HAARETZ

The Story of the First Art Museum Built in Israel

The Mishkan Museum of Art in Ein Harod was founded by driven kibbutz members who chose to focus on the communal and not on their personal lives. As Israel's first museum celebrates its 80th anniversary with a major exhibition, its former and current directors explain its uniqueness

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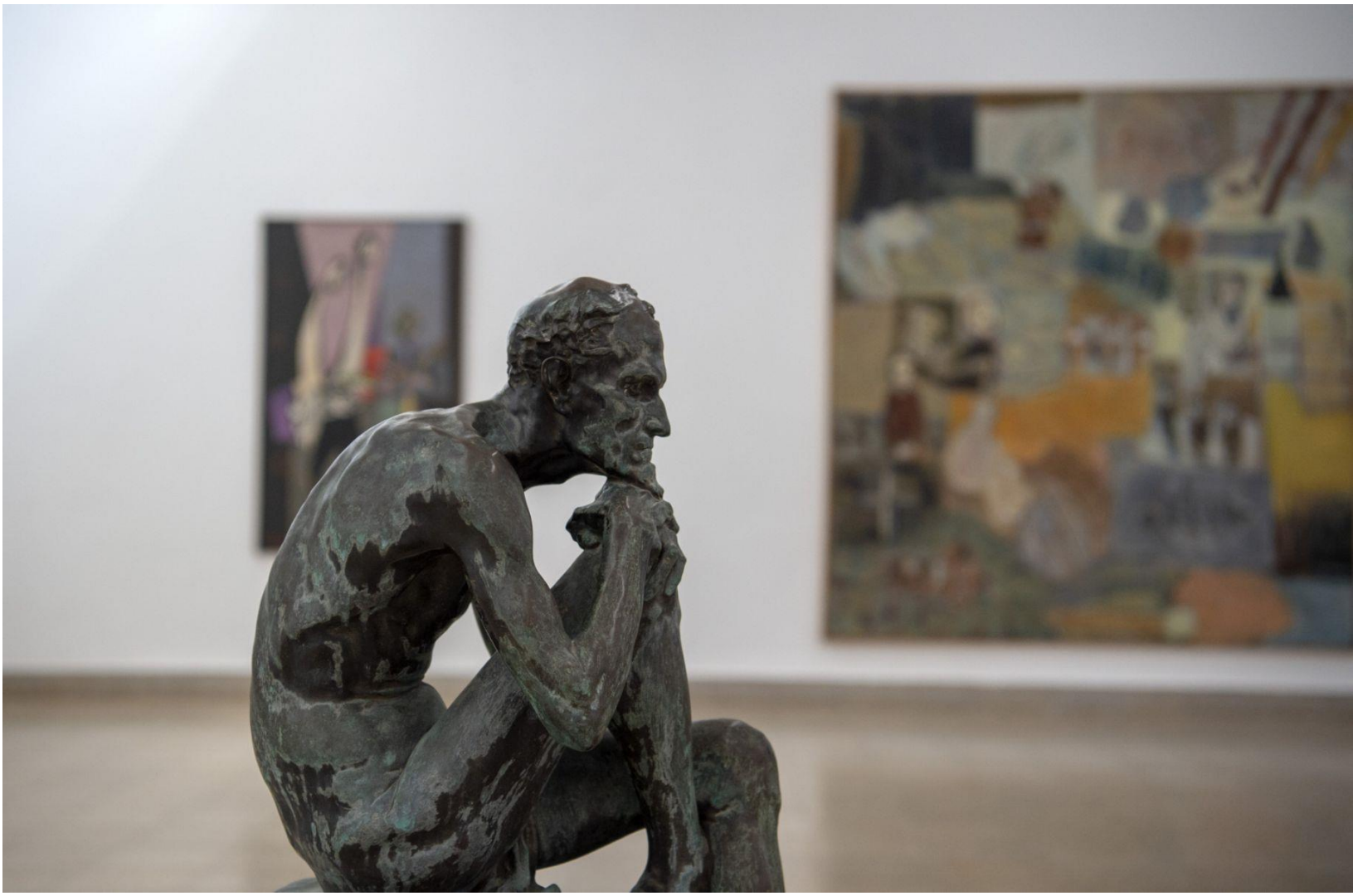
Photo by: Gil Eliyahoo

The Mishkan Museum of Art in Ein Harod became a powerful cultural magnet in the country's north even prior to the foundation of the Israeli state. For the past 80 years, it has stood there as a fact on the ground. For seven of these eight decades, it has been housed in an innovative and unique building – the first building in Israel that was planned as a museum. Over time it has expanded and developed, becoming highly professional, updating itself, and establishing its position. It has long come to be considered as a major institution on a par with the country's largest museums, and boasts a large collection of inspiring Israeli and Jewish art. Indeed, it is so familiar, that it is easy to take its existence for granted. The major exhibition currently on display at the museum in celebration of its 80th anniversary offers an opportunity to explore the museum's rich collection and contribution to the art world, and to consider a question that is far from trivial: How did this all happen in the first place?

