

AN ARTIST I

By Tamar Rotem

Ruth Zarfati's home in Tel Aviv is the epitome of an artist's residence. It is a world unto itself, thrilling with the artistic riches it holds and offering a pathway into the owner's inner world. The visitor's gaze is drawn in an unbroken arc to sculptures of a variety of styles – some standing, others lying on the floor, most of them her work, a few done by the late sculptor Moshe Sternschuss, who was her teacher and her husband; and from there to Zarfati's paintings on the walls, alongside landscapes by Avidor Steimatzky and Yehezkel Streichman, who along with Zarfati and Sternschuss were part of the "New Horizons" group of artists in the 1950s. Also on display are large and impressive works by Hagit Sternschuss, Zarfati's daughter and a fine painter in her own right.

In the narrow spaces between the works are elongated stones on which there are self-portraits that cannot but provoke a smile. She has used the flatter stones for illustrations of her husband and many of her friends. Each person on the stone that suits them. Across from them are glass cabinets that invite the visitor to come and look at the dozens of figurines and dolls reposing in captivating chaos.

One could spend hours in this quiet house on an alley in north Tel Aviv. "People sometimes knock at the door and ask to come in," Zarfati says, a faint smile darting across her gaunt, tired face. "They think it's a museum." It is the only light-hearted remark she makes in the course of the interview. Now in her eighties, Zarfati, whose personality and work are stamped with *joie de vivre*, is no longer at the peak of her powers. She seems to regret that her creative urge is not what it once was. Nevertheless, she does not tire of pointing out objects she loves, such as a life-size infant doll that she made, its arms and legs bouncy and round to the touch. She absentmindedly caresses the shining bronze sculpture of her grandson Tom, now in high school. And one clearly sees her deep connection to a long-necked plaster sculpture on a shelf. It is a likeness of dancer and choreographer Rina Sheinfeld, a friend. Another sculpture is a bust of the writer Eda Zoritte-Megged. "The cheeks; look at those cheeks," she says.

The rooms that branch off from the living room are also packed with sculptures and paintings. Works stand on cabinets in the big studio and on the shelves in Zarfati's and Sternschuss's respective work areas. The desks are in perfect order, with paints and tools that seem only to be waiting for someone to dip a brush

such as a blue chair in the workroom whose tattered cane seat she replaced with plywood on which she painted a woven-cane pattern, or the plain lampshade over the dining table, decorated capriciously with two winged dolls suspended between large insects and plastic flowers. Amazingly, this extraordinary surfeit does not tire the eye in the least. A charming harmony pervades everything, and nothing could better reflect the abundant creative expressiveness of Ruth Zarfati, a wide-ranging artist sometimes mistakenly described as an illustrator.

Painting as if possessed

Still, Zarfati deserves to be crowned as the queen of children's book illustrators, as demonstrated by the dozens of books she has illustrated and by what curator Nurit Shilo-Cohen calls a "mini-retrospective" of her work currently on display in the Youth Wing of the Israel Museum in Jerusalem. These works constitute a tiny fraction of the vast collection of illustrations that Zarfati, a three-time recipient of the museum's award for the illustration of a children's book, donated to the Youth Wing.

"Uncle Simcha – May You Live to 120!" is a small but moving exhibition, if only because the affable face of Uncle Simcha, seen in the dozens of illustrations Zarfati drew for the books of the iconic children's writer Ayin Hillel, is like a warm greeting from one's childhood. From the plump belly in a white sleeveless undershirt from which curls of chest hair peek out, to the tufts on his temples that frame a face whose expression is one of silliness tempered with good-heartedness, Uncle Simcha was drawn by Zarfati as an archetypal Israeli character.

Zarfati illustrated four books in the series, the first of which was published in 1960. She did dozens of sketches of the uncle, each lovelier than the last, some of which are in the exhibition. Zarfati explains that she painted the twinkling of an eye, as if possessed by a dybbuk. And when the spirit moved, she simply kept painting more and more.

Other notable books for children and teens that she illustrated include Yaacov Shavit's "Yotam and the Hippopotamus," Yehoash Biber's "Parasols in Hanevi'im Street," Gila Almagor's "The Summer of Aviya," Ronit Matalon's "A Story that Begins with a Snake's Funeral" and Lea Goldberg's "Reflections on My Window." A beautiful new children's book that Zarfati wrote and illustrated, "Krabit Turaka to the Big City" was published



With an exhibition of her illustrations now on display at the Israel Museum, artist Ruth Zarfati looks back on a splendid career that began at a time when few women succeeded in breaking down the gender barrier



Photo by Zur Kozar

art; in addition to painting, sculpture and illustration, she has designed clothing and fabrics for Israeli firms Maskit and Gottex, created stage sets and costumes, and fashioned jewelry and dolls. She has created greeting cards, posters and animated films, and designed the cover for the first album of Israeli rock duo Fortis-Sakharof, who are friends of her daughter Hagit. She has had more than 20 solo shows and taken part in many group exhibitions. In 1967, her work was in the Israeli pavilion at Expo '67 in Montreal, and in 1970 at the Venice Biennale.

Bohemian Tel Aviv

Whether it is the joy bursting out of her work in pastel tones of red and yellow or in blue and pink, as in "Uncle Simcha," or the nostalgic, reflective atmosphere of "Krabit Travels to the Big City," the viewer's eye is drawn to the sense of vitality that shines through Zarfati's work. She is a "total artist," says Shilo-Cohen, one whose art touches on every aspect of her life. This can be seen in the large number of paintings and sculptures of family and friends. "It was a family whose members painted one another," Shilo-Cohen says. "Uncle Simcha was modeled on her husband, Moshe Sternschuss, with his Ben Gurion-like hair, and he also resembles her father, Yehudah Zarfati."

The latter, who worked for the electric company and was an amateur painter – he had an artist's soul, Zarfati says – was the dominant figure in her life. She began painting at the age of two and a half, she says. When she was three, whenever she was asked what she wanted to be when she grew up she would say "a painter," and everyone laughed.

Born in 1928, she spent her early childhood in Petah Tikva, then a small town. The family later moved to a nearby village, Behadraga. "The Garden Book" is an illustrated memoir of that time. "My father sat me down to paint still life when I was little and he taught me how to paint. I miss the free painting of childhood. That is why I never taught Hagit how to paint." Indeed, she adds, her daughter's childhood gave Zarfati back her artistic freedom. "I learned from my daughter," she says.

In high school she devoted one full day a week to painting in Aharon Avni's studio (which later became the Avni Institute of Art and Design). "I liked painting with the adults; everyone worked there," she says. In the early 1950s she joined 20 artists, among them Steimatsky and Sionah Tagger as well as Avni, a co-founder of the school and its first director, on a cruise