

## Japan in Israeli Museums – but which Japan?

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The title of this paper is based on Shimizu Yoshiaki's article *Japan in American Museums – but which Japan?*<sup>2</sup> In this paper I examine several case-studies of Japan and Japanism in Israeli art spaces, and accordingly ask: "which Japan?" My answer to this question would be – as the Jewish saying goes – also with a question: "which Israel?" In other words, I argue that allusions to Japan in Israeli art indicate changes in Israeli and Zionist identities and culture. I unfold my argument chronologically, beginning with early Bezalel-academy artists, and ending with Israeli artwork of the last decade.

### Early Bezalel Artists

Moshe Ephraim Lilien (1874–1925) is sometimes called "The first Zionist artist." His beautiful illustrations of the Bible, first published in 1908, are still vital within the visual vocabulary of biblical scenes among Israeli audience. Heavily influenced by *Art Nouveau* and *Jugendstil* artists, Lilien's black and white illuminations depict the early Jewish kings and prophets as Oriental figures within dramatic compositions. Of particular interest to this symposium are Lilien's illustrations to the Book of Jonah (illustration 1).



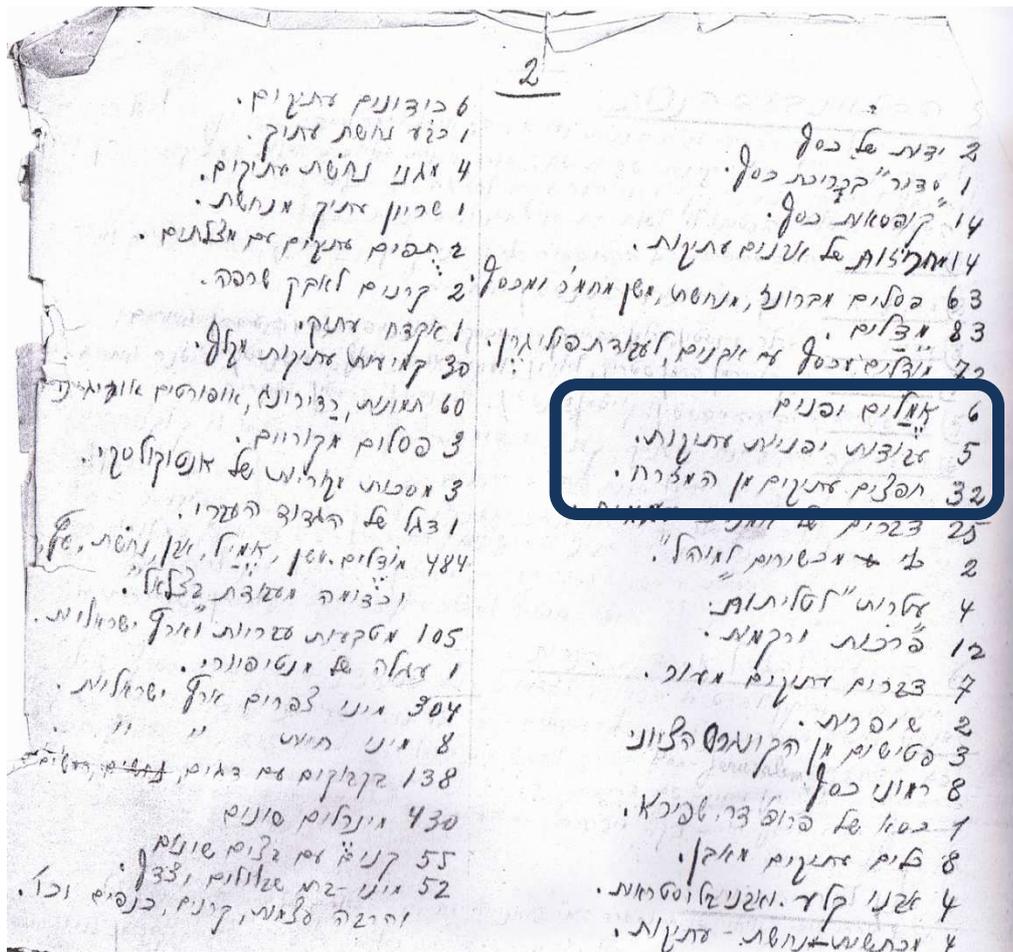
Ill. 1



ill.2

Visual comparisons clearly suggest that Lilien freely borrowed here motifs and shapes from Japanese woodblock prints. In particular, we can see a similarity to Hokusai's famous print *The Great Wave off Kanagawa* (illustration 2) to suggest the awe and terror of Jonah after he was thrown into the raging sea. Much has been written about the Orientalistic lenses through which early Bezalel artists "digested" the contemporary Palestine vis-à-vis the Zionist ideals. These included particularly images of the "Near East," but it is also exciting to realize that images of the "Far East" were not foreign to the visual vocabulary or to the social vision of Bezalel artists.

That the Japanese influence was not an arbitrary choice, we can learn from two anecdotes related to Boris Schatz (1867-1932). A successful artist of East European origin, Schatz was greatly influenced by Herzl's Zionist vision which led him to the establishment of the Bezalel arts and crafts workshops and Museum in Jerusalem in 1906. Schatz's so-called "museum" was rather a curiosity chamber with a *mélange* of religious articles and stuffed animals. Nevertheless, in a record he made in 1919 (illustration 3), Schatz lists three-thousand items in the Bezalel collection, and these include:



III. 3

6 Japanese enamels

5 ancient Japanese artworks