The Mishkan Museum seems to embody numerous question marks and contradictions. It was founded in 1938, at a time when the Arab Revolt had created a serious economic crisis in the country; its founders had no artistic background; its envoys to Europe sought out artworks for the collection as the foreboding atmosphere preceding the Holocaust was palpably felt; its unique permanent building was founded in 1948, while the Israeli War of Independence was still ongoing; and it withstood the historical split that divided Ein Harod into two different kibbutzim in the 1950s. Similar contradictions also apply to the art featured in the museum:

From the collection of Mishkan Museum of Art, Ein Harod. Mark Antokolsky, Mephisto, 1883



although it was founded by members of Ein Harod, it never focused on art documenting kibbutz life, but rather featured abstract works and modern portraits. And although its members all believed in the secular, socialist values of the kibbutz movement, it features a large collection of Judaica and Jewish art concerned with the Diaspora and life in the Eastern European *shtetl*.

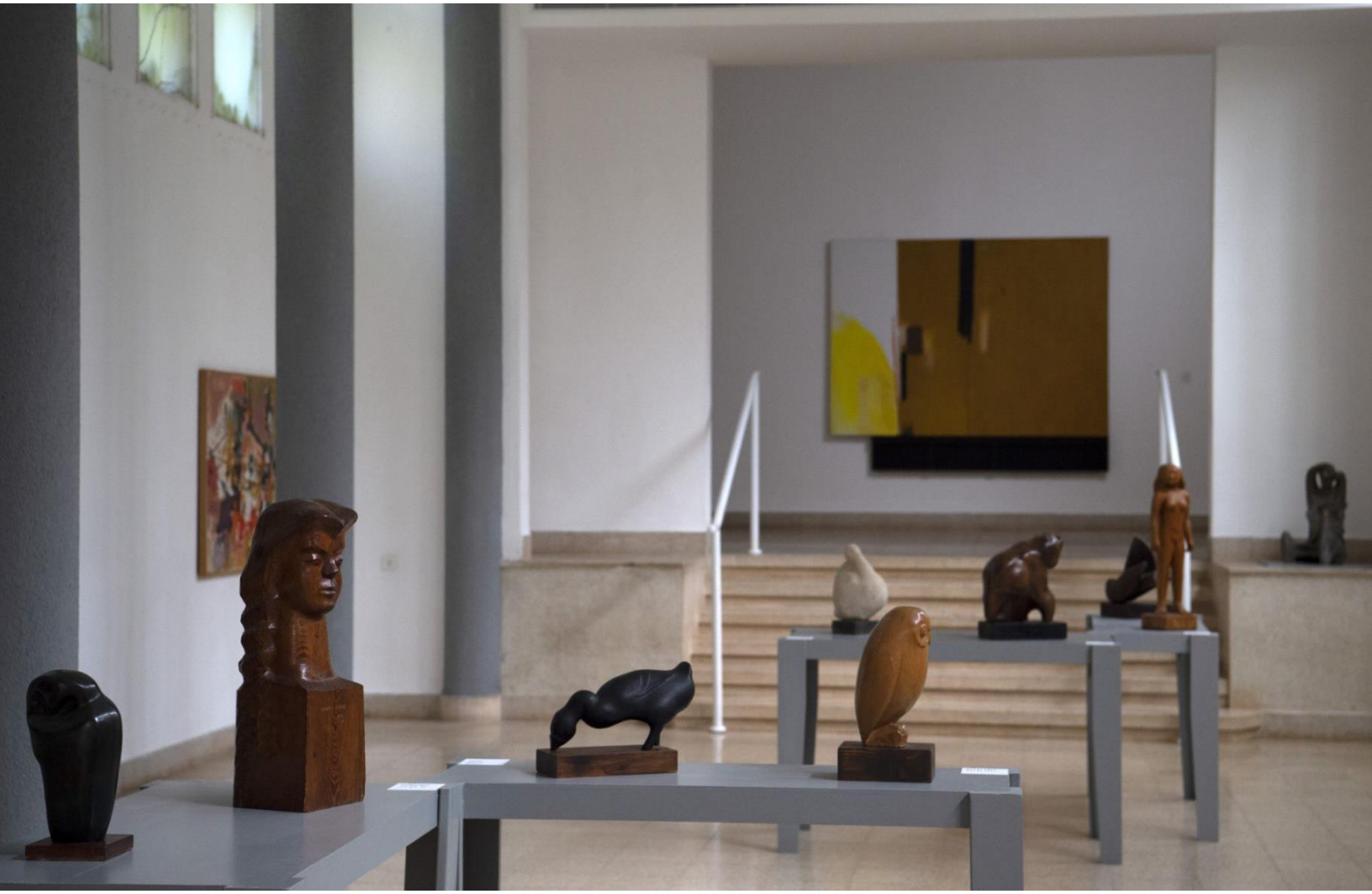
"You would have thought that people would say, "We'll establish a museum once we solve all the other problems," says curator Galia Bar-Or, a member of Kibbutz Ein Harod Meuchad who served as the director of the museum for some 30 years, up until 2016. "It was like, 'You have so much money to throw around that you are founding a museum, of all things?' Those who know the history are aware of the poverty they experienced. They had come to the country in the aftermath of pogroms, many of them were members of the second and third Aliyahs (waves of immigration to Israel). Their thirst for this subject wasn't based on academic studies. Some of them literally came from Hassidic courts or tiny Jewish towns. Still, they thought that this was extremely important and vital, and that without it, there was possibly no point in the rest of the story."

