



# Fahrelnissa Zeid

1901-1991

by Adila Laïdi-Hanieh, PhD

Author of *Fahrelnissa Zeid: Painter of Inner Worlds*

(London: Art/Books Publishing, 2017)

## INTRODUCTION

Fahrelnissa Zeid lived and worked in Turkey, Europe and Jordan but felt that as an artist she belonged “neither to a country, nor to a religion. I was born on this earth. I am made of this matter, and everything that relates to it interests me.”<sup>1</sup>

Her art and career were like no other. A painter of light and motion, her baroquely expressionist works—both abstract and figurative—demonstrate a rare command of exalted gestures and minute motifs. One of the major artists of the 20th century, her art is made to be best appreciated in this hyper connected and globalised age, where her monumental abstract vortexes of colour are accessible to millions and can be zoomed in and out of, mirroring the manner in which she herself was engulfed by them.

Her art and her turbulent life, spanning different countries, give her a unique place in the history of modernism, before globalisation was a reality and when working female artists were rare. She was the first artist from the Middle East to have a prominent and sustained career in several art capitals of the time, including being the first to exhibit in a significant New York commercial gallery in 1949—at the dawn of the Abstract Expressionist boom. She was also the first female artist of any nationality to have a solo exhibition at London’s prestigious modernist showcase Institute of Contemporary Arts in 1956.

<sup>1</sup> Quoted in André Parinaud, ‘Le goût du portrait’, *La Galerie*, No. 115, April 1972, p. 72 (in French, the author’s translation).



Fahrelnissa Zeid (1901-1991). *The Break of the Atom and Vegetal Life*, 1962, oil on canvas, 210 x 540 cm.  
Image courtesy of Dirimart.

With her drive, Fahrelnissa managed to integrate two distinct modernist art movements in different continents and time periods. Yet, her art crosses time, for no work of hers may be easily dated to an established trend. She produced such an a-temporal corpus because her approach to art was driven by a quasi-spiritual compulsion expressed through light and colour. This quest

culminated in the late 1960s, with her invention of what she called ‘Paléokrystalos’—coloured transparent polyester resin blocs, encasing small poultry bones forming a range of patterns, displayed on backlit revolving stands.

Fahrelnissa Zeid’s multimedia oeuvre reflects her conception of art as a constant quest forward, driven by a spiritual need to express in painting her inner psychic universe and her lifelong fascination with the cosmos.

#### Life & Career:

A Turkish noblewoman by birth, an Iraqi princess by marriage, a friend and relative to royals and statesmen, a busy mother, and a diplomatic wife: Fahrelnissa Zeid thrived on multitasking. Despite her privileged background, she had to overcome tragedy and turmoil, as well as social and artistic prejudice, in order to chart a unique and innovative artistic path.

By dint of inclination and upbringing at the dawn of the twentieth century in the Westernising Ottoman Empire, Fahrelnissa was a personification of late-nineteenth-century European ‘high culture’ with her connoisseurship and reverence for Old Masters, passion for Romantic and Neo-Romantic classical music, and her absorption of the French literary canon. The young Fahrinnisa Shakir Kabaagaçlı went on almost naturally to become one of the first students at the new Istanbul Women Beaux Arts Academy in 1919. In the 1920s, she travelled as a newlywed throughout Europe with her writer husband Melih Devrim, visiting museums and making copious sketches, which she annotated extensively.

Her shift towards modernism came with her 1928 enrollment at the free Académie Ranson in Paris, where she was most impressed by her instructor, the cubist painter Roger Bissière. She abandoned her academic figurative practice and turned towards figurative expressionism, painting in a studio in her Istanbul home.

In 1933, she remarried the Iraqi diplomat Prince Zeid Al-Hussein, and arabised her name. In the ensuing decade, she lived interchangeably in Iraq, Europe and Istanbul. Despite her numerous hospitalisations for a range of ailments, she visited museums extensively and took painting classes in Budapest and Berlin. Another turning point in her career was 1941, when she met Turkish Avant-garde painters and intellectuals in



Fahrelnissa Zeid (1901-1991). *Emir Hassan*, 1968.  
Image courtesy of Prince Raad bin Zeid Collection.

Istanbul, and became the only Turkish female member of their art group *D Grubu*. She exhibited with them in Turkey and Europe, while also holding a number of solo exhibitions from 1945 onwards in various Turkish cities.

