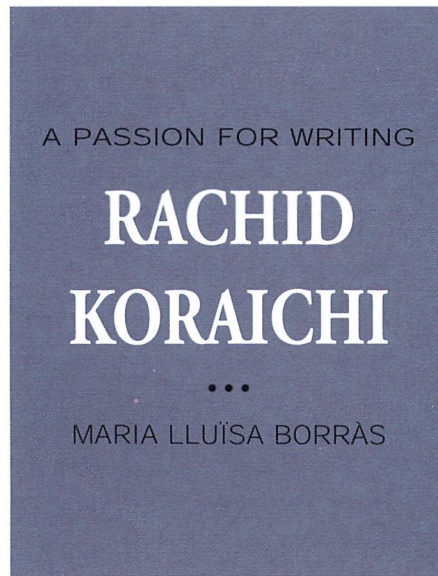


I arrive in Avignon by night. Rachid is waiting for me on the platform and he takes me to Saint Quentin la Poterie where he lives in an old, recently renovated house which the local council reserves for guest artists. It is all very simple, tidy and bare. Rachid sets about brewing a pot of his unmistakable tea – the recipe remains a secret, but the aroma takes me back to several different periods of his work which I have had the opportunity to follow closely over the years. Rachid Koraichi's work has spanned decades and all artistic categories from etching to tapestry, silk to ceramics, painting to sculpture and installations.

He starts by picking up the thread of a long conversation which we had in Havana's cathedral square last May, during the Sixth Biennial. In his very rapid French, without pausing for breath (as if he feared he would run out of time to say everything he wanted), he tells me that now, at last, at the famous Le Chêne kilns in neighboring Arduze, he finally has the chance to remake the 21 monumental urns which were destroyed the first time round. He had originally made them in the Guellala workshops in Djerba, in an almost biblical atmosphere of peace and serenity, far from the crowds of tourists. By autumn 1995 they had already been painted and were in the kiln. The intricate, detailed calligraphy covering the urns reproduced the sacred texts of the great 12<sup>th</sup> century Sufi master Ibn al Arabi, author of over 400 books which bear witness to his open spirit, his tolerance and profound mysticism. Ibn al Arabi also lived in Andalucia before crossing the Mediterranean and remaining in Syria until his death.



– I had been working on the urns for several months. I had shaped them on the wheel, waited for them to dry, and then, after the first firing, I painted like crazy for days on end until all the surfaces were covered in Ibn al Arabi's best texts, alternating with designs based on signs and symbols. All 21 urns were in the huge kilns at Guellala when suddenly, that September in 1995, in a region where it had not rained for four years,



Rachid Koraichi. *Voile indigo*. Paint on silk, 200 x 300 cm. Photo: D.R.

