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Art that spans ages and bridges cultures

Israel's 'Treasures' as good will ambassadors

By Hunter Drohojowska

Art exhibitions, as anyone from the U.S. Information Agency will tell you, can serve as cultural ambassadors, offering the more positive aspects of a nation's

personality. At least, this is one reason for the exhibition "Treasures of the Holy Land: Ancient Art From the Israel Museum," which opened last Sunday at the L.A. County Museum of Art.

When the Metropolitan Museum of Art's assistant to the director, John McDonald, asked to borrow some 150 antiquities from the Israel Museum, many officials felt trepidation. Many pieces, including the Habakkuk Commentary, the first-discovered and best-preserved of the Dead Sea Scrolls, had never left the country before.

But Dr. Martin Weyl, director of the Israel Museum, decided in favor of such an exhibition. He defended his decision by explaining, "You always read bad news about Israel — the bombings and so forth. This was a chance to present the positive side, the cultural riches that are everywhere in our country."

The "treasures" afford an enlightening perspective on the territory of Israel as settled by multiple civilizations between the 10th millennium B.C. and the seventh century A.D. There are animal carvings from an advanced Stone Age culture called "Natufian," the first-known representation of a human face mask from the 7th millennium B.C., remarkable bronze and metal work from the Caananite period, the only extant stone carving of the name of Pontius Pilate from the reign of Herod and later Roman-

influenced carvings of such notables as Hadrian. The works were selected by McDonald for their aesthetic rather than archaeological impact, and are bound to lure tourists to the Holy Land to see yet more.

But Weyl is an equally effective cultural ambassador. The story of his development as a museum director is exemplary of Israel's peculiarly self-made, self-supporting historical condition.

Weyl, 47, is a humorous, distinguished scholar, seeming a bit less guarded but not otherwise too different from other museum directors. Yet, he is more of a survivor, beginning at the age of 6 as one of the only children to walk out of the Theresienstadt death camp in Czechoslovakia. The sculptor George Segal used his friend Weyl as a model for his bronze memorial of the Holocaust.

Weyl returned to his native Rotterdam, where his family had been prominent doctors and lawyers. "Holland is a country without anti-Semitism," reports Weyl, "but there is what I call reverse discrimination." He recalls an incident in the first grade when a well-meaning teacher singled out Weyl for being Jewish and bestowed what she perceived as the honor of playing Jesus Christ in the school play. The young Weyl, instantly



The "Treasures of the Holy Land" exhibit now at LACMA is "a chance to present the positive side" of Israel, says Israel Museum director Dr. Martin Weyl, left, with mosaic of a synagogue. A bronze statue of the Roman emperor Hadrian, above, is also part of the exhibit.

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isolated from his classmates, burst out crying. "People were interested in me because I was Jewish," says Weyl, "and that bothers me."

After graduating from high school, and against the wishes of his family, Weyl immigrated to Israel, alone and without much money. He joined a kibbutz where he learned to farm, cultivating vineyards and olive trees for several years. Then he spent three years in a unit of the Israel army that specialized in agriculture. He met wife Tamar in the same unit and, at 24, decided to go to Hebrew University. To support himself, Weyl worked in construction, building the very Israel Museum he would one day direct.

Soon, Weyl became interested in more than the foundations of the building and began working as a guide. Having finished college in 1965, he approached the museum's board, saying that he would continue with graduate studies in art history if it could guarantee a job upon graduation. The board agreed and financed his master's and Ph.D. in 17th-century French art from the Institute of Fine Arts, New York University.

By 1969, he was named curator of sculptor and created the Billy Rose Sculpture Garden at the museum, designed by Isamu Noguchi. In 1974, Weyl became chief curator and, by 1981, director. Along the

way he organized exhibitions of work by Jean Arp, Sam Francis, Dennis Oppenheim and Arnold Newman. As adviser to Jerusalem's Mayor Teddy Kollek, Weyl initiated an "art in public places" program throughout the city. Reflecting on this meteoric rise, Weyl says softly, "It all happened too soon, within 10 years. I didn't have time to curate enough before I was in the managing business, learning fund raising." Weyl smiles at this memory. "I was the most timid, European-style curator, hating to ask for money. One day, Teddy Kollek shouted at me that it was my duty, part of the job, and had to be done. I had to choose whether I was more afraid of him or the fund raising."

As director, Weyl now sends other Israel Museum staff members abroad to continue their studies. "We had to build up everything from nothing, staff, library, programs, and to be an important museum, you have to know what is going on elsewhere in the world."

The Israel Museum, which now boasts healthy collections of art and archaeology, reflects Weyl's conviction that popular arts, crafts and design have a place in a museum. He also feels the museum is more European in tone, and takes exception to the trend in American museums to compile fairly similar collections of contemporary art. Most important to him, however, is that attention be paid to children at the museum.

"We have the largest youth program in the world," he states

with evident pride. He adds that the guides and teachers are all artists, not art historians. One of the most successful programs to an outsider is that of bringing artists to Jerusalem to execute projects in situ at the museum. Jonathan Borofsky, Jenny Holzer, Sol Lewitt and Jim Turrell have all been visitors. Yet Weyl realized that the current "treasures" exhibition would have more impact on the general public than an exhibition of fine art. "For people abroad, our archaeology is the most interesting aspect of Israel."

Did Weyl hone his particular drive and focus by his early experience of surviving the camp? He pauses thoughtfully before answering, "I feel distrust of people who are stuck with this life in the past. It has to be known but . . . We in Israel are aware of survival all the time." Weyl explains his position, his reason for bringing "treasures" to the United States. "I don't think civilizations are remembered for their armies. I think they are remembered because of their culture, their intellectual achievements. I give my efforts to promoting creativity. It is important for a person's immediate and larger environment. Therefore, the museum plays a part in that. Israel is always under a magnifying glass and only the bad things come out. But creative things happen, too. I hope this exhibition makes such a statement."

Hunter Drohojowska frequently writes about art for Style.