

2015

Issue . 61

**P. 84**

Features

 Sophie Halaby, Palestinian Artist of the Twentieth Century  
 Samia Halaby
**FULL TEXT**

Although my first encounter with Sophie Halaby was memorable, I knew very little about her personal life when asked by the *Jerusalem Quarterly* to write this essay. But I do have knowledge of Palestinian art history and Sophie's position therein. Discovering some aspects of her personality enriched that knowledge. I sought information from distant relatives who had accumulated extensive family archives. Parallel to this search, I conducted many interviews via email, Skype, and telephone of both my own family and of the many friends who still remember Sophie. Additionally, I had done a small interview with her a year before her death. These interviews spanned Tokyo to the Midwest in longitude, and from London to Australia in latitude. My own limited memories of Sophie were thus enhanced by all the interviews and I came to understand her through my own practice as a painter. My first visit with Sophie and her sister Asia (Anastasia) was in 1966, when I was introduced by their friend, my aunt Sultanie Halaby,<sup>1</sup> an independent businesswoman and founder of Dar al- Kutub. As the afternoon progressed, I took the opportunity of a few free moments away from the formalities to carefully peruse Sophie's paintings hanging on the walls. As I bent down to examine the signature on one of the paintings, Sophie suddenly sprang from behind and demanded to know how I sign my own paintings. I told her that my signatures vary but that I often use S. Halaby. She then took it upon herself to instruct me in clear terms that I should not do so and that I should always spell out my name. She clearly indicated that she did not want my work confused with hers. I remained politely silent, thinking that it was unlikely that my more contemporary paintings would be confused with her work. But I appreciated the significance of her attitude, the professionalism that she exhibited, the importance of painting as her life's work, and her dedication to it.

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My aunt had decided that it was high time I met Sophie and Asia as part of my Jerusalemite education. I was then a visiting exile from the United States. The two sisters were a small monument of Jerusalem society, not because of wealth and elegance, though they might have accumulated enough comfort, but rather for their accomplishments. Sophie was known as the artist who had traveled abroad to study art and returned home to practice while Asia was known for her work with the British mandatory administration and after 1948 for her embroidery workshop employing Palestinian women impoverished by the Nakba that had caused my exile.

Sophie was born on 26 June 1905 to Jiryas Nicola Halaby (1865-c. 1947) and Olga Fanahud (1880-1960s).<sup>2</sup> Sophie was named after her paternal grandmother and was the middle child of three siblings. All were born in Jerusalem. The oldest, Nicola Jiryas Halaby, was born circa 1902 and the youngest, Asia, was born in 1908. Jiryas Nicola Halaby had gone to St. Petersburg to study medicine and it is there that he met his wife Olga, who is remembered by those who knew her as an elegant, imposing woman. Sophie's father, Jiryas, practiced his profession after his return to Jerusalem until his retirement and later death circa 1947. Considering that he was born in 1865, it is likely that he finished his studies and returned to Jerusalem with his wife sometime before the turn of the century.

Of Sophie's life before 1948, we have a few dates related to her work and studies. We also know that in 1948, due to Zionist terrorism, her family was forced to move from their home in Qatamon to a neighborhood east of the city not occupied by the terrorists. Her father had by then passed away but her mother lived on through the mid-sixties. Eventually the family moved to a new home near Bab al-Sahira where Sophie and Asia lived until their death. We do not have a date for the building of the house, but it is known that it was designed and built by their older brother, Nicola Halaby, who is remembered for having studied diligently in difficult situations and who eventually went to Oxford to study engineering and became a distinguished architect.<sup>3</sup>

The Halaby family tree shows that Sophie had fourteen paternal cousins. Most of them lived either in Jerusalem or nearby and she had close ties with many of them (plate 1). Some writers on the subject believed her to be the niece of Khalil Halaby, the important Palestinian icon painter and muralist.<sup>4</sup> However, Khalil was only distantly related to Sophie. According to the family tree, they were related through their great- great-grandfather who probably lived during the last decades of the eighteenth century. I myself am related to both of them through the same progenitor, Jiryas Nakhle Halaby.<sup>5</sup>

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### Sophie Halaby's Personality as Remembered by Her Friends

Written documentation on Sophie's life and activities is yet to be recovered, but we have brief sketches from those who knew her and are still alive. Their memories of her begin in their own youth, when Sophie already was in her fifties, mature as an artist. They describe a diminutive elegantly dressed woman, graying hair drawn back in a bun, with an imposing presence,<sup>6</sup> a woman who enjoyed intellect in others and loved laughter. She seemed to have an impish tendency to play mild jokes and perhaps even create myths, such as the one about her parents returning back to Jerusalem on foot from Russia that she told my sister Nahida during one of our visits.

