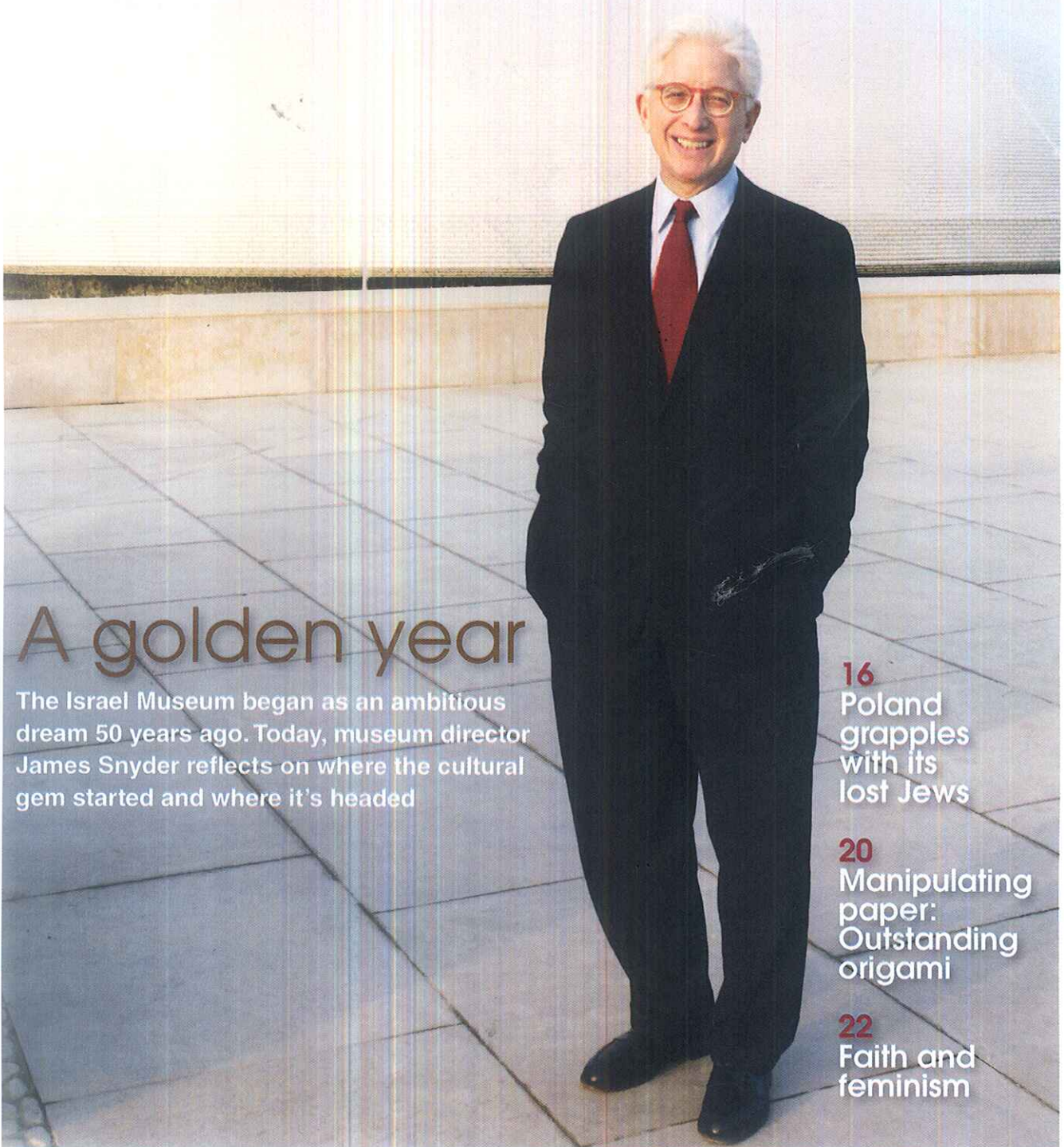


THE JERUSALEM POST

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MAGAZINE

(Ariel Jerozolimski)



A golden year

The Israel Museum began as an ambitious dream 50 years ago. Today, museum director James Snyder reflects on where the cultural gem started and where it's headed

