

Dismantling the Concrete Caissons in the Beirut National Museum

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In November 1995, some of the larger pieces in the National Museum's collection had their protective concrete shells removed, a further step in an ongoing eight month programme that had begun with the restoration of the Museum's elevations. A team of archaeologists and conservators were thus given the charge of "unveiling" 94 objects hidden in concrete for more than 15 years. Sarcophagi, mosaics, steles and statues gradually re-emerged from under their protective layers.

The technical methods used in the dismantling procedure depended primarily upon the type of concrete encasement used. Initially the upper section of the block was removed allowing the conservators to assess the condition of the object within, the manner in which it had originally been encased and thus decide upon a subsequent course of action. The removal of the four sides was done either by removing them consecutively using a winch or by lifting at once two sides forming a right angle. Twenty concrete containers were thus systematically dismantled. Bags of sand were sometimes found protecting the object behind primary defensive layers of wooden panels. The concrete, often reinforced with steel, had been poured as a final barrier on top of many other protective measures.

In light of such an important cultural event, the various stages of the dismantling procedure were carefully recorded. Photographic records were made by Suzy Hakimian, (Head of Museums Service) and Michael Halliwell, (conservator). Bahije Hojeij also made a film documenting the entire event. Anne-Marie Afeiche drafted a precise inventory of the objects as they were uncovered. Lydia Debbas and Catherine Younès handled all complimentary research in the Museum's archives.

The sarcophagi and statues first exposed in the Museum's Hall were found to be in poor condition. In fact, some of the objects showed signs of deterioration due to ambient humidity or oxidisation. Some of the artefacts had also been accidentally splattered with cement while others were blackened by smoke from fires lit nearby. The necessary conservation and consolidation treatment of the unveiled collection will be carried out under the guidance of the Museum's Head of Laboratory, Isabelle Skaf. Restoring the collection is a lengthy project that began with the collaboration of two British conservators, Franka Cole and Michael Halliwell and with the help of Elie Abboud who specialises in mosaics.

3

The dismantling of the concrete caissons was a major event for the Museum. In practical terms it meant the recovery of objects unexposed to the public for nearly two decades. Symbolically, it announces the return of one of Lebanon's principal cultural centres. One must not forget, however, that this past event represents the first phase of the long process needed to rehabilitate the collection of the Beirut National Museum

Eventually, the collection will be displayed so as to regain the educational and cultural roles it once had. Emphasis will also be placed on context and chronology in accordance with current museological perspectives.

Under the auspices of HE Mr. Elias Hraoui, President of the Lebanese Republic, and in the presence of the First Lady, Mrs. Mona Hraoui, the completion of the Museum's elevations was celebrated on the 4th of January 1996. The restoration work had been undertaken by the Mouawad-Eddé Society. This inauguration also afforded guests a closer look at the progress made in the refurbishing of the Museum's interior.



Roman sarcophagus from Tyre depicting the legend of Achilles

Reinforced concrete being dismantled while revealing Roman sarcophagus from Tyre.