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Artistic Rhythms

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Near or far, decorative artisans live in a world of beauty. This issue of *Artisphere* ranges from Memphis to Marrakech! *On the cover:* Heather Bruno Sears puts the finishing touches on lace stenciling. Story on page 42.

International Decorative Artisans League (IDAL) is an international association of artisans, businesses, and educators that provides inspiration, public awareness, and member growth through education, philanthropy, and preservation of the decorative arts.

Magical Marrakech

An Artist's Journey of Discovery, Creativity, and Camaraderie

BY MELANIE ROYALS

As artists, most of us enjoy the unique advantage of being able to “discover” other cultures, other eras and other countries through the decorative arts. We pore over pictures of Pompeian frescoes in order to replicate their unique color combinations and delicate motifs. We study the Renaissance period so that we can interpret that particular style of acanthus leaf in a trompe l’oeil panel. We immerse ourselves in the language of design and hope that we can capture the essence of a particular era or country’s design style in our artwork.

It isn’t often though, that we get to experience the designs and decorative arts of different cultures or countries by “living it”; seeing, feeling and touching it through a first-hand encounter.

I have been very fortunate in this last year to visit one of the most visually stimulating and design-rich countries in the world not once, but twice. Even better, I’ve had the privilege of being accompanied by a small group of talented artisans each time as we’ve completed unique painting projects in a forthcoming boutique hotel, Peacock Pavilions, just outside of Marrakech.

Marrakech, with its amazing carved architecture, saturated color palette, bustling souks filled with handcrafted wares, and exotically spiced cuisine, provides the ultimate sensory experience for artists and non artists alike. Decorative artists, though, seem to feel a deep and almost immediate connection to the place and to its people. Perhaps that is because, in this

place, almost all aspects of daily life and rituals have been elevated to art and to creating and appreciating beauty. Utilitarian objects of daily use (silver teapots, carpets, ceramic platters) are all meticulously crafted. Morocco is a country of highly skilled craftsmen who fashion leather, silver, metal, cedar wood, fabric, tile and tadelakt plaster into decorative objects that beg to be appreciated—if not bought! The artisans there have a deeply meaningful and spiritual connection both to the objects they make and to the process. Visiting decorative artists connect with that.

The group of ten American decorative artists that visited Morocco with me in January 2009 certainly did! They also deeply connected with each other, as artists—especially women artists—tend to do. When we met up for the transatlantic flight from JFK, none in our group knew any of the others—except me. By the time we landed in Marrakech, tight bonds had already begun to form.

We were greeted by an unseasonable and unusual chilly rain, but the reception at our lovely Hotel du Tresor couldn’t have been warmer. Moroccans are SO kind and hospitable, and it is obvious that they take great pleasure in making guests comfortable and happy. It’s a level of service and respect that is becoming all

