

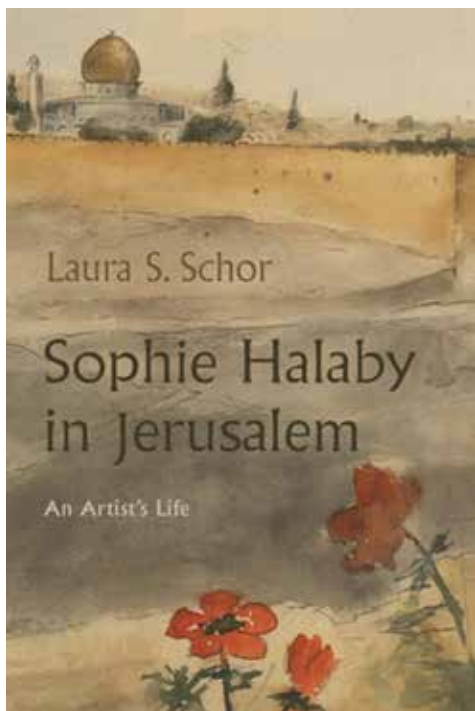
## BOOK REVIEW

# Speaking in a Different Key

## The Life and Art of Sophie Halaby

Laura S. Schor, *Sophie Halaby in Jerusalem: An Artist's Life*. 296 pages, 11 black and white, 21 color illustrations, 2 maps. Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 2019. \$34.95 paper, \$80.00 hardcover.

Review by Nisa Ari



*"We didn't pay enough attention to Sophie Halaby. We didn't know her work was important."*

Mary Joury, interviewed by Laura S. Schor, January 2018

These words, spoken by a younger peer of the late artist Sophie Halaby, capture both the urgency and doubt underlying any attempt to grapple with the life and works of this enigmatic Palestinian artist. Born in 1906 (formally as Sonia Halaby), either in Kiev or Jerusalem, to a Russian mother and Palestinian father, the artist came of age during the era of the British Mandate and lived through the wars, occupations, threats of demise, and promises of change that shaped the lives of all Palestinians, until her death in 1997. Remarkable to both neophytes and experts of Palestinian history and art history, Halaby's drawn and painted visions of the world around her seemed to resist any hint of the political tumult, deadly violence, or urban transformations which spanned her lifetime. The subjects of Halaby's life work were purple irises, pink cyclamens, and red poppies bursting out of glass vases; gently sloping hillsides, knotted tree-trunks, and pencil-thin outlines of Jerusalem's architectural landmarks punctuating views of deep horizons; muted displays of Palestine's cornucopia of fruits and vegetables resting on featureless wooden tables; and infrequent portraits of figures, both nude and dressed, facing toward the viewer and away, revealing little of their internal selves. Quietly removed from the immense socio-political drama

that punctuates the history of Palestine and Palestinians during the twentieth century, Halaby's work is notable for its stoicism. So why was this work, as Mary Joury indicated, "important"? Why was her story neglected for so long and why are scholars particularly interested in her now?

That the name Sophie Halaby is known to an audience interested in Palestinian history is not because her artworks are prominently displayed and celebrated in public museum collections around the world, or even in Palestine. (Today, Halaby's artworks exist primarily in the private art collections of Yvette and Mazen Quity and George al-'Ama, after being miraculously recovered from the garbage after the artist's death – a Sherlockian detective story full of twists and turns, best saved for the reader of Laura S. Schor's new book.) Rather, she achieved recognition through the pioneering efforts of the late artist and art historian Kamal Boullata, who was the first to attempt to write a synthetic history of Palestinian art, spanning the ruptures and tumults of Palestinian history in the long twentieth-century. In Boullata's field-defining, English-language book *Palestinian Art 1850–2005* (Saqi Press, 2004), he includes an analysis of Halaby's work both in the context of her association with the Russian Orthodox Church in Jerusalem and grouped according to her modified status as a Palestinian *woman* artist. Boullata recalled seeing Halaby's paintings as a young man throughout the 1950s and 60s, when they were exhibited weekly in the street-level window of her sister's embroidery workshop on Zahra Street in East Jerusalem. Her vivid paintings of wildflowers and still lifes echoed the neighboring *tatriz* designs, mostly abstracted visions of Palestine's floral bounty, within the window display. Struck by Halaby's artistic reticence toward the changing geopolitical landscape around her, Boullata interpreted Halaby's painting practice as intensely personal and devoid of political resonance, "responsive only to the sounds of her inner bell." Despite his reverence for Halaby's exquisite painting technique and her boldness as the first woman (and first Palestinian artist of her generation) to further her art studies abroad in Europe, Boullata's conclusion ultimately reduced Halaby's artistic output to personal sentimentalism – an all too familiar refrain in the evaluation of women artists.



