

Azaz Sculpture as architecture

by Charles S. Spencer

'I had the notion that small scale sculpture was no longer valid in the new post-war social circumstances—certainly not in an egalitarian society like Israel. The class which had patronised Western art for close on 2,000 years was losing its power. I had strong convictions that art should become public art, or find a form which the average person could relate to modern life'.

This assessment of Azaz's attitude as an artist, at the time when he was reaching maturity, would likely be echoed by most Israeli sculptors. In an article 'Sculpture in the Sun' (*Studio International*, August 1964) I stated that Israeli artists 'are not concerned with domestic decoration, with interior set-pieces, even with museum representation. Invariably they think in large-scale terms—public monuments, town-centres, parks, schools, in some cases overall town-planning. In tune with a class-less society, a country with Mediterranean out-door life, a people drunk with freedom after centuries of physical and psychological darkness, it is an art for the people, for the totality of society. . . .'

Azaz, who has perhaps gone further than his compatriots in re-establishing the relationship of artist and community, is today Israel's leading architectural artist, whose diverse talents have also been widely employed in the United States and Great Britain.

A powerful, bearded figure, he projects the positive, vital personality of a man who has consciously

organised his training and skills in order to fulfil a pre-meditated role. The more we discussed his career and achievements, and studied his work of the last ten years, the more it became clear that each step, each experiment and discovery, fitted into a planned design.

The beginnings could not have been more inauspicious. At the age of nine he was severely punished by his father for carving stone figures and he had no further contact with art until he was eighteen.

His parents had come to Palestine in 1920; his father, a Russian-born expert on water irrigation, pioneered scientific farming at Zichron Ya'acov, south of Haifa. Azaz was, however, born in Berlin in 1923 since his mother feared the inadequacy of medical facilities in the still primitive country. At the age of three months he was taken to Palestine. His father distrusted the non-utilitarian aspect of art—an attitude, it will be seen, inherited by the son. The young Azaz was educated in Palestine and at the American College in Beirut. As a youth he was a champion sprinter; when he was asked to pose for a visiting South African painter that, at the age of eighteen, he decided to take up drawing.

