



COLOR HARMONY: Jewish and Arab children get a lesson in abstract painting at the Ruth Youth Wing of the Israel Museum

Young at Art

Luring street kids to sketch and bringing Arab and Jewish youth together to sculpt are among the activities run by the Israel Museum's Youth Wing

Joseph R. Hoffman

ON MOST NIGHTS YOU SEE them in downtown pubs, alleyways and street corners. But on this night, several dozen of Jerusalem's wayward youth have something in their hands other than a joint or a syringe. Seated at a table in downtown Zion Square in the chilly midnight air, they are holding pencils and crayons and enthusiastically sketching.

Luring these largely alienated youths from pubs to portraits is the goal of this outreach pro-

gram run by the education department of the Israel Museum's Ruth Youth Wing. It is one of several Youth Wing activities that strive to expose the city's youth to art and, sometimes, to each other. The programs range from sculpting workshops promoting coexistence among Jewish and Arab Jerusalemites to this effort to introduce art to street kids, which is done in collaboration with Elem, a non-profit organization for runaway, homeless and neglected Jewish and Arab youth.

Assaf Horesh, Elem's project director, drives a colorfully painted van to the square every Thursday night, and together with a core of

volunteers unloads and set ups the table, chairs, crayons, pencils, sheaves of drawing paper and hot drinks and pastries, the last of which are quickly consumed by Jerusalem's youthful demimonde. Inside the van, speakers blare out rock music, whose tribal rhythms summon the youth like the sirens of Ulysses. The aroma of hot coffee warms the winter air.

"It's the coffee that gets them here, but it's the art that keeps them here," says Horesh, 31, who has been in charge of the program since it began 18 months ago. With some encouragement to sit down, the youngsters begin to relax a little. "We give these kids an opportu-

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project director for Elem, which helps youth in distress

nity to make a connection with grown-ups, to see that there are good people out there working for their benefit," Horesh says, pointing to a motley array of youth gathered around the table.

The high-school-aged youth are an eclectic mix of late-night urban types, mostly Jewish, from the down-and-out scruffy to the slicked-down loudmouths to curious but cautious religious youths and a teenage girl with a row of blonde spiked hair sprouting from an otherwise bald scalp, who is referred to good-naturedly

by her peers as "Mona Lisa."

After a few sips of coffee and a couple of drags on a cigarette, the kids get down to work. One avid youngster, whose face is almost completely obscured by his ski mask and long, stringy hair, bends over the table and knocks off in just a few minutes of frenetic energy a snappy profile portrait of a young woman. Having completed his creation, he quickly departs, leaving his sketch behind.

Some artists take their creations with them. Others leave them, where they are usually

"improved" by other youngsters in a burst of creative collectivism. Smoking, boasting, kvetching and bonhomie characterize the 20-minute stay, on average, of each youngster. There is no overt inappropriate or menacing behavior – just kids having fun and staying out (too) late on a school night.

"There's never a lack of 'clients,'" says Guy Briller, who coordinates the Israel Museum's workshops. "We try to create a warm, comfortable, non-judgmental atmosphere to compensate for the lack of privacy," he adds, noting that art is usually done in isolation.

The art created by these youths is "very rough-edged and unpolished," he says, not like what you find in a conventional art class "where the teaching is focused on catching the beautiful. With these kids it's the contrary. Their art revolves around releasing some pretty raw inner reality that is unconnected to aes-



SIDE BY SIDE: A sculpture workshop at the Ruth Youth Wing of the Israel Museum, Jerusalem produces a friendly hybrid animal



EAST AND WEST: Portrait busts include a woman with an Arab headdress, a boy with headphones, a girl with a braided pony tail and a boy with a baseball cap

thetics," says Briller.

"They go from cliché to pain in a single evening," he continues, citing teenagers who at first glibly draw "Mickey Mouse subjects," which he describes as those lacking relevance to their lives, before getting the courage to deal with "their own damaged goods." Indeed, in a "collective" drawing, not only do the pages show clutter, "but the surface of the paper itself is [also] crumpled and scarred, just like their lives."

The organizers ask the teens to donate their sketches to the museum to be viewed by the broader public. "Clearly, much of the work is not high in artistic value, but there is a straightforward expression of personal needs that viewers find meaningful," says Eldad Shaaltiel, acting head of the Israel Museum's Ruth Youth Wing.

Shaaltiel, 50, who was born in Ein Hod (an artists' colony near Haifa in the north) to parents who were artists, also oversees a comprehensive syllabus of courses at the Israel Museum campus opposite the Knesset

designed not only to teach individual pupils the rudiments of color, line and composition, but also to teach coexistence.

"Our courses at the museum are usually set up so that there is some sort of interaction between different population groups, such as Arab and Jew or religious and secular," states Shaaltiel, who holds an MFA from Columbia University in New York. The courses are for a fee, but Shaaltiel notes that the museum doesn't turn away families who can't afford to pay. To expand its outreach the Youth Wing operates a shuttle bus to bring Ethiopians students from their absorption center in Mevaseret Zion (just west of the capital).