In 1946, she followed her husband to London where he had been posted, and quickly secured a number of solo exhibitions at some of the most prominent local art galleries. By 1948, she was gradually moving towards abstraction and decided to do so completely in 1949 after undergoing a sensory epiphany when flying for the first time on an intercontinental flight. She experienced from her window the vertiginous speed of the change of scale and perspective, as the landscape receded into a riot of multicoloured parcels and geometric shards. The same year, at her first Paris exhibition, she met art critic and organiser Charles Estienne. He invited her into the constellation of artists working in lyrical abstraction whom he promoted, and she became a prominent member of the



Fahrelnissa Zeid (1901-1991). *Les Visionnaires No. 4*, late 1950s, oil on canvas, 76 x 101 cm. Image courtesy of The Khalid Shoman Collection, Amman.

*Nouvelle École de Paris* from its founding in 1952. She began to live part-time in Paris, and exhibited frequently at the modernist international Salon des Réalités Nouvelles. In parallel, she continued to hold small solo exhibitions in London, and was invited to exhibit in the large halls of the innovative ICA in 1954.

After the 1958 republican coup in Iraq, Fahrelnissa Zeid lived in exile in Europe. The trauma of losing her husband's family and former life

led her to suspend her painting for some time, until she returned to it accidentally via colouring poultry bones and carcasses in her kitchen from the remains of home-cooked meals. She gradually reprised her abstract painting and in the 1960s, returned to figuration via portraiture. In the meanwhile, she was inventing the unique art form of Paléokrystalos, which she coined after her coloured poultry bones were appreciated by French writer and then minister of culture André Malraux. She continued exhibiting at major Paris venues run by the prominent women gallerists of the time.

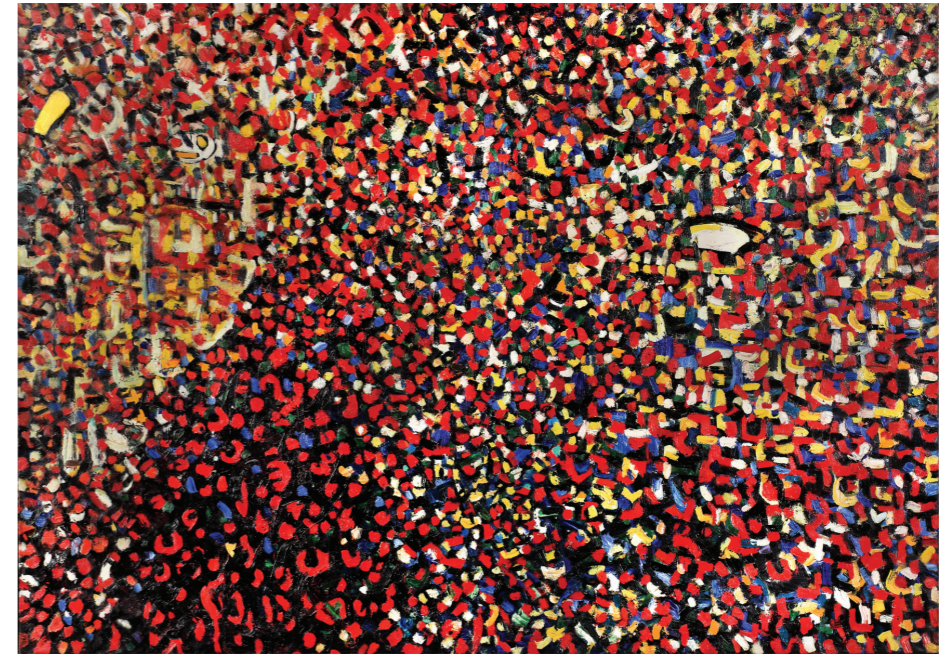
In 1975, she left Paris for Jordan to join her son and his family who lived there, and began teaching art in Amman. Her teaching activities and exhibitions helped to validate abstract art in Jordan, which became her adopted country. A highlight of her work in Amman was a massive 1981 group exhibit, held in a cultural centre theatre with its seats removed as no exhibition gallery in the city could then accommodate all her paintings and those of her students, which she showed in full equality alongside her own.

From the mid-1980s, Fahrelnissa Zeid returned to exhibit her work in Turkey and Europe. She received two major retrospectives just one year before her death: at the Neue Gallery-Sammlung Ludwig in Germany, and at Paris' Institut du Monde Arabe. Her works have been posthumously exhibited in many countries, including in a centenary exhibition at Darat al Funun in Amman, and 2017 retrospectives at Tate Modern and at Deutsche Bank Kunsthalle in Berlin.

