

Introduction to Harquus: Part 1

The Disappearance of Traditional Women's Adornment in North Africa

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Harquus.com

Why study and recreate traditional harquus, facial tattooing, and other women's adornments? Simply, these traditional adornments are beautiful, are part of history and tradition, and should be maintained in the body of knowledge for those reasons alone.



Algerian woman with harquus, tattoos, kohl and henna:

70. Scenes et Types Moresque

Modernity and traditional adornment:

Women's traditional adornments in the Middle East and North Africa, especially tattooing, have virtually disappeared during the twentieth century. Data collected by

Susan Searight indicated that a high proportion of Moroccan women were tattooed around 1930, but fewer and fewer were tattooed each subsequent decade. Wealthy, educated, urban women abandoned the tradition first, and rural classes kept the traditions longer.



Algerian woman with traditional cosmetics and tattooing
Detail, 859 A Mauresque ND Phot.

During and after the colonial period in North Africa, the outward appearances of wealth and privilege became increasingly tied to acquiring and displaying western status symbols. Henna, kohl, harquus, and tattooing were traditional expressions of women's beauty, desirability, celebration, and leisure. Through the twentieth century, expensive imported western clothing and western cosmetics replaced home made cosmetics as status symbols. Harquus became associated with the unsophisticated rural poor, while lipstick and an unmarked face became associated with the urban, wealthy, educated, modern woman.



Algerian woman with commercial lipstick, about 1916
876 Types Algeriens
Jeune Femme Kabyle paree de ses bijoux
Levy et Neurdein Reunis, Paris

Religion and traditional women's tattoos:

Islam does not permit tattooing, and Muslim men rarely tattooed. However, most (up to eighty percent) of nominally Muslim North African and Middle Eastern women tattooed, saying, “We have always done this, it is our tradition.” Even then, some women felt the traditional tattoos were sinful, and scorned those who tattooed.

Judaism does not permit tattooing, and North African and Middle Eastern Jewish women were less likely to tattoo than Muslim women. They marked their cheeks and brows with harquus in the same patterns as Muslim women tattooed, and occasionally tattooed because of social pressure. Ethiopian Coptic Christian women tattooed, and Christians who had made a pilgrimage to Jerusalem had "souvenir tattoos."

Present-day women who feel their religious beliefs or social situation prohibit tattooing can wear these patterns in temporary cosmetics if they wish to enjoy the beauty and heritage of this body art.

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