During the years prior to the 1967 war, Randa Atalla, Sultanie Halaby's niece, resided with her mother and sister next door to Sophie and Asia in East Jerusalem.<sup>7</sup> To Randa, Sophie was a vibrant, eccentric, and delightful woman who loved to play harmless tricks on her guests to entertain them and herself. Randa described her as a strong, bossy type who was very precise in all she did. As Randa relates:

Sophie and Asia lived in their home and were our neighbors in the years before 1966. Sophie had the first floor and Asia had the second floor. The basement was used for Asia's workshop. They both loved cats, which freely roamed the house. Sophie had a dedicated room that she called her atelier. She never brought out her artwork for us to see and approve and she never took us in to look...

When she received guests she would delight in shocking them. If she knew of a particular fear that someone had, she would play on it. Actually, someone she knew feared spiders, so she bought a plastic spider and she would place it somewhere on the floor and at the right moment point to it in mock fright. She liked to laugh. We laughed with her especially when she pronounced the Arabic in ways that inverted their meaning. If she cooked *musakhkhan* (a traditional dish named for being heated) she would say *musakhkham* converting the *n* to *m*, which changed the meaning from "heated" to "unfortunate." We laughed at the idea of an unfortunate dish.

She had a beautiful rug and she always made us remove our shoes at the door even in winter. She was very meticulous and precise and she was a good tailor. She sewed most of her own clothes and always used the best materials and especially expensive buttons. She would remove the buttons on sending her clothes to the drycleaners, lest they be damaged, and later sew them back. She always looked tip-top. Everything had to be tip-top with Sophie.

Sophie was a good cook and baked wonderful scones. She would invite us to what she called "high tea." All would be very proper. She would set up a fancy trolley with an elegant embroidered tablecloth; the teapot would have a wonderful tea cozy. All would be of the finest linen and china. And along with this elegance would be the half-hidden plastic spider to shock and create laughter.

One of Sophie's eccentricities became famous. A majority of the people who remember Sophie talked first of all about one of her cats. Randa Atallah said, "She trained one of her cats to eat with a fork. She enjoyed showing her off. She taught the cat to sit on her hind legs with paws on the table and eat with a fork." Vera Tamari, a distinguished Palestinian artist and educator, relates a story, probably just as mythical as some of Sophie's own postures, but one that is revealing of the aura Sophie created. The story goes that a stranger cat was brought by a guest to visit and was fed in the kitchen and that in a fit of jealousy Sophie's cat ran away and was seen wandering the Old City in her amazing embroidered cap and bib.<sup>8</sup>

Sophie is described as being blunt and outspoken but tenderhearted. When Suhail Shukry Halaby, one of her distant cousins who knew her in his youth, went to visit Sophie in the mid-nineties, she met him at the door saying bluntly: "Who are you? Why do you come to visit us? What do you want from us?"<sup>9</sup> When Claudette Habesch, an old friend of Sophie's, heard this, she said, "Yes, exactly, that is how Sophie was. But when I worked with her when she first started her project for the old people's home, I discovered what a sweet personality she possessed and how tenderhearted she was."<sup>10</sup> Doris Saleh, who was general secretary of the YWCA for Palestine, said, "She was such a great person, one with whom you enjoyed being. She had her own sense of humor. Both [Sophie and Asia] had a good political stance. Sometime you feared what they would say in front of people. They were outspoken."<sup>11</sup> About Sophie's precise and outspoken manner, her cousin's niece, Lily Wahbe, said, "When my twin sister and I admired her paintings a great deal, she gave each of us a picture and made us pay five dollars for the cost of paints."<sup>12</sup> Those who remember Sophie also remember Asia as they were, for the most part, inseparable. They would say Sophie was more outgoing socially while Asia was more serious and somewhat shy. However, they would say that Asia was more often outside the house than Sophie, as she had her own car and drove.

Sophie and Asia traveled a lot and moved freely. Randa Atalla relates that after she and her family moved to Amman, Sophie often visited them there. Sophie herself enumerated to me her several trips to Europe. Furthermore, Adli Halabi, one of her cousin's nephews, remembers meeting Sophie in Beirut during the fifties and mentions that she traveled with her family to Russia more than once.<sup>13</sup>

Sophie was reputed to be deeply nationalist. Ra'uf Halabi, the distinguished Palestinian national hero, was one of Sophie and Asia's paternal cousins.<sup>14</sup> He was very close to them and visited them often on a one-to-

one basis. His visits were more intellectual exchanges than the larger, more formal family visits. Sophie, Asia, and Ra'uf shared strong feelings about Palestine. Samia Khoury, who visited Sophie often, quotes Sophie's reply when told her friends in the United States were anxious to hear from her: "I am not going to buy Israeli stamps to send mail."<sup>15</sup> In regard to their nationalist feelings, Randa Atalla relates a poignant story:

In 1967, Sophie and Asia became known for having saved a batch of Jordanian soldiers from probable death at the hands of the Israelis. There was a clinic for the Jordanian Army across the street from their house. Approximately ten soldiers took refuge at their house. They kept them hidden for several days while they surreptitiously went out to neighbors begging for men's clothing. They then made the soldiers change from uniform to civilian dress and snuck them out one at a time. After this, they had to burn the uniforms very slowly so that the smell would not attract suspicion from the Israeli soldiers.

