

THE NATIONAL MUSEUM'S

Isabelle Skaf

CONSERVATION LABORATORY: ACTIVITIES & ACHIEVEMENTS

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Five years after its rehabilitation, the conservation laboratory of the Beirut National Museum has become the conservation center of the Lebanese Directorate General of Antiquities. Its responsibilities cover the examination and conservation of objects from the Beirut National Museum and other regional museums, advising on problems relating to lighting, climate and presentation and the packing and transportation of objects. Recently, its responsibilities have been extended to advise the Directorate General of Antiquities excavation department on the preservation of sites. Drawing attention to problems has been a major part of our activities as well as the coordination and preparation for projects executed jointly with foreign conservators.

The aim of this article is to give a summary of the laboratory's activities and achievements since 1994.

The National Museum

Ongoing recovery of the collections from the museum's basement

All the objects found in the flooded rooms in the basement have been cleaned and recorded. So far the number of objects recovered is almost 27 000.

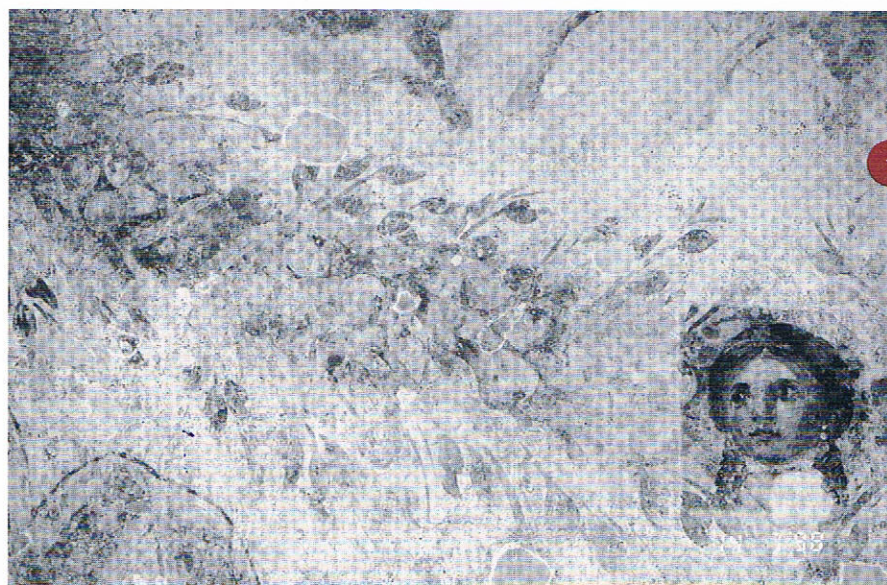
Other old storage rooms are still closed until waterproofing works are completed in one section of the basement and the area rehabilitated for proper storage conditions.

The sculpture collection

112 pieces of sculpture were conserved for the opening of the ground floor in November 1997 (*NMN* 7, Winter 1997 pp.12-16). This was made possible after Tracy Sweek, an expert stone conservator from the British Museum gave a one month training course in the techniques of stone conservation to local trainees, (*NMN* 5, Spring 1997 pp. 21-24).

Paintings from a tomb discovered in Al-Awatin near Tyre (fig.1-3)

Paintings from a tomb discovered in Al-Awatin were detached and transferred to the museum's basement in 1940. Three visits have already been undertaken by Giorgio Capriotti ICCROM Consultant, to diagnose the causes of decay



and provide technical advice on the dehumidification of the tomb. Reinforcement and temporary protection of the walls as well as cleaning tests have also been accomplished. The next phase of the project will be to continue cleaning with the assistance of local trainees while allowing gradual and limited access to the public between conservation campaigns.

Conservation of objects from the museum's collections for the *Institut du Monde Arabe* exhibition (fig. 4-5).

360 objects from the museum's archaeological collection were selected for the Paris Exhibition "*Liban, l'autre rive*" (see p. 8). Ann Brysbaert, Georgina Garrett, Badr Jabbour Gedeon, Graham Langford, Emma Neville and Eric Nordgren have been working on the conservation of these objects for the last year. These include copper alloy figurines with gold leaf from the obelisque temple in Byblos and gold jewellery with stone incrustations from Sidon and Beirut. Phoenician and Roman glass vessels as well ceramics from the Bronze Age to Islamic periods were also treated.

Conservation treatments comprised cleaning, consolidation, gapfilling and remounting. In some cases the use of x-ray was necessary to identify old repairs before mechanical intervention. A few fragile objects were mounted in Beirut prior to packing and shipping.

Two mosaics, the "Birth of Alexander" and the "Rape of Europe" were also selected. They were exhibited in the museum galleries before the war and had been remounted in cement. The Alexander mosaic which was originally presented horizontally was too large and heavy to be moved safely. A team of conservators from the *Atelier de Restauration de Mosaiques* in Saint-Romain-en-Gal carried out a lifting operation in Beirut to make transportation of the mosaic possible (NMN 7, Spring 1998 pp. 14-17). Close coordination and careful planning were necessary to insure the success of the mission.

The two mosaics had to be shipped to the workshop in Saint-Romain-en-Gal for conservation before the exhibition. The basic treatment consisted of removing the cement backing and remounting the mosaic on a lighter fiberglass support. Two Lebanese trainees, Badr Jabbour Gedeon and Dany Khalaf participated actively for three months in the conservation and remounting of the mosaics in France.



1-3 Paintings from the tomb of Al-Awatin being cleaned

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The Ahirom sarcophagus (fig. 7-8)

Transport of the sarcophagus proved to be a major challenge. It was cracked and had been reinforced in the past with iron bars and gypsum. The Hariri Foundation sponsored the conservation and transport of the sarcophagus. Conservation was undertaken in Beirut by Jean Délivré, a private conservator.

