

The Old Convent Garden in the Medina

By Catherine Lefebvre

A convent in Tunis. A garden. A garden in the city. In the medina. An old, historic garden.

A space which, by definition, is going to attract the attention of visual artist Maria Dubin.

For long periods of her life, Maria Dubin has been living and working in Tunis. The inspiration from Tunisia has embedded itself and has left its indelible stamp mark on Maria's oeuvre. Although Maria lives in Denmark, the influence from Tunis and the medina is massively present and altogether visible and close at hand.

There are only two gardens left in the medina, and after having heard about the cloister and the garden that belongs to it, this place becomes the epicenter of Dubin's immersion and artistic activity for a period of time in 2022.

With a great deal of intensity, Maria Dubin creates a series of pencil drawings that point toward the essence of the garden and the vital importance of the medina. These drawings were exhibited as a pop-up exhibition inside the chapel in the old abbey, and they were subsequently brought home to Denmark.

Here, Maria Dubin took them with her into her studio, and the process continued. And the pencil drawings eventually came to be source models for a series of oil pastels, which were anointed with the title, 'The Old Convent Garden in the Medina'. In this way, the oil pastels were being created in Copenhagen on the basis of the primary source, that is to say, from particular pencil drawings created during those important moments in Tunis.

The pastels embody a sense of nearness and in their color composition they describe the unique atmosphere that is present in the garden and the surrounding medina. At the same time, the pastel works stand as expressions of the artist's recollection of the colors and the shapes in the garden and in the medina, which have come to be materialized in the time after her trip to Tunis – back home in Copenhagen.

The garden theme is quite powerful and has not emerged randomly, from out of the blue. Earlier on, Maria has been dealing with gardens that are, in one way or another, iconic and somehow speak to us. For example, the natural and wild gardens at Rungstedlund that belonged to and were tended by the Danish writer Karen Blixen

(1885-1962), came to establish a point of departure for a group of new pieces, back in 2016, when Maria Dubin, having made a thorough study of the garden's space and the individual flowers, created new works that were engaged in the garden and commented on it. In Tunis, hundred-year-old subtropical trees, olive trees and palm trees adorn the garden. At Rungstedlund, hundred-year-old beech and oak trees adorn the patches of soil that Blixen had under her wings for her whole life. Both gardens touch Dubin, and it seems as if she is revolving around capturing what could be called 'the garden's soul'. Everything that is altogether special and unique, which render this very spot on earth something altogether special, and rife with spirit.

Today, this garden in Tunis next to the building that is now called Dar Meso houses an international artist residency, which was brought to Maria Dubin's attention by Hayet Larnaout, who spent her time in the nunnery as a child. The nuns opened up what eventually became Hayet Larnaout's avid interest in books. Back at that time, the convent's library was a fertile and luxurious space for immersion and learning.

Dar Meso was constructed between 1887 and 1908 by the Frenchman, Alain Fournials. Fascinated as he was by the oriental garden, as a prototype, Fournials endeavored to establish this paradise on earth. Fournials died in 1927. In the wake of his passing, the house and the garden were passed further to various religious communities, who made use of the place for beneficence.

Maria Dubin's striking series of works from the old convent garden and the medina stands as a testimony to Maria Dubin's unbounded affection for Tunisia and her urge to share this with the whole world. With the art of building bridges between cultures. From Rungstedlund to Tunis. The works from the medina in Tunis have been exhibited in Lisbon, in November 2022, at a pop-up exhibition, and they are now returning home to Tunis, to be seen. The artist's gaze on the local garden is a forerunner for these works, and seeing as they have partly been created in Copenhagen, Dubin's memory is also being put into play here. The memory of the sumptuously exquisite and alluring Tunisian gardens.

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Translated by Dan A. Marmorstein