

Semiotics and the Levant Fairs of Palestine

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"Semiotics is the study of signs and the messages they contain." This is the opening sentence of a marvelous book by Jack Child entitled *Miniature Messages: The Semiotics and Politics of Latin American Postage Stamps*, published by Duke University Press in 2008. There have been a number of similar books written about the stamps of the United Kingdom, the Netherlands and Italy, among others. I am unaware of any such work devoted to paraphilately.



I reread my latest monograph, *The Flying Camel; The Levant Fairs of Mandate Palestine*, available from the Society of Israel Philatelists with that in mind and saw that I had approached the topic without realizing it. But first some background.

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 (the Jews of Palestine) as a vital economic link between West and East reflects the cosmopolitan attitude of many of the new immigrants who had more significant experience with the secular world than did the earlier settlers.

Early in the 1920's, there were several small local fairs devoted solely to the agricultural products of Palestine. Initially, the 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 [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 [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 waves 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, under the direction of Arie El-Hanani. The fairgrounds were an integrated assemblage of International Style buildings. 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).

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 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). I have implied in the earlier paragraphs that the fairgrounds themselves had semiotic importance. This fact can readily be seen by comparing the postcard images of the 1929 and 1934 sites (Fig. 1).



Figure 1: These postcards show the venues for the 1929 and the 1934 Fairs. A visitor to the prosaic 1929 venue would not expect the same degree of excitement and wonder as one attending the 1934 site.



Figure 2: The five logos created for the Tel Aviv fairs show a clear transition from the old to the new. The message is that the old-fashioned ways of Ottoman Palestine are giving way to the modern ones of Europe.

The easiest part of the design complex created for each Fair to analyze is its logo. 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 (Fig. 2).



Figure 3

The Fifth Fair (1932) was the first to use the Flying Camel as its logo, designed by Arieh 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.

No particular logo is associated with the First Fair (1925). The Second and Third Fairs (1926) used a leaping gazelle (an icon), an animal indigenous to the country, as their 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).

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 (Fig. 3).



Figure 4

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 (Figs. 5, 6 & 7).



Figure 5



Figure 6



Figure 7

But for the Seventh (1936) 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 (Fig. 8).

These logos were used on all promotional ephemera, from poster stamps to machine cancels and meter slogans, from letterheads to entry passes. This way of looking at paraphilatic material adds yet another dimension to the possibilities inherent in collecting and exhibiting.

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