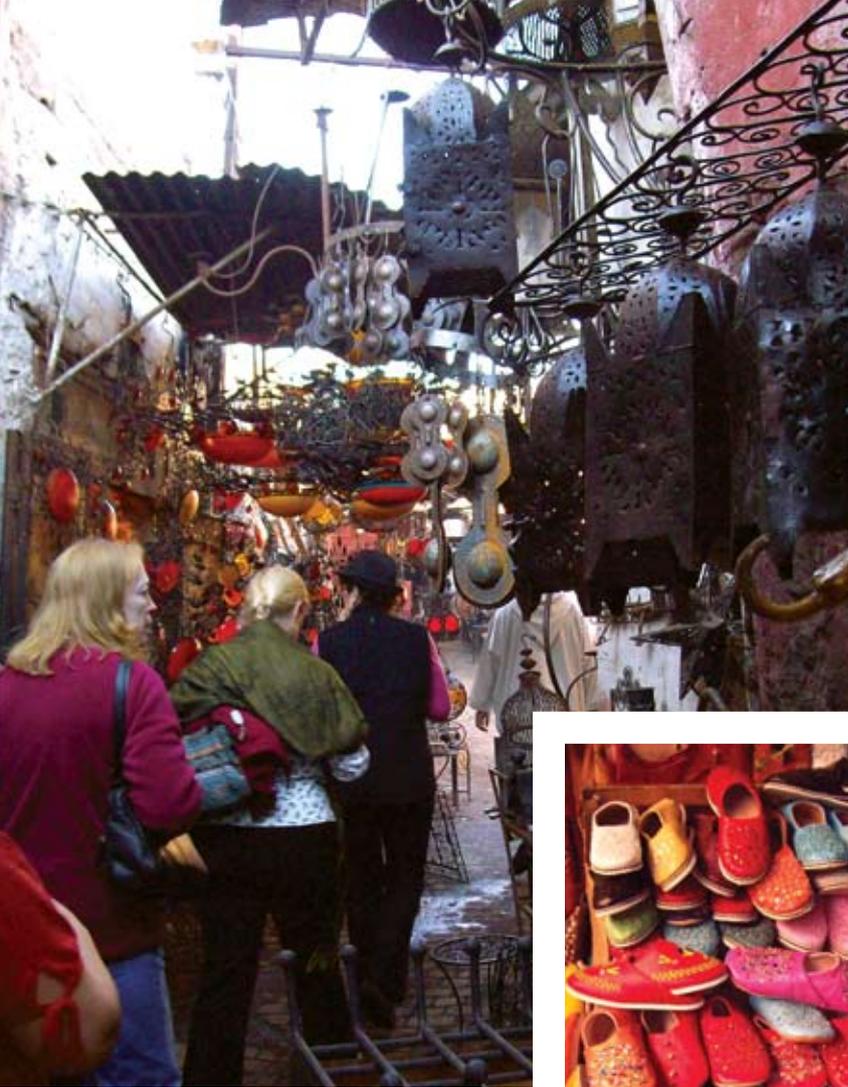
too rare in our country, and we basked in it the entire trip. Our hotel was located in the Medina, which is the old, walled area of Marrakech that contains the famous Jmaa el Fna square and the endless maze of souks. The souks are the market areas containing small shops where individuals both create and sell their wares. There is a different souk area for fabric, leather, metalwork, inlaid wood, yarn dying, cosmetics, spices and

even babouches, the famous Moroccan leather slippers. Needless to say, it is both a visual delight and a shopper’s paradise, and once our group became comfortable with finding our way around, each of us went back on a DAILY basis to procure more and more gifts and goodies.

Our first day was spent lunching and shopping with our lovely hostess, Maryam Montague. Maryam and her architect husband, Chris, have bought 7 hectares of land just outside of the city where they are building Peacock Pavilions. When completed it will be a lovely



ABOVE, LEFT TO RIGHT: Pam Grace, Gwen Ware, Margaret Von Kaenel, Rebecca Hotop, Barbara Rasmussen, Cynthia Davis, our guide Mostafa, Melanie Royals, Robin Johnston, Vicki Shultz, Heather Bruno Sears



COCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: Intrepid IDAL artisans explore the maze of souks; Robin Johnston shows off her new scarf which has been wrapped in traditional style by the vendors in the wool dyeing souk; a lone musician plays on an otherwise quiet side street in the old Jewish quarter; Cynthia Davis and Maryam Montague bargain for a silver bracelet. CENTER: A colorful display of babouches (Moroccan slippers) look like colorful jewels at a shop in the Slipper Souk.



“boutique hotel” comprised of several guest houses set amidst an olive grove. Maryam has a very popular design and lifestyle blog, <http://moroccanmaryam.typepad.com/>, and we actually “met” through the blogosphere.

Maryam is a professional shopper, among many other things. Literally. She hires herself out, on occasion, to shop with visiting Americans and Europeans, and we SO enjoyed that she shared her best sources and amazing bargaining skills with us. You see, there are NO price tags. You must go through a sometimes lengthy process to arrive at a final agreed upon price and get out the door with your goodies. At first, this can be intimidating, but once you realize that this is an expected social process and learn the basics you find that you are bargaining “like a Berber woman” very quickly. If you smile, are friendly and respectful, and attempt to walk out the door two or three times, you can get some amazing deals on goods that are already priced low by our standards.