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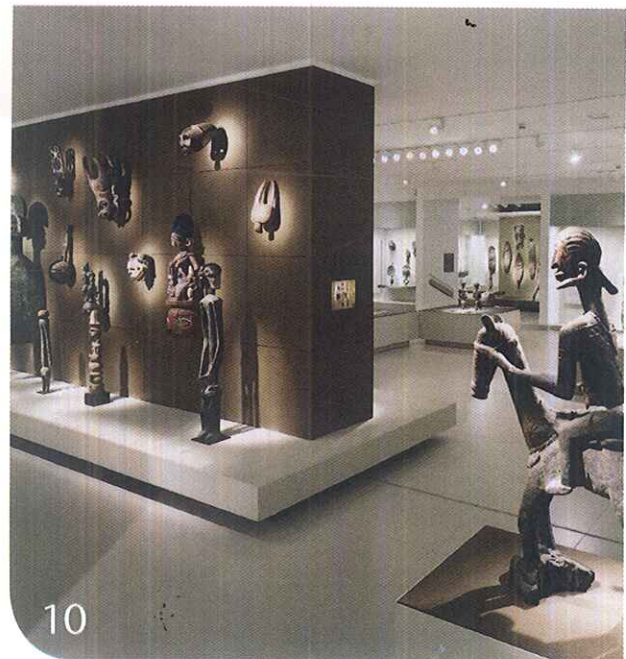
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MAGAZINE

Editor: LAURA KELLY
 Assistant Editors: ERICA SCHACHNE
 and RACHEL BEITSCH-FELDMAN
 Literary Editor: NECHAMA VEEDER
 Letters Editor: LAWRENCE RIFKIN
 Graphic Designer: ORIT HAZON MENDEL
 EMAIL: mag@jpost.com
www.jpost.com >> magazine



(Tim Hurstley)

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(Courtesy)

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THE ISRAEL MUSEUM sprawls over 600,000 square feet, sits high on a Jerusalem hilltop and balances between modern architecture and sculpture and serene landscaping. (Tim Hursley)



50 shades of culture and civilization

• BARRY DAVIS

To paraphrase an immortal line from Monty Python's "Four Yorkshiremen" sketch: Who would have believed, 50 years ago, that the Israel Museum would be in such rude health?

James Snyder, the institution's Anne and Jerome Fisher Director, is clearly delighted with the way things have gone over the years. While the 62-year-old, American-born Snyder wasn't around to witness the inauguration, he has had his capable hands firmly on the museum's tiller for the past 18 years.

Had Snyder been at the hilltop location, with its panoramic view of Jerusalem, on May 11, 1965 – when then-mayor Teddy

Kollek and a roll call of hundreds of politicians, foreign VIPs and other public figures gathered to officially open the doors to what was described at the time as the national "palace of culture" – he would have seen a far more compact arts and culture repository than the current premises.

Even so, the dynamic, long-serving museum honcho attributes much of the institution's magnetism to its location rather than to the amount of floor space it covers. "We try to think of ourselves not as being so big physically – although we do sit on a very large site, which is grand and powerful – but we prefer to think about the strength of the place as emanating from the power of that site," notes Snyder.

"The museum itself is not small," he adds with a smidgen of understatement, "and I would say that 600,000 square feet

[55,700 square meters] of physical museum, of which 50 percent is public, for a museum in a modernist architectural frame that's not small – but it's not huge."

Snyder clearly delights in the external aesthetics of the museum, and he loves to roam the grounds. En route to our café berth to chat about the forthcoming landmark anniversary, we took a detour via the Big Bambu, the maze-like and eminently climbable bamboo construction put up by brothers Mike and Doug Starn last year, which has proven to be a popular attraction with Israelis of all ages and ilks. It was a fun preliminary constitutional with the trim Snyder, and an aside typical of a person who gets involved in practically every aspect of what it takes to keep the museum up, running and evolving.

MIND YOU, as often seems to be the case with projects on a grand scale in this part of the world, not everything ran smoothly in the lead-up to the opening in 1965. As one newspaper report of half a century ago noted: "Theodore Kollek, board chairman of Israel's National Museum, is swearing that the palace of culture will be completed" on time, despite what the journalist described as "an atmosphere of complete chaos" amid "the din of concrete mixers, pneumatic drills and bulldozers, and the screams of harassed hotel managers who have only so many nooks and crannies in which to shove the guests." As the list of celebrities from abroad included no fewer than 900 names, one can understand the hoteliers' concerns at a time when guest accommodation in the then-divided capital was at a premium.