Figure 1. Flower painting, courtesy of Lily W. Porter and Nelly W. Porter.

Sounding out the many complex resonances that made up Halaby's "inner bell" is the focus of historian and critical biographer Laura S. Schor's latest effort to restore the voices, experiences, and legacies of women overlooked in histories narrated through conventional archival evidence. Written (and saved) letters, legal papers, organizational records, and newspapers primarily privilege and preserve the voices of men. As the author of numerous studies on exceptional women of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, from the French feminist-socialist Flora Tristan to Annie Landau, the British headmistress who steered Jerusalem's Evelina de Rothschild School for Girls through political strife with aplomb, Schor is particularly adept at spinning the complex web of a woman's life out of mere threads of documentation and impressionistic, and often conflicting, oral recollections. In this, and in her knowledge of the social landscape of Jerusalem in the early twentieth century, she is uniquely poised to transport Halaby and her world into our present view.

In writing *Sophie Halaby in Jerusalem: An Artist's Life*, Schor also had to contend with the traces of Sophie's life gleaned from her oil paintings, watercolors, and drawings in pencil, charcoal, and ink. These artworks, while numerous, were rarely signed, dated, or titled, and the artist, although well-known to younger Jerusalemites as one of the "two old Russian ladies" (177) who lived on Nur al-Din Street with her politically active and outspoken sister Asia (Anastasia), seldom participated in the exhibitions or events which formed the building blocks of the Palestinian art world. Aside from exhibiting several drawings in the *Salon des Tuileries* during her student days in Paris in the early 1930s, Halaby only contributed works to a small handful of exhibitions in Jerusalem throughout the rest of her life – primarily at the Young Women's Christian Association (YWCA) in the 1950s and 60s – and hesitantly agreed to the display of three of her paintings and drawings at an exhibition at the Hakawati Theater in 1986, organized by Palestinian women artists two generations her junior. In other words, while Halaby's artworks are relatively abundant, information surrounding their production, dissemination, and reception is sparse. Through nearly fifty oral interviews, careful mining of related memoirs, and research in personal collections and public archives from Israel/Palestine to France, England, and the United States, Schor constructs – for the first time – a detailed account of how this "pioneer" of Palestinian art came to be and the unusual life she lived.

Following the chronology of the artist's life, Schor sketches Halaby's biography as she simultaneously narrates the sociopolitical history of Jerusalem, and in particular what came to be known as "East Jerusalem," from its status as an Ottoman territory, through its control under the British Mandate from 1920 to 1948, annexation by Jordan shortly thereafter, and occupation by Israel in 1967. Told in a series of five chapters which roughly follow this historical segmentation, with an additional episode reserved at the end to evaluate the artist's posthumous legacy, the book's structure emphasizes the intertwined strands of the personal and the political, regardless of the fact that, as Schor submits, "[Halaby's] art focused on the enduring beauty of the landscape and flowers of Jerusalem, not

on the traumatic experiences of her life.” (1) Each chapter reckons with Halaby’s inscrutable passivity and continuity as an artist, while as a person Halaby rarely stood still, especially in the first half of the century: she fled with her family from Jerusalem to Kiev during the First World War (and back again once the Bolshevik Revolution started), traveled to Paris to study art on a four-year scholarship from the French government at the outbreak of the 1929 riots in Jerusalem (and again to Paris and Italy for a short visit in 1949), and shuttled between her first family home in Musrara to the Old City, and then to East Jerusalem as the violence and terror perpetrated by Zionist militias forced her movements.

