

Not exactly what you think

By MEIR RONNEN

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In a large show that fills all the main galleries of the Jerusalem Artists' House, Tunisian french-born **Eliahou Eric Bokobza** rewrites the history of the original Bezalel School (1906-1930) by reviving memories of six talented students who were all, like Bokobza himself, Mizrahi (Sephardi) Jews. Bezalel Version B is the second show by this artist devoted to the subject of Bezalel; on view is an item from his earlier exhibition, an early Bezalel souvenir in the form of a metal salt and pepper shaker. The curators evidently don't know this for they ascribe several symbolic meanings to the "B."

Neither Bokobza nor the curators (Dalya Markovich and Ktzia Alon) know if the six artists selected were a group or if they had a sociological axe to grind. They do point out that in general nearly all the Bezalel silversmiths and weavers were poorly paid Yemenites (including illiterate children) and other Mizrahim, while nearly all the designers were artists of Ashkenazi descent, who had trained in European schools. But even this distinction obscures the fact that the six artists selected broke this conceptual mould and were likely honored students because of their talent. Several were noted designers and one was a pioneer photographer.

One must remember too that in Boris Schatz's day, Mizrahim were Jerusalem's aristocrats, landowners, scholars and lawyers. In other words, the Mizrahi issue, in this context, may be a red herring.

No matter, I can hear the artist saying, "this is a pretext for the show," which consists of alleged portraits in oils of the six (Habib Sasson, Haim Mahboub, Rahamim Ezra, Yehuda Nahmias, Yaacov Mizrahi and David Serry); facsimiles of their work (the originals are in the Israel Museum); and some fun posters in colorful silkscreens.

There are also modern coffee mugs decorated with contemporary images relating to Bezalel; an innovative Bezalel chessboard and chessmen; and even some T-shirts bearing a likeness of Herzl. Funniest of all is a poster depicting a tall Herzl in fancy underwear surrounded by fold-on cutouts of a dozen different suits of clothing.

Then there are two "robots" with fake TV screens depicting themes of Bezalel tourist kitsch like David's Tower and Rachel's Tomb.

Bokobza's skillfully finished works (there are camel bookends too) are given instant recognition by his mannerism of rendering the eyes of everyone, even of himself, with the fully rounded pupil familiar to us from Japanese animated cartoons. These serve to further remove his portraits from figurative reality. They fit nicely with his highly decorative orientalism and happy color schemes.

And then there are the historic designs and caricatures, notably by Habib Sasson; and the excellent photographs made by David Serry. They serve to remind us that the Old Bezalel was not synonymous with kitsch.