Considering the topographical boon of the museum spot, and its central position in the urban sprawl, it comes as some surprise to learn from Snyder that in fact, an uncontrolled series of events led to the convergence of the ingredients which imbue the institution with its unique X-factor.

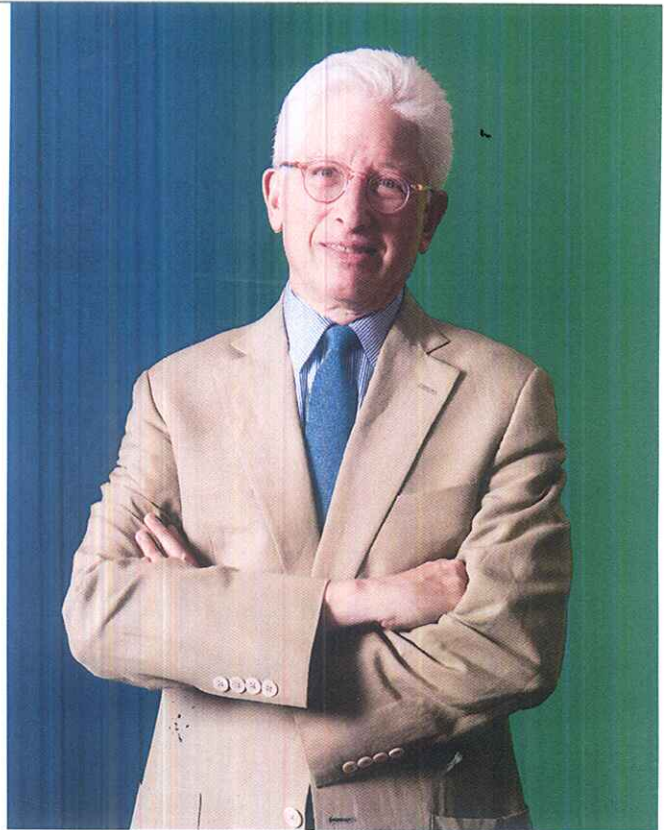
"In a way, the origin of the museum is serendipitous," he notes. "Teddy Kollek decided to create, by force of will, a museum on a hilltop in Jerusalem. I am sure he did that consciously, but the choice of Alfred Mansfeld as architect – a Russian-born, Bauhaus-period, German-trained émigré to Palestine, who came with the vocabulary of international modernism; and the choice of [Japanese-American sculptor] Isamu Noguchi to design the sculpture garden, and of [Austrian-American architect, theoretician, theater designer, artist and sculptor] Frederick Kiesler to design the Shrine of the Book, these were not conscious decisions on Teddy's part."

At least one of the triad elements of the museum was, however, premeditated – with the selection of Mansfeld made by an official committee. But Noguchi was the fruit of a package deal. "He came with the donor who agreed to gift his collection of sculpture if the museum built a sculpture garden de-

signed by Noguchi," Snyder explains. The philanthropist in question was Jewish-American impresario, theater showman and lyricist Billy Rose.

By all accounts, Rose was something of a mercurial character. At the opening event of the sculpture garden, it seems Rose was asked by one of the VIP invitees what he thought should be done with the modern steel artworks in the event of war breaking out in the Middle East. Rose's quick-fire response was: "Melt them down for bullets." Thankfully, the IDF has thus far managed without resorting to deconstructing works of art in order to keep us safe.

THERE IS plenty to see, clamber over, listen to and even touch around the sprawling campus – but for Snyder, it is what resides within the building walls that takes precedence in the cultural offering stakes. "Part of the museum's mantra is to knit a universal cultural narrative across time and place – and to do so in an embracing way. So, while collections and exhibitions in our galleries are central to our agenda, so are other kinds of programming that bring diverse audiences to the museum and let those audiences absorb many kinds of cultural experiences on our campus that are perhaps deeper or richer because of taking place in our special setting – and always with a focus on emphasizing cultural creativity in its many forms. >>>

