



1



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Samples of tradition

The Musée d'Angoulême's collection of Moroccan embroidery owes a great deal to Prosper Ricard, the famed researcher, educator, collector and vigorous promoter of the region's textile arts. In this article, adapted from the French language catalogue to a recent exhibition, 'Tarz', the museum's director **Emilie Salaberry** examines the legacy of this enlightened pioneer, whose approach was nonetheless influenced by the attitudes of his time

2



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1 Embroidered hanging, Chaouen, Morocco, 18th-19th century. Silk embroidery on cotton, 2.75 x 0.81 m (9' 0" x 2' 7"). Musée des tissus, Lyon, MT29204

2 Jewish woman's dress, (detail), Anti-Atlas, Morocco, 19th century. Cotton and silk, 1.55 x 1.10 m (5' 1" x 3' 7"). Prosper Ricard collection, purchased by the City of Angoulême in 1962. Musée d'Angoulême, 962.7.157

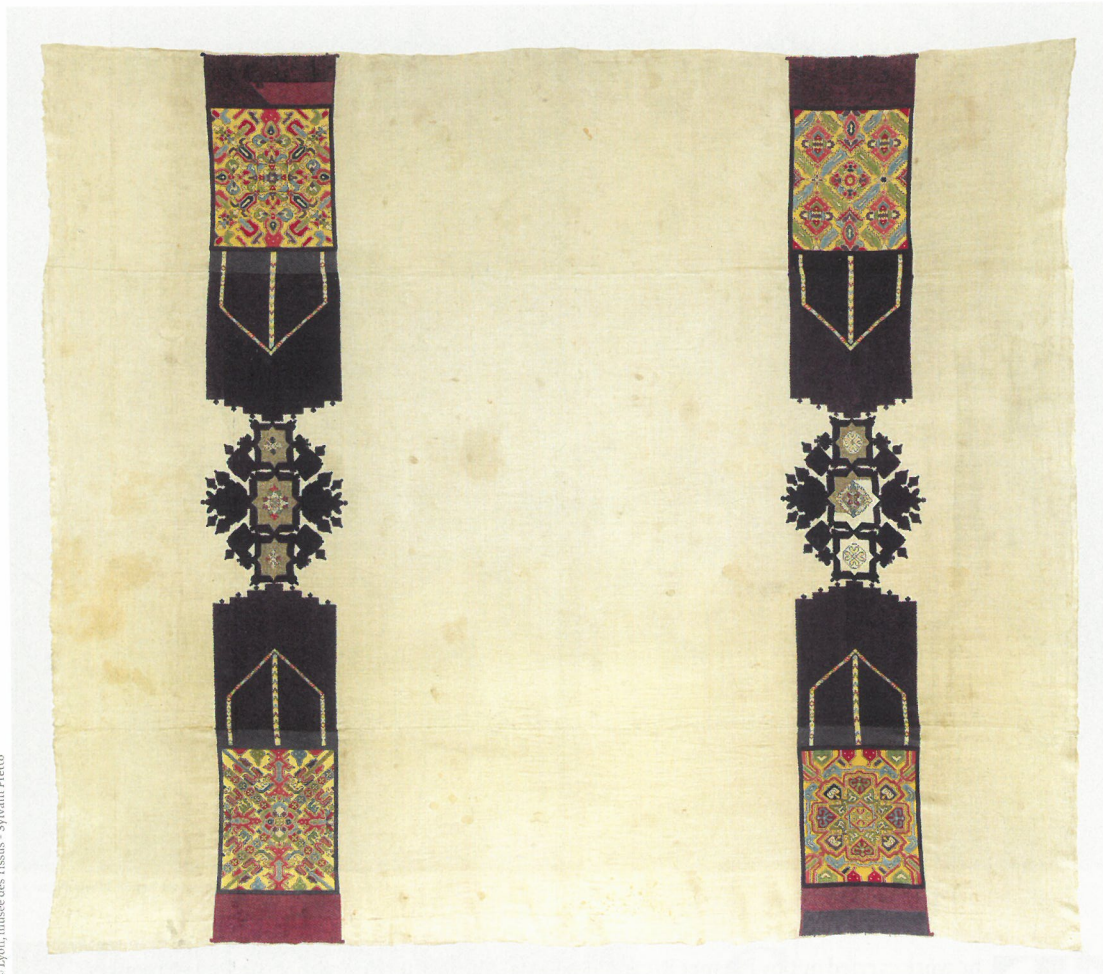
The work carried out by Prosper Ricard (1874–1952), the former director of the Department of Indigenous Arts of Morocco, was colossal. In particular we owe to him the creation and development of Muslim art museums in Fez, Meknes and Marrakech. Wishing to counter the trend of a 'false exoticism', a purely Western fantasy, he attempted to create an 'authentic' art, taking inspiration directly from the local techniques that he documented.

