

# EXHIBITION *ART SHE CRAFTED* OPENS ON 16 JANUARY AT WERELDMUSEUM ROTTERDAM: *REVALUING WOMEN MAKERS AND KEY FIGURES IN ART AND CULTURE WORLDWIDE*

From 16 January 2026, Wereldmuseum Rotterdam presents *Art She Crafted*: an exhibition showcasing how women – across the globe and throughout the centuries – have shaped, and continue to shape, art and culture. Guest curator Rajae El Mouhandiz selected dozens of stories that reveal how women, despite systemic exclusion and class barriers, played an indispensable role as makers, patrons, collectors, innovators, and trailblazers. Through international art, fashion, photography, and design, these stories come to life, demonstrating that the table of art history is far longer than is often assumed.

*“Art She Crafted shows that women were never merely subjects in art – they were its architects. This exhibition brings their stories together and celebrates a global legacy that is much older, broader, and richer than we tend to think.”*

–Rajae El Mouhandiz, Guest Curator

## A LONGER TABLE THAN IMAGINED

The intergenerational and multidisciplinary exhibition highlights, among other things, that art history is not a neutral succession of styles, but is shaped by those who had access to resources, space, and recognition. For instance, the Egyptian pharaoh Hatshepsut (1505–1458 BCE) used her power to promote large-scale building programmes and religious art. Empress Wu Zetian (624–705), during the Tang dynasty, sparked a cultural renaissance by supporting ateliers, calligraphers, and artisans. Their stories show how women wielding political and spiritual authority profoundly influenced artistic and intellectual production – often laying the foundations for collections and cultural forms that would later become part of museums.

The stories in *Art She Crafted* also reveal that women’s creativity has been a constant driving force. A global modernity emerges, for instance, through the work of Baya Mahieddine (1931–1998), who, at the age of sixteen, made her breakthrough in Paris with a wholly distinctive visual language that inspired artists such as Picasso and Matisse. And through Hanae Mori (1926–2022), the first Asian designer to be admitted in 1977 to the Chambre Syndicale de la Haute Couture in Paris. Mori helped open up the international fashion world to non-Western designers. In her creations, she interwove Japanese textile traditions with Western couture techniques, resulting in a refined cultural cross-pollination in which both traditions meet on equal terms. Their work demonstrates that the engine of innovation was never exclusively European or male.

The exhibition also features artists who use art as a force for change. Shirin Neshat (1957–) explores in her photographs and video works how power and religion are deployed to regulate women’s bodies. The graphic work of Laila Shawa (1940–2022) exposes the realities of conflict and ideology in Palestine. Their powerful visual languages underline that art in the 20th and 21st centuries not only voices critique but also imagines alternative futures and strengthens communities.

## A CONTEMPORARY RENAISSANCE AS CATALYST

For guest curator Rajae El Mouhandiz, *Art She Crafted* emerged from the realisation that we are in the midst of a contemporary renaissance: a new period of flourishing in which a young generation of women makers merges tradition with innovation, and in which radical, future-oriented voices resonate across the world. This is not a return to the past, but a forward gaze: interdisciplinary, intersectional, and deeply rooted in both personal and cultural emancipation.

Within this new movement, various artists are working on new stories in their own unique ways. April Bey creates colourful textile installations in which Afro-futuristic and feministic worlds intersect. In Zoubida, Sophia Kacimi uses hand-woven brocade and Tarz Fassi embroidery to create new forms, thereby revaluing the craftsmanship of Fez.

Joana Choumali embroiders photographs and creates meditative, layered landscapes that explore introspection and recovery. Designers such as Rei Kawakubo – who radically broke with conventions surrounding the body and clothing in the 1980s and put fashion on the map as an art form – are also important figures in this renaissance. Malak Mattar, who recently organised the much-discussed Together for Palestine concert at Wembley London, began painting in Gaza and later worked in Istanbul and London. She translates her personal experiences into powerful colours and shapes, demonstrating that female voices, from antiquity to the present day, cannot be erased.