Most of the children are 10th graders (15- and 16-year-olds). The Jewish children come from all parts of the city; most of the Arab youth come from Abu Tor, a mixed Arab-Jewish neighborhood on the city's southeast side. "We live side by side with them, but we don't know them. Even if they are our next-door neighbors," laments Shaaltiel. "It is our job to bridge those gaps."

ANAT BAREL, WHO HAS TAUGHT at the Israel Museum for 19 years, was leading a workshop at the museum on the day *The Report* paid a visit. She had the pupils pair up, a Jew and an Arab, to learn how to make a portrait bust from clay.

After Barel creates a general outline of the head and neck for each pair, the students begin to add the facial features. "It is here that the process of self-identity starts to work," she states. Each workstation is outfitted with a mirror, giving the pupils the choice of making self-portraiture. "Many of the children are going through puberty, when their bodies are constantly changing. How much or how little they take from the mirror can give insights into their self-esteem," she says.

At one extreme of the self-worth pendulum is Jaber, a 15-year-old Arab boy from Abu Tor, who insists that he would not make a self-portrait because no work of art can capture his good looks. Jaber's certainty contrasts with 15-year-old Odellia's vacillations. When asked to describe her own face, she blurts out, "It's

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– Nisrin Najar, art teacher

round; no, square; no, pointed," expressing the fluidity of teenage identity.

Two youngsters debate how to apply lips to a clay bust. Should they be pulled from the clay already on the face or should they be added? The teacher, following their conversation closely, whispers to The Report, "This is one of the most crucial aspects of sculpture – how to treat a surface – and they have hit on it in five minutes," she says, her grin widening.

Across the table, which accommodates six workstations, a pair of boys decide against making a combined self-portrait because they cannot agree which is longer, a Jewish or Arab nose.

"Working with Arabs you forget the stuff that's going on," she says, referring to the Arab-Israeli conflict, "and get to know them [as individuals]. First of all, they are human, and they are funny, really funny. They laugh a lot at us. We aren't afraid of each other in this class," says Gabi, 15. "We don't speak the same language so we speak through the art," she states.

"Not speaking each other's language" is more than a figure of speech. When the Arab guide who brought the students from east Jerusalem is asked how many of his charges speak Hebrew, he answers – with equal measures of stoicism and anger – "None of them." Recovering his poise, he quickly asks, "How many Jewish kids speak Arabic?"

In another class, the pupils balk at pairing up with "the other," feeling more comfortable with "one of their own." Acquiescing to the pupils' decision, the Jewish teacher, Ohad Hoffman, 31, makes certain that the groups are not segregated in their seating arrangements. The Arab teacher, Nisrin Najar, 23, is disappointed with the class's decision not to mix because, "More important than bringing out artistic talent is to teach the two groups how to interact."

In another classroom, a project between secular and religious Jews is under way. The class is divided into mixed pairs whose assignment is to draw a plan for an ideal city. The pairs have no objections to edifices like banks, grocery stores, hospitals, schools and synagogues, with no factories and plenty of parks and cafés. But the hackles started to rise when

discussing the propriety of swimming pools, the inconvenience of Shabbat street closures or the centrality of key buildings within the ideal city. "As you can see," says teacher Shai Gillis, who represents Gesher, an educational organization dedicated to bridging the gap between different segments of the population in Israel, "resolving one compromise leads to the birth of at least two more."

In one corner, a secular girl and a religious boy argue about the synagogue. She capitulates to his demand for segregation of the sexes, but demands that the women's section be on the same floor as the men's section. "No pregnant women will have to walk up to a second-floor gallery," she tells the religious lad in no uncertain terms.

THE ISRAEL MUSEUM ALSO CONDUCTS a drama class for developmentally challenged Jewish and Arab youngsters and adults (aged 22 to 65), most of whom have Down syndrome. They are busy rehearsing the fables of 17th-century French poet

Jean de La Fontaine, which are replete with animal anthropomorphism. The goal of the class, according to Rina Padwa, the creative director of the special-needs actors' workshop, is teaching the students animal movements. Padwa explains that these actors have been presenting the fables for the last four years in collaboration with Gesher. Approximately every six weeks, there is a joint performance of La Fontaine's fables by Gesher actors and the Museum class.

"The actors walk about and mix with the regular museum staff in a normal working environment, which is a whole different atmosphere from their own educational institutions and living quarters," Padwa states. The benefits spill over to the actors' parents, too, "who are shocked when they see their children speaking onstage about emotions," says Padwa.

Shaaltiel notes that since the museum opened in 1965, education has been considered a major part of the institution, together with fine arts, archaeology and Judaica. Blockbuster exhibitions "are great for grown-ups," he says, "but not if you have a child in tow." "Just one more room, just one more picture," Shaaltiel mimics a frustrated parent's efforts to win their children's cooperation while simultaneously dragging them through a museum. "But in the Youth Wing," he differentiates, "the whole point is to make the child the center of attention." ●



FAMILY AFFAIR: Pupils attending an Israel Museum art course sketch a family of elephants at Jerusalem's Tisch Family Zoological Gardens