

# Looking in the mirror

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Gil Goldfine

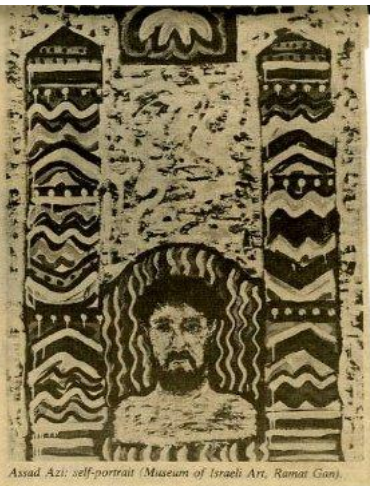
**PAINTING** A self-portrait is not always a search for identity or an act of promoting personal revelation. Historically, it has also provided an artist with the means for instant subject-matter. The vehicle for expression, whatever it may be, is merely the rack onto which a painter hangs his hat. The work of art relies on the combined force of line, shape, chromatic scales and textures coalescing into a substantial, personal reflection.

Assad Azi is a young Druse from Sfar'am. His one-person exhibit (the first by an artist from an Israeli ethnic minority in a major museum) is his third devoted to the theme of self-portrait. Seeking the reasons for this, both Meir Aahronson, director of the museum and curator of the show and his catalogue co-editor Oded Broshi, delve into the artist's dilemma of living within a sphere of cultural alternatives and facing the conflicts of varying social encounters.

Looking for ethnographic sources provides only a marginal basis for the realization of Azi's pictures; for in the end accomplishment does not depend on facial characteristics or surrounding decoration, but on the ability to use them as transcendental elements in solid, meaningful painting.

Each of Azi's tightly organized compositions reflects a previous one. His schematically painted portraits are placed cameo-like at the centre of surrounding geometric, architectural, decorative and symbolic images from Christian, Moslem and Jewish cultures, as well as the natural environment. Richly patterned slabs (carpets, mosaics), Matisse-like leaf patterns as applied cutouts, ornamental arabesques and religious structures (mosque, church) seem to protect and insulate Azi, girding him like a socio-political wall. The paintings are rather Byzantine or Coptic in their flatness and surface richness, collage, gold-leaf and silver being used as additives to the multi-coloured decoration. Azi peers out from the rough surface like a bearded prophet or a mystic in an icon seeking to make contact with his audience.

The variety of painterly options provided by Azi indicates a fertile and imaginative mind. He is a Western-oriented painter to the core; and it is only the compelling frills and decorations enveloping the painterly surfaces that remind the viewer of his heritage, though even those elements have been absorbed into the artistic language of contemporary art. As Azi has said of himself:



Assad Azi; self-portrait (Museum of Israeli Art, Ramat Gan).