

Under-Writing Beirut - Mathaf

Lamia Joreige

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Special Thanks

The Lebanese Ministry of Culture

Farès El Dahdah

Suzy Hakimian

Anne-Marie Afeiche

Helen Sader

Hans Curvers

The Fouad Debbas Collection

Yasmine Chemali

Nabila Bittar

Sandra Dagher

Commissioned by Sharjah Art Foundation



SHARJAH ART FOUNDATION

Design Concept by Lamia Joreige

Layout by Suzy AlHage

Printed at Imprimerie Khawam, Beirut, Lebanon

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PLAN DE BEYROUTH
 dédié à
S. M. le SULTAN
ABDUL HAMID II.

par Julius Jöcqvied
 Rue de la Harpe, n. 10
 chez les Citoyens de la République, n. 10
 1838

Échelle

1000 Toises									
1000 Toises									

EXPLICATION DES SIGNES

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Propriété 1:2250



M E D I T E R R A N E E

Ant. Jöcqvied del.
 Jöcqvied fecit.



When excavating specific instances or locations, whether from the past, present, or projected future, intertemporal continuities and ruptures surface via what persists, what has vanished, and the promise of knowing and imagining inherent in both.

Mathaf, the Arabic word for museum, is a historically significant area that is home to the National Museum of Beirut. It is also the neighborhood where I live. Until 1915, this area, then on the southern outskirts of the city, was undeveloped. It was covered in pine forests planted in the 17th century by Emir Fakhreddine to halt the advancement of sands from the south into Beirut and provided recreational grounds for the city's inhabitants. Towards the end of the Ottoman Empire and beginning of the French mandate, the area witnessed its first bout of development. As an extension of Beirut's modernization efforts, Wali Azmi Bey set plans in motion for the construction of a club for the upper classes, inspired by those in contemporaneous European metropolises. The club was to include a public causeway, cinema, casino, and hippodrome that would stretch over 600,000 square meters. The casino building, completed in 1920, was never used for its initial purpose; the building served as a military hospital briefly during World War I and eventually became the Résidence des Pins - the seat of the French mandate authorities and later the French Ambassador in Lebanon. The hippodrome, completed in 1921, would later become one of the most active racecourses worldwide, holding races twice a week throughout the 1960s in Beirut. The area of the museum remained largely intact, however, until the 1950s urban expansion, when arterial roads were cut through and surrounding neighborhoods such as Badaro sprang up. The majority of construction in these neighborhoods, nonetheless, dates from the 1960s and 1970s, as is visible in the architectural style of their buildings.

In this early period, the area known today as Mathaf, resounded with national significance. It was, after all, from the porch of the Résidence des Pins that General Gouraud declared the establishment of Greater Lebanon in 1920 and on one of its main arteries, the Damascus Road, that parades were held on the nascent nation's Independence Day celebrations following 1943.

The National Museum of Beirut itself was a product of and witness to these developments. The story of the museum begins in 1919, and specifically with French Officer Raymond Weill's collection of antiquities, exhibited in a temporary hall on Georges Picot Street. In 1923, building on the Archaeological and Fine Arts Service's growing collection, a committee was formed to raise funds for a national museum. The museum was to be constructed on a plot of land adjacent to the hippodrome that had been gifted by the local municipality. Both the location of the plot and its position over a water table would later beleague the museum. An architectural competition for the building's design was held in Paris: the plan by architects Antoine Selim Nahas and Pierre Leprince-Ringuet was chosen. The design was in the then-popular Egyptian Revival style, boasting decorative elements such as lotus-head pillar capitals inspired by those at Luxor. Enigmatically, Nahas's two major offices in Cairo and Beirut as well as his last apartment in Rome were looted, rendering scarce any archival material. The construction of the National Museum of Beirut lasted from 1930 to 1937. Delayed by the outbreak of World War II, the museum's inauguration finally took place in May 1942. The National Museum of Beirut prided itself on having a small yet impressive collection of objects from pre-history to the 19th century. During Lebanon's most recent period of prolific excavations, from the 1960s to the irruption of the Lebanese wars in 1975, new additions were made to this collection on a daily basis.

