



ESSAYS

Fahrelnissa Zeid in the Mega-Museum

Mega-museums and modern artists from the Middle East

Sarah-Neel Smith

010_03 / 14 July 2016

Over the last several years, major international museums like the Tate Modern in London, the Metropolitan Museum of Art (Met) in New York, and the Guggenheim Abu Dhabi have developed large-scale initiatives to account for 'global' modern and contemporary art, moving significantly beyond their historical interest in the West. Tate has given a new international focus to its collecting and programming, including a notable retrospective of modern Lebanese artist Saloua Raouda Choucair in 2013. The Met has gone through a burst of hiring, bringing in curators with expertise in modern and contemporary art of Latin America, the Middle East, and other underrepresented regions. The Guggenheim Abu Dhabi is acquiring a substantial collection centred on the geographic hubs of the Middle East, North Africa, and West Asia.

Such initiatives are only picking up speed. They've even helped generate a name for the institutions that increasingly make them a core part of their identity: 'mega-museums', a term that captures not just the large-scale ambitions of these museums' broadening geographic scope but also the expansionist logic of the global capital that drives their activities. Critiques of such institutional formations are both well founded and plentiful.^[1] But is there an upside? In their search for historical figures that speak to contemporary concerns with global models of artistic practice, mega-museums have already begun to bring an unprecedented amount of scholarly and curatorial attention to long-ignored geographies of modern art.

So what might the mega-museum do differently than the international institutions that have championed modern artists from outside the Euro-American canon in the recent past? Take the case of Fahrelnissa Zeid (1901–1991), a painter and bi-lingual cosmopolite born in Turkey whose rich life spanned the first 90 years of the twentieth century and included countless privilege-enabled peregrinations between Europe and the Middle East. Zeid has gained increasing notoriety since her death in 1991, moving gradually from the realm of institutions invested in a notion of 'Arab culture' into the purview of an international contemporary art world that celebrates her cosmopolitanism.

In 2015, Zeid's artwork hit the biennial circuit. Appearing at biennials in Sharjah and Istanbul within a period of months, Zeid fit smoothly into an exhibition format where it is now *de rigueur* to feature twentieth century moderns alongside the living artists that provide the raw material for the biennial machine.^[2] The contemporary

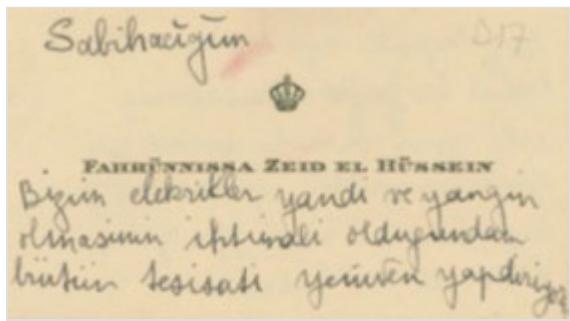


Fahrelnissa Zeid, *Composition*, year unknown.
Copyright the estate of the artist. Courtesy Dirimart.

consensus seems to be that the painter's wide-ranging practice forged in twentieth century Istanbul, London, Amman and Paris, positions her as the quintessential 'global' artist. Yet, as a look at recent exhibitions of her work demonstrates, the cultural centres, museums, and biennials that have championed Zeid have also struggled to fully account for the multi-faceted nature of her practice and biography. Zeid's life and work present a substantial set of scholarly and curatorial challenges, demanding new interpretive frameworks that move beyond the fracturing prism of cultural-national categories. Is this the project and the promise of the mega-museum?

Fahrelnissa Zeid (1901–1991)

A cream coloured *carte-de-visite* captures many of the defining biographical features that make Zeid so appealing to a contemporary art world interested in global models of artistic practice. The card, dating from the mid-twentieth century and now held in the SALT archives in Istanbul, features her name, 'Fahrünnissa Zeid El Hüssein', a small icon of a crown, and a casual note scribbled in Turkish, to one of Turkey's first female illustrators.