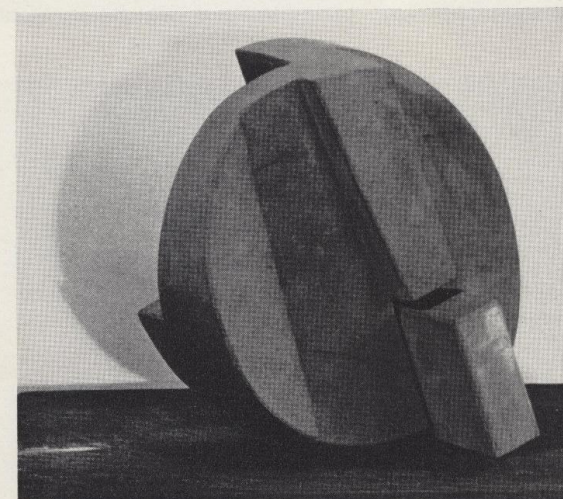
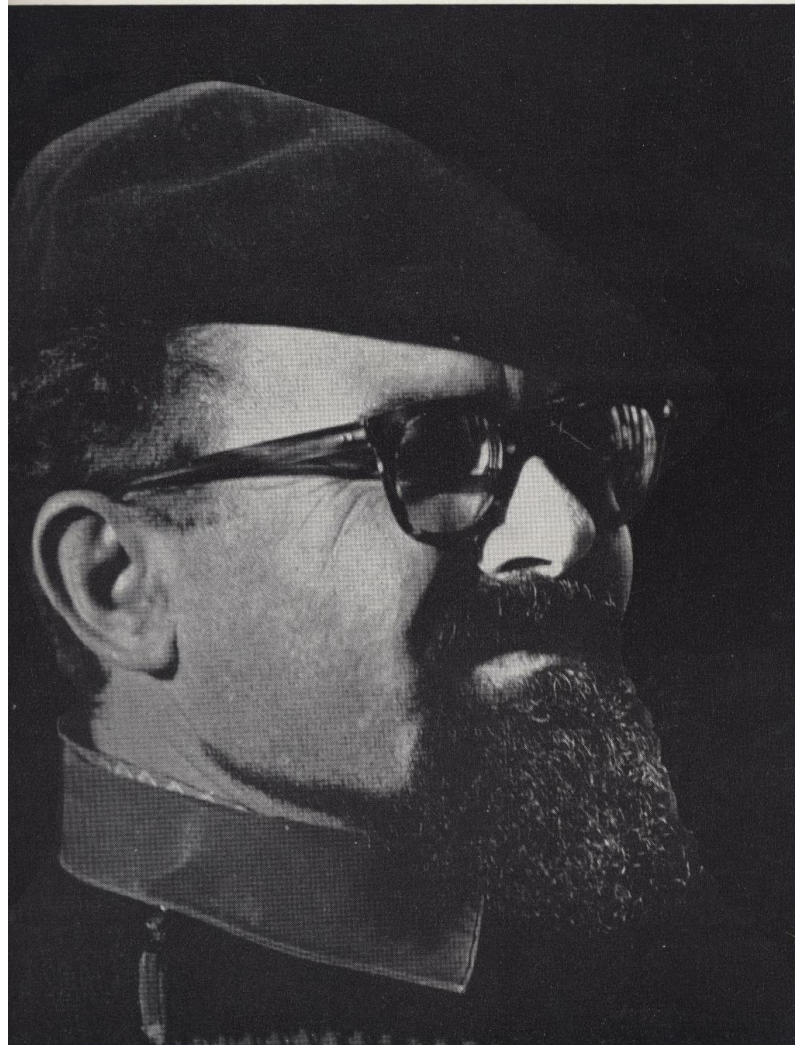
By this time the World War had started and Azaz enlisted in the British Navy. Severely wounded in a tanker explosion, he became an external student at the Hebrew University to study archaeology, a subject which has become an abiding passion and which has contributed to his sculpture. He later joined the British Army and served first in Italy and then throughout Europe. 'It was in Italy that I awakened to art and resolved to become a sculptor'. At first aroused by Renaissance sculpture, especially Michelangelo, Gothic art in Italy, Germany and France later made a more profound impression.

Invalided out of the Army with a small pension, and with a legacy from his mother, he ignored paternal objections and embarked on an art career. He enrolled in Bologna University, but after six months resigned to work with a local stone-mason. 'That was the foundation of my training', the beginning of his concern with skills and techniques rather than stylistic theories.

The same set plan led to his joining Stauthamer, the leading Dutch Catholic sculptor and stained-glass worker, in 1947 at the end of his Army service. Living in the master's house, like a medieval apprentice, 'I learned technique and attitude. As a sculptor he was not particularly interesting, but he was a first class teacher with absolute control over the skills of sculpting and the use of stained glass'.