In 1962 the Musée d'Angoulême purchased 180 objects from the Ricard collection, most of them dating from the end of the 19th and beginning of the 20th century. These are mainly textile pieces forming a set of samples from various Moroccan embroidery schools, notably those of Meknes, Rabat, Salé and Fez, with a major imbalance between the regional schools represented. The embroideries of Fez predominate, with 112 samples (incomplete fragments), as well as twenty-nine complete items (table mats, shawls, cushions, henna handkerchiefs) with varied motifs and in a colour palette going from crimson red to blues and violets, as well as a very beautiful ochre piece.

In numerical terms, the items from Rabat come next, with four complete items and eight samples, some of which illustrate a style referred to as 'old Rabat'. Its characteristics include a liberated colour palette unfolding as a shimmering polychromy. In the same way, the Salé school is illustrated by four beautiful complete items including one embroiderer's maquette and eight samples representative of the diversity of shades and decorative motifs. Finally there is a collection of Jewish and Berber embroideries originating from the regions of the Tafilalet and Anti-Atlas, comprising robes and bonnets, a belt and four samples accompanied by an embroidered textile purse and a pair of ornate slippers. The last town is Meknes, for which a complete item (cushion cover) and five samples have been brought together.

Ricard departed for Algeria at a very young age, straight after his military service in Nancy, and pursued a course of art studies at the art department in Bouzaréah (Algiers) between 1899 and 1900 while at the same time studying the Arab and Kabyle languages. This training enabled him to start his career as director of 'apprenticeship courses in arts and crafts intended for indigenous peoples' between 1900 and 1905, first in Tlemcen then in Oran. It was in Algeria that he became involved with militants supporting the 'indigenist' cause, with the creation of a Department of Indigenous Arts in 1908. The purpose of this department was to design and organise training courses aimed at the production of 'intrinsically Algerian' decorative crafts.

His meeting in 1909 with General Hubert Lyautey, commander of the Oran division, was to prove decisive. The general suggested that Ricard join him in Morocco when he became Resident General, initially for a fact-finding



3 Cover, Chaouen, Morocco, 18th-19th century. Silk embroidery on cotton, 2.04 x 0.45 m (6' 8" x 8'). Musée des tissus, Lyon, MT29205

4 Cover (detail), Fez, Morocco, 19th century. Silk embroidery on cotton, 0.41 x 0.73 m (3' 5" x 6' 1"). Prosper Ricard collection, purchased by the City of Angoulême in 1962. Musée d'Angoulême, 962.7.11

5 Cover, Fez, Morocco, late 19th-early 20th century (?). Silk embroidery on cotton, 0.91 m (2' 11") square. Prosper Ricard collection, purchased by the City of Angoulême in 1962. Musée d'Angoulême, 962.7.18

mission in 1913, then permanently in 1915. Ricard was subsequently appointed Inspector of Industrial Arts at Fez and Meknes, then curator of the Muslim art museums in Fez between 1915 and 1920, and finally Director of the Department of Indigenous Arts of Morocco in Rabat from 1920 to 1935. He established an inventory, studying, documenting, passing on and safeguarding local craft techniques as well as their ornamental components, all within the most varied areas: ironwork, leatherwork, tapestry, ceramics and embroidery.

During his Algerian period, he made several study expeditions in France and Spain; then, once settled in Morocco, he visited the central Atlas Mountains and Souss. Ricard established a methodology that was both meticulous and systematic. An object was scrutinised from the point of view of its technical manufacture and its ornamentation. He dedicated a significant amount of time to close observation of craftsmen at work, and the exchanges between them. He recorded all his field observations in the form of photographs, detailed drawings, and annotated sketches, taking care to note the vernacular terms for each decorative detail.

The museum and its collections are the cornerstone of a whole system for rehabilitating what are known as the 'traditional' arts developed by Ricard and driven by the Department of Indigenous Arts. In this approach a museum is a place for visual education, intended to facilitate high-quality production in artisan workshops for local or foreign customers. This artisanal creation is based on ancient models and, through these, on the techniques of the past which it reactivates and perpetuates. As the newly created examples are purchased and dispersed, they spread

aesthetic values and know-how over a whole territory, circumventing the obstacle of 'trade secrets' which had been limiting the transfer of practical knowledge between master and pupil.

The ideological background to the Department of Indigenous Arts is certainly a form of regeneration of the arts under the aegis of the government. Ricard in fact considered that he was intervening in a transition phase, marked by the loss of know-how and a drop in quality due in particular to the change in materials used, which aged more rapidly than the older ones.

It is thus the idea of safeguarding, or rescue even, which gives the museum its rightful place. The ancient works collected and exhibited in the museums serve as models for the contemporary creations supported by the government, which also promotes them through temporary exhibitions. At most, permission is given for the decorative style to be 'adapted' a little to suit the era and the needs of customers.

