



Lia Bruce is Worth Her Salt

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After studying architecture at the Technion, learning art in an art college, and a getting a master's degree in industrial design at Bezalel, now Lia Bruce designs ceremonial artifacts from the Judaic tradition and others – hamsas (hand-shaped good luck charms), crosses – tableware, and, more recently, engagement ring boxes, all made of salt.

When was the last time, if ever, you thought of salt beyond seasoning salads and stews? Presumably, salt's existence doesn't really get a thought beyond the flavor it adds to food, but when it comes to designer Lia Bruce, owner of the SALTWARE DESIGN label for designing and manufacturing objects made of "this salty salt," salt is what fills her whole world – as a material used in her designs, as a focus of cultural-spiritual-symbolic interest, and as the subject of constant material research, which naturally includes quite a bit of trial and error.



"I don't have an explanation for this fascination of mine with salt, but it's always been there, and it's always fascinated me," says Bruce, who defines her choice of unconventional material as an intuitive choice: "When we were little, my grandmother used to sew hidden bags of salt in our clothes to guard us against the evil eye, and who knows, maybe it all started there."

Bruce's creative track on the way to salt design passed through the Faculty of Architecture and Town Planning of the Technion, Israel's Institute of Technology, the Ramat Hasharon Academy of Art, and master's degree studies in the Industrial Design program at Bezalel Academy of Arts and Design. "I sympathize with Steve Jobs's familiar statement about connecting the dots; I feel that it really fits my story."

Thus, even though she had completed her undergraduate studies in architecture, it was clear to Bruce that her real interest was in art, especially in sculpture, and she applied to study at the Ramat Hasharon Art College. "The first artistic creation I did there was with salt, and works that I presented later, such as an installation in an exhibition held at the Camara Obscura, were also always combined with salt."







However, the art, it turns out, was not the end of the road for Bruce, who performed another U-turn, this time studying for a master's degree in design at Bezalel. "Since I always had salt in my background, all these years I've collected stories and information about it. I discovered a whole world that crosses cultures, religions, and beliefs, and always in positive spiritual contexts, such as the promise of blessing and a good start, or a charm for protection from evil spirits.

"And it is not necessary to go far: by us too, in Judaism, dipping the Sabbath loaf, the challah, in salt is an act intended to ratify our covenant with God. All this information intersected with my initial fascination with the material, and later on with a feeling that I had exhausted my other artistic endeavors. I felt that I wanted to do things that would speak to people from different cultures from a cultural viewpoint, and I realized that design was the way to do it."

From Kingship (Heb.: melech) to Salt (Heb.: melach)

Bruce traded in her artistic endeavors for the world of design, but she didn't trade in her loyalty to salt. This material accompanied her to her studies at Bezalel, and was also the subject of her final project, which dealt with the cultural and material aspect of salt. "I called my project Melech (with the consonants of melech and the vowels of melach) as a play on words (king in Hebrew is melech, and salt is melach), because in the past, salt was considered a material of high (kingly) status and equivalent to money. Today it is a byproduct of the mineral mining industry, which accumulates in huge quantities and is considered an environmental nuisance. In Israel alone, for example, 20 million tons of salt accumulate every year, and the world of science investigates and researches how it can be used for the benefit of industry."

At the beginning of her second year of studies, life created a scenario that seemed custom-made just for Bruce: a collaboration that was created between the Bezalel Academy and the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, in the framework of which she became acquainted with Professor Daniel Mandler of the Institute for the study of Chemistry. Mandler and his team led a study that examined how salt can be utilized in the construction world by using it to make construction blocks, and in this way to also make the use of cement, that is a very polluting material, unnecessary. "The fact that of all the study groups, my group was chosen to participate in the first meeting that took place with the university personnel, and that Prof. Mandler, the salt researcher, was the one who took part in it, was like a kind of cosmic signal of what was meant to happen. I spent most of my second year working on my final project at the university institute."

The collaboration was successful and contributed greatly to Bruce, but at the same time, she adds "Inside me all the time I knew I wasn't going to stop at construction blocks. I don't come from the world of chemistry, so I looked at things from a design perspective, and the idea that came to me was to make decorative tiles."

The designer part of her won out, and with the blessing she received from Prof. Mandler, Bruce did move on, and in January 2020, after a year of exciting preparation and a moment before the coronavirus, she officially established SALTWARE DESIGN.







The brand's "home" is an old railroad car that once belonged to the Valley Railway. "I probably have a thing for leftovers and things that are left behind," she laughs. "That railroad car had been lying in our yard for years. When we purchased our house, it was already there, and when I decided that I was setting up a studio, it occurred to me that the railroad car could be suitable for that, and so I renovated it."

Bruce purchases her salt, which is sold in sacks, usually for the purpose of softening pool water, from Dead Sea factories or the Melach Haaretz plant, and what she produces, based on using that salt, is ecological all the way down the line. "We're talking about is a non-polluting process that does not involve ovens and does not require any energy, and of course is based on a byproduct that is considered an environmental problem," she explains.

Bruce's salt production process uses heavy stainless steel molds – which are very expensive – and takes place at high pressure, causing compression of the material, up to a level that makes it as solid as marble. The additives Bruce incorporates into the blend (a

"professional secret" she says with a smile) are natural and make up less than 1% of the final product, so the pureness of the natural material is preserved, and in cases where she adds pigments, they are natural too.



Bruce treats her salt according to the design she intends it for; she leaves it as large granules – like cooking salt – whose molecular composition gives them some transparency, or grinds it into a thin powder similar to powdered sugar. Mass production, or of large objects, requires large presses, but Bruce isn't there, at least for now. "I'm a 'small' producer, and so my objects are small, while in some larger designs I have to assemble parts, that I do using a kind of adhesion."

The objects she designs and manufactures are ceremonial artifacts from the Judaic tradition and others – candlesticks, hamsas (hand-shaped good luck charms), crosses – tableware, and, more recently, engagement ring boxes. "The objects are resistant to moisture to a certain degree, but when the moisture is too great, their surface may become damaged. If they are stained, it's not a problem to clean them, and the tableware is suitable for dry products, not for direct contact with food."

A year and a half after she made the move and started her own brand, Bruce is looking forward. "The process was accompanied by a difficult technical side, and there are still formal things that I need to solve, but I hope to get to that solution as well. So far, at least, it seems that all the roads have led me to the Rome that I was supposed to reach."