The impression one receives from all who knew Sophie during the sixties and until her death is that Sophie was an intellectually alert, socially involved, fiercely nationalist woman and one who could be blunt. Along with these qualities was a unique sense of humor and appreciation of laughter.

### **Sophie Halaby's Education**

In a 1996 interview, Sophie Halaby told me that as a child she studied at the British College for Girls in Jerusalem.<sup>16</sup> She told me that in those days the teachers had them, for the most part, drawing flowers. Her talents then began to show and she became the best at drawing flowers. In her own words: "Then after finishing school I worked in the government [British Mandate] for four years and then I could not stand it any more and wanted to paint the beautiful country in which we lived in those days. So I went to Paris. I got tired of Paris. I studied in private studios, one or two different ones." Sophie went on to indicate that in Paris she lived in an international hostel for students. When I asked her for the dates of her study in Paris, her response was that she went in 1932 and was back by 1936.<sup>17</sup> However, being in her nineties and narrating from memory, I believe Sophie was mistaken. Her dated student drawings indicate she was there in 1930. It is probable that she was there between 1929 and 1932.<sup>18</sup>

Sophie began teaching at Schmidt Girls' School after her return from Paris and taught there until 1955.<sup>19</sup> Sophie's paternal cousin, Sonia Wahbe, who was also a painter, taught there as well; Sonia's sister, Louba Wahbe, was secretary at the school. The Wahbe sisters were very close to Sophie.<sup>20</sup>

The distinguished educator, Olga Wahbe, Sophie's paternal cousin and Sonia and Louba's older sister, told me that Sophie went to the Sorbonne and later to Italy to study art and to paint.<sup>21</sup> Sophie herself had told Suhail Shukrie Halaby that she went to the Sorbonne for some artistic functions but that by then she was already an artist.<sup>22</sup> Her studies seem to have been independent, as was her study in Italy when she was indeed a developed and mature painter. During our meetings, Sophie confirmed that she was in Europe three times. The first was her stay in Paris during the early thirties. About her second trip she said, "I was in Paris again in 1948-1949 when we had troubles here. Maybe that was the second time we went to avoid troubles." Her third trip was to study and paint independently. Sophie referred to her third visit as going to "Italy during the [1956] crisis with Egypt when the French and the English occupied the Suez."<sup>23</sup> She would have been just over fifty at the time and might have decided to leave teaching and devote herself to painting. We have no record of her teaching after 1955.

Her drawings speak for her, regardless of the formalities of her studies. We have many of her drawings from 1930, which feature typical studio models of the French academy. One drawing dated 1930 shows a bearded, long-haired old man wearing only shorts (plate 2). This typical classroom pose is rendered in charcoal, using lines and hatchings. The old man's right hand dangling between his thighs is badly drawn and is redrawn separately on the side with great clarity. It could be that she redrew it carefully as a side study after receiving criticism. Or maybe a teacher showed her how to draw the hand. Another head study with all the same attributes is dated 1930 and signed with initials S.G.H.<sup>24</sup> These student drawings are of high quality.

### **Sophie Halaby's Studio, Exhibitions, and Influence**

From all indications, Sophie was not only very private about her personal life, but also about her studio. Those who knew her well said that she did not want anyone in her studio; others seemed unaware of its existence. Though Sophie seemed willing to talk about herself and her art, it appears that she was reluctant to allow people to see her studio. Perhaps its location on the third floor of the house was indicative of the privacy many said she liked. Her friend Claudette Habesch said that, to Sophie, her studio "was her world and she did not seem to want anyone in it."

