

Art in Israel

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Introduction

From its outset, [Israeli art](#) has been an offshoot of Western culture, in spite of the actual geographic site in which it is located - the [Middle East](#). A common claim maintains that Israeli art makes a unique phenomenon, that it has particular characteristics. In fact, Israeli art is one of many examples of modern peripheral art forms that are influenced and aspire at establishing links with the hegemony of Western – European and American - models. Consequently, any attempt at assigning unique qualities to Israeli art must revolve around two significant phenomena:

- The [Zionist](#) concept of the “New Jew,” a unique persona, a modern version of the Diaspora Jew. New Jews are Jewish individuals that have become natives of an ancient Hebrew culture in the modern Land of Israel.
- The biblical Second Commandment that allegedly restricts [Jewish](#) creation of visual images.

The [Zionist](#) goal that strived for a creation of a “New Jew,” a persona marked by its own aspiration to disassociate itself from alleged restrictive [Jewish-Orthodox](#) laws, amply applies to artists of Jewish Palestine and later on to Israeli artists; both groups regarded themselves different in many ways from their Jewish colleagues in the [Diaspora](#). In the Israeli art field this phenomenon was expressed in a conscious disregard of the cultural contributions made by fellow Jewish artists - either contemporary or earlier in time - from Europe and the [United States](#) towards the creation of secular, modern Jewish art.

Artists in [Israel](#), art critics, art historians, museum curators and directors constantly and repeatedly refer to Israeli artworks as if they were created in a new realm, a “lonely planet” that shares no connections with Jewish culture of the Diaspora. Only on rare occasions is the sequence of links with Jewish ideas and concepts mentioned.

Israeli Art and the Clerical Establishment

A unique aspect of Jewish-Israeli art is the complex relationship between the country's clerical and political establishments in all matters concerning the *public* exposure of artworks. From the First Century C. E. to 1948, Jewish spiritual leaders expressed various interpretations regarding the alleged restrictions included in the biblical

Second Commandment concerning the making of “graven images”. During certain historical periods, [Jewish](#) spiritual leaders granted permission and even supported the creation of visual images; in other periods and circumstances, they opposed them. Even though the Israeli political establishment took it upon itself (in sporadic cases) to turn to Jewish clerics and ask for their expertise in matters concerning the proper use of certain visual images, in most cases, it ruled against their public exhibition. While Jewish spiritual leaders in the [Diaspora](#) imposed their views only on Jewish public institutions in local Jewish communities ([synagogues](#), cemeteries, public ritual baths and the like), Israeli Jewish clerics in Palestine, and later in Israel, were often allowed to place restrictions on the display of artworks in *secular* public institutions and public spaces.

When it comes to public commissions sponsored by the [Israeli government](#), Israeli artists face limitations on their subject matter as well as the visual images they purport to use in their works. They are also subject to intervention by both political and religious-clerical establishments. The government supports certain artists’ styles and works – and do not support others. The history of the visual arts in Palestine and Israel is suffused with repeated clashes between two polar approaches to the visual arts: the one held by artists and theoreticians striving for a modern, secular Jewish art, and that taken by the Jewish-Israeli establishment's constant fear of potential transgressions of the traditional Jewish restrictions concerning the visual arts.

The Origins of Israeli Art: 1906 - 1948

“Israeli art” is usually said to have originated in 1906, the year [Boris Schatz](#), a Jewish sculptor of Eastern European origin, and a fervent [Zionist](#), founded the “[Bezalel School of Arts and Crafts](#)” in Jerusalem. After 23 years of existence (1906-1929) the school was closed for lack of funds and then re-opened in 1935 and called “The New Bezalel.” The “Bezalel” style is conceived by most scholars as “Jewish”; a conception in line with the common Zionist notion that perceived Diaspora Jews as an inverted image of the “new Jews” who lived and prospered in Palestine.

Jewish art in Palestine was originally viewed as irrelevant to the Zionist enterprise due to its [Diasporic](#) and allegedly outmoded and obsolete characteristics (“Jewish,” as opposed to “Hebrew”). Scholars labeled these artistic tendencies of the “Bezalel” school by the generic term “academic”. The term is used to define anything that is basically not avant-garde. The faulty use of the term assists in claiming that Jewish art created in Palestine in the 1920s and 1930s expressed an alleged mutiny against Bezalel’s academic style and consequently its disassociation with it. This claim is based on two assumptions: that the [Bezalel School](#) in [Jerusalem](#) was an art academy

and that the alleged mutiny showed distinctive differences in artistic styles. Both of the assumptions are very doubtful.

