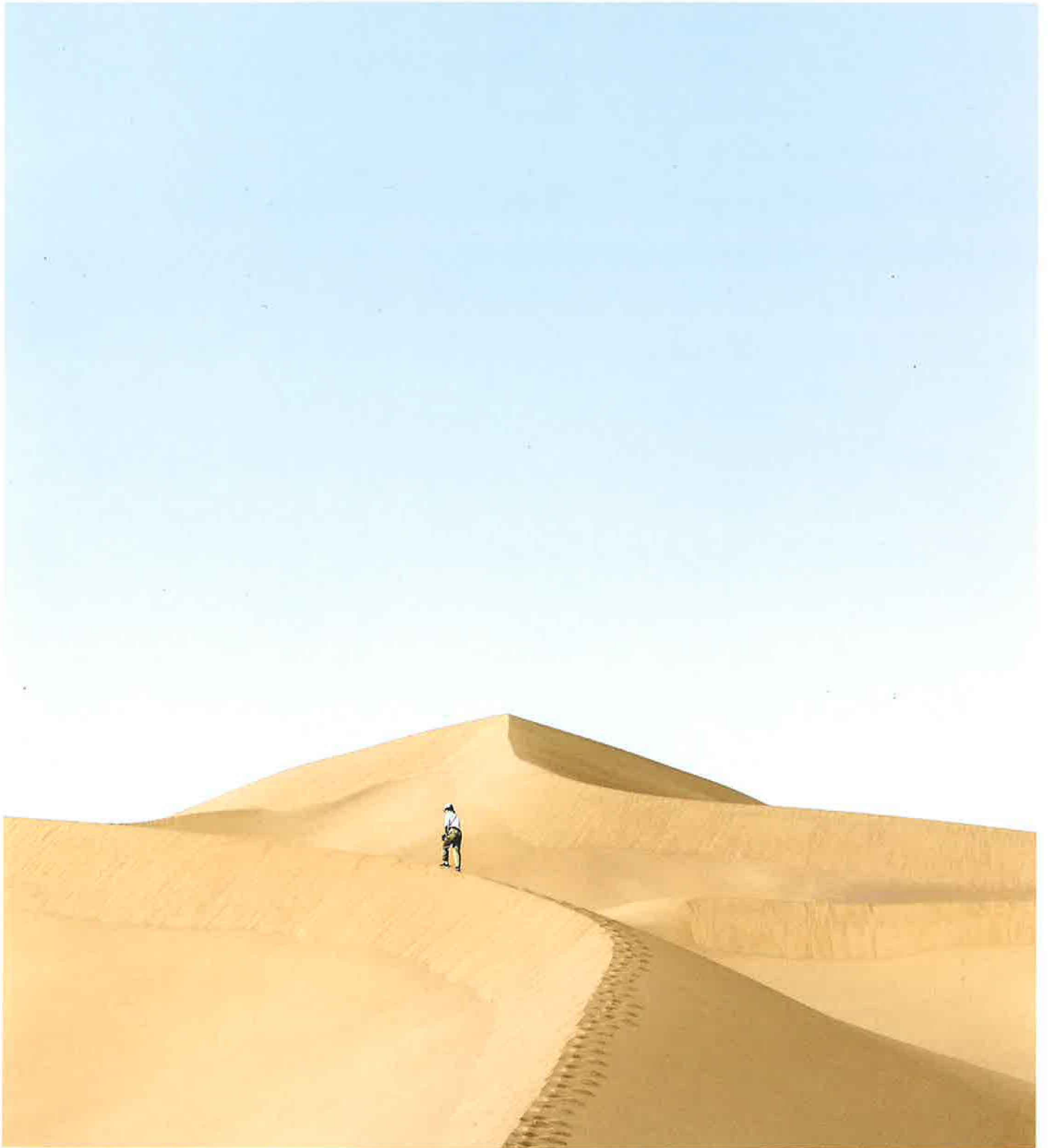


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MAISON DE LA PHOTOGRAPHIE

PORTRAITS OF THE PAST

Words: Zosia Swidlicka Photos: Rich Stapleton





THE COUNTRY WAS RICH IN THE STRANGE AND THE BEAUTIFUL, A
TREASURE CHEST CONTAINING STORIES AND MEMORIES

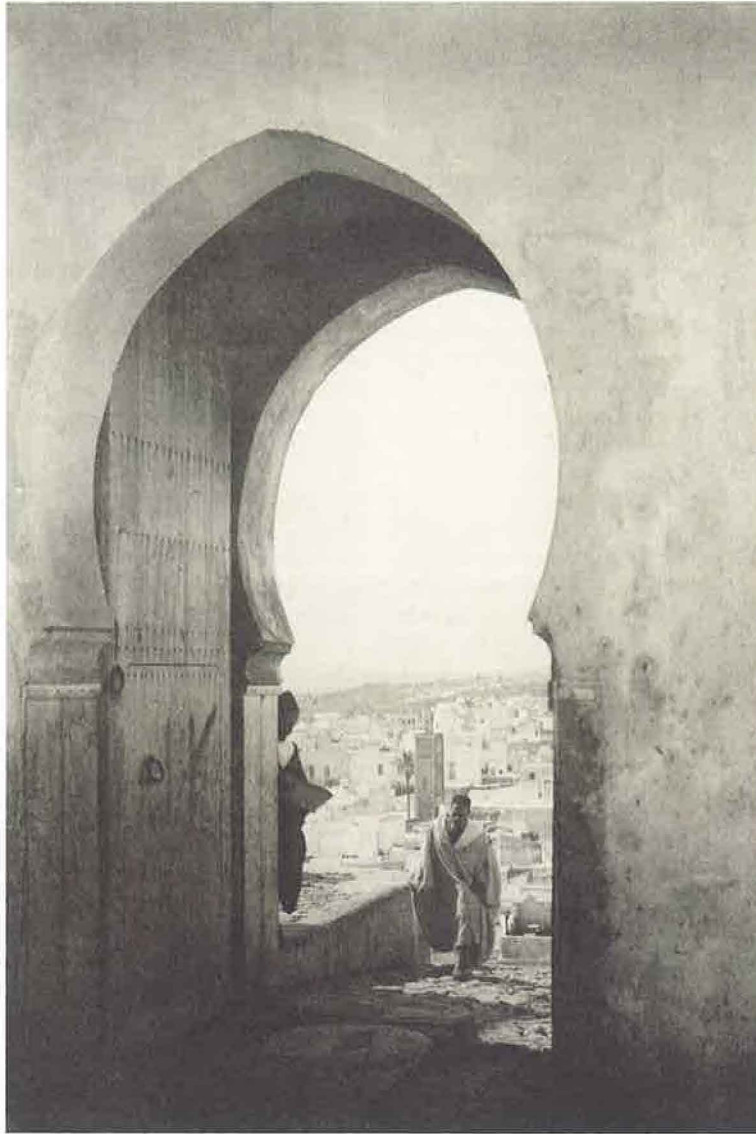
I make a mental note to take a left after the second mosque and duck back out of the doorway. Forcing myself to ignore the shouts of passers by telling me there is nothing here, that it is back the other way, that it is closed, I stifle a seed of doubt in my brain that grows rapidly greater the further from the *souq* I get. I realise I have lost count of the mosques, and I pause. The sun beats down on the ochre walls of the Medina, catching in a flash on the handle of a tea pot. Somewhere, a radio crackles with the sound of a female voice singing, in faultless polyphony with the gruff lilt of the spice merchant next door. A child runs after a rogue watermelon that has detached itself from the pile towering high on the side of the road, leading my gaze further down the empty street. Suddenly, like a beacon of light, I see my destination – Marrakech's Maison de la Photographie.

