

# Hamid Zénati Large Print Artwork Labels

## Gallery Three

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### Zénati's family and childhood

Zenati's grandmother Alia Lagmara (otherwise affectionately called Nanna) lived to over 105 years old (1). Alia originated from Setif and belonged to one of the three major Berber groups populating the Maghreb: The Zenetes. The dots and lines tattooed on her face and chin are part of a now disappearing but important ancestral tradition among the Amazigh, the practice of facial and body tattooing.

The recurring symbols were often inspired by elements in nature and reinforce the Amazigh cosmology and belief in the interconnectedness of the indigenous relationship to land. These symbols used in tattooing were also found on ceramic dishes, wall paintings and

woven into rugs. These would have been present around Zénati during his frequent trips South to the Sahara Desert and influential to his work (2).

Within Halim Zénati's *Livret de Famille* (Family Book) on display in Gallery 4, we can see an intimate record of the Zénati family life. One such example is a portrait of Hamid's father, Ahmed, and nephew, Tallal, posing in front of a traditional Algerian carpet (3). As with the way Zénati presented and activated his work, the carpet is not wall mounted but draped. It brings to life the way in which textiles can be understood as flexible; creating refuge, dressing bodies, covering beds, windows, tables and curtains (4). This agile use of textiles would have been present throughout Zénati's upbringing and visual memory and reinstates the elemental connection between the body and architecture.

In the neighbourhood of Belcourt, Algiers, where the Zénatis purchased a plot of land and built their family home, Zénati's room occupied the upper floor which

comprised of a large bedroom, used as the artist's painting studio, and a small bathroom that often doubled as a darkroom to develop his photographs. The rest of this level was a sunny roof terrace (5) with views of the bay (6) and city below, the patterns of roofs and streets on full display. As a typical Algerian household, it was the site of countless quotidian activities: spreading couscous to dry, hosing off in the sun, taking family portraits, as well as creative workshops for the children of the family organised and overseen by Zénati.

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## Experiments with fashion

Zénati's imagination was not restricted by any rules or hierarchies. He painted on every surface and did not adhere to the distinctions Western values placed around the production or presentation of high art or popular material culture. He presented his work at exhibitions formal and improvised, street markets and

**sold his designs to the textiles industry. Clothing and fashion interested him for its potential as a moving canvas, becoming a 3D object as the wearer walks. His first garment was conceived from cleaning wipes found in a market, which he covered with a constellation of painted dots before sewing them together to create a vest (7). After this point, he began to paint clothing and cheap material such as bed sheets, tablecloths and curtains using the stencil technique he perfected when developing his textile paintings.**

**Zénati approached his clothing designs through a variety of techniques including painting, collage, dying, stitching and tapestry, while continuing to add new techniques over the course of his career. He collaged fragments of older fabrics onto sweatshirts using coloured stitching as accents and applied details, cutouts from industrially produced textile patterns, experimenting with seams, dying and the effects of partially bleaching colours. Zénati's jumpers from the**

1980s synthesised colour and shapes. Over time these designs became more complex, morphing into the densely colourful designs from his last creative phase in the 2010s until his death (8, 9).

Zénati was not known to provide much contextual information on his work and left behind very few signed works. This desire for anonymity and disguise is perhaps not surprising when read within the context of Algeria's political conditions and the exodus of intellectuals and artists. As such, Zenati's disguise and opacity might be read as a strategy of survival and resistance. Instead of his birth name he often opted to use a variety of pseudonyms, for example 'Sinhue' the protagonist of an ancient Egyptian literary tale. From the late 80s and 90s onwards he donned the pen name Xalam (10), which refers to a five-string lute played by traditional storytellers in West Africa.

Zénati was interested in traditional costume from around the world – from Japan and Indonesia, to across

the Arab world. The clothing in these images (11, 12) may have been inspired by the kimono, kaftan or the daraa and melhfa, traditional Sahrawi clothing worn by men and women. The basic cut of traditional dress often remains the same even across different parts of the world.