Day two was spent touring some of the many historical sites with our wonderful guide, Mostafa. It was wonderful to experience the city with a knowledgeable “local” and learn more about the history of the city and country while enjoying the amazing architectural decoration that Morocco is known for. We visited the Palais Bahia, an amazing palace built by two different important rulers who hired the best craftsman in the country to fashion the intricate zellij tiles, carve the marble, and paint the intricate cedar wood ceilings throughout. The Musée de Marrakech introduced us to traditional Berber arts and crafts, including carpets from the High Atlas, carved knives, wood with camel bone inlay, ceramics from Fes, and amazingly heavy and elaborate jewelry. Non-Muslims are not allowed in the beautiful mosques that are scattered throughout the city, but we did visit the Ali Ben Youssef Medersa, a Qur’anic school founded in the 14th century that once

housed up to 900 students and is a splendid example of classic Moroccan architecture.

Our Painting Projects

Our four-day “work” week began at Peacock Pavilions as we arrived to assess how to begin on our four main painting projects: an art deco mural on a guest room wall, painted concrete floors in a little boy’s and little girl’s rooms including typography and pattern on closet doors, and a set of stenciled stair risers based on classic Moroccan zelij tile patterns.

Art Deco Mural after Rateau

The art deco mural was inspired by an original gilded floor screen by Armand Albert Rateau that now is housed in the Musée des Arts Decoratifs at the Louvre in Paris. I wanted to make the

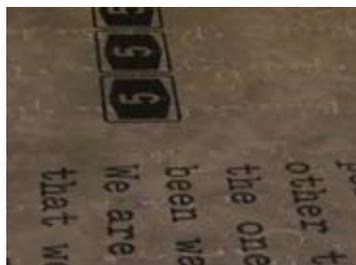
LEFT: Rebecca Hotop and Vicki Shultz use multiple colors of water-based gilt creams to stencil the Art Deco mural through a Modello Designs decorative masking pattern.



ABOVE: Melanie Royals shows off the completed mural, which she designed exclusively for this project at Peacock Pavilions, and is not available through Modello Designs

mural for Peacock Pavilions personal to the space, so redesigned it to include a peacock (of course) as well as animals that are indigenous to Morocco, such as a cheetah and gazelle. The mural is intended to be the “headboard” on the feature wall where the beds will be placed, so an intricate dado that incorporates both Art Deco and Moroccan patterns was created to stretch across the entire wall. This serves to both unite the mural and “ground” it.

The wall space measured approximately 12' wide by 11' tall. Once the mural had been designed and laid out on the computer, it was cut from a Modello Decorative Masking Pattern into eight pieces. To reduce the amount of vinyl needed, I opted to have the scattered flower and star motifs placed using traditional mylar stencils. Once the mural was designed and in place, the actual painting went quite fast thanks to the skill and dedication of the artists who worked on it. Rather than using metallic paint, we mixed water-based gilt crèmes by combining three separate colors of mica powders with Aquacreme. This allowed us to achieve good opacity of color very quickly! Stenciling the three different colors in and around each other helped to give the gold metallic a soft patina look.



Artful Typography

For a young boy’s room we did a very interesting layered typography treatment that had the theme of helping to guide a young man through his youth through words and symbols. We were going back and forth between using one of our Modello labyrinth patterns versus words and quotes on the floor. After some fun computer “play” time, I presented Maryam with a way to combine both. She was thrilled, and it was nice to be able to incorporate meaningful quotes into the overall finish in a unique way. The tiny script running through the background lists Marrakech street names and points of interest while providing a subtle all-over texture that unifies the whole floor. While the labyrinth and script were done with reverse Modellos, the quotes, longitude and latitude



The unique, layered typography floor was designed with a combination of Modello decorative masking patterns and stencils cut by Royal Design Studio. Here, Gwen Ware and Margaret Von Kaenel add the finishing touches



.LEFT; Small flower stencils from Royal Design Studio were used to fill in areas of the mural following the art layout guide posted nearby.

markers and “lucky” numbers were done with oil-based Japan paint through custom mylar stencils. Unfortunately, they do not have the vast selection of products in Africa that we have here in the states, so we were forced to work with the oil-based concrete paint that the floors had been prepped with. Closet doors continue the typography theme in the black, white and gray color scheme.

