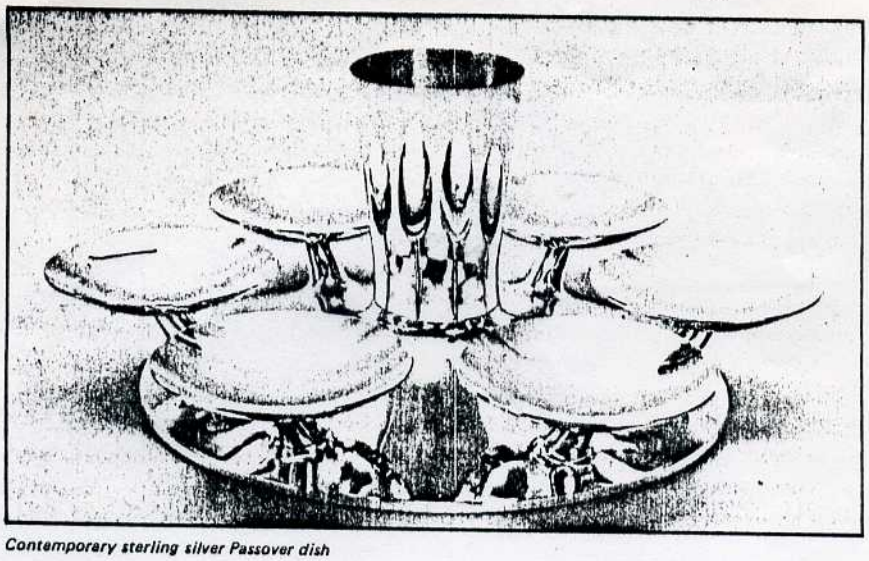


*Contemporary sterling silver Passover dish*

Ofir is not a great believer in the perpetuation of ancient traditions. He is always in search of new images and fresh forms, and encourages his students to adopt a similar view.

Acutely conscious that he and his fellow faculty members are teaching in an Academy of *Art and Design*, Ofir steers away from the word *profession* in the context of what his students are learning. "We see it more as a means of artistic expression," he says. The department has a wide range of subjects based on all the art and design disciplines and technologies, and in the course of its creativity, develops new technologies of its own.

Students work with many media such as anodized aluminum, potassium, stainless steel, iron, plastic, leather, wood, textiles, etc. "We don't usually deal with precious metals in the classroom," explains Ofir, "because we're only teaching, and there's no need to put a strain on the budget by purchasing such expensive materials."

Nonetheless, Bezalel is cognizant that its students must become acquainted with precious metals, and towards this end, embarks on co-operative projects with jewelry manufacturing firms who supply the gold and silver which is crafted by the students. The finished products are purchased by the sponsoring company, and the whole exercise is conducted on a commercial basis.

Students are constantly involved in industrial design projects in conjunction with on-going industrial developments, but Ofir does not allow the commercial aspects of the project to supercede the creative.

While acknowledging that designers must have a sense of what is commercially viable, Ofir underscores that the artistic contribution to the quality of life must take first priority.

It is his credo that the quality of design should not be sacrificed for commercial interests. Thus a jewelry item which is relatively low in price, should at the same time have a high aesthetic value. "We place more emphasis on the design than on the material used," he says, "because the materials are speculative, whereas the designs are the expression of the artist."

The department has undergone a revolution during the nine years of Ofir's tenure. It has developed from a glorified workshop into a comprehensive educational facility, and even has its own lapidary for the cutting and polishing of stones collected in the Negev and in Sinai.

Comparing what he was taught to what is being taught to his students today, Ofir claims that the difference is as vast as that between an elementary school and a university. Graduates from his four-year course receive a Bachelor of Fine Arts degree.

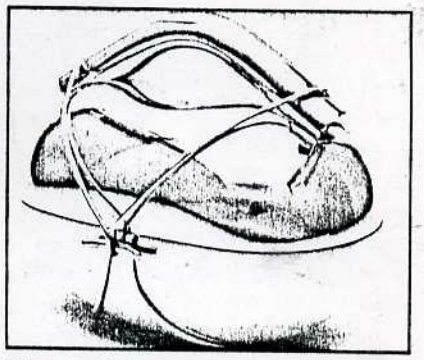
Each year there are some 15 new enrolments — young people with fresh vision, who are destined to become the designers of the future. Throughout the course, Ofir integrates external projects with formal studies, a measure designed to prepare students for the world beyond the classroom. Close and continuing contact with the industry enables students to find employment with comparative ease after graduation.

Not all of those who have successfully passed the course remain in Israel. Some are snapped up by overseas companies, such as for instance, Mira Feller, who won the Van Cleef prize, and now resides in New York, working as one of Van Cleef's five in-house designers.

Ofir takes quiet pride in the fact that several of his graduates are represented in major exhibitions and galleries abroad. He himself has had more than twenty exhibitions in Israel, Europe and the US, most notably in the Shmuck Museum, Pforzhein, West Germany; the Diamond Museum, Antwerp, Belgium; Victoria and Albert Museum, London, England; Spertus Museum, Chicago, USA; Electrum Gallery, London, England; Concepts Gallery, California, USA and the Israel Museum, Jerusalem.

After completing his own studies at Bezalel, Ofir worked for three years at the Gumbel studio in Jerusalem before winning a scholarship sponsored by the Danish Ministry of Education. He subsequently spent two years in Copenhagen, studying in the Georg Jensen workshop. There is a distinct Jensen influence in the magnificently clean lines of Ofir's own silver hollow-ware.

His designs are defined as Jewish ritual objects, but not by traditionalists who find them too modern for their tastes. Ofir on the other hand, disdains the constant imitation of Baroque and Roccoco styles, which he maintains have so many non-Jewish motifs, that they cannot be truthfully classified as Judaica. His designs are much fresher, much more contemporary, in keeping with modern life styles and the aesthetic values of modern day Judaism.



*Ethrog container*

The exquisite pieces are fashioned in such a way that with rare exceptions, they need not be confined to the label of *Judaica*. Apple-shaped candle holders for instance, may be reminiscent of the Garden of Eden, but the Garden existed before Judaism came into being. Thus the candle-holders are universal. Likewise, a bowl designed for the traditional Jewish washing of the hands before and after meals, can just as easily be an unusual fruit bowl; and a silver edged board for slicing Sabbath loaves can be used on any festive occasion.

Ofir does not impose his own style on his students, because that would stifle their creativity. He allows them to move in their own individual directions providing that they do not forsake essential art disciplines. ■