



bulletin

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Response to Disaster: USAID and ARCE Assist in Repairs

JANE SMYTHE

*Ms. Smythe is the Assistant
to the Director for ARCE.*



Fig. 1—Entrance of the Museum of Islamic Art after the bombing. Photo courtesy of the MoA

It sounds so depressingly familiar, another attack on an Egyptian museum building housing valuable and irreplaceable objects of historical and cultural heritage. (Fig. 1)

In the early hours of Friday morning, January 25, 2014, approx. 500 kg of TNT was detonated in front of the Cairo Security Directorate on Port Said Street resulting in the death of five people and the injury of at least 75. During the course of the day another three smaller bombs were detonated throughout Cairo, resulting in three more fatalities.

The Cairo Security Directorate is located within an area known as Bab el-Khalq, which is part of Historic Cairo, a vibrant and heavily populated area of the city that also happens to contain many buildings of great historical significance. In 1979 UNESCO included this area

on the World Heritage List recognizing its “absolutely unquestionable historical, archaeological and urbanistic importance” to Cairo and the world (Fig. 2).

Because the explosion occurred very early on a Friday morning the number of fatalities and casualties were mercifully low; however, extensive collateral damage was done to a building across the street from the Cairo Security Directorate housing one of the world’s most significant collections of Islamic art and manuscripts. This building, constructed in what is known as the Neo-Mamlouk Style, was completed and inaugurated by Khedive Abbas II Hilmi in 1904. Today, the ground floor is occupied by the Museum of Islamic Art, managed by the Ministry of Antiquities (MoA); and the upper floors house the Manuscript Library and Manuscript Museum collection of the National Library and Archives of Egypt (Dar el-Kotob, Bab el-Khalq), under the

management of the Ministry of Culture. Both institutes had undergone extensive renovations in recent years and both could boast state of the art exhibition spaces, storage, research and conservation facilities (Fig. 3).

Very soon after the bombing a group of heritage activists rushed to the site to try to assess what might have happened to the building; to help form a protective line around the site if needed to stop potential looting; and to assist where possible in the collection and purchase of any supplies required to stabilize artifacts. Thankfully the collections remained safe from looting; however, what they found was a cultural disaster. The façade of the building was very badly damaged and the resulting vacuum created by the blast contributed to vast and extensive damage to both the Museum and the Library (Fig. 4).

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Director
Gerry D. Scott, III

Editor
Kathleen S. Scott

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Center in Egypt
2 Midan Simón Bolívar
Garden City, Cairo, 11461
Egypt
tel: 20 2 2794 8239
fax: 20 2 2795 6052
email: cairo@arce.org
arce.org

US Business Office
ARCE
8700 Crownhill Blvd., Suite 507
San Antonio, Texas 78209
tel: 210 821 7000
fax: 210 821 7007
email: info@arce.org

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FROM THE DIRECTOR

Dear ARCE Members,

One of the great tragedies that has accompanied the political uncertainty in Egypt since 2011 is the devastating toll that the resulting instability has taken on Egypt's invaluable cultural heritage—affecting artifacts and monuments ranging in date from prehistory to the turn of the last century. Near the Cairo headquarters of the American Research Center in Egypt (ARCE), in the early days of the Revolution, there was the break-in at the Egyptian Museum with the resulting theft and damage of some of the objects in the collection. Thanks to ARCE's Egyptian Museum Registrars Training Project, the newly created Registration Department of the Egyptian Museum was able to quickly identify each of the missing and damaged objects, assisting in the recovery and conservation of many of the artifacts.

Also near ARCE's Cairo headquarters and also in 2011, there was the fire at the Institut d'Égypte building, which broke out during one of the street clashes and resulted in the loss and damage of most of the books housed there. Thanks to ARCE's long-standing relationship with the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), ARCE received a small grant that allowed us to quickly respond to that tragedy with much-needed equipment and supplies.

This January, another building, this one housing important collections of Islamic art and manuscripts, was devastated when a massive car bomb went off outside the police facility across the street. Again with the support of

USAID, ARCE has been able to lend quick and important assistance as described in the lead article of this issue of the *Bulletin*.

In addition to these tragic events at Egyptian museums and libraries, many archaeological sites have suffered, mainly from looting. The looting has varied according to the site. Fortunately, the iconic sites at Luxor have largely been spared, but other sites have not been so fortunate, as was described by Salima Ikram, Monica Hanna, and others in a recent issue of our *Bulletin* (No. 202). In this issue, Matt Adams describes the looting he has encountered at Abydos and how a grant from ARCE's Antiquities Endowment Fund enabled him to begin to assess the damage.

Throughout the shifting tide of recent events, however, ARCE has continued its work in Egypt and has helped American institutions and scholars with their projects, as several of the remaining articles describe. From conservation and documentation projects to the discovery and identification of an important Coptic tomb, ARCE's members continue to make vital contributions to the preservation and understanding of Egypt's many-layered cultural history.

Again, we thank you, our members, for your support of these important activities.

Gerry D. Scott, III
Director

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