Art supplies would not have been difficult for Sophie to obtain at any time during her life, though we have no specific record of where she obtained them. From the beginning of the twentieth century, Jerusalem was open to the world. Art and office supplies and magazines were available in bookshops. Furthermore, Sophie traveled widely and could easily have stocked up on the materials she needed. It was also possible to

obtain art supplies from Paris. We know from Vera Tamari's discussion about her own mother, who created art as a youth, that during the first half of the twentieth century she ordered her art supplies by mail from Paris and they arrived by boat.<sup>25</sup>

Sophie was neither shy nor lazy about exhibiting her work. She exploited the opportunities available at the time. Reading contemporaneous news media reveals that art exhibitions took place regularly in social and professional clubs and fairs. Doris Saleh, former general secretary of the Jerusalem YWCA, who began working there in 1967, mentions that Sophie had at least one and probably several exhibitions there. Her openings were well attended and the show would last for several days.<sup>26</sup> Sophie was a member of the YWCA and an avid attendee at its many other cultural events.

We know from Randa Atalla's description of Sophie that she exhibited her work in Asia's workshop in the basement of their home. The workshop had a door to the outside that tourists used. There was a "vitrine in which embroidered products were shown. There, Sophie would place some paintings and the postcards of flowers that she made." Randa goes on to describe the workshop as a "busy place visited by tourists from all over the world." That was indeed so, as exemplified by the fact that during the eighties and nineties my sister and I would often find Asia's embroideries at flea markets and estate auctions in Ohio, halfway around the globe.

The artist and author Kamal Boullata writes that Sophie regularly attended openings of the work of young artists at the "new Arab Orthodox Club of East Jerusalem" but did not exhibit there herself. "The one and only place that her work was viewed on a regular basis" was the window of Asia's embroidery shop, which opened after 1948 on Zahra Street and where once a week "Halaby displayed a single new painting."<sup>27</sup> The unintended result was an influence on the youthful artists of Jerusalem. Kamal Boullata writes that he and his friends would often pass by to see these paintings.<sup>28</sup>

Sophie Halaby's exhibitions, though modest by today's standards, had a significant effect on the young artists of Jerusalem. They admired her continued presence during times of difficulty. To them she was a fragile but important connection to the past. Tania Tamari Nasser, a Palestinian writer and singer, told me of the effect Halaby had on her siblings, Vera and Vladimir Tamari, and their friends Kamal Boullata and Sari Khoury - all of them young artists: "Halaby's glowing color and her treatment of the wild flowers of Palestine inspired them."<sup>29</sup>

Her exhibition activity was reduced during the final two decades of her life. But one exception was special. Sophie was honored by younger Palestinian women artists who invited her to exhibit with them as a special guest. They made her artwork the focus of the exhibition titled *Tallat: Women's Art in Palestine*, which was mounted at the National Theater of Jerusalem, the Hakawati, in 1986.

### Formal Attributes of Sophie Halaby's Work

Based on an academic foundation, Sophie Halaby developed a substantial formal capability, creating illusions of space. Her painter's eye is never lost in details, she perceives the general visual attributes of the view before her and fearlessly represents it, a difficult accomplishment. At times the execution of her watercolors was so simple and broad that she needed to finalize paintings using an ink line to crisp the edges and indicate a few details. The last thing you would accuse her of is nit-picking details. If everything in Sophie's daily life had to be "tip-top," as Randa Atallah so vividly described, in her art Sophie knew when to stop, when not to indulge in refining details, a truly rare quality, a quality particularly necessary to the rigorous discipline of watercolor painting. Sophie Halaby's subject matter was focused on landscape, still life, and the human figure, in that order of importance. In her mature work there are only a few portraits and figures. These are the subjects of academic training. They are the basics that prepare European artists to combine them in the creation of complex monumental, historical, or religious themes. But Sophie had no interest in complex themes and maintained focus on her three subjects developing and refining them throughout her career. Sophie Halaby enjoyed a petit bourgeois existence, painting those things that give pleasure to that class: occasional portraits, landscapes, and still life paintings almost exclusively of flowers and occasionally fruits (plate 3).

The landscape Sophie loved painting most was the hills surrounding Jerusalem. In my meeting with her in 1996, she told me that she often traveled with her father on his calls outside the city and spent the time drawing and painting. She made hundreds of simple line drawings in pencil. They are formally economical, using a minimum number of lines to indicate the hills and to articulate various foci scattered in the landscape, such as houses, rocks, or trees. Vera Tamari remembers "that she would indicate on her sketches the colors in the landscape, for her to further develop into a painting when she got back home." An example is the untitled landscape identified as Mount Scopus (plate 4).

The beautiful landscapes surrounding Jerusalem were primary in Sophie's artistic life. Her wholehearted focus on them is described by Vladimir Tamari who wrote, "What I do remember and that really impressed me and awoke the artistic instincts in me, was my father telling us how he watched while Sophie, a fellow passenger in a taxi to Jericho, would sketch the landscape en passant."<sup>30</sup> Sophie's landscapes are a precious record of the beauty of the land and the love affair Palestinians have with it. Sophie herself bitterly felt its obliteration. In 1996, she told me, "All the while in Palestine I sketched and drew the original views of Palestine. Nowadays it all changes with their stupid buildings." Sophie was referring to the rapid building

of Israeli settlements on her beloved mountains and source of her inspiration.

