Fabled Renaissance Man:

An Interview with Schlomo Ben Ari, Photographer, Painter, Musician

by Geoffrey Clarfield (April 1, 2020)



Even Athena Must Die, Museum of Fine Arts, Amsterdam

Schlomo ben Ari is an Israeli musician, photographer and painter who has had much success in Europe, New York and LA. His latest travelling international exhibit, “Bronze Age Conflicts” has once again confirmed his reputation among a growing number of discerning international art collectors, studios and museums around the world who are captivated by his Mediterranean images.

Vincent Nagy of the *New York Times* recently wrote, “Ben Ari brings an archaic feeling to his photos and images. It is as if he is conjuring up the past of the land of Israel, when Canaanites fought Israelites and Maccabees fought Hellenizers. I am not quite sure if he is a visual archaeologist or some sort of Moroccan born conjurer.”

I managed to find Ben Ari at his studio/house on the Carmel Hills in Haifa where he lives and works. He served me up a glass of hot green Moroccan tea, put in far too much sugar and told me to take my time.

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People say that you are a Moroccan-born Israeli artist. What does this really mean?

I was born in Fez Morocco in 1953. I left when my family took me to Israel in 1963. We were not a poor family nor a rich family. My father had a good business running taxis in the new city of Fez under the French and he had wisely put much of his savings in a French bank in Marseille. When we left Morocco for Israel, we arrived in Haifa and we have never left.

Visually I was very affected by the old city of Fez, its streets, its colours, the Jewish and Moslem costumes, the holidays that we celebrated, our visits to the tombs of saints, when a female family member wanted to conceive or when someone was sick. I remember the music and still listen to it, both Jewish and Arab and the Mediterranean light inflects my

childhood memories. I no longer live in Morocco but Morocco lives in me.

The Israeli side came gradually. I was a Moroccan Jew living on the Carmel, among Askhenazim, yet my family spoke French, Moroccan Arabic, Biblical Hebrew and soon picked up fluent modern Hebrew. My father worked for a taxi company with an Askhenazic immigrant named Chaim Tilo who had come from Belorussia when he was a child and spoke Arabic better than Hebrew as he used to drive to Amman and Damascus during the Mandate.

We went to the Sephardic Synagogue in Ahuza and I had a wonderful Bible teacher in secondary school. He also taught us history and I learnt much about the Greeks and the ancient conflict between our aniconic and their visual culture which is the backbone of Western art. My teenage girlfriend liked to draw. She loved Picasso and her family had coffee table books of the great painters of the West. One day she confessed that I reminded her of Omar Sharif. I still do not know how I feel about that!

Living and growing up in Israel, going to its museums, and watching Robert Graves series “I Claudius” on Israeli TV made me understand that the whole palette of the ancient Mediterranean was mine for the taking. I happen to be an Israeli artist with deep roots in North Africa and the ancient near east. I thank all my guides in Scouts who took me to those wonderful Israeli museums with their Bronze age gold and Greek sculpture! I am forever grateful although my father’s rabbi may not feel the same way. Moroccan rabbis are not keen on visual artists.



The First Titans, part of a series of painted photographs by Schlomo Ben Ari, The Basil Museum of Fine Arts

How did you fall into the habit of painting photographs?

I loved photography growing up and took pictures of everything and everyone. I also took drawing lessons from a German Jew who had escaped the Nazis and later from a French immigrant who had studied in Paris. One day I just got tired of struggling with two different aesthetics and decided to combine the two. My first exhibitions were here in Haifa and the curators did not know what to do with me. They wanted to know if I was a photographer or a painter. Instead of saying “both” I told them to bill me as a visual artist. It was that simple.



The Drinking Horn of Odysseus, courtesy of the private collection of Mr. and Mrs. G. Seligman, New York City

Where do you get your ideas for your painted photographs?