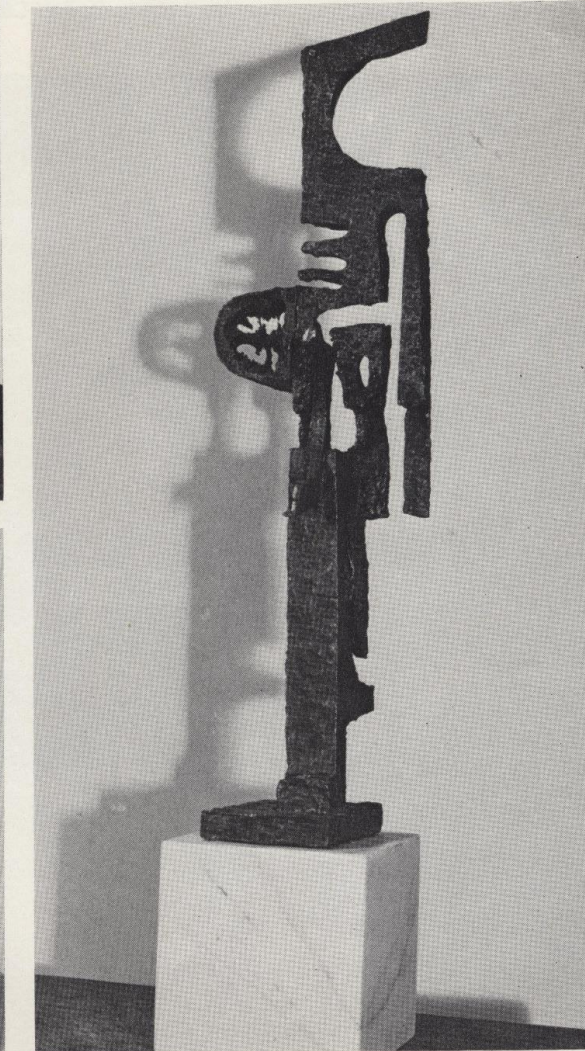
Anxious for wider experience Azaz then enrolled in the La Grande Chaumiere in Paris, but the outbreak of the War of Independence in Israel interrupted his plan. After the war he returned to Paris and studied under Zadkine for six months. 'I didn't find it very profitable and went back to Stauthamer in Holland'. However, now he sees that 'Zadkine (and to a lesser degree Archipenko) has been my greatest modern influence'.

Later he joined the Hague Technical Institute to study ceramic engineering. 'I was interested in gaining control of as many mediums as possible. At the time I undertook the course I had in mind creating an art centre in Beersheba'. Yet another example of the continuity of his planning. The art centre was closely related to the philosophy referred to at the opening of this article—creating works of art accessible to the ordinary public. 'Art originated from utility' Azaz says, 'when man first expressed his aesthetic, atavistic or religious needs in utilitarian forms. I do not like art being shut away in



ivory towers, separated from every-day life'.

His ceramic work had been seen by Henry Rothschild of Primavera who suggested he should come to London to prepare for an exhibition. In 1954 he worked in a pottery in Brompton Road, which he later managed. 'It was the practical experience I needed for my Israel plans'. And indeed two years later, a master potter and designer, he opened the *Harsa* plant in Beersheba, which still exists. Based on pre-industrial concepts, with six separate ateliers each occupied by an artist working in his individual style and at the same time training a group of apprentices, within 3½ years it employed forty-five persons. 'I gave myself five years to prove it could be done, commercially and artistically'; he still retains an interest in the concern, and designs for it, although now it is managed by the *Histadrut*—the Israel Trade Union movement. During this period Azaz was maturing as an artist. He had become an expert jeweller and silversmith and helped set up *Maskit*, a body employing the skills of emigrant craftsmen from North Africa. He carried out commissions in a variety of techniques—stained-glass set in concrete, mosaic, ceramic murals, wood, and held exhibitions in the major cities. 'I think I matured as an artist in about 1958 when my concept of working in architecture crystallised. The pottery experiment did not entirely satisfy me because the vessels we made for functional purposes were



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1
Azaz at work on his
sculpted wall in the
Sheraton Hotel, Tel Aviv

2
Signal
Bronze
17½ in. High

3
Work by Azaz in the Main Lobby
of the New Hilton Hotel, Tel Aviv
Opened 14th September 1965
Bronze, Welded Copper and Brass