In a watercolor painted from the Mount of Olives, we see the old wall of the city and the slope leading to it. An ancient olive tree dominates the foreground on the left and another one just a bit smaller occupies the right. In the distance across the valley are rows of olive trees covering the hillside leading up to the Muslim cemetery. Halaby titled it in ink on the lower left corner: *The Golden Gate from the Gethsemanie Garden* (plate 5). Apart from the wall of the Old City, there are no structures to be seen. The headstones in the cemetery are sparse and few. All this indicates an early date for this watercolor – possibly the late thirties or early forties. Under her signature, on the lower right corner, she wrote “Jerusalem, Palestine.” This addition is rare in her work indicating that the painting might have been done in the mid-thirties, when the spirit of Palestinian nationalism was high stimulated by the revolutionary motion and general strike of 1936–1939.

The execution is clearly that of an image painted on sight, paying attention to the accuracy of the general principles of her scene and disregarding unessential detail. Halaby used dark lines to outline the main shapes. These lines are drawn in an open, discontinuous manner and are equal in thickness. Thus they all seem to lie on the surface. This is a sophisticated way of playing the surface of the painting against the illusion of depth. The lines on the surface stress the picture plane through which we see the space of the scene executed in broad swashes of color. The dark lines, few and open, are mere hints of detail. An undated watercolor by Sophie of the dome of the Church of the Holy Sepulchre is unusual in being the rare cityscape in her oeuvre (plate 6). It is reminiscent of the artist George Aleeff, a Russian who had come to Palestine in 1917. Aleeff devoted himself to painting the cityscapes of Palestine. His small watercolors were of high quality, based on empirical observation, not skewed with the colonialist attitudes of the Orientalist painters. His sure execution of perspective and the typical use of a high viewing point indicate photography as a guide. Sophie’s painting of the Church of the Holy Sepulchre might have been the rare instance where she utilized a photograph as basis for her painting. The organization of parts as would be seen through a lens is noticeable.

During my 1996 interview with Sophie, she told me that she did a lot of paintings while in Italy. I photographed one watercolor in her studio, painted from a hotel window overlooking the Mediterranean Sea. It stands as witness to her professionalism and her love of painting that she was always at all times practicing her art. Considering the dates of her trips, this work probably dates from 1949 (plate 7).

When in the studio, Sophie painted from a still life – mostly of flowers. Some were done in oil, but most were watercolors. An undated oil on paper painting of tulips is a typical example of her flower arrangements (plate 8). Her best-known flowers are not ones arranged in vases but those that grow wild in the mountains of Jerusalem and elsewhere in Palestine. Sophie made a careful study of them and had them printed as postcards that she mostly gave away. Samia Khoury relates that Asia would always add a few atop purchases of embroideries, helping to circulate her sister’s name.<sup>31</sup>

It is important to note that Sophie was empirical in her painting and drawing. She did not invent or fantasize. Her work is always based on observation. We have nothing in Sophie Halaby’s work that indicates she had even a remote interest in either European, Russian, or Arabic icon painting. Her pictures do not call to mind either the compositional nature of icon painting nor the precisionist manner in which they are normally executed. The freedom and broadness of her brush, her use of color and light, are in direct opposition to the formalized methods of icon painting. Indeed, neither Sophie nor Asia were interested in religion. As Randa Atalla indicated, they seemed to feel it to be a waste of time and, to Randa’s knowledge, Sunday morning at church was definitely not one of their habits.<sup>32</sup> Even though they had a Russian mother and even while that part of the Halaby family kept close ties with the Russian Orthodox Church in Jerusalem, they seemed to remain aloof from it, at least during the years Randa Atalla knew them, beginning in the sixties and continuing through till the end of their lives. Asia called Sunday morning church services *kalam fadi* (empty words).<sup>33</sup>

### **Sophie Halaby’s Position in the Transition Period in Arab Art**

Sophie Halaby’s art is a coherent part of the development of Arab art. In Palestine, the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries were a time of transition from dormant feudal relations to the mixed influences arriving from Europe and the then Soviet Union. The desire for democratic and national rights emerged with the growth of capitalist relations in the cities of the Arab world.

