



Photo: Lucien Viola, 2019

An infinity of stripes

In the Anti-Atlas regions of Morocco, Berber women sometimes still wear, as they historically have, striated costumes. **Lucien Viola**, an art and textile collector and gallerist living in Marrakesh, presents a first-hand view of the deceptively simple but highly creative striped robes of the Ait Moussa, and **Alexandra Sachs**, a Brooklyn and Zurich-based fellow specialist in Moroccan rugs and textiles, offers a singular view of the southwest Moroccan striped aesthetic

1 Berber haik, Mejjat tribe, Anti-Atlas, southern Morocco, second half 20th century. Wool, 1.47 x 2.76 m (4' 10" x 9' 1"). Lucien Viola collection. All textile photos courtesy Gebhart Blazek

2 Ait Moussa Berber woman enveloped in her haik, Commune Tighirt, Tiznit Province, southern Morocco, 2019

The French photographer Jean Besancenot, in his *Costumes du Maroc* (1942), describes the use of a wool and cotton striped blanket type of garment, the *amendil*, worn over their heads and shoulders by Tiznit women. He also comments that the *amendil* had replaced the use of the traditional haik.

This type of decorated textile was also used by women of the Mejjat tribe (Imejjat in Berber), located about 90 kilometres southeast of Tiznit. The Mejjat is a large and important Berber tribe, who were once known for their fierce warriors. The tribe is divided into four moieties, one of which, the Ait Moussa, is today established in parts of Tighirt Commune, living in 44 different villages. Striated Ait Moussa everyday textiles are among the most spectacular costumes of the Anti-Atlas tribes, and are worn without adornments, fibulas or jewellery.

On vertical looms Ait Moussa women primarily wove rectangular flatweaves of different sizes to be used for different occasions. Smaller pieces were generally woven by one person, with two weavers needed for larger ones. The haik (*afaggou* in Berber), measuring on average 140 x 280 cm, was folded around the body and worn in cold weather. It was also used as a blanket, but never as a floor cover. A somewhat smaller and shorter haik, measuring on average 100 x 150 cm, was worn in warmer weather, in the same way as the haik, and also served as a blanket when needed.

The *tahaikt* (a small haik) was another important type of textile that could be worn as a skirt or a shawl, over the shoulders, and even sometimes as a head and shoulder cover. When a *tahaikt* was woven with only one decorated end, it was folded around the waist with the decorated design showing on the outside and a corner tucked in to hold it in place. This explains the wear



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3 Berber tahaikt, Mejjat tribe, Anti-Atlas, southern Morocco, second half 20th century. Wool, 0.71 x 1.84 m (2' 4" x 6' 0"). Lucien Viola collection

4 Berber haik, Mejjat tribe, Anti-Atlas, southern Morocco, second half 20th century. Wool, 1.20 x 2.00 m (4' 0" x 6' 7"). Gebhart Blazek collection

5 Berber haik, Mejjat tribe, Anti-Atlas, southern Morocco, second half 20th century. Wool, 1.43 x 2.95 m (4' 8" x 9' 8"). Lucien Viola collection

and damage found on the corner portions of some examples. The skirts were also sometimes held in place with cords or with a simple undecorated belt. Otherwise, when the piece was completely decorated, women folded it from one end or the other to show their preferred design for the occasion.

During a recent visit to an Ait Moussa village, I saw an older woman wearing a tahaikt under her nylon skirt. Even though younger girls are always taught how to weave by their mothers, they prefer wearing ready-made clothes purchased in the souks rather than weaving them. The internet has been available for a number of years in all the Ait Moussa villages, and it is no longer surprising to see young shepherd boys and girls in the mountains using their portable cell phones. During their free time, girls prefer watching Turkish or Egyptian television series and films to weaving. The only traditional weaving that is still always worn by young girls is their wedding haik; otherwise, they dislike wearing traditional costumes.

No decorative distinction was made between a wedding haik and an everyday haik, except that the wedding haik had to be new. The bride's mother wove the new haik, a smaller and lighter haik and a tahaikt for her daughter's wedding. Each piece took about ten days to complete. Unlike other Anti-Atlas tribes, other Ait Moussa family members also wove new textiles as gifts for the bride. However, she always wore her mother's new haik for her wedding. This haik was afterwards used on a daily basis. After her wedding the bride loaned her haik to unmarried family girls and close friends, in this way wishing them too to get married.

Haiks were mostly woven in varying shades with natural sheep's wool, or by using coloured wool yarns that were purchased in the surrounding souks, since the Ait Moussa never dyed wool. This is no longer the case, as in 2012 a women's co-operative opened in Boutrouch which taught the weavers how to produce natural dyes. The women also occasionally used other types of woollen yarns and pieces of fabric taken from old commercial garments, called *bouidgharn*, known in other tribes as *boucharouite*. However, *bouidgharn* was preferred for rug-weaving rather than garment-making. The Ait Moussa also occasionally used some cotton yarns.

Ait Moussa women still weave some traditional textiles, which they usually combine with modern souk pieces. During my most recent visit, I asked an older woman to tell me about her weaving technique and to describe how she created the extraordinary and elegant designs on her textiles. She said: 'I use different threads, thick and thin ones, mix and roll them differently to get infinite shades of greys, browns and darker tones and to create contrasts between the striations. Then, at the same time, I place the bands on different levels of the textile, and, at the right time, I add other coloured threads, here and there, to enliven the design... I want them to be attractive because they are made for us women... they are meant to make us look more beautiful when we wear them.'

