

Meet the French artist who was drawn to Israel

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BY ALAN ROSENBAUM, MARCH 18, 2021

It's a long way from Rouen, France, to Jerusalem, Israel – geographically, culturally and artistically. Ethan Amram, a talented, 22-year-old Jerusalem-based artist, was 10 when, in 2009, together with his parents, he moved from Rouen, capital of the Normandy region of northern France, to Jerusalem.



Ethan Amram, 22, from Normandy, France, to Jerusalem, 2009.
(photo credit: ETHAN AMRAM)

While Normandy is perhaps most closely associated with the D-Day Allied landings on its beaches in June 1944, it is an art-lover's paradise, from the famous 11th-century Bayeux Tapestry to the home of Impressionist master Claude Monet in Giverny with its verdant gardens that inspired much of his work. Yet ironically, Amram explains, it was the family's move to Israel and his attendant difficulties in learning Hebrew and adjusting to Israeli culture that forced him to express himself through drawing and art.

Ethan and his parents moved to the Jerusalem neighborhood of Har Homa. His older sister had come to Israel several years earlier and married.

“When I came to Israel,” says Ethan, “there was no ulpan in our neighborhood to learn Hebrew, and school was held only in Hebrew. For eight months, I didn't understand anything.” Ethan needed to express himself, but lacking in Hebrew proficiency, turned to drawing. He started with pencils and progressed to oil paints. He attended high school in Yemin Orde and took art courses at the artist's colony in nearby Ein Hod.

The first exhibition of his art was held at a private gallery in Ein Hod when he was just 14. Since then, an additional 10 showings of his work have been held at different venues, from Yes Planet and the Jerusalem Theatre to the most recent showing in Tel Aviv at the Sissy Gallery.

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Recalling his family's immigration, Ethan says that there was not a large French community in Har Homa when they first arrived, but over time, it grew. Nevertheless, he says, "I prefer to be with Israelis. That's how I learned the language. I learned faster that way, in an environment that speaks another language."

Ethan says his father, who has spent much of his time in Israel with fellow French expatriates, still has difficulty speaking Hebrew. Nevertheless, he says, the family is happy here. "There was a lot of antisemitism where we were in France, and in the end, this is our land. We were very Zionistic."

Ethan paints expressively in a large format and uses bold, lush colors to capture the essence of his subjects. He draws the faces of people whom he has met in his life here in Israel, focusing on their facial expressions. "Every period of my life has had a different setting," he notes, "which has inspired me to paint according to that setting."

Just over two years ago, Ethan was drafted into the IDF, and once again was inspired to take yet another direction in his art.

"I thought of a new technique," he explains, "painting on bullet shells." Ethan collects the shells from the bullets he has used in his army shooting drills and builds different shapes with them. He notes that bullets are ideal for his art projects because they are "very aesthetic, aerodynamic and shine like gold." He then pours liquid epoxy over the bullet creation, which is then ready for painting. "There is nothing political about my work," he says. "I am not connected to politics."

Ethan has not limited his transformation of weaponry to bullets. He has painted on an imitation Kalashnikov (AK-47) rifle that was used in army drills, as well as on smoke and shock grenades. He says that removing the gunpowder from the bullets and reassembling the bullets while retaining the original shape of the bullets is a time-consuming process.

Ethan does most of his work in a spacious storage area in the family's Jerusalem home. His current exhibit, titled *Power*, symbolizes not only the erstwhile weapons that he has converted to artwork, but the strength in the colors and technique that is in his paintings.

Most of Ethan's family, including his 96-year-old grandmother, have remained in France, though he has cousins living in Netanya. Ethan hopes they will come to Israel someday, especially his grandmother. After Ethan finishes his IDF service in the next few months, he wants to work for a bit and then travel the world – COVID permitting – to receive further inspiration to draw and paint for many years to come.

He has no regrets about moving to Israel at a young age and is delighted that his parents made aliyah with him. Had he not moved to Israel, he says, he would not have become an artist. "The inspiration came only when I came here and would not have happened in another country."

Speaking of his talent for turning weapons of war into art, Ethan says, "When I turn a weapon of war into a piece of art, I remove its intimidating power, both ideologically and physically."

He adds, "Changing the essence of a bullet reminds me of the verse in Isaiah (2:4), which reads, 'And they shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks. Nation shall not take up sword against nation; they shall never again know war.'

"My drawing style recalls this verse – to throw out the weapons and turn them into something else. It may be utopian, but perhaps one day, we'll be able to make art out of the world's artillery."