As if presciently, given the fate of the museum during the wars, the collection was particularly renowned for its Anthropoid Sarcophagi and extensive funerary material. As Professor Farès el-Dahdah indicates, to a visitor these necessarily evoked death, mourning, and anguish. El-Dahdah writes: "The meaning of the sarcophagus inevitably exceeds what one actually sees as it alludes to something that extends beyond its physical and geographical reality: the sentiment of mourning, for example. As Georges Didi-Huberman has pointed out, looking at a container of death no doubt brings about the anguish that stems from being confronted with a decaying body – both whisper in one's ear a fate identical to one's own."¹ This relation between the museum and death, later compounded by the political context, led to the creation of *Mathaf*, the first chapter of *Under-Writing Beirut*.

The museum's evocation of death took on added dimensions during the Lebanese wars. In 1975, the museum found itself on the Green Line that divided East and West Beirut. The crossing became known as one of the rare passageways where people could traverse from one side of the city to the other during times of truce. The Mathaf-Barbir Crossing, as it was called, ran along the length of

the hippodrome and linked the museum area with the neighborhood of Barbir. Because of its strategic location along the front, the crossing and its surroundings became the site of rampant killings and kidnappings as well as skirmishes between militias and various nations' armies struggling for its control. The Résidence des Pins, for instance, was occupied by militias as early as 1978. Moreover, both the residence and the hippodrome's old grandstand were destroyed, and most of the remaining pine forest was burnt down by Israeli shelling in 1982. The museum itself suffered an equal if not more crippling fate. It witnessed its share of shelling, sniper fire, and defacement and was used as fighters' barracks and bunkers. The museum area served as a stronghold for the syrian army, and the museum building itself was occupied by the Israeli army, during its invasion of Beirut. Despite the protective measures taken, some objects from the collection were looted or severely damaged. Others disappeared. Initially, emergency makeshift measures such as laying sandbags were taken, with more permanent measures adopted as the war intensified in instances of relative calm. The museum's conservator, Emir Maurice Chehab, led the efforts. Wooden boxes were constructed around the museum's large sculptures, stelae and sarcophagi and poured over with concrete. Horizontal mosaics were made to disappear: covered in plastic bags and coated with cement. Smaller objects from the museum's display cases were hurriedly returned to the storage areas, which were then walled up and made undetectable. Once a site meant to represent national union, the museum and its area became a symbol of the country's division and the backdrop for sectarian violence.





The violence witnessed during the wars added a further layer evoking death to the museum and its funerary collection. El Dahdah writes that the protective structures, which he calls “concrete parallelepipeds”, “held within and outside them the memory of those who died in their proximity”, referring to both “militia warriors and ancient monarchs”. As a second layer evoking death, the concrete parallelepipeds themselves “acquired the funerary properties which they protected”. El Dahdah even speaks of the act of the objects’ concealment as “a process of entombment”. Thirdly, war, and the collection’s entombment, “in effect returned the museum to its archetypal origin: the mausoleum, in which bodies and collections are preserved hidden from public view”. When the museum reopened with a temporary exhibit of the concrete parallelepipeds in 1993, it “had already become a vivid mnemonic monument capable of triggering affects with no more than the minimalist cubes, that which is supposedly lacking in affective charge.”²

In opposition to the reconstruction initiatives undertaken in the initial post-war period, and later adopted by the museum itself – initiatives which aimed to erase the blemishes of the war and restore a more glorified image of the past – El Dahdah espouses minimal intervention and the memorializing of the conflict through its ruins. He writes: “the initial design instinct was simply to open the museum as it was. The instinct went so far as to suggest that the museum should never be restored; the civil war had built its own memorial.”³

These opposing positions resonate with the broader debate on memorializing and remembering versus restoring and forgetting played out in Lebanon since 1991. The debate has been further problematized by disagreements over what should be remembered and how it should be commemorated. It was particularly central to the controversy surrounding the reconstruction of the city center in the early post-war period, and remains, to a certain extent, valid today. It underlies in significant ways the practice of those involved in researching and reflecting on the Lebanese wars, and is central to my own artistic practice. The politics of remembrance and the question of how to approach history are further complicated by issues surrounding the treatment of archival and documentary material as well as access to them. Together, for me, these issues underscore the impossibility of constructing complete and comprehensive narratives.