Fahrünissa Zeid El Hüsseini's business card, 4,7-8,6 cm. Early 20th century/ Date not specified.
Courtesy SALT Research. Open access.

Arabic stands as a multi-layered declaration of self-identity, from this life-long resident of Istanbul, Paris, London and Amman – one which might be put in dialogue with the florid autographic mark, in Arabic script, that Zeid persisted in using to sign many of her paintings until the end of her life.

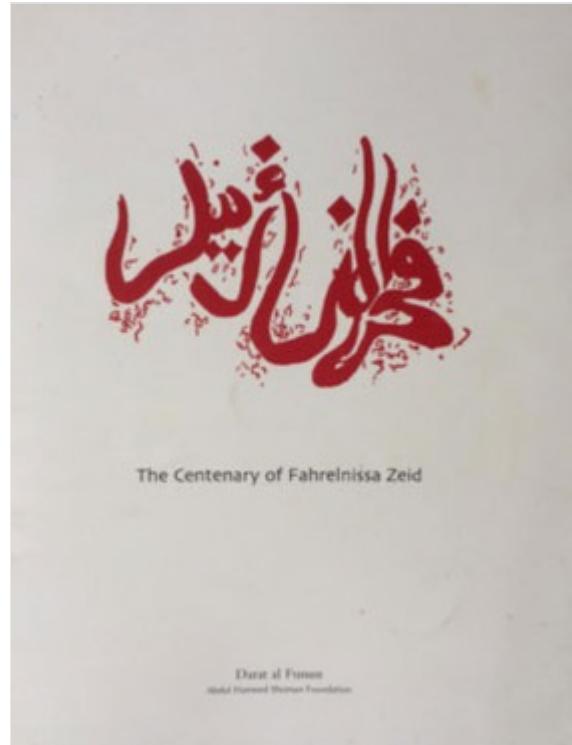
Despite its diminutive size, the *carte de visite* is an apt illustration of why Zeid has been deployed within divergent, even contradictory, interpretations in exhibitions since the 1990s. The variegated nature of her life has made her a malleable subject hailed as many things, from an ambassador of 'Arab culture' to a twentieth century cosmopolite embodying the inseparability of European and Turkish culture.

Arabicizing Zeid in Amman and Paris, 1980s–1990s

Hardly one to hide from the public eye, Zeid herself had a hand in inaugurating the contemporary historiography on her work. In 1975, some five years after the death of her husband (ambassador and Hashemite prince Zeid bin Hussein), the painter relocated permanently from Paris to Amman. There, she continued her life-long habit of transforming domestic space into a sphere for artistic activity. This was a practice Zeid had begun as early as 1946, when she staged her first solo exhibition by emptying her luxurious Istanbul apartment of furniture, filling its walls with her paintings, and opening it to the public. Letters, sketches, and photographs from throughout her life reflect Zeid's regular transformations of her living spaces into a studio, from the realm of the gracious hostess to a place where she also staged dramatic photographic representations of herself as an artist at work.^[3]

If this long-established approach was, for Zeid, a fundamentally transcultural project whose importance extended from one context to the next, in Amman she gave it its most institutionalized form. Under the banner of the Fahrelnissa Zeid Institute of Fine Arts, nearly a dozen female students became Zeid's pupils in a semi-formal school located at her home.^[4] The collapse of artist and institution into one was formalized by an

Together, they demonstrate Zeid's provocative elusion of straightforward attachments of national, cultural, linguistic or regional identification. The crown signals her membership, through marriage, to the Jordanian royal family, an official aristocratic affiliation for the daughter of an already-prestigious Ottoman-Turkish family. The pencilled note speaks to the painter's prominent position in an Istanbul-based art world, where Zeid was also known as a sibling and cousin to several of Turkey's most famous modernist artists and writers. Finally, Zeid's married name, El Hüsseini, in the Latinized Turkish alphabet rather than in



Front cover, *The Centenary of Fahrelnissa Zeid*, Darat Al Funun.
Courtesy Darat Al Funun.

exhibition she mounted in 1981, titled *Fahrelnissa Zeid and her Institute*.^[5] While the exhibition featured her work and those of her students, the self-portrait of Zeid that stares out from the cover of the catalogue makes the painter's prominence absolutely clear. The image simultaneously establishes the primacy of the person herself as well as announcing the distinct formal paradigm that she had imparted to her painting students, distinguished by oversized eyes, dark linear outlines, and decorative patterning.



