Beat: Arts

C.PEGARD CULTURE MINISTERS ONE FESTIVAL FRANCE & MOROCCO MEET AT FONTAINEBLEAU

FOR ART HISTORY FESTIVAL

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USPA NEWS - During the ministerial visit, French Culture Minister Catherine Pegard welcomed er countrepart, Moroccan Youth, Culture and Communication Minister Mohamed Mehdi Bensaid and followed a programme that moved from gardens to music, from the Moroccan pavilion to the art book fair, projecting the image of a shared cultural dialogue between the two countries. Yet on the ground, another reality imposed itself just as forcefully: access. Reporting on site for USPA in an electric wheelchair, Rahma Rachdi encountered a château environment that remained extremely difficult to navigate because of damaged and uneven cobblestones, scarce signage and the absence of a clearly marked route for visitors with reduced mobility. By contrast, Versailles publicly details accessible routes, lifts and adapted reception areas, underscoring how far Fontainebleau still has to go in turning cultural prestige into actual physical inclusion.

TWO CULTURE MINISTERS, ONE FESTIVAL: FRANCE AND MOROCCO MEET AT FONTAINEBLEAU ART, DIPLOMACY AND AN ACCESSIBILITY GAP IN PLAIN SIGHT

At the Chateau de Fontainebleau, the 15th Festival de l'histoire de l'art (Art & History Festival) opened this year under the sign of fashion and Morocco, bringing together scholarship, performance, diplomacy and public culture in one of France's most symbolically charged heritage sites. Morocco was the guest country of honour the first African country to receive that distinction at the festival while the 2026 edition was framed around fashion as a fully fledged artistic language and a lens through which to read societies, identities and cultural exchange.

FRENCH MINISTER OF CULTURE CATHERINE PEGARD'S VISION

In her editorial for the festival, Catherine Pegard presents the event as a place where demanding research meets the widest possible curiosity, and where art history becomes a living, accessible and shared experience. She recalls that the festival, created at the initiative of Frédéric Mitterrand and now celebrating its fifteenth edition, was designed to create dialogue between knowledge and audiences while opening new horizons for students and younger generations.

That ambition is reflected in the structure of this year's edition. With Morocco as guest country and fashion as the central theme, the festival sought to connect heritage, creation, transmission and contemporary cultural imagination. Across the programme, this meant not only conferences and debates, but also performances, books, encounters and spaces designed to make culture circulate freely between publics.

A SITE THAT STILL EXCLUDES

The contradiction, however, was impossible to ignore. A festival devoted to widening access to knowledge cannot fully achieve that mission if the most basic forms of physical access remain fragile or improvised. At Fontainebleau, a temporary stabilising strip plastic, silicone or another protective material laid over the worst paved sections could already make a practical difference for wheelchair users, elderly visitors and those walking with canes.

Instead, media coverage of the ministerial route had to remain limited in practice to the more reachable sections of the site. That narrowing of movement did not erase the cultural richness of what was presented, but it shaped the conditions under which the event could be experienced and reported.

THE BALLROOM AND DELACROIX'S MOROCCO AT CHATEAU

One of the strongest moments of the day took place in the ballroom, where the musical tale Le Voyage de Delacroix au Maroc unfolded before an audience of schoolchildren, families and accredited media. The performance revisited Eugène Delacroix's 1832 journey to Morocco, a trip that became central to his artistic imagination and later influenced much of Western painting's vision of Morocco and the so-called Orient.

Performed by Fred and Léo, the tale drew on the atmosphere of Delacroix's travel notebooks and Moroccan musical textures to evoke a country of sovereignty, refinement and coexistence. It presented a Morocco in which Jews and Muslims lived side by side, and in which Sultan Abd al?Rahman emerged as a sovereign figure of dignity and authority, arriving on horseback with the bearing of a noble ruler. Carried by guitar, guembri and darbuka, and at times shaped by darija phrasing and Moroccan rhythmic patterns, the performance transported both children and adults into a two?hundred?year?old world of ceremony, colour and sound. In doing so, it gave the festival's Moroccan focus a historical depth that went far beyond symbolism.

THE MOROCCAN TENT SPARKLING IN THE CASTLE's GARDEN AND THE BOOK FAIR WS EXCLUSIVE

The next sequence of the press route led through the Moroccan pavilion, erected in the château gardens as a carefully staged space of hospitality and cultural display. There, Moroccan decorative arts, textiles, marquetry, metalwork and the codes of interior refinement combined to recreate the atmosphere of a salon immediately recognisable for its embroidery, passementerie and art of receiving.

Nearby, the route continued into the art book and journal fair, one of the festival's most important intellectual crossroads. It was there, after the visit to the pavilion and exchanges with members of the Moroccan delegation, that the reporting sequence deepened into direct conversation. Rahma Rachdi met Driss El Yazami, president of the Council of the Moroccan Community Abroad, as well as members of the delegation and creative figures, before reaching Moroccan minister Mohamed Mehdi Bensaid for a doorstep interview.

INTERVIEW WITH MOROCCAN MINISTER OF CULTURE & COMMUNICATION, MOHAMED MEHDI BENSAID

It was in this section of the route, between the Moroccan presence in the gardens and the circulation of books, reviews and ideas, that the interview with Moroccan Youth, Culture and Communication Minister Mohamed Mehdi Bensaïd who kindly and naturally answered our questions. The setting mattered: it placed ministerial speech inside a living environment of cultural transmission, bilateral symbolism and public exchange.