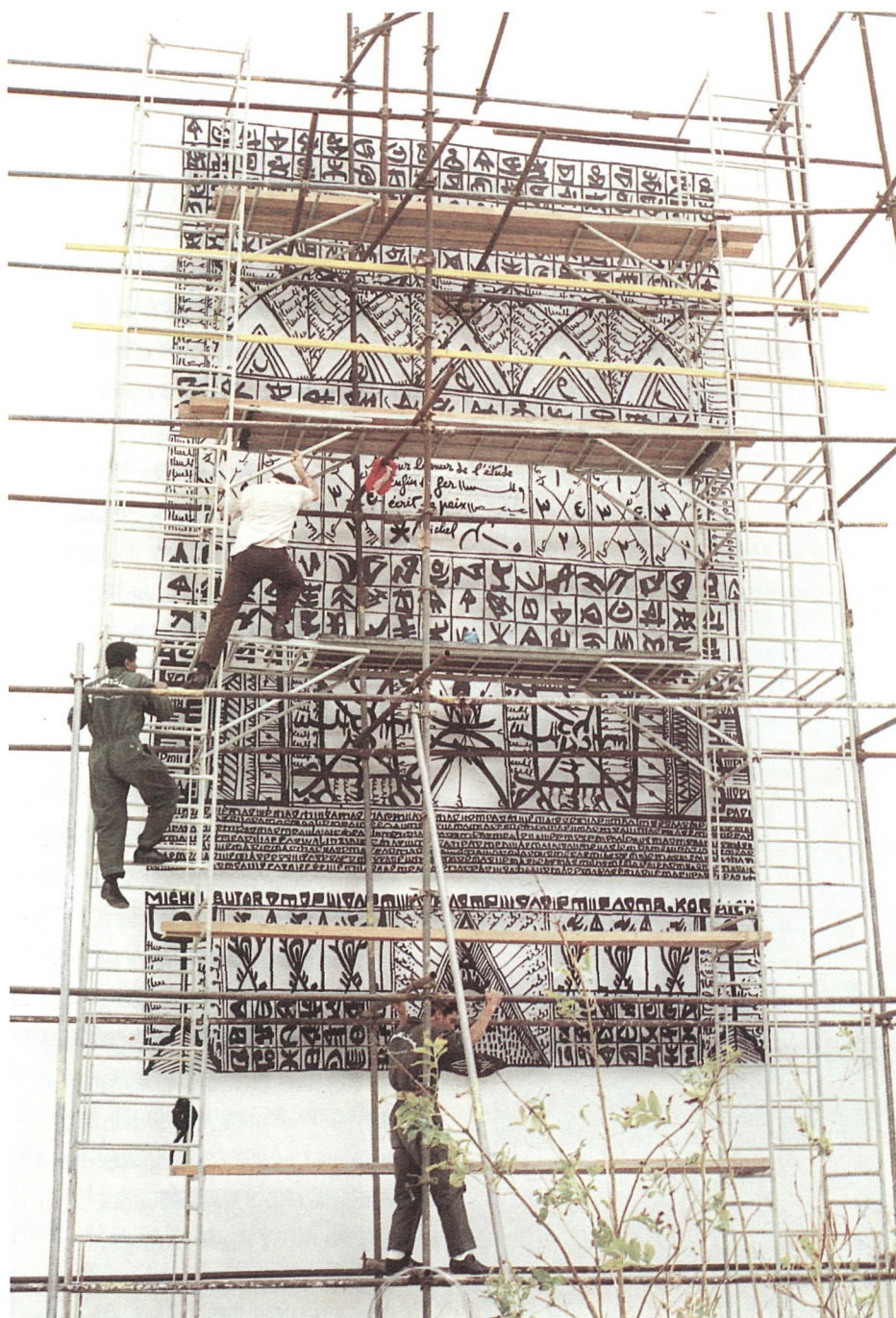
there was the most terrific rainstorm in the middle of the night. I was woken by the storm at midnight and I ran to the kilns where the urns had been baking for three days, just praying that those huge kilns which had held out since Roman times would make it through the storm. But even before I got there, I could see that the roof of the workshop had caved in completely. Inside, the kilns were totally destroyed: everything was just a big muddy mess.

The next day at breakfast time, people start arriving at the house. The mayor of San Quentin, who has been consistently re-elected for the last 12 years and is the driving force behind the village's transformation into a ceramics center. Also, a photographer, a journalist from Nîmes, and several friends. There are plans for a trip to neighboring Arduze, to the workshop where Rachid has rebuilt the 21 urns. He explains:

*There is an age-old tradition of ceramics here. They used to make the so-called "Vases d'Arduze", which were one and a half meters tall, commissioned by Henry IV in the 16<sup>th</sup> century. Strangely, they were made by Protestant ceramists and so, following their disappearance after the Edict of Nantes, their manufacture was apparently doomed. But two centuries later, it was brought to life again.*

Jean Pierre Chassériau, a descendent of Ingres's most famous disciple, shows us a piece from that period. It is a little chipped but the characteristic floral motif remains intact.

The 21 urns stand before us, freshly painted. The clay is still slightly damp, and they are ready to go back in the kiln. There are 21 of them because Rachid's work always revolves around the number



Rachid Koraichi.

7. They are 1'40 meters tall with a diameter of 70 cm. They are truly magnificent.

— To paint them, I put them upside down and always start at the bottom. I don't make any preparatory studies – at most I might have a few jottings at hand in my notebook. As in the etchings, Arabic is written from left to right rather than right to left. I use the sentences

about divine love, tolerance and friendship among all men which Ibn al Arabi spread throughout the Islamic world in the 12<sup>th</sup> century, from Al-Andalus to Syria.

— And what about the signs?

— One leads me to another, one figure to the next, completely spontaneously because I try to find a sort of balance of forms.

When I ask him why Ibn al Arabi he replies:

— Because he should be a point of reference now that philosophy, humanities and the study of other cultures is increasingly excluded from the education of young people, not only in my country, Algeria, but everywhere else. Since Independence, school syllabuses in Algeria are terrible. They exclude everything, not only everything related to French culture, but also all other native cultures like the Berbers, the Twaregs, the Mozabites... Since the mass reinstatement of Arabic in 1962 lots of fundamentalist teachers were brought in from Nasser's Egypt, because the schools were thought to be lacking qualified staff to teach in Arabic. But because they failed to understand the role French could play in the diffusion of Arabic cultures, they simply fought it cloak-and-dagger. It got to the point where the children, under the influence of these fanatical teachers, used to report their parents for speaking French so that appropriate measures could be taken. The fundamentalist movement is full of young people who were educated in this way. And their own parents are so terrified that, for example, even those who never used to respect the Ramadan, now keep to it strictly out of fear.

