



Exhibition «Harem Fantasies and New Scheherazades»
18/02/2003 - 18/05/2003

Masculine Power, feminine Power

Fortunately, in nearly all things in life, the human factor plays a decisive role. For men, this is difficult to accept, because they believe in the necessary—in other words restrictively rational—nature of their power and their decision-making capacity. For women it is not so difficult, because they know that power is not possessed, but rather it is exercised, and they are well aware of the complexities of the economy of desire. This is the central issue of this exhibition: the two different ways of weaving society, which we could represent as masculine power and feminine power.

Fatema Mernissi says that Arab men have always known how to enjoy women's power, and that Western men have missed out on this, since judging by their way of representing women, they have always thought that "women could only be attractive if stupid". This exhibition is also a manifesto against stereotypes.

Harem Fantasies and New Scheherazades would not have existed without the human factor: a fortuitous encounter—as all encounters are—with Fatema Mernissi, one day in Barcelona, when she visited my office and infused it with her aura, with all the communicative force of a modern-day Scheherazade. We later met up in Morocco and she made me see—and, to a certain extent, understand—some cultural realities of the past and some present-day civic movements that, without her help, would have otherwise passed me by unnoticed. Out there, in the field, I came to understand the banality of all the clichés, even when hidden under the guise of Western sophistication. I was also able to confirm what I had learned many years previously from Michel Foucault: that all social institutions have their counter-power and their resistance. So, too, does the harem.

With Fatema, we travelled to Fez, where she wanted to show me the harem where she lived as a child. Her eyes were bright with expectation as we drew closer to the grand house. And her frustration was visible when they opened the door to us and we entered a labyrinth of tiny apartments for emigrants arriving from the mountains. The harem, Fatema said, was a world and a culture in itself. And its relationships were much more complex than is given to be understood by Western fantasies.

This exhibition also contrasts two sets of imagery: the confabulations of Western Orientalism, and the fantastic constructions from real experience of the harem. Two paths that cross at a historical moment: at the time when Kemal Attaturk prohibited the harem in Turkey, Matisse was painting his *Odalisque with red trousers*. Europe was distant from reality.

The direct power of men, incapable of self-question, and the capacity to subvert that power, represented by Scheherazade as she traps the Sultan in her never-ending story of *The Thousand and One Nights*: here is the idea that runs through this exhibition, which evokes historical, cultural and artistic memory to lead us to a globalised world right in the midst of a transformation, in which the new Scheherazades are playing a decisive role in awakening civil societies whose voice was largely unacknowledged.