Her works are held by major collections and museums internationally, while those that are still in private hands continue to break record prices for female and Middle Eastern artists at auctions in the Middle East, Turkey and Europe.

## ART

Fahrelnissa masterfully deployed colour, line, notions of the sublime and the infinitesimal in a five-decade-long career, producing an extraordinary body of work. She is mainly known today for her vast chromoluminarist abstract compositions and for her hieratic portraits. In fact, her



Fahrelnissa Zeid (1901-1991). *Sargasso Sea*, 1953, oil on canvas, 198 x 279 cm. Istanbul Museum of Modern Art Collection. Eczacıbaşı Group Donation. Photo: Reha Arcan. ©Raad Zeid Al-Hussein ©Istanbul Museum of Modern Art.

oeuvre spans so many stylistic directions and explorations with different media, that it may be mistaken for the output of a number of artists, rather than of only one individual whose career began quite late in life, and whose biography was beset by numerous upheavals. Fahrelnissa Zeid's single-mindedness allowed her to develop a consistently innovative output and to overcome her shifting moods and states of energy. She was able to work rapidly and create abstract monumental works, that contemporary artists execute via computer software-generated patterns projected onto canvases. She created alone: first designing the pattern by charcoal on the white canvas, then filling it with paint over hours or days of uninterrupted work.

At the other end of the spectrum, her hypomania afforded Fahrelnissa Zeid an awareness of cognitive realms outside prosaic perceptual frames of the here and now. She described it as feeling the vibrations of the universe, as transposing in her paintings cosmic forces that traverse our world. This awareness led her to identify with the writings of Carl Jung and especially those of Wassily Kandinsky. She found in his writings on *The Spiritual in Art* a conceptualisation of her long-held thoughts on art as spiritual quest of fusion with the universe, and of painting as an "inner necessity."

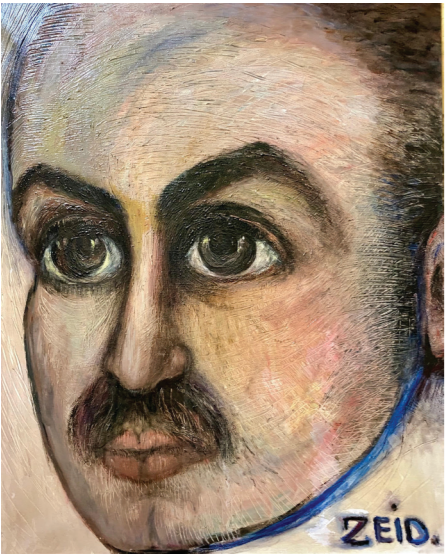
Between her perception of unseen cosmic realms and their transposition onto the canvas, there is a recognisable Fahrelnissa gesture. Her paintings are characterised by a high degree of painterliness, while also extensively exploring the notion of linearity. Her "hand" is identifiable in the landscapes and portraits she drew in her sketchbooks, in her interiors and outdoor scenes of the 1940s, in her expansive 1950s canvases, and in her later portraits. That gesture is at the origin of the lines that traverse Fahrelnissa's compositions: sharp, rapid, thrusting



Fahrelnissa Zeid (1901-1991). *Intermittence... Sand... Water... Sun*, 1953, oil on canvas, 185 x 452 cm. Istanbul Museum of Modern Art Collection. Eczacıbaşı Group Donation. Photo: Reha Arcan. ©Istanbul Museum of Modern Art.



Fahrelnissa Zeid (1901-1991). *The Red City*, 1957, oil on canvas, 162 x 132 cm. Image courtesy of Barjeel Art Foundation, Sharjah.



Fahrelnissa Zeid (1901-1991). *Emir Zeid*, 1973. Image courtesy of Prince Raad bin Zeid Collection.

lines that crisscross and swarm the pictorial plane. In her highly saturated coloured works, the rapid line is present in a multiplicity of divisionist tangles and bursts. Colour fills their recesses when it is not super-imposed. In her late portraits, featuring large visages and painted with colour-field minimalism, she did not abandon that gesture and handled her palette knife to repeatedly incise the thickly impasto-ed paint with a weft of furrows.