Zelij Tile Stair Risers

While Marrakech is known for its intricate decoration and bold color schemes, the owners of Peacock Pavilions want to incorporate traditional Moroccan patterns into their home and guest houses in more contemporary and unexpected ways. On my initial painting trip there in May of 2008 we did a series of painted stair risers in one guest house that were based on traditional henna patterns. They turned out so well that Maryam wanted to repeat that same idea in another building, using the theme of graphic black and white images.

I am a huge fan of allover tile patterns, and Morocco is famous for its many different zelij tile patterns. You see them on walls, floors, fountains and tabletops and usually will

I wish that I was better with words. Looking back on this trip I feel... soulful, exotic, sensuous, enlightened, and peaceful, to say the least. —Gwen Ware



Gwen Ware

find multiple patterns and colorways in the same space. Somehow it always looks “right.” We initially thought to just do three or four patterns and repeat them up the stairs. Once I started looking through the many Moroccan design books on my shelf and finding yet another pattern that I loved, though, there was no choice but to do a different one on each of the twenty-one stair risers.

Fortunately the architect husband cut pieces of wood to be painted and installed later, sparing our knees and backs from having to sit and stoop on the stairs for this project. A large table was set up for assembly line stenciling, a fire was lit, and several of our artists were able to sit and easily stencil perfect, crisp repeats of pattern.

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Skylar's Lace

Simple, graphic stenciling of an intricate and large scaled lace pattern rounded out our painting projects. Maryam wanted a simple, almost Scandinavian feel for her daughter's room. Coloring the lace in white and soft grey created a feminine, romantic finish without becoming too "sweet." Daughter Skylar was over the moon with the lace on her floor and even helped a bit with the stenciling!

For Skylar's closet doors, we took some of the simpler floral motifs from the lace pattern and fashioned them into a random, stylized cherry blossom branch that was simply painted white. The final touch was to add some small round mirrors for just the right touch of sparkle.

Robin Johnston, with Skylar



The main cultural difference that sticks out in my mind is that they still care for other people. They are not trying to get ahead in the frenzied sort of way that Americans do. I was blown away by their gentle spirit. They weren't just kind to us, they were kind to the homeless and anyone that crossed their path. They truly believe that it takes a community to raise a child. —Robin Johnston

BELOW: Heather Bruno Sears and Margaret Von Kaenel patiently stencil the wood that has been cut for the stair risers using 21 different stencils from Royal Design Studio. Each design has been taken from the classic zellij tile patterns that Morocco is famous for. **LEFT:** The finished stencil patterns, done in crisp black and white, are laid out to dry once completed.



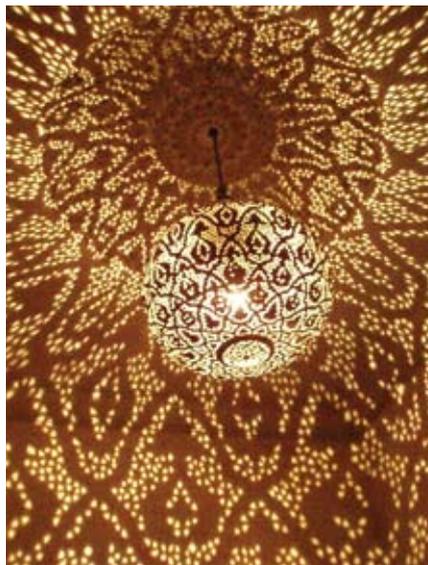
Exploring all the Senses

In addition to the ongoing visual feast that is Marrakech, we were able to indulge some other senses as well; mainly touch, smell, and taste!