Sophie’s milieu in her youth is an important factor in her development. That she boldly abandoned a safe job with the British colonial administration in order to fulfill an aesthetic impulse is in harmony with the growing desire for democratic rights and women’s freedom. The Arab Women’s Union and the YWCA provided a forum for the heightened social, political, and intellectual activities of women at the time. It is possible that Sophie knew of the literary scholar Kulthum ‘Awda, whose political consciousness was shaped by the Soviet revolution and who had returned to do research in Palestine in 1928.<sup>34</sup>

In the arts, during Sophie’s youth, Arabs were simultaneously undergoing an aesthetic change paralleling the social and political one. Two interacting currents informed the transition. One current, Arab art, was abstract in its mainstream but paralleled by minor expressions in illusion and figuration. The second current emanating from the advanced capitalist states of Europe contained two contradictory parts. One

part was the academic descendant of Renaissance painting and the other was the new abstraction born of working class revolution. The trend to abstraction began with Impressionism born of the revolutionary atmosphere created by the Paris Commune and culminated in Constructivism born in the Soviet revolution.

At any given time in history, one geographic area and one society generally advance faster than the rest. Then, as others catch up, one of them takes leadership. This explains why European influences, old Renaissance methods plus revolutionary avant-garde modernism, began coming to Palestine, whose mainstream visual expression, Islamic abstraction, predated the Renaissance and had led international art at the height of its feudal era. During the period in question, Arab art was catching up, eventually arriving at modernist trends late in the twentieth century. Sophie Halaby's contribution lay along this transitional path.

In Jerusalem there were still shops headed by master craftsmen, where the feudal methods of art education took place. This method was being replaced by private studios and art classes in schools. The painter Daoud Zalatio, who taught art at the Lydda school, is a good example as is Sophie Halaby. Patronage by mosque and church was being replaced by private collectors; icon painting was being replaced by paintings of secular subject matter. Nicola Saig, the great icon painter of a family of icon painters, used to have a shop in the Old City selling icons to tourists. Like other painters of his time, Saig began selling secular paintings and many Palestinians would buy them for themselves or as gifts. The same is also true of Khalil Halaby. One collector, R. I. Tannous, related that his father often passed by Saig's shop during the twenties and thirties and purchased secular paintings as gifts for his friends, especially as wedding gifts.<sup>35</sup>

As a clear expression of these interwoven currents, traditional Arab art and the bifurcated arts of Europe, one finds a variety of visual expressions in the Jerusalem of Sophie's youth. There were practices in medieval geometric abstraction and calligraphy, ironwork, inlaid panels in all media, and stained glass as well as private studios and shops of painters, calligraphers, and other artists and artisans. One of these, of course,

was the embroidery workshop of Asia Halaby. Although these differing practices may seem separate on the surface, their interaction lay beneath the surface. No artist living in Jerusalem could miss the efflorescence of visual production in the city. Often several of these practices, old and new, met in one artist, as, for example, in Jamal Badran (1909–1998) and Mubarak Saad (1880–1967), both of whom were working in Jerusalem during Sophie's youth. Uniquely, these currents also met in the sisters Sophie and Asia, both artists, one making modern pictures, the other working in the ancient traditions of Palestinian embroidery, copying old patterns and adding new ones of her own.

Sophie Halaby's painting lies at the point just after the first enchantment of Arab artists with Renaissance perspective and shading. Evaluation of her formal methods and subject matter place her at a parallel point to European art of a half-century earlier, when pre-Impressionist painters were first pushed by the Paris Commune into new ways of thinking as Sophie was by the 1936–1939 Revolt. Sophie Halaby was consistent in her interest, as she never ventured into Cubism or Fauvism. In contrast, Jabra Ibrahim Jabra (1910–1994), the distinguished Palestinian painter and writer who studied in Europe and painted in Jerusalem during the forties, fully embraced Fauvist painting in his youth, taking Palestinian visual development a huge step forward along the transitional path.

Not only was Sophie Halaby's contribution to the development of Palestinian, and therefore Arab, art a significant step along the path of its rapid change during the twentieth century, it was, additionally, of a uniquely high quality, practiced consistently throughout her life.

### **My Last Visits with Sophie Halaby**

An opportunity to meet with Sophie and her sister was uppermost on my mind during the mid-nineties when I began to return to Palestine for extended visits. I searched for her home and gently introduced myself. She was by then old and circumspect. The dark years of the occupation were visible everywhere. Shopkeepers near her home whom I befriended talked of criminal gangs that exploited them, demanding protection money. Only traditional social connections held communities together. Law and police protection were absent. Occupation is an insufficient description regarding what Palestinians of Jerusalem, the West Bank, and Gaza experience. Being packaged by a poisonous spider for slow consumption is a more descriptive metaphor for the Israeli occupation. I am reminded that on my first visit to the West Bank in 1995, Vera Tamari describing how for the first time after many dreary years she had the pleasure of hearing the laughter of a young couple daring to be out on the street as night descended.

