

Emergency Preparedness and Salvage in the Event of Armed Conflict

Introduction

In October, 2003 I was one of four museum professionals sent by the United States Department of State to assess the conditions in the Iraq Museum in Baghdad and make recommendations about what needed to be done to enable the museum to function after the invasion of 2003. The conditions found five months after the so-called end of the war were heart-breaking. While actual fighting did not take place in the museum, considerable damage was sustained by the building and, more important, by the collections.

Waves of vandals swept through the museum between April 10 and 12, 2003. Every room in the museum and the wing that housed the offices of the State Board of Antiquities was broken into and everything that was not nailed down was taken, including tables, chairs, computers, telephones and office machines. The contents of filing cabinets were dumped on the floor and strewn about the halls; some were set afire. Artifacts on exhibit were stolen while others that could not be removed were damaged. For example, attempts to remove the heads of some statues were unsuccessful, but the stone around the necks was chipped and scarred in the process.

Five of the museum's eight storerooms were entered and considerable wanton, indiscriminate damage ensued. The entire contents of storage shelves were swept onto the floor and thousands of artifacts were broken in the process. More devastating, however, was the fact that at the same time most artifacts were separated from their documentation.

All of the artifacts in the storeroom where this occurred came from excavations conducted throughout the country. Much of this material had hurriedly come into the museum prior to the invasion and staff had not had time to complete the registration process (Gibson 2003, 91). In addition, the bulk of excavated material consisted of ceramic sherds, scrappy pieces of bone, metal, etc. While this material has important research potential, it usually has little exhibit value. As a result many of the artifacts in this storeroom were not inventoried into the museum's catalogue system. They were, however, inventoried in the excavation records. All site information, such as where an artifact was found, in what level, on what date, and indeed even from what site it came, was recorded in the time-honored registration system of excavations in this part of the world on the envelopes and containers in which the artifacts were packed. When the artifacts were swept onto the floor, most fell out of their boxes or envelopes and thus were separated from their identifying documentation. It will be extremely difficult to reunite artifacts with their documentation.

Looting also occurred in the Iraq Museum. After the initial wave of rabble, a more calculating group entered the museum, looking for valuable artifacts. It was clear that they knew exactly what they were looking for and where to find it. All told, it is estimated that approximately 17,000 artifacts were stolen from the museum. As of June 2004, roughly 2,000 had been recovered (Bahrani 2004, 46). All figures of missing artifacts are estimates, however, because museum staff do not have a complete single inventory from which to work. They must go through excavation site records as well as museum registers, involving hundreds of books, in order to establish what is missing.

Museum staff did what they could to protect the collections. Having faced similar situations twice before, with the Iran-Iraq War in the 1980s and again in the Gulf War in

1991, they had some previously developed strategies on which to rely, many of which are time-honored, having been used in Europe in World War II. Three weeks before the actual invasion, when it was clear that war was inevitable, staff emptied out the exhibit galleries, packed all the artifacts away in trunks and stored them in a safe place. The location of this haven has not been revealed, but at least one non-Iraqi has been there, reporting that the collections were safe. Other artifacts remained in a vault in the Central Bank, having been placed there just before the outbreak of the first Gulf War in 1991. The manuscript collection was taken to a bomb shelter somewhere in western Baghdad while archival materials were packed and distributed amongst Shiite clerics in the area.

All immovable artifacts on exhibit were protected as best staff could with rubber foam, cardboard, sand bags and any other materials they could get their hands on.

For the most part, these strategies were successful. Most of the material stored in safe havens is in good condition, although some 8th century BC ivory plaques in the Central Bank were wet and it is unclear how or why this happened. The artifacts left on exhibit, however, did not fare so well. Many were stolen while others were broken or damaged. Similarly, the artifacts in the storerooms in the museum proper did not fare too well, as discussed above.

As the situation in Iraq has shown, protecting collections during armed conflict is a difficult proposition. Unfortunately, other museums in the Middle East have faced similar experiences. Each has dealt with armed conflict in differing ways and some important lessons can be learned from each of them.

Lebanon

Lebanon was racked by a civil war for several decades that ended in 1991. In the early years as the situation worsened, staff at the Beirut Museum, for whatever reason, did not utilize this time to advantage and protective measures were taken only after the building had been vandalized (Skaf 1997, 173). Staff relied on similar strategies as were used in the Iraq Museum.

