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THE INTERNATIONAL ART MAGAZINE

COMMENT

What does the reopening of the National Museum of Damascus mean for Syria?

Ross Burns

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The entrance to the National Museum of Damascus, featuring the doorway from the Umayyad desert castle at Qasr al-Hayr al-Sharqi in the Syrian desert. Photo: Louai Beshara/AFP/Getty Images

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The National Museum of Damascus, which reopened in October six years after civil war forced its closure, is one of the world's great collections of archaeological and historical treasures. Along with its counterpart in Aleppo (still under restoration), the Damascus museum – which dates to the inauguration of the national collection of antiquities immediately after the First World War – provides an irreplaceable panorama of the country's past. Thankfully largely untouched during the conflict that has raged across Syria since 2011, the museum's facilities, including a cavernous underground storage space, were used for the safe-keeping not only of the items from its own collection but also for material moved from centres more exposed to the ravages of fighting. Most notably, many of the smaller finds from the Palmyra Museum were moved here before the conflict reached the desert city. The figure of the lion that once protected the temple of Allat (the Arab equivalent of Athena or Minerva) had stood at the entrance to the Palmyra museum but was detonated by the 'Islamic State' (IS) during their occupation of the ancient city in 2015. Now restored, it finds a temporary home in the Damascus museum garden, already the resting place of scores of important classical- and Islamic-era statues and decorative stones.

The visitor to the museum is greeted by an entrance that could hardly convey a more overwhelming message about Syria's past. Rescued from the ravages of

time among the ruins of the eighth-century Qasr al-Hayr al-Sharqi in the Syrian desert, the gateway is an extraordinary blend of the range of cultures that came together in the early Islamic period. The Umayyad castle's towering entrance combines ideas from the classical and Mesopotamian past while heralding the new styles of the Islamic centuries to come. It is a fitting symbol of the messages of the past that Syria so well represented – one culture merging its themes with those of its predecessors rather than trying to impose the form of bleak mono-culture that today's Islamists claim to profess.

Like the restored National Museum in Beirut, which became a flagship for the country's recovery after 15 years of civil conflict, the Damascus museum is being presented as an assertion of the value of honouring history as a regenerative tool. While the Beirut museum had long stood on the main crossing point between factional lines, its remarkable restoration was used to signal a new Lebanese national consciousness. Syria is not there yet, with some parts of the country still in rebel hands, but the assembling of the rich memories of its past can be an equally powerful tool.

The Temple of Allat in Palmyra (where the Lion of Allat now in the Damascus museum came from). Photo courtesy Judith McKenzie/Manar al-Athar

In Syria's case the damage to heritage has been spread across the country, but as the fighting dies down, it is perhaps time to attempt a more accurate appraisal of what has been lost. Overstating the level of destruction has become a constant in the coverage of Syria's tragic conflict. In fact, many buildings routinely assumed in the outside world to have been lost or destroyed have survived, with minor repairs or cleaning of scorched walls often all that is needed to bring them back to life. By contrast, many of the isolated examples of deliberate and complete obliteration have rarely rated a mention. While Palmyra was given blanket coverage through the cynically manipulative publicity campaign mounted by IS, the 'tunnel bombs' dug by the Islamists in Aleppo to take out whole city blocks, with their major monuments, were noted only in passing. It may be time to take stock of the reality that across the country, much of Syria's remarkable heritage survives – sometimes battered, but persisting. Even in Aleppo ordinary citizens have turned to the job of basic cleaning and restoration, as can be seen in photographs being posted online.

The sobering fact is, however, that the overall level of destruction of heritage structures, allowing for the just-mentioned exceptions, is proportionately less than the damage in many areas to civilian housing and facilities essential to normal life such as schools and hospitals. Regeneration and the return of refugees go hand in hand. Restoration is a great creator of employment, can often be initiated by the residents themselves and should not be put off *sine die*. Luckily, Syrians are a richly skilled and enterprising people but there is much on their plate for the moment.

Wider international support for Syria's recovery seems shackled by the lack of progress on a political solution to the seven-year conflict, which would allow the return of refugees. Until measures are in place to lock in a political settlement, existing restrictions and an uncertain security situation in many areas discourage even non-governmental gestures of assistance. Foreign experts who might be keen to visit as individuals are constrained by most Western countries' security warnings (which rule out travel to Syria and so trigger withdrawal of institutions' insurance cover). This effectively locks out those attached to state-funded research bodies. Compared to the scores of foreign teams conducting programmes in Syria before 2011, not even a handful of experts have been able to re-visit. While signs of recovery such as the reopening of the National Museum are essentially symbolic and regrettably isolated, they remain important in combatting assumptions in many quarters that Syria should be written off.

Ross Burns was Australian Ambassador to Syria and Lebanon in the 1980s, and is the author of *Monuments of Syria* (IB Tauris, 2009) and *histories of Damascus and Aleppo* (Routledge). His [website](#) has tracked the continuing toll of damage across Syria since 2011.