Rahma Sophia Rachdi, USPA:

Minister, Morocco is today the guest of honour at the Festival of Art History. It is the first country from the African continent to receive that distinction. It is a great honour. What does this invitation represent for you?

"Minister, could you explain the political and symbolic significance of your visit today to the Château de Fontainebleau, on the occasion of the France/Morocco art festival, and how it forms a prelude to the forthcoming State visit to France by His Majesty King Mohammed VI of Morocco?"

Mohamed Mehdi Bensaid, Moroccan Minister of Youth, Culture and Communication:

"First of all, it is an honour for us, for Morocco, to be present at this prestigious festival in Fontainebleau, in this magnificent château. Morocco has a very rich history rich in its tributaries, rich in its diversity. When one looks at the history of Morocco, it is clearly plural. And today Morocco stands for that very model, a model of living together that is an example for many countries around the world. It represents this strength, this Moroccan model that we want to project across the world. That is why it is an honour for us to be here today and to present this side of Morocco to the European public."

His answer placed the Moroccan presence at Fontainebleau within a broader narrative of plural identity, coexistence and cultural projection. Rather than treating the invitation as a diplomatic courtesy, Bensaïd framed it as an opportunity to present Morocco as a civilizational model rooted in diversity and openness.

Rahma Sophia Rachdi:

We visited the Moroccan Paviliion tent earlier. What exactly is being presented there?

Mohamed Mehdi Bensaïd:

"What is being presented there is a number of books connected to Moroccan history and culture. We also had a moment of exchange

with students of different nationalities students from ENA, from INP, from many schools who were able to share their experiences and their views of Morocco. We were also able to explain what Morocco is today: a Morocco that is moving forward rapidly, a Morocco with real strength, a Morocco that is today both a gateway into Africa and a gateway out of Africa, and one that has an important role to play in the years ahead."

That response shifted the focus from display to dialogue. In Minister Bensaïd's account, the Moroccan pavilion was not merely an exhibition space, but a forum in which books, student exchange and cultural diplomacy came together to position Morocco as a strategic and intellectual crossroads between Europe and Africa.

Rahma Sophia Rachdi, USPA:
And this festival also places fashion at the centre of its programme. What can you tell us about Moroccan fashion in that context?

Mohamed Mehdi Bensaïd:
"Moroccan fashion is now in full effervescence. We are seeing an extraordinary creativity among Moroccan youth in several fields in crafts, in digital culture, and in fashion. And we have seen it this year with UNESCO's recognition of the caftan as intangible cultural heritage of humanity. That is something that will help support our efforts, and today we hope to build a genuine creative and cultural industry in Morocco so that this youth can find real opportunities. We want to be the first country in Africa to develop what we call the CCIs the Cultural and Creative Industries as a true lever for sustainable economic development in our country."

Here again, the minister connected heritage to the future. Fashion, in his telling, is not a decorative appendix to Moroccan culture but one of the most dynamic sectors through which youth creativity, craft knowledge and economic ambition can converge. The reference to the caftan and to the development of cultural and creative industries gave the Moroccan presence at Fontainebleau a clear policy dimension, linking symbolic recognition to long?term development.

The encounter was also marked by a more personal note when the minister warmly welcomed the discovery of the reporter's Moroccan origins. That moment of recognition gave the exchange a human texture that matched the wider spirit of the day: culture as a bridge not only between institutions, but also between biographies, languages and forms of belonging.

TWO FRENCH & MOROCCAN MINISTERS, ONE CULTURAL SIGNAL
The joint presence of Catherine Pegard and Mohamed Mehdi Bensaid gave the festival a clear diplomatic dimension. Official festival communications highlighted the opening of the 15th edition with Morocco in the spotlight, while surrounding media coverage confirmed the symbolic significance of having both counterpart ministers present during the launch sequence.

This mattered not only because of protocol. It suggested that the festival has evolved into more than a specialist gathering for art historians; it now operates as a platform where heritage, publishing, education, public diplomacy and creative industry intersect. Morocco's place in this year's edition reinforced by performance, design, scholarship and ministerial visibility made that particularly visible.

ACCESSIBILITY FOR THE DISABLED WHEELCHAIR - BOUND IS ALSO A CULTURAL QUESTION
And yet the day also exposed a structural blind spot. The very idea of shared culture loses some of its force when movement through the site depends on improvisation, informal assistance or individual goodwill. In practice, the route became possible thanks in large part to the exceptional help of one on?site security guard, Meheddine, who went far beyond his formal role by escorting the reporter from one area to another, opening passages with his own access keys and helping compensate for the absence of adequate routing or signage for people with reduced mobility.

That assistance deserves genuine recognition, but it should not have been necessary in this form. If a major national cultural event truly wants to embody openness, hospitality and transmission, accessibility cannot remain secondary to heritage aesthetics or

logistical habit. It belongs at the centre of the institutional promise.

The 2026 Festival de l'histoire de l'art succeeds in many of the goals it sets itself. It brings Morocco to the centre of the conversation, treats fashion as a serious cultural subject, builds bridges between ministers, scholars, artists and students, and offers the public moments of genuine beauty and discovery. The musical tale about Delacroix, the Moroccan pavilion and the exchange with Mohamed Mehdi Bensaid all showed how art history can become a living language rather than a closed discipline.

However Fontainebleau also delivered a more uncomfortable lesson. A festival cannot genuinely claim universality, openness and shared knowledge while remaining so difficult to navigate for people whose mobility does not fit the site's assumptions. If this prestigious cultural gathering truly wants to welcome every audience, then access must become part of the programme's philosophy as visible, as intentional and as carefully designed as the art itself.

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