4
Sculpted Wall, Tel Aviv
Architectural Association Building



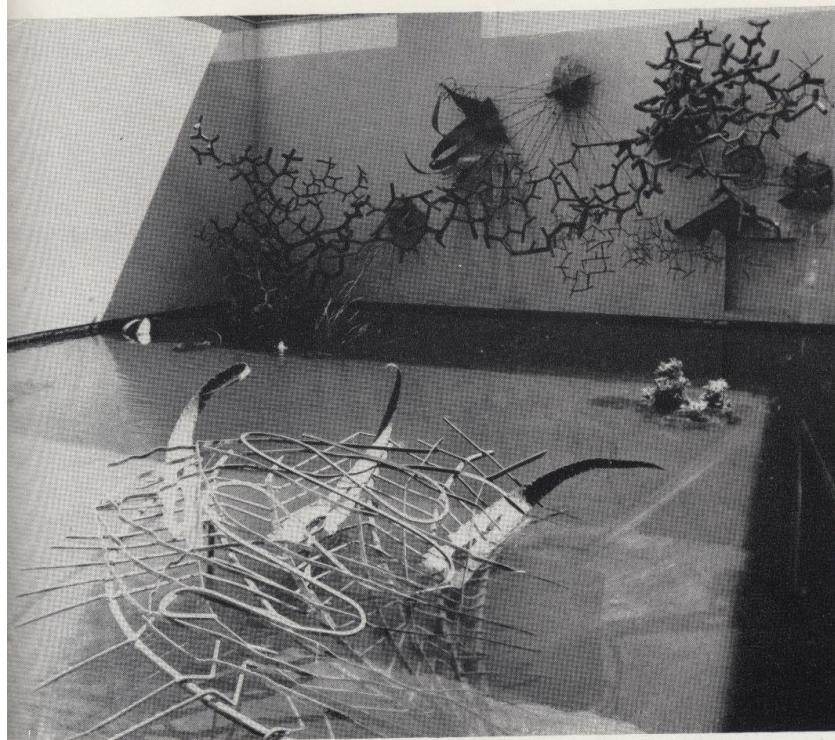
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for the past year he has been 'Artist in Residence'. This unusual appointment has provided him and his family with living quarters, and a well equipped studio-workshop within the school, so that he could undertake the huge task of making stained-glass windows for the new synagogue. The project, commenced in April 1964, which will be completed by the end of 1965, covers 1,032 square feet—two large side windows and forty-four panels for the front of the building. For this commission Azaz has used French glass in a brilliant new manner, breaking the material into heavy chunks and placing them in layers, to given designs, set in transparent cement. The task answers his desire to work within a communal framework, since not only is it a work of art in a public building but it has been carried out with the assistance of the pupils. The boys of the school were invited to join the artist in his studio and a group of them have been so employed, in their spare time, throughout the project.

