1995

JEWISH ART?!

By Emily Bloch

What is Jewish art? Despite prolonged disputation among artists, craftsmen, historians and philosophers - there is no simple answer. Designer Arie Ophir, Professor of Fine Arts discusses contemporary Jewish art and its role in the making of a local culture.

Chanukia, brass. Arie Ophir
חנוכיה מפליז. אריה אופיר

When people talk about Jewish art or Judaica they usually refer to ritual items found in most Jewish homes and passed from generation to generation as heirlooms. The most common among these are the Chanukiya (Chanukah lamp), candlesticks, wine goblets, mezuzahs and the like.

Many of these objects originated in 17th - 19th century Europe and were mostly crafted by non-Jewish artists. As Jews in Medieval Europe were forbidden to work in most crafts, they commissioned Christian artists to create and design ritual articles. These craftsmen did so according to the style and fashion of the time. Thus we can find a Baroque style Chanukah lamp, a Venetian spice box resembling a church spire and a Rococo design on an *etrog* box. Later, when restrictions were lifted, Jewish craftsmen continued to produce articles in the same style, which by then had become "traditional".

Ophir argues that this is not really Jewish ceremonial art. Many of the Jewish ritual items so dexterously made today by skillful Jewish craftsmen, who still follow old styles, cannot really be called Jewish art. This does not mean