

Silver

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BEZALEL

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NATIONAL IDENTITY

An Exhibition...

The Story of Bezalel: A Vision Realized (?)

By Dr. Bernard Bernstein and Patricia Jay Reiner

And the Lord spoke unto Moses, saying: See, I have called by name Bezalel the son of Uri...and I have filled him with the spirit of God, in wisdom, and in understanding, and in knowledge...to work in gold, and in silver, and in brass, and in cutting of stones for setting, and in carving of wood, to work in all manner of workmanship. Exodus 31:1-5



Fig. 1. Damascene Vase and Plate. Brass, silver, and copper, Jerusalem, 1913. The date is incorporated into the inlaid damascene work. Moldovan Family Collection.

The story of Bezalel is as much a story of the will and passion of a single individual pursuing his dream as it is about his stunning achievement in founding the Bezalel School of Arts and Crafts (1906), an enterprise to develop a uniquely Jewish aesthetic and national identity. Boris Schatz, born in Lithuania (1866) and educated in France at the height of the Beaux-Arts period, achieved prominence as an “academic” sculptor. Invited to Sophia as court sculptor to the Royal Bulgarian Court (1895), he also served on a committee to develop a national artistic identity with home industries for the production and distribution of arts and crafts, and a school to teach these skills. With this experience as a model, Schatz envisioned a Jewish school in the land of Israel named for the artisan selected by God to build the Tabernacle.

Against a backdrop of rising religious persecution throughout Europe, Schatz found funding and support from Theodor Hertzl’s Political Zionist Committee in Berlin. Its focus was re-establishment of Jewish settlement in the historical land of Israel, then Ottoman Palestine, along with instilling a sense of historic identity in the largely immigrant population. Schatz left for Palestine with a handful of artists and students steeped in European traditions, especially the prevailing Art Nouveau style. He found buildings in Jerusalem and recruited students. He

imported skilled Yemenite craftsmen and sent teachers to Damascus, Cairo, and Istanbul to learn local techniques. Following the examples of the British Arts and Crafts Movement and the Viennese Wiener Werkstätte, as well as the Tiffany & Co. studios in New York, Schatz unified the arts and crafts under thirty-five artisan workshops ranging from textiles to metalworks along with an extensive “home/cottage industry.”

His agenda to create a new and identifiable “Jewish Style” using European techniques overlaid with Orientalist influence was largely realized in the earliest years of the enterprise, and along with his teachers and artisan students, Schatz produced an impressive array of work in the new “eclectic” style.

However, the enterprise faced many challenges. The economy was stagnant, unemployment was high, and the Jewish immigrants from Europe and the Middle East were largely unskilled. While Schatz was trying to remain true to his artistic



Fig. 2. Wine Goblet. Sharar Workshop, silver set with stones, Jerusalem, ca. 1925. Moldovan Family Collection.



Figs. 3, 3a, and 3b. **Bible with Bezael Binding.** Ze'ev Raban and Meir Gur-Arie, silver and ivory, Jerusalem, ca. 1923. Collection of Congregation Emanu-El, Bequest of Judge Irving Lehman, 1945.

vision, his sponsors were pressing for broader, more profitable output to support the burgeoning immigrant population and bolster the economy in the new land. Financial support eroded in the years leading up to World War I, and thereafter Bezalel experienced intermittent interruptions which continued until the Depression, and it closed in 1929. Nonetheless, Schatz pressed forward tirelessly, attempting to fund a reopening, while neglecting his own artistic endeavors and his health; he died in 1932.

The "Bezalel School of Arts and Crafts" reopened as "The New Bezalel" in 1935, with Modernism supplanting its earlier eclectic "Jewish style." The school continued to evolve over the succeeding seventy-five years. Currently the world renowned "Bezalel School for Art and Design" includes over 400 teachers and close

to two thousand students. The collections of the early Bezalel museum established by Schatz with the work of local artists, indigenous flora and fauna, archeological artifacts, and tra-

ditional ritual objects ultimately became the core of the highly regarded Israel Museum.

While it is arguable whether Boris Schatz's vision for Bezalel was fully



Fig. 4. **Etrog (Citron) Container.** Silver, set with glass, copper, and copper coins, Jerusalem, 1920s. Moldovan Family Collection.



Fig. 5

realized, it is undeniable that the institutions it inspired have been remarkably successful. Schatz will be remembered not only as a major catalyst for establishing the importance of art in the national consciousness of the Israeli people, but also for creating a unique Jewish aesthetic of its time. One can only speculate if Schatz had lived, whether his own artistic focus could have shifted enough to allow for the modernist style which defined "The New Bezalel" art school of 1935.



