



**Chaanineh (Palm Sunday)**

c. 1960

Oil on masonite

100 x 60cm (39.4 x 23.6 in.)

Agial Art gallery, Beirut

# KHALIL ZGAIB

1911-1975

## A truly false naiveté

The life and work of Khalil Zgaib raise more questions than they answer. Zgaib was born in Dbayeh, on the outskirts of Beirut, and became a hairdresser. In his forties, he suddenly decided to paint; this turn towards art remains a mystery. Zgaib's rise as a self-taught artist however stems from a happy turn of events. In the early nineteen-fifties, he captured the attention of French archaeologist Henry Seyrig, the director of the Institut Français d'Archéologie du Proche-Orient at the time. (Seyrig was also a fervent art collector and later museum curator, and two of Zgaib's works in his Paris office.) Seyrig introduced Zgaib to artist Maryette Charlton, a graduate of the Art Institute of Chicago and director of the newly created fine arts department at the American University of Beirut. The AUB fashioned itself an alternative to the French system of the Académie Libanaise des Beaux-Arts, and promoted American art's spontaneity and absence of rules. Charmed by Zgaib's paintings, Charlton encouraged him to persist in his path and took on the task of promoting his career.

Zgaib's success quickly earned him the title of Lebanon's foremost naive painter, particularly in Beirut's English-speaking circles. But was his work really naive? Zgaib's paintings seem to correspond to the common definition of *art naïf* – painting that's considered marginal, even backwards, compared to its contemporaries. Yet, faced with so-called naive representations, one is compelled to wonder if something else could be hidden behind the apparent clumsiness. With his flat areas of color, did Zgaib deliberately avoid applying the laws of perspective, or did he not understand them? Did he lack finesse in his renderings of people, or did he deliberately turn them into carefully executed small men and women, reminiscent of children's books illustrations?

If his detailed brush transforms his compatriots into tiny characters, close to caricatures, this is part of Zgaib's overall artistic project: to tell a story with great humor and transform everyday Lebanon into an imaginary world full of nostalgia. His paintings are poetic and joyous interpretations of Lebanese life, far from folkloric or documentary reproductions. In his village scenes, the sky is a vibrant blue, the trees leafy, the cows and geese peaceful. The small stone houses precisely rectangular, with freely interpreted colors – limestone sometimes becomes blue, yellow, or green – that perfectly complement one another. Zgaib captures mild mountain life, traditional weddings, daytime and nighttime village festivals, and agricultural activities. He was also fascinated by the tumultuous life of the palpitating capital city where he lived, portraying downtown Beirut, the areas surrounding Martyrs' Square,

Zgaib tells stories with great humor and transforms everyday Lebanese life into an imaginary world full of nostalgia.



and capturing snapshots of his own life. An astute observer and narrator of the popular traditions of his country, Zgaib also painted landscapes where flowers compete with trees for attention, rising high and invading the space with their simple geometric petals of cheerful colors.

Zgaib exposed his internal world of imaginary and highly poetic places in vivid colors, all of which sharply contrast with the very little that is known of his life. He suffered from alcoholism and died in 1975, completely destitute, despite his talent and success.



**Untitled**

**c. 1960**

Oil on masonite

60 x 60 cm (23.6 x 23.6 in.)

Nizar and Joumana Dalloul Collection



**Bouquet**  
1968

Oil on panel

60 x 50 cm (23.6 x 19.7 in.)

Nicolas Ibrahim Sursock Collection



1958 Revolution

c. 1960

Oil on masonite

61 x 75 cm (24 x 29.5 in.)

Naji and Hoda Skaff Collection



'Anazig Eid el Adha  
1950s / 1960s

Oil on canvas

46 x 46 cm (18.1 x 18.1 in.)

Antoine and Janine Maamari Collection



Untitled

c. 1950

Oil on canvas

84 x 101 cm (33.1 x 39.8 in.)

Ministry of Culture Collection, Lebanon



## EXHIBITIONS AND PRIZES

Khalil Zgaib exhibited at the AUB, Gallery One and the Alecco Saab Gallery in Beirut from the fifties to the seventies. He took part in the Sursock Museum Salons from 1961 to 1974 and in the Alexandria biennales from 1957 to 1970, and also exhibited in Rome. He received a prize from the Ministry of Education and the first prize in painting from the Sursock Museum in 1968.

**Harem by the Sea**

1950s / 1960s

Oil on canvas

60 x 75 cm (23.6 x 29.5 in.)

Antoine and Janine Maamari Collection