With No Prior Training

The current exhibition, "Treasures of the Mishkan Museum of Art," which will be open until March 25, 2019, includes 250 works that span a period of some 120 years – Jewish art from the late 19th and early 20th centuries, and Israeli art from its inception to the present. The exhibition is divided into 12 parts that have a chronological element, yet its overall structure is thematic – with subjects such as "Community Life," "Immigrant Artists," "Art in Pre-State Israel," and "Israeli Abstraction," and it focuses on concerns that preoccupied the museum's curators and collectors. Although it might appear as a retrospective of Jewish and Israeli art, the Mishkan's director and chief curator, Yaniv Shapira, insists that he did not attempt to remain objective. "This is an exhibition that tells the story of the first museum of art built in pre-state Israel," he says.

The exhibition's first part is devoted to Ein Harod. Among paintings by kibbutz members, works concerned with life on the kibbutz, and architectural drawings by Shmuel Bickels, which document the Mishkan building itself, is a wall devoted entirely to Chaim Atar, the founder of the museum that now bears his name. Alongside a sculpted image of Atar created by Itzhak Sirkin and a portrait painted by Moshe Mokadi are two paintings by Atar. "Although he was a very involved kibbutz member – to this day, the decorations he prepared for Passover are hung every year – and he served on committees and was a charismatic figure, he was first and foremost an artist," says Shapira. "When he entered his shack, his thoughts abandoned the kibbutz and corresponded with Soutine, with van Gogh."

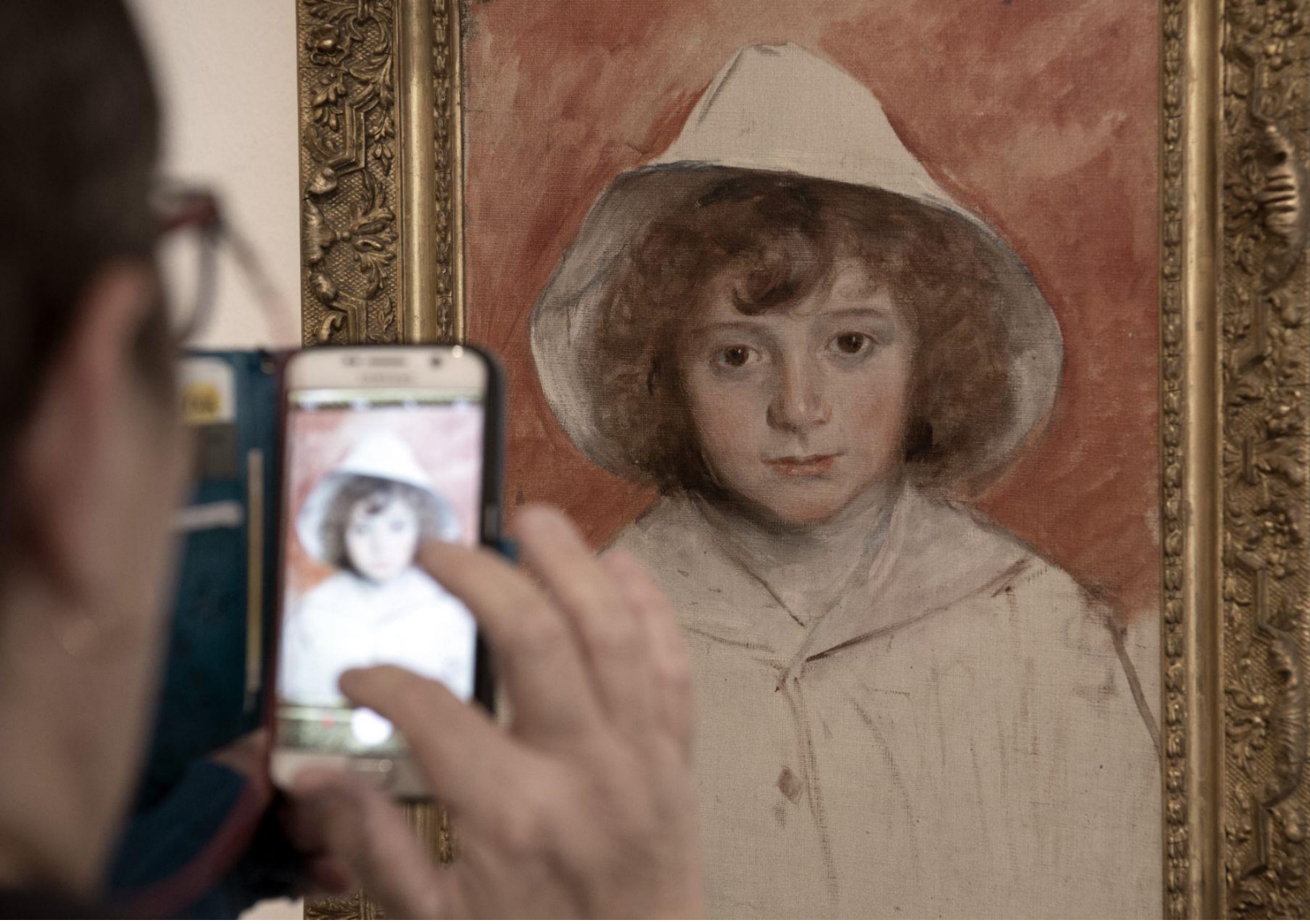
Atar had immigrated to the country from Russia and settled in Ein Harod in 1923. He likely began making art only then, without any prior training. He connected to local artists such as Mokadi and Menahcem Shemi, who introduced him to European styles of art-making. In the mythology of Ein Harod, Atar is viewed as the charismatic artist who swept the entire kibbutz onto its feet and single-handedly transformed the vision of a museum into a reality. He traveled twice to train in Paris – in 1933 and in 1937 – and purchased paintings in antique markets there. "I am asked why I am spending my last pennies on buying pictures," he wrote in a letter from 1937, "What can I do, I am madly committed to this idea of a museum in Ein Harod." The "Ärt Corner" that was finally inaugurated in early 1938 was located in his own studio until the designated shack was ready for use.



