

Behold the Man



Ecce Homo by Titian, between 1558 and 1560

by Geoffrey Clarfield (February 2022)

I am an average Israeli if there is such a thing. I was born in the fifties when Israel was a socialist society, although as in all socialist systems some people, especially politicians and bureaucrats, manage to become more equal than others.

But life was good back then. There was radio. European and American films came to the cinemas. I remember that I had to take a nap if I was to go to the Cinema with my parents, my younger brother and sister. It was a big do. You brought your own food and saw your neighbours, relatives and school mates. There was even an intermission.

Israelis study the ancient world as if it happened yesterday. I admired Charleton Heston. I was quite impressed by the film Ben Hur. I liked everything about it. When I was watching it I felt like I was there, back in Judea (the land I now lived in) but two thousand years back. When we got home my friends and I tried to build a chariot but got distracted and instead built a cart for the donkey of the milk man. We called it Ben Hur. The milk man was touched by our generosity.

Life was simple. You went school. You went to the beach. You joined scouts. You had a crush on someone or someone had a crush on you. You got ready for national service and if you managed your three years properly, you came out a tad more adult than North Americans who at the time were being spoiled rotten by their parents, the "greatest generation," who had won world war two for them.

Here in Israel World War Two never ended. The Arab League had invited in scores of battle hardened Nazis to give them a second chance to destroy the Jewish people in their many wars against us. As I read the papers today and watch the news and see young Harvard graduates tearing down statues of Abraham Lincoln, I scratch my head and ask what has gone wrong on that wonderful country? Time will tell. But I digress.

After the army most of us went to university. Most of us studied math, chemistry, medicine, engineering or law. "Tachlis" as my Yiddish speaking paternal grandparents said. "Practicality" as it translates into English. I was a good officer in the army, three years in tanks and a bit mechanical but, I did not have engineering imagination and rarely thought about how to improve things which is the hallmark of Israeli ingenuity. My mind was somewhere else.

During one of my holidays from my unit I went to the Israel Museum. It is a series of hyper modern buildings with various exhibits spread across an olive grove covered hillside in Jerusalem beside the Georgian Monastery where their national epic The Leopard, was composed during the Middle Ages. We have had full diplomatic relations with The Republic of Georgia since the fall of the Berlin Wall and Israeli tourists flock to its alpine meadows and Black Sea beaches every summer.

Thousands of Georgian Jews came to Israel after 1990. Some of them were in my unit. They were and are gregarious, kind and friendly, hospitable to a fault and remarkable singers and dancers. They told me that the Georgian Christians are among the least anti-Jewish people in the world and many of them have a deep sympathy with Israel, as they have been tyrannized by the Russians on and off for centuries.

At the Museum I saw an exhibit of Da Vinci drawings and paintings. I was hooked. I knew what I was going to do after the army. When I finished my service I worked for a car rental company for a year, lived at my parents and got a ticket to Europe. I started in Italy and ended up in Ireland and northern Scandinavia. I visited every public art gallery, museum and church that I could. When I ran out of money I washed dishes in restaurants.

I saw more European art in one year than most curators see in a lifetime. I came home and did three degrees in the Fine Arts with a doctorate on the persistence of New Testament images in

European art.

My teachers were German Jewish academics who came here in the late nineteen thirties escaping Hitler. They were stellar and had a very dry sense of humour. One of them, Dr Krauss, quipped one day in his Viennese accent, "It is obvious why the Mona Lisa smiles. Da Vinci was probably frowning from the start to the finish of the painting. If he smiled, she would have frowned. Ya. Young girls are like that. Or, am I telling you something you could not figure out for yourselves? Now go study."

My parents were appalled, "What are you going to do with all this European art knowledge? There is no market for it here. You are going to end up selling falafel in front of the Museum. You are wasting your life," my father remarked at a Friday night family dinner. My sister and brother defended me, albeit in an inarticulate way. Then one day I got a phone call.

A voice on the other end said "Mr. Narkiss, a representative of the government of Israel would like to meet with you at the following address at two o'clock tomorrow afternoon. This is not a hoax. Here is a government number that you can call to confirm that the meeting is real. I cannot say anything more over the phone."

The next day I was sitting on the veranda of the Anna Ticho restaurant, not far from the Jaffa Gate, which was once an eye clinic for the husband of this famous woman who drew evocative landscapes of Jerusalem during Mandate times. The man wore sunglasses, of course, but blended in like a typical Israeli. He introduced himself as Joseph, paid for lunch and then said, " We have been watching you for some time and are convinced that you are who and what we have been looking for, an expert in European art who can liaise with the European Union on behalf of our government on delicate matters such as art theft and smuggling."

They certainly know a lot more than they seem. I had just finished reading the *Da Vinci Conspiracy* and I had a copy of the book in my bag. After having finished reading it I had had an irrational desire to contact the author to see if I could help him. Here is how Amazon describes the book:

*The story begins, as stories do in all good thrillers, with a botched robbery and a police chase. Eight Apuleian vases of the fourth century B.C. are discovered in the swimming pool of a German-based art smuggler. More valuable than the recovery of the vases, however, is the discovery of the smuggler's card index detailing his deals and dealers. It reveals the existence of a web of tombaroli—tomb raiders—who steal classical artifacts, and a network of dealers and smugglers who spirit them out of Italy and into the hands of wealthy collectors and museums. Peter Watson, a former investigative journalist for the London Sunday Times and author of two previous exposés of art world scandals, names the key figures in this network that has depleted Europe's classical artifacts. Among the loot are the irreplaceable and highly collectable vases of Euphronius, the equivalent in their field of the sculpture of Bernini or the painting of Michelangelo. The narrative leads to the doors of some major institutions: Sothebys, the Getty Museum in L.A., the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston, and the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York among them. Filled with great characters and human drama, *The Medici Conspiracy* authoritatively exposes another shameful round in one of the oldest games in the world: theft, smuggling and duplicitous dealing, all in the name of art.*

Joseph told me that a major painting from a European Museum had been smuggled into the country by a UN diplomat and was probably on its way to the private vault of a Gulf Arab Sheikh. The European government from whose national gallery it had been stolen had asked the Mossad and Shabak (internal security) for assistance. He asked me if I would take on the

job. I said yes and within two hours I had signed non disclosure agreements and official secrets acts that amounted to thirty pages all told. I was not allowed to keep a copy.