The tension between these many changes in the artist’s life and the constancy of her artistic practice proves productive for Schor, who orients her understanding of Halaby’s personality and paintings around this psychological dissociation. The Halaby family’s exile in Kiev, a necessity due to Sophie’s mother’s status as a Russian national, was, incidentally, the teenage Halaby’s first trip abroad and her first exposure to a much larger and more modern city than Jerusalem. Gleaning the effects this time had on Halaby through family interviews, Schor asserts:

It was during this tumultuous period that the young Sophie developed the plurality of vision that would inform her art. [...] Sophie told some people that she was born in Kiev and others that she was born in Jerusalem. This playful inconsistency was an element of her originality; secrecy and confounding others about her origins was a feature of her personality. (14)

This quality of being purposefully mysterious, Schor suggests, derived from the early reckoning with identity that came through Halaby’s wartime exile, as a well as from the opportunity to connect with her Russian roots. Schor postulates that Halaby formed a “contrapuntal” identity, in the manner in which Edward Said described the positive plurality of vision one derives from exile and a multi-cultural upbringing. Halaby and her sister, Asia, conversed in Russian all their lives, often using it as a private language, a channel through which to distance themselves from the commotion around them. Yet, as Schor emphasizes, this fondness for Russian culture only entered Halaby’s paintings through depictions of nineteenth-century Russian religious monuments sketched into the backgrounds of her canvases devoted to the Mount of Olives. Halaby lived her life “painting the hills and flowers of her city [Jerusalem] repeatedly.” (14)

Schor maps the many data points of Halaby’s life onto her artistic work in order to strengthen her argument that if Halaby’s life experiences and political views could be seen anywhere in her artistic work, they were only witnessed in the deliberate, dogged erasure of those events. As Jerusalem began expanding under the British Mandate, “[Halaby] painted Jerusalem as she saw and loved it,” Schor contends, “erasing all of the new buildings that brought European influence into its borders.” (69) During the events of the Nakba, when a bomb landed near the

Halaby family home in Musrara, Halaby rolled up her paintings and sought their safe storage in the Old City. With no prospect of returning home to Musrara after the neighborhood was occupied as part of “West Jerusalem” in the summer of 1948, the Halaby sisters were forced to live elsewhere. Their brother, Nicola, a civil engineer who lived in Beirut (and later, Kuwait), designed a newly built home for his sisters on Nur al-Din Street. In her top-floor studio, Halaby continued “to look out over the hills of her beloved city and paint.” (113) Despite being wrested from her physical home and legally made a citizen of Jordan under the Jordanian Nationality Law of 1954, Schor argues, “her homeland was all around her. Her art remained independent of the ideology and its attendant aesthetic that were created in the diaspora [where the homeland was an idea].” (113) When, in the final decades of her life, the Halaby sisters experienced considerable anguish and a litany of legal woes due to seized family property following the *naksa*, then too, Schor asserts, “[Halaby’s] landscapes were images of Jerusalem as she remembered it in her childhood, before the noise of construction filled the air and dust polluted the atmosphere.” (187) Unlike her sister, who joined women’s protest groups and was frequently found leading a march against the Israeli occupation, Halaby, as friends recall, stayed home in her studio, painting. “This,” Schor concludes, “was her form of protest.” (169) A handwritten letter from Halaby to her close friend Ada Kalbian in September of 1968 – one of only two documents written by Halaby that Schor was able to locate through her dense network of oral interviewees – seems to support Schor’s view that Halaby conceived of painting as a release from politics. The artist, then in her early sixties, stated in the letter that the political situation in Palestine had become so monotonous that it was a relief to “plunge again into the serene world of art.” (171)

Schor’s other astonishing discovery while working on this biography, however, greatly challenges her reading of Halaby’s life and oeuvre as a persistent and “silent” protest (169), as well as Boullata’s analysis of Halaby’s artworks as the manifestations only of her “inner bell.” Halaby produced a series of eight political cartoons for the economic and political missive *Palestine and TransJordan Weekly*, an English-language, Palestinian-supported publication, which debuted in the summer of 1936. Her first cartoon appeared that August, as the first phase of the Arab Higher Committee’s boycott and revolt against the Mandate government brought commercial and economic activity in Palestine to a grinding halt. Her cartoons continued to appear until March 1937, covering the period of the Peel Commission’s sojourn in Palestine and its recommendation to partition Palestine into Jewish and Arab states and an international enclave. In the climax of the book, Schor deftly narrates how each of Halaby’s cartoons responded in real time to the troubling events of those eight months and documented political opinions within the Palestinian community. Halaby’s final cartoon, a damning picture of frustration with the Peel Commission’s prescription, illustrates a British official rocking twin babies in a double-wide cradle, the words “Palestine Mandate” etched into its wooden footboard. In Schor’s words:

