

British Museum to restore ancient artefacts damaged in 2020 Beirut port explosion, with the support of TEFAF

Press images:

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- **8 glass vessels damaged in the 2020 port explosion in Beirut will be restored at the British Museum in London**
- **The objects have been salvaged from a destroyed case which displayed Classical and Islamic glass vessels in the Archaeological Museum at the American University of Beirut**
- **This work has been made possible with the support of The European Fine Art Foundation (TEFAF)**

The British Museum, with the support of The European Fine Art Foundation (TEFAF), today announces an important project to restore eight ancient glass vessels which were severely damaged in the Beirut port explosion in Lebanon on 4 August 2020.

The vessels, from the Roman and Islamic periods, were on display in the Archaeological Museum at the American University of Beirut (AUB) when the explosion took place. The case they were in blew over from the force of the blast, shattering the glass objects. This new collaboration will see hundreds of the glass fragments painstakingly pieced back together and restored at the conservation laboratories at the British Museum in London.

The AUB Archaeological Museum lay 3.2 km from the port explosion, and sustained heavy damage to its windows and doors. The case the vessels were displayed in contained 74 Roman, Byzantine and Islamic period glass vessels. Most vessels were shattered beyond repair with only 15 being identified as salvageable. Of these, only eight are safe to travel to the British Museum, which has the facilities and expertise to restore and conserve these items.

Hartwig Fischer, Director of the British Museum, said: "Like the rest of the world, we looked on in horror at the devastating scenes in Beirut in August last year. We immediately offered the assistance of the British Museum to colleagues in the city. As we mark one year since the tragedy, we're pleased to be able to provide the expertise

and resources of the British Museum to restore these important ancient objects so they can be enjoyed in Lebanon for many more years to come.”

After the blast, Claire Cuyaubère, a conservator from the French *Institut national du patrimoine* oversaw the initial work by Archaeological Museum staff to carefully collect and categorize the shards of ancient glass from the mixed debris, which included glass from the display case and surrounding windows. She returned to Beirut in July 2021 to lead the “puzzle-work” of this material, identifying and matching broken shards from each vessel, and identifying those suitable for shipment to London. The puzzle-work was supported by the Friends of the Middle East Department at the British Museum.

Jamie Fraser, Curator for the Ancient Levant and Anatolia at the British Museum, supported by HENI, said: “It is a privilege to collaborate with the AUB Archaeological Museum on this remarkable project. The glass vessels have survived several disasters and conflicts over the last 2,000 years, only to be shattered by the port explosion in 2020. Their restoration reflects the resilience of the staff at the Archaeological Museum, and the importance that Lebanon places on its rich cultural heritage”.

Hidde van Seggelen, TEFAF Chairman, said: “The destruction of these works of art was a terrible consequence of a larger tragedy for the people of Beirut. We are proud to support the restoration of the glass vessels through TEFAF’s Museum Restoration Fund, as these objects hold immense historical, artistic and cultural significance. Their return to their rightful form is a powerful symbol of healing and resilience after disaster.”

Once the vessels are fully restored, they will go on temporary display at the British Museum before traveling back to Beirut.

The eight objects are hugely important in telling the story of the development of glass-blowing technology in Lebanon in the 1st century BC, a period which saw glass production revolutionised. This technique enabled the mass production of glass objects in different forms, making an elite material available for common, domestic use. Six of the eight vessels identified for restoration were made by early glass-blowing technology and show experimentation in function and form. Two other vessels date to the late Byzantine - early Islamic periods, and may have been imported to Lebanon from neighbouring glass manufacturing centres in Syria or Egypt.

Prof Nadine Panayot, Curator of the AUB Archaeological Museum, said: “The loss of many glass tableware vessels dating back to the Roman period, some as early as the 1st century BC, represents a priceless cultural loss for Lebanon and the Near East. We are extremely grateful for the British Museum’s contribution to the restoration of eight of the glass vessels of the AUB Archaeological Museum that were shattered by the Beirut port explosion. My thanks go to TEFAF as well for their generosity and their support of the project.”

Sandra Smith, Head of Collection Care at the British Museum, said: “Glass is a very difficult material to reconstruct, not least because the sherds flex and ‘spring’ out of shape and have to be drawn back under tension to restore the original shape. Doing this for hundreds of pieces is a delicate process but our world class facilities and highly experienced conservation staff will ensure these items are preserved to exceptional standards.”

Notes to editors

This project is made possible by the TEFAF Museum Restoration Fund which was established in 2012 to support and promote the professional restoration and related scholarly research of significant museum artworks. Championing art in all its forms, each year TEFAF awards grants to one or two museums around the world to restore artworks from across the ages. A Committee of independent experts selects the winners, whose work in restoration is a remarkable contribution to the field of art history. Visit www.tefaf.com/stories to learn about restorations TEFAF has supported in the last nine years



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Further information

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High resolution images and caption sheet available at <https://bit.ly/3wYgyvU>

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