Sophie decided to trust me and invited me inside for proper tea and cake. I wanted to interview her and to perhaps buy one of her paintings, or at the very least document some of her life's work. However Sophie would have none of this. Her heart was overflowing with anger and anguish and she wanted to ventilate. She told of the agonies she and her sister endured after the 1967 Israeli occupation of the West Bank, when most members of her family were in exile or unreachable due to unobtainable Israeli permits, or due to closures and endless checkpoints. Sophie was then ninety-one years of age, sharp of mind and memory

but agitated. Her sister Asia, who could vocalize a bit yet was unable to say anything clearly, was peaceful and loving. While Sophie talked, Asia listened and occasionally patted my knee with her palm, sweetly offering more cake and tea.

Sophie talked in the first person, on her own behalf only. At that point Asia had essentially become a helpless ward of Sophie's, adding to her anguish and sense of isolation. In losing Asia to dementia, she had essentially lost her lifelong councilor. Sophie was very proud of Asia and brought out a three-ring-binder, in which she had organized letters and certificates of award pertaining to Asia's career. She thumbed through the pages, insisting that I pay attention, all the while avoiding my attempts to ask about her art and permission to visit her studio. But it gave me a hint about all the valuable documentation contained in her files about both their lives.

Sophie's primary complaint was about a certain mayor of Bethlehem who had tricked her out of a parcel of land. She had signed it over freely on the promise that a home for old men would be built on it by the municipality of Bethlehem. Instead, the mayor took it as his own private property. She talked extensively about the terror applied to her and her sister by this mayor, how he terrorized them by telephone and by sending people to scare them at night by making threatening noises outside their windows. She said that that is why she had a big dog outside in the garden. Sophie was also very angry with Teddy Kollek, the one-time Israeli mayor of Jerusalem, who had demolished her parents' home in Qatamon because, as she said, there had been a Russian guest there that the Israelis hated. She said she had found a lawyer that she trusted to execute her wishes. However, this lawyer in the end turned out to be a swindler who had played on her fears. Instead of fulfilling her wishes, he took personal ownership of all of the two sisters' assets, including their house and its contents.

Each time that I visited Sophie in the mid-nineties she insisted on extensively telling me about the mayor of Bethlehem, Teddy Kollek, and the lawyer whom she trusted to execute her wishes. At the very end of my last visit, when I was trying to say goodbye, Sophie finally took me to her studio. The room was dark and shuttered and looked as though it had not been recently used. Portfolios were stacked everywhere. She pulled out a few paintings and let me photograph them but the light was so poor and my film good only for daylight. Finally, she opened the balcony door and let in some light, but stopped further photography. We stood on the narrow balcony, she enjoying the sunlight, and I tried to photograph her but she refused. I tried to buy a drawing and she refused.

Surprisingly, she allowed me to open many of her portfolios and look through her drawings. I saw many pencil drawings in line on all sizes of paper, some not larger than typing paper. They were simple line drawings of the surrounding hills of Jerusalem. I told her that I would like to help her organize the work using acid free portfolios and slip-sheets. She allowed me to pull the ones on the floor under tables and organize them on upper shelves. I noted that some had water damage due to rain that had leaked through the balcony door.

Tragically, the lawyer she so mistakenly trusted gave her artwork to a souvenir shop owner to sell. The shop owner knew nothing of either their value or their importance and cared little for documentation. A new generation of Palestinian collectors rescued some of Sophie's work.<sup>36</sup> However, her line drawings have not shown up yet, nor has the archival material that Sophie and Asia collected. Their home was full of family photographs, books, papers, albums, archeological material, Persian carpets, mother of pearl inlaid furniture, an embroidered village dress collection, and much more. The loss of Sophie's work and documentation is an injury not to private property but to the cultural legacy that belongs to all Palestinians. It can be added to the millions of injuries caused by the Israeli occupation of Palestine.

Sophie died at St. Joseph Hospital in Jerusalem on 21 May 1997, having lived the length of the twentieth century in that city. She practiced her art throughout her life, contributing to and experiencing the rich history of Arab culture. During Sophie Halaby's twentieth century in Palestine, hope expressed in revolutionary uprisings – from the general strike of the thirties to the first intifada – see-sawed with the destructiveness of both World Wars of the twentieth century and the three major occupations – Ottoman rule, British colonialism, and Zionist imperialism, each more destructive than the previous one. Sophie Halaby's life and oeuvre are a coherent part of the vivid stories of Palestinian history, a fitting subject for epic poetry, inspiring an international culture of resistance.

Samia Halaby is a painter and writer born in Jerusalem in 1936, now living and practicing in New York City. Her paintings are in museum collections internationally and she has published one book, *Liberation Art of Palestine* (New York: H.T.T.B., 2001), and many essays on the history of Palestinian art of the twentieth century.

