



courtyard of complex



ceiling of mausoleum



Giuseppe Fanfoni with work crew supervisor



inscription outside the centre



Sama' Khana



Giuseppe Fanfoni

http://www.italyinus2013.org/ansa/news-details.php?news_id=2013-01-10_110905507

ITALIAN PROFESSOR HELPS RESTORE CAIRO SUFI COMPLEX

By Shelly Kittleson

(ANSA) - Cairo, January 10 - Tucked away on a street not far from the citadel, an inscription over the door tells you in Italian and Arabic that you have arrived at the Italian-Egyptian Centre for Restoration and Archaeology (CIERA). Once past the entranceway and into the courtyard, wander to the left and you find the domed, wood-paneled wonder of the Sama' Khana, which would have fallen into ruin years ago had it not been for the determination of an Italian professor of archaeology and restoration techniques and the passion of his young Egyptian students. The 14th-century Sanqur Sa'di Madrasa located underneath was found only after the restoration works had begun, leading to archaeological excavations that slowed the works but led to other invaluable discoveries within, such as the important Mausoleum of Hassan Sadaka. The part of the complex containing the Sufi monastery, or tekkiye, has also been restored and is where the centre's offices are located, while work is still underway on other parts of the complex. It all started in 1979, when the domed theatre known as the Sama' Khana (or 'House of the Sama') - used by Cairo's whirling dervishes of the Mevlevi Order in the 18th century and near collapse on its 'rediscovery' - was happened upon by former head of the Italian Institute of Culture in Cairo, Carla Burri. She contacted Giuseppe Fanfoni, known for his work in archaeological excavations around the world and teachings at Rome's Institute of Art, to see what could be done, thus setting in motion a decades-long mission to save a precious part of Egyptian history and train young Egyptians amid an array of technical, logistical, economic and bureaucratic hurdles. The work began after an agreement between the Italian Institute of Culture and the Egyptian Antiquities Department as part of a program that was to include the training of students from the Universities of Cairo and Helwan in restoration techniques. Initially Fanfoni could only work two months of the year, when classes were not in session. Funding was a major problem, as was dealing with restoration problems not found in other parts of the world, such as preventing damage from humidity in the structures in a mostly hot, dry climate. Salinity levels are exceptionally high here, with no regular rainfall to keep them down, resulting in technical problems that led to innovations which - as he proudly notes, 'numerous others have since made use of, including the Americans working just down the road on Bab Al-Zuweiyah'. Now CIERA director and professor at the University of Rome La Sapienza, Fanfoni is pushing ahead with the works, trying to get funding for the school and for the more difficult work required on the Yashbak Palace, for which construction companies will have to be involved and not just artisans. Having gained renown over the years, he has received many awards for his work in archeology and restoration techniques, but there are two that he holds especially dear, and both in homage to his decades-long work on restoring the architectural complex of the Mevlevi Dervishes in the Egyptian capital. One was bestowed on him in September 2012 in Sassocorvaro. Named in honour of a man responsible for saving some 10,000 Italian artworks from destruction at the hands of the Nazis, the international Pasquale Rotondi Salvatore dell'Arte award is given out every year to individuals who have distinguished themselves in saving artistic heritage from destruction. Not only has Fanfoni long looked at his work as a sort of mission and not in any way a chance to profit monetarily (much to the contrary, he notes, as he at one point had to mortgage his home to continue with his work, not to mention recruiting his son to volunteer during the holidays as manpower was lacking) but he has long felt that, too often 'we see people speculating on art'. For Fanfoni, 'art is the expression of spirituality, and one does not sell spirituality'. He notes that institutions tend to see everything in the light of how much it 'produces', and that this is detrimental to society, since if 'we don't wake up soon, we'll end up consuming each other and the world around us'. The other award that he cherishes most was from the Arab League for training young students, which he feels is important because 'it shows they have understood how important training is'. He notes that 'none of the people who have worked here, who have been trained here, have moved abroad. They haven't fled to Europe or anything like that. You can find our former students in all universities and places of learning across the country, teaching others now'. One of his favourite quotes, used in some of his numerous publications and from the Sufi poet Jalal Ad-Din Rumi's massive tome the Masnavi, reads: 'I have not written the Masnavi to make you repeat it only, but for you to put it under your feet and fly high'. For him, these words embody an essential idea behind his mission to save artistic heritage and train the next generation of Egyptian archaeology and restoration experts, as well as their Italian counterparts.