Fahrelnissa Zeid in her Ralli apartment.

Courtesy Dirimart.

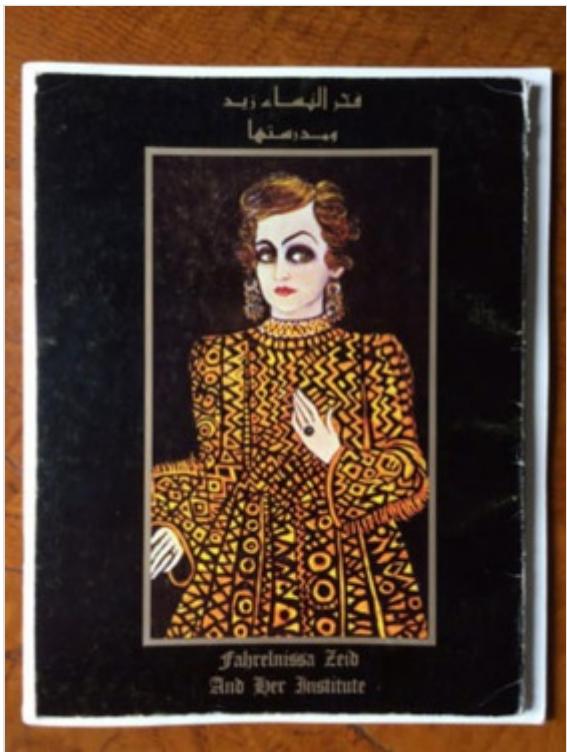
Zeid's self-organized show in 1981 laid the ground for several posthumous exhibitions of her work in the 1990s. During the heyday of Western multiculturalism and at a moment of expansion in cultural initiatives in the Middle East, she was hailed as a representative of 'Arab modernism'. As the art world in her adopted hometown of Amman experienced a wave of 'economic prosperity and vibrant, energetic, artistic activity, including the opening of a number of commercial galleries', the acquisition of several of her works by a private collection in the city both physically and symbolically substantiated the connection to the Arab world that Zeid herself had forged through her simultaneously nurturing and controversial role within a local artistic community.^[6]

The collection would subsequently become part of Darat al Funun, a contemporary art centre with a focus on Arab art

founded in 1993 by one of Zeid's former students, Suha Shoman, who would later stage an important exhibition of Zeid's work on the centenary of her birth. The embrace of Zeid in Amman may be seen as emblematic of the ways that self-identified supporters of 'modern Arab art' took a varyingly inclusive view of which 'partial' or 'non-Arab' artists might nevertheless be welcomed as contributors to such histories. But Darat al Funun and the exhibitions that Shoman facilitated were as much a personal homage to Zeid, who Shoman saw as a 'teacher and mentor who [had] revealed... the infinite horizons of art' to her, as they were an institutional claiming of the artist.^[7] Just as the artist herself had found a final resting place in the tomb of the Jordanian royal family, within two years of her death Zeid's two-decade affiliation with the region had been secured through the collecting practices of Shoman and Darat al Funun.

As Zeid's connection to the region was cemented in early-1990s Amman, her historiographic affiliation with the so-called 'Arab world' also occurred further afield: in Paris, at the Institut du Monde Arabe (IMA), one of then-president François Mitterrand's infamous *grands projets*. The IMA was founded in 1980 with the declared aim of 'developing knowledge of the Arab world, stimulating in-depth research on its language, its cultural and spiritual values, as well as facilitating exchanges and cooperation... between France and the Arab world'.^[8] Its establishment, which relied on funding from both France and 22 member states, stood as a diplomatic vote of confidence from a president whose pro-Israel leanings had caused concern in the Middle East when he was first elected. It was also a meaningful statement from a country whose relationship to the region in the 1990s was strongly shaped by its vehement stance against the first Gulf War.