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## Works in motion

As a migrant, Zénati's life was underscored by a level of forced mobility and precarity. For a long time, he didn't have a permanent residence in Germany, and returned to Algeria yearly during the summers. Textiles as a medium are conducive to the mobility and independence Zénati needed, allowing him to be able to leave immediately, carrying his work with him in his suitcase.

Rather than stretch his works over a frame Zénati preferred to spontaneously lay them out in his

surroundings or stage them as performative sculptures. His improvised exhibitions took place within barns, public space, gardens and on street stands in Grenoble's flea market (13). At times he arranged his work pegged on clothing lines in a friend's garden (14), draped them along banisters on public buildings (15) or stretched them in the seas of Indonesia (16).

One of the images here is taken on one of Zénati's many trips to Indonesia, on the island of Bunaken in 1994 when he decorated a canoe, in dialogue with the boat owner, and named it Lapisan, meaning 'layers' in Indonesian (17).

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## Headpieces

Hamid fashioned headpieces out of textiles, straw (18), paper, plastic, feathers (19), everyday objects and

**national flags as well as his own artworks, seeing the creative potential of humble materials.**

**The artist's headpieces are reminiscent of the tagelmust (20), an indigo dyed cotton cloth whose fabric served as both a veil and a turban and was worn by Tuareg men in the Sahara Desert as protection from the sun and wind-borne sand.**

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**Postcards**

**Undated**

**Paper**

**Zénati produced postcards featuring photographs documenting his travels or showcasing images of his friends sporting his artworks or posing in front of his textile paintings. Zénati intervened on the postcards through unconventional tactics – cutting, painting designs, punching holes, placing stickers, stitching and scratching his drawings – relaying the same quirky**



approach and experimentation he practiced across disciplines. Within the postcards we see a playful attitude towards language, remixing and constructing phrases and encasing messages within an image. Like Zénati's jumpers these postcards were sold, gifted, and shared with family and friends, circulating in non-conventional and mobile ways, through mail and personal networks.

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**Jumper**

**Undated**

**Fabric paint on textile**

This jumper is an example of one of Zénati's forays into fashion. As with his textile paintings, he used fabric paint to customise and ornament numerous items of clothing which were worn by himself, sold, or gifted to friends and family.

Over the course of the exhibition some of Zénati's jumpers will be activated and worn by the Gallery Assistants. Rather than being presented enclosed in a display, they will circulate within the exhibition in action and constant motion, much as Zénati envisioned his works.

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## Performing to the camera

Hamid Zénati's extensive photo archive showcased his attraction to the carnivalesque (21) through a mixture of his own photographs, as well as portraits of himself performing to the camera, shape shifting and slipping into different roles (22). In this way he became part of his work as a performer by donning one of his headpieces or performatively staging his textiles and costumes (23). Zénati primarily made this performative aspect of his character visible through lens-based media.

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## Photographic experiments

As with the artist's manipulation and adaptation of postcards using varying techniques, or his use of everyday materials to make headpieces, Zénati experimented with the medium of photography. As seen in some of the images here, he approached these experiments with a collage approach, cutting and pasting multiple layers together to create a new image (24, 25) or using a double exposure to fuse snapshots together (26). In one image, Zénati's son is seen as a sleeping child, cradled with the curve of his father's jumper as if under a giant yellow blanket (27).

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## Hamid at work

No matter where in the world he was, Zénati worked, compulsively creating, whether in one of his studios in Algeria or Munich (28), or while travelling as can be seen in this photo of the artist during his trips to Indonesia (29).

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From the moment the French expeditionary force captured Algiers in 1830 until the end of the brutal 8-year revolutionary war in 1962, Algeria endured 132 years of colonisation. On the heels of independence, the nation set about forging a distinct Algerian identity and national culture. After more than a century predominated by European Orientalists, the postcolonial period ushered in modern Algerian painting.