Rachid Koraichi (Aïn Beda, 1947) is one of the most important figures in contemporary Algerian art. His early work centered around the infinite variations in Arabic calligraphy, treating each character as an individual and obtaining images of considerable strength and expressive power. His *Etchings from Exile* (an impressive series of etchings crowned by a beautiful, large-scale silk painting) are more like chapters of a diary in which Koraichi reveals his very

fertile memory. Despite evoking events and people from the past, he voluntarily renounces nostalgia for days gone by, remaining firm in his belief that there are things which never die but which, like the phoenix, rise from their own ashes time and time again.

It is difficult to know what to admire most in Rachid Koraichi: the perfection of his technique as a highly accomplished etcher, his passion for writing or the expressive power of his images. Although he started out using the beautiful, intricate forms of traditional calligraphy, making each sign or symbol reminiscent of a certain figure or character, he soon widened his horizons and extended his highly versatile creative domain to include ceramics and textiles.

The steles, the stone and metal pyramids positioned like suggestive installations, the ceramic murals integrated into architecture, the painted silks and magnificent tapestries and, of course, the impressive etchings; these are all milestones of a unique collection of work in which East and West, tradition and modernity, all converge in one of the most relevant figures of contemporary art, by which I do not refer solely to contemporary North African art.

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— Your life has not been easy. You spent your childhood under military oppression and when Algeria finally gained independence, the problems worsened until they culminated in today's horrific situation. Were you happy as a child?

— I was named Rachid after the founders of the Kaaba, the Rashitas, the name of the prophet. I was born in the Aurès region, which was marked by the War of Independence, and as a child I witnessed the worst atrocities. Alongside my brothers, I saw my father being

tortured and my grandmother's house ransacked. I studied Latin and Greek at the Classics Liceo in Constantine. The teachers were French and I soon learned that not all French people were the same: there were teachers who belonged to the OAS and others who were really great with us. Then I went to the Academy of Fine Arts in Algiers: an excellent school in a beautiful new, modern building overlooking the city, surrounded by park land. The teachers, who were artists, are now my friends. It was a golden age: the



Rachid Koraichi.

age of the Black Panthers, of Carmichael, of Che. Algiers hosted the Pan African Festival which encouraged black American artists to come into contact directly with African artists. At that time, Algiers was a sort of flagship, a meeting place for freedom movements. The city had it all: it was sensual, humane and full of cultural resources. It could have been the California of Africa. Not by chance is it the geographical center of the world.

— All that, of course, was during

Algeria's first independent government, led by Ben Bella.

— The worst thing about the Algerian war, which lasted 8 years from 1954 to 1962, is that the page was turned too quickly on it. There were so many massacres, more than a thousand casualties, countless people missing, and the communist leaders were eliminated without a trace. But there were no prosecutions, no trials or convictions whatsoever. Nobody ever took the trouble to declare that these atrocities should never happen again. Nobody was proven guilty, nobody admitted responsibility and many of those who were guilty continued in power.

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— Where did you get the idea of painting huge ceramic urns?

— The Cultural Center in Berlin and the Museum of Granada invited me, and nine other artists, to take part in the opening ceremony of Granada's first Archaeological Museum, in April 1995. I asked them which was the first piece to have been found during the excavations and they showed me a wonderful urn, which seemed to me to be a good symbol of the origins of the Mediterranean. It reminded me of Tarek Ibn Ziyad's famous words on arriving on Andalusian shores ("Behind us is the sea and before us, the enemy"), and also of Leon the African's voyage, from Granada to Djerba, skirting North Africa. This was exactly the same journey that I had just made, but the other way round: from Djerba to Granada. It was not the first time I had been intrigued by ceramics. I had already used the technique in a 38 meter long wall for a building in Algiers. Back in 1983, I was commissioned to create a mural painting and I realized that only ceramics would stand up to the passing of time.

Why were you commissioned to make a tapestry for the library in Limoges?