32 ancient items from the East.<sup>3</sup>

There are no concrete explanations regarding those items, although I conjecture that the mentioned "items and artworks" were probably only Meiji export knick-knacks. But the interesting issue for me here is not the actual items, but rather the fact that in a list which includes only Jewish and local artifacts, the only "foreign" items we find are Japanese. Clearly Boris Schatz had a special interest in Japanese crafts.

But - Why Japan? Why in Jerusalem?

A hint in this direction I could find in this brief report from the daily Hebrew newspaper *DoarHayom* of 1928 (illustration 4). The journalist noted that Prof. Schatz gave a lecture on Japanese art in the Bezalel National

Museum. "He lectured mainly on the development of Japanese art as functional [i.e. applied] arts, and using actual illustrations demonstrated how the Japanese came to this artistic summit, as to make them teachers to modern art."<sup>4</sup>



ill. 4

The approach of Boris Schatz reflects the ideals of the "arts and crafts" movement and the *Jugendstil*. Highly-influential in turn of twentieth-century Europe, these movements called for the revival of artistic and social ideals expressed in carefully designed handmade crafts. Within the background of Meiji-period exports of finely-designed porcelain, lacquer, and woodblock prints, Japanese crafts were seen as ideals. Japan itself was seen as a model for emulation for using its arts for national revival.

Having received their artistic education in the turn of the twentieth-century Europe, it is not surprising that Schatz and the early artists of Bezalel absorbed the visual language of Japanism; namely, the construction of "Japan" as a place of natural purity, antithetic to the malaises of European industrialized urban-society. These social ideals suited well the vision of the Zionist movement, and influenced Schatz in his vision of Bezalel as a set of workshops for arts and crafts. In other words, we can see the early Bezalel academy as the embodiment of Japanistic ideals. Within this context, we can understand why it was important for Schatz to collect and lecture about Japanese arts. We can also understand why Zeev Raban (1890-1970), another influential Bezalel artist, inserted motifs borrowed from Hiroshige to his idealized illustrations for the *Song of Solomon* (illustration 5). As Mira

Lapidothas demonstrated in her exhibition *Far and Away*, in 1929 Raban depicted Mount Hermon as Mt. Fuji and the almond spring flowers as cherry blossoms (illustration 6).<sup>5</sup> Such Japonistic visual vocabulary stresses the utopic aspects of Zionism.



