

CULTURE & ART

Despite the constant threat of terrorism and war, [Israel](#) is home to a thriving and vibrant [cultural life](#) symbolized by internationally renowned artists, musicians and actors.

Israeli artists, writers, dancers, actors and [musicians](#) have made an impact far beyond their number, while an increasing variety of international festivals and events, such as the Israel Festival, the Jerusalem International Book Fair, the International Poetry Festival, the Karmiel Dance Festival and many others, have become notable events in the world's cultural calendar. Increasingly, Israeli movies and television programs are being praised across international borders and Israel has become one of the more attractive places for world-renowned singers and musical bands to kick off tours in Europe and Asia.

History

Despite the paucity of its population, [Pre-state Israel](#) had a rich cultural life of its own.

Literature, especially, flourished with national poet [Chaim Nahman Bialik](#) and writer [Shmuel Yosef Agnon](#) leading the way. Years later, in 1966, Agnon would receive Israel's only [Nobel Prize](#) for literature to date. In the words of fellow Nobel Prize winner [Nelly Sachs](#), Agnon embodied the future of the Jewish people.

In 1936, renowned [Polish](#)-born violinist, Bronislaw Huberman, founded the [Palestine Philharmonic Orchestra](#), which subsequently became the [Israel Philharmonic Orchestra](#). Its opening concert was conducted by Arturo Toscanini.

The [Bezalel Academy of Art](#), which had been founded by the [Bulgarian](#)-born Professor [Boris Schatz](#) in [Jerusalem](#) in 1906, had already trained a generation of painters, sculptors, carpet weavers, craftsmen and craftswomen, whose work was widely appreciated and had even been shown in exhibitions abroad. Painters such as [Reuven Rubin](#), [Anna Ticho](#), Mordechai Ardon, Yosef Zaritsky, Marcel Janco; the sculptors Yitzhak Danziger, Avraham Melnikoff, Chana Orloff and others, were beginning to receive international recognition.

The [Habimah Theater](#), founded in Moscow in 1917, had moved to [Tel Aviv](#) in 1931 and attracted large and appreciative audiences for its dramatic offerings, which included works by local playwrights.

Literature

In the world of [Hebrew literature](#), a group of writers, known as the "*Palmach Generation*" (the [Palmach](#) was the striking force of the [Haganah](#), the forerunner of the [Israel Defense Forces](#)) emerged in Israel. These writers, who had fought in the 1948 [War of Independence](#), included S. Yizhar, Haim Gouri, Hanoach Bar Tov, Benjamin Tammuz, Aharon Megged, Yoram Kaniuk, Igal Mossinsohn, Moshe Shamir and the poets Yehuda Amichai, Natan Alterman and Uri Zvi Greenberg. The work of

these writers was often cast in the heroic mold called for by the times. They set the tone for artistic creation in other fields as well, and can be seen as the starting point of contemporary Hebrew cultural activity.

These literary icons were succeeded by the so-called "*Generation of the State*" writers. These writers were profoundly influenced by the preceding generation, and focused on the creation of the State of Israel and her existentialist struggle as a new nation. Several of these writers have gained substantial international recognition, and their works are widely translated. They include Amos Oz, A.B. Yehoshua, Yehoshua Kenaz and Aharon Appelfeld.

"*Generation of the State*" writers were followed by a new wave of Israeli literary icons, including David Grossman, Yeshayahu Koren, Meir Shalev and Haim Be'er. These authors continue to have a major influence on the local literary scene and are widely published abroad.

An important phenomenon in recent local writing is the predominance of women, whose voice was relatively unheard during the early years of the State. These female writers include Shulamith Hareven, Amalia Kahana-Carmon, Shulamit Lapid, Yehudit Hendel, Savyon Leibrecht, Nava Semel, Nurit Zarchi, Batya Gur, and the poets Dahlia Ravikovich and the late Yona Wallach.

A new literary style focused on the good life, the pursuit of happiness, the debunking of hitherto sacred causes - often in a surrealistic, anarchic, iconoclastic, and at times even nihilistic, has surfaced in the writings of Yehudit Katzir, Orly Castel-Bloom, Etgar Keret, Irit Linor, Gadi Taub, Alex Epstein, Esty Hayim and several others, all of whom might be loosely termed the "*Post-Zionist Generation*."

