THE LONG JOURNEY OF ISRAEL'S ARTISTS

From pathos, through optimism to "bleakness and loss". One hundred years since Boris Schatz established his arts and crafts school in Jerusalem, ANGELA LEVINE describes how major developments in Israeli art have followed political and social realities

Politics and social factors have continuously and strikingly influenced art production in Eretz Israel. Highlighting this connection is a new Israel Museum exhibition: Boris Schatz, Father of Israeli Art, marking 100 years since the opening of the Arts and Crafts School that he established in Jerusalem. The school, named after Bezalel, the biblical architect of the Tabernacle, went some way to affirm some of the objectives proposed by Zionist leaders such as 'art in the service of society' (Max Nordau) and Eretz Israel as the spiritual centre for renewed Jewish life (Ahad Ha'am). It also met the practical social objective of providing a trade and means of livelihood for some of the city's impoverished Jewish citizens, previously dependent on financial support from abroad.

The style of art at Bezalel – whether for paintings or the design of functional objects like carpets or ceramic tiles – was set by Schatz and the artists he brought from Europe to teach in his school. It was a strange eclectic mix with German Art Nouveau (Jugendstil) and academic realism predominating. As for subject-matter, biblical figures and scenes were favoured, as were illustrations to the psalms, and depictions of holy sites.

The Balfour Declaration of 1917, pledging the establishment of a Jewish national homeland, was signed some two years before the arrival of the first socialist-Zionist settlers of the Third Aliyah. A significant number of artists were among this group; and they chose to settle in the new city of Tel Aviv rather than Jerusalem. In touch with modern trends abroad, they rejected the pathos-ridden legacy of Jewish Diaspora art, seeking instead to create art that would reflect their joyful identification with their new country.

With no local art traditions to draw on, the Eretz Israel painters of the 1920s looked to French art for stylistic inspiration; notably to the Impressionists, the primitivism of Henri Rousseau; and to Picasso for the sturdy figures of his neoclassical period. Their paintings, characterised by optimism and innocence, gave expression to the light and landscapes of Eretz Israel; the rolling hills, its streams and rivers, the lushness of orange groves, all clearly delineated in a soft and sparkling palette. In their portrait paintings (often of each other), they included details illustrating the fact that they saw themselves both as artists and pioneers. This is clear, for example, from a self-portrait by Reuven Rubin (1922), the best loved artist of the 1920s generation: against the background of the Tel Aviv seashore where the first houses were being constructed on sand, he portrays himself with paint brushes in one hand and a flowering plant in the other.

With the rise of Nazism in the 1930s, well-known Jewish artists fled Germany and Austria and settled in Jerusalem. As teachers at the New Bezalel (Schatz's school had closed in 1929, but reopened six years later with the emphasis on arts not crafts) they were responsible for raising professional standards. They also initiated a trend of painting and drawing having its source in German expressionism.

One of their number was Mordechai Ardon, (director of the New Bezalel from 1941-52), a painter of brilliantly colourful metaphysical landscapes. Almost alone among his colleagues, he had the courage to relate to the Holocaust through his art, albeit through metaphor and allegory. Among several triptychs that Ardon produced on this subject was *Missa Dura*, (1958-60), now in the collection of the Tate Gallery, London.

When news of Jewish persecution in Europe reached Palestine, a group of artists, poets and writers, known as the Canaanites, wanted to sever all cultural ties with Europe. They believed that the arts of Israel should take inspiration from the people originally living in the region; in particular, the ancient Israelites, their myths and pagan cults. This archaic trend was most notable in the realm of sculpture. The figure of Nimrod, the mythical hunter, sculpted in Nubian stone by Yitzhak Danziger in 1939, is acknowledged to be the best example.

A new chapter in Israeli art opened with the establishment of the State of Israel. Russian-born artist Yosef Zaritsky viewed this as the right time to 'normalize' art in Israel and free its artists from an obsessive search for a Jewish or Hebrew identity. Influenced by French abstractionists of those times, he and his many followers began to produce lyrical abstract paintings which related to the local landscape only as a starting point.