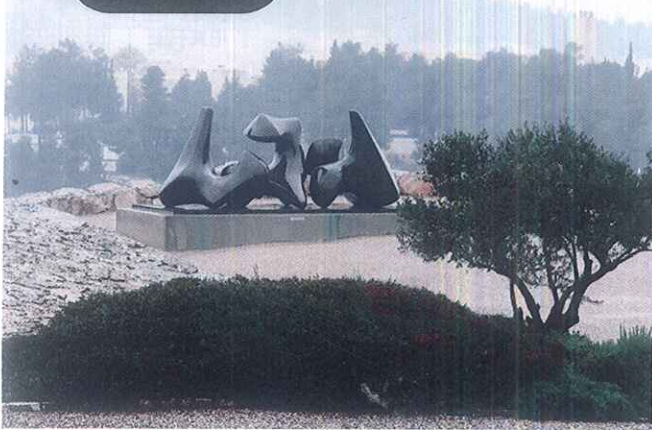


MUSEUM DIRECTOR James Snyder says it's not the physical scale of the museum but its cultural presence that gives it beauty and power. (Elie Posner)



THE CLIMBABLE structure of Big Bambu is seen in the foreground with the famous 'Ahava' in the back. (Marc Israel Sellem)

COVER



HENRY MOORE, Three Piece Sculpture: Vertebrae, 1968-69, in the Billy Rose Art Garden at the Israel Museum designed by Isamu Noguchi. (Courtesy)

"The great thing about the museum, in our own view, is that it's not about its physical scale. It is about the beauty and the power, and the sense of cultural presence of what is present within it," he affirms.

The proof of the cultural pudding is in the seeing, and there is an abundance of visual collateral for Snyder's proud declaration. The exhibits traverse just about as far-reaching a time line as is humanly possible, incorporating the world's oldest-known piece of artwork, a female figurine - known as the Venus of Berekhat Ram, the site on the Golan Heights where it was found - dating back close to a quarter of a million years ago.

The Archeology Wing also houses a fascinating collection of 429 ritual ob-

jects, which are thought to be 5,500 to 6,500 years old, unearthed in a remote cave in the Judean Desert, and there is a child's coffin made of painted wood, decorated with a scarab and the protective figure of the Egyptian goddess of the sky, Nut, from the third century BCE.

The museum also pushed the frontiers of presenting art and culture, with the monumental Herod exhibition and a photographic exhibition documenting the communities of Jerusalem's ultra-Orthodox.

"Given the breadth of our reach, we are fortunate to have the opportunity to stretch our envelope at all times," Snyder says, "producing exhibitions like 'A World Apart Next Door: Glimpses into

(Nili Yagel)



(Nili Yagel)



(Courtesy)

Part of the family

In celebration of the Israel Museum's 50th anniversary, visitors to the museum sent in pictures of themselves or their families visiting the Museum from the year of its opening in 1965 until today



(Courtesy)



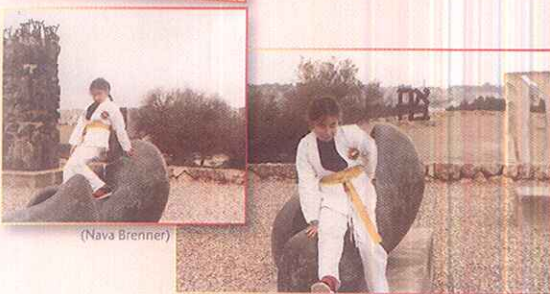
(Courtesy Shapiro Family)



(Leah Levy)



(Courtesy Yagil family)



(Nava Brenner)

If you'd like to send your family photos to the Israel Museum, send an email to israelalbum@ybz.or.il with your name, phone number, and desired credit line (such as "From the Cohen family album, Haifa") and attach the photos in jpg format.



THE MUSEUM has an impressive range of exhibits including contemporary art, ancient artifacts or historical collections. (Courtesy)



the Lives of Hassidic Jews,' or 'Herod the Great: The King's Final Journey,' which both introduce our audiences to new subjects and also bring new audiences to our setting. And this is not so much about pushing frontiers as it is about stretching to the limits of our potential."

Of course, outdoors there is also the instantly recognizable urn-top-shaped Shrine of the Book structure, where wide-eyed members of the public can see the Dead Sea scrolls, the world's oldest biblical manuscripts, at close quarters.

FAST-FORWARD across the millennia and you can find plenty of cutting-edge contemporary fare at the museum, too. The jubilee display agenda includes an intriguing range of disciplines, ap-

proaches and sensibilities; for example, in the shape of the "6 Artists 6 Projects" exhibition. The half-dozen wide-ranging creations feature the definitively here and now, and thematically oxymoronic "Five Bands from Romania," created by Gilad Ratman, whereby five heavy metal bands played their decibel-saturated music in an open field, with all their amplification equipment buried – and largely muffled – deep below the surface. The process of achieving that contrary sonic state of affairs was documented and is presented in two videos, one of which can only be listened to in a specially constructed sound room.