Ill. 5 Ze'ev Raban *Come to Palestine*, 1929 Poster for the Society for the Promotion of Travel in the Holy Land

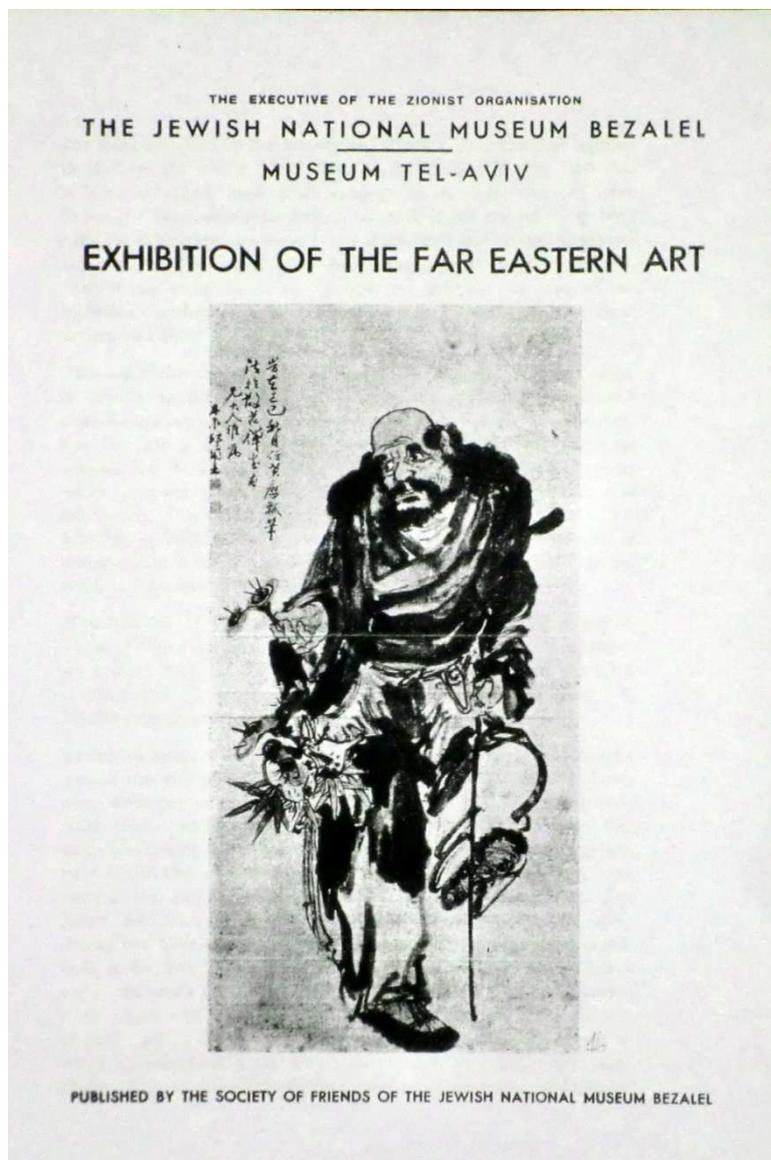
Ill. 6. Hiroshige, *The original Fuji from Meguro*, from the series: *One hundred views of Edo*, ca. 1857

### Early Exhibitions of Japanese Art

The interest in Japanese arts did not remain a footnote in the local history of arts and crafts production. In 1940, the Tel Aviv Museum, in

cooperation with Bezalel, held the first exhibition of so-called "far eastern art" (illustration 7). Displaying approximately two-hundred Japanese objects, the catalogue opens with the following celebratory words:

"For the first time in the history of Palestine, and, for that matter, in that of the whole Near East, an exhibition of Far East Art is being arranged. Large-scale exhibits of works from abroad have never yet been shown in Palestine, and, if we are opening with such an exhibition as this, it is an important insight into the creativeness of the artists of Asia."



ill. 7

The author, Mordechai Narkiss (1898-1957) – another mythological curator of Bezalel - then continues:

"No one can foretell the fate of exhibitions: perhaps this one will open new horizons to [artists of this country] and show them the way in the art of their own country."<sup>6</sup>

Later Narkiss writes that he dreamed about such an exhibition for many years, but because, unlike in Europe and America, there are no public collections of Eastern art here, he could not curate such an exhibition. The immigration of recent years, however, brought with it many treasures, thus allowing him to fulfill his wish. The immigration wave, to which Narkiss refers here, is termed now "the fifth Aliyah" – it included mainly Jews who fled Germany during the 1930's for obvious reasons. Many of these immigrants were highly-educated bourgeoisie, and their important role as agents of European culture was narrated by many. It is, nevertheless, interesting to note that as part of their elitist European education, Jewish immigrants from Germany brought with them Chinese and Japanese paintings, sculptures, crafts, and particularly woodblock prints (*ukiyo-e*).

