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## Conservators in Beirut are restoring 1,800 paintings found in a long-forgotten government archive

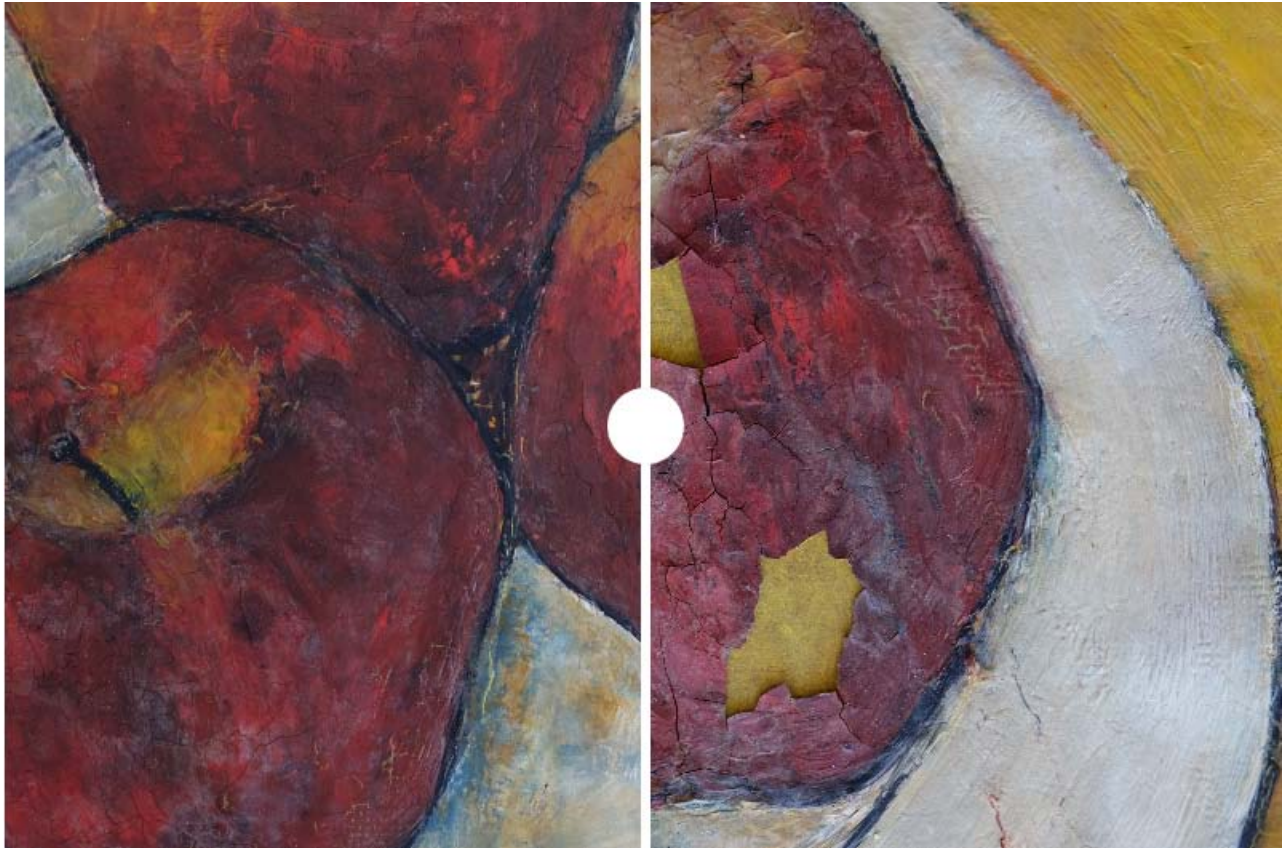
Lead conservator Kerstin Khalife tells how hundreds of Lebanon's artworks are being rescued



Some of the paintings restored were on display at the Beirut Art Fair last month.  
Courtesy Maghie Ghali

Although Beirut Museum of Art is not set to open until 2023, the team behind the venue have been keeping busy over the past few years with pop-up exhibitions and preparatory projects, setting the stage for its eventual opening. One such project is The Restoration Lab, which was unveiled to the public just over a week ago during Beirut Art Fair and aims to conserve a damaged treasure trove of Lebanese art.

The project was set up in 2017 to begin the process of restoring more than 2,000 artworks on loan from Lebanon's Ministry of Culture, with the support of the Cultural Preservation Programme of Germany's Federal Foreign Office. The ministry's collection features art dating from the 19th century to the present day, and includes paintings, sculptures and works on paper by more than 500 Lebanese artists, collected over the past 70 years.