Zeid's introduction to an international public in the 1990s thus took place at a national cultural institution whose defining purpose dictated that it position her as an *ambassadrice* of 'Arab culture' at large. The exhibition *Three*



Fahrelnissa Zeid And Her Institute, 1981. Cover, exhibition catalogue.

Copyright Royal Jordanian Cultural Centre, Amman, Retrospective: 1915-1983. Courtesy Dirimart.

painter is integrated into the Qatar Museum Authority's broader endeavours to emphasize the country's regional ascendancy.

A Cosmopolite of Many Stripes: Zeid in Istanbul, 2006

If the denominational contest between 'Arab' and 'Turkish' proved insurmountable in the 1990s, the rigidity of this framework had loosened by the early 2000s, when it was not through recourse to discrete categories of cultural identity but rather through an emphasis upon Zeid's cosmopolitanism that institutions like Darat al Funun and the Istanbul Museum of Modern Art revivified the artist. Still, these were what we might call inflected cosmopolitanisms – framings of the artist that encompassed multiple geographic nodes, yet nevertheless prioritized some over others. Darat al Funun's 2001 exhibition memorializing the 100-year anniversary of Zeid's birth is notable because it was one of the earliest to account for the many chapters of her life.^[11] But the most explicit example of an inflected cosmopolitan framing took place in 2006 at the Istanbul Museum of Modern Art, where Zeid was portrayed as both a Turkish national and a world citizen in order to demonstrate Turkey's cultural compatibility with Europe on the eve of EU membership negotiations.

The exhibition *Fahrelnissa and Nejad: Two Generations of the Rainbow* (2006) presented Zeid's work alongside that of her son Nejad Devrim (1923–1995), a painter and the child of her first marriage to the famous (Ottoman) Turkish writer İzzet Melih Devrim. Crucially, the exhibition's genealogical premise also functioned to frame a national history, in a generational account of the political transition from Ottoman Empire to Turkish republic.

Woman Painters (1992), which placed Zeid in the company of Algerian and Moroccan artists Baya Mahieddine and Chaibia Talal, embodied several of the IMA's most enduring essentialisms, chief among them the idea that what meaningfully united the three artists on display was their capacity to prevail 'despite the weight of social traditions' placed upon them as women.^[9] The IMA officially anointed Zeid with the ethnic-cultural designation of 'Arab' – a denomination that worked to the exclusion of any affiliation with Turkey (importantly, not a member country of the IMA), and is only topped in its reductiveness by the IMA's actively inaccurate description of her as 'Irano-Jordanian' in 2007.^[10]

Thus, the 'Arabicization' of Zeid that took place in the 1990s Amman and Paris is emblematic of the interpenetration of affiliated discourses of cultural belonging even in the context of the radically different personal and political projects that shaped Darat al Funun and the Institut du Monde Arabe. The next chapter in this story, which still remains to be told, might centre on Zeid's incorporation into the collection of Mathaf: Arab Museum of Modern Art, which was established in 2010, where the



Fahrelnissa Zeid, *Abstract composition*, year unknown.
Copyright the estate of the artist. Courtesy Dirimart.