#### Endnotes

- Where individuals mentioned in this article have published in English – as in the case of Sultanie Halaby's poetry – I have chosen to use their published name rather than imposing standard transliteration of the original Arabic.
- Information regarding Sophie's parents is provided by Sami Wahbe based on his copy of the family tree.

Sophie's date and place of birth and death were obtained from the death certificate issued by the Israeli Ministry of the Interior.

- Suhail Shukry Halaby, personal interview, December 2014. Suhail said that Sultanie Halaby always reiterated about young Nicola for whom she had a deep affection that he was so diligent that sometimes he studied by a street lamp. This might have been an affectionate myth built to characterize sincere diligence, similar to the one Sophie told my sister about her parents returning to Jerusalem from Russia on foot.
- Kamal Boullata, *Palestinian Art: From 1850 to the Present* (London: Saqi, 2009), 166. The fact is that Khalil Halaby only had one niece and one nephew both born in the United States. Based on my acquaintance, Khalil's niece lived out her life in Brooklyn, while the nephew died during the Second World War serving in the U.S. air force.
- This information is provided by notes found in a bible belonging to Hanna Halaby of Amman.
- Vera Tamari comment, January 2015.
- Randa Atalla, personal interview November 2014.
- Vera Tamari, personal interview, December 2014.
- Suhail Shukry Halaby, personal interview, December 2014.
- Suhail Shukrie Halaby and Claudette Habesch, personal interviews, December 2014.
- Doris Saleh, personal interview, December 2014.
- Lily Wahbe, personal interview, December 2014.
- Adli Halabi, personal interview, December 2014.
- Ra'uf Halabi was born sometime in the early 1930s. As a young man, he fought in the 1948 war of resistance, during which he was wounded in the head but survived. During the 1960s and 1970s, revolutionary fervor grew and, given his complete commitment to the liberation of Palestine, he became involved in the Palestinian resistance at high levels. He had lands in Jordan where he allowed the training of freedom fighters, who were then allowed to penetrate into Israeli-occupied Palestinian lands through his farm on the Jordan River. On 1 January 1970, he was assassinated by a U.S.-made missile, delivered from the air by Israelis, using intelligence regarding his location provided by Jordanian authorities. In the atmosphere of nationalist resistance of the time, his funeral attracted a huge, militant outpouring.
- Samia Khoury, personal email, November 2014.
- It is possible that Sophie meant the Jerusalem College for Girls.
- Sophie Halaby, personal interview, April 20, 1996.
- Claudette Habesch, personal interview, December 2014. Claudette tells that her sister-in-law, Beatrice Habesch, born in 1927 and started at Schmidt Girls' School at age five, remembers Sophie teaching there by then.
- Schmidt Girls' School in Jerusalem, established in 1886, lies opposite Bab al-'Amud (Damascus Gate) and is today sponsored by the German Association of the Holy Land. The date 1955 as the year Sophie stopped teaching at Schmidt was obtained from the catalog of an exhibition, held in Ramallah in 2003, of Sophie Halaby's works in the collection of Yvette and Mazen Qupty.
- Claudette Habesch, personal interview, December 2014.
- Olga Wahbe, personal interview June 16, 2003.
- Suhail Shukrie Halaby, personal interview, November 2014.
- Sophie Halaby, personal interview, April 20, 1996.
- Arabs commonly take their father's name for a middle name. In Sophie's case, the G stands for George, the English version of Jiryes.
- Vera Tamari, personal interview, December 2014.
- Doris Saleh, personal interview, December 2014.
- Boullata, *Palestinian Art*, 172.
- Kamal Boullata, *Istihdar al-Makan: dirasa fi al-fann al-tashkili al-Filastini al-mu'asir* [Visualizing the Place: A Study of Contemporary Palestinian Plastic Arts] (Tunis: Arab League Educational, Cultural, and Scientific Organization, 2000), 885.
- Tania Tamari Nasser, personal interview, December 2000.
- Vladimir Tamari, personal letter, November 2014.
- Samia Khoury, email letter, November 2014.
- Randa Atalla, personal interview November 2014.
- Suhail Halaby, personal interview, November 2014.
- Garay Menicucci, "Kulthum Auda, Palestinian Ethnographer: Gendering the Palestinian Landscape,"



in *The Landscape of Palestine: Equivocal Poetry*, ed. Ibrahim Abu-Lughod, Roger Heacock, and Khaled Nashef (Birzeit: Birzeit University Publications, 1999), 80.

- R. I. Tannous, personal interview, 1999.
- Mazen Qudus had the wisdom to immediately and without question buy a batch of her work when he found it in a souvenir shop.



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