Morocco is also famous for its tadelakt plaster, which is a lime plaster made from indigenous lime that is built up in multiple layers. It is then tediously burnished and polished with a stone and sealed with black soap wax. As the saying goes, “it is hard as stone and soft as silk,” and it is! It is used everywhere in Marrakech, from the chicest restaurants to our boutique hotel bathrooms. Most often, it is done in soft earth colors for bathrooms, but the restaurants seem to like deep black, brown, earth red and blue. Pierced metal lanterns cast patterns of lacy light on these walls at night, adding to the already romantic and dreamy quality of the setting.

Tadelakt plaster was and is also traditionally used in the hammams, which are the public baths (men and woman separately, of course) that Moroccans generally go to once a week. Cleanliness is highly important in this culture and involves a lot of exfoliating and that famous black soap. We pampered ourselves with a visit to a hammam/spa that involved a hot steam room, body masque, and a brisk scrubbing, followed by a relaxing massage and then mint tea in the lovely courtyard. It was delicious.

Speaking of delicious . . . enough cannot really be said about how good the food is in Morocco. We gorged and gorged on delicious tagines and cous cous dishes on a daily basis. The fruit, meat and vegetables are fresh and organic, and they are traditionally paired with such things as dried fruit, almonds, preserved lemons, mint, olives and the most amazing combinations of exotic spices. Most of us brought home fragrant



A delicate, pierced metal lantern casts a mesmerizing lacy pattern at lovely La Taniija restaurant

spices from the spice souks, including Ras el Hanout which is basically a “house blend” of the merchant’s best spices. It can include up to thirty-five different spices and herbs such as cinnamon, cardamom, clove, cumin, coriander, paprika, turmeric, nutmeg, mace, etc. Oh, and the best part? They also grow delicious wine grapes in Morocco. Even though it is a Muslim country and the locals don’t drink (in public, at least), wine and alcohol are served in most hotels, riads, and restaurants.

Morocco is a country that has long been a melting pot of different cultures, and they have a very rich past and present that reflects many influences. The country seems to

have one foot in the Arab world and one foot in the European world, which makes it a wonderful balance of the best of all worlds! Each one of us on this trip developed not only a deep bond with each other, but also with this amazing country and its people. I think that somehow, someday, we will all return. ✨



The trip to Morocco was akin to a “magical, mystery tour” . . . it became a rich life experience that moved and inspired us all beyond what we anticipated before our departure. The art and architecture were so exotic, rich and layered with character and timelessness. Everywhere I swiveled my head was a visual feast. . . I felt like a bobble-head doll! All I could do was look all around with wide eyes and smile. Morocco was a place to glean many ideas and inspiration for our work as decorative artists. All of us came home with a slight swagger and deeper sense of style. From the daily life, to the swanky restaurants, to the very special home of dear Maryam, Chris, Tristan, and Skylar, with snow-capped mountains off in the distance . . . everything struck me as extremely beautiful. One day, I stood in the middle of the Jmaa el Fna square . . . slowly rotating 360 degrees . . . intoxicated by the sights, sounds, and smells. I felt in the midst of a dream; snake-charmers, belly-dancers, tribal drummers, spicy smoke swirling around late afternoon sun rays . . . then the prayers and chants from the mosques filled the air.

—Heather Bruno

Heather Bruno, with snake-charmer



Even the simplest of objects are artfully displayed, as evidenced by these mouth-watering mounds of local olives



RIGHT: A vendor displays an amazing array of nuts and dried fruits
BELOW: The famous Jmaa el Fna square, with its bustle of vendors, performers, and onlookers as seen from a nearby rooftop restaurant

I love a trip with a group of women because it doesn't take long to find something you love about EVERY one! I will always have a warm place in my heart for this group: talented, silly, and adventurous. –Cynthia Davis



Cynthia Davis