We therefore oscillate between perpetuating ancient forms resurrected by heritage objects and partially recreating the latter. In other words, the notion of authenticity is a fairly relative one, is variably assessed and is likely to be redefined as the needs of society evolve. A whole facet of the dialectic between authenticity and tradition is at work here, and is at the heart of the colonial discourse on objects of art which have become heritage items, originating from the colonies, which even today remains the basis on which the latter are assessed.

The initial assumption is that we are looking at countries characterised as 'traditional', in the sense that they have perpetuated habits and customs since a time that is often unknown, which can therefore be credited with a



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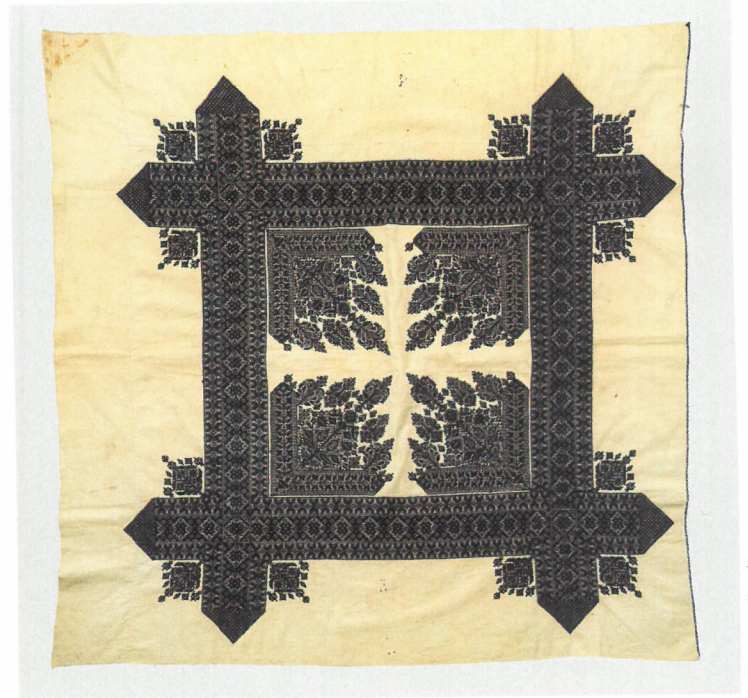
quasi-immemorial kind of quality. This maintenance of 'tradition' would give these societies a sort of original purity which would appear to have been protected for the most part from contacts with the outside world.

Through his whole enterprise supported by the Department of Indigenous Arts, Ricard saw his role as the guarantor of tradition, which he contrasted with exoticism, a reinvented and emasculated form of material creation. To ensure that this transmission would be passed on, he had to make collections, support production, organise teaching, generate a large number of publications and spend time on popularisation, thanks to radio broadcasts. From the standpoint of this policy aimed at resurrecting craftsmanship and promoting indigenous arts, it is ultimately a question of legitimising the actions of the Department of Indigenous Arts and the controlling colonial power.

This method of stopping time and the natural process of evolution of styles runs counter to all the mechanisms at play in artistic creation. The approach theorised by the Department of Indigenous Arts advocates the return to an assumed authenticity to combat a false exoticism conveyed on the mainland; in effect, therefore, we are witnessing the fabrication of a vision equally, or almost as much, a fantasy of what indigenous arts should be and, through them, of the men and women who create them. It is a way of denying and rejecting the inexorable evolution in societies of their customs and practices, their tastes and their resources, and of constraining the creativity and inventiveness of the people, these being nourished in particular by the inevitable contacts with the outside world.

After the departure of General Lyautey, his successor General Nogues allowed Prosper Ricard to continue his work. Becoming honorary director of 'Indigenous Arts' after 1935, he was given responsibility in 1940 for preserving artisanal production. Thus in 1949 he organised the first Congress of North-African Artisans held in Fez and Rabat. He repeated the undertaking two years later in Algiers, setting up an 'Arts and Techniques of North Africa' week.

The Ricard collection arrived in Angoulême (and Paris) soon after Moroccan independence. The items were very quickly exhibited, but later



5

demoted to the background, without any work being started on documentation and precise identification. Undoubtedly the worn, stained, torn and almost abruptly cut-off appearance of numerous items in the collection did not correspond to the idea that people had of works in a museum. For a long time pride of place was given to sculptures from sub-Saharan Africa or Oceania, before the museum clearly made its choice also to offer an ethnographic approach, in which all the collections would be considered in their diversity as so many different ways of exploring and highlighting documentary and heritage values.

At the start of the 2000s a vast plan to renovate and extend the museum was led by Monique Bussac. Within this a study of the original collections from the Maghreb was initiated with Marie-France Vivier, at that time curator in charge of North African collections at the Musée du quai Branly. The work enabled the inventory of this collection to be re-started, and some beautiful specimens were taken from it and presented in a permanent exhibition setting. More than forty years after it became part of the municipal assets of the city of Angoulême, this collection would again find its place in the public eye. ❖

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