Travel and reading, but of a certain kind. When I can I have travelled the Mediterranean, Greece, Turkey, Italy, Spain and I have visited Morocco a number of times to reconnect visually. Often I get inspiration from *The Odyssey* or *The Iliad* or the ancient Greek myths and occasionally from the Bible. Once something gets set in my head I become a hunter and cannot rest until I find the image.



Clytemnestra, City Museum of New York

It took me a year until I “found” the image of Clytemnestra. I was hiking through rural Greece with my elder brother and two of our cousins who recently made Aliya from France because of the explosion of anti Semitism there. I had been thinking about what happens after a war is fought and won. What are some of the social costs? And what people look like when they are old and after the story has ended. I was searching for the outline of a frail woman and I found it on an enormous container used for making wine in Crete and that probably has not changed for three thousand years. The painting part allowed me to show her lying down looking up, petite and frail, perhaps in her late seventies, not so sure about who she is or what she was or what she had done, kind of like a candid snap of a film star from the forties caught on the streets of LA in the nineties– “Oh, you are Betty Davis!” or better still, “You were Betty Davis, weren’t you?” That canvas which was part of a series earned me twice the amount of my

previous works.

I must have tapped into something that was going on in people’s heads or perhaps in the art world. You can’t think too much about art. No, that is not true. I think about it all the time but what I mean is you cannot beat the muses. They will give you their gifts when you are open and on the quest. It is a very humbling feeling and other artists that I respect have confirmed this feeling.

How did you come up with Pugilists?

I found that I spent a lot of time looking at ancient Greek pottery with its labours of Hercules, Hellenic games heroes and ancient Greek warriors. These images are graphic and are seen from the outside. I wanted to give the impression of what it must have felt like to be a boxer in these semi sacred games, to be dizzy, to have bled, to have bandaged up and struggled to walk back into the ring, to be semi-conscious and full of fear, maybe even regret. I was trying to get behind the warrior ethos, to channel the kind of thing we read in the psalms of David. He modeled himself on these Greek warriors and was a mercenary for the Philistines for a while but he developed the first inner voice of any composer. I think his lyrics, the psalms are as good as Dylan. The effect I was looking for in this composition was the opposite of the ancient images, the frightened individual inside the hero.



Pugilists, The San Francisco Art Museum, courtesy of Debbie Nightengale

What is riding the tortoise all about?

It is a very simple image. You can just see the head of a woman to the left who appears to be riding a tortoise in the ocean. She is suspended in a great sea. The Mediterranean is under threat. It is very polluted. So much of the wildlife is under threat. I am not a biologist nor an ecologist but having seen Mediterranean turtles and tortoises in their natural habitat, I am hoping that even the planners and industrialists may help us save these animals, even if it is only because their children beg them to do so. We cannot live in a dead Mediterranean. If a tenth of the money that the oil rich Arab countries like Libya and Algeria had been spent on preserving the environment the entire sea would be in better shape. Instead they opted for expensive civil wars. That is tragic.



Riding the Tortoise, Montreal Museum of Fine Art, donated by Dr. Mark Doidge

How did you get the idea for the sealed tomb of Priam?

I had been hiking in Bulgaria with some friends from the Jewish community in Sofia. One of them was an archaeologist. It was just before the fall of the Berlin Wall and the Bulgarians were still making noises about their Thracian origins and the fact that their ancestors were similar to those of the ancient Greeks and Trojans. We must have climbed through scores of ancient tombs. There was one site which had been paved over, a large ten foot wide black stripe had been put on it, it was off limits to the wider public and the reason for this was it was thought there was buried treasure there. The locals called it the Treasure of Priam. I found the idea of not knowing if it was really true and decided that

that would be the first of my series on the Thracians. It was very well received.



The Sealed Tomb of Priam, The Glasgow Centre for the Fine Arts

I recently went on holiday to the Greek island of Naxos and I saw a bunch of teenagers wearing t-shirts with your now-iconic Death Mask of the Spartan Warrior on it. I understand that thousands of Greeks have bought these t-shirts and wear them proudly.