The 42 years of Jewish-Hebrew art - from the establishment of “Bezalel” in [Jerusalem](#) until 1948 – may be summed up as a chain of attempts at producing a unique “Hebrew Art,” i.e., a series of variations of art styles that would be uniquely local, but would differ from “Jewish art” of the [Diaspora](#) while adhering to Western trends. The 1920s and 1930s show the contribution of scholars and men of letters to the theoretical and, at times, mostly utopian searches for a Hebrew art that would manifest [Zionist](#) ideals. Such contributors were the Hebrew poet laureate [Hayim Nachman Bialik](#), art historian Karl Schwartz and, later, poet [Avraham Shlonsky](#), art critics Eugen Kolb and [Haim Gamzu](#), author [Yeshurun Keshet](#) and others. The common denominator of all those who contributed ideas for the desired style and functions of a “Hebrew art,” local and national, never materialized because most artists who immigrated to Jewish Palestine came from different places, and each one had their own ideas and ideals absorbed from their native countries. Consequently, the sought after amalgamation of a local style for the production of a unique “native” art never materialized.

Artworks of the 1920s and 1930s dealt with various quasi Orientalist impressions of the local landscape, mostly countryside panoramic views. Prime examples for this phenomenon are works by artists Arie Lubin, Ludwig Blum and [Reuven Rubin](#). Artists such as Mordechai Levanon and Yitzhak Frenkel were fascinated by the old cities of [Jaffa](#), [Tiberias](#), [Safed](#) and, especially, [Jerusalem](#). Other artists, such as [Nahim Gutman](#) and Pinchas Litvinowsky, held in great respect and almost venerated images of Arabs, the country’s local inhabitants; they documented their stereotypical characteristics as rural people, tillers of the land.

The 1920s and 1930s witnessed connections that were established between the Jewish art field in Palestine with the neighboring art fields in Cairo, [Alexandria](#) and [Beirut](#), as well as with Jewish patrons of art and art dealers in Europe and the United States. Jewish artists from Palestine exhibited and sold their works in Alexandria's art galleries and exhibited their works in faraway places such as India.

The Israeli Canon

The establishment of the Israeli *canon* in the visual arts coincides with the State's [independence](#) in 1948. The newborn state witnessed the first steps in the formation of its art establishment. A competition for influence slowly emerged pitting the country's two main museums - The Tel Aviv Museum and the "Bezalel National Museum" in Jerusalem against The Association of Painters and Sculptors. At the end of a long, eventful struggle, the museums were the ones – as early as 1949 - that appropriated the privilege of artistic judgment and became recognized as the supreme arbiters of which artworks – or artists – were worthy of becoming a part of the official Israeli canon.

During Israel's first 15 years of existence, the Jewish-Israeli art field established itself, expanded and maintained patterns that have hardly changed to this day. During these early years of the state, the [Israeli](#) political establishment initiated and financed the following significant artistic institutions and events:

- "The First Decade Exhibition" (1958), an official Israeli government exhibition held in [Jerusalem](#), celebrating and proclaiming the state's achievements during its first decade of existence, with a special section devoted to the documentation of achievements and innovations of [Israeli art](#).
- The [Herzl Mausoleum Project](#) in Jerusalem (1949-1960), a grand-scale government enterprise that began as a grandiose international competition, open to Jewish architects from Israel, Europe and the United States, for a design to a permanent grave for the revered father of [Zionism](#). The political debates of this project lasted ten years and the Herzl tomb was finally inaugurated in 1960.
- The establishment of *Omanut la'Am* (literally "Art for the People"), state-organized itinerant art exhibitions shown in peripheral towns and *kibbutzim*.
- The establishment of "Artists colonies" in the old cities of [Jaffa](#), [Safed](#) and the Arab village of Eyn Chud.
- The establishment of peripheral museums such as the ones in [Bat-Yam](#), [Ashdod](#) and other small communities.
- Endowment of public prizes to artists: "The Dizengoff Prize" and the "Young Artist Prize," both by the [Tel Aviv](#) municipality.
- Inauguration of the "Helena Rubinstein" Pavilion of Contemporary Art" in Tel Aviv (1959), the first modern exhibition space, added to the old edifice of the Tel Aviv museum from the 1930s.
- Inauguration of the [Israel Museum](#) in Jerusalem (1965) as Israel's official national museum. The museum's collection, started by [Boris Schatz](#) at the

beginning of the 20th century, was housed until 1965 in the old “[Bezalel National Museum](#)” in Jerusalem. The new museum grounds enabled a new, state-of-the-art installation of the collection next to the modern design of the Billy Rose Sculpture Garden within the museum grounds.

