Arie Ofir

On contemporary Jewish ceremonial art and Israeli survival.
As interviewd with Joraim Rozov.

Arie Ofir is young... forty years old. Born, and is living in Israel!
At present on a triumphant tour of the U.S.A.
Not as another fund raiser, but as Israels foremost gold and silversmithing designer, whose tenth one-man show takes place right now at the Jewish Museum in New York City.

Professor Ofir-who is still so much more of a Kibutznik rather than a professor who heads the gold and silversmithing department at the Bezalel academy of Arts & Design in Jerusalem — is a versatile creative person, who designs Torah Crowns, Chanuka Lamps and Kiddush Cups along side with a monumental memorial in memory of the Israeli Soldiers from the "Jerusalem Division" killed in the Yom-Kippur war.

I met Arie in N.Y.C. on the eve of his exhibition at the Jewish Museum and presented him with the following questions.

Q: Finding myself puzzled in front of the contradiction between the image you reflect and between the ceremonial objects you design for religious functions. I wonder where and how did it all began...

A. My parents, born in Poland, arrived to Israel, then Palestine, forty years ago. My mother arrived legally where as my father simply crossed the bordern from Lebanon during the night.

My father like so many other pioneers did not have too many choices and meaningful to me, over-night! A personal encounter with Ya'acov Agam shortly afterwards brought my growing interest to full bloom. The road to the "Bezalel" Academy of Arts and Design in Jerusalem was short; except that interest in sculpture was suddenly replaced by my discovery of an emerging style in Silversmithing — so different though from the traditional ornate Yemenite approach.

The "Bezalel" workshops have introduced a new concept of modern, immaculate and simpler lines, under the inspiring guidance of two great and Balihaus oriented teachers — Gimbel and Wolpert.
I personally owe so much to Gimbel — a great man and a great artist.

Q: Your next mile-stone...

A: Copenhagen, Denmark

The most significant mile-stone along my artistic and professional build-up.Two years there, on a scholarship from the Danish ministry of Education at the world's top and most renouned workshop, that of Georg Jensen.

It was also in Copenhagen where my wife Hanytah gave birth to our daughter, Michal, and that too must have added to the experience.

The Jensen experience was actually painful at the beginning, because of my own professional inferiority, as well as the realization that Israel was "stuck" so far away from where things really happen. Yet-it was there where my identity as a Jew and as an Israeli emerged. It happened upon my first encounter with the local Jewish community. It was so

Gradually I noticed that the saga will sink, the pain and the ordeal will lock themselves behind those doors of the berieved- families and life will once again celebrate its usual victory over memory.

It struck me that I should create a document!
A visible and readable document.

Q: The result . . . ?

A: On one of Jerusalem's panoramic spots, in Abu-Tor. I have placed a series of concrete cubes-on the facets of which I etched the authentic exchange of messages and fragments of personal stories of the soldiers who fought and died during October 1973.

People came there....to enjoy the view-but also to be reminded and united...

Q: ...Still its hard for me to settle the contradiction... the artist and the soldier, if you know what I mean.

A: It is rather simple, if not for any other reason it could be the struggle for my survival for my survival, indeed as an artist-not less than the struggle for my obvious physical exsistence.

It is the struggle to defend my fundamental freedom-freedom of artistic expression as well as that of my national identity.

On another level, the artist in Israel, upon being, a soldier practically all year long, gets a unique opportunity to emerge out of his lofty and isolated studio — he mixes with others who are

A: Judaica presents me with tremendous challenges as an artist and as a designer.
When I design a Torah-Crown my message gets across to one kind of audience.
Thru designing a Chanukah-Lamp I get across to the Jewish home and the Jewish family.

At the same time I myself develop an awareness to values which are important to me and which are not to be found within any other context, or ordinary commission.

Q: What other context?

A: As an individual who designs ceremonial cups, lamps, crowns, etrog boxes and candle sticks I get an opportunity to offer my aesthetic values to a wider audience.
I regard it as a mission
This is my link, as well as contribution, as an artist to my society and to my heritage, that started way back in biblical times with Bezalel's design of the Mishkan. Even then there were those who were dedicated to aesthetics along side with those who dedicated themselves to sanctity.

Q: Aesthetics in the visual sense within the context of Judaism have always been a controversial subject-what indeed is the status or the image of contemporary ceremonial art?

A: The present image is distorted.

The Jewish public tends to accept the process ceremonial art has gone thru in the last three hundred years without realizing its distorted image.When the Jewish communities became more prosperous after the middle ages in Europe they had nowhere to go but to non-Jewish Silver and Goldsmiths for their ceremonial objects. Jews were not admitted into the professional guilds and Jewish silversmiths were practically non-existent.

Take the traditional perfume, box in the shape of a castle with Templars on horse backs in its corners, or the Chanukah lamp with an eagle - That