This era saw a generation of painters, most of whom were formally trained in fine art academies in France, called upon to establish a national school of painting. Their goal was to develop a pictorial language that

reflected their cultural heritage and the revolutionary ideals of the new state by producing works that were uniquely Algerian and readily identifiable as such.

Known colloquially as ‘independence painters’, these artists were politically savvy; many were informed by anticolonial nationalist discourses.

Through print media outlets, notably *Révolution Africaine* and *El Moudjahid*, and nationalised art institutions such as Union Nationale des Arts Plastiques (UNAP, or National Union of Plastic Artists), they came together and engaged in prolific but sometimes incendiary and slanderous debates on establishing Algeria’s new art. Artists diverged significantly in their approaches, leading to a diverse range of themes and styles. Influenced by Soviet art, some embraced social realism and others expressionism, while an overwhelming number turned to abstraction.

**This form of abstraction, however, did not signify a break from tradition, as commonly recognised in European art, but rather a reinvention of it with a modern twist. Abstract painters drew from a rich array of sources, including, not least, Arabic calligraphy, architectural shapes, carpet designs, local materials, and geometric symbols. The members of the avant-garde artist collective Aouchem, Choukri Mesli (b.1931, Algeria; d.2017, France) and Denis Martinez (b. 1941, Algeria), set themselves apart from the artistic expression of their time by proposing a return to the Sahara and the millennial visual forms of the indigenous territories known as Tamazgha (30).**

**The post-independence era was an energetic yet tumultuous one, with no ultimate method for image-making or consensus on defining Algerian art. For the artists of the abstract genre, this particular expression offered not a definitive answer but one of several possibilities.**

Text by Sheyda Aisha Khaymaz

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**Aouchem**

**Manifesto of the Aouchem group**

**1967**

**Facsimile of the original printed on paper**

**Courtesy Tarik Mesli.**

**In May 1967, following the contentious debut at the UNAP galleries two months earlier, the Aouchem group reorganised *Aouchem 1* at the National Liberation Front (FLN) Cultural Centre in Blida, Algeria, facilitated by an FLN official, Mustapha Toumi. During this exhibition, the group issued a manifesto in response to the unfavourable reception of their first exhibition. Signed by Choukri Mesli (b.1931, Algeria; d.2017, France), Denis Martinez (b.1941, Algeria), and Baya Mahieddine (née Fatima Haddad; b.1931, Algeria; d.1998, Algeria), amongst others, the text underscored their**

commitment to Algeria's popular arts and cultural foundations. The manifesto championed the geometric abstract forms intrinsic to traditional Amazigh crafts such as weaving, pottery, and jewellery-making. Martinez highlights how these practices, often propagated by Amazigh women, were not mere lowbrow art but important stories told through colours, patterns, and symbols—each a lesson in existence itself. Aouchem saw these everyday artistic expressions as critical to decolonial thought and rich in cultural identity, history, and cosmology in a manner that transcends their quotidian utility to reflect broader universal themes.

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## **Aouchem**

**The cover of the catalogue for the first exhibition of the Aouchem group, *Aouchem 1***

**1967**

**Facsimile of the original printed on paper**

**Courtesy Tarik Mesli.**



Members of the group contributed experimental prose and poetry to a catalogue that accompanied the *Aouchem 1* exhibition (1967). Among the many factors that helped shape Algerian artistic modernism, Aouchem's emphasis on the collaborative creative process was crucial. Their approach was rooted in a method by which creative roles were frequently reversed: painters wrote poetry, and poets created paintings and sculptures. Underlying Aouchem's mission to redefine the relationship and close the gap between the artist, the art, and the public were these cross-disciplinary experiments. Throughout the catalogue, which served as a proto manifesto, the artists effectively contextualised their collective ethos via different modes of writing.

