Gate to the Jewish quarter in San’aa, Yemen

Yemenite Culture Museum
Gallery & Workshop

Scent of Yemen
The workshop of Yemenite Art was established by Ben Zion David (Benzi) in 1984. Benzi is an eighth generation silversmith as well as a certified electrical engineer. Rather than pursuing a career in engineering, Benzi decided to continue the craft trade that he had learned from his father. In 1986, Benzi moved his workshop to the artist’s quarter of Old Jaffa and ever since he has been designing, manufacturing and selling his art.

In 2010, Benzi has created an empire in his corner of Old Jaffa.

Beginning in the workshop where each silver item is created, the Yemenite filigree masterpieces are proudly displayed in the Gallery for sale to visitors from all over the world, including local passersby strolling in the beautiful location by the Mediterranean Sea. It was the steady public interest in Benzi’s lectures about Yemenite Filigree as well as his own passion to preserve this dying art, for which this Museum was founded. It is devoted to the unique artisans, culture and history of the Yemenite people in hopes that visitors will return home with a little “Scent of Yemen”.
According to tradition, Yemenite Jews are the descendants of the Tribe of Judah who came to the country after the destruction of the first Temple. Jews in Yemen were defined as being under the king’s patronage and protection and therefore citizens with lesser rights. The first significant wave of immigration to Israel in modern times was recorded in 1881. Up until the establishment of the State of Israel in 1948, approximately 35,000 Jews had arrived from Yemen. Immediately after the establishment of Israel, the government launched an urgent operation to bring the remaining Jews to Israel, due to reports of pogroms in Yemen. Jews from all corners of Yemen made their way to the “Hashed” transit camp in Aden to await their flight to Israel. The journey to Hashed was dangerous and difficult, but the Jews of Yemen were determined to complete their long awaited exodus and fulfill their dream of returning to Zion. These immigration operations, known as “On Eagle’s Wings” and “Magic Carpet”, lasted about three years, during which the vast majority of Yemenite Jews (about 50,000) immigrated to Israel. The few Yemenite Jews remaining behind arrived during the following years. Today, only about 150 Jews still live in Yemen.
The most respected craft for Jewish men in Yemen was silversmithing. It originated with the first Jews who arrived in Yemen and was passed down from one generation to another. Jewish silversmiths had superior artistic skills. Despite their inferior civil status, their jewelry creations were highly regarded by the authorities who allowed them to work in their profession. When ordering a jewel, a customer paid with silver coins, which were used by the artisan to prepare the fine silver filigree strands. The leftover material was to be his fee.

Ben-Zion David, a leading designer of artistic Judaica and jewelry in Israel, presents pieces of “Tradition with Soul.” An eighth generation silversmith, Benzi believes with all his soul, that it is his obligation to preserve the Yemenite Silversmith trade, an art that is disappearing from the world. Therefore, in addition to his work as a silversmith, Benzi lectures and explains how “the Yemenite Silversmith” in Yemen created intricate jewelry with simple tools. Benzi’s two sons, Nadav and Yoav, join him in his workshop in Old Jaffa to learn the silversmith trade, with hope that they will continue the family dynasty.
Yemenite Jewish cuisine developed in the shadow of poverty and adhered to the strict Jewish laws of Kashrut. Based mainly upon various baked goods and soups flavored with hawayij (spice mix), almost every meal was accompanied by unique sauces such as hilbe (fenugreek) and skhug (a hot sauce). The women cooked, baked and even worked in the fields, harvesting the wheat. They would go out to the fields and harvest, dry, sort, and grind the seeds with basalt millstones. From the flour they produced, the women would then make dough and bake different types of bread in a clay oven in the yard.

Most of the Yemenite woman’s time was devoted to housework and fieldwork as she cared for her family. Very few Yemenite women were literate. With the little free time they had, the women engaged in handicrafts such as weaving with raffia. Preparations began by gathering special plants from the mountains and near the water and drying and dyeing them in appropriate colors. After preparing the material, the women would sit together and weave the raffia in wrapped and coiled formations. The final products, characterized by colorful and intricate patterns, were used for storage, serving and decoration.
The foundations of Yemenite music, including poetry, melodies and dance are rooted in ancient times. Singing and dancing played a central role in the lives of Yemenite Jews, who, in addition to being religious, maintained a lively cultural life. Family events, celebrations, and most holidays, always focused around dancing. Due to decrees and prohibitions, Yemenite Jews celebrated secretly and quietly. The Yemenite dance style is not uniform and consists mainly of fixed steps which are the basis for improvisation. The musical accompaniment usually includes vocals, a tin drum and cymbals.

The wedding celebrations of Yemenite Jews lasted seven days. The festivities began on the Saturday before the wedding and continued with bridal “adornment” ceremonies at the bride’s house. On the eve of the wedding, the “henna” ceremony was held, in which the bride’s hands were painted as a symbol of fertility and blessing. At the marriage ceremony itself, Yemenite brides wore embroidered clothes and jewelry made of pure silver. On the day after the ceremony, a large crowd accompanied the bride to the groom’s house in a festive procession (“zaffa”), with singing and dancing.
The Jewish community in Yemen was very religious and preserved ancient Jewish traditions. Yemenite Jews attached great importance to Jewish education and proficiency in the Torah (Jewish Bible). Every community had a Mori (“my teacher”) who taught male pupils reading, writing and the Torah, from the age of three. The “Mori” was paid as charity or by a meal in the pupils’ homes. After their bar-mitzvahs, boys began to accompany their fathers to Torah lessons every day. Those who proved bright and proficient were groomed to be used as “holy vessels” and were trained for various religious professions.

The most difficult decree for the Jews of Yemen was the “orphan decree” which came into effect in the 17th century. It was stringently enforced with the reign of the Imam in 1922. This decree was established by two basic Islamic laws. First, according to the Koran, all orphans had to be cared for and provided with food. Second, to provide for Jews was strictly forbidden. To fulfill both laws, Jewish orphan children were forced to convert to Islam. The Jewish people refused to accept this and risked their lives by falsely claiming these children as their own. Under the threat of death, discovery meant execution.
Yemenite Culture Museum
Silversmith Art Gallery
3 Mazal Dagim St.
Old Jaffa
03-6812503, 03-6835336
office@yemenite-art.com
www.yemenite-art.com