Israeli wooden sculptures in the exhibition. In the background: Michael Gross, *Untitled*, 1999

Yet although Atar was the catalyzing force, Shapira and Bar-Or insist that he could not have established such an institution on his own, certainly not in the context of the kibbutz, which required widespread consent. Despite the prevalent view concerning ideologically based priorities or the individual's ability to promote independent ideas in the collective context of the kibbutz, the members of Ein Harod did not put obstacles in Atar's way. They enabled him to work only half the day and use the rest of his time to make art, and the protocols of their meetings register no sweeping resistance to the idea of an "art corner." They agreed to budget this project, and the moment that the process of collecting artworks began, it became a group project like any other.

A short time after the inauguration of the art corner, another kibbutz member, Aharon Zisling – who would later sign the Israeli Declaration of Independence and serve as a minister in Ben-Gurion's government – dedicated himself to this goal, and spent years raising funds, garnering support, and collecting artworks. Despite the difficult local conditions at the time – economic crises, internal conflicts, and later also wars – the dream of the museum was gradually realized. The kibbutz journal notes: "The great value of consistently and systematically educating Man in the service of art, the understanding acquired through such an education, and the consistent habit of viewing and living with artworks is especially important for our youth and children."

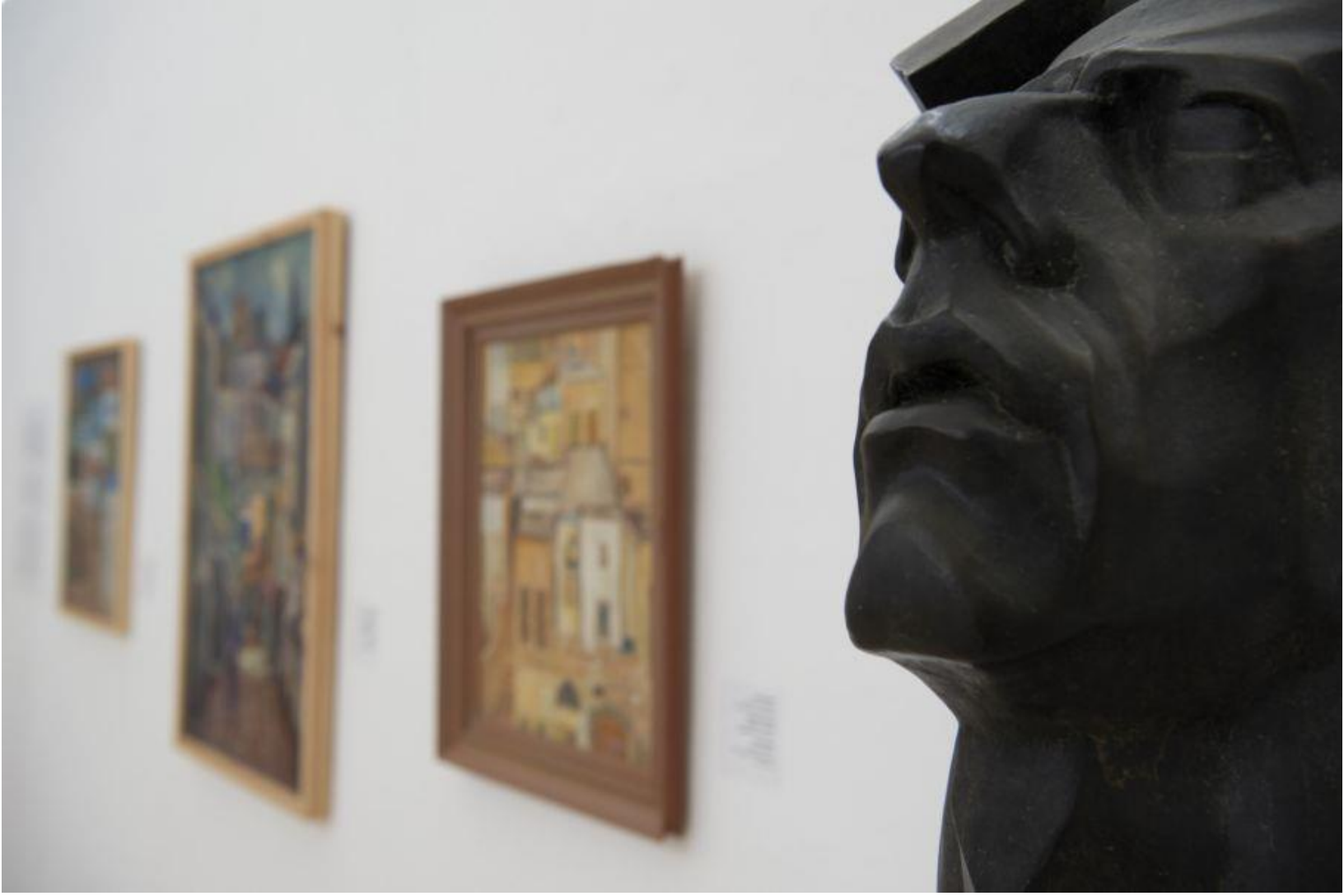


Shmuel Hirshberg, *Portrait of the Young Emanuel Romano Glicenstein*, 1887–1907

A Rich and Variegated World

This is just one of the ways in which the museum contributes to shattering conventional understandings about the kibbutz movement in general, and about Ein Harod in particular. The art collected in the museum – Jewish art and Judaica alongside Israeli art that was not "conscripted," as Bar-Or puts it, in the service of any ideological cause – points to the complexity of Ein Harod's ethos. One of the most impressive rooms in the current exhibition, and the one provoking the most excited responses, is the room dedicated to Jewish art, from "Everyday Community Life" to "Pogroms, Refugees, and the Holocaust." Paintings of synagogues, Jews at prayer, holidays, and the observance of Sabbath laws – all of which capture life in the *shtetl* and existence in the Diaspora – are located at the heart of the Hebrew kibbutz, which also prides itself on an impressive collection of Judaica and ritual objects.

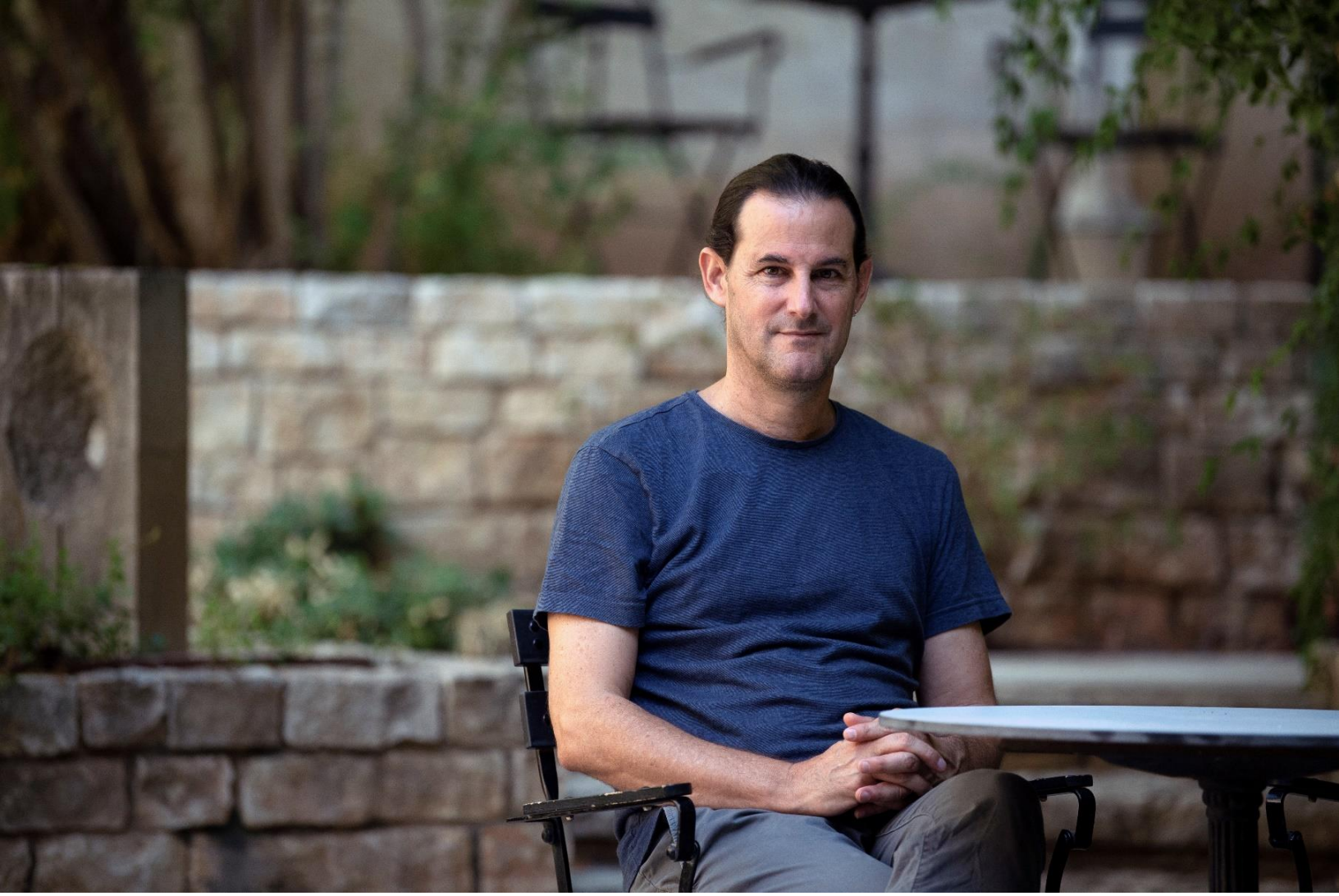
"The myth fixed in collective consciousness is that these two things, the kibbutz and religion, are incompatible," Shapira comments. "But one must understand that the kibbutz entity is very complex, and constitutes a rich and heterogeneous world. Some members of its various strains and movements rebelled against the religious world and violently rejected it, and others did not, remaining very conscious of Jewish tradition and culture. Speaking of Ein Harod, the



