



Daoud Zalatimo and Jerusalem Painting During the Early Mandate

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This essay on the art of Daoud Zalatimo 1906-2001, is excerpted from Boullata's encyclopaedic study of Palestinian art, published in 2009.¹ This section is preceded by a discussion of Jerusalem iconography as a painting tradition which involved a number of early Palestinian painters, several of whom began their career as iconographers, but who also painted non-religious themes. Those early painters were Christians and Muslims and included, Jiryis Jawhariyyeh (1828-1914), Nicola Saig (1863-1942), Mubarak Sa'ed (1876-1961), Khalil Halabi (1889-1964), Tawfiq Jawhariyyeh (1890-1944) and Zulfa al Sa'di (1910-1988).

Born to a Muslim family, the young Zalatimo was a close friend of Fakhri, the youngest of the Jawhariyyeh brothers. This friendship allowed him to spend much of his leisure time at Nicola Saig's studio, especially since his family's bakery was just

Daoud Zalatimo 1906-2001. *Source: Palestinian Art 1850-2005 by Kamal Boullata (Al-Saqi).*

around the corner. Like all Jerusalemites, Saig was fond of the mutabbaq, the sweet light and crunchy pie invented by the boy's grandfather, remembered as a turbaned man with a white beard. The Zalatimo boy, who had dabbled with imaginative drawings since a tender age, was impressed by the array of icons and paintings displayed at Saig's studio and would feast his eyes whenever he could see them at close range. Many decades later he would recount how he was mesmerized by the life like vividness of the everyday scenes depicted in Saig's oil paintings and how the older Jawhariyyeh brother, Tawfiq, was instrumental in recognizing and guiding the young Zalatimo's aptitude for artistic expression. He allowed him to study his charcoal drawings and often commented encouragingly on the boy's work, kindling in the process Zalatimo's determination to further cultivate his artistic talents.²

The religious and family customs in which Zalatimo was raised, however, made it impossible for him to imagine himself capable of ever earning a living from a painting profession in the manner of Saig and his coterie of painters. While he absorbed much from first-hand observation of painting process from conception to finished execution, the aspiring artist did not know that the end of the Great War and the historical events that were about to unfold in the country would ironically provide him with the opportunity to realize his dream of attaining further artistic training and secure an income from his art.

During the years when Zalatimo was frequenting the Saig studio, Palestine was slipping out of Ottoman control to fall subject to British colonial sovereignty. – which had been the subject of a painting by Saig – announced a new hope for the Palestinian people, who had been striving for national independence after enduring four centuries under a decaying Ottoman administration. The hopes that the Palestinians placed in the British Mandate, however, quickly turned into grave concerns when they realized that Allenby's Jerusalem's entry came within a month of a secret agreement between the British minister of foreign affairs, Lord Arthur James Balfour, and the influential British Zionist, Baron Lionel D. Rothschild, that promised British support for establishing a national homeland for the Jews in Palestine. Once installed, the British colonial authorities categorically refused to listen to Palestinian objections and Arab demands. Within two years, the British authorities appointed a well-known British Zionist, Sir Herbert Samuel, to be the country's first High Commissioner.³ That same year, the exclusivist Jewish workers union, the Histadrut, was established and the armed Jewish armed bands of the Haganah were formed. The early 1920s also witnessed the first in a series of great waves of Jewish immigration into the country. Previous occasional skirmishes between Jewish settlers and Palestinian natives would later escalate into bloody confrontations. While the bulk of the British budget was directed to the enforcement of colonial rule in Palestine, a scant budget – less than 5 per cent – was allocated for educational purposes.⁴ Since Palestine's major cities had their own established institutions, most elementary schools subsidized by the Mandate were located in the country's smaller towns; their teachers were all hired from Palestinian cities. At nineteen, Daoud Zalatimo secured employment as an art teacher in Khan Younis and years later was transferred to a Lydda school which was closer



Daoud Zalatimo, *The Painter's Son*, oil on canvas, Family collection, Jerusalem. *Source: Palestinian Art 1850-2005 by Kamal Boullata (Al-Saqi).*

to home. With his employment, the young man secured a dependable income that justified to everyone concerned the importance of practising his art, a vocation which some elders in his community continued to denounce as mere blasphemy. Through the summer workshops offered by British art instructors who worked in the Mandate's Department of Education, Zalatimo was able to develop and refine the skills that he had begun to acquire during the formative years he spent around Saig's studio.

After classes, Zalatimo devoted his time to what was to become the major contribution of his art. Due to the recent arrival of the British in Palestine, art supplies, ranging from quality paper and canvas to boxes of watercolours and pastel as well as oil colours conveniently sealed in tubes, became more readily accessible. Availing himself of these ready-made materials, Zalatimo sought to develop a form of art that he could use as an educational tool to inspire his students. Having seen how many of them recited by heart freshly published poems by the young nationalist poets Ibrahim Tuqan (1905–41) and his friend 'Abd al-Rahim Mahmud (1913–48), the Jerusalem art teacher who retained a vivid memory of how struck he had been by Saig's paintings wished to demonstrate to his students how visual expression could be as emphatic as written language.