The idea of safe havens was utilized. Great show was made of taking small, moveable artifacts to an offsite, secure facility, but in reality they were smuggled downstairs to storerooms in the basement of the museum building whose entrances were then blocked (Skaf 1997, 173). Large immovable artifacts, such as mosaics and stone sarcophagi, were protected by constructing false concrete floors over them or encasing them in concrete-covered wooden boxes. The artifacts thus protected fared reasonably well, although damage, such as from graffiti and burning, was incurred (Skaf 1997, 174).

Collections in the storerooms, however, fared poorly. The storerooms were closed for 18 years. During that time, the building was badly damaged by ordinance from nearby fighting and it was impossible for any building maintenance to be undertaken. Water leaked into the storerooms, causing metal shelves to rust and then buckle and wooden shelves to rot and collapse. Artifacts were broken as the shelves they were on collapsed, and the majority of the collections sat in standing water and mud (Skaf 1997, 176).

Kuwait

Kuwait never expected to be invaded by Iraq in 1991. The invasion happened so quickly that the staff of the National Museum did not have an opportunity to prepare the collections. Two collections actually were involved, those of the National Museum and

those of a private collection of Islamic art, the Dar al-Athar al-Islamiyyah collection. Both collections were housed in the National Museum and were hastily packed up and transported to Baghdad by the invading Iraqis (Norman 1997, 181). The Dar al-Athar al-Islamiyyah collection survived the ordeal in good condition because, prior to the invasion, it had been carefully inventoried, organized and packed for storage. Transportation was simply a matter of loading up boxes and crates into trucks. The National Museum's collections, on the other hand, did not fare well at all. They had to be packed up hastily before transport with inadequate and inappropriate packing materials and, as a result, packing was less than ideal and breakage occurred (Norman 1997, 184).

In addition, poor documentation of the National Museum collections prevented staff from assembling an inventory of their material for use with Interpol and later as a basis for restitution in Baghdad when the hand-over occurred. As a result, 20-30% of the collection is missing and has not been recovered. (Norman 1997, 182)

Afghanistan

Staff of Afghanistan's National Museum utilized similar strategies as both Baghdad and Beirut. Collections were packed and stored off-site in the center of Kabul in 1979 when hostilities first erupted (Dupree 1996, 44). They were returned to the museum a year later only for the gold artifacts to be packed up again and stored in a bank vault where they were found in good condition in 2002 (Lobell 2003, 11). The collections that remained in the museum have suffered greatly. For many years, the museum was on the front line of fighting, sustaining numerous hits from rockets and other ordinance that caused devastating damage to both the building and the collections. Today, roughly 70% of the collections are now missing, the result not only of physical damage to the building, but also from the breakdown of law and order in the period since the fighting ended as well as during the war itself (Dupree 1996,42)

Unpredictability of war

These are just a few of the conflicts that have taken place in the last few decades. Perhaps the most important thing museum personnel can learn from them is that war is unpredictable at best. It can break out at any time and is not necessarily preceded by a long lead-in period or any warning. As in the case of Kuwait, no one expected the country to be invaded by Iraq. No doubt the museum staff in their wildest dreams would not have predicted that they would have to deal with their collections being commandeered and taken away by an invading army.

Sometimes, too, it is not only the "other side" that poses a threat to collections. During the invasion of Cyprus in 1974, Cypriotes ransacked one of their own museum storerooms where excavated material was housed in cloth bags. These bags were emptied out in order to reuse them as sand bags for defense.

Given the arbitrariness and unpredictability of war, it can be difficult for museums to prepare for such situations. Warning, as we have seen in Kuwait, is not always given. There are things, however, that can be done.

Emergency plan

First, it is vital to have an emergency response plan in place before a disaster occurs, whether it be natural or man-made (Roberts 1997, 160). Circumstances may not

enable all parts of a plan to be effected, but at least staff will have given some thought to disasters and emergency preparedness, and will be more likely to adapt an existing plan or hurriedly create a new one to meet the circumstances.

The importance of documentation

Perhaps the most important preventive measure that museum staff can take to protect their collections is to ensure that the collections are in the best possible order. Should war or other disaster occur, the collections and staff are then as prepared as they can possibly be.

Collections should be fully documented. This means having an accurate inventory of the institution's entire holdings, including photographs as well as written records. Ideally, this should be in the form of a computer database.

As discussed above, the Iraq Museum now has thousands of artifacts separated from their documentation. Had the artifacts been fully catalogued and marked, the situation today would not be so dire. No museum should be in the unenviable position of not being able to claim its stolen artifacts that turn up at customs around the world. Without inventories, photographs and other documentation, it is difficult to prove ownership. This was a problem experienced by the National Museum of Kuwait during the restitution of its collections; poor documentation hampered the process and prevented staff from knowing exactly what had been returned and what was still missing (Norman 1997, 185). The Dar al-Athar al-Islamiyyah collection, however, was fully documented, making restitution easy and straightforward. An added bonus was that a duplicate of all collection documentation existed in London, so regardless of whether or not the documentation in Kuwait survived, the owners still had proof of ownership and full records were available from the moment of the invasion (Norman 1997, 185). This serves to emphasize the importance of having duplicate documentation in a safe place.