Ze'ev Ben-Zvi, *The Pioneer*, 1936

exhibition and this museum bring to the fore the deep historical consciousness that drove the pioneering kibbutz members and founders of the museum – the understanding that without an acquaintance with Jewish tradition and our past in the diaspora, we remained incomplete."

The Antisemitism sweeping across Europe and the Second World War also played a role in the construction of the collection. In addition to working to bring Jews to the country in order to save them, the envoys sent to Europe by the kibbutz worked to locate and salvage Jewish artworks. "The envoys were very aware of what was going on, it was explicitly stated in their letters that people had to realize that there were lives in danger, but also that an entire culture was on the verge of becoming extinct, and that was also very important," says Bar-Or. "So everywhere where these envoys went, they collected something. Everyone was aware of the existence of the museum and that artworks had to be collected for it. The sense was that they were not as safe elsewhere in the world. They viewed the museum as a place that was salvaging Jewish culture for the sake of the entire world. They were charged with this mission. There were similar trends in a range of other cultural fields."



Yaniv Shapira, Director of the Mishkan Musuem of Art and curator of the exhibition

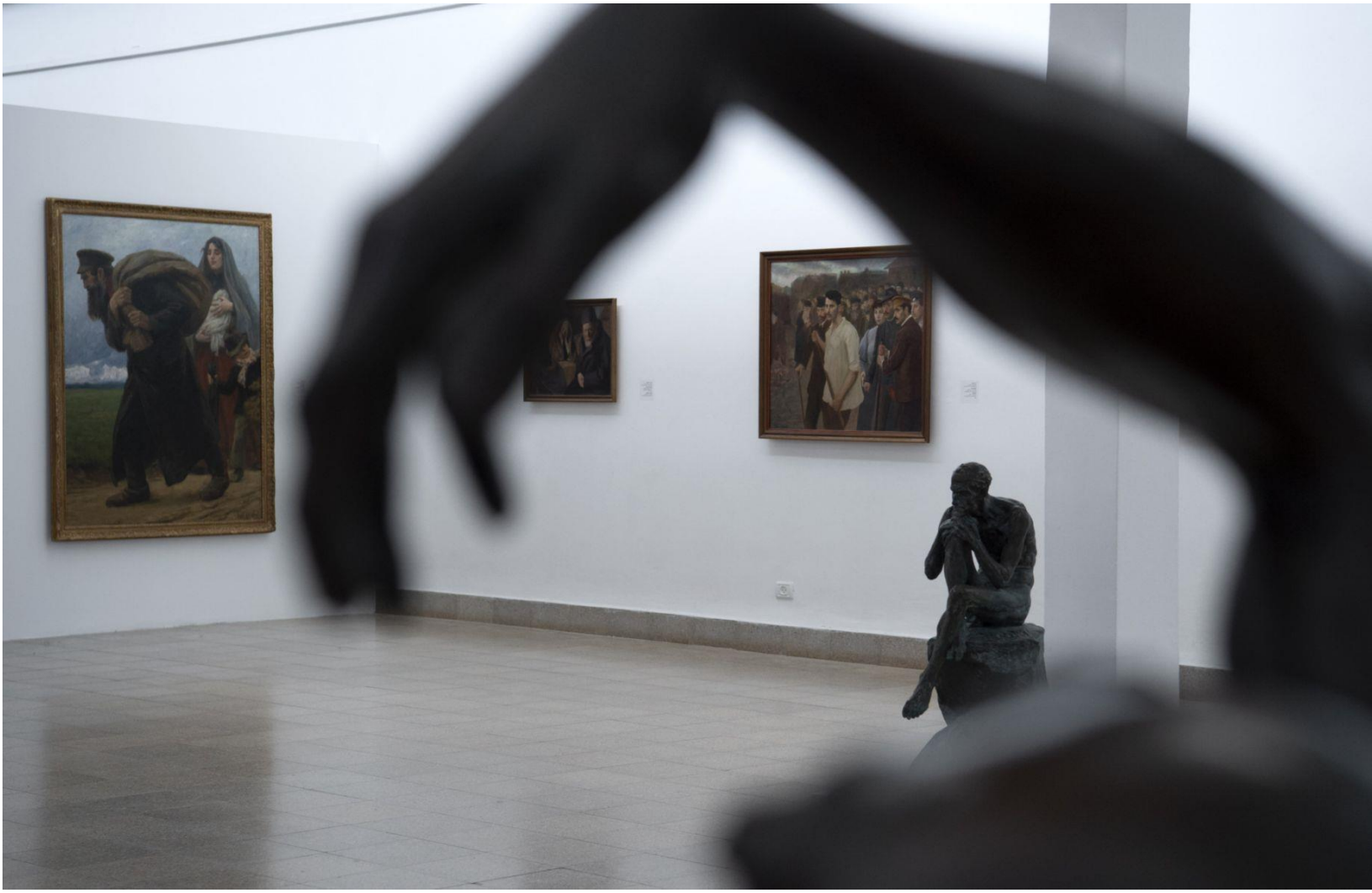
The choice to focus on art that was not directly identified with the kibbutz also stemmed from the character of the Kibbutz Hameuchad movement, which was represented by Ein Harod. Like the decision to establish a museum, the conception of the art that would be featured in it gave expression to the importance of the individual within a collective society. Suffice it to observe Atar's own paintings: dark portraits featuring children with somewhat desolate expressions, who were painted with crude brushstrokes reminiscent of European art. "They do not conform to any model of pioneering youth," remarks Bar-Or. "There is no water tower or cowshed in the background."