The choice of his subject matter, however, had to be carefully thought out if he were not only to avoid the possible wrath of more conventional Muslims among his

larger audience, but more importantly to ensure their approval. Zalatimo had to walk a tightrope between his Arab viewers and his British employer. Were he to paint a subject matter esteemed by his compatriots who were vehemently opposed to British policies in Palestine, he could well invite a quarrel with his British employers. It was in Saig's metaphoric interpretations of historical moments in Islamic history that Zalatimo found an ideal model to emulate. His work, initially displayed as an educational aid within the walls of the school in which he taught, thus expounded themes that were eventually to win the hearts of every Arab of his day, regardless of religious affiliation, and at the same time it did not displease the British who could not see it with the same eyes.

Zalatimo repeatedly drew and painted a wide array of imagined portraits that he mostly copied from printed illustrations of heroic Arab figures from Islamic history including Khalid Ibn al-Walid, the seventh-century leader who delivered Syria and Palestine to the Muslim Arabs, and the magnanimous Saladin, the twelfth-century Kurdish leader who defeated the Crusaders in Palestine. Zalatimo also painted imaginary scenes that included the cavalry of Tariq Ibn Ziyad as he led the invasion of the Iberian Peninsula in the eighth century and the last Arab ruler in Andalusia Abu Abdullah, better known as Boabdil, as he took a last glance at Granada in 1492 when his mother allegedly said to him, 'you do well to weep like a woman for what you failed to defend like a man'.

Zalatimo's students were awestruck by these iconic and allegorical images, especially given the critical national juncture. Consequently, many national school principals requested duplicate paintings by Zalatimo to display them at prominent places in school and the young Jerusalem painter was glad to supply them their requests. Back in Jerusalem, the 'Umariyyeh School, named after Islam's first caliph, obtained a portrait painting representing 'Umar Ibn al-Khattab while the Rashidiyyeh School, named after caliph Harun al-Rashid, who reigned during the height of Islamic learning, commissioned Zalatimo to paint an imagined portrait of the Abbasid caliph. Unlike the busts of historic figures, the imagined portrait he did for the Ma'arif School for Girls showed the full figure of Zenobia, the legendary third-century queen of Palmyra; she was portrayed standing in profile with a battle shield as she rested her stretched arm on a marble column. When Zalatimo's themes and compositions were not copied from printed images, they were mostly, like Zenobia's portrait, faithful copies of paintings created by Saig.

It is noteworthy that the politically allegorical method Zalatimo devised in his paintings began to play a greater role in establishing a Palestinian nationalist iconography after the loss of Palestine in 1948. Ismail Shammout (1930–2006), who studied with Zalatimo at the Lydda school, succeeded his mentor in becoming the leading artist of his generation to infuse his paintings with allegorical images borrowed from verbal expression for the purpose of nurturing national memory and mobilizing his people to regain Palestine.⁵

Zalatimo's work, however, was not available to the general public outside the schools where it was displayed. In those days, art exhibitions were unheard of. In fact,

the only space in which a general Palestinian public could view exhibited handicrafts of any kind, outside the Old City's workshops and souvenir shops, was in the context of the seasonal activities sponsored by the Christian missions. Since the turn of the century, all educational institutions belonging to the different missions in the country had mounted yearly exhibitions of products by their native students. Paintings on canvas were displayed side by side with all forms of other crafts including brass work, glazed pottery, needlepoint, embroidery, weaving, basketry, woodcarving and hand-made greeting cards. Held within the walls of each institution, these public displays attracted a limited public, usually composed of students, family members and friends associated with the institution.

Kamal Boullata is a Palestinian painter and writer. His work is held in major public collections and museums. His writings on Palestinian and Arab art have appeared in exhibition catalogues, anthologies and periodicals including the Journal of Palestine Studies, Third Text, and The Encyclopedia of the Palestinians. He is the author of Recovery of Place: A Study of Contemporary Palestinian Art (in Arabic) and the editor of Belonging and Globalization: Critical Essays in Contemporary Art and Culture (Saqi).

Endnotes

- 1 Boullata, Kamal *Palestinian Art: From 1850 to the Present*. Saqi, London, 2009.
- 2 Information on Daoud Zalatio was mainly based on a personal interview conducted in his Wad al-Joz residence in Jerusalem, 24 Oct. 1998.
- 3 For a comprehensive background of the period leading to the political conflict, see Rashid Khalidi, *British Policy towards Syria and Palestine, 1906–14: A Study of the Antecedents of the Hussein–McMahon Correspondence, the Sykes–Picot Agreement and the Balfour Declaration*, London 1980
- 4 For a major sourcebook on education in Mandatory Palestine see Abdul Latif Tibawi, *Arab Education in Mandatory Palestine: A Study of Three Decades of British Administration*, London 1956.
- 5 See Isma'il Shammout, *Al-Fan al-Tashkili fi Filastin* (Art in Palestine), Kuwait 1989, pp. 48–9.