

SUPERLATIVE JUDAICA

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The exhibition included *havdala*, memorial and eternal lights, Shabbat candlesticks and *hanukkiyot*. They were crafted in clay, glass, metals, plastic and silver. Some of them were lit by laser, others by batteries.

"Artists should think about design," Zipkin says. "Rituals are performed and designers should take that fact into consideration."

The Israel Museum exhibit of contemporary Judaica, the first of its kind, is now touring the U.S. and Europe.

Zelig Segal, whose work appeared in the exhibit, has recently produced a *hanukkiya* that Zipkin singled out as a good example of well-designed Judaica that can be mass produced. Two bars of silver-plated metal slide together to eventually form a whole *hanukkiya*. Each night of the holiday the bars move closer together and thus the form changes every time another candle is added.

"It doesn't look like much," says Zipkin, and it can be made of any material. But it shows thought. Its esthetic attraction is that it moves every night and always looks different."

Segal used his childhood memories of the Orthodox home he grew up in for his design. "I remember how special it was adding a candle each night and watching how the *hanukkiya* changed because of it," he says. "My *hanukkiya* shows the movement of the miracle of hanukka."

Simplicity characterizes much of Segal's work. His *netilat yadayim* vessel, used for the ritual before-meal hand-washing, has lost its traditional design as a cup with two handles. Two cylinders have been welded together at angles forming an X-like shape and the water flows between the two sides through a central hole. The shape of the piece follows the ritual of washing first one hand then the other.

"Minimalism is my way," says

Segal, "I don't think of fashion in art. I say what I have to say in the simplest way with the simplest shapes and then add a little fun to it with a clever idea - you don't want your work to be too serious."

ANOTHER ARTIST with a completely different set of ideas is Arie Ophir, former head of Bezalel's gold and silversmith department. Ophir has taken his extraordinarily modern silver designs and infused them with spots of colour, using anodized titanium.

"Bringing colour into silverwork is a break with the traditional approach and many people cannot accept it, he says, noting that the currently popular and trendy Memphis design style from Italy broke traditional rules with regard to the use of shape, form and colour.

"I integrate fine art motifs into my designs because their principles have influenced me as an artist," explains Ophir. "I see contemporary Judaica today as somewhere between fine art and product design. It is very important to create a new local culture in this field, and not just by making something 'Israeli.'"

"Western art culture and trends have influence all over and we should be part of that general process. Unless we are we'll stagnate," Ophir asserts.

Ophir's work is representative of trends in the contemporary art world at large. A *hanukkiya* of his, displayed at the "Nerot Mitzvah" exhibition, is made of eight free-standing upright rectangular bases of thin silver bars. Atop each base is a coloured piece of titanium, each a different shape from the other seven. The individual holders look like a candle with the coloured shape on top resembling a flame. When the candles are inserted and lit, the real flame is reflected in the coloured shape. The pieces can be arranged into any formation and can also be used separately for Shabbat or entertaining. Ninety per cent of Ophir's

work is for collectors but he is working on ideas for mass production.

Ya'acov Greenvareel's work using primarily silver or brass is a collection of sculptural pieces simply formed and functional, yet very modern.

"I try to make things different from what has been done before," he says.

His *havdala* set has taken the spice box, candle holder and wine cup trio and integrated them into an abstract piece of art yet, when each piece is separated it stands on its own just as well. "I attempted to have all the pieces relate to one another as a whole, yet from any angle it has sculptural qualities as well."

THE CONTEMPORARY Judaica artists and museum personnel praise U.S. philanthropist Erica Jesselson and her husband Ludwig for their contribution to the field through financial support and the interest they generate both here and abroad. In a speech delivered last year at the awarding of the first Jesselson Prize for contemporary Judaica Design, Jesselson summed up the importance of contemporary Judaica in laymen's terms:

"We are required not only to perform the commandments but to add one additional ingredient, 'beauty,'" she said. "This is the commandment of *hiddur mitzah* - the beautification of the commandments.

"When Hitler took the lives of millions of our people he also destroyed a culture which had flourished for thousands of years. What is left is either in museums or fiercely competed for by collectors. It is therefore an obligation for us to recreate these treasures.

"In our effort to recreate lost belongings it is not enough to copy old patterns. We must find a way to create and strive for excellence in design... to make twentieth century design available for the coming generations."

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