Responding to international crises

Shattered glass of Beirut

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"For 2000 years these vessels survived earthquakes, tsunamis and wars until 4 August 2020 when they shattered into thousands of pieces like our hearts and souls' ( Nadine Panayot, curator of the Archaeological Museum)

On 4 August 2020, the whole world heard the shocking news of a massive explosion at the port of Beirut when 27500 tonnes of improperly stored ammonium nitrate ignited and exploded. The blast wreaked terrible destruction in its wake and was felt over 200 km away. More than 210 children, women, and men lost their lives, 7000 were injured, 300,000 made homeless, dozens of buildings pulverised, and thousands of other structures were badly damaged. Coming in the middle of the Covid pandemic while Lebanon was struggling with a crippling financial crisis, the explosion brought Beirut to its knees.

The American University of Beirut, situated 5 km from the impact point, was not spared the force of the blast, and many buildings were damaged, including the Post Hall building, built in 1902, where the AUB Archaeological Museum is located. Windows and doors were broken but the damage to the collection occurred in one of its towers where a display showcase was blown away from the wall. This contained 74 glass objects showing glass used as tableware dating from the Roman to the Islamic periods but now all lay face down, ancient glass mixed with the smashed modern glass showcase, and only two of the vessels surviving intact.

Shortly after the discovery of the extent of the damage, the British Museum contacted Nadine Panayot, curator of the AUB Museum, expressing concern and extending an offer of assistance if they could help. With the support of many institutions, acknowledged in full below, eight of the glass vessels were brought from Beirut to London. They were carefully and sensitively restored in the World Conservation and Exhibition Centre by Claire Cuyaubère, who had also carried out the initial rescue mission and sorting in Beirut under the aegis of the Institut national du patrimoine, France (INP) and the International Alliance for the Protection of Heritage in Conflict Areas (ALIPH). This was also an opportunity to carry out scientific analysis on some of the glass fragments, the results of which will be published in due course.

In addition, training was provided for an Archaeological Museum's staff member, Aimée Bou Rizk, who writes:

"This is why I got to attend a 3-month training programme at the British Museum that started on March 14, 2022. I was immediately warmly welcomed by everybody. During the first month I joined the International Training Programme. It was a very enlightening experience. I met people from around the world, from different backgrounds. Sharing experiences and discovering new cultures brought new perspectives and understanding to heritage and museum activity. I was introduced to the Middle East department and library. I learned a lot about Collection Management and Collection Care which I later applied in my current work at the Museum back in Beirut. I did a tour of the Photography Studios and was trained in the best way to take professional-quality photographs of museum objects. We learned, too, how to prepare for special exhibitions, which will help me in future projects.

After the training, I was taken to the impressive conservation studios and given a tour of the different departments and facilities. This was followed by a brainstorming session with Duygu Camurcuoglu and Hayley Bullock, conservators at the British Museum, where we drafted a plan for setting up a conservation lab at the AUB Museum in the future. The session on Preventive Conservation was extremely helpful and I later started implementing the different methods I had learned in Beirut. The work on the eight glass vessels began on 28 March 2022 with Claire Cuyaubère as project conservator. The Beirut Glass Project was allotted its own room in the conservation studio. The room is spacious with large tables and flat surfaces to spread out the glass, along with all the conservation materials and devices needed. The six boxes containing the eight glass objects were spread out on a table in this room waiting to be unpacked.

I helped Claire with unpacking the fragments and the 'jigsaw-puzzle' work that followed. We worked on the condition report of each object and I took before-treatment photos. I was documenting every minute of the conservation process, taking photos and writing reports. I also learned how to take micro-photos using the microscope at the studio. I had access to the Middle East and Greece and Rome department libraries, so I was able to carry out research during my time at the British Museum and get a better understanding of the eight vessels. Finally, our objects were expertly restored in the conservation studios of the British Museum. They were then put on show in the special exhibition in Room
3 before their return to Beirut. None of this could have happened without international collaboration and initiative, and I am so grateful to everyone involved in making this happen. Together we can achieve great things and I hope this is not the end of the collaboration.

The Room 3 exhibition *Shattered glass of Beirut* (25 August – 23 October 2022), supported by The Asahi Shimbun, was co-curated by Zeina Klink-Hoppe and James Fraser from the British Museum and Nadine Panayot from the Archaeological Museum. It allows these vessels to tell their story of destruction and reconstruction while retaining the scars of their damage. Designed to take visitors on a journey similar to that taken by the vessels from Beirut to London, the exhibition included audio-visual content using footage both from the Archaeological Museum and taken during the conservation of the vessels at the British Museum to allow for immersive and emotional engagement.

The restored vessels tell eloquent stories of the explosion and its aftermath. They speak of collaboration and cooperation between institutions, and of work which goes on behind the scenes in museums. They highlight the importance of the rescue and reconstruction of cultural heritage in areas with volatile political and economic situations, and stress the necessity to engage and stand together to support a city’s inhabitants as they rebuild their lives and city, piece by piece and step by step.

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