I was on the island of Djerba when I heard that the City of Limoges was holding a competition for the creation of a large tapestry for its library. Despite having a lot of work at the time,

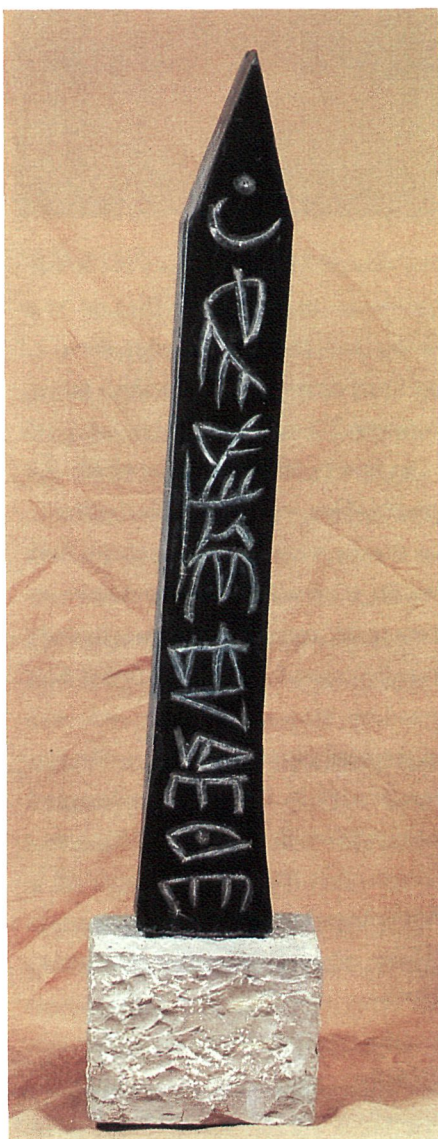
**I decided to enter straight away.**

**First, because tapestry is one of my favorite techniques:** I have made many tapestries in Tunisia, with several different craftsmen, especially one master tapestry-maker who had trained in Aubusson. And second because it was commissioned for a place which is very closely linked to the written word. I have a great passion for writing, for text and calligraphy, as can be seen in most of my work; I almost always use signs and symbols from different regions of the world, and from the work of friends of mine who are writers. I was also impressed by the fact that the competition's organizers completely respected the artist's freedom: unlike most commissioned work, the theme of this piece was of the artist's choice.

— What did it mean to you that the city of Limoges chose you?

— I was quite overcome that they chose me, an African, when so many local governments are pro-exclusion. I was born in the Aurès but Paris is my second spiritual home. Speaking French is very important for me, it is an unquestionable link between two cultures which are very different yet enrich each other through these differences. I designed my tapestry in line with this idea, as a kind of opening, a series of threads sewn together in space to strengthen the links which exist between men, whoever they are and wherever they come from. Creating a piece for a French library which is inspired by the *Blue Koran* from the

Kairuán library (of which some pages are held in London and Paris), is like a symbol of tolerance. For the same reason I wanted to pay homage to three writer friends: Mohammed Dib, Michel Butor and René Char.



Rachid Koraichi.

— My work has come into contact with theirs on other occasions. I have worked, and continue working, with Michel Butor and Mohammed Dib. I took part in a homage to René Char which was held in Avignon's Palais des Papes in 1990, and with Michel Butor, at the *Salomé* exhibition organized by the

Georges Pompidou Center in Paris that same year. At the moment I am working on an album of lithographs and hand-written illustrated texts with Mohammed Dib. I wanted to integrate texts by these three authors into the Limoges tapestry, both in French and in Arabic, rewriting the letters and symbols back-to-front so that it could only be read with the help of a mirror.

— Apart from paying homage to these writer friends, what is the meaning behind this piece?

— I have tried to reflect in the tapestry my love for books, for paper, manuscripts, the sheer smell and color of ink. I designed it in the image of the *Blue Koran* of Kairuán, like a large, indigo blue page which absorbs the light; a great embroidered or illustrated page, with golden silk radiating color. I avoided any kind of decorative elements and kept to a strict linear composition: an assemblage reminiscent of the library shelves, full of signs in ancient Greek, Latin, Arabic, Tuareg, Sumerian, Egyptian and Babylonian. An evocation of the relief sculptures of King Darius, and of the Elamites, the Old Testament and the *Bhâgavata Purana* and a reflection, in filigree, of the square composition of the two Roman mosaics situated in the middle of the library. I have also used various symbols which are dear to me, and which can be found in all cultures: the sun, the crescent moon, the star (to guide the shepherd, sailor or reader), boats (voyages), spirals (the dynamism of life), pyramids (existence), a raised hand (peace), fish (eternal life), the heart (spirituality), the tree (original unity). I hope that all those who contemplate the tapestry will be able to find their own wishes in it, and also a reply to those wishes.