This poignant cartoon is different in tone from the previous ones. It suggests that the British were unable to sing a song that would be intelligible and comforting to two babies with incompatible languages and needs. The British official wipes his brow in frustration at his failure to pacify the babies. The failure of the Peel Commission to find a solution to the growing dissatisfaction of the Arab population of Palestine was sobering to the artist. (87)

Here, at last, is Sophie Halaby – the politically-engaged artist. This Sophie Halaby appears to align much more closely with the portrait drawn of the artist by her younger relative, the artist and scholar Samia Halaby, in an essay published in the *Jerusalem Quarterly* 61 (2015),<sup>1</sup> in which she recounts several family anecdotes characterizing Halaby as blunt, outspoken, and “deeply nationalist.” Yet, little evidence for this position within the artist’s work was known to exist prior to the discovery of these cartoons.

Samia Halaby had read Sophie Halaby’s excision and rejection of urban, social, and political developments in her quiet landscape paintings as the primary evidence for the artist’s bitterness and opposition toward the Israeli occupation. As Schor is quick to point out, however, despite Halaby’s obvious worry over Palestine’s future during the 1936 revolt, as highlighted in her cartoons, “she hereafter ceased using her artistic talent to comment on the British, the Jews, or the Arabs.” (87)



THE DIFFICULTY SEEMS TO BE THAT OF SINGING  
TWO DIFFERENT LULLABIES AT THE SAME TIME.

Figure 2. “The difficulty seems to be that of singing two different lullabies at the same time,” The Dorot Jewish Division, New York Public Library.

But did Halaby’s politics, as represented through her art, really start and end with these eight cartoons? If so, how are we to rectify this apparent schism in Halaby’s oeuvre? And how are we to understand the gap between Schor’s characterization of

Halaby as a multi-cultural, cosmopolitan, and somewhat politically subdued person against Samia Halaby's vision of her as acutely Palestinian and nationalist? Is it possible that there are more, yet undiscovered, political artworks or that the artist's politics are buried inside her landscapes and still lifes in ways that scholars have yet to see? On this point, a deeper dive into the works of Halaby's fellow artists, especially those who were actively producing art prior to the Nakba alongside her, may have proven valuable. Schor refers to, but interacts little with, Halaby's near-contemporaries, such as Nicola Saig, Zulfa al-Sa'di, Mubarak Sa'ed, Jabra Ibrahim Jabra, and the Jewish artist Anna Ticho, wife of the famous ophthalmologist Dr. Albert Ticho, who was Halaby's neighbor in Musrara. While several of these artists produced more overtly political works during their careers, such as al-Sa'di's portraits of pan-Arab luminaries for the 1933 First National Arab Fair in Jerusalem, they too continued to paint the hills, flowers, and fruits of Palestine. For instance, the prolific poet, novelist, translator, and painter Jabra depicted the blood-red petals of Palestine's profuse poppies in *Field of Anemones* (or *The Girl and the Poppies*), painted sometime between 1945 and 1947, just before his own exile to Baghdad and a career rooted at the intersection of art and politics. In this painting, Jabra's poppies dot the grass beneath a seated woman whose serene face and slack pose reveal – as in Halaby's artworks – nearly nothing of the human violence and land ravages of the mid-1940s during which this work was made.

Moreover, flowers, particularly wildflowers from the “Holy Land,” were transforming in the first half of the twentieth century from religious tourist souvenirs to poignant and proto-nationalist artifacts establishing one's connection to the land. Boris Schatz, founder of the Zionist-funded Bezalel School for Arts and Crafts, agitated for the establishment of both a botanical department and a nature museum at the school's founding in 1906. The school's pedagogy emphasized the importance of researching Palestine's native botanical specimens for the development of a “Hebrew style” of art and the bolstering of a Jewish nation. Similarly, as historian Enaya Othman illuminates in her recent book on the American Quaker Friends Girls School in Ramallah (*Negotiating Palestinian Womanhood* [Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2016]), an understanding of botany was considered essential for uniting the girls' training for “home life” to their “national life,” as the Arab national movement gained momentum in Palestine throughout the years of the Mandate. Seen through this lens, and in concert with other “quiet” artworks by her contemporaries, it is possible to speculate that Halaby's artworks were not made in silent protest so much as they were speaking in a different key, one that became all the harder to hear once the generation of Palestinian artists who rose to prominence in the 1950s–70s, such as Ismail Shammout, Nabil Anani, and Sliman Mansour, transformed Palestine's botanical and agricultural motifs into explicit, powerful emblems of the homeland and political symbols of Palestinian resistance.