At the core of the issue of the accessibility (and inaccessibility) of documents and objects as well as information, the prerequisite for any investigation, are political questions. After all, how can war crimes be scrutinized and addressed when a number of warlords are still in power and prevent us from digging into the war’s events?

Today, although many of the tensions and issues that led to the Lebanese wars persist unresolved and unchanged, the landscape of the country, and particularly of Beirut, has been radically altered. Following the city’s large-scale reconstruction, what remains for us to consider or appropriate from the era of the wars, and how should it be handled? Even now, in its resemblance to its pre-war form, the museum continues to be haunted by lingering traces, tormented by the layers of death it carries within its folds whose ghosts must be summoned and remains must be exhumed.



Of the museum's collection, it seems that it is impossible to find out which objects went missing during the wars. It appears that the museum had no comprehensive inventory of its collection prior to the outbreak of the wars. Many of the documents and tags on objects that did exist were destroyed when the basement storage was flooded and its contents deteriorated due to high humidity levels, and when the museum's administrative building caught fire following an attack. One of the possible narratives surrounding this episode suggests that the attack was made by the Israeli army after Maurice Chehab refused it entry into the museum building. It was only after the war, when restoration efforts were initiated, that the museum's collection was extensively archived. Objects recognized as missing are those stumbled upon by researchers when looking for an artifact based on images or texts published before the war and which cannot be found in the museum's present-day holdings.

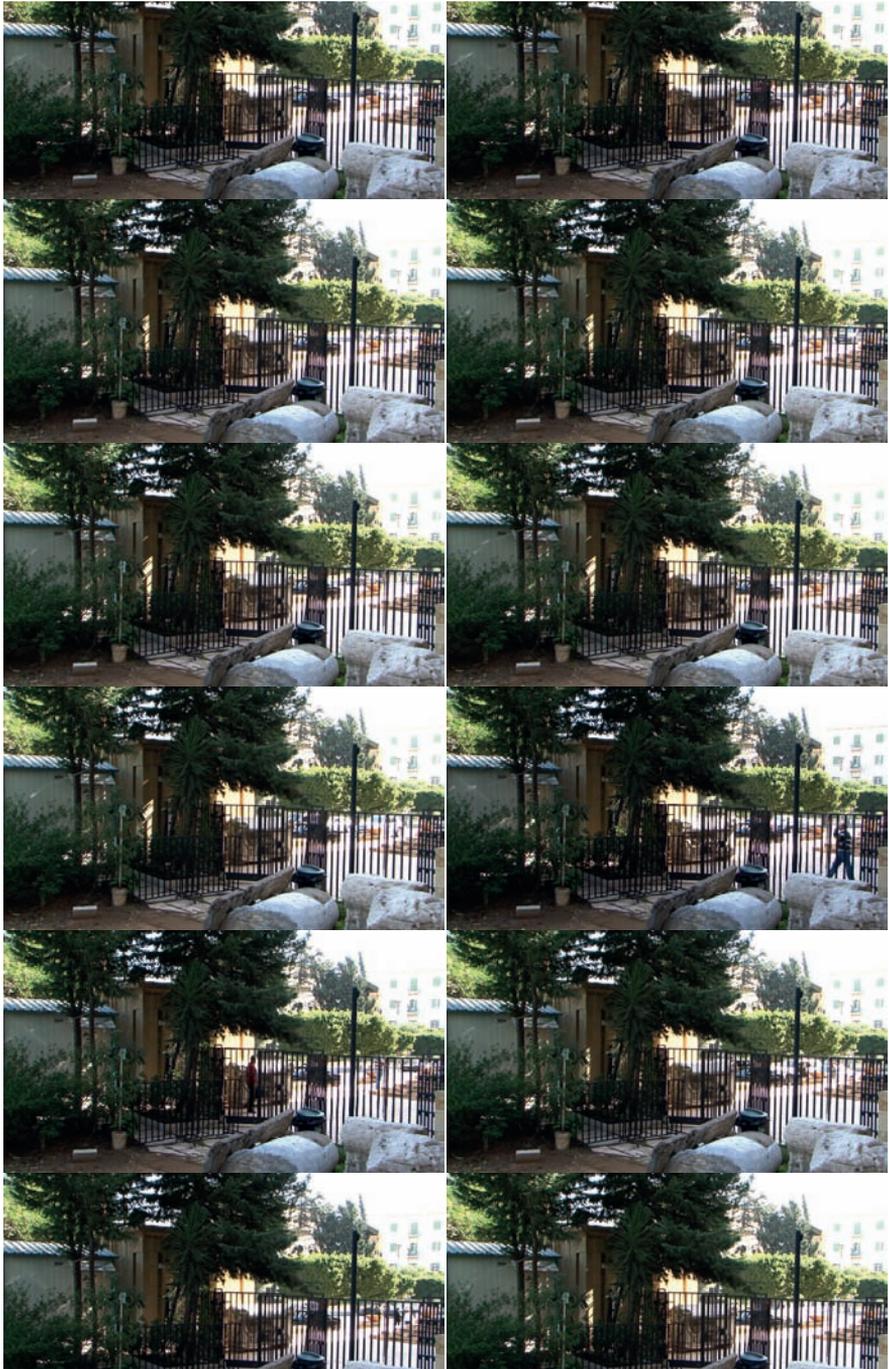
For various reasons – political and non-political, rational and irrational, and mainly practical because of the museum's organization and shortage of staff – it has proven impossible for me to access the museum's post-war inventory, storage, archive of documents and photographs, and library publications including the museum's bulletin.