Most pieces were donated by the artists soon after they were made, but the collection also includes items bought by the ministry during Lebanon's annual Salon d'Automne. "We do this for two reasons," Lebanon's Minister of Culture, Mohammed Daoud, tells *The National*. "Firstly to support Lebanese artists; by buying a painting from them, we're sponsoring them, giving them monetary support. Secondly, for an artist to have a piece in the ministry's collection, it becomes a point of prestige for the artist, that they are now recorded in our registers and appraised by the Culture Ministry."

With the onset of the Lebanese Civil War, which lasted from 1975 to 1990, artist appraisals became an afterthought. The ministry's art collection was hastily put into storage, where it suffered under the elements, forgotten. The collaboration with Beirut Museum of Art is a step towards returning these paintings to their former glory and giving the works back to the public.



A close up shot of a conservator filling in the paint gaps in Amin Sfeir's 'Little Girl' from 1970. Beirut Museum of Art

To date, 200 of 500 selected paintings have been restored by lead conservator Kerstin Khalife, assisted by a small team of Lebanese and German conservation professionals and trainees. About 1,800 artworks have also been cleaned of dust and discolouration.

Khalife says the team is a mixture of professionals and students who are being trained onsite by the experienced conservators. “Some paintings are more damaged than others,” Khalife says. “We have a lot of paintings with tears and flaking paint. We have to do a lot of consolidation, which is a lot of work, and it’s not always visible what we’re doing, but we have to do it to keep the paint layer attached to the canvas.

“We use a glue that is strong enough but flexible and we try to drip it through the surface cracks between the paint layer and the canvas,” she says. “It can take months to restore them, others one week or a few days, depending on the extent of the damage.”

Many of the issues stem from the artworks being exposed to humidity, kept in damp conditions with unregulated temperatures. Some of the works had been destroyed by fire.

Among the collection are stunning compositions. Khalil Saleeby, an early 19th-century master, painted portraits with extraordinary accuracy. Khalil Zgaib brought village weddings to life through the use of bold, folkloric colour, while figures such as Yvette Achkar and Shafic Abboud experimented with Abstract Expressionism. Rafic Charaf, Amine El Bacha, Adel El Saghir, Paul Guiragossian, Saliba Duwayhi and Elie Kanaan are other notable names whose works appear in the collection.

“We have a lot of very well-known artists in the collection but we also have lesser-known artists, and we hope this will bring them to light, such as Michel El Mir, Esperance Ghorayeb and Moustapha Haidar,” Khalife says.



Lead conservator Kerstin Khalife at work. Beirut Museum of Art

Because the pieces were acquired at different stages in the artists’ careers, the collection showcases the development and breadth of their capabilities. The restoration process and anything uncovered about the works during their project will become part of The Beirut Museum of Art Collection Collaborative, a digital research platform that showcases the collection and all relevant information.

Lead conservator Kerstin Khalife at work. Beirut Museum of Art

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“We document everything and try to preserve as much information as possible,” Khalife says. “For example, on the back of the artworks there are a lot of labels with interesting information on them, like where the painting has been exhibited before – like in Cairo and Sao Paulo in the '60s – so these paintings have already travelled a lot, which is interesting.

“We also keep all the original strainers or stretchers, which hold a lot of information and are useful to art historians,” she adds. “Some paintings are too damaged to restore, but we keep them as a document for academic purposes.”

The online database is available to the public free of charge, providing easy access to information on these artists and their works. Professionals conducting research on them will have the opportunity to add and link relevant information to the images, while curious parties can simply browse through the collection's treasures.

The restored paintings are currently being kept at the newly renovated Ministry of Culture, with appropriate storage that will protect the conservators' hard work. The rest of the collection is currently spread across five sites – the Presidential Palace, the Parliament, the presidential summer residence Beiteddine, the Unesco Palace and assorted Ministry of Culture offices. Many of these spaces are not open to the public and without a national gallery in Lebanon, the opening of the Beirut Museum of Art will in a way fulfil this role. The 12,000-square-metre museum will feature 70 balconies arranged as a six-storey promenade wrapped around the building's facade.

The ministry's artwork will become part of Beirut Museum of Art's permanent collection and the works within it will be displayed in one place for everyone to enjoy for the first time. “These paintings must be seen, not just collected to be stored in a depot,” Daoud says. “We'll show them at certain galleries and centres. We're working on the idea of having a touring pop-up exhibit, showing part of the collection for a certain amount of time, maybe three months, and later show another part of the collection.

“We may also showcase some at official offices and public buildings, such as the airport or National Library,” he adds, “but in the end we want them to be shown at Beirut Museum of Art when it opens.”

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