As Schor acknowledges in her book's final chapter and afterword, despite her own herculean efforts to puzzle together the pieces of Halaby's life, as well as the important contributions of other historians, curators, and artists like Boullata, Samia

Halaby, Tina Sherwell, Reem Fadda, and Esmail Neshif to our understanding of this elusive artist, “the full impact of Sophie Halaby’s legacy as an artist remains to be addressed.” (197) She posits several avenues for further research, including the continued study of all of Halaby’s known artworks to decipher their chronology, or the unearthing of the artist’s detailed record book, *History of Drawings*, the spine of which was incorporated into one of her paintings like a tantalizing clue. Schor moreover encourages her readers “to continue the process of expanding the boundaries of Palestinian history to document and to interpret the lives and work of Palestinian women.” (198) The mere fact that Halaby’s artworks exist, when so much of Palestinian cultural and artistic heritage has been lost, looted, or destroyed, and many promising artistic careers prematurely stunted in the wake of the Nakba – like that of her younger contemporary, Zulfa al-Sa‘di, who fled to Damascus – is extraordinary in itself. The work of determining why, in what ways, and to whom Halaby’s artworks were and continue to be “important,” however, persists.

What Schor generously provides to the next generation of scholars on Palestinian art, Palestinian women’s history, and social histories of Jerusalem is a holistic vision of Halaby’s world. The sights, smells, tastes, and, above all, the voices that filled Halaby’s senses are brought to new life through this book. Using published memoirs and unpublished archival letters and documents, Schor amasses a circle of friends, schoolmates, teachers, diplomats, missionaries, archaeologists, dentists, and doctors (among others) who either knew Halaby and/or experienced the world in similar ways – in effect, downloading some of their sights and impressions into the artist’s psyche. While, at times, this technique risks assuming what Halaby felt or believed, it simultaneously produces the positive effect of raising the voices of other, especially female, Palestinians, such as Ghada Karmi, Hala Sakakini, Betty Dagher Majaj, Hanan Ashrawi, and Samia Nasir Houry, whose lives flash throughout the pages. Schor offers an intimate vision of the rich social network built by the teachers and elite alumnae of the Jerusalem Girls College (JGC), the prominent Anglican missionary school in Jerusalem that Halaby attended from ages twelve to eighteen. Historicized by Inger Marie Okkenhaug in *The Quality of Heroic Living, of High Endeavor and Adventure* (Brill, 2002), the JGC was the magnet through which Halaby and some of Palestine’s most enterprising women were bound together. In Schor’s book, the young teachers of the school, like Halaby’s drawing teacher Susan P. Emery, similarly emerge as important contributors to the landscape of Palestinian art and society.

Leaving no stone unturned, Schor also expands upon the previously published historical narratives surrounding the life of Halaby and her family – knowledge of the family’s exile in Kiev during the First World War, for example, stands out as a point of great significance for understanding the artist’s identity formation – and, at times, even corrects those earlier sources: for instance, Halaby’s father, George, the eldest son of an established Christian Jerusalemite family, was not a physician, but graduated from the Moscow Ecclesiastical Seminary in 1888 and



was appointed dragoman of the Imperial Orthodox Palestine Society in 1901 (a position inherited from his uncle Ya‘qub); no firm birth records exist for Sophie, either in Jerusalem or Kiev, nor are there records of Halaby ever having taught at the German-run Schmidt’s Girls College, although her cousin Sonia Wahbe certainly did.

With this work, the first full-length, published biography of any Palestinian artist born prior to the Nakba, Schor has exposed the difficulties and rewards of this type of intellectual endeavor. Her book sets the stage for future research on Palestinian modern art and artists and moves the needle forward for future scholars of Halaby’s work in particular. Throughout the book, Schor refers to Halaby as “Sophie,” a designation surely meant to distinguish the protagonist from the many familial relations and others who bear her last name, but one that also provides the reader with a certain sense of intimacy: after reading Schor’s book, we too will all be on a first-name-basis with this rare figure in Palestinian history.

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#### **Endnotes**

- 1 Samia Halaby, “Sophie Halaby, Palestinian Artist of the Twentieth Century,” *Jerusalem Quarterly* 61 (2015): 84–100.