Another important strand in Israel's cultural life is the burgeoning of a strong ethnic consciousness on the part of writers of Sephardi background. In literature, this trend is evident in the works of Shimon Ballas, Sami Michael and Eli Amir, all born in Iraq, Amnon Shamosh, born in Syria, Albert Suissa, born in Morocco and Yitzhak Gormezano-Goren, born in Egypt.

Music

The arrival of nearly a million immigrants from the former Soviet Union in the late 1980's and early 1990's had a critical impact on Israel's cultural life in all its facets, but none more than in the field of music.

Since then, Israel has seen a proliferation of new orchestras, chamber music groups, choirs and soloists, and music education in the country has been immeasurably enriched. Soloists such as [Yitzhak Perlman](#), Pinhas Zuckerman, Daniel Barenboim and Shlomo Mintz have left an indelible mark on the stages of concert halls and in recording studios all over the world.

Opera, as well, received a tremendous boost from the massive Russian immigration. In particular, opera in Israel has entered a new era with the opening in 1995 of the magnificent Opera House in Tel Aviv's new Golda Center for the Performing Arts.

Israel is well known for its famous classical orchestras, including the [Israeli Philharmonic Orchestra](#) (IPO), overseen by world-renowned manager, Zubin Mehta. The IPO frequently tours the world and

currently has a subscriber base in the tens of thousands. A few notable Israeli classical musicians are, Daniel Barenboim (piano, conductor), Dudu Fisher (cantor, opera singer), Yaacov Bilansky Levanon (composer, violinist), Itzhak Perlman (violin), Yavgeni Shapovalov (opera singer), Pinchas Zukerman (violin, viola).

Though not geographically in Europe, Israel is allowed to participate in the annual Eurovision Song Competition which pits top musical contenders from every nation in the region against each other to determine a winner. Israeli artists have participated in the contest thirty-four times since 1973. Israel has won three times: 1978 (Izhar Cohen, "A Ba Ni Bi"); 1979 (Gali Atari, "Hallelujah"); and, 1998 (Dana International, "Diva"). It has also placed twice two times: 1982 (Avi Toledano, "Hora"); and, 1983 (Ofra Haza, "Chai").

Popular Israeli music ranges from hard rock to hip hop to reggae, with many talented bands and musicians in every style.

Israeli rock tends to be softer than American or British rock. A number of famous Israeli bands are [Kaveret](#) (known in English-speaking countries as [Poogie](#)), [Mashina](#), [Hayeudim](#), [Aviv Geffen](#), [Shlomo Artzi](#), and [Arik Einstein](#). Popular rock festivals like the Arad Festival and the Red Sea Festival in [Eilat](#) attract tens of thousands of young people.

Alternative music, including metal and punk, has also been gaining popularity in the country since the 1980s. Salem and Orphaned Land are two well-known bands, as well as Sleepless, Eternal Grey, Lehavoth, Kehei Na'atza, and Useless ID. Hip hop and rap music has also made its way to Israel. Israeli artists such as Subliminal, Hadag Nahash, Ha Shevet, and Muki have been pioneers in the style new to the country.

Internationally-renowned singer Idan Raichel has had immense success for his distinctive musical blends of reggae and electronics with traditional Hebrew, Ethiopian and Middle Eastern musical styles. His most famous album, called "The Idan Raichel Project," has sold more than 120,000 copies worldwide and carries a 3x Platinum Israeli certificate.

Theater & Dance

Israeli [playwrights](#) such as Hanoch Levin, Yehoshua Sobol, Shmuel Hasfari are very popular in the country. Hillel Mittelpunkt. Levin, who wrote thirty-four plays before his untimely death in 1999, has been far and away Israel's most prolific and prominent playwright.

[Dance](#) is yet another field that has seen vast changes.

Prior to 1948, dance in the country was mainly folk dance, perfected by dancers such as the [Russian](#)-born Rina Nikova, or the Tel Aviv-born Baruch Agadati, who created a local dance idiom from a skein of Russian, Balkan, and local Arab influences, and meeting at regular folk dance festivals, beginning in 1944 at Kibbutz Dalia. Since then, several professional groups and dance schools have come into being, notably the Batsheva and Bat Dor groups, the Kibbutz Contemporary Dance Company and the Israel Ballet.