Devrim, after all, means 'revolution', and was adopted after the Turkish Surname Law of 1934 was passed in the context of Atatürk's modernizing reforms. Accordingly, Zeid was described by the museum as having 'produced the most significant works in Turkey's history', and plenty of emphasis was given to her early Ottoman schooling, her training in Istanbul at the Fine Arts Academy, and her 1930s collaborations with a group of Istanbul artists, the D Group, who used cubistic formal strategies to critique the category of 'national art' (*millî sanat*) affiliated with Atatürk's modernizing regime.[12]

Yet the Istanbul Museum of Modern Art was far from isolationist in its approach to nationalizing Zeid. Rather, its description of the artist and her son as 'both Turkish and international' and as 'embracing both Eastern and Western artistic and cultural values' positioned her as an icon of Turkey's congruity with European political and cultural formations.[13] Such descriptions of the artist interlinked with the official political rhetoric that had surrounded the (privately funded) art museum's opening just a couple years earlier, in December 2004. The date is significant, for the Istanbul Museum of Modern Art had opened ahead of schedule in order to synchronize with ongoing EU negotiations at a moment when Turkey's entrance seemed more within reach than ever before. Both then-Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and the many European heads of state who sent congratulatory messages to the museum structured their own remarks through precisely such phrasings. As British Prime Minister Tony Blair proclaimed, 'as we look ahead to the prospect of Turkey joining the European Union, it is increasingly important that the world learns more of what Turkey, and Turkish people, have to offer us'.[14]

With the placement of her monumental abstract canvas *My Hell* (1951) on the main entrance wall in the museum's foyer, Zeid became an integral part of the Istanbul Museum of Modern Art's concrete rebuttal to opponents of Turkey's EU membership. With its shattered surface, broken into fields of saturated yellow, red, black, and grey, the painting itself testifies to Zeid's affiliation with the post-war abstractions of the École de Paris. Its prominent positioning also shows that museum's account of a history of modern Turkish art is an explicitly Europhilic one that traffics in the same idea of Turkish art's simultaneously national and international nature. (It seems less likely that the Istanbul Museum of Modern Art would encourage a reading of the painting's title, *My Hell*, as a commentary on Turkey's potential entry into the EU.) Thus, in a remarkably brief span of time, Zeid went from serving as a personification of the essential cultural difference of the 'Arab world' in the 1990s to its opposite: a model for the absence of such difference.

The Promise of the Mega-Museum?



Fahrelnissa Zeid, *La coupe de la vie*, year unknown.
Copyright the estate of the artist.

Zeid's story confirms that there is a well-worn path that non-Western artists must follow in order to fully plug in to the global contemporary, as has been amply demonstrated.^[15] If her latest tour through the auction houses,

where one of her paintings recently sold for \$2.7 million, is any indication, Zeid's stock is going nowhere but up.^[16] Indeed, it seems almost inevitable that she will soon find herself wrapped in the self-declared 'global' embrace of the mega-museum. So what new curatorial and scholarly models would Zeid demand of this emergent institutional form? How might these mega-museums – with their teams of curatorial experts, wide-ranging programming, and, yes, their capital – account for the many dynamics encompassed within her *carte de visite*? The Tate, the Met, and the Guggenheim Abu Dhabi have already demonstrated their interest in building historical frameworks that account for multiple geographic nodes, enabling multi-lingual research and collaboration, and accounting for formal paradigms with roots in geographically and ideologically wide-ranging aesthetic discourses.

Proponents argue that such initiatives represent a radically inclusive gesture, a fundamental shift in way that the Western modern art museum has policed the borders of art history. Critics point out that this also serves to shore up the authority of the centre. If the mega-museum is routinely chastised for its politics of scale – its gigantism, its insatiable drive to 'discover', and its embodiment of the economic logic of neo-liberal globalization – perhaps its redemption will be in the moments where it shrinks its scope, where it zooms in on the granular details of the lives of artists and their objects. What would happen if the mega-museum took up a palm-sized calling card in order inaugurate a framework for future curating and scholarship, not just about Fahrelnissa Zeid, but more broadly on art of the modern Middle East?^[17]

[1] Saloni Mathur, 'Museums and Globalization,' *Anthropological Quarterly* 78.3 (2005): pp. 697-708; and John O'Ceallaigh, 'The Rise of the Mega-Museum,' *The Telegraph*, 3 March 2014, www.telegraph.co.uk/luxury/travel/26243/the-rise-of-the-mega-museum.html.