The list of artworks and collectors in the catalogue still requires much archival digging. The two names that I managed to detect, however, are Dr. Max Bodenheimer, who was a predominant activist within the German Zionist association, and Mr. Otto Lilien – the son of (by then deceased) painter Ephraim Moshe Lilien - whose image we saw before. Apparently, he bequeathed from his father several *ukiyo-e*, among them, not surprisingly, was Hokusai's *Great Wave*.

The collection and display of Japanese arts in Israel enter a whole new phase after the establishment of the state of Israel, and particularly since the establishment of diplomatic relations with Japan in 1952. I will mention here briefly two major venues.

Japanese art exhibitions started to gain special visibility in the Israeli art scene particularly since the establishment of the Tikotin Museum in Haifa in the late 1950s. Concurrently, the artist Jacob Pins (1917-2005) also began to

exhibit his private collection of *ukiyo-e*, in various venues from the 1960's on. After his death, the collection was donated to the Israel Museum, where items from the collection are exhibited as part of the Asian art wing. The Asian wing at the Israel Museum continues the ethnographic tradition of presenting the so-called "non-Western" visual cultures according to geographical division.

### Exhibiting "Japan" in Israel after the first *Intifada*

As we find in other cases of Japanism around the world, the early interest in the formal and technical characteristics of Japanese arts and crafts and their beauty was transformed into the discussion of the arts of Japan as a reflection of its culture. For example, a piece of ceramics from Japan is attractive not only for its novel beauty, but it was also framed into the discourse of the delicacy of ceramics as an epitome of the Japanese country and its people. Among other signifiers of Japan, Zen is the most obvious example. Japanese artists, the ones who are still alive, are not always happy to be displayed first and foremost as Japanese. Nevertheless, it is because of this made-up connection between the country's beauty and its arts, or the connection between national character and aesthetics, that the Japanese embassy in Israel is an important patron of most exhibitions of Japanese arts in Israel.

The tendency to represent arts and artistic styles as reflecting the national culture or as the embodiment of national character began to work as a double-edged sword for artistic display of the last generation. Artists - both in Japan from the end of the Shōwa period (1989), and in Israel from the first *intifada* (1987) - were the first to investigate and criticize concepts of national essentialism. Many Israeli artworks in the last generation, thus, reflect the growing political discourse about Zionism and militarism. It is within this background of questioning national identity and self-identity that we can see the rise of interest in the cultures of others. Questions of national identity (as well as individual identity) are, thus, framed into the representation of the local vis-à-vis the "other." This is of course a large issue, and I do not wish to

dwell on it; let me suffice by saying that within the Israeli discourse of "self" and "other" Japan was often framed and represented as *the* alternative "other."<sup>7</sup> Within this background, I would like to problematize the issue of displaying Japanese art in Israel by giving examples from two exhibitions. These were not necessarily major exhibitions, but I analyze them here as representative examples of broader phenomena.

The first example is *Nature: Material & Image: Contemporary Art from Japan* held in 1996 at the Artists House in Jerusalem. The curator, Reviva Regev, is herself an artist who uses concepts such as "wabi-sabi" as major paradigms in her work. In her writing, Regev does not distinguish the individual Japanese artists from their nation. She describes the national character of Japan as a key to deciphering whatever artistic creation that was made in the Japanese archipelago from times immemorial to the present. For example, she writes: "The high-tech superpower, which is also still living in traditional patterns and in close relations with nature."<sup>8</sup> What is the base for such essentializing? "The Japanese sense of aesthetics is rooted in the Shinto religion, [...] it is apparent not only in temples, but in living spaces and food."<sup>9</sup> At places, Regev does emphasize the versatility of the arts created in Japan, and its dialogue with what she (and many others) term "Western art." Yet, even the "borrowing" from the "West" is done in "their own thinking, i.e. close to Nature."<sup>10</sup> Regev, like many other Israeli artists and curators, refers to Zen (or to Shinto) as a metonymy for Japanese culture. The problem is, however, the lack of distinction between these concepts and the actual country and its complex history and historiography, a distinction that is very clear for all those who study Japan closely or have lived there. But because of certain historical developments it became common to "wrap" Japan together with Zen or with Shinto outside of the country.<sup>11</sup>

The artists quoted in the above catalogue, however, do not support the thesis of the curator, but offer rather individualistic statements about their personal attitude to work, form, or material, and general statement about

“people” and about “us.” The emphasis of the international voice in their work stands out in opposition to the national dichotomy in the introduction.