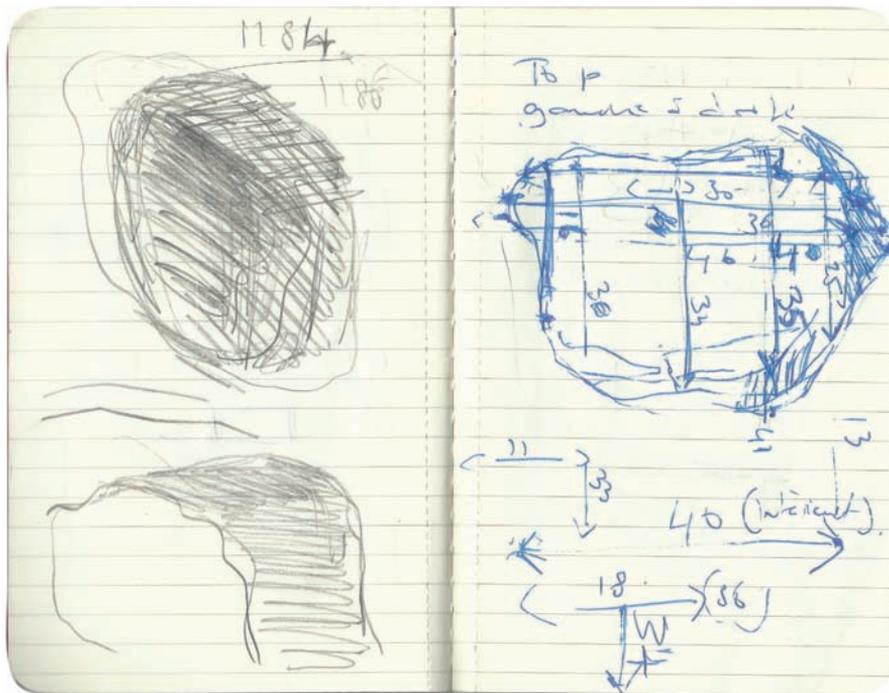
Among the thousands of pieces from the collection in storage, the only object that was made accessible to me was the 'Good Shepherd Mosaic', possibly because it will soon be displayed to the public.



Figure 42 (p. 112): Le Bon Pasteur

This mosaic could not be protected during the wars and remains impossible to fully restore because of its vertical positioning. The mosaic bears a hole, believed to have been made strategically by a sniper. The hole provided the sniper with a line of sight onto the Mathaf-Barbir crossing and immediate surroundings. It has now been sealed off but the outline of the cavity remains visible. By reenacting the sniper's line of sight, *180 Degree Garden View* puts us in the position to imagine what the sniper saw and whom he may have killed through the hole. The video's ostensible banality - the peaceful shots of artifacts that lie in the museum's garden, trees that rustle in the wind, and the unfolding of the urban landscape - is punctuated by ominous sirens.





