

Blount Seminar 2010
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Semiotics and the Levant Fairs of Palestine

Semiotic theory is, as in many fields, presented scientifically. But, as in many fields including medicine, its application is more art than science and, to that extent, subjective. It is important to keep that in mind when evaluating material for its content. Interpretation, like beauty, is very much in the eye of the beholder.

Professor Jack Child has said in the opening sentence of his book *Miniature Messages: The Semiotics and Politics of Latin American Postage Stamps*, “Semiotics is the study of signs and the messages they contain.” (1)

The material collected over many years that resulted in my monograph, *The Flying Camel; The Levant Fairs of Mandate Palestine* lends itself to a semiotic reading and it is this case study that is presented here. Ephemera in this context is to be considered as paraphilately: close to it, surrounding it, but not of it.

But first some background about the Fairs is needed.

Regional and World trade fairs have been a staple of international commerce since the mid 19th century. As markets and industries developed outside the European sphere, such fairs were instrumental in demonstrating the capabilities of these emerging countries or regions.

Near East regional fairs were held regularly in Bari, Italy; Thessaloniki, Greece and Izmir, Turkey after WWI. With the post-WWI emigrations to Palestine, her population began changing from a primarily rural and agricultural one to a more urban and entrepreneurial one. The need to promote the Palestine of the Yishuv, as the Jews of Palestine were called, as a vital economic link between West and East reflected the cosmopolitan attitude of many of the new immigrants who had significantly more experience with the secular world than did the earlier settlers or indigenous population.

Early in the 1920's, there were several small local fairs, usually in Haifa, devoted solely to the agricultural products of Palestine. Initially, the Palestinian Levant Fairs were known as the Near East Fairs. Four were held from 1925 to 1929 and were distinguished from the earlier fairs in being general exhibitions for industrial and commercial, as well as agricultural, products. This change in the scope of the fairs reflects a clear move away from the romantic notion of Zionism as a return to the land, figuratively and actually, to a more worldly view wherein the Yishuv would be not only agriculturalists

but also the businessmen who sold those products, as well as others produced in the factories of a new Palestine.

The 1932 [or Fifth] Palestine and Near East Fair was the first to be called a “Levant Fair” in recognition of its increasing importance. It was the first to have official foreign governmental representation including Great Britain, U.S.S.R, Egypt, Cyprus, Rumania, Turkey, Switzerland, Poland, Latvia and Bulgaria. 831 foreign firms exhibited and 285,000 people attended.

The 1934 [or Sixth] Levant Fair, held from April 26 to May 25, was a masterpiece of European modernist design, projecting the forward-looking views of the new wave of European Jews coming to Palestine through the construction of an entirely new complex on the banks of the Yarkon River, by a group of young architects, trained in Europe, many at the Bauhaus, under the direction of Arie El-Hanani. The fairgrounds were an integrated assemblage of International Style buildings. In fact, it was the largest such integrated grouping ever constructed.

All aspects of the Fair, including architecture, interior design, landscaping, signage and graphic design were coordinated to demonstrate to the world the vigor and forward-looking character of the Yishuv at a time when Jews were under attack in Europe. It is the only one of the Fairs held in Palestine to be considered a World’s Fair and was by far the largest and most successful of all the Levant Fairs held during the Mandate. Over 600,000 visitors paid to attend an event that included 36 foreign governments and 2200 firms (1500 being foreign). (2)

The Seventh, and last, Levant Fair to be held during the Mandate was open from April 30 to May 30, 1936 at the same site as the 1934 Fair. Because of the civil unrest in Palestine and gathering clouds in Europe, it was not nearly as successful as the 1934 Fair.

By looking at the changing image of the Fair as put forth by the designers, we can understand how semiotics was foremost in their thinking. Jack Child notes three basic classifications for a sign: as an index (a pointer taking the viewer somewhere), an icon (a graphical pictorial representation) and a symbol (an element that stands for something else). (3)

The logo created for each Fair is the easiest part of the design complex to analyze. In each, the index is the Fair name and location and the icon is the central image. After 1932, the central image became both the icon and the symbol, the flying camel having become synonymous with the Fair. (Figure 1)



Figure 1: the 6 logos

No particular logo is associated with the First Fair (1925).

The Second Fair (Spring, 1926) used a leaping gazelle (an icon), an animal indigenous to the country, as its logo. The gazelle has an antiquated appearance and is seen leaping over a 19th century ship, the ship semiotically representing trade over a distance (a symbol).

The Third Fair (Autumn, 1926) used the Spring logo as well as another, more complicated, one. The gazelle, leaping over the ship, is now flanked by wings at the top, a symbol of Mercury, god of speed and commerce, and an anchor at the bottom, reinforcing the maritime symbolism.

For the Fourth Fair (1929), the logo was changed from the leaping gazelle to an image of the modernist headquarters of the Fair promoters with a modern ship docked nearby.

The Fifth Fair (1932) was the first to use the Flying Camel as its logo, designed by Arie El-Hanani. There is an apocryphal tale that when Mayor Dizengoff first proposed hosting, at Tel Aviv, a true “Levant Fair”, such as those held throughout the Near East, he was told by the Mayor of Jaffa that it would happen “when camels fly.” Thus we have the use of the Flying Camel as its logo now that the Fairs were well established and successful. The bell around the camel’s neck indicates the historical importance of its domestication. The image is representational. Removal of the reference to a ship

simplifies the design and the lettering gives a modern feel but total commitment to the modern world has not yet occurred.

The Sixth (1934) Fair shows a tendency towards a more modernist depiction of the camel, losing some detail and showing signs of streamlining, but retaining the bell.

