



## A TRIBUTE TO DR. JOHN CURTIS

Anne-Marie Maila-Afeiche

"...Objects speak truths, and objects from other cultures tell us not only about distant peoples, but about ourselves too, about our souls", Neil MacGregor.

There exists a special relationship between the British Museum, and more particularly the Department of the Middle East and the National Museum of Beirut. There is also a special story to be told about how and when this special link between the two institutions was established.

In 1995, the Directorate General of Antiquities under the auspices of the Ministry of Culture and Higher Education carried out a major rescue program of Lebanon's National Museum after the country's debilitating war had left it in ruins. The small team of resident archaeologists were absolutely determined, despite the reduced means available, to restore their museum and reinstate it as the principle institution responsible for guarding the National Heritage.

By 1996, intense activity on the inside of the museum, namely the refurbishment of its interior, was well underway in order to carry out urgent renovations. At this stage it was difficult to choose a priority as to where to begin as so much needed to be done; the archaeologists' concern was nonetheless the opening of the storage rooms and the recovery of the antique artefacts, mainly in order to establish an initial assessment of the national collection, hidden away unseen in the storerooms during the war years.

It is in this context of intense pressure that I met John Curtis; in response to the gigantic task he knew we were facing his reaction was to offer the expertise and help of individual conservators from the British Museum as well as to give advice and practical know-how with respect to the newly renovated Conservation Laboratory.

John Curtis' presence in Beirut went beyond the occasional visit to the National Museum; he personally attended and witnessed the sporadic stages through which the renovation was periodically undertaken especially pivotal events such as the unveiling of the concrete caissons that once protected the major pieces of the collection, the logistics and planning involved in readying the museum's inventory as well as the commencement of the restoration and cleaning of the museum's objects.

The immensely important help which the British Museum kindly made possible with regard to the badly damaged collection meant that

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British conservators Tracy Sweek, Franka Cole and Michael Halliwell, in collaboration with Mrs. Isabelle Doumet-Skaf, Head of the Conservation Laboratory, were the first to assess the condition of the deteriorated collection. At the time, determining the direction and goals of a conservation program was not an easy task. British conservators like Janet Berry and Graham Langford were still contributing their time and skill in cleaning and restoring the masterpieces prior to the temporary opening of the National Museum in 1997 and again before the permanent opening in 1999.

Nevertheless, in spite of the numerous challenges being met by the Anglo-Lebanese team, the biggest challenge was probably having to organize an archaeological exhibition in the British Museum itself as early as March 1996. While still recovering and restoring the bulk of the collection from the storage depots of the National Museum, "Beirut: Uncovering the Past" was revealing to the British public Lebanon's cultural side. The exhibition was a big success in that it was held at the end of what had been a harsh civil war and served to raise a different profile of the country and create an awareness of a different aspect of Lebanese life.

The revival of the National Museum owes much of its success to the will of those who had a long term vision of a museum's *raison d'être*. John Curtis is pre-eminent amongst them.