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**Denis Martinez**

**Poster for the first exhibition of the Aouchem group,  
*Aouchem 1***

**1967**

**Facsimile of the original printed on paper**

**Courtesy Tarik Mesli.**

**Controversial avant-garde artist collective Aouchem's (meaning tattoo) inaugural exhibition at the UNAP gallery on Pasteur Avenue in Algiers was mired in chaos on its opening night in 1967. A group of artist members of UNAP, prominent among them M'hamed Issiakhem (b.1928, Algeria; d.1985, Algeria), enraged by what they perceived as inauthentic art, stormed the event after imbibing at a local bar. Sticks in hand, they vandalised the group's works on display while denouncing them as 'counter-revolutionary' and 'petty bourgeois'. They shouted accusations of pauperism and demanded the gallery's closure. The situation escalated until the military intervened to secure the venue and safely evacuate the guests, resulting in the exhibition's premature closure.**

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Photographer unknown

Five painters from the *Aouchem* group

1967

Facsimile of the original printed on paper

Courtesy Tarik Mesli.

The photograph captures a moment from the *Aouchem 1* exhibition in Algiers, 1967. Pictured from left to right are artists Choukri Mesli, Mustapha Adane (b.1933, Algeria), Mohamed Baghdadi (né Ben Baghdad b.1941, Algeria; d.2020, Algeria), Saïd Saïdani (b.1944, Algeria), and Denis Martinez, shown kneeling on the floor.

Behind the group are two of Martinez's works from the exhibition. On the left is *Pourquoi? (Why?)*, 1967, relief painting, on the right *À l'année prochaine si nous sommes encore en vie (See You Next Year If We're Still Alive)*, 1966, oil on floorcloth, whose title alludes to a poem by Martinez, *Pourquoi? (Why?)*, published in the exhibition catalogue. Similarly, a playful handwritten

note by Mesli affixed to the photograph reads, in translation, “like a nothing at ground level”, referencing again the first line of the same poem and humorously noting Martinez’s position kneeling at ground level.

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**Denis Martinez**

*Pourquoi (Why?)*

**1967**

**Facsimile of the original printed on paper**

**Courtesy Tarik Mesli.**

**Denis Martinez’s aesthetic language was greatly influenced by his early encounters with the work of Spanish poet Federico García Lorca, as well as the intellectual friendship he formed with Jean Sénac and his circle of poet-painters. In the 1960s, Martinez began incorporating writing into his drawings, a practice that flourished among many during Algeria’s early years of independence. The imagery, in Martinez’s view, had to complement the text. Amid restrictions on the**

distribution of printed materials, Martinez and his peers creatively circumvented these limitations by using hand-cranked presses and screen-printing techniques to distribute their writing. On the weekends, his studio in Blida would become a workshop for producing print material. Themes of death, inconsequentiality, and the search for meaning are explored in this poem from the *Aouchem 1* catalogue, which reflects on the continuous human struggle with existential questions and makes heavy use of Martinez's recurring motif of skeleton imagery.

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**Arik Nepo**

**Baya's artistic debut in Paris at Galerie Maeght  
1947**

**Facsimile of the original printed on paper  
Courtesy Arik Nepo/Vogue Paris.**

**Baya was the sole woman artist in the Aouchem group,  
and despite being a co-signee of the manifesto, her**

involvement remains mysterious. Celebrated by the Surrealists, especially French poet André Breton, who dubbed her 'the Queen of Surrealists', Baya's polychromatic paintings debuted in a Surrealist group exhibition at Galerie Maeght in Paris in July 1947. She held a solo exhibition there later that year and gained significant recognition. At just sixteen, Baya spent a month at Pablo Picasso's studio in Vallauris, France; and together they experimented with ceramics. Under the guidance of Aimé Maeght and André Breton, Baya's solo exhibition and its accompanying catalogue, which included an impassioned essay by Breton, helped launch her career. Though associated with the Surrealists, Baya never claimed to be one and stated that it was the Surrealists who borrowed from her. Despite her fame, mid-century literature often infantilised her work, which reflects a broader trend of treating colonised cultures as primitive.

