

Childhood ever after

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MOST children love to draw and paint. Many show talent and a few achieve unusual or prodigious results, at least before the age when they become inhibited by others' perceptions of things. But even fewer "grow up" to become artists and fewer still become illustrators of books for other children. Ruth Zarfati is one such case. A marvellous record of her work, from childhood and adolescence to her adult career as a leading illustrator, maker of dolls and puppets and unusual sculptress, is set out in a new exhibition at an eminently suitable venue: the Youth Wing of the Israel Museum. It is accompanied by a delightful little book (in Hebrew) entitled, "I Was a Child Painter".

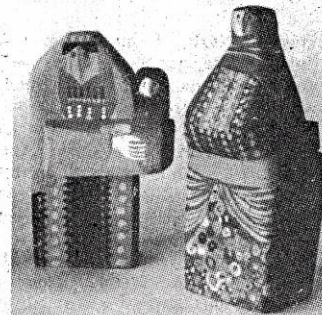
There's nothing to prevent adults enjoying this show, but it is oriented to children. The exhibits and show cases are set low and the captions are written right on the glass in the appropriate place or on the adjoining wall, a not very educational measure; I also wonder how many third graders can read script. These reservations aside, the show, with its painted transparent "screens" and a huge stylized doll at the entrance, is displayed with far more imagination than previous ones in this particular hall.



Ruth Zarfati: watercolour illustration to a story by Nurit Zarchi and, at right, two painted dolls (Israel Museum Youth Wing).

The show ranges from her own toys to those she made for her daughter and the dolls she made for tourists (several decades ago when everyone saw the Ingathering of the Exiles in a more idealized light). She proves once again that a doll can be made out of anything, soft or hard. Some of her stylizations had a strong effect on her remarkably economical sculpture. She also has a strong sense of personal identity; there are not only self-portraits from various periods in various mediums (the sculptured head is particularly good) but many of her doll faces, particularly the ones in the illustrations, seem to be self-portraits too. Most of her themes are dolls and babies; her bronzes, of babies, with detachable limbs and bodies that can be recombined in different ways, are as touching as they are ingenious.

Some of her best work here consists of details from painterly illustrations, chiefly in watercolour (and beautifully mounted in identical and adjoining frames). Her gifts for setting down the essence of a figure or picture with admirable economy of means are evidence of



sacrificing spontaneity (as a young soldier in 1948, she served as a technical draughtswoman).

Ruth Zarfati-Sternschuss was born in Petah Tikva and studied at the Avni Studio for four years during World War Two. Just before the War of Liberation she studied with sculptor Moshe Sternschuss and right after the war she married him. She also joined the New Horizons Group. In the fifties and sixties she made dolls and weavings for Maskit. She has illustrated a dozen children's books, one of which she wrote herself. A few years ago she had a fine show of her sculptures, chiefly of babies and portraits, at the Helena Rubinstein Pavilion of