

MARRAKECH

Meet the artist bringing Moroccan culture to celebrity photo shoots



Just the facts

Hassan Hajjaj

Age 58 Occupation Artist, photographer and designer
Lives London and Marrakech
Fun fact Hajjaj is frequently labelled as the 'Andy Warhol of Marrakech'

→ **Morocco-born Hassan Hajjaj** is best known for his vibrant portraits that see colourful collisions of Moroccan traditions with Western labels – and show his subjects looking seriously cool. Ahead of the 1-54 Contemporary African Art Fair in Marrakech (22-23 February), where his work is on show, Hajjaj talks to us about his roots and what it's like shooting with the stars.

I didn't set out to become an artist. I moved to London when I was 13, left school at 15, and was unemployed for a few years. I ran underground parties and opened a streetwear boutique in Covent Garden in 1984. I started meeting lots of creatives: musicians, DJs, photographers, filmmakers and artists – that was my schooling.

I wanted to capture the spirit of a society when I started mixing Western labels with Moroccan traditional dress and designs. I saw that magazines and photographers were only using Morocco as an exotic backdrop, so I decided to do

my own fashion shoots to show my own people, my own experience. It was, and still is, about making something out of nothing, using cheap materials and making people look grand, spectacular – like a rock star.

Being asked to shoot with big names like Madonna and Will Smith is great recognition, but I'm not striving to be a celebrity photographer. Working with Cardi B for *New York* magazine was something I was so happy to be part of, to capture that moment when she was blowing up. But it was the ordinary people who I first took photos of that got me there – I don't want to forget what got me there.

The 'Andy Warhol of Marrakech' tag is like a tattoo on my back, but I try not to let it tire me. Some journalist started it in the '90s as my work got popular, but it's not really something I've said of myself. It did inspire a label of mine, though: Andy Wahloo, after my friend – the singer Rachid Taha – called me that. It's an

Arabic slang for 'I have nothing'.

It feels like there's something exciting cooking in Marrakech right now. There's a spotlight on the city and a new generation of artists, but in every way it's become more lively – it used to have a village vibe. It's got the mixture of old and new, low and high-end, so whatever people come for, wherever they're from, they immediately fall in love with it.

The 1-54 Art Fair is a win for Africa and its artists. I've been involved with it since (founder) Touria El Glaoui had the idea, before the first fairs in London and New York. She has done something very, very important for art in Africa, so it's great to see the fair in Marrakech, bringing it back to the continent. *Catch some of Hajjaj's work at the 1-54 Contemporary African Art Fair on 22-23 February. 1-54.com*

Rock stars and rebels
Hajjaj's works include *Arfoud Brother*; *White Dotted Stance*; *Cardi B*, *Unity*; and *Naabz Chanel* (clockwise from top left)

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