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### *Signes et Désert: Dessins et Peintures*

**1989**

**Paper**

**Courtesy Dia al-Azzawi Archive**

**An exhibition catalogue from the 1989 exhibition *Signes et Désert: Dessins et Peintures* at Galerie Ipso in Brussels. The exhibition featured works by several artists associated with the Aouchem group, notably Baya, Denis Martinez and Choukri Mesli.**

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**Abderrahmane Ould Mohand, known as Mohand**

**Portrait of Baya**

**1998**

**Facsimile of the original printed on paper**

**Courtesy Abderrahmane Ould Mohand.**

**Taken two months before her death at the age of 66, the photograph captures Baya at the *Painters of the Sign* exhibition held at La Courneuve, Seine-Saint-Denis, France, during the Humanity Festival organised every**

year by the French newspaper *L'Humanité*. Jean Sénac (b.1926, Algeria; d.1973, Algeria), an influential French Algerian poet and a staunch promoter of Algerian aesthetic modernism, coined the term 'The Painters of the Sign' to describe a group of post-independence artists who employed signs and symbols of the Maghreb in their paintings. Among them was Baya, whose work resisted Western artistic influences despite her integration into Parisian elite circles. Drawing from her Arab and Amazigh roots, Baya's aesthetic sensibility, which she termed 'Bayatism', was vibrant with magenta and turquoise hues, inspired by Amazigh women's traditional attire. Known also for her prolific use of symbols like circles, crosses, and eye motifs, Baya was featured in prominent exhibitions in Paris and in the February 1948 issue of *Vogue* magazine.

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**Sheyda Aisha Khaymaz**

**Photograph of the Sahara Desert**



**2023**

**Digital image, printed on paper**

**Courtesy Sheyda Aisha Khaymaz.**

**Aouchem's 1967 manifesto opens with a claim that the group's origins date back thousands of years, to the central Saharan caves. The desert has also served as a refuge and source of aesthetic inspiration for Hamid Zénati. Often called the world's greatest museum of prehistoric art, the Saharan plateaus are rich with rock art depicting humans and animals in daily life, dating back as far as 12,000 years. Archaeologists have classified Saharan rock art into stylistic and thematic periods that reflect the societal changes prompted by geological transformations over millennia. While the earliest periods prominently feature large animals such as rhinos, giraffes, and elephants, which thrived in the region's once favourable climate, the middle periods depict pastoral scenes where cattle and humans coexist symbiotically. Most recently, the period beginning around 2,000 years ago introduced a**

style of written expression using the ancient Tifinagh alphabet integrated into visual imagery.

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**Samia Henni**

*Colonial Toxicity: Rehearsing French Radioactive  
Architecture and Landscape in the Sahara*

**2024**

**Paper**

**Courtesy Samia Henni**

**Seventy-two years after the occupation of Algiers, France annexed the Saharan regions on 24 December 1902. Driven by imperial ambition and strategic necessity, the French colonial vision of the Sahara was one of both allure and disdain. The desert's ancient trade networks connected distant regions and created vital economic corridors for the Empire. Even so, French administrators viewed the Sahara as empty and untamed, which in turn prompted a host of initiatives for development and centralisation. The Niamey**

**Convention of 1909, which established the border between Algeria and then French West Africa, and subsequent laws limited movement across the desert and disrupted the traditional routes of its nomadic populations. By the late 1950s, large-scale mining and fracking operations were already taking place in the desert. Even after Algerian independence, France maintained military and hydrocarbon interests in the desert, reflecting a long-standing entanglement that extended beyond colonial rule.**

**Between 1960 and 1966, France intensified its nuclear efforts in the Sahara as its control over the region's hydrocarbons weakened. Two major installations were built in Southern Algeria: The Saharan Centre for Military Experiments (CSEM) in Reggane for atmospheric detonations and the Oasis Military Experiment Centre (CEMO) in In-Ecker for secret underground tests. CSEM's construction depleted the desert's precious water supply, while CEMO was established in response to international pressure to**

cease air tests. On 13 February 1960, the first nuclear detonation, named Blue Jerboa after a native desert rodent, exploded with a force four times greater than the bomb dropped on Hiroshima, causing radioactive fallout that reached as far as Spain and Sicily. The tests continued until 1966, when the programme moved to the Pacific, leaving behind hazardous waste that contaminated the desert and afflicted the local population with devastating health issues.