In a following preface, Prof. Ran Shehori, who was the manager of Bezalel in the 1980's writes about Japanism:

“[T]he Japanese magic has enthralled Westerners since the middle of the [nineteenth] century.[...] The artists of the West bowed their heads in common submission before the reproof inherent in the [...] organic materials and deep harmony. [...]”<sup>12</sup>

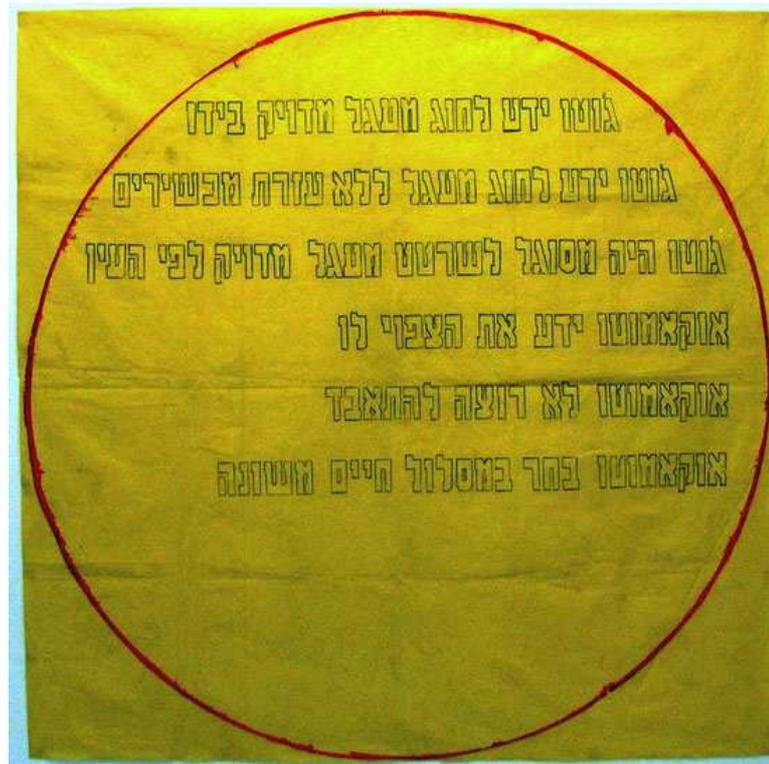
Of particular interest are his last sentences, comparing Japanese culture to Western culture which

“is a dynamic mixture of intensive movement to and from, [...] of the constant blurring of borders [...] a culture driven by the winds [...] to annex, to annihilate and erase the past, to destroy tradition. The sons and the daughters of this culture, particularly Israelis, whose roots have been weakened, who are the angry children of an immigrant country where loudness, violence, and crude materialism are essentials of the way of life, bend the knee before the power of supreme beauty that radiates from the Japanese Nothingness.”<sup>13</sup>

It is interesting to compare Shehori's approach to Japanese art to that of Boris Schatz. Both obviously look at "Japan" as an idealized model for the so-called “western arts” (in which both Schatz and Shehori include themselves). But what is the difference between the early Zionist Japanism expressed in the 1928 article to that of the 1996 catalogue? I argue that the main difference and the point of interest are not what Shehori or Regev are saying about Japan, the most powerful point is what they are saying about Israel. In other words, this text exemplifies a common image of Japanese arts in Israel; “Japan” is epitomized as the ultimate “other,” and thus Japanese arts become a means mainly to say something about ourselves.

I am saying of course nothing new in the large-scale discourse concerning Orientalism and Othering, but I want to take this discussion one

step further, and point to exhibitions of Israeli art which consciously investigated this very artificial dichotomy between Israel and Japan as a trend in Israeli art.