Again, I do not know how this happened. I was walking in Corinth and took a picture on a wall that looked like an ancient Spartan mask. I included it in my exhibition in Athens. It was actually a last minute piece and I had to

borrow a Greek artist friend’s studio to do the final painting. It seemed to have touched a chord. There is a line in the book of the Maccabees where in a letter from the Spartans they claim kinship with the Judeans of the time. That was in 180 BC.

Despite the old fashioned anti-Semitism that can be still found in Greece I think that the Greek youth liked the idea of an Israeli artist reminding them of this connection. At the time, they were furious with the Germans who were crushing them in the debt crisis and I think I simply struck a chord. I have been told that the greenery that I had added to the piece gave them hope for the future. It really is impossible to understand symbolism, your own or others. I think I was on automatic pilot on that one.



The Death Mask of the Spartan Warrior, Courtesy of the Private Collection of Alexis Onassis, Athens

One boat Returns from Troy was used as the front cover of a bootlegged album of the British Band Coldplay. How do you explain that?

If you look at this painting carefully you will see a tiny smudge of a boat towards the top of the picture and outlines of whales at the bottom. When I read *The Odyssey* and *The Iliad*, I often imagine what it must have been like for men to have returned from the war. They may have won the war but there was no guarantee they were to get home alive. I wanted to produce an image which showed how small men must have felt, how they felt that they were alive at the mercy of Poseidon the God of the sea.

I remember during my military service in Israel, I was in the navy and we had to stay out for 24 hours on the sea in a small rescue boat, no motor, just raincoats and no radio. The Mediterranean looked and felt very different to me for this period.

Now Coldplay has never come to Israel and that is a shame, but clearly some fan thought that one of their albums' mood was captured by my image. If they ever get over their BDS self righteousness I will personally host them in Haifa. In the meantime, they can see the image in the Museum in Manchester.

Pete Townsend from the Who bought it from me and then donated it. He is a great friend of Israel. Few people know that. He has visited me in Haifa a number of times. My British-born wife and he get along very well. They have the same sense of humour—pure Monty Python.



One Boat Returns from Troy, courtesy of the private collection of Mr. Peter Townsend, Manchester Museum of Fine Arts

My final question is about music. What kind of musician are you?

My band is called *Ein Kedem* which is Hebrew for the ancient well. We are soon to release our fifth CD and we have a following here in Israel and abroad. We get hundreds of thousands of hits on Youtube and not millions because we are non commercial. We explore the various traditions of Mediterranean music.

We work with Hebrew, Arabic, Spanish, Turkish and Greek singers and instrumentalists from both inside and outside of

Israel. We were well received at the annual Festival of the Oud here in Israel and, we have been invited by the King of Spain to perform at the palace and by the Sultan of Morocco—probably because of my family origins. I am not sure they are our music fans!

Of course, the family name Ari means Lion in Hebrew and it is a typical Sephardic name. We were booted out of Spain in 1450 during one of the many pogroms, some were Muslim inspired, some were Christian inspired. I never expected to play for Kings and Sultans but you know what they say about show business: "If there is no show, there is no business, and if there is no business, there is no show." Besides, they may buy one or two of my paintings. I would like to think we are being invited because of the quality of our music but clearly the King and the Sultan are using culture to make political statements. As long as I can say I am Israeli I am all for it. I hope this has been of some help.

Can we expect an exhibit of Moroccan inspired images anytime soon?

Yes, I am working on it and I hope to have it ready soon—definitely by next April Fool's Day.

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I thanked Schlomo and left his studio to return to the hustle and bustle of downtown Haifa. I breathlessly await his next album and his next show. I have no idea what gift God is going

to give to him, visually or musically, but He has already bestowed on him much success. Israel should be proud.



Entrance gate to the family house of the Ben Ari family, Haifa Israel, taken by Geoffrey Clarfield, 3/20

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Geoffrey Clarfield is an anthropologist at large. For twenty years he lived in, worked among and explored the cultures and societies of Africa, the Middle East and Asia. As a

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