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## **Vessels**

**Various dates**

**Glass, ceramic or wood**

From the 2000's Hamid experimented upon 3D forms made from ceramic, glass or wood. These ornamental objects were not made by the artist's own hand, but rather purchased and collected from flea markets and second-hand shops. Zénati took these plain

readymade objects and transformed their surfaces with his abstract patterns and figurative motifs.

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## **Gallery 4:**

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**Textile paintings**

**Various dates**

**Fabric paint on textile**

By 1985 Zénati had moved to working on textiles as he was dissatisfied by the confines of drawing on paper. This became his preferred medium and he made over 1000 textile paintings during his life. Zénati was never directive or instructive with how viewers should orientate, display or live with these works. In Gallery 4 the artist's textiles hang freely, held in space, as flexible active sculptures and forms of architecture. The placement of the textile paintings has been informed

by the street layout of Algiers, as if seen from the artist's viewpoint from his rooftop terrace studio.

The forms and styles of these paintings had many inspirations, such as the Sahara Desert and its indigenous inhabitants, whose lifestyle, traditions and cultural material history represented serenity to Zénati, and a freer way of living.

The tents of the indigenous inhabitants the Tuareg, Sahrawi, Bedouin and Fulani are emblematic of this freer lifestyle, suggestive of a nomadic existence infringed upon by the imposition of national borders. The technology of textiles is primary and ancient. Comprised of several fabric panels, the tent is a movable and malleable space. You can see woven examples of Al Sadu Bedouin tent dividers on the window seating in Gallery 4.

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**CD covers**

**Undated**

**Paint, paper**

**As with Zénati's varied interests in literature, his taste in music was eclectic. The CDs the artist kept in his studio were all self-made compilations of his favourite artists and tracks, ranging from Umm Kulthum, Fela Kuti, and Sun Ra to Cuban jazz, eighties German pop and Gnawa music. Often, he worked across both sides of the covers in his 'all over' signature style. Presented here as a larger collage, they collectively become a tapestry of forms in an abstract vocabulary.**

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## **Hamid Zénati's Music**

**Radio was a constant companion for Zénati while he worked. His niece Wassila Bedjaoui fondly recounted the sounds of Channel 3 Algerian radio broadcasting**

blues, jazz or social and political news from his studio whilst he worked late into the twilight hours.

The radio here plays a selection of tracks taken from Zénati's CD compilations.

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### Hamid Zénati's Library

Although Zénati held back from speaking about his work, we find traces of his persona, assertions and interests within his wide-ranging personal library. Examples from his library cite texts by revolutionary poets, politicians and anti-colonial thinkers such as Aimé Césaire, one of the founders of the Négritude movement, the first President of Senegal Leopold Sédar Senghor and Algerian sociologist Habib Tengour, alongside books of Sufi poetry and ornamental costume design.



**The poetry and literature found within his library convey a sense of freedom and self-determination, inspired by anti-colonial figures such as Césaire who heavily critiqued French colonialism in the island of Martinique. Other books in Zénati's library included novels by Chawki Amari, one of Algeria's best-known commentators and cartoonists, and the memoirs of Isabelle Eberhardt, the radical Swiss-Russian writer and explorer who lived and travelled extensively across North Africa in disguise as an Arab boy, seeking freedom in the Sahara.**

**Presented here are copies of some of the books from Zénati's library alongside texts derived from their ideas. Visitors are welcome to sit and read books from this communal library.**

**Please return to the display after use.**