Foreword

Welcome

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It is once again a great pleasure to introduce you to the latest issue of our Newsletter, and I do hope you will enjoy the contributions from across my department and from other colleagues.

Despite lockdown, the closure of the Museum and the furlough of most of our staff, it has still been a year of achievement and successes. The Iraq Scheme core team were not furloughed, in the hope that the training programme, both in the UK and in Iraq, might continue. Alas, that was not to be, and the Iraq Scheme was officially due to come to an end in April this year. That is the unfortunate news. The good news is that both field projects are still due to take place this autumn, and that the training of our last Iraqi participants will proceed as planned, but fully in the field instead of partly at the Museum, as the UK Government (DCMS) have granted an extension of their funding to allow John MacGinnis to undertake this as part of a final excavation season at Darband i-Rania in Iraqi Kurdistan. In the meantime, the Getty Foundation have generously undertaken to fund Sebastien Rey’s excavations at Tello (ancient Girsu) as part of their ‘Ancient Worlds’ programme. This new iteration of Tello/Girsu, while still maintaining the strong training element for our colleagues in Iraq, will maintain a strong research element but also include greater emphasis on heritage conservation and site management. This grant will therefore ensure the continuation of Sebastien’s outstanding work at the site for another three to five years.

Another achievement during lockdown has been the completion of what is another enduring legacy of the Iraq Scheme: a field manual. It would have been a tragic waste if the wealth of expertise gathered for the scheme had not been captured and preserved, to be used by future archaeologists, students and all concerned with the protection and preservation of cultural heritage. I am indebted to John MacGinnis for taking the initiative to do just that, and by bringing together those experts responsible for the training scheme to produce one of the most comprehensive and authoritative archaeological field manuals available. It covers every aspect of archaeological fieldwork, from conception and initiation to execution, post-exavcation analysis and publication, with additional sections on ethical reconstruction and site management. Although based on our work in Iraq, the principles are applicable to projects throughout the Middle East and beyond and, with versions freely available in Arabic and Kurdish, the manual will be widely accessible.

Lockdown has been kind to research of another kind and many other important publications have appeared during the past year, most notably a festschrift for Julian Reade, our former Mesopotamia curator: edited by Irving Finkel and St John Simpson, it contains contributions by many past and present curators from this department. There has also been a whole stream of papers published in journals, conference proceedings and edited volumes, and virtual presentations given in conferences, webinars and supporter groups around the world. I am pleased to report that we were able to respond to the terrible devastation caused by the 4 August explosion at the port of Beirut, which killed at least 204 people and left over 300,000 homeless, and ripped through the historic downtown districts, home to some of Beirut’s oldest buildings and cultural institutions. Based on a detailed situation report swiftly compiled by my curators, Jamie Fraser and Zeina Klink-Hoppe, it was established that whilst most museums sustained infrastructural damage to doors, windows and ceilings, their collections were fortunately largely unaffected. However, institutions closest to the port were critically affected, including the Sursock Museum of modern art, the historic villa of which was badly damaged and the displayed artworks destroyed. In addition, the blast destroyed a case of over 70 Classical and Islamic period glass vessels at the Archaeological Museum at the American University of Beirut (AUB) with most vessels smashed into tiny fragments. With the aim of providing much-needed assistance, and with the help of a generous grant from TEFAF (The European Fine Art Foundation), arrangements are now in place to bring those vessels that are restorable to the BM for expert conservation. Further, we are hoping to host a Lebanese trainee conservator for the duration of the project to observe and learn the specialised processes involved.

The highlight of the year is undoubtedly the outstanding exhibition of contemporary Middle Eastern Art in Room 90, which opened in mid-May and continued until mid-August. Entitled Reflections: contemporary art of the Middle East and North Africa, it is the brainchild of the department’s senior curator for Islamic Art, Venetia Porter. For many years Venetia’s abiding passion has been for contemporary art from our region, and she has, during this time, acquired a formidable collection of artworks which dramatically document the changing fortunes of countries throughout the region, many of which have endured, and continue to endure, bitter conflict and instability. However, her exhibition was not a grim catalogue of the horrors of war, but instead explored the deeper and personal reactions of artists to the contextualisation of Middle Eastern societies within an ever-changing world. It is an illuminating and exciting exhibition, as is her accompanying book of the same name, edited with the assistance of Natasha Morris, her former project curator, and Charles Tripp. We should also mention here CaMMEA (Contemporary and Modern Middle Eastern Art), the distinguished group of contemporary art specialists and connoisseurs which has demonstrated outstanding generosity in supporting Venetia’s activities over many years, and we thank them for supporting the exhibition, book and for funding most of the artworks presented in them.