Opened in 2009, this photographic gallery sets out to display the origins of

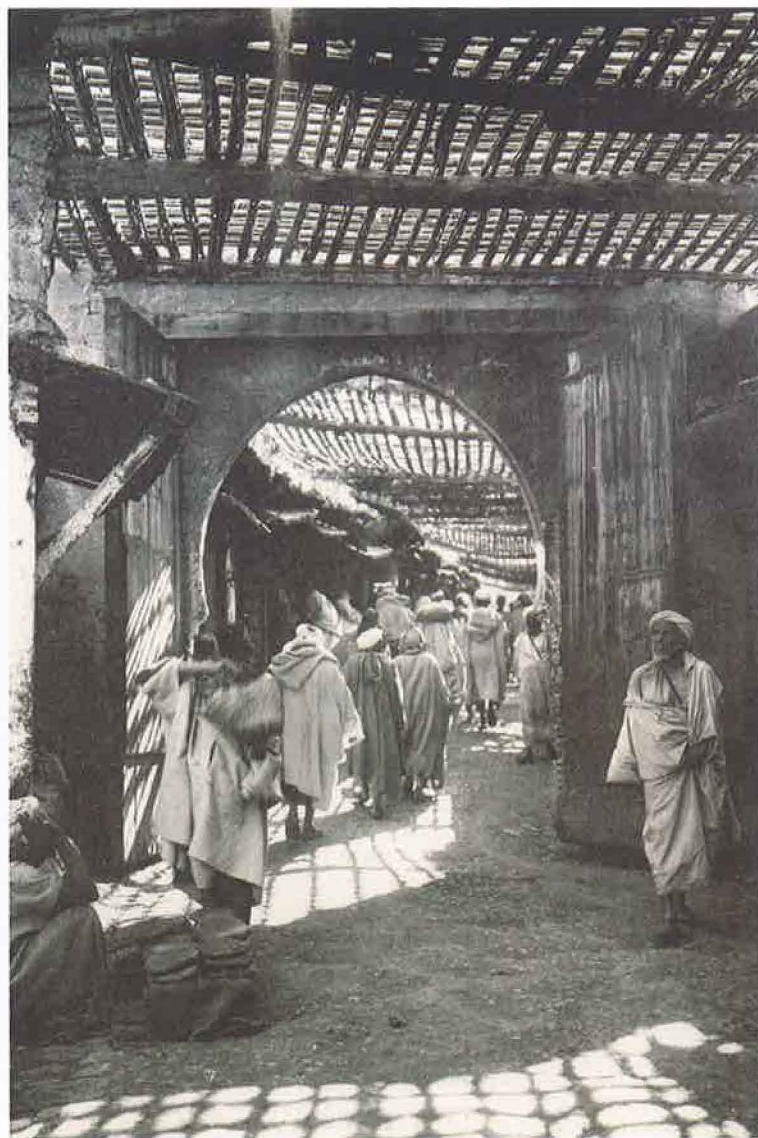
photography in Morocco through the wide eyes of the Grand Tourists who came here at the turn of the 20th century. Seduced by exotic depictions of Moroccan culture, these European and North American artists, writers, and intellectuals documented their experiences through the photographic lens. They presented their findings in intimate portraits and dramatic landscapes, from the busy port city of Tangier, to the remote wilderness of the Atlas Mountains. As the only photography museum in Morocco, the collection includes rare perspectives of Marrakech, a city which was at the time, beyond the reach of all but the most privileged of travellers.

The bright white interior beckons me in further, and as I step gingerly into a floodlit courtyard, eight pairs of eyes stare back at me; a turbaned Berber, a bearded elder, and two women, posing defiantly. These are portraits of the past, yet there is something surprisingly familiar about them. The contours of their expressions





Cavilla. Porte des Portugais, Tanger, 1880



Garaud. Dans les souks, Marrakech, 1920



mirror precisely the facial features of the merchants outside, and the sepia tone of the photographs recalls the earthy colours of the streets I have just left. The eight portraits at the entrance of the gallery form part of its collection of original photos taken between 1870 and 1950. Within the walls of this former *fondouq*, or inn, is contained the history of a people long defined by cultural complexity. Portraits of women of Jewish, Berber, Arab, and slave origin hang side by side in the same alcove. The current exhibition is titled *Astonishing Voyageurs*, a phrase borrowed from a poem by Charles Baudelaire, whose own enchanted eyes soaked up so much inspiration in Morocco when he visited in the 1850s. For him, as for so many of the photographers in the exhibition, the country was rich in the strange and the beautiful, a treasure chest containing stories and memories. The Grand Tourists travelled for the sake of travelling, for the love of discovering the unknown, with perhaps the ultimate aim of finding meaning in life. Following in their footsteps over one hundred years later, I discover not just the stories of the observed, but those of the observers too.

Taking the stairs up a level, I find myself in Marrakech in the 1920s. Shafts of sunlight pierce the thatched roof of the *souq*, landing in stripes on a lone walker as he glides through its narrow passages. In a similar scene, the roofs criss-cross, travelling in parallel towards an unseen vanishing point in the distance, obscured by dust and ageing film, and the rounded edges of an archway frame one of history's lost instants. I continue my circuit on the balcony, discovering yet more stolen moments from daily life a century ago. On the first floor, I peek through the lens of Marcelin Flandrin, a former army photographer who set up a studio in Casablanca in the 1920s. I ascend to the top floor and switch on the light in a darkened room. Scenes of Rabat light up on two autochrome prints using a technique invented by the Lumière brothers in 1907. They employed potato starch on a glass plate to enhance the beauty of the colours. I see a group of men resting against an ancient wall, immortalised in grains of starch. Despite their obvious fragility, the prints have resisted the passing of time, and continue releasing their not inconsiderable energy as yet more years accumulate.

I come out onto the roof terrace and peer down at the *souq* stirring below. In it, the people and places that are so still on the gallery walls are brought to life, seemingly unchanged, having remained faithful to their traditions and customs for generations. The fringing on the Jewish woman's headdress still swings in the breeze, the water fountain still occupies pride of place, and bread is still baked in big batches to be sold from tiny carts in dark passageways. It is a cultural pride that has withstood years of progress. I stay until closing time, reluctantly leaving the gallery and its secrets behind to cross the threshold back into the present. A family on their way to mosque, reminiscent of another family photographed a century go, watch me leave. A young boy races past me on a bicycle, mobile phone in hand, and the illusion is finally broken. My journey has come to an end. ■