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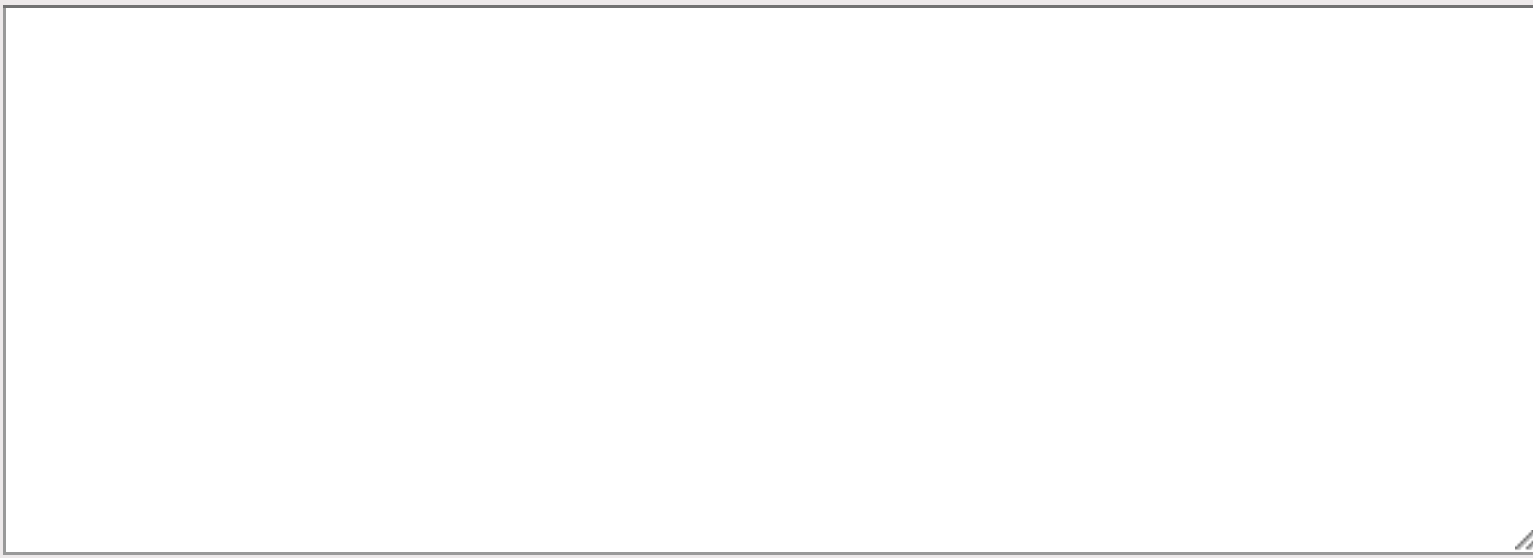


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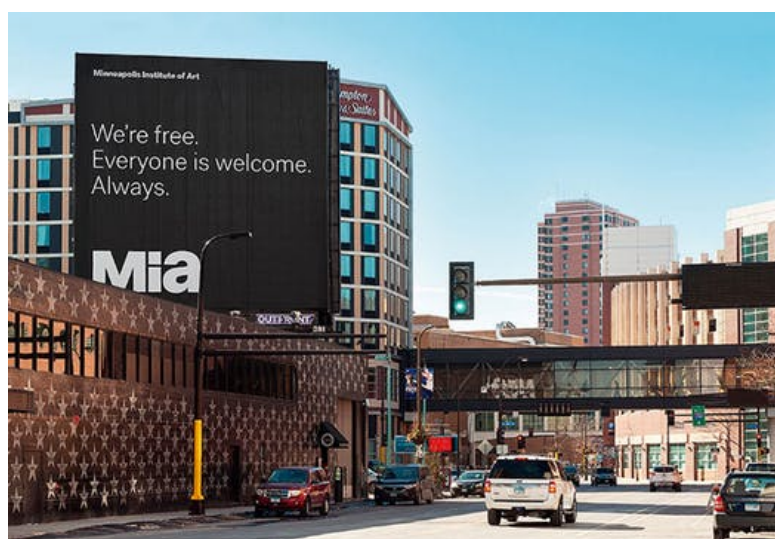
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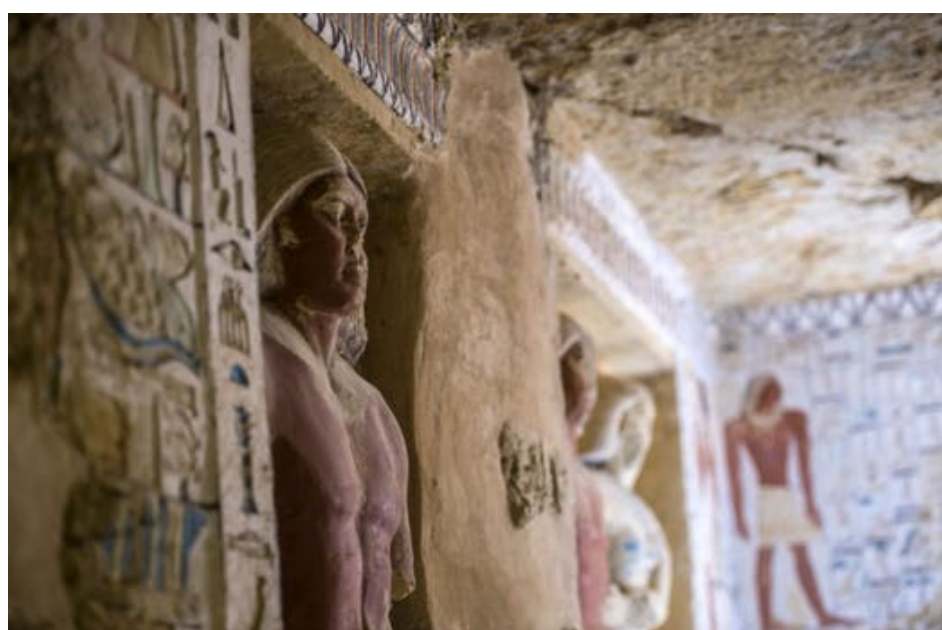
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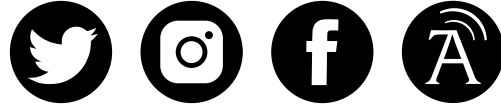
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