



Treasures from a Shared Heritage

“President Bush’s people initially proposed a quarter of an hour for a tour of the whole museum,” Amanda Weiss, Director of Jerusalem’s Bible Land Museum confides, referring to George W. Bush’s tour of the Museum during his state visit to Israel last May. “I was horrified! But I pressed and pressed, and eventually they relented, and allocated a full hour. Not that even this would have been enough.” / Akin Ajayi

And she does have a point. As one of the world’s leading repositories of Ancient Near Eastern art and archaeology in the world, dedicated as a showcase for the history of the Bible and its contemporary relevance, a scant quarter of an hour would not even begin to do justice to the museum’s rich collection. President Bush, for one, should be grateful to Ms. Weiss and her persistence.

“Our mission is to place the Bible in its historical context,” Weiss explains in her smartly appointed offices. “We hope to remind our audience of the importance of our shared history, or our common heritage.” This statement of intent neatly sums up the philosophy of Dr. Elie Borowski, the Museum’s founder and first Director. Founded in 1992, the Bible Lands Museum is the culmination of a lifetime’s work for Borowski, devoted to assembling what has become an unparalleled collection of Near Eastern art and antiquities spanning an epoch, from the dawn of civilization to the Byzantine Era. Borowski passed away in 2003, but his legacy and vision remain, protected and championed by his wife Batya, co-founder and Executive Director of the Museum.

A unique collection

Borowski was born in Warsaw, Poland in 1913, the son of a flour merchant. A traditional Jewish education was followed by a period of study at some of Europe’s most noted universities, including the Sorbonne, the Pontifical Biblical Institute in Rome and the University of Geneva. His intellectual sojourn was interrupted by the Second World War, when Borowski enlisted in the Polish Division of the French Army. Along with his fellow combatants, the division was forced to retreat into Switzerland and he remained there until the end of the war. Resuming his academic career after the cessation of hostilities, he began to develop an interest in ancient art, particularly art with a connection to biblical history, and started to acquire what would eventually form the backbone of the permanent collection of the Bible Lands Museum.

Dividing his time between Switzerland and Canada, Borowski earned a reputation as a leading dealer and expert in his speciality. For a long period, Borowski harboured ambitions of turning his burgeoning collection into the basis for an institution of learning, a place where people of all faiths could come to learn about biblical history, and about their shared history and common heritage.

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But it took a chance encounter in a Jerusalem hotel before the dream was given the opportunity to take shape.

As the story goes, Borowski started to argue with a female visitor in his hotel about his collection's catalog, 'Ladders to Heaven', and a suitable final destination for what was by then a significant collection. Borowski was inclined to allow the collection to remain in Canada, where he had been based for some time; his interlocutor thought otherwise. "Such a collection can only be located here, in Jerusalem," she insisted.

Batya Borowski - as she became a year later, when the couple married - backed up her insistence with energy and determination, enlisting the support of Teddy Kollek, the legendary mayor of Jerusalem, in her quest to convince Borowski to establish a museum of biblical art in Jerusalem. According to Weiss, they made the perfect couple. "They complemented each other perfectly," she says. "The dreamer-scholar and the pragmatic business woman." It took a while, but with time a site was acquired, permission was granted and, ten years later, the Bible Lands Museum was born.

History and art

Sixteen years after its inauguration, the Museum, located on Jerusalem's 'Museum Row' next door to the Israel Museum and a stone's throw from the Knesset, has garnered an international reputation as the home to a unique collection of ancient artefacts and rare works of art. Entering the subtle yet still impressive domed facade, the visitor descends a flight of steps and is immediately greeted with the impressive spectacle of the main exhibit hall. It lacks the starch-fronted formality commonly associated with museums, a layout that the writer Mordechai Beck once likened to an archaeological dig. "Everything is open. You can look from one part (of the exhibit) to another, because that's what the plan is. There is no room that isn't somehow interconnected to the other rooms."

The artefacts on display in the main exhibit inform in detail about the lives of the civilizations that fall within the Museum's remit. Cylindrical seals from Phoenicia supply clues about commercial life and trade in the seafaring nation; a cedar wood sarcophagus from Egypt, detailed with imprecations to an omniscient deity, reveal much about the rituals and routines associated with that ancient civilization.

The collection combines historical significance and aesthetic beauty, reflecting the tastes and interests of the Museum's founders. It is a point emphasised by Ariella Rones-Tsafir, head of the Education Department, as she shows me around the exhibits. "97% of the artefacts on display are from the personal collection of Elie and Batya Borowski," she confirms. As a depository for history and culture, museums have an opportunity, if not a responsibility, to play a useful role in the dissemination of learning. This is a position that the Bible Lands Museum recognizes and takes seriously.



Regular tours, replete with contextual information by fully trained guides, are accompanied by a popular weekly lecture series, in both English and Hebrew, based upon a broad range of topics connected to the museum's *raison d'être*. Last May, as part of the range of activities organized to commemorate its 16th anniversary, the Museum convened a five-day tour of significant archaeological sites across the country, in the company of noted academics and archaeologists. Highlights of the tour included visits to Qumran, home to the Dead Sea Scrolls, and Gamla, considered the best-preserved example of a Jewish town during the period of the Second Temple.

