The Coca Cola magnate and the Song of Songs

King Solomon's great love poem continues to be a source of artistic inspiration.

Detail from Leela Ganin's illuminated edition of the Song of Songs — which is read over Pesach

An exhibition of sacred texts in the Vatican features a section of the Dead Sea Scrolls, displayed in a mock-up cave. Most visitors probably assume the exhibits were brought from Jerusalem. But they are not originals: they are faithful recreations, produced by a London company, Facsimile Editions.

Facsimile have made their name with collector-quality copies of illustrated medieval sacred texts. Now husband and wife team, Michael and Linda Falter, have embarked on their most complex challenge yet, reproducing a contemporary artistic edition of the Song of Songs.

It came at the invitation of Muzi Wertheim, a man in whom the venerable tradition of illuminated manuscripts lives on. Now in his 80s, he is one of Israel's best-known industrialists, who helped bring Coca Cola to the country. Like the patrons of old, he commissioned new versions of two of the five megillot, Esther and Shir Hashirim, the Song of Songs, created on parchment scrolls by Israeli artist Leela Ganin. He turned to the Falters to make limited editions of the work in book form.

Having completed Esther - as a folding concertina-like book - they are in the midst of work on the Song. "Leila Ganin's Shir Hashirim is illuminated in the style of the best Mughal artists of the 16th century, fitting perfectly with its romantic text," said Michael Falter.

But reproducing its intricately-layered textures is taxing. "The golden background of many of the miniatures is overlaid with delicate sparkling gold and silver," he said. "Each of the intricate borders features a wealth of vibrant colours intertwined with gold, silver, bronze and copper, some raised and some flat. The calligraphy of the master scribe is raised within those borders."

Leela Ganin herself arrived in Israel 11 years ago. She was born in Siberia to a Chinese father and a Jewish mother. When she tried to find work in Communist Leningrad as a young woman in the early 80s, her Asian features prevented her from securing a residence permit. You could stay as a student, a lawyer advised her, "but as a Jew, you would have certain problems."

She came to Israel for the sake of her daughter, who has a behavioural disorder, on the recommendation of a doctor. "She was a nice, young woman who had just returned home from some sort of professional training in Israel," Ganin recalled. " 'If you want to help your daughter, you must go to Israel' - that was her prescription."

Having done jewellery, commercial design and illustration in Russia, she began to specialise more in Judaica in her new home. She has illustrated a complete Five Megillot for Koren publishers. But the technical demands of the Wertheim commissions were in a different league.

"It takes a few months - up to a year - to illuminate a scroll," she said. "Parchment is a very special and expensive material. No mistakes are allowed. It takes a lot of time to transfer the drawings on parchment. Water-based colours make the scroll's surface wavy, so it's not easy to execute small details. Humidity makes it longer and softer, dry and hot weather makes it hard and inflexible, every micro piece of dust tries to stick itself to the white surface."

Attributed to King Solomon, the Song of Songs expresses a young couple's yearning for each other but is read by the rabbis as an allegory of God's bond with Israel. Some religious people have "very strict demands," Ganin said. "If they commission an illuminated Song of Songs, only symbolic illustrations are allowed such as deers, peacocks, flowers and so on. Koren did not mind the sight of a man and woman but dressed properly and behaving respectfully."

But the imagery she has used for Muzi Wertheim reflects the sensual nature of the poetry. "He expressed directly that the aspect of human love must be shown and that's what I tried to do."

As for her sources of inspiration, she admitted "I hardly know what it is, to tell you the truth. I think the same things that give inspiration for living - nature, people, art, just the world by itself."