The exhibition also features Uri Gershuni's thought-provoking paean to 19th-century British photography pioneer Sir William Henry Fox Talbot, and there is Dana Levy's proffering of the

man-made/natural environment confluence conundrum in her "Literature of Storms" video work.

Betwixt the centuries, the museum also houses a plethora of notable works in the Fine Arts Wing, taking in European and Israeli art across the ages and generations, as well as items from Africa, the Americas, Asia and Oceania, and photography, design and architecture, prints and drawings.

Then there is the unrivaled lineup of collections in the Jack, Joseph and Morton Mandel Wing for Jewish Art and Life, which reflects some of the religious and secular material culture of Jewish communities across the globe, with items from the Middle Ages up to the present, taking in such universal themes as birth, marriage and death, the cycle of the Jewish year, >>



VIEW OF the new main entrance to the Israel Museum from the Mansfeld café, including entrance pavilion (L), shop (R) and Menashe Kadishman's *Suspense* (1966) in the foreground (Tim Hursley)



DUSK VIEW of *Turning The World Upside Down*, Jerusalem (2010), a new site-specific sculpture by Anish Kapoor created for the Israel Museum's Crown Plaza. (Tim Hursley)

costume and jewelry, and the ever-popular restored interiors of synagogues from Europe, Asia and the Americas.

The Israel Museum is a truly imposing institution; the scale and breadth of its collections and exhibits is simply impossible to digest in a single visit.

It is also hard to imagine the Israel Museum without the pleasingly rotund figure of the Shrine of the Book over to the right of the main entrance, but it appears that even this juxtaposition was not in the original plan. "The choice of Frederick Kiesler to design the Shrine of the Book had been made long before the decision was made to put the Shrine on the campus of the museum," Snyder continues. "It was meant to be on the Givat Ram campus of the Hebrew University."

It was only due to an overdose of conservatism, and a touch of opportunism, that the Israel Museum ended up with the Dead Sea Scrolls repository. "The story is that the university decided the architecture was too eccentric for the campus, and Teddy seized the moment and brought it here."

The Shrine of the Book catches any visitor's eye as they approach the museum site, and it certainly left its mark on Snyder as he arrived at the site for the first time, just prior to taking over the reins on January 1, 1997. "What struck me when I saw the museum for the first time was, of course, the power of the site; but then, this amazing intersection of these three strains of modernist architecture, none of which was really here by purposeful choice on Teddy's

part," the director recalls. "That created site and setting, which are two of the three critical factors in the power of a cultural place."

That synthesis, says Snyder, has over the years helped to lead the museum on to bigger and better things. "The magnetic draw of that combination, I think, is what really started to trigger the arrival here of great collections."

There appears to be a recurrent, almost laissez-faire, vibe that runs through the museum along its entire 50-years-and-counting timeline – whereby things just happen to pan out the right way. "There was no one making a checklist of what you needed in order to have an encyclopedic museum with the breadth of the universal, from the first moment in recorded cultural times to the present," says Snyder.

This too was the summation of a go-with-the-flow continuum. "That, in a funny way, also happened by happenstance," continues Snyder. "In the last 15-plus years, we have been fortunate enough to realize that all the ingredients were here to cast a narrative that would take this powerful modernist backdrop, then fill it with a story that began 1.5 million years ago and continues to the present."

Part of that rethink also included a three-year, \$100 million renewal and expansion project that was completed in 2010, which not only spruced up the museum's appearance but also doubled its size.

YIGAL ZALMONA has one of the longest working histories with the Israel Muse-

um, starting out in 1980 as the curator responsible for Israeli art and eventually progressing to the position of chief curator in 1998. He retired in 2012.

Zalmona's first recollection of the museum predates the grand opening in 1965. "I was in Jerusalem with my parents and I remember seeing the place under construction," he says. However, the Tel Aviv-born Zalmona was not around to see the institution takes its first furtive steps. He spent 1966 to 1972 studying in Paris, a turbulent period which included student demonstrations, and on his return to Israel began making his way in the local art world.

Zalmona says that despite all the pomp and circumstance, and the understandable national pride in the Israel Museum, the institution had to withstand a lot of flak in its early years. "I was an art critic for a while, and I was one of the few journalists who defended the museum," he recounts.