Known as the 'New Horizons' group, these painters would dominate the local scene for 15 years or more. They were

however castigated for turning a blind eye to Israel's fight for survival, and the social upheaval in the country during the war. It was left to a small group of artists, some from kibbutzim, painting in a Socialist Realist style, to draw attention to problems stemming from mass immigration such as poverty, strikes and unemployment.

The second half of the 1960s is associated in Israel with the 'Americanisation' of Israeli Art. Partly the result of a rapidly developing admiration of everything which that country has to offer, socially and economically; and directly through the influence of young Israeli artists newly returning from study in the States, this was a trend manifested by lacklustre forays into Pop and minimalist art, often without true understanding of their basic tenets.

Coming to prominence in the 1970s were artists who elected to use meagre materials in their paintings and sculpture (eg plywood, whitewash, drawing rather than painting), incorporating into them photographs and news cuttings having local relevance. Their work as a group was recognised only in 1986 in a Tel Aviv Museum exhibition entitled *The Want of Matter*. The social origins of this austere style have been linked to the spiritual legacy of socialist Zionism and its rejection of materialistic values.

Art with a political message did not surface in the country until the mid 1960s. This development started with Ygael Tumarkin's theatrical anti-war sculptures. Cut from bronze, or utilising junk, they featured mutilated figures and weaponry.

The high number of casualties sustained during the War of Attrition along the Suez Canal (1969-70), followed by the trauma of the Yom Kippur War (1973) led to protests on the right and the left of the political spectrum. Many artists were involved. One aspect they dealt with was the heartbreaking loss of young lives. Featured, for instance, in expressionist landscape paintings of Moshe Gershuni are the heads of black cyclamens. This imagery, representing the idea that dead soldiers are transformed into flowers, is taken from a poem by Chaim Guri. Elsewhere in this series, Gershuni scribbles words into his paintings such as *Itzhak! Itzhak!* The parallel he is making is between the biblical Isaac intended for sacrifice by his father; and the young Israeli soldier, viewed as an innocent victim.

From the 1990s onwards, artists from a younger generation have been creating works carrying the message that the Zionist dream has ended. This is one way in which to interpret *The Country*, a critically acclaimed installation mounted by Sigalit Landau in 2002 at the Alon Segev Gallery, Tel Aviv. Here, the gallery was turned into a fruit orchard from Hell. Trunks of trees burst from the roof bearing blackened, misshapen fruit which also lies in piles on the ground, alongside collection trucks filled with puddles of black water. Constructed from steel and papier maché are three life-sized skeletal figures (slaves perhaps), their bodies frozen in the act of picking, transporting or counting this malevolent produce. The 'counter' figure who is also a scribe (his pose recalling ancient Egyptian statuary) kneels near a stove where other fruit is stacked. On his lap is an open ledger containing newspaper headlines relating to the latest *intifada*.

This scene exudes an almost tangible sense of bleakness and loss. Its mood contrasts starkly with the optimism and joy that radiated from the nature paintings of the artist-pioneers in the 1920s. That was a time when, politically and socially, hopes for a peaceful life in Eretz Israel waxed bright and strong.

Left above:
Bezelel graduate Shmuel Ben David , Bezalel National Museum postcard, from an album published in 1926, The Israel Museum, Jerusalem

Opposite below: *Shepherd*, glazed tile, 1920s, produced in Bezalel ceramics workshop, collection of Ze'ev Holzman, Tel Aviv

Top: Reuven Rubin, *Self Portrait with Flower*, oil on canvas, 1922, collection of Rubin Museum Foundation

Above: Sigalit Landau, *The Country: The Porter* (detail), papier mache, steel, 2001, Alon Segev Gallery, Tel Aviv

The exhibition *BORIS SCHATZ: FATHER OF ISRAELI ART* runs at the Israel Museum, Jerusalem until July.

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