Ill. 8: Tamar Getter<sup>14</sup>

### "Japan" in works of Israeli Artists: a dichotomy?

Two recent Israeli exhibitions referred to the constructed image of Japan in Israeli art: *Chopsticks* in 2003 and *Far and Away* in 2006. I refer here only to former curated by Doron Rabina for the Beit Berl Gallery.<sup>15</sup> The title *Chopsticks* was selected as a signifier of East Asia, while "East Asia" for Rabina and the artists who exhibited with him signified a safe enough distance from where they can observe Israeli reality. Rabina suggested that because the "here and now" in Israel is "on fire" (we should remember that the exhibition took place during the days of the second *intifada*), artists need to go – symbolically – as far away as possible in order to examine their burning, bleeding, and open wounds.<sup>16</sup> How does the aesthetic and mental distance serve what cannot be touched directly? In what ways the imagined Japan helps give shape to what

otherwise is too intimidating, or too painful, or perhaps too close to be really captured. And consequently, is art to serve the political immediacy or allow a space for escapism? Tamar Getter's painting, writes Rabina, is emblematic to these questions (illustration 9).<sup>17</sup> And it is questions indeed, although Getter's artwork seems to suggest a series of axioms. These "axioms" dig into the undecipherable and the inexpressible and thus manage to problematize the false image of "Japanese art."

Looking at Getter's painting, we can see that it formally refers to the "ensō" – the full or empty circle associated with Zen enlightenment. But the exact circle drawn here painstakingly refers also to the geometric perfection of the Renaissance artist Giotto. Getter's reference to Japan here, however, does not dwell on the aesthetic; her text refers to the most infamous Japanese figure in Israel during the 1970's – the terrorist Okamoto Kōzō.

Getter is almost the only Israeli artist whose work refers directly to "negative" images of Japan. In vain I searched for any Israeli artist who would refer, for example, to the well-known fact that Japan allied Nazi Germany. But hardly any works in the Israeli visual arts associated Japan with violence or war; I found almost entirely geisha-like, *manga*-like, or cherry blossoms images. Rabina's exhibition indeed explains why, for example, there is no World War II, no samurai, nor hardly any atomic bombs in the Israeli Japanisms: it is us who are the militarists, we are the ones who are bombed, and we are the ones who bomb others. And thus it is us who need to imagine the peaceful "Japan" in order to explain to ourselves why we may feel abnormal when militarism and bombs are our everyday reality.

In conclusion: Can Japan and Israel be presented as a continuum?

I discussed important art figures in my talk, and I left many other important names outside of its scope, so forgive me for ending this paper with a project I was involved with myself. The exhibition *Ani-ma?9004 km. between Israel and Japan*<sup>18</sup> curated by Michal Mor and myself on the occasion of this symposium revolves around meeting points between art produced in

Israel and art that is identified with Japan. In contrast to former exhibitions, we intentionally choose artists who view their lives and their work as a continuum between “Israel” and “Japan.” In *Ani-ma?* we are suggesting that despite the physical distance, the language of images is not nation-based. Like the Jungian concept *Anima* (soul or spirit) which is not confined to the physical, we argue that neither identity nor art need to be confined to constructs of nationhood. Shapes, as suggested by the ancient strategist Sunzi in his *Art of War*, can be deceitful.



Ill. 9

Sunzi makes a reference point for two artists in the exhibition: Ayelet Zohar’s *Camouflage* installation (illustration 9) and Ishii Kazuo’s calligraphy which renders quotes from the classical Asian text. I conclude this paper, however, with Eric Eliahou Bokobza’s *Robot* (illustration 10).

The Orientalist and Japonistic ideals of early Bezalel became a key concept in the works of Bokobza.<sup>19</sup> He created a “robot” using Shōwa-period models, but covered it with motifs which became identified with early Bezalel artwork, such as the olivewood and the Tower of David view. His work thus bridges popular images of the authentic and the mechanical, the natural and

the technological, and also false images of "Japan," "Israel," and the "Orient." Deconstructing stereotypes, this work indicates new directions of mutual understanding and new horizons of learning and creating Japan in Israel, and Israel in Japan.