Fig. 5a

Figs. 5 and 5a. Candlesticks (one of a pair). Silver with filigree appliqué, Jerusalem, ca. 1910. Private Collection.

Bezalel Style, Iconography, and Metalwork Techniques

Style

The aesthetic style of Bezalel metalwork during the period between 1906 and 1929 was really a mixture of already existing eastern and western styles, and it was that blending which formed the uniquely characteristic style of the school and affiliated workshops. It included elements of Schatz's academic philosophy as well as the artistic approach of the artists/teachers who worked there. Considered an eclectic style, it incorporated Art Nouveau, Arts and Crafts, Orientalism, and Yemenite ornamental traditions.

Iconography

The recurring symbols of early Bezalel were drawn from the historic past and contemporaneous period.

- Archeological symbols of the biblical past. Turning to the Bible Cover (Figure 3) we see Cherubim in the

form of winged lions guarding the Tablets of the Law, carved in ivory. The twisted columns recall the two columns in front of the Biblical Temple. The central ivory cameo on the back cover (Figure 3a) depicts the Western Wall, sometimes called the Wailing Wall.

- The Zionist ideal of Jewish people returning to their historic land, depicted in various media as agricultural workers and pioneers.
- The Hebrew alphabet influenced by Islamic calligraphy and Art Nouveau. The Hebrew lettering woven into the intricate damascene design around the bands of the vase (Figure 1) is an instructive example.
- Familiar Jewish symbols such as the Menorah and Star of David in classical as well as stylized interpretations. For example, the stylized Menorahs (Figure 1) and the Stars of David set into filigree cartouches encircling the Etrog Container (Figure 4).

- Flora and fauna of the Holy Land. Popular motifs were the pomegranate and the palm tree, lions, stags, and camels and are included in much Bezalel metalwork. The lions and stags in the clasp of the Bible (Figure 3b) and in the candlestick base (Figure 5a) together with the surround of pomegranates are vivid examples.

Metalworking Techniques

Just as the style of early Bezalel was a mixture, so too were the techniques used to execute the work. These were derived from different sources and often combined within one object. This combining of techniques and materials was a common characteristic of Bezalel metalwork.

Filigree: A universal and ancient technique, mostly executed by Yemenite metalworkers who were highly skilled in this tradition. There are two basic ways of making filigree objects; either applied which involves the soldering of the filigree wires onto an existing surface (Figure 5), or used alone to construct the object itself. The latter is beautifully illustrated in the etrog container (Figure 4), in which you can see the light filtered through the spaces between the wires.

Damascening: Inlaying of silver and copper into a brass base to produce intricate patterns. An example of this is the vase and tray (Figure 1). The teachers from Bezalel traveled to Da-

mascus to learn this technique.

Etching: This is primarily a European technique. The Bezalel interpretation was known as “batik” and was used to create surface ornamentation. It was often combined with other surface treatments such as filigree and repoussé. See the cup and base of the wine goblet (Figure 2) and the back cover of the Bible (Figure 3a).

Repoussé: A universal and ancient metalworking technique mostly done in low relief on Bezalel objects. Examples include the animals in the base of the candlestick (Figure 5a).

Early Bezalel metalwork often included other materials, such as ivory and semiprecious stones.

Identifying Marks

The usual way of identifying metalwork objects from the early Bezalel period was the use of the words “Bezalel” and “Jerusalem.” These were either applied, stamped, or integrated into the design of the object in either Hebrew or English. In some instances, the markings of the exterior workshop, for example the Sharar Workshop (Figure 2), were included with the Bezalel marks. Sometimes the name of the artist or designer was included.

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All of the objects included in this article can be seen in the current exhibition together with a broad range of works reflecting both the ritual and secular aspects of early twentieth-century Jewish life in the Bezalel style.

The skillful display of objects by Co-Curators Elka Deitsch and David Wachtel, especially the abundant examples of metalwork, adds to the understanding of the early Bezalel vision and enterprise. Their insightful text and videos add to this comprehensive narrative of Bezalel's achievement during its most important period.

Special thanks to Co-Curators Elka Deitsch and David Wachtel and Associate Curator Warren Klein for providing us with detailed information on the history and philosophy of the Bezalel School, as well as photographic images and portions of the texts used in the exhibit.

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