Instead of weaving apotropaic designs, as is traditionally done on the textiles of other Berber tribes, among the Ait Moussa, the stripes are purely decorative. This allows the weavers much greater freedom and creativity. However, even if these textiles do not bear any visible signs to ward off evil spirits, the weavers follow an established ritual to assure their protection. It is traditionally believed that if the weaver starts to work on the fifth day of the crescent moon, this is sufficient to ward off evil spirits and thus protect the person who is to wear the garment. According to older village weavers, this belief was once challenged by a



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woman who said that it made no sense to follow an absurd old practice and decided to weave whenever she wanted. One day, however, while she was weaving, a young calf came running into her room and went through the loom, totally destroying the installation and the textile. From that day on, everyone in the village has followed their traditional weaving habits.

I would like to thank the Mejjati women and Jamaa from the Boutrouch co-operative, as well as Abdelouahid for Berber translations. LV



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Over time, more and more traditional motifs in textiles are slowly disappearing or being mixed in with other visual influences. Human innovation and technical progress mean that culture is steadily and inevitably changing. Throughout the developed world, television, cell phones and the internet have moved into practically every rural village—and Morocco is no exception.

This flood of globalised information has seen original, localised customs and aspirations being utterly transformed. In today's world the predominant demand is for clothing to be cheaply made, cheap to buy, and swiftly discarded in favour of new garments. Again, Morocco has succumbed like most other countries. It is therefore a matter of importance and urgency to take a closer look at the origin of traditionally handwoven textiles.

If we talk about garments we also talk about fashion. Fashion is an adornment of the human form that is constantly adapted to passing concerns of time and a place. And one of the motivations for making a dress, be it conscious or unconscious, is to define an individual identity within a homogenous culture and ethnicity.

Despite the prevailing circumstances, the traditional form of weaving peculiar to the Anti-Atlas region hasn't vanished completely—though to my eyes it breaks the boundary of the term 'tribal textiles'. And the imagination and effort that has gone in to creating these textiles for everyday practicality is reflected in a profound beauty, one that transcends the limitation implied by treating them as 'cultural artefacts'. Especially, this type of garment reveals what appears to be a somewhat liberated approach within the accepted parameters of traditional design. Despite the reduction of the pattern to stripes only, the overall picture seen in an unfolded garment shows a beautiful flow and freedom.

One can detect a fine sensibility that informs the women during the process of weaving. If we can access this same aesthetic, it allows us to



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look at the textiles with newly opened eyes and appreciate a unique combination of simplicity and charismatic power. Most of the handcrafted textiles have intrinsic properties that cannot fail to trigger an emotional response from the viewer.

A noteworthy characteristic is the almost exclusive use of natural wool. Once we might have given this little thought beyond acknowledging the logic of utilising available local material. But now that our resources are threatened worldwide, wool assumes a preciousness, and seems to draw on the energy of nature itself: the energy of the sun, the heartbeat of an animal, pulsating life.

Even though garments of this type have been made for daily use in the Anti-Atlas—or maybe precisely for that reason—the Berber weavers have created an enchanting effect which could almost be described as painterly or draftsman-like. Each textile has its own personality, following a linear structure that radiates a distinctive vitality.



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6 Tiznit Berber women wearing traditional striped haiks. Mid 1030s by Jean Besancenot

7 Berber haik, Mejjat tribe, Anti-Atlas, southern Morocco, second half 20th century. Wool, 1.17 x 2.04 m (3' 10" x 6' 8"). Alexandra Sachs collection

8 Berber haik, Mejjat tribe, Anti-Atlas, southern Morocco, second half 20th century. Wool, 1.27 x 1.83 m (4' 2" x 6'). Alexandra Sachs collection

All the textiles are woven using the same stringent design vocabulary: horizontal stripes in natural undyed shades of wool ranging from warm to cold hues. Yet innumerable possibilities are available in how that design is executed, what is written or spoken with that vocabulary.

It is beholden on us to take the time to look thoroughly and thoughtfully, to discover up close how the subtlety of the different lines and shades of the wool interact to produce surprising compositions. The entire textile resembles a virtuoso line drawing playing on the contrast between light and shadow, line versus space and depth against surface. The design principle seems to be strict and spartan, exploiting the minimal to maximise the effect.

It is almost irresistably tempting to see them as a visual imprint of the landscape of the region around Ait Bonouh in the Anti-Atlas/Souss-Massa-Drâa area

Depending on how the lines relate to each other, they either make a strong statement or fade into the depth of space. They create horizons or emulate eternity, the entity of the design dependent on each single line: elegant or unwieldy, awkwardly loud or quietly present, broken or intact. With regard to the thickness, crookedness, straightness, wideness or fineness of the stripe and the shading of its colour, in the end it is the interrelationship of these graphic elements that determines the virtuosity and impact of each composition.

How is the idea for the design of these textiles brought into being? It is almost irresistably tempting to see them as a visual imprint of the landscape of the region around Ait Bonouh in the Anti-Atlas/Souss-Massa-Drâa area. But the arrangement of lines, materials and natural hues can equally be viewed as non-representational, and therefore considered as an abstract visualisation. In the end we don't know which interpretation might apply—but does the way we relate to textiles such as these really not matter?

To answer that question, I can only quote a passage from *The Goldfinch* (2013) by the American novelist Donna Tartt, which in my eyes can apply to handcrafted objects in general:

...if a painting really works down in your heart and changes the way you see, and think, and feel, you don't think, oh, I love this picture because it's universal. I love this painting because it speaks to all mankind. That's not the reason anyone loves a piece of art. It's a secret whisper from an alleyway. Psst, you. Hey kid. Yes you... AS ♡