Few events trigger collective grief or a heartache that spans nations more than the destruction of history and its markers. “It’s because this destruction touches on global consciousness, and it touches everybody’s past and roots, whether we like it or not,” says Nadine Panayot, curator of AUB’s Archaeological Museum and associate professor of practice at the Department of History and Archaeology.

Hence the great lament and outrage when the museum’s display case, facing east, around the corner from the Iron Age section, holding 72 pieces of Phoenician and Roman era glass, toppled to the floor. Its contents, save two pieces, were shattered by shockwaves emanating from the explosion at the Beirut Port on August 4, 2020.

Just how far back into history do these objects take us? 95 percent of them date back to between the first and third centuries of the Roman period. The rest date to either the Byzantine or medieval periods,” says Panayot. The Archaeological Museum, founded in 1868, just two years after the Syrian Protestant College’s founding, acquired the bulk of the collection in the 1970s.

And how does one date such pieces? “Well, because we don’t have any provenance, we date them by comparanda (Latin for ‘comparables.’) 36, its coloring, its thickness,” Panayot says.

Though now making up a collection, each piece of glass arrived at the museum after its own journey, washed up on a sandy beach perhaps, or buried under the remains of a Roman banquet hall. Each one has been shaped uniquely by the elements—rain, sand, and snow—that have come in contact with it for the past two millennia. And each one, weathered in its own way, its surface no longer smooth like the skin of a child, but uneven, multifaceted, and full of crags, like the skin of an old shepherd, filters light differently. The more weathered and multifaceted the glass, the more fragmented and rainbow like the light it reflects.

Old and delicate as they are, the ancient glass pieces must be handled with great care and skill by the hands of an expert conservator. Their destruction touched off an international effort to preserve their remains and, with luck, reconstruct them.

“I immediately called someone at the Institut national du patrimoine,“ Panayot explains, “and asked if they could send me the material just to pick up these shards: acid-free paper, gloves, basic stuff to handle the collection. I hadn’t yet assumed the director position. I didn’t have access to my own bank account, much less the AUB Museum one.”

She did, however, have friends at the Institut, a French “grande école” and the country’s only academy charged with the training of conservators. But what is a conservator? What does one do? How is one trained? And what guides their conservation efforts?

“The training is really a mix of knowledge from different fields: chemistry, physics, art history, technical knowledge, manufacturing processes, or creative techniques,” says Claire Cuyaubère, a conservator to the Institut national du patrimoine, working on behalf of the Swiss foundation Aliph, arrived in Beirut on September 4th, 2020, exactly one month after the explosion. “This was during the pandemic. Lebanon was in lockdown. I was there for seven days, but I had to stay for 72 hours locked up in my hotel room, so only four days of work,” she says.

Her first move was to clean up and organize the site. Panayot had purposefully left the damaged glass untouched on the floor underneath the showcase. “I divided the floor into a grid, like an archaeological grid, so we could work small area by small area and track everything. If two objects seemed like they belonged together, I’d put them in tray labeled according to their composition.”

Panayot recruited archaeology students at AUB to help sift through the shards and assist in the filling work of matching pieces. She began connecting with various departments at AUB to transform the catastrophe into a teachable moment. Both faculty and students brought digital modeling and chemical analysis experience to bear in assisting in the restoration, picking the glass objects in 3D, and analyzing their composition.

Meanwhile, Panayot recruited archaeology students at AUB to help with the excavation and assisting in the puzzling work of matching pieces. Cuyaubère returned several months later, a small contingent of AUB students and faculty had familiarized themselves with the glass collection and could be of greater assistance. She set up what she describes as a field lab and began to make a teachable moment. Both faculty and students brought digital modeling and chemical analysis experience to bear in assisting in the restoration, picking the glass objects in 3D, and analyzing their composition.

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“With those principles in mind, Cuyaubère, working on behalf of the Institut and with funding support from the Swiss foundation Aliph, arrived in Beirut on September 4th, 2020, exactly one month after the explosion. “This was during the pandemic. Lebanon was in lockdown. I was there for seven days, but I had to stay for 72 hours locked up in my hotel room, so only four days of work,” she says.

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those pieces that had the best chance of survival.

By this time, the British Museum (BM), had gotten involved following its cultural damage assessment report of Beirut after the explosion and having received funding from the European Fine Art Foundation to restore eight glass pieces. “We recruited Claire Cuyaubère. It was the perfect fit in a sense. She already knew the pieces, knew the fragments, had taken part in the initial rescue mission in Beirut,” says Zeina Klink-Hoppe, the Phyllis Bishop Curator for the Modern Middle East at the British Museum.

“I preselected a few objects that might be able to travel that seemed a little less fragile or a little more stable than others, that seemed complete enough that it was worth reconstructing them,” Cuyaubère says.

To complete the international picture, Stephen Koob, chief conservator emeritus at the Corning Museum of Glass, arrived in Beirut soon after Cuyaubère’s second visit. Along with Cuyaubère, he is one of a handful of people globally with expertise in ancient glass restoration. Indeed the world of ancient glass restoration is so small that experts often know of one another. “Claire says she already knew of me, possibly from my teaching at the Institut national du patrimoine,” Koob says.

“I’d read a notice in the Guardian newspaper that there was going to be some collaboration between AUB and the British Museum. It was a great time, very quiet, just the two of us. We had this whole storage area to ourselves,” Koob says. Between them, Koob and Cuyaubère had built up a lifetime of glass restoration experience and become masters of the archaeological jigsaw puzzle.

“You develop an eye for shapes and patterns,” added Koob.

Of the 24 pieces restored in total, 16 remained at AUB, while eight were reconstructed at the British Museum. “You know, being a museum, we always do exhibitions, and when we raised the funding, everybody at the museum was saying, ‘Oh, this would be an amazing Room 3 project,’” says BM curator Klink-Hoppe. Room 3, directly to the right of the main entrance, is dedicated to small exhibitions, which focus on a single object or set of objects and tell their story in depth.

The announcement of the forthcoming exhibition and the object restoration at the British Museum led to significant publicity that heretofore had been absent. “The French worked for a year, a year and a half in total silence, but then the minute the British stepped in, all hell broke loose,” says Panayot. “We were suddenly on CNN, the BBC, all over the place. But that just speaks to two different approaches.”

The exhibition, now public in Room 3, has indeed garnered a great deal of positive press. The BM has also produced a film that goes into detail as to the painstaking process of reconstructing ancient glass artifacts. Whether more pieces will be restored or not mostly depends on funding. The eight pieces at the BM will return to Lebanon at the end of this year to join their sixteen counterparts, broken and repaired, as part of a cultural history reassembled.