

Arab American Heritage Month Spotlight

Did You Know?

Helen Zughaib (1959 -)

Helen Zughaib, an Arab American painter and multimedia artist, reflects her heritage, identity, and experiences through her work, bridging cultures and inviting viewers to explore themes of identity, belonging, displacement, and resilience.

Helen's parents, Elia and Georgia Zughaib, welcomed her into the world in Beirut, Lebanon. Elia, a diplomat with the U.S. Foreign Service, relocated his family to various countries across the Middle East and Europe due to the Lebanese Civil War. In Paris, France, Helen discovered solace in art, spending much of her time at the Louvre Museum, where she marveled at artworks that inspired her childhood. It was during this time that Helen decided to pursue art professionally. After completing high school in Paris, she studied at the Northeast London Polytechnic School of Art before continuing her education in the United States at Syracuse University, where she earned her BFA from the College of Visual and Performing Arts in 1981.

Helen began her career as an illustrator for books but gained notoriety for her paintings. Notable instances include Hillary Clinton purchasing her painting of the Washington Monument as a gift for Morocco's King Mohamed V, and President Barack Obama presenting Helen's painting *Midnight Prayers* to the Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki during a visit to the White House in 2010. Her artwork has also been featured in embassies worldwide, including those in Brunei, Nicaragua, Belgium, and Sweden.

Her artwork blends traditional Arabic motifs, vibrant colors, and intricate patterns with contemporary techniques and themes. It reflects the experiences of immigrants and diaspora communities, capturing the struggle to reconcile multiple identities while forging a sense of belonging in a new land. One of her notable series, *Arab Spring* reflects on the wave of protests and social movements that swept across the Arab world in the early 2010s, capturing the spirit of resilience and hope amid political upheaval and societal change. Additionally, her multimedia installations and public art projects have received widespread acclaim for their innovative approach to storytelling, transcending traditional boundaries and inviting viewers to engage with pressing social issues.

Beyond her artistic endeavors, Helen is an advocate for cultural exchange and dialogue. Through lectures, workshops, and community engagements, she promotes cross-cultural understanding and celebrates the richness and diversity of her Arab heritage. Through her creativity, vision, and advocacy, Helen showcases the power of storytelling to transcend borders and build bridges of solidarity.

Sources:

- Jenkins, Mark. 2014. "Through Art, Creating a Dialogue Between Palestinians and Others." *The Washington Post*. Retrieved March 15, 2024. (https://www.washingtonpost.com/entertainment/museums/through-art-creating-a-dialogue-between-palestinians-and-others/2014/09/25/129cdb6e-3271-11e4-9f4d-24103cb8b742_story.html)
- Zughaib, Helen. 2021. "About the Artist: Helen Zughaib." *Helen Zughaib*. Retrieved March 15, 2024 (<https://www.hzughaib.com/>)