Fahrelnissa began her professional career as an expressionist figurative painter of thick impastos and short brushstrokes. Some of her works from the mid-1940s mix figurative portentous symbolism with busy motifs that veer into abstraction, while others were dramatic expressionist portraits and self-portraits. Her best works are sunny landscapes and seascapes that show quick brushstrokes, luminous colour and dynamism that make rolling waves and the breeze palpable. That same dynamism and assured brushstrokes manipulating primary colour contrasts contoured by thick black lines, are also evident in the meticulously-detailed renditions of her domestic interiors. For her paintings, regardless of conditions of execution and subject matter, were foremost the result of her boundless physical energy and intense focus.

After Fahrelnissa settled into abstraction from 1949 to 1969, she developed, and then grew out of several styles in quick, and even overlapping sequence. She had six broad overlapping phases: an experimental abstract period of aerial views and geometries around 1949, such as *Voyage of the Moon Man* and *Abstraction* (mis-attributed to 1947). After she gained in assurance, she moved to her well-known kinetic vortexes of which the prime specimens are *My Hell* (1951) and *Towards a Sky* (1953). She then transitioned to a maritime, sunny-dappled phase of optimistic large works like *Intermittence... Water... Sun* (Riviera) (1953), and *Sargasso Sea* (1953) bearing the imprint of her Mediterranean summers.

Then, she reinvented herself with two shorter periods, executed on mainly smaller canvases. Ranging from the primitivist nightmarish to the menacing portentous dark canvases like *Alice in Wonderland* (1955) and *Les Gauloises* (1954), followed by a 1956 to 1957 period of dark painterly unfolded linearity, showing on smaller canvases large swaths of intense colour bleeding into other darker colours and sometimes bearing mysterious grids like *The Red City* from 1957.



Fahrelnissa Zeid (1901-1991). *Oriental Interior*, 1943, oil on canvas, 118 x 85 cm. Image courtesy of The Khalid Shoman Collection, Amman.

After a brief interruption and a series of sui generis works after the 1958 coup, Fahrelnissa returned to painting in earnest in 1961, inaugurating a period of mixed media output with large paintings of varied thematics. They encompass the depths of the sea and transpose its abstract quiet underwater sensuous vistas and blurry biomorphic lush blues such as *Punta Imperator* (1963). She also endeavoured to paint a few astral voyage-themed works in bi-chromatic renditions of glistening stars and mechanical grids of spaceships, as in the spectacular *Flight of the Moon and the Astronaut/Intruder* (1965.) In the same decade, Fahrelnissa inaugurated her enduring return to figuration via large-scale close up portraits of friends and family. She argued that portraiture was no different from abstraction, or maybe a variation of it. It was “a sort of

<sup>2</sup> P. 72. Quoted in Parinaud, André. "Le Goût du Portrait." *La Galerie*. April 1972, No. 115, Pp. 72-73. French.



Fahrelnissa Zeid (1901-1991). *Puncta Imperator*, 1963.  
Image courtesy of Prince Raad bin Zeid Collection.

totality of art” that encompasses “structure, the colour, forms, the soul.”<sup>2</sup> Her portraits—even those from the 1970s and 1980s—share common features: large-scale, simple colour scheme, meditative gazes, enlarged eyes, simplified features, hieratic presence, long brushstrokes, and an extensive use of the palette knife, which turned the planar surface of the sitters’ faces into abstract “paintings-within” a figurative portrait, as is evident in the 1964 portrait *The Adolescent* and the 1968 *Emir Hassan*.

At almost the same time, between 1968 and 1972, Fahrelnissa Zeid developed her Paléokrystalos. This dizzying output was shown in a succession of exhibitions in Paris, as well as at her large 1964 homecoming retrospectives in Istanbul and Ankara. Fahrelnissa focused in this vein during her Amman years, while teaching her students and encouraging them to paint abstract art.

## CONCLUSION:

What drove Fahrelnissa to work and paint prolifically from her twenties to her eighties, despite multiple illnesses and tragedies? Art for her was a way out of her selfhood, like an “overabundance” that “starts where living does not suffice to express life.” She said that one does not paint to “make art” because “there is no art, no works of art. There is the joy of living, the joy of creating, because one is not enough to oneself.”

<sup>3</sup> Fahrelnissa underlined this quote by André Gide in 1951 on the last page of her copy of a book by her fellow Nouvelle École de Paris painter Jean Bazaine, *Notes sur la Peinture d’aujourd’hui* (Paris: Floury, 1948) (in French, author’s translation). From Fahrelnissa’s private library, conserved at Darat al Funun, Amman, Jordan.

<sup>4</sup> Fahrelnissa Zeid: *À Paris 1949–1975*, un-broadcast documentary directed by Oliver Lorquin, 1975.