

Judaica Twist

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The title of the book "Altneuland," by Benjamin Zeev Herzl, charts his vision for the rebirth of the Jewish nation and reveals one of the more complex characteristics of the Jewish state: the connection between new and old; the linking of an ancient heritage with the promise of a new and modern society; adopting new ways of action while continuing a historical tradition.

This dichotomy and resulting tension between these opposing forces characterized the Zionist movement and enterprise from its beginnings, and they continue to reverberate in Israeli society today.

The exhibition **Judaica Twist** presents the current work in the field of Judaica (Jewish arts and crafts) in Israel – and its title reflects the tension and suggests the gap between the perception of Judaica as a static and antiquated field, irrelevant to contemporary Israeli culture and identity, and the characteristics identified with the dynamic realm of design and forms constituting modern creativity, including the use of new mediums.

The artists participating in the exhibition challenge the familiar, traditional models, while examining themselves as Israelis and Jews in the 21st Century and seeking to introduce the dilemmas of their current identity into the mix, and thus creating their own interpretations.; The majority of artists do not come from a religious practice background, and by designing and creating the objects on display, they have delineated the elements typifying their identification with Jewish religion and tradition - while forging their way in the world as secular Jews.

For centuries, the design of Judaic objects has been influenced by prevalent styles and trends, interlaced with Jewish conceptual ideas. Often, the craftsmen creating Judaic items were not Jewish themselves; they worked according to their customers' orders or on the basis of earlier models.

The question of Judaic design was addressed at length during the 19th century when the Zionist movement first began to take form and its artistic and esthetic values began to assume a new nationalistic significance. From the earliest days of the Zionist movement, one can discern the dissention between Herzl and Nordau in regard to the esthetic design of new Jewish art. Herzl, representing pragmatic Zionism, chose to adopt Western values of modernism as the ideal model. Nordau, on the other hand, advocated a romanticized, utopian Zionism which sought to resurrect the Jewish nation as an alternative to the West by creating a new aesthetic.

Boris Schatz, who was largely responsible for implementing the artistic ideals set forth by Herzl and Nordau, established the Bezalel Academy of Art and Design and the adjoining national Bezalel-Museum. Schatz attempted to synthesize the two aesthetics: the practical approach of Herzl and the utopian vision of a modern society that would embrace both Oriental and Western values. In his book, "The Rebuilt Jerusalem," which was written in 1918 and published in 1924, he expresses his intent of blending these two approaches.

Indeed, for years Bezalel represented the traditional academic approach to combining ideas of romantic Orientalism as a possible foundation for the creation of Western art, integrating local elements with an expression of Oriental Biblical fantasies. Gradually the school became associated with traditional craftwork and souvenirs for tourists; this led to the first rebellion, in the 1920's, of Eretz Israeli artists protesting the academy's approach, and eventually resulted in its closing in 1926.

However, in 1929, the school was reopened with a new platform. The academy adopted the ideas of Bauhaus and employed instructors who were educated according to its principles. Functionalism reigned, and a decorative approach was looked upon negatively. The design department abandoned its preoccupation with ritual objects for the sake of utilitarianism, focusing instead on the field of typography. Objects of Judaica reflected modern values: a clean line; the use of machinery to produce the objects; a lack of decorative detailing; the ideal of functionalism and, of course, the integration of universal forms into the various objects. The more political Zionism gathered strength as an alternative to the Diaspora, the less Judaica occupied the centers of the creative establishment.

During the 1970s and 80s, influenced by Israeli art which had begun to reexamine the issue of Jewish identity and its relationship to tradition, many designers chose to address the question of the link between Israeli cultural identity and its origins in the past – how connected was modern culture to tradition and Jewish values? Post-modernistic philosophies undermined the values of modern design, while at the same time allowing for a multiplicity of approaches and styles.

Judaic Twist presents a variety of artists who employ unique and original approaches both in their work methods and in the design of the objects. Nevertheless, it is possible to discern several elements which are common to both the artistic visions presented here and to the techniques used by these artists.

Many of the artists have chosen a personal, biographical dimension as the driving force behind their work, revealing segments from their private lives. Memories of the past or meaningful life experiences are embedded in the objects. The concept for the nail mezuzah, for example, produced by the designer pair Eran

Lederman and Ilan Lior, was born during a renovation of Eran's home by an Arab contractor with whom the designers had numerous discussions regarding the significance of a home in Israeli and Arabic societies, and what characterizes and distinguishes a Jewish home in Israel.

Shai Goldberg's choice of an iconic Keren Kayemet blue box expresses his strong feelings about the underlying common goal characterizing far flung Jewish communities: the building and redemption of the Land of Israel. Using the Haggadah, Yoel Gilinsky returns to childhood memories associated with the Passover Seder and the shared familial reading of the book; Rori Hopper, who leaves his fingerprint on the Mezuzah attached to the door frame, brings an intimate and personal dimension to an everyday occurrence.

In addition to the personal depictions and experiences portrayed by one group, we are able to distinguish another group of artists: those who have chosen to examine the subject of Judaica in a critical manner, raising profound questions regarding the relevance of these objects and of their role in today's society and culture. The objects remain functional, for the most part, but bear an added critical value. Examples include artists such as Nimrod Vardi, who examines the mold for the mass production and industrialization of the popular Kiddush cup, and Zoya Cherkassky who addresses the tradition of illustration of the Passover Haggadah as compared to modern graphic elements and stereotypical anti-Semitic models. Associated with this group are the designers who critically examine the meaning of the religious commandments and their relevance to the realities of modern life. Roie Elbaz attempts to juxtapose the ritual of hand washing with field trips and the elements of militarism-machoism exhibited in Israeli society, while Doron Sar-Shalom addresses the custom of Hannukah gelt (money) in a world inundated by credit cards. Tal Zur stages a modern setting for welcoming the Sabbath (Kabalat Shabbat) according to her beliefs and personal inclinations.

Other artists link various issues arising out of contemporary design to the realm of Judaica: characteristics such as the use of new materials; addressing the elements of post-modern economics; the recycling of materials to further environmental values; combining models associated with high culture to those of low culture; and the adoption of content borrowed from the media and popular culture.

Designers such as Yaakov Greenvurcel, Yossi Mathitiah, Rawet Karni Hila and Marit Meisler remain faithful to the values of modern design which they examine and adapt to the genre of Judaica.

Other artists such as Anat Stein and Hadas Kruk (Studio Armadillo), Naama Steinbock and Idan Friedman (studio Reddish) experiment with an alternative language of design and application of materials which embodies the complexity of their relationship to the subject.

One of the recurrent characteristics evident in many of the works is the modular dimension of the details – an element which welcomes the user to take an active part in the design - using flexibility of form and changing configurations. An element of humor is also recognizable in many of the works, facilitating a buoyant approach to subjects usually steeped in profound meanings, thus enabling the spectator to identify with the subject and possibly engage in self-examination.

The exhibition serves as a reflection of the transitions in Jewish identity within Israeli society nowadays. A period when the dichotomy between 'secular and 'religious identities is taking other forms: Secular" society is more intensely engaged in questioning the meaning of its relationship to tradition and Judaism, while the religious society – modern and ultra orthodox – is taking an active role in designing the ethos of Israeli culture and identity. In large measure, the

exhibition reflects these contemporary currents in Israeli society and presents a wealth of creativity in a field inspired by the spirit of the age.