Similarly, proper documentation is critical in assessing damage after a disaster. In 2003, there was considerable discussion in the U.S. press about the constantly changing numbers of artifacts reported missing from the Iraq Museum. The reason for these changes was simple. Some inventories were kept on file cards that were dumped on the floor by looters; many cards were subsequently burned, a situation that also occurred in the museum in Afghanistan. In addition, as discussed above, much of the excavation material was never inventoried into the museum's cataloguing system, but was listed only in excavation registers. As a result, there was no way to arrive easily and quickly at an accurate number of missing artifacts. A duplicate of collections documentation would undoubtedly have helped in the assessment.

Not only should collections be fully documented, but the documentation system used should be simple and easily understandable. People not familiar with it should be able to use it effectively with minimal effort. The importance of this was pointed out by the situation at the Kuwait National Museum. During the restitution process, Museum staff went back to Kuwait, leaving the staff of the Dar al-Athar al-Islamiyyah collection to handle the restitution of both collections. When the National Museum's collections documentation was finally found, the system proved to be so "cumbersome, complicated, and incomplete" (Norman 1997, 185) that it was difficult for non-National Museum people to use it effectively.

Storeroom order

It is extremely important to have all storerooms as orderly as possible. Objects should be properly labeled and packed. Had this been true of the excavation material in the Iraq Museum, it would not have suffered nearly as much damage as it did, and artifacts would have been less likely to lose their documentation. A similar situation could have been avoided in Cyprus in 1974 where some collections stored in the Kyrenia Castle Museum still were housed in the cigarette boxes used for storage on the excavation. Invading Turkish soldiers overran the museum and ransacked the storerooms, looking for the cigarettes they assumed were in the cigarette boxes. As at the Iraq Museum, artifacts were separated from their identifying catalogue numbers and site information. All material stored in standard storage boxes was left untouched.

As seen in Kuwait, the Dar al-Athar al-Islamiyyah collection that was properly packed in storage was easily moved and transported to Baghdad and back without sustaining much, if any, damage. It was the National Museum's collections that suffered the most, as they were rapidly removed from storage and display by untrained personnel and hastily and inadequately packed (Norman 1997, 184).

Importance of preventive conservation

By being familiar with preventive conservation theory and practice, all museum personnel can help to protect collections in the event of armed conflict. What happened at the Beirut Museum emphasizes the importance of taking the long view. What were thought to be temporary storerooms in fact ended up housing artifacts for over 18 years, during which time it was not possible to monitor or maintain them. This was also the situation with the material stored in the Central Bank in Baghdad. What was packed away temporarily in 1991 before the Gulf War is still there, 14 years and another war later. Granted, in the event of war museum staff do not always have the luxury to fully plan an emergency storeroom to provide the ideal storage conditions for the various types of collection materials. Lack of time can be circumvented to a certain extent, however, if staff are familiar with preventive conservation strategies and use them to guide the planning of emergency storerooms. The goal should be to use protective measures that will be as beneficial to the collections as possible regardless of the time they spend in the emergency situation (Stanley Price 1997, 158).

Breakdown of law and order

Another point illustrated by the Iraq Museum, the Afghanistan Museum, and undoubtedly countless other museums in similar situations, is that it is important to realize that damage to the museum building is not the only threat to collections. The breakdown of law and order that inevitably accompanies armed conflict poses just as much a threat to collections as the building itself sustaining armed attack. In Iraq and Afghanistan, civil unrest has been responsible for the majority of the damage sustained by the museums' collections (Dupree 1996, 44). Unfortunately, this eventuality is extremely difficult to plan for; even a good security system in place, while it can help, cannot always be totally effective.

Conclusions

Circumstances in different museums have been so varied that it is difficult to generalize and say there is one right way to protect collections from war. If time permits, it appears that the most effective strategy is to evacuate collections to a safe haven for the duration of the conflict, and perhaps part of the post-conflict period as well, depending on circumstances. In situations where this is not possible, individualized strategies need to be worked out. But in either case, probably the best way to protect collections from war is to have an emergency response plan in place and to have collections properly curated, labeled, documented, photographed and packed. For many museum professionals in western countries, these measures may seem fairly fundamental, but for many museums throughout the world accomplishing them would involve a monumental effort.

References

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