Object of War, on the other hand, is the negative of the sniper hole cast as a concrete sculpture. Concrete features as a central element in the museum's history, from its construction to the collection's wartime preservation, and as a consequence in *Under-Writing Beirut - Mathaf*.

Object of War's initial impetus rests on the practice of the imprint as a trace of contact with a body or void and is more specifically inspired by the tradition of the death mask and portrait. Yet the sculpture was not produced from a mold but rather from a digital model created from photographs and precise measurements taken of the sniper hole. Rather than standing in as a replica, the sculpture moves away from the exactness of reproduction towards the freedom of reformulation.

The title *Object of War* refers to a previous work, *Objects of War* (1999-ongoing). This association has been purposely constructed since both works approach the history of the Lebanese wars through mnemonic objects.

In *Objects of War*, participants choose an object from the time of the wars, whether ordinary or unusual, that serves as a starting point for recounting a personal experience. The work presents participants' video testimonies along with the actual objects.



In an earlier work, *Here and Perhaps Elsewhere* (2003), I asked people I encountered along the former Green Line if they knew anyone kidnapped during the wars. The footage, taken in 2002, was partly filmed near Mathaf and used archival photographs to pinpoint the locations of former checkpoints – the sites of frequent kidnappings – including Mathaf-Barbir. The video marked the beginning of my interest in the neighborhood of the National Museum of Beirut. The responses of those interviewed sometimes resounded with reluctance towards, and in certain cases even fear of, remembering and telling. An uncertainty about what happened, an endless waiting for clarification or closure in the present, and a bitterness about the lack of accountability and action taken by the government also prevailed. “We don’t know anything like that here...We don’t want to get involved in those kinds of stories,” one says. “They never found out. Dead or alive, no one knows,” another laments. A third poses the question: “If the government won’t talk, why should we?”

As stories are told, it became clear that, as one man says, “everyone has someone kidnapped.” A mother has two boys who disappear and when she goes to inquire after them, she never returns. The parents of a child, kidnapped at the age of 14 by the Syrians on account of collaborating with Israel, continue to hope to see their son come home every time a prisoner is set free. In the absence of explanation or information, the scenarios and endings of these stories remain open to speculation and interpretation.



The museum objects that disappeared are surrounded by an eerily similar obscurity and silence. On the one hand, it has been said that little actually disappeared from the museum's collection during the wars. Yet, on the other, in a fiery article from 1991, journalist May Menassa writes, "We have heard that precious pieces from the National Museum of Beirut have been stolen and sold abroad, but we never heard anyone troubling themselves to retrieve them."⁴ Complicating the matter of finding information about the objects known to be missing is the impossibility of ascertaining how they disappeared – whether they were stolen or destroyed – since it is unknown precisely what was destroyed by the fire in the 1980s. Moreover, it seems there was never any declaration of theft by the authorities at the time.

Through written exposés or oral testimonies, awareness of some objects that disappeared has grown, without the objects themselves necessarily resurfacing. One such object is a weight, which bears the Phoenician number of one hundred as well as what is believed to be the first appearance of the cross of St. Andrew on an artifact of this kind. Another is a weight from Antakya that features the midriff of Hermes, marked by scratches and a crack. Both these weights were discovered while for sale in Cologne, Germany, and matched, from descriptions and images, with objects missing from the collection of the National Museum of Beirut.

Objects Missing from the National Museum of Beirut relates to the stories heard and unheard about the museum's disappeared objects. This closed leather book emphasizes the secrecy surrounding their disappearance and the inaccessibility of pertinent information. It highlights the potential for imagination to fill in such fissures and culminates in an archive that may or may not have existed in another form in the past and that could or could never exist in the future.

All the Objects from the National Museum of Beirut is also partly inspired by inaccessibility, and in particular by the inaccessibility of the museum storage. Instead, it dwells by default on the only part of the collection that is visible, the entirety of the display on December 15, 2012. By reproducing every caption identifying the objects on view, the work ironically and vainly attempts to represent the museum's holdings in one image, uncovering the politics of historiography and questioning the museum as a foundation for national identity.