In the room dedicated to art on the kibbutz, Shapira reveals how painters affiliated with the Shomer Hatzair movement – such as Ruda Reilinger and Dan Frank – captured outdoor spaces, milk cans, and the working life, while members of the Kibbutz Hameuchad movement, such as Ori Reisman and Noam Rabinowitz, worked in a more abstract, expressive vein. "The Mishkan never took it upon itself to represent the kibbutz or kibbutz art," Shapira says. "From the outstart, it viewed itself as a universal, national museum with great aspirations, which sought to feature only good art and important artists. Although it was established on Ein Harod, in

order to enter the collection you have to be a good artist, it isn't enough to be a kibbutz member."

"It would be incorrect to view it as a kibbutz museum," Bar-Or adds. "One can show how it was the product of the Kibbutz Hameuchad movement and we did that, but in many senses, who cares?"

"It's possible that if you asked one kibbutz member after another, certainly the first generation born on the kibbutz – most grew up with great respect for the museum, but it was not necessarily the art they liked. Nobody studied this, and in a way there is something nice about the fact that the kibbutz enabled this phenomenon to exist nevertheless. There are two aspects to the process in which the museum collection was consolidated," she concludes. "One is the thirst for an intellectual and cultural life, the conception that it was important for this place to put an emphasis on the life of the spirit and on culture, because they were an inseparable part of the ability to survive under harsh conditions. The understanding was that art and culture were empowering; that a museum was a sphere that provided an intimate space in a very crowded society; that it was also empowering in the context of traumas; and that it was a powerful social institution. The second thing that is still terribly important today, in the age of