- Commissioning and financing the production of decorative artworks for the new campus of the [Hebrew University](#) at Givat-Ram, Jerusalem (1953-1960).
- Establishment of the Art History cathedra at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem (1958).

All of these institutions and events were to imprint a great influence on the changing and developing Israeli art field of the 1960s and 1970s.

Israel Joins the Abstract Art Movement

In their never-ending attempts to be up-to-date, Israeli artists of the 1950s could not help but join the sweeping circle of abstract art that ruled the art fields of [Europe](#) and the United States. Twentieth century abstract art originated in the United States during the late 1940s as a cultural weapon in the Cold War. Representatives of American culture promoted an individual art, an abstract art, as the all-encompassing expression of its citizens’ freedom of speech. This *Abstract Expressionism* contrasted with the *Social Realism* of the [Soviet Union](#), the (single) style of Soviet culture in all artistic media that was meant to be easily understood by the masses, reflecting the spirit of the collective and eschewing “bourgeois” individualism while serving the society for which it was created.

Abstraction arrived in [Israel](#) a bit late - only during the early 1950s – and became the mainstream style, the most venerated “ism” of the local art field. For years, scholars tried to attribute Israeli abstraction with local traits, in an attempt to show its independence of universal abstraction and thus to establish unique characteristics for it. Are there differences between an American abstract painting and an Israeli one? Some scholars invented a unique adjective for Israeli abstraction: they labeled it “lyrical abstraction,” thus hoping that it would be conceived as more “local”. In this category are works by artists Yosef Zaritzky, Elhanan Halperin, Yechezkel Shteichman and [Leah Nikel](#), as well as [sculptures](#) by Doc Feigin.

Throughout the 1950s, most high-rated Israeli artists' works – [paintings](#) and [sculptures](#) – were abstract in some form or other. They were

individualistic, “bourgeois” art consistent with the notion of “art for art's sake”. This approach conflicted with the Israeli political establishment's *socialist* ideology, which held that art should serve society and reflect its ideals.

Israeli officials in the 1950s and 1960s showed a conscious preference for Jewish artists from the Diaspora who were not Israeli citizens and they were awarded significant public commissions. For example, [Nathan Rapaport](#), a Jewish artist from Russia, was commissioned to erect giant Soviet styled bronze memorials in two [kibbutzim](#) in the southern part of the country (1950-1953); Benno Elkan, a Jewish artist of German origin who fled Germany and made England his home, was commissioned to sculpt the *Knesset* (Israeli parliament) *Menorah* (1956); and [Marc Chagall](#), a Jewish artist residing in France, created the famous stained glass [windows](#) for the *Hadassah* hospital in Jerusalem (1962).

Israeli Op, Minimalist and Pop Art

Israeli art of the 1960s and early 1970s shows yet another attempt at nearing universal contemporary artistic trends. Three main currents were commonly practiced during these years: *Op art*, *Minimalism* and *Pop art*. At the same time, the leading style in contemporary Israeli canon was still abstract art. Israeli artists who adhered to the other leading contemporary styles produced significant artifacts that expressed their fascinating searches in an attempt to implement universal concepts and ideas to Israeli locality. Some Minimalist and Op art Israeli works expressed – consciously at times and unconsciously at others – blurred hints to traditional [Jewish](#) concepts concerning the forbidding of making “graven images” by choosing to be abstract.

The Israeli government was very supportive of Minimalist art that was abstract and commissioned works for official monuments and public sculptures throughout Israel during this period. One reason the government financed these minimalist-abstract sculptures was that they appealed to clerical officials who must have considered Minimalism's abstract principles “Jewish”.