It was Borowski's belief that an appreciation of the period commemorated by the Museum is crucial for the modern age, taking into account the historical and contemporary importance of the ancient lands of Canaan and Judea, at the crossroads of the ancient world. "The future of mankind has its roots in the past, and only through understanding our history can we work together to create a better future for the generations to come," he once noted.

Image of Abraham

It is this understanding that informs the Museum's 'Image of Abraham' project, initiated by Weiss and now in

Amanda Weiss, Director of the Bible Lands Museum, giving President George W. Bush and First Lady Laura Bush a tour of the museum





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its tenth year, promoting the ideal of coexistence through work with an interesting demographic, one perhaps not always thought about in connection with museums. The 'Image of Abraham' project was conceived as an opportunity for schoolchildren, 4th and 5th graders from communities in East and West Jerusalem, to learn about and appreciate each other's communities and cultures, and to promote ideals of communication and mutual respect, not just between the children but also between their parents and teachers too.

"Through learning about ourselves and each other, we are able to understand our similarities and respect our differences, a vital ingredient for building a future where peaceful coexistence can be realized," Weiss observes. As the name suggests, the project is inspired by the legacy of the Patriarch Ibrahim/Abraham, who bequeathed values of honesty and the aspiration for peace among neighbors to his descendants.

Over the course of a school year, the children participate in a wide range of activities, intended to challenge and stimulate their imaginations and designed to require cooperation and nurture team spirit. Using the exhibits of the museum as tools, the children are afforded the opportunity to trace the common elements in Arab and Jewish heritage and contemplate shared values. A collective art exhibit, *The Journey of Abraham*, is created by the pupils over the course of the year and exhibited in both the museum and the participating schools at the conclusion of the project. The Museum selected this age group for the project deliberately. "At this age, they are old enough to grasp the historical perspective of learning the Bible, yet young enough to be open and eager to take on a challenge

like this," Weiss explains.

The project is dependent upon private sponsorship to ensure its continued survival, with key funding provided by the Gladstein Family Foundation, the Bernard van Leer Foundation and the Jerusalem Foundation, as well as other private donors.

Special exhibitions

In its 16 years of existence, the Museum has received praise and acclaim for its program of special exhibitions, noted for both their contemporary relevance and intellectual stimulation. Its landmark exhibition, 'The Jewish Presence in Ancient Rome,' marked the first cultural exchange between the State of Israel and the Vatican, following the establishment of diplomatic relations in 1993.

In 1996, the Museum presented 'Jerusalem - A Capital for All Times; Royal Cities of the Biblical World' as the primary exhibition for the 'Jerusalem 3000' celebrations. It attracted record crowds to the Kunsthistorisches Museum in Vienna on the first stop of its international tour.

The Museum's current featured exhibition, 'Three Faces of Monotheism', confirms this multi-faceted approach to cultural programming with an intriguing mix of historical fact and social relevance. Taking an ecumenical approach to its subject matter, the exhibition explores the commonalities of the three monotheistic faiths through their symbols and iconography. The display includes architectural elements, jewelry, ritual objects and artefacts that highlight the intriguing similarities with which the three faiths represented themselves to the outside world, through a shared iconography.

Assistant curator Filip Vukosavovic thinks that it is important to acknowledge these similarities. "Our origins are mutual origins. Iconography, signs and symbols of all three religions have been used interchangeably for thousands of years. It is only recently, selfishly, that we have separated everything and divided them amongst each other exclusively." He observes that images of the *menorah*, commonly associated today exclusively with the Jewish faith, have been found etched on the walls of Christian catacombs in Rome and were impressed upon coins used in the 7th century Islamic dynasty. More recently, the flag of Morocco bore the six-pointed star identified today as the Magen David until as recently as the early 1950s, when it was pared down to five points representing the pillars of Islam.

Also currently running at the Museum is the 'Sounds of Ancient Music' exhibition, on display until the end of the year. Exploring the vital role of music in the religious rituals, musical events and daily lives of the people, the exhibit includes rare musical instruments preserved from ancient times as well as replicas scrupulously recreated by the sculptor Moshe Frumin.

Weiss anticipates that the next few years will be a significant period for the Museum. Consolidating on a 40% growth in visitor numbers over the last year, it expects to receive final approval for the Museum's building plans, allowing for the expansion of the current exhibition space and the construction of laboratories and educational facilities. She also hopes that the 'Three Faces of Monotheism' exhibition will secure partners that will allow it to reach a wider audience on an international tour after it closes at the Museum in early 2009.

Underlining the significance of the exhibition, she points out that after his private tour, President Bush, accompanied by Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice and US Ambassador to Israel Richard Jones, met with students from the three faiths in the Museum's Biblical Garden to hear their vision for the future of the Middle East - "to hearken, to teach, to learn", as inscribed on the dedication stone on the entrance plaza. ✨