However, I'm not speaking solely for myself. During my visits to Mohammed VI Aisha expressed to me that there is very little research done on this topic. This is part of the reason she was so willing to help me and provide me with information. She went on to say that fresh perspectives are desperately needed when discussing a topic like this. I do not claim my research to be some long-awaited heroic project. It is easy for project's like mine to take on a white-savior sort of identity. All of this will be actively avoided. I simply hope that this project, and the further research which will follow it, will begin to provide what Aisha was talking about: a new perspective on the inner workings of a relatively new museum, situated in a deep and intricate context.

### **Limitations of Study**

It's crucial to devote a section of this paper to the limitations of the study, for there were many. As I've mentioned already, none of the limitations or difficulties encountered during this

study deterred me from going through with it. However, conducting this project without both acknowledging and dealing with these limitations would inevitably give rise to serious problems, qualitatively and ethically. I am intentionally placing this section toward the end of this work as to allow for reflection, with the body of the project already committed to paper.

Firstly, it must be noted that language posed an issue in this project. I would not qualify the language barrier as a major limitation, in most instances I was able to work around it or find alternatives, though it was something I needed to be constantly aware of. My limited knowledge of Arabic and French did not hurt this project, though had my language skills been stronger, there is no doubt that this project would've been more nuanced and intricate. There were a few instances where I was hesitant to reach out to potential collaborators because of language barriers, as well as times where a conversation with a collaborator was hindered due to language. Ideally, I would spend far more time in Morocco, immersing myself in the culture and striving to become as fluent as possible in Arabic in order to conduct thorough ethnographic fieldwork. This sentiment moves right into the primary limitation of this study.

I believe that the most significant limitation to this study was the amount of time I had to work with. Subsequently, other issues stemmed from this overarching obstacle. I had 14 days in Morocco to conduct research for this project. It's almost comical to think about how much time I had to conduct research when compared to other similar projects. For example, Katarzyna Pieprzak spent a decade doing research for her book. By no means I am equating the scale of my project with hers, or anybody else's for that matter. I'm simply pointing out that virtually every limitation of this study can be traced back to the time constraint. I mentioned earlier how I forced myself to scale down this project for it to be better suited to the time allotted. I believe I did a good job of that. Nonetheless, that doesn't mean issues were no longer a factor. My access to

collaborators was limited to whoever I was able to come into contact with in those two weeks. My bonds with these people, though genuine and proactive, were still in a very early stage, meaning the information being conveyed to me may well not have been as detailed and personal if I had been able to develop stronger relationships with them. Additionally, I simply didn't have the time to visit all the places I would've liked to. As a result, I had to rely on the fieldnotes I had from a more limited amount of spaces. I had to expand upon what I had in order to make up for the lack of a wide variety of findings. What I'm getting at is I want to continue finding ways to compensate for this; to allow this project to develop further outside the limits of this particular time frame and model.

One last limitation which must be addressed is the sudden and dramatic ending to my time in Morocco. When conducting ethnographic fieldwork in the middle of a global pandemic, there is always a chance that plans could change or fall apart completely. Unfortunately, literally overnight, this possibility became the reality. Many of the people I spoke with repeatedly told me of how the pandemic has had very harmful effects on Moroccan artists, economically and otherwise. And then shortly thereafter, the pandemic forced my departure and interrupted that very research.

I lost about 10 days. During that time I had planned on speaking with several more collaborators and visiting several other spaces of study. I again had to reconfigure the scope of this project. This is to be expected with this kind of research, yet the seriousness and stress of my departure made things especially difficult. With the few days I had to work with while home I had to choose how to go about completing this project. I had the contact information of a couple other possible collaborators whom I was originally planning to reach out to. After departing I still had the opportunity but ultimately decided not to reach out to them. The reason being I felt

personally and ethically that it wouldn't be right at that point. There were only days left in the project period and at that point I would be reaching out simply to increase the amount of collaborators in my paper. I think those relationships would've been shallow and superficial, existing for my benefit only, not for the sake of the project or to benefit my collaborators. I decided to save their contact information and reach out to them at a later date when I had more time to conduct this research. Instead I spoke further with people whom I had already built relationships with in order to deepen my understanding of their experiences and insights.

There are several limitations to this study, some were expected and some were not. The point I want to stress more than any other is that this project demanded creativity. I came to realize quite early on that a standard and generic approach to this project was not going to be able to yield any substantial results. This project has several limitations, it has bias, and it is a result of my own unique and changing positionality. Despite all of these variables, a project was still produced. I believe this wouldn't have been possible without a willingness to be creative and to adapt to changing and challenging factors.

### **Future Study**

As I have been alluding to throughout this paper, I believe that the best way to reconcile with the shortcomings and limitations of this project is to commit to further research. There is far more I wish to do with this topic. I want to continue moving through these questions and allow for others to branch off of them. I have built relationships with people throughout the duration of this project which I want to maintain and strengthen. Overall, this topic and my collaborators have become very meaningful to me; to properly do them justice I am committing myself to further and more in-depth research on this topic in the future. In the coming year I will be writing

a thesis which will be grounded in anthropological theory and, in my opinion, very suitable for a continuation of this research. As I mentioned in the methodology section, I see this paper largely as a starting point; an opportunity to discuss research which can easily lead into a larger scale project, exploring these questions minus all the limitations present this time around.

Lastly, in terms of future research projects, whether that be ISPs conducted in Morocco or otherwise, I believe this project represents a fine starting point where others could definitely expand upon it. For instance, whereas I did research at Mohammed VI and no other national museums, I think it would be very wise to have multiple national museums as places of study. My project, partly because of the time constraints, ended up being tailored toward the national art museum and how the state can utilize it. I touched on so-called alternative museums, though I would've liked to have devoted far more time and research to this idea. Future projects should explore these spaces and what they mean as much as possible. They are undoubtedly linked to the realities of the national museums and they represent the creative and expressive aspects of Moroccan culture. I believe the alternative museums, really any space outside the confines of the traditional museum where Moroccans can showcase various forms of art and have the public engage with it, are key to understanding this topic.

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