The museum and its missing objects are indeed a microcosm for the state of antiquities in Lebanon. Although in 1933 a law was passed that made mandatory the reporting of any antiquities discovered, designating them property of the Lebanese government, the trade of artifacts was fairly common and openly practiced until the 1970s. Objects were dug up by profiteering treasure hunters, illicitly transported by dealers by sea or air, or installed in the living rooms and gardens of Lebanese homes. The trade of antiquities eventually went underground after Lebanon signed the 1970 UNESCO Convention that curtailed the export of antiquities by developing countries and their importing by developed ones. Illegal trafficking only persisted and intensified, however, in the anarchy of the wars. We can barely begin to fathom the number and the range of objects that were never reported found or relinquished to the national government.

1990]

13



Fig. 24. — Masque perle.

supra, fig. 8). En dessous du disque ailé, p
contre, se trouvent deux hiéroglyphes de pa
et d'autre d'une branche stylisée. Il s'ag

In “The Biggest Supermarket in Lebanon”, journalist Robert Fisk describes the looting of “thousands of tons of artefacts” and consequent destruction of archaeological sites like Kamed el Loz during and directly following the Lebanese wars as “a national tragedy”. Detailed accounts are given by Fisk of the testimonies of treasure hunters and dealers, including: “A dealer near Baalbek told me of the unearthing of the ‘goddess of water’, a Graeco-Roman bronze statue of a woman lying on a bed and holding a cup in her hand, 50 cm high. ‘It was magnificent; in perfect condition. It had been found in a temple. I was offered it for \$100,000 (£60,000) but I couldn’t afford it. Later, they smuggled it out of Lebanon and I was told it sold for half a million dollars in Germany.’”

The protagonists featured in Fisk’s article exhibit a “business-like” attitude towards the theft of Lebanon’s heritage. “When I started [while] at school, I wasn’t interested in the history of this place... It meant only money to me,” Hussein, a treasure hunter, says. With the lack of knowledge of Lebanon’s history and heritage, imagination starts to fill the gap. “[M]any of the diggers and dealers are trying to construct a mental picture of the past, based on legends and scraps of hearsay,” Fisk says.⁵

As monuments, national museums aim at reflecting but also shaping a citizen’s sense of national history and identity. It is ironic then that the National Museum of Beirut was located along the city’s dividing line. It is also paradoxical that its collection, and the digs that feed into it, have been grounds for disagreement over the writing of Lebanon’s history.



Given the absence of a notion of shared ancestry in Lebanon, how can the subject of collective history and identity be addressed? Almost seventy years since the country's creation, Lebanon's national identity remains at stake, nonconsensual, and fragile. This vulnerability and uncertainty is invoked in a previous work, *Beirut, Autopsy of a City* (2010), which explores the possibility of Beirut disappearing by recounting the stories of conquests, defeats and natural disasters that have disfigured and endangered the city from 1200 BC to 2058 AD.

Today it seems to me that this possibility is an actuality. So too is the question of how to deal with missing elements and gaps in our history as well as how to live with ghosts, whether one chooses to acknowledge them or not.

When asked of his sentiments "about disturbing...dead ancestors" by digging up their graves, Hussein matter-of-factly states: "The bones I find belong to people who lived maybe 4,000 years ago, while I know I may find something that will make me money. In eight years, I've seen no ghosts in the tombs. Inside it is very dark but when I find bones I think, 'Yes, these are the people who helped to start civilization and now their bones are in Hussein's hands.'" ⁶

¹El-Dahdah, Farès, "Latent Parallepipeds: The First Postwar Exhibition at the Beirut National Museum." *Slow Space*. Ed. Michael Bell and Sze Tsung Leong. New York: The Monacelli Press, 1998. 408-425. El-Dahdah's reference to Georges Didi-Huberman is taken from his book *Ce que nous voyons, ce qui nous regarde* (Paris: Les Editions de Minuit, 1992).

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Menassa, May. "Kamil Asmar Yahtaz Li Nahb Al Aathar." *An Nahar*. 7 June 1991

⁵ Fisk, Robert. "The Biggest Supermarket in Lebanon: A Journalist Investigates the Plundering of Lebanon's Heritage." *Berytus* Vol. 39 (1991). Online. Available FTP: <http://almashriq.hiof.no/ddc/projects/archaeology/berytus-back/berytus39/fisk/>

⁶ Ibid.

