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Recommended Citation

Blum, Shayna Tova, "History of Visual Communication Design: The Bezelel Academy of Art, Jerusalem" (2016). *Faculty and Staff Publications*. 50.

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HISTORY OF VISUAL COMMUNICATION DESIGN: THE BEZELEL ACADEMY OF ART, JERUSALEM

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ABSTRACT

Supported by the modern European Zionist movement, the Bezelel Academy of Art, Jerusalem, was founded in 1906 by Lithuanian artist and Zionist Boris Schatz. In the early years of the academy, work produced by students exhibited the political complexities presented in the Jewish return to Eretz Israel. The expression of concepts addressed in modern Jewish identity and Zionist ideologies were utilized in creative processes of visual communication and design. As most faculty and students were immigrating to Mandatory Palestine from Europe, the academy's curriculum was developed through the culmination of styles and materials reflective of the both European art and design canon and biblical allegory and Hebrew typography. This essay discusses the philosophies and aesthetics that influenced the progression of the Bezelel Academy of Art, Jerusalem, in its founding years.

Keywords: Design, Culture, Typography, Language, History

FOUNDING FATHER, BORIS SCHATZ

Schatz was unselfish, worked indefatigably, and was an ardent Zionist, but he had the fault of a self made man - not knowing the limit of his abilities. By training and taste he was an artist; but he believed himself to be much more, and people who were more talented but less aggressive had no chance beside him.¹

-Dr. Arthur Ruppin

Born in 1866 in Varniai, Lithuania, Boris Schatz, founder of the Bezalel Academy of Art in Jerusalem, was raised in a traditional Ashkenazi household. Schatz's parents encouraged his education in Jewish law and practice (which is common in a religious family), beginning his studies at a young age and continuing into his twenties when he left home to study at the Yeshiva in Vilnius. Unbeknown to his family, Schatz's interest in aesthetics and artistic practice

had developed since his youth, and while away studying at Yeshiva, Schatz enrolled in a local art school where he explored creative processes in drawing and sculpture. For the next several years, Schatz balanced his time between his Judaic studies and art education, and after finishing Yeshiva, Schatz travelled extensively throughout Europe and Russia, supporting himself as an art educator for Jewish schools in Berlin, Paris, and Moscow.

Through his travels, Schatz engaged with scholars and participants within the growing Zionist movement that was spreading throughout Ashkenazi European and American communities. By 1903, Schatz was an active member of the Zionist Council and had gained a wide network of like-minded individuals, contributing notoriety to his work as an artist and activist. In 1905, Schatz approached Theodore Hertzl, the founder and leader of the Zionist Organization, to discuss the idea of developing an academy of art in Eretz Israel. Convinced it would be beneficial to consider the proposal, Herzl suggested Schatz present his idea at the Seventh Zionist Congress in Basle, Switzerland. Initially, members of the council were divided, debating the purpose of an art institution in Eretz Israel. However, after much discourse, the majority voted in favor of funding an academy of art.

Named after Bezalel Ben Uri, the architect and designer of the original tabernacle, the Bezalel Academy of Art opened in 1906 on Ethiopia Street in Jerusalem. Schatz believe the school to be the “Third Temple,”² acting as the primary cultural institution established to define the material and sensual philosophies of modern Jewish nationalism. As Zalman David Levontin, manager of the Anglo-Palestine Company Bank, said on October 25, 1906, “We will create in Jerusalem a centre for practical, cultural, and political Zionism.”³

HASKALAH/ZIONISM

Influenced by the Enlightenment in Europe, the *Haskalah* (the Jewish Enlightenment of the late eighteenth century and the nineteenth century) proved to initiate a shift in European Jewry.

Students from various yeshivot in Germany, Lithuania, and Belarus began contemplating

Judaism from scientific and philosophical perspectives, defending Jewish identity beyond that of religious practice and law. Influenced by the study of science, western philosophy, and humanities (subjects that were popular during the Enlightenment) the Haskalah discussed Jewish identity via culture: history, language, and tradition. Having produced a significant number of literary texts, Haskalah led way to the next generation of European Jews, contributing to the birth of Zionism.

