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## How Tunisia Develops Traditional Handicrafts in the Post-Print Era

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### Abstract

**Purpose/Significance:** Handicrafts constitute Tunisia's national hallmark. A specialized investigation into Tunisia's developmental strategies for its traditional handicraft industry can yield valuable insights for our nation. **Method/Process:** This study predominantly draws upon foreign research materials, employing documentary research methodology to synthesize Tunisia's experiences in developing its traditional handicraft industry. **Results/Conclusion:** Tunisia's development of its traditional handicraft industry is characterized by five pivotal successful experiences: First, the Tunisian government and broader society have long prioritized traditional handicrafts, collectively fostering a conducive environment for the industry's development. Second, rather than pursuing indiscriminate expansion, Tunisian localities have adapted strategies to their specific contexts, steadfastly maintaining their distinctive, generationally-transmitted handicraft specializations. Third, over several decades, to ensure enduring prosperity and intergenerational continuity, Tunisia's government and societal stakeholders have mobilized multi-pronged efforts to establish a sophisticated vocational and technical education and training system. Fourth, to overcome the limitation of a narrow domestic market, Tunisia has vigorously promoted export-oriented revenue generation from traditional handicrafts. Fifth, through national initiatives and creators' endeavors, Tunisia's handicraft industry has successfully navigated a path between tradition and modernity.

### Full Text

## How Tunisia Develops Traditional Handicrafts

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## Abstract

**[Purpose/Significance]** Handicrafts serve as Tunisia's national calling card. A thematic study on how Tunisia develops its traditional handicrafts can provide valuable lessons for our country.

**[Method/Process]** This paper summarizes Tunisia's experience in developing its handicrafts, based primarily on foreign research materials and using literature review methods.

**[Result/Conclusion]** Tunisia has five main successful experiences in developing traditional handicrafts: First, the Tunisian government and all sectors of society have long attached great importance to traditional handicrafts, jointly creating a favorable environment for their development. Second, when developing traditional handicrafts, various regions of Tunisia have adapted to local conditions rather than rushing in all at once, steadfastly maintaining their distinctive crafts passed down through generations. Third, for decades, to ensure the lasting prosperity and intergenerational transmission of traditional handicrafts, the Tunisian government and society have mobilized multiple forces through various channels to establish a relatively mature technical and vocational education and training system. Fourth, to address the problem of a small domestic market, Tunisia has vigorously promoted the export of traditional handicrafts to generate income. Fifth, thanks to national initiatives and creators' efforts, Tunisian handicrafts have found their own path between tradition and modernity.

**Keywords:** Tunisia; Handicrafts; Tourism; TVET; Cultural Heritage

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Handicrafts serve as Tunisia's national calling card. Renowned for their exquisite craftsmanship and fusion of Arab, Mediterranean, and other diverse styles, Tunisian handicrafts have long been favored by foreign tourists [1]. The sector currently employs nearly 300,000 people and contributes approximately 4% to the country's GDP [2]. How, then, has Tunisia developed its traditional handicrafts in the modern era?

For decades, the Tunisian government and all sectors of society have attached great importance to traditional handicrafts, jointly creating a favorable environment for their development. As early as 1959, Tunisia established the National Handicrafts Office (Office National de l' Artisanat, ONAT) [3], which today operates under the Ministry of Tourism and Handicrafts (MoTH) to implement national strategies for protecting and developing the sector [4]. Complementing this governmental body is a robust industry association—the Tunisian Union of Industry, Commerce, and Handicrafts (UTICA). As one of the four parties in the 2015 Nobel Peace Prize-winning Tunisian National Dialogue Quartet, UTICA represents nearly 150,000 private enterprises with nationwide coverage [5]. In recent years, Tunisia has introduced policy documents such as the National Handicrafts Development Plan 2018-2022 [6], while national tourism strategies like *Tunisia Tourism 2035: National Sustainable Tourism Strategy* also incorporate specific measures to promote handicrafts [7]. Furthermore, Tunisia actively

encourages foreign investment in the sector: according to the *Tunisia Investor's Guide* published by the Foreign Investment Promotion Agency, handicraft enterprises enjoy a corporate tax rate of only 10%, less than half the standard rate of 25%. Businesses operating in Regional Development Zones (ZDR), established to incentivize foreign investment, also benefit from comprehensive incentives including fiscal subsidies and exemption from the vocational training tax (TFP) [1].