To conclude, I can only repeat what I said a year ago: I very much look forward to seeing and welcoming you to the department when it is possible for us to do so again.
Zeina Klink-Hoppé
Phyllis Bishop Curator for the Modern Middle East,
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On this date, shortly after 6pm, a massive explosion rocked the heart of Beirut. This was one of the largest non-nuclear artificial explosions in history and its epicentre was a warehouse in the port area where nearly three tonnes of ammonium nitrate were stored alongside other flammable materials. These had ignited, burned for a short period and then exploded, sending a massive red mushroom cloud into the sky and generating a shockwave devastating everything in its path. While the port infrastructure was flattened and the neighbouring areas suffered structural damage to buildings old and new, many at risk of collapse, the destruction spread over a much larger area, with glass façades and windows shattering over a 10 km radius. The city found its telecommunications infrastructure destroyed, several hospitals critically damaged, and its naval base, grain silos and central bus station devastated. The explosion shocked the world and overwhelmed Lebanon, compounding the difficulties caused by a severe economic and financial crisis and the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic. The explosion left 207 dead, more than 6000 injured, roughly 300,000 homeless and a damage bill surpassing US$ 15 billion.

The arts and culture sectors were severely impacted by the explosion, with museums, art galleries, cultural spaces, libraries, archives and artists’ studios damaged, some irreparably. The neighbourhoods close to the port, with their large warehouse spaces, had attracted the contemporary art community and become the centre of Lebanon’s artistic life, with many of Beirut’s art galleries establishing themselves there over the last two decades. The neighbouring areas of Mar Mikhael and Gemmayzeh, with their late Ottoman houses, saw artists set up
their studios in stimulating, intellectual and bohemian surroundings. While some galleries were closed because of the pandemic, others had just re-opened after the easing of local lockdowns and found their displayed artworks shredded by, or embedded with, sherds of glass and other debris. Most of the city’s museums are also located within the blast radius and several sustained comprehensive structural building damage. Most affected were the Nicolas Ibrahim Sursock Museum of modern and contemporary art and the Archaeological Museum of the American University of Beirut, where damage extended beyond infrastructure to collection objects, and 57 out of 130 artworks displayed at the Sursock Museum sustained substantial damage. Works in storage were not spared either but were covered with a layer of dust, and at the Archaeological Museum a case containing Roman, Byzantine and early Islamic glass vessels collapsed and shattered most of the 74 vessels within.

The response of the cultural and heritage sector was immediate. Locally, teams of volunteers composed of heritage sector students, conservators, museum professionals, architects and engineers were formed to clear debris, and to salvage, dust and store artworks and archaeological artefacts. International response was also forthcoming, with ICOM, ALIPH, UNESCO and the Institut National du Patrimoine sending delegations to Beirut within a few days of the explosion to assess the damage and offer assistance. The Department of the Middle East, at the express request of our Director, Dr Hartwig Fisher, established contact immediately with museums affected in Beirut in order to develop a situation report clarifying the extent of the damage, and to express support and offer assistance. The Archaeological Museum has since approached the British Museum for help in conservation of the damaged glass vessels as it has neither the facilities nor capabilities for the work to be carried out locally. Dr Nadine Panayot Haroun, newly appointed director of the museum, with the help of glass conservators from the Institut National du Patrimoine, managed to sort out the sherds of the individual vessels and identify 15 as restorable: of these, seven are deemed too fragile to travel, while the remaining eight can be transported abroad for restoration in specialised centres. The British Museum, with support from The European Fine Art Foundation (TEFAF), is currently exploring ways in which this work can be undertaken.