But for the Seventh (1936) Fair, the projection of, and commitment to, a modernist esthetic is seen in the further, almost abstract, streamlining of the Flying Camel logo, reflecting Arieh El-Hanani's belief in progress as a definable and attainable goal in Eretz Yisrael. The bell is no longer present; that anchor to the past is gone.

These logos were used on all promotional ephemera, from poster stamps to machine cancels and meter slogans, from letterheads to entry passes. For a full record of the known ephemera, the reader is referred to my monograph. Here let us examine some representative examples, in particular the sole philatelic manifestations, the machine and meter slogans.



Figure 2: Spring 1926 admission ticket

Material from the first three Fairs is very rare. An admission ticket for the Second or Spring Fair of 1926 shows the old-fashioned gazelle logo. (Figure 2)



Figure 3: 1929 admission ticket and staff pass

It is not at all clear why the Fair promoters chose to change their logo for the Fourth Fair of 1929. Perhaps they envisioned a future change although the creator of that change was not involved until 1932. In any event, the use of a modern building and ship certainly shows a move away from the archaic as seen in the admission ticket and staff pass in Figure 3.



Figure 4: Exhibitor's admission ticket and machine slogan with logo

Arieh el-Hanani's first logo, for the Fifth Fair, takes another step towards modernity. The camel, while representational, has wings conjuring the idea of something a bit fantastical, out of the ordinary and, perhaps, a reference to the air mania sweeping the world. This notion ties in well with the idea of flight on the one hand and the Flying Camel on the other. Both at first seemed impossible, but both were actually attained, one in the form of the airplane, the other in the form of the Fair itself. This was the first Fair to use a logo in the machine slogans. (Figure 4) (4)



Figure 5: 1934 machine cancel and meter slogan on official Fair envelope to Germany

This iconography, and what it implied about the Yishuv, was further disseminated in the remarkable outpouring of promotion for the Sixth Fair, the most successful during the Mandate. In this 1934 Fair as well as the next in 1936, the logo was used in both machine and meter slogans. (Figure 5) (5)



Figure 6: 1936 streamlined logo on official stationery and the (rare) Tel Aviv Postage Paid machine imprint

For the Seventh Fair, el-Hanani completely streamlined the logo, making clear the slow progression toward a modern outlook. (Figure 6) (6)



Figure 7: 1934 special labels for Fair officials mimicked the Tel Aviv town coat-of-arms

Another, subtler, symbol is present in the shape of special labels used only by officials of the 1934 Fair. Its shape is that of the seal of Tel Aviv within which is the flying camel: Tel Aviv as the gestator of the Fairs. (Figure 7)



Figure 8: The Flying camel first leaps out from the Tel Aviv coat-of-arms (1934) and then from the world itself (1936)

Furthermore, some ephemera from the 1934 Fair shows the camel to be leaping, not from a vacuum, but out from the seal of Tel Aviv. Indeed, the next step in the progression of this “leaping out from” theme is seen among the 1936 ephemera where the camel is leaping out from the world itself. This is yet another symbol of the increasingly internationalist outlook of Palestine. (Figure 8)

I have been able to discern no particular pattern or rationale for whether the leaping animal is facing to the left or to the right.



Figure 9: Site of the 1929 and 1932 Fairs

I have implied earlier that the fairgrounds themselves had semiotic importance. This fact can readily be seen by comparing postcard or photographic images of the 1929 and 1934 sites. The 1929 site is clearly antiquated but it sufficed through 1932. (Figure 9)



Figure 10: Site of the 1934 and 1936 Fairs

With the success of that Fair, it was deemed necessary to construct a new larger and more modern facility. (Figure 10) As I have said, this task was given to Arie El-Hanani, a Bauhaus trained architect, who controlled all artistic aspects of the undertaking. What he created was an entity all of whose design parameters were carefully integrated to project the image that he and the Yishuv wished to project. It was a rousing success and, I am told, portions of the site are now being restored.

The inclusion of his designs within official machine cancels, postpaid and meter slogans and advertising envelopes follows a well-established practice common in Germany (and other places) at that time. Such items add significantly to our understanding of the event being promoted and what it meant to the organizers and the populace.

This paper has addressed my view that the study of the semiotics of philately is incomplete with consideration of parafilatelic material such as I have shown.

Footnotes:

- 1) Jack Child, *Miniature Messages: The Semiotics and Politics of Latin American Stamps*. (Durham: Duke University Press, 2008), p. 13.
- 2) Sigal D. Kunda & Robert Oxman, “The Flight of the Camel: The Levant Fair of 1934 and the Creation of a Situated Modernism,” in *Construction a Sense of Place*, pp. 52-75, passim.
- 3) Child, p. 14.
- 4) Krag machine cancellations with this logo were used in Haifa, Jaffa, Jerusalem and Tel Aviv.
- 5) Krag machine cancellations with this logo were used in Haifa, Jerusalem and Tel Aviv. Meter slogans with this logo were used only at the Fair promoters headquarters in Tel Aviv. There are 5 types of meter slogans known in proof form but only here types are known actually used.
- 6) Universal machine cancellations with this logo were used at Haifa, Jaffa, Jerusalem and Tel Aviv. Three types of meter machine slogans are known, again all from Tel Aviv. Tel Aviv used this logo on a Postage Paid machine cancellation.

Bibliography:

- Child, Jack. *Miniature Messages: The Semiotics and Politics of Latin American Stamps*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2008.
- Groten, Arthur H., M.D.. *The Flying Camel: The Levant Fairs of Mandate Palestine*. Cleveland: Society of Israel Philatelists, 2009.
- Kunda, Sigal D. and Robert Oxman. “The Flight of the Camel: The Levant Fair of 1934 and the Creation of a Situated Modernism.” In *Construction a Sense of Place*, ed. Haim Yacobi. Aldershot: Ashgate, 2004.