David's tower robot | 2006  
oil on canvas, acrylic on olive wood  
45cm x 80cm x 15cm

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<sup>2</sup> Shimizu, Yoshiaki. 2001. Japan in American Museums: But Which Japan? *The Art Bulletin* 83 (1):123.

<sup>3</sup> Jerusalem Municipality Archive, 99 (Report on the "Bezalel" Musuem, dated 25 July 1919). File B1915-1925. I am grateful to GilitIvgi of the cultural studies program at the Hebrew University for bringing this list to my attention.

<sup>4</sup> DoarHayom, 16 February 1928, p. 4. In: Historical Jewish Press.

[http://jpress.org.il/Repository/getFiles.asp?Style=OliveXLib:LowLevelEntityToSaveGifMSIE\\_TAUHE&Type=text/html&Locale=hebrew-skin-custom&Path=DHY/1928/02/16&ChunkNum=-1&ID=Ar00400&PageLabel=4](http://jpress.org.il/Repository/getFiles.asp?Style=OliveXLib:LowLevelEntityToSaveGifMSIE_TAUHE&Type=text/html&Locale=hebrew-skin-custom&Path=DHY/1928/02/16&ChunkNum=-1&ID=Ar00400&PageLabel=4) (accessed:2012).

<sup>5</sup> Lapidot Mira (curator). *Far and Away*. The Israel Museum. 2006.

<sup>6</sup> BezalelBeitHanekhotHaleumi. 1940. Exhibition of Far Eastern Art. Jerusalem: Society of Friends of the Jewish National Museum Bezalel.

<sup>7</sup> For a discussion of "Japan" in Israeli identities, see: Goldstein-Gidoni, Ofra. 2003. "'YapanZeKan': YapanKealternativaTarbutit BeisraelShelShenotHaalpaim" ('Japan is Here': Japan as a Cultural Alternative in Israel of the 2000s.) *Israeli Sociology* 5(1): 193-218, (in Hebrew).

<sup>8</sup> In: RegevRviva, 1996, "Nature: Material & Image: Contemporary Art from Japan," 1996. Artists House in Jerusalem, n.p.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> ibid.

<sup>11</sup> Major reasons were the writings of Suzuki Daisetsu and certain fashions in post-war US. See also: Shimizu, op.cit.

<sup>12</sup> Shehori in *Nature*. Op.cit.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> Translation of the six sentences written in the painting: Giotto knew how to round a circle free hand | Giotto knew how to round a circle without tools | Giotto could draw a round circle by the eye | Okamoto knew what awaits him | Okamoto doesn't want to kill himself | Okamoto chose a weird walk of life. ([http://www.beitberl.ac.il/academic/art/exhbitions\\_galleries/gallery\\_tel-aviv/2003/chopstiks/Pages/default.aspx](http://www.beitberl.ac.il/academic/art/exhbitions_galleries/gallery_tel-aviv/2003/chopstiks/Pages/default.aspx) Accessed: 2012)

<sup>15</sup> *Chopsticks* inspired Mira Lapidot's *Far and Away* (2006), which was constructed around the concept of "Japan" in Israel art. Lapidot intentionally selected works by Israeli artists who never visited Japan although their aesthetic language owes much to "Japanese" styles. The exhibition was titled in Hebrew "YapanzeKan" – Japan is here, creating a pun on the popular right-wing slogan "YESHA [Judea and Samaria] is here."

<sup>16</sup> For further details about the exhibition, see:

[http://www.beitberl.ac.il/academic/art/exhbitions\\_galleries/gallery\\_tel-aviv/2003/chopstiks/Pages/default.aspx](http://www.beitberl.ac.il/academic/art/exhbitions_galleries/gallery_tel-aviv/2003/chopstiks/Pages/default.aspx) (accessed: 2012).

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> The exhibition *Ani-ma? 9004 between Japan and Israel* accompanied the opening of the symposium, to commemorate the sixtieth anniversary of diplomatic relations between Israel and Japan. Curators: Michal Mor and ShalmitBejarano, May- September 2012, The Stern Gallery at the Hebrew University.

<sup>19</sup> Bokobza's installation: <http://ebokobza.brinkster.net/eb-anima.html> (accessed: 2012).