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Under Li Beirut, UNESCO and BeMA restore a collection of Lebanese artworks damaged by the port blasts

Beirut, 20 January, 2022- The UNESCO Office in Beirut and The Beirut Museum of Art – BeMA, held an exhibition today under the title “Lift”. The event displayed 17 paintings that were damaged during the Beirut port blasts, in 2020, and that were fully restored as part of UNESCO’s flagship initiative Li Beirut.

The restoration works were conducted by BeMA, with a grant from the Government of Iceland to revive cultural life in the Lebanese capital, following the blasts. The artworks all carry the signatures of renowned Lebanese artists such as Jamil Molaeb, Hussein Madi, Amine El Basha, Shawki Chamoun, Paul Guiraguossian, Rafik Majzoub, Edgar Mazigi, Nizar Daher, Hassan Jouni and Bibi Zoghbe, and include pieces from the BeMA - Ministry of Culture collection exhibited at the Grand Serail, as well as others from local galleries and private collectors.

Speaking during the exhibition opening, Costanza Farina, Director of the UNESCO Office in Beirut, affirmed that “historic buildings, cultural heritage and artworks, represent the soul of a people, and in turn the soul of Beirut.” “These are so much more than mere objects, they tell a story of an individual, of a society and its people, she added. UNESCO is proud to have been collaborating with such dedicated and competent professionals to restore these artworks, which embody the renowned Lebanese creativity. Heritage preservation and the revival of cultural life is at the center of UNESCO’s engagement in Lebanon within the Li Beirut initiative. Culture fuels innovation, fosters creativity and is an asset for economic development. It is a critically important investment that we must collectively support.”

“BeMA is very happy with its first association with UNESCO through the Li Beirut initiative and we thank the republic of Iceland for their generous support”, said from her side Michele Haddad, Director of BeMA. “It is a real joy to see the restored artworks and have them returned, in the next few days, to their original locations. BeMA’s restoration team continues its meticulous important work restoring and conserving pieces of the BeMA - Ministry of Culture Collection, a stunning collection that is a visual history of modern Lebanon”, she added.

The treatment of the artworks followed a series of steps, such as the cleaning of the paintings’ surface and reverse, the mending of the tears using microscopes and special light, and the retouching of the scratches. 7 restorers worked on the restoration project: 4 from the BeMA team and 3 Graduate students of the Conservation Institute of the Cologne University of Applied Sciences, specialized in tear mending canvas restoration. BeMA also extended an



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internship program to the graduate students for 6 weeks in October and November 2021 in order to support the restoration project.

The exhibition will be on view until 22 January 2022, at the Crypt of the Saint-Joseph University campus in Huvelin, after which the artworks will return to their original locations, 16 months after the blasts.

About Li Beirut

Li Beirut is an international flagship initiative launched from Beirut by the Director-General of UNESCO, Audrey Azoulay, on August 27, 2020, in the aftermath of the port explosions, to support the rehabilitation of schools and educational institutions, historic heritage buildings, museums, galleries, and the creative industry, all of which suffered significant damage in the deadly explosions.

About BeMA

BeMA is a new museum scheduled to open in 2026 on a site owned by the Université Saint Joseph (USJ). Situated in an area that once represented the city's dividing line, BeMA symbolizes reconciliation and unification through art and culture. This new cultural platform for modern and contemporary art from Lebanon and the region will primarily showcase the work of local artists and the Lebanese diaspora, while also introducing regional and international artistic traditions and production.

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