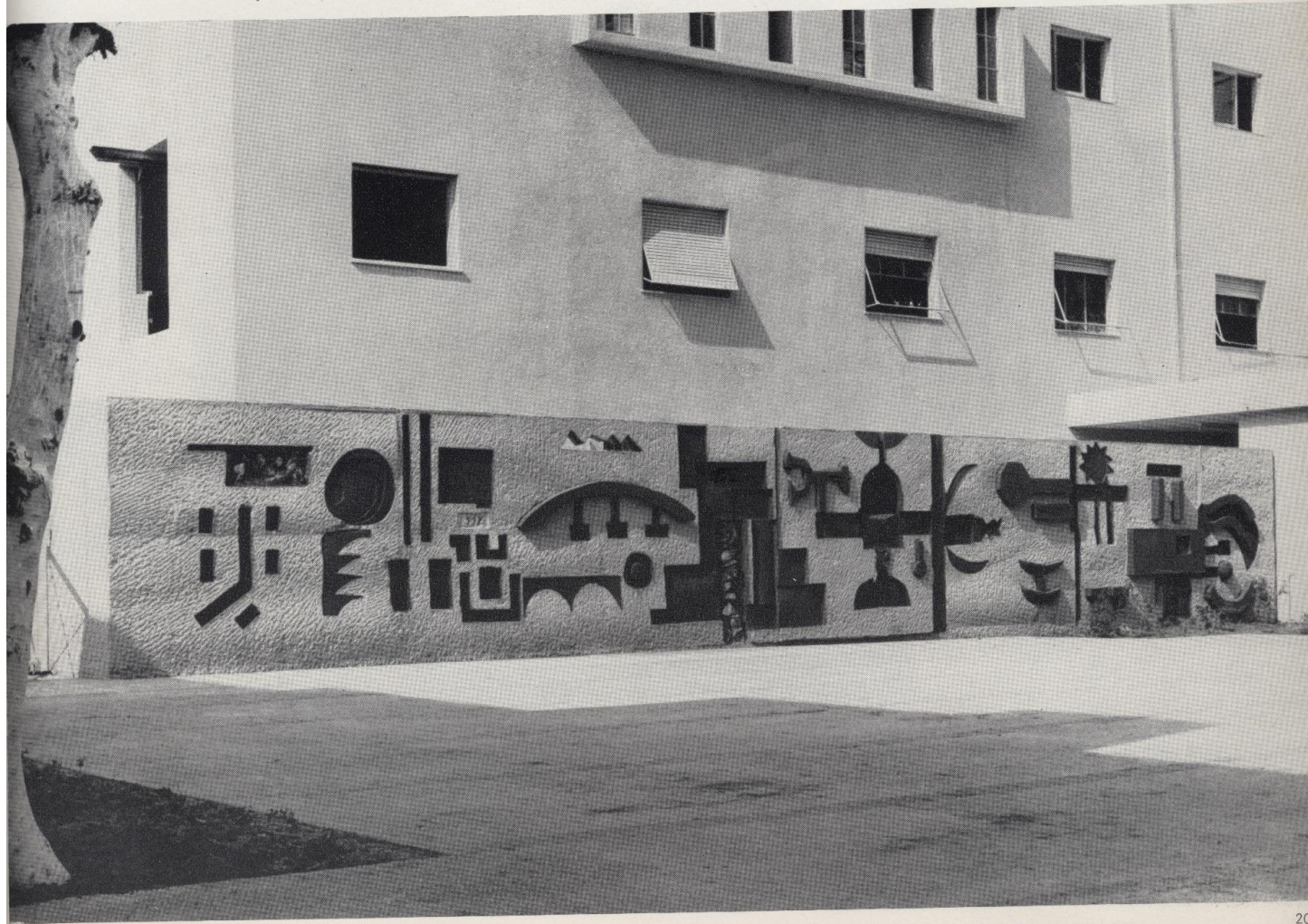
Azaz is now holding his first London exhibition of sculpture at the Grosvenor Gallery, of works done in this country. Whilst these bronzes, some of them maquettes for architectural commissions, and stone carvings, are satisfying forms in themselves, he feels 'they are really studies for larger works. Every small sculpture has been created as a project for a public place, in relation to people and urban environment. If I were incapable of producing large scale sculpture I would never work on a



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Azaz

small scale'.

What is fascinating in these sculptures is the origin and relationship of forms, which can be traced in all his work. When we spoke of the Sheraton Wall, for instance, he showed me a photograph of a section of the old town of Cesarea and point to the influence of the visual aspect of Israel, with its old and new shapes, on his work. The remarkable fusion of the residual impressions of a rich and varied experience, artistic as well as technical, has given Azaz's work a powerful individuality. The influence of Zadkine can be seen in the cubist-expressionism—the hard, jagged, sometimes brutal Gothic shapes. The landscape and visual appearance of the Middle East is well evident, seen as much in the cuneiform basis of the Hebrew script as in the strong affinity with Assyrian and Hittite sculpture. The long training as a master-craftsman has given him a deep respect for material. 'As a sculptor I conceive in each material, do not impose my ideas on them; stone must feel stone, clay must feel clay, bronze is metal. I do not bend metal so that it looks like cloth. I have no emotional preference for materials'.

Behind the solid convictions, the outspoken assessments, the personal ambition and determination, one also senses a deep humility in Azaz. There are no false illusions about the exclusiveness of art. He sees himself as a servant of society, a contributor to the well-being, the aesthetic environment, of mankind. ■