



Beirut National Museum, front elevation being renovated, 1995



In 1975, on the eve of the events that were to take place in the Lebanon, the Beirut National Museum contained within its walls the whole of the country's cultural wealth. That year, as the museum finally closed its doors to the public, protective measures were taken by the previous Director of Antiquities, Emir Maurice Chéhab. The smaller objects were removed for safety whilst those items too large to be moved were covered with reinforced concrete.

The 1993 photographic exhibition held on the occasion of the 50th anniversary of Lebanese Independence allowed the Lebanese public to see for the first time in 18 years the extent of the damage done to the interior of the National Museum. The exhibition marked not only the symbolic reopening of the museum's doors but also heightened the determination of the Department of Antiquities to emerge from years of inertia and oblivion. The exhibition revived public interest in the museum and brought about various achievements listed below as well as the many improvements that have been made at the National Museum in the last four years:

- The President of the Lebanese Republic, His Excellency Mr. Elias Hraoui, who inaugurated the exhibition on the 19th of November 1993, made a personal financial donation to the Committee of the Friends of the Museum.
- The Minister of Culture and Higher Education, His Excellency Mr. Michel Eddé, through his constant concern to protect the national cultural heritage obtains the necessary funds from the Lebanese Government for the repairs to the museum's facade. The work begun in January 1995, will in a short while establish the first basic security precaution by enabling the doors and windows to be secured and closed shut. Thus the re-opening to the public of the museum's ground floor and basement will soon be possible.

Some of the Foreign Diplomatic Missions in Beirut have contributed in various ways:

- The British Embassy supplied British expertise in the establishing of the museum's new laboratory.
- The Czech Embassy donated photographic material.
- The Association of the Friends of the National Museum, presided by Khawla Arslane along with Ghasan Tuéni and Amin Bizri (Vice-Presidents), Raymond Audi (Treasurer), Wadad Karamé, Nayla Moawad, Nina Jidéjian, Najwa Rayess, Rima al-Husseini, Pierre el-Khoury, Nasser Safieddine and Michel de Bustros brought about the repair of the museum's administrative offices. Through their financial support, the building which had been badly damaged by the war, has been completely renovated.
- Abroad and since its inception in 1993, The Lebanese British Friends of the National Museum has campaigned to raise funds. As a first objective in its long

term policy, a laboratory for the restoration of the museum's collections was created in the museum. This laboratory is now equipped and fully operational.

- Through the auspices of UNESCO, a team of experts on secondment from the city of Marseilles trained administrative staff of the Beirut National Museum in the use of new indexing software systems.
- The Council for Development and Reconstruction carried out in 1992 urgent repairs on the holes and large cavities in the ceiling of the museum.
- The Lebanese Army who protected the museum throughout the war continues its protective mission. Private associations have also graciously contributed: ISOTEC Engineering (Antoine Salameh) for the water proofing of the buildings terraces. OLIVETTI (Ralph Audi) jointly with CIS (Antoine Kareh) for the generous donation of computer equipment.

This first issue of *National Museum News* aims to represent the aspirations, activities and hopes of the Department of Antiquities. Although slow, in view of the difficulties encountered by the vestiges of war, our progress can thus be followed by all. In addition to the various articles that will cover a wide range of recent developments, we will attempt to interest our readers in the museum's collections by publishing in every issue a scientific article on one or several of its artifacts. *National Museum News* will inform the public of our will and determination to reinstate the National Museum of Beirut as the guardian of our national heritage, as a witness of its past, and as a cultural presence for the future.

