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# Crafting a Jewish Style: The Art of Bezalel 1906-1996

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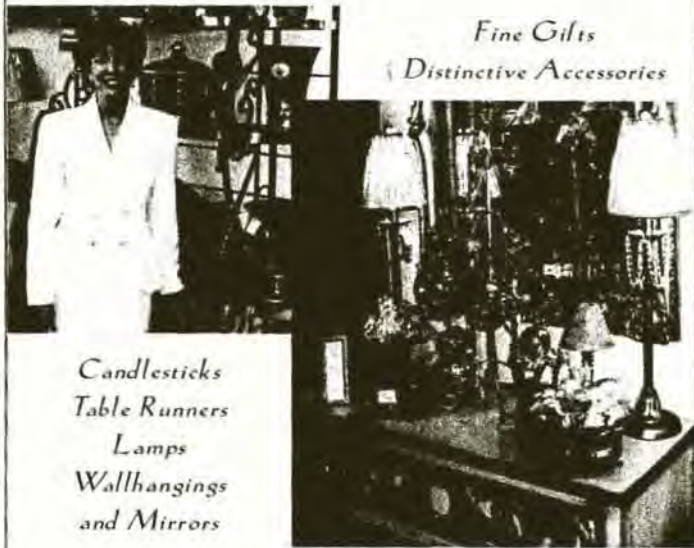
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# Crafting a Jewish Style:

The Art of Bezalel 1906-1996

AUGUST 26 THROUGH OCTOBER 29, 2000

What is "Jewish Style"? Can it be expressed artistically? How does it differ from any other artistic style? Jewish art is an amalgamation of characteristics and ideas drawn from the Holy Land, Jewish religious heritage, ornamental design elements of the Near East, and artistic styles prevalent on the European continent during the twentieth century.

Crafting a Jewish Style showcases art created at the Bezalel School in Jerusalem between 1906 and 1996, which today is the preeminent training ground for contemporary Israeli artists.

Boris Schatz and Theodore Herzl founded The Bezalel School of Arts and Crafts in 1906 in Jerusalem. The school's mission was two-fold: to create an authentic "Jewish Style," and to provide Palestinian Jews with revenue through the production and sale of Jewish handicrafts. The school was an outgrowth of the Arts and



Crafts movement of the 1890s, the nationalist awakening in Europe in the late nineteenth century, and the birth of the Zionist movement. Schatz envisioned an ethical and liberated society in Israel based on the lost golden age of biblical Judaism. Schatz and his colleagues at the school combined various stylistic idioms including the Arts and Crafts Style of William Morris, Art Nouveau, Bauhaus, and the International Style into their curriculum. Some elements of these styles were derived from the Islamic and Oriental cultures that belonged to the biblical past of the Jewish people, with the handicrafts of the Middle East. To learn these traditional crafts, European-trained artisans studied in Istanbul and Damascus. The result was an mixture of indigenous craftsmanship and European sensibility, made complete by the incorporation of distinctly Jewish motifs and subject matter.



By 1911, the Bezalel School grew at an extraordinary rate, the staff and student body reaching a combined total of 460 with 32 departments. The institution came to include a museum of Jewish art and artifacts and a small zoo, and became a major cul-

TOP MEZUZAH, JERUSALEM, 1950'S, SILVER. COLLECTION OF THE JEWISH MUSEUM, NEW YORK. BELOW BEZADEL STORE SIGN, JERUSALEM, 1925, PAINTED AND GLAZED TILE. COLLECTION OF THE JEWISH MUSEUM, NEW YORK.



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tural force in early twentieth-century Jerusalem. From 1911 to 1926, exhibitions of Bezelel products were mounted in Basel, Buenos Aires, Cairo, The Hague, Johannesburg, London, Odessa, New York, and St. Louis. However, the enormous popularity of these exhibitions failed to make the Bezelel School a financial success, and it was forced to close in 1929.



The Jews who immigrated to Palestine following Hitler's rise to power included a highly cultured group of artists. They joined to re-open the New Bezelel School in 1935 under the directorship of Joseph Budko, a metalwork artist trained in Berlin. Budko rejected what he called Schatzís "Archaeological Orientalism," and argued instead for a new conception of an authentic Jewish style that incorporated the modern European experience of the Diaspora Jew. Rather than employing local artisans and traditional handicrafts, the school introduced modern industrial equipment to the Bezelel workshop. The New Bezelel School abandoned the romanticism of the old school and embraced the modernist aesthetic in which the new generation of artists had been trained.

After the founding of the State of Israel in 1948, objects designed at the New Bezelel School acquired a dual significance as symbols of both ancient Jewish culture and a new political identity in the modern world.

In 1964, the school was renamed the Bezelel Academy of Arts and Design, and is the leading institution of modern design in Israel. The contemporary art produced there is remarkable in its diversity of style. Each artist's personal exploration has taken primacy over the institution's earlier struggle between traditionalism and modernism. Deeply interested in international artistic trends, Bezelel graduates of the past 30 years have experimented with new techniques and unusual media but continue to examine the role of cultural identity in their art.

This exhibition was organized by The Jewish Museum, New York. It is sponsored locally by The Jewish Federation of Montgomery; The Aaron Aronov Family Foundation; the Emily B. and Irvin Gassenheimer, Jr. Family; The Birmingham Jewish Foundation; and Charles Schulwolf.

*Lana A. Burgess is Former Associate Curator of Paintings and Sculpture Montgomery Museum of Fine Arts.*



TOP FIVE LIGHT SCION, JERUSALEM, 1920, REPOUSEE COPPER ALLOY AND CAST. COLLECTION OF THE JEWISH MUSEUM, NEW YORK. ABOVE SPICE CONTAINER, AFTER 1948, SILVER AND TOURQUOISE. COLLECTION OF THE JEWISH MUSEUM, NEW YORK.

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