

PIER Outreach: On the Road to Morocco

Where the Middle East is concerned, most people initially think of political strife, religious fundamentalism, and violent conflict. This past summer, PIER-Middle East Studies took a radically different approach to learning and teaching about Middle Eastern culture and society. Rather than playing into simplistic stereotypes of the region, “Arts in Action in the Middle East” looked first at arts and culture, tracing the historical, political, and social impact of the creative arts in the region over time. Thirty-nine educators, hailing from 11 states (CT, OR, IL, TX, GA, NY, MD, DC, NC, RI, and NJ) participated in “Arts in Action” programs this summer, first in a summer institute on Yale’s campus, and then in a field study tour through Morocco. “Arts in Action” was organized and led by Greta Scharnweber, PIER Director, Council on Middle East Studies.

During the New Haven-based portion of the program, teachers learned about political and social themes as portrayed through the arts through lectures, film screenings, and hands-on activities. The topics covered ranged from visual arts and cinema to theater, dance, literature, and music. Sylvia Godlas, an artist who has designed Islamic wood carvings for the Prophet’s Mosque in Medina, led the teachers through an art project on calligraphy and Islamic Art. Jamsheed Akrami, a scholar and critic of the Iranian Cinema, discussed the films of Bahman Ghobadi, an up-and-coming Kurdish filmmaker, and teachers viewed *Marooned in Iraq*, a film about the Kurdish plight on the Iran-Iraq border. Karim Nagi Mohamed, an artist from the Boston area, led workshops in Arabic music, as well as Egyptian and Levantine dance. A full day was spent touring sites in New York City, the highlight of which was a private performance of Soha Al-Jurf’s *Pressing Beyond and In Between*, a theatrical exploration of Palestinian-American identity (curated by Dalia Basiouny of CUNY). Heather Raffo, playwright and performer of *The Nine Parts of Desire* shared thoughts with the audience following the performance.



Following this intensive course, some participants embarked upon the pinnacle of the “Arts in Action” summer program: a field study tour through Morocco, cohosted by Amideast, a Washington DC-based organization dedicated to strengthening understanding between Americans and the peoples of the Middle East and North Africa. Over the course of 10 days, 23 educators, including seven from New Haven, visited five major cities in different regions of Morocco: Rabat, Fes, Marrakech, Essaouira, and Casablanca. The tour was led by Hassan Radoine, a Doctoral Candidate at the University of Pennsylvania in Architecture and Urban Planning. Mr. Radoine, a Moroccan citizen, has worked extensively on the preservation of historic Fes, one of the more significant destinations on the tour. Participants in the Morocco tour learned about Moroccan identity and history through the art, music, food, and customs of each region that was visited. The group heard from leading university professors and scholars, as well as from local artists, musicians, and critics. Most significantly, the Yale travelers were introduced extensively to cultural issues pertaining to the Amazight

(commonly referred to as Berber) communities that populate many of the southern cities and mountain villages. Each day was filled with extensive walking tours, stimulating lectures and discussions, exquisite meals that sampled regional foods, and relaxing evenings spent exploring the old walled cities (*medinas*) or perhaps listening to live classical Arab music played by a local ‘oud musician.



“Arts in Action” travelers were introduced to five major cultural regions of the country: Rabat, the legal and political capital of the country is home to some of the nation’s finest monuments; Fes, situated near the Atlas mountains of central Morocco, is proud to have maintained the largest and best preserved Medieval Islamic city in the larger Middle East; Marrakech, the cultural and social capital of Southern Morocco, is jointly a Berber and Arab city, nestled at the foot of the High Atlas mountain ranges of the South; Essaouira, a sleepy coastal fishing town,

is known for its artisans’ galleries for modern art and traditional wood working; and finally, Casablanca, the cosmopolitan center of commerce, links Morocco with international centers of business in Europe, particularly France.

Teachers of language, literature, art, music, and history joined Yale and PIER for this summer institute journey to Morocco and will share their photos, artifacts, and stories from their journeys with students in K-12 schools as well as community colleges. Plans are currently under way for the next adventure, a 2006 PIER study tour to the Arabian/Persian gulf with a focus on the geopolitics of oil.