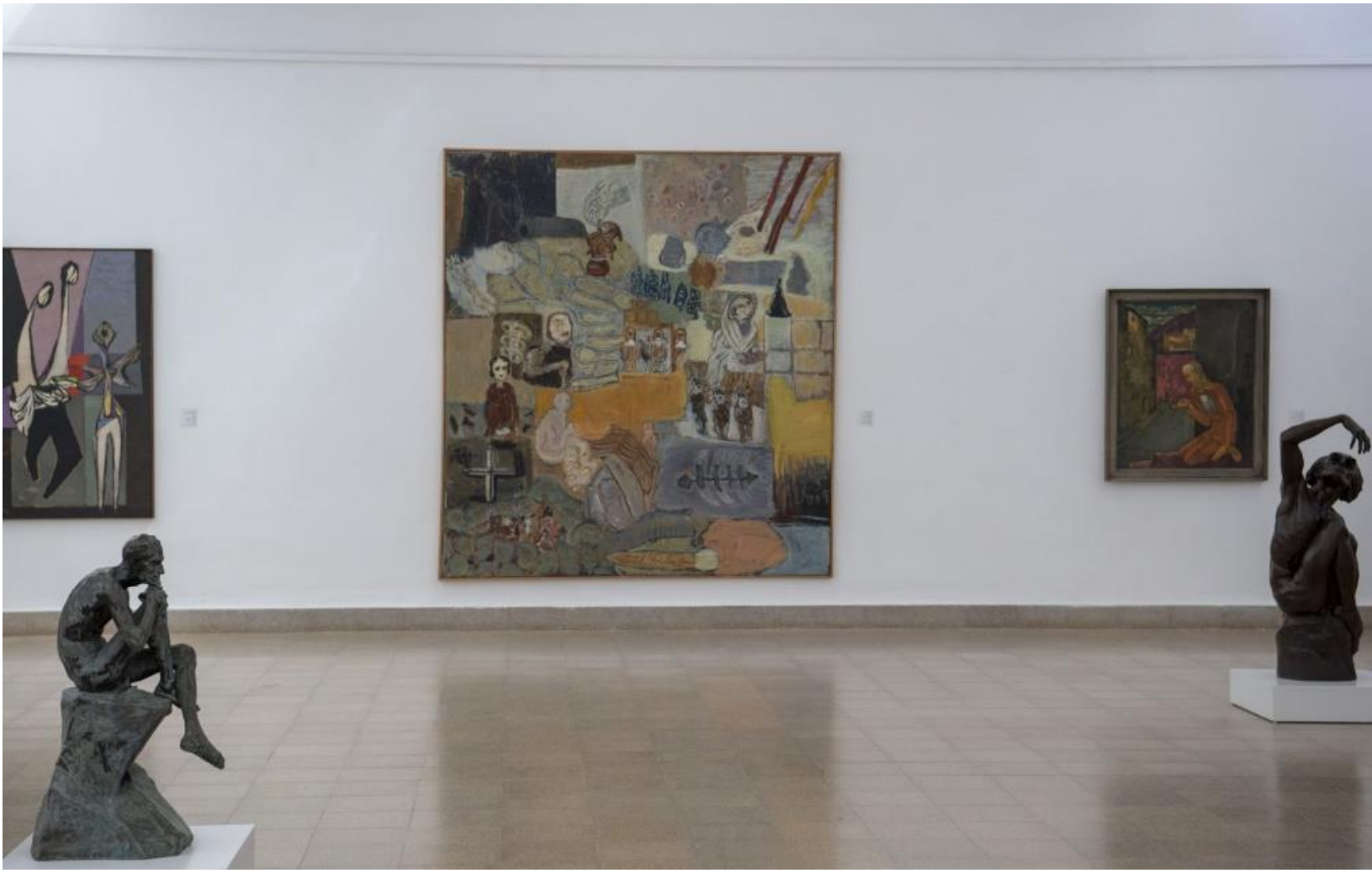


From the exhibition: the sculpture Mephisto by Mark Antokolsky, 1940s, on the wall from right to left: Krestin Lazar, Self-Defence, Maurycy Minkowski, Jewish Refugees Family, 1915 oil on canvas.

Miri Regev, is the understanding that art and culture amount to much more than the Zionist narrative, or any narrative for that matter. It was an act of survival, on both an individual and a collective level. The Kibbutz Hameuchad movement, in contrast to the Shomer Hatzair, had a greater awareness of this. There was much discussion of the individual as a sensor that alerts society when it is approaching an abyss. There was this belief that the artist was endowed with such a sensibility, and that society simply needed it even if it had no concrete understanding of what this or that painting was about. This story is unique to this movement, and it's made evident in the museum collection."

A Unique Set of Circumstances

Atar served as the museum's director until his death in 1953, and was followed by four additional directors. Bar-Or was responsible, among other things, for expanding the focus of the collection, increasing the range of concerns explored in the exhibitions, and transforming it into a cutting-edge, contemporary museum. Yet Shapira, who assumed this position two-and-a-half years ago, underscores that the treasures of the Mishkan reveal the extent to which the museum exceeds the sum of its parts. "Although its directors and curators changed over time, there is something about this place that adds up to more than the individuals who worked



On the wall, from left to right: Leon Engelsberg, Holocoust 1950s, oil on canvas. Euge'ne Zak, The Blind Beggar, 1925, oil on canvas. Jankel Adler, Tremblinka, 1948, oil on canvas.

here," he says. "Anyone coming to direct a place brings himself, his worldview and his eye, but there is something about the Mishkan that also brings you to it, that does not say, 'take me and make me your own.' There is a very unique set of circumstances here, which I still do not understand and am struggling to make sense of: a matter of respect and of paying tribute, of not effacing what came before you. It happens here, perhaps precisely because of the museum's location on a kibbutz."

When the exhibition closes, the 80th-anniversary celebrations will continue with two additional exhibitions. The first will feature 14 contemporary artists who created special works inspired by the museum. The second exhibition will be devoted to Chaim Soutine, perhaps the most successful Jewish artist, who in many ways encapsulated the spirit of the museum. "It went through different stages, different states," Bar-Or comments about the development of the Mishkan over the past 80 years. "In many senses, its existence today is less secure. To begin with, a museum on the periphery has to work very hard because it constantly has to create a certain environment and intensity. It is very fragile: even the building appears fragile, because it is so thin and seems to be sitting there simply in order to capture space and light. But it is also very fragile in the sense that it has no real economic or political base, no large surrounding population with access to resources and the power to move things, but I felt that that was part of its beauty. It has to constantly reinvent itself."