[2] 'Fahrelnissa Zeid,' The Sharjah Art Foundation website, www.sharjah.bureau-va.com/sharjah-art-foundation/people/zeid-fahrelnissa.

[3] See: 'Beyond the Arab-Turkish Divide: Transcultural Stagings of Self in Fahrünissa Zeid's Photographic Archive,' exhibition catalogue (Istanbul: Dirimart, forthcoming 2016).

[4] Sarah A. Rogers, 'The Formation of the Khalid Shoman Private Collection and the Founding of Darat al Funun' in eds. Sonja Mejcher-Atassi and John Pedro Schwartz, *Archives, Museums, and Collecting in the Modern Arab World* (Farnham: Ashgate Publishing, 2012), p.172.

[5] *Ibid.*, p. 176.

[6] *Ibid.*, p. 165.

[7] Suha Shoman, 'Our Journey Through Time,' *Arab Art Histories* (Amman: The Khalid Shoman Foundation, 2013), p. 61.

[8] 'Acte de Fondation, Texte de l'Institut du Monde Arabe,' Institut du Monde Arabe website, 14 October 1980, http://www.imarabe.org/sites/default/files/file/Connaitrelima/actedefondation/acte_fondation_ima.pdf.

[9] Noha Hosni et al., *Trois Femmes Peintres: Baya, Chaibia, Fahrelnissa* (Paris: Librairie IMA, 1990), p. 5.

[10] Ameziane Ferhani, 'Exposition - Art Contemporain Arabe.' Institut du Monde Arabe website, 6 September 2007, www.imarabe.org/node/1418.

[11] See: www.youtube.com/watch?v=8WF1jYyZS64. The show itself brought together an extensive compilation of archival material and artworks, and a catalogue in English, Arabic, and French, including an essay by a Turkish art historian, demonstrating the efforts of scholarship and geographic reach.

[12] Cem Ilteri, ed., et al., *Fahrelnissa and Nejad: Two Generations of the Rainbow* (Istanbul: Istanbul Museum of Modern Art, 2006), p. 14.

[13] *Ibid.*, pp.5-6.

[14] Arden Reed, 'Art and Politics and the Crossroads,' *Los Angeles Times*, 11 December 2005, www.articles.latimes.com/2005/dec/11/entertainment/ca-istanbul11.

[15] Chin-Tao Wu, 'Biennials Without Borders?' *New Left Review* 57 (2009): pp. 107-115.

[16] See: Brooke Anderson, 'Is the Time Ripe to Buy Middle Eastern Art?' BBC News, 3 December 2014, www.bbc.com/capital/story/20141202-hidden-value-in-mideast-art; and Martin Croucher, 'Sold for US\$2.7m: Christie's Auction Sells One of Middle East's Most Costly Paintings,' *The National*, 20 October 2013, www.thenational.ae/uae/dubai/sold-for-us-2-7m-christies-auction-sells-one-of-middle-east-s-most-costly-paintings; Bonhams, 'Bonhams Sets New World Record for Turkish Artist Fahrelnissa Zeid (1901-1991),' Bonhams website, 2 October 2012, www.bonhams.com/press_release/11462/.

[17] I am grateful to Sarah A. Rogers for her generous sharing of sources for this essay, and to Farah Aksoy of Dirimart gallery in Istanbul for the opportunity to begin thinking through these issues in connection with the gallery's upcoming exhibition on Zeid (2016).

TAGS

Turkey

Institutions

Female artists

Cultural production

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Sarah-Neel Smith

Sarah-Neel Smith is Assistant Professor in the Department of Art History, Theory, and Criticism at the Maryland Institute College of Art, where her work focuses on art of the modern Middle East, modernism in a global and comparative perspective, and the history of museums. Her current book project, *Art, Democracy, and the Culture of Dissent in 1950s Turkey* focuses on the intersection of art and politics in the post-war period.

[FACEBOOK](#)

[TWITTER](#)

[INSTAGRAM](#)

[E-NEWSLETTER](#)

[RSS](#)