Film & Television

Only relatively recently did Israel begin to develop a [cinema industry](#), though in recent years both movies and television shows produced in Israel have gained widespread international acclaim.

The more successful films still tend to draw on the Israeli experience, the Arab-Israel conflict, [Holocaust](#)-related topics and so on, rather than on themes of a broader, more universal nature. The industry is severely handicapped by lack of funding and investment. Budgets have been cut, pledges for new funds ignored, and the only film laboratory in the country has closed down.

The Council for Quality Films, a publicly funded institution, has provided some help. Despite the condition of the industry, well-known film makers such as Boaz Davidson (*Eskimo Limon*), Assi Dayan (*Givat Halfon Eina Ona* or *Halfon Hill Does not Respond*, *The life according to Agfa*, *A Whale in Sharon Beach*), Eytan Fox (*Yossi & Jagger*, *Walk on Water*), Amos Gitay (*Kadosh*, *Kedma*, *Alila*), Dover Kosashvili (*Late Marriage*), Elia Suleiman (*Divine Intervention*, *Chronicle of a Disappearance* and *Cyber Palestine*), Uri Zohar (*Lul*, *Metzitzim* or *Peeping Toms*), *Hor Ba-Levana* (*A Hole in the Moon*) have continued to pursue the art form.

The Israel Film Festival, started in 1982, spotlights the country's culturally diverse film and television industry. Showing more than 550 films to over 700,000 viewers in the United States, the festival focuses on enhancing the American view on Israel and promoting open-mindedness and acceptance.

Since 1964, Israel has had nine movies nominated for the Academy Award for Best Foreign Language Film, including four nominees since 2007 alone. These more recent movies include: *Beaufort* (Joseph Cedar, 2007); *Waltz with Bashir* (Ari Folman, 2008); *Ajami* (Yaron Shani, 2009); and, *Footnote* (Joseph Cedar, 2011).

Even more recently, Israeli television programming has become a new beacon of Israeli exports to the world. "Homeland," a mini-series action thriller that debuted in 2011 and broke the American premier channel Showtime's ratings record for a first-year series, was based off the Israeli show "Hatufim" (Prisoners-of-War). NBC's new 2011 game show, "Who's Still Standing?" is also an Israeli import. Likewise, the former HBO series, "In Treatment," starring Gabriel Byrne that ran for three seasons, was bought from Israel.

In 2012, it's assumed that nearly half a dozen shows in development at U.S. networks are based on hit Israeli series, their themes and language tweaked for American audiences. "The two countries [Israel and the U.S.] have a lot in common, whether it's in social values or storytelling," Gideon Raff, the creator of "Hatufim" and an executive producer on "Homeland," said.

Visual Arts

In 1965, the [Israel Museum](#) in [Jerusalem](#), the country's largest and most important museum, opened. It has many divisions, notably those of archeology and Judaica, which include the collections from Bezalel as well as the Shrine of the Book which houses the [Dead Sea Scrolls](#); the Ruth Youth Wing; departments for photography and design, classic art and above all, extensive collections of modern

Israeli art on permanent display and in temporary exhibitions, as well as the country's major repository of modern sculpture in the Billy Rose Sculpture Garden.

The Israel Museum was sometimes accused of neglecting Israeli art in favor of contemporary international art, but in recent years, major strides have been taken to broaden the museum's activities in this sphere. Other important venues where one can view modern Israeli art are the [Tel Aviv Museum](#), the Ramat Gan Art Museum, Mishkan Omanut in [Kibbutz Ein Harod](#) and smaller museums throughout the country, as well as private galleries, most of which are concentrated in the Tel Aviv area. The museums showcase modern Israeli and international art, Holocaust memorial exhibitions, [Islamic Art](#), and scientific exhibits.

In addition to painters and sculptors, the country's artistic life comprises a host of talented craftspeople (ceramicists, silver and goldsmiths, weavers, calligraphers, glass blowers, etc.), many of whom specialize in modern interpretations of traditional Jewish ceremonial objects.

