


New Narratives and Legacies of Israeli Modernisms

Three exhibitions at Israeli museums this year, each accompanied by a catalog, could prove to be milestones in the study of Israeli design. By viewing the contributions of Ludwig Yehuda Wolpert, David Heinz Gumbel and Friedrich Adler to the development of a local visual language, we learn not only about the founding fathers of Israeli design, but also about how their work reflects the process of forging a national identity during the creative height of the modernist movement. While it would be incorrect to call the visual language that they constructed original, their choice of particular elements from within the International repertoire, and the way they adapted theoretical principles to the Israeli context, laid the groundwork for a design language whose influence can still be felt today.

The Israel Museum, Jerusalem, held an exhibition of the works of Wolpert and Gumbel, who taught at the New Bezalel school (as it was then known) and in the 1930s laid the foundations of modern Israeli metalwork. The Tel Aviv Museum of Art showed the work of Friedrich Adler, who was active in Germany at the turn of the twentieth century, the period of the most important revolution in the history of modernism. Common Roots at Design Museum Holon, added another dimension to the works of these three German-educated designers. This exhibition revealed the connections between Israeli design and the design produced in the ten Central and Eastern European countries between Russia and Germany since World War II, during and after Communist rule.

Taken together, the exhibition catalogs offer a reevaluation of the key period during which the “Zionist revolution” adopted modern design, by showing how modernism was fundamentally linked to the process of national renewal. At first glance there seems to be a contradiction between the universal, “mechanistic” identity attributed to modernism, and the idea of being rooted in the land that characterizes Jewish nationalism. But in the past several years an increasing number of studies have appeared challenging most of the myths associated with modernism, including those attached to the Bauhaus school.1 As a result, any analysis of these three designers, and any reevaluation of the principles that the New Bezalel School bequeathed to Israeli design, must adopt an “alternative to the Bauhaus narrative of modernism,” as Suzanne Landau, the chief curator of the Tel Aviv Museum of Art, notes in the preface to the Adler exhibition.2

As scholars have come to recognize, the theoretical basis of modern design language was laid already in the nineteenth century.3 The theories that were developed long before the Bauhaus opened its doors, or Le Corbusier published his books, faithfully reflected the mood of that century: on the one hand, they showed

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2 Suzanne Landau, preface to Friedrich Adler: Ways and Byways, by Batsheva Goldman Ida (Tel Aviv: Tel Aviv Museum of Art, 2012), 123.

enthusiasm for scientific and technological advancement and the freedom embodied in the revolt against the “Old World”; on the other hand, they expressed apprehension toward the “New World,” which was increasingly perceived as intellectually bankrupt, mechanistic and alienating. The flowering of nationalist movements, as well as the desire for a renewed connection to nature and/or the archaic world, stemmed from the various attempts to turn design into a tool for forging a new union of matter and spirit. Awareness of the important role of Romanticism in formulating the theory of modern design also helps to deconstruct the enlightened, universalist and rational image that has usually been associated with the abstract language created in the early twentieth century in Europe and the United States.

It is in this intellectual context that the development of Israeli design can be understood. Boris Schatz founded Bezalel in 1906 with the aim of contributing to Jewish national revival. Schatz may have fancied himself the Jewish William Morris, adopting the ideals of the English Arts and Crafts movement, but his worldview embodied the Romantic tradition of Central and Eastern Europe. A combination of ideals characterizes Adler’s art; he could have joined Bezalel as an instructor immediately after the school’s establishment. But unlike Schatz, Adler was capable of adapting to changes in the zeitgeist: his shift from Jugendstil to Expressionism and his joining of the Deutscher Werkbund gave him standing in progressive design circles in Germany even as their styles changed, and may have granted him entrée to the New Bezalel.

The exhibition’s curator, Batsheva Goldman Ida, hails Adler as a pioneering industrial designer of the modern age. Born in Germany in 1878, he was active in an era that saw the flowering of German industry at the turn of the twentieth century, when awareness of the importance of the design of industrial goods fomented a genuine revolution in the field. Adler studied in Munich, an important center of the Jugendstil and the Expressionist movements, and taught in schools that applied the principles of Arts and Crafts; meanwhile, he continued designing decorative objects (fig. 1). In her catalog, Goldman Ida situates Adler in relation to contemporary trends, while also documenting, in words and images, his stylistic shift from the curving, flowing lines of Art Nouveau that characterized his early works, to the angular forms of Expressionism. But this was not a complete reversal. Adler never abandoned decoration, and his fundamental design principles never changed: he treated nature as a source of inspiration and sought to give the objects he designed a spiritual dimension that reflected “the great, simple and eternal form.” As an artist, he served (in his words) “as a medium and means of continuously creative divine intent in the world, in which we have been placed.”

Goldman Ida describes Adler’s joining of the Werkbund in 1910 as an important step in his career. Indeed, it was the establishment of the Werkbund, more than that of the Bauhaus, that marked the real revolution in the history of modern design. Founded in Germany by government initiative in 1907 as an association of designers, architects, intellectuals and industrialists, the organization’s members managed to combine the functional principles of Arts and Crafts (chief among which were “truth to material” and an emphasis on functionalist construction) with the demands of industrial manufacturing. This elite group, which quickly saw the need to adapt design to the economic circumstances, contributed significantly to Germany’s status as the cradle of the “modernist Revolution” and to its becoming a pioneer of minimalist serial design adapted for a mass society.

At first glance it is difficult to find a link between Adler’s style and the standardized, industrial character attributed to the Werkbund. Similarly, the essays by Adler included in the exhibition catalog do not seem to match the materialistic and utilitarian myth that is associated with German modernism. The transition to a geometric language, however compatible with making industrial-type objects, did not eliminate the influence of the Romantic tradition. It is enough to look at Bruno Taut’s Glass Pavilion, designed for the 1914 Werkbund Exhibition in Cologne, or his 1913 Monument of Iron—works that featured the most representative construction materials of the modern age—to recognize the extent to which the central figures of the Werkbund embraced both Romantic ideals and Expressionist design. Even an examination of the minutes of Werkbund meetings upends many assumptions about the modernist revolution of the early twentieth century, not merely the famous rift between proponents of standard prototypes suitable

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