Pop Art appeared simultaneously in [Britain](#) and in the [United States](#) in the 1960s as an artistic reaction against Abstract Expressionism. First and foremost, Pop artists dealt with contents and issues typical of Western consumer society in a witty, critical approach. Implementation of Pop principles into Israeli culture was expressed by Israeli artists in criticizing particular Israeli social and ecological issues and as early expressions of political protest. These first artistic attempts at protest were welcomed neither by the Israeli art establishment nor by the Israeli political establishment. They

would become stronger in a different art current – Conceptual Art – that would become the absolute style in the Israeli art field of the late 1970s and early 1980s.

Conceptual and Earth Art

The intellectual aspect of Conceptual Art gave Israeli artists a cause for celebration. Conceptual Art considers *ideas* expressed in a work of art as its most significant component; consequently, the final “product” of a work of art is either totally non-existent or, in certain cases, it is documented by photographs or other visual means. Written texts are also an integral and significant component of Conceptualism. Israeli artists incorporated texts into their artworks in [Hebrew](#), catering to the Israeli public, and in English to appeal to international audiences. The traditional claim that Judaism is a textual, verbal culture, made a perfect fit for Conceptualism. This generation of Israeli artists took advantage of Western principles of Conceptual Art and transformed them into an investigation of themes, issues and local Jewish-Israeli principles as well as new, secular references to Jewish tradition, accompanied by a twinge of protest and criticism.

In contrast to Earth Art produced in the United States during the late 1970s, conceived as dealing with utopian, cosmic and metaphysical ideas, as part of the struggle for contemporary definition of alternative spaces for the traditional museum institution, the *Earth* in [Israel](#) is conceived as a national myth. Israeli Earth art works of the 1970s were infused with political aspects since they touch upon the roots of Jewish-Israeli existence. Israeli *Adamah* (Earth or soil) is linked to [Zionist](#) concepts and ideas that attribute mythical aspects to every earth clod throughout the country's borders. This theme is best expressed in works by Micha Ulman and Yitzchak Danziger.

The status of Israeli art was transformed in the 1970s from being considered on the lowest rung of the art field's hierarchical ladder, beneath Hebrew fiction and poetry, theater and music, to a much higher and more prestigious realm. One of the reasons for this shift was that Conceptual Art was more intellectual.

The image of young Israeli artists of the 1970s and 1980s – most of whom were native Israelis – changed tremendously thanks to two parallel factors:

- The new nature of the two, main art schools in Israel: “[Bezalel](#)” in Jerusalem and “The *Midrasha*,” (a nickname for The Teachers Art College) in Ramat HaSharon
- The publication of professional art journals in Hebrew: *Tziur vePisool* (Painting and Sculpture), *Mussag* (Concept), *Kav* (Line), *Iton 77* (Journal 77), *Tvay* (Path) and later on *Studio*.

[Bezalel](#) and the *Midrasha* allegedly had two different missions; the [Jerusalem](#) art institution was said to have focused its efforts on more “practical” aspects of art such as visual communication, certain crafts and architecture while the *Midarasha* was allegedly more inclined toward “art for art’s sake”; the latter considered it to be the focus of Israeli avant-garde. The question of which institution was more avant-garde is less important than the fact that young Israeli artists who graduated from *both* institutions showed growing familiarity with theories, abstract concepts and universal cultural traditions, areas that were not so close at hand for veteran Israeli artists. The young artists’ familiarity with academic publications in art history, philosophy, history and theories from the fields of literature and poetry, sociology and cinema, impregnated contemporary Israeli artworks with concepts from Christian iconography, from classical mythology on a scale [Israeli art](#) never had before. All these components contributed to the creation of an art that was founded on contemporary universal values that were transformed in certain cases into themes, issues and subjects that shared common Israeli characteristics (Jewish and non-Jewish).

Themes in Israeli Art

Israeli artists express a variety of themes in their work, but the four most common are unique to [Israeli culture](#):

- References to the [Holocaust](#)
- References to the [Israeli military](#)
- References to the [Hebrew](#) language
- Personal interpretations of [Jewish](#) identity

References to the Holocaust

Up until the 1980s, references to the [Holocaust](#) were extremely rare, a phenomenon that is parallel to the general repression of dealing with the Holocaust by most strata of Jewish-Israeli society. Works by artists who Holocaust survivors were hardly made public through art exhibitions during the 1960s and 1970s. The first references to the Holocaust in appeared in abstract works of survivor Moshe Kupferman and the expressionistic drawings and etchings by Osias Hofstatter and Moshe Bernstein. Other influential Israeli artworks with references to the Holocaust came from the second generation of survivors, such as Hayim Ma'or.