Initiators of the Zionist movement were primarily modern-educated Jews who, having been introduced to works of the Haskalah, believed in Jewish identity and took it one step further by presenting the principles of Jewish nationalism. Similar to Haskalah, the Zionist movement sought to influence the (Jewish) people in recognizing “their values and appreciate their particular traits.”⁴ The goal was to unite the Jewish people across the diaspora by examining distinct history, language, lineage, and values. However, due to the religious and secular duality of beliefs, the early years of the Zionist movement witnessed debate on the cultural principles of the Jewish people.⁵

The creation of Jewish nationalism inspired both religious and secular Jews to contemplate their social and cultural existence when establishing the fact that the Jewish/Hebrew nation is great and strong.⁶ The theories that circulated within the European and American Jewish intellectual communities created a great desire for independence in the state of Eretz Israel, where the Zionist movement foresaw an ideal future for the Jewish people.⁷ Jewish cultural ideologies were addressed at the First Zionist Congress in Basle,⁸ where Boris Schatz presented his proposal to establish an academy of art in Eretz Israel. Members evaluated the rationale in support of the Bezalel Academy of Art in Jerusalem, and factions debated the purpose of the venture. The majority of speakers viewed visual arts and design as a tool for propaganda to assist in promoting the Zionist agenda and the Jewish return to Israel. However, other leaders,

such as Martin Buber, perceived design and artmaking as an ideal tool for healing and educating a population that had not had the opportunity to explore aesthetics and forms of beauty because of the common poverty and suffering they experienced. According to Buber, “The Jew of the Diaspora was incomplete and barren. His eyes were blind to beauty, and the blooming and blossoming from the other side of the ghetto wall did not reach him.”⁹ Buber believed that art and design had a transformative purpose that could assist in settling generations of a displaced nation.

BEZALEL ACADEMY OF ART, JERUSALEM

The Bezalel Academy of Art began its first year with a class of ten students, all of whom had recently immigrated to Eretz Israel from Europe, North Africa, and the Middle East.¹⁰ At the academy, students studied methods and techniques of artmaking reflective of European concepts and aesthetics—namely the Arts and Crafts and Art Nouveau styles. The designs were produced using Hebrew symbolism and text intended to endorse Zionist ideology and Jewish nationalism. Within a short period of time, the Bezalel Academy of Art, Jerusalem, grew in its number of students and faculty, requiring additional programs and facilities.

The curriculum for the school was adjusted by developing a core with two parts. The first part was the style and technique favored by Schatz, Arts and Crafts, which had originated in Scotland and England during the 1800s as a response to the creation of aesthetic forms through mass production (by factory workers and machinery) during the Industrial Revolution. Arts and Crafts sought to re-establish the creation of functional and decorative forms made by an individual artist or craftsman. Highly influenced by Medieval Gothic design, the movement was known for its extreme adornment of symbolic patterning, ornamentation, and stylistic typography. During the pioneering years of the Bezalel Academy, students studied both art and artisan processes (drawing, painting, and sculpture) in addition to ceramics, textiles, typography,

bookmaking, and product design. The second part of the curriculum educated students in Jewish history and the Hebrew language with the intention of using their knowledge to produce work that encourages the return to Eretz Israel. All students attended Hebrew courses to develop fluency in reading, writing, and speaking the original Jewish language. Students were taught to create visual imagery and design through research into historical references: ancient Jewish texts, ritual objects, the Torah, and language. The goal was to serve in developing aesthetically pleasing work that visually promoted the Zionist concept of the “New Jew”, Jewish identity defined as great in physical, intellectual, mental, and religious strength. The Bezalel academy was intended to act as the great cultural institution of Eretz Israel, “not merely (as) an art school accompanied by workshops, but rather an organized enterprise that aimed at national and cultural goals.”¹¹

The work produced by faculty and students at the Bezalel academy, marked the beginning of modern Hebrew art by which the visual interpretation of Jewish nationalism was defined in images of heroic figuration, influenced by Renaissance art, ancient Roman art.¹² Often, the strong and dignified figures were placed in an environment indicative of biblical allegory or the inspired Israeli landscape. By developing projects that portrayed biblical characters and allegory, students familiarized the people with their history. Signs appearing in Bezalel work frequently included symbolic forms such as the Magen of David, the menorah, and Hebrew letterforms. Images depicting Jewish exile and redemption were juxtaposed with romantic pastorals inspired by the Arts and Crafts movement.