Tunisia's handicraft tradition is renowned, with over 70 distinct types of products [8]. Rather than pursuing uniform development across all regions, however, Tunisia has adopted a localized approach, with each area preserving its unique, generations-old specialties. In the medina of Tunis, thousands of workshops produce jewelry, silverware, pottery, tea sets, carpets, leather goods, embroidered silk gowns, and traditional red felt caps year after year [9][10]. The historic city of Carthage features streets lined with shops offering ornaments, statues, wool and silk textiles, and blown-glass lamps [11]. In Tataouine, Berber villages create vibrantly colored, intricately decorated carpets and shawls beloved by tourists [12]. Tabarka takes pride in its exquisite coral bead jewelry, while artisans also craft fine woodcarvings from local oak [13]. Nabeul, blessed with high-quality clay deposits, has produced pottery since ancient times and has evolved into the renowned "City of Ceramics," offering distinctive yet affordable wares [14]. Similarly, Kairouan is celebrated as the "Carpet City," producing Tunisia's most famous handmade carpets [15]; Tozeur, the "Palm Land," specializes in baskets woven from palm leaves and boxes made from palm wood [16]; the coastal city of Gabes excels in esparto grass products such as baskets and sun hats, as well as textiles including carpets, tapestries, and cushions [17]; and the Mediterranean island of Djerba is known for silver jewelry, tablecloths, scarves, dresses, tapestries, and striped bedding [18].

To ensure the lasting prosperity and intergenerational transmission of traditional handicrafts, Tunisia has developed a relatively mature Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) system through multi-pronged efforts by government and society. First, the National Handicrafts Office established specialized vocational training centres (Centres de formation professionnelle) across the country. In 1997, oversight of all 15 centres transferred to the Ministry of Vocational Training, and in 2002 the government conducted evaluations to reorganize them according to industry needs [19]. These centres now actively provide handicraft training courses for young rural women—a critical initiative given that 85% of artisans are female [20]. Second, the Ministry of National Education launched pilot programmes for vocational schools in the 1990s, and in 2014 introduced handicraft courses in secondary schools. By 2015-2016, the vocational school network had expanded to 87 institutions with 2,387 teachers and 12,292 students, and in 2017 the Ministry implemented reforms to integrate handicraft-related content into primary and secondary education [19]. Finally, families play a vital role in heritage transmission. In Sejnane near Bizerte, renowned for pottery traditions dating back to ancient times, girls learn from elders to create Berber-style pottery using simple tools like sticks and shells [21].

To overcome its limited domestic market, Tunisia has vigorously promoted handicraft exports to generate revenue. In 2018, 440 artisans in Monastir Governorate secured financing through various export channels, with loan guarantees exceeding 1.5 billion Tunisian dinars, resulting in a 27% increase in export earnings compared to 2017 [22]. On March 22, 2019, Prime Minister Youssef Chahed announced at a handicraft exhibition that the government would strengthen the sector's position long-term, moving beyond fairs and markets, and provide financial support to facilitate exports [23]. Tunisian enterprises have become regular participants in international exhibitions such as the Milan Furniture Fair and the "Silk Road at Your Fingertips" International Women's Handicrafts and Home Services Exhibition, where their plant fibre products, embroidery, pottery, and olive wood carvings attract considerable attention [24]. Traditionally, Tunisian handicrafts have been exported primarily to the United States, Europe, and Gulf countries, enjoying tariff reductions and tax benefits in markets like the U.S., Canada, and Australia [1]. More recently, UTICA has engaged in multiple discussions with the Chinese Embassy in Tunisia to explore bilateral economic cooperation and expand into the Chinese market [25]. Tunisian handicrafts emphasizing "natural materials," "handmade craftsmanship," "organic aesthetics," and "local Tunisian culture"—such as handwoven straw hat lamps—have already entered Chinese mainstream social media platforms like Xiaohongshu and found their way into Chinese households [26]. Latest data indicate that direct exports from the handicrafts sector are estimated at 149 million Tunisian dinars [2].

Today, through national initiatives and artisans' efforts, Tunisia's handicraft sector has forged its own path between tradition and modernity [27]. Each year on March 16, Tunisians celebrate the National Day of Traditional Dress and Crafts with grand parades and festivities on Avenue Habib Bourgiba, the country's "Champs-Élysées" [28]. Tunisia has reportedly applied to UNESCO to designate this as a global day for traditional dress and identity [29]. The government also organizes annual exhibitions providing artisans with platforms to showcase their talents and creativity; for instance, the March 10-19, 2023 exhibition themed "Our Crafts Tell Our Stories" attracted over 1,200 enterprises [30]. Most importantly, Tunisian artisans have actively embraced modern design and fashion within the broader market economy, creating innovative new products. Traditional costume designers draw inspiration from contemporary festive attire, exquisite Bedouin textiles are adapted for furniture and cushions, and blown glass explores new textures to better integrate into modern interior design. Even village artisans have demonstrated remarkable creativity, developing novel forms that combine modern functionality with unique aesthetics [31].

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