References to the [Holocaust](#) in 20th century art were made by artists – Jewish and non-Jewish – throughout the world and, therefore, those made by Israeli artists were not unique. However, Israeli artworks were distinguished by the [Zionist](#) idea that linked the Holocaust with Jewish heroism. Jewish-Israeli soldiers of the newly formed

Israeli army were conceived as descendants of Jewish ghetto fighters who personally experienced the horrors of the Holocaust. The most self-explicatory expression of this theme is the [Mordechai Anilewicz Memorial](#) at Kibbutz Yad Mordechai which honors the commander of the [Warsaw ghetto](#) uprising.

References to the Israeli Military

The theme of war first appears in artworks created during and after the [1948 War](#). They dealt mainly with the results of war, i.e., the terrible aspects of Jewish-Israeli bereavement. Years later, in the late 1960s, shortly after the [Six-Day War of 1967](#), Israeli artists referred to the Israeli military by expressing their conception of its mistreatment of the civilian Palestinian population. Thus, in less than two decades, Israeli artists observing their country at war shifted their focus from laments to using their art as a means of political protest. In this context are works by Yigal Tumarkin, Yoram Rozov, David Reeb, and Eran Shakine and photography by Micky Kratzman, Avi Ganor and Guy Raz.

Hebrew as a Source of Identity

The [Hebrew](#) language is the most significant, direct and clear expression of Jewish-Israeli local identity; it is one of the most significant expressions of the new, secular Hebrew Israeli culture. One of the Hebrew language's *visual* expressions is the Hebrew alphabet. Since the beginning of the 20th century it became the subject of many Jewish artists and designers, who worked laboriously on expanding its uses and shaping new and improved designs for it. The general aim was to adapt Hebrew typography for modern uses.

The development and improvement of Hebrew typography gained momentum during the [British mandate](#). For the first time in the modern era, the Hebrew alphabet was used for widespread communication, a phenomenon unique to this Jewish culture, as opposed to that in the Diaspora where Hebrew was not used as an everyday language. Since the 1930s, the development of Hebrew typography became a preoccupation of Jewish artists and designers. One of the challenges they faced was to meet the growing demand for new type-faces with greater legibility.

The Hebrew language is also expressed in [Israeli art](#) by the inclusion of short texts in paintings and sculptures. Various Israeli artists, such as Michael Sgan-Cohen, Drora Domini, Hila Lulu-Lin and David Tartakover, dedicate their works to visual expressions of the Hebrew language, especially concerning themselves with meta-language manifestations such as visual renderings of Hebrew expressions, puns, double meanings, idioms and proverbs.

Artists as Rebels

Israeli artists often struggle with their identity as [Israelis](#) and [Jews](#). They typically feel a part of Jewish tradition even while some have little or no affinity for [Judaism](#). In some cases, their references to Jewish traditions and symbolism are expressed in quasi-rebellious ways that challenge rabbinical tradition concerning Jewish rituals and ceremonies. Works by Moshe Gershuni and photographs by Honi Hame'agel and others convey overt, conscious ingredients of blasphemy.

Another phenomenon in this overall approach to examining Jewish identity is expressed in a re-examination of Zionist concepts and myths. Israeli artists refer to a rich array of Zionist visual images that have turned into icons of popular Israeli culture and put changes in them. Consequently, they create artifacts that convey clear communicative messages of myth shattering; at times they ridicule the myth or, in contrast, lament the fact that it has become merely a nostalgic memory. Within the overall phenomenon of self-examination of their Jewish-Israeli identity, certain Israeli artists express, through their introvert observations, issues of ethnic identity within the multiple facets of [Israeli society](#).

Beyond Jewish Art

This paper, like most historiography of [Israeli art](#), from 1948 until today, focuses on the part played by Jewish-Israeli artists, despite the fact that many non-Jews have also contributed to the field. The number of publications concerning the artistic production of Israeli artists who are not Jewish is extremely small -- most of them were published only from the beginning of the 1980s -- and deal with individual non-Jewish artists' works. The themes and subjects that are still waiting for scholarly historical research of the non-Jewish art field are, among others, a survey concerning monumental wall paintings in Israeli churches, sculptures and memorials that are installed in non-Jewish public spaces and non-Jewish artists' individual artworks that related to traditional symbols that are not Jewish.