

## Sophie Halaby in Jerusalem: An Artist's Life

**Laura S. Schor**

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Little known outside of Palestine, Sophie Halaby was a Russian-Arab painter, Jerusalemite, and member of a prominent Christian family. Laura S. Schor's *Sophie Halaby in Jerusalem* is a careful, elegant portrait that highlights the contrasts between the war and displacement that Halaby endured, and her delicate hillside landscapes.

Composed through interviews with people who knew the artist, readings of memoirs by her contemporaries, archival research, and Schor's travels, the book is a broad window into Halaby's origins. It covers her education and life under the British Mandate; her study in Paris; her return to Palestine; and the turbulent decades after.

The loss of Halaby's personal papers and photographs results in unavoidable speculation on what she may have thought or done. Her solitary nature also makes her an elusive subject. Still, Schor presents a twentieth century milieu with acuity, making it possible to imagine how the artist might have formed her modern ideas.

The book works much like an intriguing negative, capturing Halaby's surroundings while leaving Halaby herself luminous and less defined. Halaby's place among a cosmopolitan elite with deep Jerusalem roots is drawn in chapters set before the city's division. Gaps in her biography are filled with political and domestic concerns. Meticulous details provide a clearer understanding of Palestine's past.

Halaby's paintings, which often focused on wildflowers and serene natural beauty, stand apart from their contemporaries. The book presents her recurring fascination with Old Jerusalem as her answer to a changing environment. It's a compelling reading that emphasizes the artist not as a documentarian, but as an independent visionary.

*Sophie Halaby in Jerusalem* is poignant in its appreciation for an artist who dedicated her life to her homeland through her work, adding a valuable note to art history.

KAREN RIGBY (July/August 2019)

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