Faculty and students of the academy “ began to work with a particular Hebrew flavour and for Hebrews... everything in a pure, national, typically Jewish spirit. New Hebrew forms appeared in everything. Each small item stamped with a Jewish stamp was made with tender care.”¹³

In 1908, the Bezalel Academy moved to a larger building and enough work had been produced by faculty and students to participate in an international exhibition that travelled from Israel to Paris, Berlin, Odessa, London, and New York. Having begun with only ten students, by 1914, the academy's population grew to over five hundred students and became known as the main cultural institution in Jerusalem, offering a Museum of Jewish Art and an ideal space for poetry readings, performances, and music. Soon after World War I started in Europe, the Zionist organization reformatted the academy's structure and appointed Professor Otto Warburg as head of the executive board. Several disputes took place regarding the program curriculum, namely a debate concerning the school's contribution toward Zionist efforts. Schatz sought for the school to continue its curriculum as is and focus on learning processes that engage students in the study of aesthetics, styles, and techniques of modern European art while depicting subject matter inspired by Jewish identity. On the other hand, the board wanted the production of projects that emphasized capitalism, in which projects would be produced for sale and marketing to raise money for the organization.

The disagreements between the board and Schatz were reflected in the digression of the institution and its dissolution. Due to board legislation, faculty were let go and replaced by new faculty—often Jewish European immigrants. At the start of World War I, the executive board in Berlin, Germany, ended its support of the academy, and the Palestine Jewish Board of Education took over. A lack of funding and participation from the organization led to further challenges for the academy.

After two years of exile from the ruling Turkish Ottoman Empire, Schatz returned to Jerusalem in 1919 and began marketing the school by organizing exhibitions in England and New York. The exhibitions did not do well because viewers felt the design style was outdated. In 1929, the year that began the Great Depression in the United States, the school closed its doors to the

public. Having taught thousands of students over the two decades, Schatz was unwilling to accept the school's conclusion and persevered in his quest for the academy to reopen. Schatz committed his life to the Bezalel Academy, and his remaining years were spent fundraising and traveling throughout the United States and Europe to meet with leaders and members of Jewish communities.

Conclusion

After the Bezalel Academy of Art, Jerusalem, closed its doors in 1929, Boris Schatz continued his quest for the school's survival. In 1932, while on a fundraising trip in Denver, Colorado, Schatz suffered a severe heart attack and passed away, leaving a great legacy that has continued to today. He never witnessed his dream come to fruition—the academy reopening in the 1940s. In response to the rise of the National Socialist (Nazi) Party in Europe in the 1930s and 1940s, an increased number of European Jews fled and sought refuge in the United States, England, and Israel. Under the control of the British Empire, Palestine, as created by the British mandate, (Israel) experienced an overwhelming number of Jewish refugees, significantly exceeding the quota.

The influx of faculty and students who had migrated to Israel from Europe to escape the Holocaust brought with them education and knowledge of modern European art and design canons: Bauhaus, Minimalism, and Dada. Similar to the founding years of the academy, students trained in various forms of creative practice, blurring the line between art and design. By this time, the early techniques and principles (of the 1900s) of making had changed, so rather than the highly decorative symbolism of Arts and Crafts and Art Nuevo movements, modern European art evolved into the work of Dada, Constructivism, and the Bauhaus School, all of which focused on functional materials through the study of product design, visual communication, and typography.

Currently located on Mount Scopus adjacent to the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, the Bezalel Academy of Art and Design continues to be a leading cultural institute in Israel and a prominent academic institution for contemporary creative practice and design throughout the globe. The school has grown over the century and has a current population of two thousand students and over one hundred faculties. The significance in the academy's existence and the influence that faculty and students have had upon each generation has been profound in the development of the visual identity and culture of Israel. Schatz's contribution in founding the school and teaching visual art and design, influenced students to address Zionist concepts and Jewish identity through the creation of visual communication and object design. Discussing the history of Schatz and the establishment of the Bezalel Academy of Art, Jerusalem, impacts the study of art and design within global context by addressing details of a divers culture. Future examination into the subject would cover the exploration and analysis of selected faculty and student work, further research into the purpose of visual communication and design for Zionist efforts, and investigation into the academy's participation in contemporary Israeli design.

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