Mosaics from the Beirut excavations (fig. 9-11)

Approximately 600m² of late Roman/Byzantine mosaics were lifted between 1994-1996 from a site (Bey 006) situated in the old souks. They were stored in the run-down *Orient-le-Jour* building next to the site.

They had been stacked without rigid supports or protection around the edges. The facing adhesive was deteriorating because of exposure to light.

The aim of the project was to prepare the mosaics for transportation to a more permanent storage area until sufficient funds are raised for their conservation.

The project was carried out by Thomas Roby, a private conservator with the assistance of DGA staff and volunteers. The Dept. of Antiquities financed the project with a contribution from UNESCO. A large steel hangar was constructed in Sidon to house the mosaics. Plans are to turn a smaller adjacent structure into a conservation workshop and a training center for local students.

Marie-Reine Aboujaoude and Joseph Tabet who had worked on the *Orient-le-Jour* project, used the same method of documentation and packing for other mosaics stacked in the church of St Elie lifted from the Bey 101 site.



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Regional projects

Museum of the convent of Mar Antonios Kozhaya

The convent which is situated in the Mar Sarkis valley in North Lebanon at an altitude of 900 m has a small museum partly built into the rock face. On exhibit are mainly religious objects (robes, calices...), a wood and iron printing press and most importantly, 18th and 19th century books and manuscripts. Recommendations were made in relation to display cases and environmental monitoring.

Byblos Museum of Fossil fish

The most interesting specimens of fossil fish found in Lebanon (*NMN* 2 Winter 1995, pp. 30-31; *NMN* 5 Spring 1997, p. 29) are exhibited in the Byblos Museum of Fossil fish. Several were cleaned and consolidation work was carried out in the National Museum's laboratory.

Baalbek

A site museum in Baalbek is to be opened in November 1998 in association with the German Archaeological Institute of Berlin (see p. 11). Sixty pieces of sculpture found on the site and some Islamic ceramics will be exhibited. The conservation team is currently in Baalbek (Sept 1998) working on these objects.

Temple of Eshmun, Sidon (fig. 12):

The site which was abandoned during the war, is situated near the Awali river north of Sidon. When first visited in 1995, the site was covered with vegetation and several square meters of mosaics were rapidly deteriorating due to neglect, vandalism, plant growth and exposure to atmospheric agents.

4-5 Conservation treatments for the objects to be exhibited at the *Institut du Monde Arabe*

6 Students in the Qadisha Valley (Deir El Salib) during the wall painting training course, Photo: Kamal el Helou



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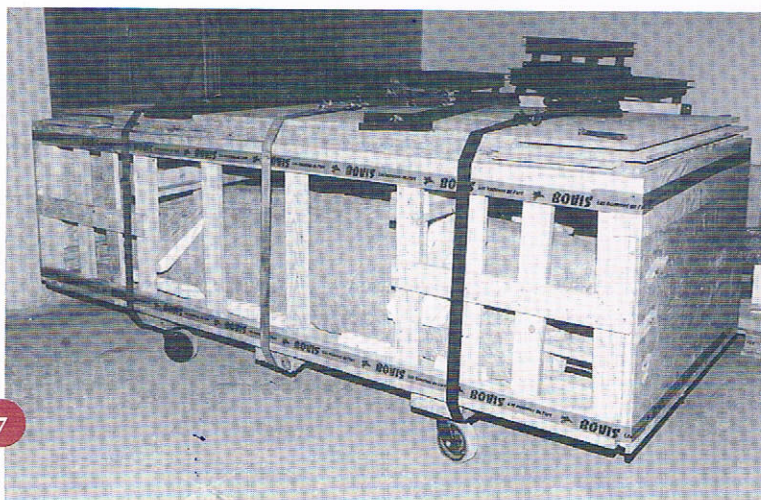
With the collaboration of the archaeologists from the Antiquities Department's office in Sidon, the site is regularly cleaned and a guard has been appointed to prevent visitors from walking on the mosaics. The edges of the mosaics were consolidated with hydraulic lime to prevent loss of tesserae and further deterioration. Two shelters (metallic structure and textile roofing) were erected in 1996 on the site to cover a particular mosaic and a plastered wall. Close monitoring and regular maintenance are being undertaken. Extending the building of shelters to other sites is still under study.

Training program for the conservation of wall paintings with the contribution of the World Heritage Fund (fig.6)

The program was started in 1998 in cooperation with the ICCROM to train a local team in the preservation and conservation of mural paintings. This year the first phase consisted of a one-month session taught by Rodolfo Lujan Lunsford, an ICCROM consultant. It was mainly an introduction to the techniques of documentation, causes of deterioration and emergency interventions. The course was partly held in the Mar Charbel church in Maad (North Lebanon) and in the newly discovered painted tomb of Aabra, west of Sidon. Short trips to the Qadisha Valley and Tyre were also part of the training program. A group of masons was trained in the preparation and use of traditional mortars.

Our next deadline is the opening of the museum's first floor to the public. The *Institut du Monde Arabe* selection will be exhibited when the objects return to Lebanon in the spring of 1999. Additional pieces will also be put on display, some of them for the first time.

We have only started to train students and volunteers in preventive and more direct conservation practices through the organization of theoretical and practical courses. They have nonetheless learned a great deal through practice. Our aim is to develop training programs and reinforce, after twenty years of war the principles of conservation as laid down by international charters. The ultimate goal is to achieve a high standard of working practises.



7-8 Transport to Paris of the Ahrim sarcophagus



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9 Mosaics from the Beirut excavations, stacked in the *Orient-le-Jour* building

10 After packing, mosaics being lifted out of the building with a crane

11 Mosaics piled up in the Sidon hangar

12 Eshmun, prototype shelter erected to cover a mosaic



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