For Rajae El Mouhandiz, these contemporary makers are living proof that women's legacy in art and culture not only has deep historical roots, but also a vibrant and urgent future. Their work serves as both inspiration and impetus for the exhibition, demonstrating that women's creativity is not only preserved in archives but is unfolding once again today – unmistakably and in full view.

#### UNIQUE GLOBAL APPROACH

The exhibition combines eras, continents, and disciplines into a single, integrated narrative. It revalues both institutionally recognised and everyday forms of makership and makes visible the social inequalities at play. Some women gained access to academic and artistic spaces through networks or family, while others remained unseen. Rachel Ruysch (1664–1750), for example, achieved international renown as a painter thanks to her scientific family circle. And Maria Sibylla Merian (1647–1717) was able to undertake groundbreaking natural-historical work because she had exceptional access to the colonial expeditions of the time. Murasaki Shikibu (around 973–1014/1025), too, could enter literary and artistic circles through her position at the Japanese Heian court. She authored what is considered the first novel in world literature. The exhibition features a hanging scroll painting depicting Shikibu. This individual image contrasts with the collective art forms in the exhibition, such as Palestinian tatreez embroidery and Shipibo ceramics from Peru. Through this art and without individual recognition, generations of women preserved knowledge, rituals and identity.

From textiles, embroidery, and ceramics to avant-garde fashion, art, and contemporary photography, *Art She Crafted* shows how women makers and key figures – from queens to activists, and from autodidacts to collectors – have structurally contributed to artistic periods of flourishing. Through this intersectional lens – who was able to create, for whom, and under what conditions – a layered counter-narrative emerges. Visitors will leave *Art She Crafted* with a perspective on art and cultural history enriched by diverse viewpoints.

*Art She Crafted – The Power of Women in Arts and Culture* – can be visited at Wereldmuseum Rotterdam from 16 January to 27 September 2026.

#### ABOUT RAJAE EL MOUHANDIZ

Rajae El Mouhandiz is an interdisciplinary artist, maker, and curator working at the intersection of art, heritage, and social change. As the founder of the Ellae Foundation, she develops projects and productions centred on new narratives and markets, creating space for underrepresented voices within the arts and the cultural canon. With a background in classical music, jazz, soul, and contemporary storytelling forms, El Mouhandiz moves effortlessly between disciplines and continents. Her work repeatedly poses the question: who is seen as culturally valuable, and who decides that?

Her approach is intersectional, politically aware, and oriented towards building connections across generations, communities, artistic disciplines and worlds. *Art She Crafted* is the result of more than eight years of research, fieldwork, and international collaboration. As the guest curator, El Mouhandiz brings together historical depth and present-day urgency, with a sharp focus on representation, class differences, power, and creative agency.

Her museum work has previously been presented at institutions including KØN – Gender Museum Denmark (former Kvindemuseet Århus) (*MUSLIMA*), Stedelijk Museum Schiedam (*Modest Fashion: An International Phenomenon in Art and Fashion*), the Venice Architecture Biennale at San Giorgio Maggiore (*The Majlis: A Meeting Place*), and most recently M7, Doha/ Qatar Museums (*Amazigh Hair Couture*), as well as on various national and international stages through her performances. With *Art She Crafted*, El Mouhandiz invites visitors to look beyond the familiar chapters of art history and to contribute to a richer, more inclusive canon in which women worldwide become visible both as makers of significance and as key players in the creative economy.

### ARTISTS

Fong Leng

Amrita Sher-Gil

Jeanne Lanvin

Maïmouna Guerresi

Amina Agueznay

Shirin Neshat

Malak Mattar

Rei Kawakubo

Saida Bennoude Azzabi

Esma Yigitoglu

Laila Shawa

Naqsh Collective

Safia Farhat

Singh Twins

Sophia Kacimi

April Bey

Baya Mahieddine

Dora Maar

Simone Rocha

Hanae Mori

Yasmin Mansour

*And many other, known and unknown, makers from Tonga, Mexico, the Amazon, and other places.*