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Art. Faith. Community.

The Studia program enables tourists to peek into the world of local Israeli artists, while empowering Jerusalem women



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A group of Studia artists visit the Wolfson Museum of Jewish Art at Hechal Shlomo, where several pieces of their art are on exhibit: (Back row from left) Gila Elyashar-Stocklisky, Malka Schallheim, Menucha Yankelevitch and Michal Halevy; (front row from left) Hanna Salmon, Haya White and Ety Barclay. (Marc Israel Sellem)

Women and art in Jerusalem

Studia fuses color and community

• MAAYAN HOFFMAN

Art. Faith. Community. To some, these are just three words. But to artist Gila Elyashar-Stocklisky, the words describe “Studia: Women & Art in Jerusalem,” a daughter project of the social tourism program “Women and Stories of Jerusalem,” co-sponsored by the Tourism Ministry and the Jerusalem Municipality.

Studia enables tourists to peek into the world of local Israeli artists, to see their work and hear their life stories. It also empowers Jerusalem women to earn an income from home through their creativity.

“It is hard for even the most talented artists to make a living selling their art,” said Elyashar-Stocklisky, who uses ceramics and bronze to create intricate and delicate sculptures, creates paintings that show nature both in its ethereal and earthly forms, and designs jewelry that combines colorful bold crystals and gemstones, along with delicate pearls, “and for women it is always harder than for men. Studia has helped change that for us.”

On a hot and sticky Jerusalem Wednesday, eight Studia participants gathered at the Wolfson Museum of Jewish Art at Hechal Shlomo, where they are displaying some of their art. The group is a mosaic of haredi (ultra-Orthodox), modern Orthodox and secular women. They come from Mea She’arim, Kiryat Sanz, Ein Kerem and Beit Hakerem, and they range in age from young to young at heart. There are Israeli Arab women participants, as well, they told

The Jerusalem Post. Those women live in Umm Tuba and Sur Bahir.

“We use art as a bridge for peace,” said Elyashar-Stocklisky’s co-leader, Haya White. “We do a lot of work together, we visit each other’s homes, learn about each other’s lifestyles and explore each other’s artistic techniques.”

The Hechal Shlomo exhibit, “This Too is Possible,” focuses on Israeli society in all its variations and diversity, including presenting work by Druze women alongside the work of the Studia artists and the museum’s own rich collection of items relating to Jewish heritage, tradition and culture.

A second show is live at the Jerusalem Municipality. “I am a Jerusalemite,” which went up in July and runs until the end of September, pulls together works by Studia artists surrounding their vision of and connection with the Holy City. The exhibit was

Untitled panorama, Menucha Yankelevitch. (Photos: Courtesy the artists)



'Rosita,'
Gila Elyashar-Stocklisky.

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Adi Nahum, director of Neve Amit Jerusalem, invites you to meet and visit over a cup of coffee and cake

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'Almond Blossoms Hill,' Haya White.

curated by Beverly Barkat, the wife of Mayor Nir Barkat, who is an artist herself.

"EVERYONE HAS a story," said Menucha Yankelevitch. "Each person is a world."

This is what tourists find interesting and why the program is successful, she said.

Yankelevitch, 54, is a seventh-generation Jerusalemite. She is a haredi artist with 10 children. Her husband learns in yeshiva. She supports her family by selling art and now through Studia visits, as well.

"Painting revives me as dew revives a person, both body and soul," she said, describing her art as an "integral and joyous part" of her daily life.

"The delight of creativity brings serenity, relief, energy and joy to my status as a mother, and conversely, my Jewish existence and family life are a source of ideas, style and refinement for my paintings," Yankelevitch said.

In her works, she depicts the Jerusalem she has lived in for so many years: The Western Wall, magical scenes capturing the Old City of Jerusalem in its various glorious moments, and Mea She'arim. The ancient alleyways become saturated with stories and colors that have "touched my heart, along with images from all colors of the rainbow that evoke nostalgia within me and the rich Jewish life that I experienced alongside them."

In her work, she gives visual expression to all the sensations and sights she has absorbed through the years, and she bring them to life with the aid of rich color.

She admitted it is unusual for haredim to leave their community to work with people of such colorful stripes as those involved with Studia, but she said she has learned there is beauty in everyone, and she has moved past judging people based on how they dress.

"Most artists are wonderful people and they want to do good," Yankelevitch said. "This is the way I see it, and this mind-set has opened me to wonderful experiences."

Similarly, Malka Schallheim is a *ba'alat teshuva* who returned to Torah in her early 20s when she moved to Israel. Since then, she raised a large Orthodox family, putting her art on the side. Studia, she said, has helped revive her passion for art and bring it back into her life with the appropriate balance between art, family and business.

"STUDIA" AND "Women and Stories of Jerusalem" are the brain-children of Yael Kurlander, who presented the idea to Orly Ben Aharon, adviser to the Jerusalem mayor on the advancement of women. Kurlander, who serves as the project manager, came up with the idea after she visited China with her husband, where they



'Hagbah at the Kotel,' Malka Schallheim.

were hosted by a local couple.

The Women and Stories of Jerusalem programs empower women who either never worked or were forced to retire. The women make between NIS 4,000 and NIS 8,000 per month, depending on how often they host and the season. The artists make a similar salary, though they sometimes take in smaller groups, making less per visit that is offset by the income they make from selling their art to the visitors.

Proceeds from the project also help support the city through tax money. All home visits are operated on the books. The women bill either as independent contractors or through their neighborhood community centers. They were trained to do so through the program.

Today, according to Kurlander, there are 70 women throughout Jerusalem who take part in the Women and Stories program and 25 of them are local artists in the Studia program. One-third of the 70 are from the haredi sector and another roughly 10 are part of the Israeli Arab community.

Many of the women work every day, hosting tourists from around the world, who speak a variety of languages. Some visitors come privately and others through tour guides and operators. Kurlander said when she started the program, home hosting was not a large part of the Israeli tourism industry. Today, she said, almost every tour group goes on a home visit. "It is almost standard."

"It is much more interesting to be hosted by an artist and buy a piece of art from her, than to simply go to a gallery and buy a piece of art and you don't really know who made it," Kurlander said.

White said the women practice hosting each other to prepare for these visits. A tour group usually hears the artist's story, sees her work and engages in a short workshop.

"The idea is to empower women and these visits give them a voice," said White, who noted that the women are now looking to present their art beyond the city or even Israel. They have been in contact with a number of embassies, including the Brazilian embassy in Israel, about potential shows in their countries.

"Everyone alone has a little voice," said artist Michal Haley. "Together, we have a voice that is interesting."

And beautiful.

They paint with oil, acrylics and watercolors. Some fashion metal, clay and cardboard. Some use parchment and Jerusalem stone. Others take pictures.

"We dream a lot," Elyashar-Stocklisky said.

"I thank the Creator of the World for this wonderful gift," said Yankelevitch. "I hope to continue using it in health and happiness."

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