This was my dream job and Joseph was my point man. I reported to no one else. I was in!

What was I supposed to find? Nothing less than the painting named *Ecce Homo* by Titian which I had seen years earlier in the National Gallery of Dublin in Ireland. Joseph told me it had been stolen recently and that they believed a UN diplomat had brought it to Jerusalem for sale to an Arab Sheikh who would no doubt keep it in a private vault and take it out to impress his English and Ukrainian mistresses during lavish private meals. This should not happen and I must stop it. Here. Now.

The Irish are usually quite anti-Israel, but Joseph said that if we find the painting we may gain some political good will from a nation that should have been sympathetic with Jewish national sentiments, but that votes against us all the time in the UN. Perhaps I thought. He gave me a list of contacts and had me sign off for ten thousand US dollars (marked of course) for bribery money. He asked me to start the next day despite the fact that it was the Sabbath. Yes, the Mossad unlike God, works seven days a week.

I interviewed the beggar in front of the Damascus Gate. He knew nothing. Then the Muslim seller of women's jewelry in the Old City. Then I found an Armenian potter who gave me my first clue. He said a Russian had been attacked in the Old City a few days earlier. I then walked over to the Garden of Gethsemane and bribed the Russian man who tended the gate. In Arabic he confirmed that a Russian had been attacked, had come to the Russian Church, had been treated by the nuns and then left on foot.

I then went back to the Christian quarter and the owner of a restaurant told me that he had witnessed a punch up which he

still could not believe, a group of nuns beating up a tall man and taking a large package from him. I then bribed an Italian nun who knew nothing about it but said that the only nuns who would do something like that would be the Irish, as they were known for their assertiveness. It is amazing how quickly an investigation goes when you are handing out 100 dollar bills with only a few questions asked.

I managed to get a list of every nun in the Old city and ended up in front of a church in the Christian quarter on the Via Dolorosa. I had focused on those nuns with Irish names. Sister Nancy McMurtry was the head nun in the Church of Ecce Homo, despite the fact that it had been founded by Italians and was still under their authority. I was ushered into her office and explained to her what it was I was doing and why. Over coffee and baclava she told me a little about her life.

She was about my age. She had been an art student in Dublin, and had completed a Phd in the iconology of the New Testament in European art. After her doctorate she had had a spiritual crisis. It ended up with her joining the church and becoming a nun. As a graduate student she had read my doctoral thesis. She laughed and told me that she was not surprised to finally meet me, although under these somewhat unexpected circumstances. I had suffered no spiritual crisis and very much wanted to find a wife and settle down. We had lost six million during the Holocaust and the Irish had maintained an embassy in Berlin until the bitter end. Nevertheless, we go on well and spent an hour talking art history before she spilled the beans.

She told me, "When we heard the painting went missing, we alerted our networks and communities. We knew the Russians were involved and put the squeeze on the head of the Russian Orthodox church. He alerted his monks and nuns. Once they knew who the man was, a rogue diplomat, they sent out a group of tough young nuns, caught him in the Old City, beat him up and took the painting. As we are the guardians of the church of

Ecce Homo they thought it was only just to leave it with us for safe keeping. Mr. Narkiss, or is it Yona, she said with a smile I am sure you will have no trouble delivering it to the Irish Embassy.”

She handed me the package and I left the building. The Italian had been wrong. It would appear that Russian nuns can be a tad more violent than Irish ones. Who was to know?

I went home and opened my undergraduate textbook in European Art:

Ecce homo ([/ˈɛksi ˈhoʊmʊ/](#), [Ecclesiastical Latin](#): [\[ˈettʃe ˈomɒ\]](#), [Classical Latin](#): [\[ˈɛkke ˈhomoː\]](#); “behold the man”) are the [Latin](#) words used by [Pontius Pilate](#) in the [Vulgate](#) translation of the [Gospel of John](#), when he presents a [scourged Jesus Christ](#), bound and [crowned with thorns](#), to a hostile crowd shortly before [his Crucifixion](#). The original [New Testament Greek](#): “[ἰδοὺ ὁ ἄνθρωπος](#)”, romanized: “[idoú ho ánthropos](#)”, is rendered by most [English Bible translations](#), e.g. [Douay-Rheims Bible](#) and [King James Version](#), as “behold the man”. The scene has been widely depicted in [Christian art](#), the most famous example being the version by Titian that hangs in the National Gallery in Dublin.

The painting is now back in the National Gallery and no one knows the difference. While it was gone the curators hung a lavishly framed fine art print in its place worth about 200 Euros. No one seemed to notice the difference. Food for thought.

I remember once seeing Umberto Eco give a lecture on the Last Supper. He described fifteen versions of it, including one that advertises an Italian family diner in the southern United States. He seemed to be asking the audience, “What is fake and what is real? How can we really tell?” He called these essays “Travels in Hyper Reality.” It was a question that at this point in time in my new career was a level above my payslip,

for my first adventure in the world of art theft had gone rather well. The Mossad was happy with their new recruit.

My only disappointment was that the following week, the Irish government once again voted against Israel at the United Nations.

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