Apparently the general ire was prompted by the museum's forward-looking ethos. "There was a lot of negative criticism of the contemporary art they exhibited back then. The public didn't really like it, and the establishment didn't like it at all."

One can possibly understand the overriding conservative approach to art. After all, Israel was a small, threatened country, and the memory of the Holocaust was still very fresh. Zalmona has a different take on the intellectual and cultural climes of the museum's early days.



OVER 750,000 visitors came to the museum in 2014. (Courtesy)



A RECREATION of Jerusalem's Old City in the Second Temple period. (Courtesy)

"The intellectual environment of 1965, at the very roots of art, was based on universalism," he notes. "The Zionist perception was to be modern, and to look outwards and to be like everyone else. I remember [modern art pioneer artist Joseph] Zaritsky said he didn't want to be exhibited together with Israeli artists, he wanted his work to be shown in London and Paris."

But surely we are talking about the national repository of art of a still-young state – and as such, one would have thought that the museum's principal objective would be to provide a stage for our own purveyors of art? Zalmona begs to differ. "In order to turn the national institution into a top-class international museum, you have to engage in international terms. The approach from the start was to go for an out-and-out modern art approach."

Things changed around about the time that Zalmona joined the museum staff. "In the '80s, there was a general shift towards national art, all over the world," he says. "The Germans wanted to define German art and other countries wanted to define their national arts identity, and then the Israeli Art Pavilion opened at the museum in 1985. That would have been unthinkable in 1965."

Today, the Israeli art section houses works by some of the teachers at the Bezalel Academy of Arts and Design, from the early years of the 20th century, including Ze'ev Raban's *Elijah's Chair* and the large sketch for a carpet by E.M. Lilien, who was known as "the first Zi-

onist artist." There are also works by local Modernist artists such as Nahum Gutman, Reuven Rubin, Yitzhak Danziger, Arie Aroch and Zaritsky, and late Modernists including Moshe Kupferman, Yigal Tumarkin and Raffi Lavie.

Zalmona says that once creations by local artists had been given their due at the museum, there was a flurry of debate about the field. "Every couple of weeks or so there would be a symposium on what Israeli art was," he recalls, adding that while the discussions did not generally lead to a clear conclusion, one artist and later art critic did proffer a definition of sorts. "Raffi Lavie used to say: 'Show me a line of works by various artists, and I'll be able to tell you which are by Israelis – because they have impudence.'"

SOME MIGHT say you need a touch or two of audacity to create such a world-renowned museum, here in the Middle East. People come from all over the world to marvel at the Judaica and archeology exhibits – there are more treasures from yesteryear to be seen at the museum's east Jerusalem offshoot, the Rockefeller Archeological Museum – as well as the more contemporary items, and they can also view the delightful collection of early- to mid-20th century drawings at the Israel Museum's downtown Anna Ticho House repository. The latter is currently closed for a physical overhaul, and is due to reopen in May.

And, in case you are ruing the fact that you weren't around for the museum launch, and missed some of the

milestone events over the last half century, the 1965 Today retrospective, which opens on March 31, should help to redress the nostalgia balance somewhat.

1965 Today comprises 50 select artworks created in Israel during this signature period, reflecting the range of creative production emerging from Israel's young and dynamic art and design scene during this time. The eclectic exhibition takes in industrial design, household objects and interior settings from daily life, and newsreels and home film footage, offering something of a snapshot of life here in the mid-1960s. The concurrent art scene in Europe and America is referenced by documentary images, and there are examples of Pop Art, Op Art, and Minimalism that were emerging worldwide at the time.

At the end of the day, of course, museums exist to serve the public, to offer the world an in-depth and possibly expansive take on culture and art. The Israel Museum certainly packs them in, with over 800,000 visitors a year, including many youngsters and schoolchildren – with the junior culture consumers gaining valuable hands-on arts enlightenment at the busy Ruth Youth and Art Education Wing.

"When I was a very young curator I had this strange notion that the visitors get in the way of the works of art," admits Zalmona. "But today, I know that museums are there to serve the members of the public, and the more the merrier."

Here's to the next 50 years. ■



DAYTIME VIEW of the Entrance Pavilion from Carter Promenade, with David Smith's *Cubi VI* (1963) in the foreground. (Tim Hursley)