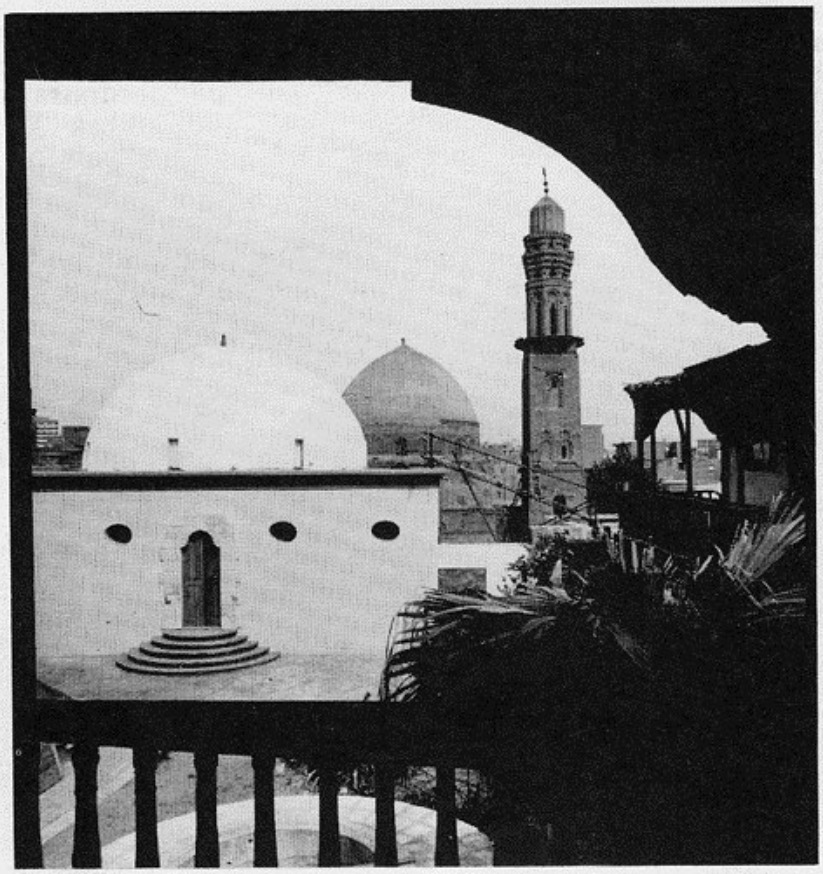
THE SAMAA'KHANA of the Mewlewi Derwishes



On the 28th of July 1988, an important celebration marked the inauguration of the Whirling Derwishes' Theatre in Cairo. It was presided over by the Minister of Culture, Mr. Farouk Hosny, and by the Ambassador of Italy in Cairo, Mr. Giovani Migliuolo.

The theatre is located on Helmieh Street, dating back to the ninth century. It is part of the complex of the Mawlawi Derwishes' Convent, as well as of the "Sunqur Saadi Madrassa", of the mausoleum of Hassan Sadaqa and of all the monuments of the adjacent Yashbak Palace.

The first scaffolding was installed between 1977 and 1978. Historical as well as technical research was carried out in order to ensure the safekeeping of the complex's architectural entity. Restoration works started in 1979, after the signing of an agreement between the Italian Cultural Institute, the Cairo University and the Egyptian Antiquities Department.

In 1984, following the intervention of the "Direzione Generale per la Cooperazione allo Sviluppo" of the Italian Ministry for Foreign Affairs and the University of Rome, it was decided to establish a yard-school supplied with a four-year professional training program, which completed the restoration of the Mawlawi Derwishes' Sama'Khana.

Professore Giuseppe Fanfoni, who is in charge of the enterprise, provided supplementary explanations : *"...It was Sunqur Saadi's Madrassa, which was first built around 1315. The adjacent Yashbak Palace was erected approximately around the same period and Sunqur Saadi had many problems with the first landlord of Yashbak Palace. Furthermore, Sunqur Saadi left the country and went into exile to Tripoli, where he lived until he died. Following his departure, Hassan Sadaqa took care of the premises until his death. His mausoleum is built inside the complex. The "madrassa", however, remained deserted, until the arrival of the whirling derwishes..."*

Excavation and restoration works were rather problematic. Some of the Sama'Khana's pillars are built directly over the Madrassa and the walls of Yashbak Palace intertwine with part of Sunqur Saadi's convent.

Nevertheless, work started according to an established plan. Restoration was performed on the outer parts of the dome, prior to the inside, a number of supplementary researches and excavations were carried through. These brought about the discovery, that the Madrassa extended underneath the Mawlawi gardens. When construction of the Yashbak Palace ended in the 16th century, it was placed on the structures of the Sunqur Saadi building.

After all these complications were finally revealed and studied, restoration works started inside the theatre. Walls and floors were reinforced and paintings restored. It has now been opened to the public.

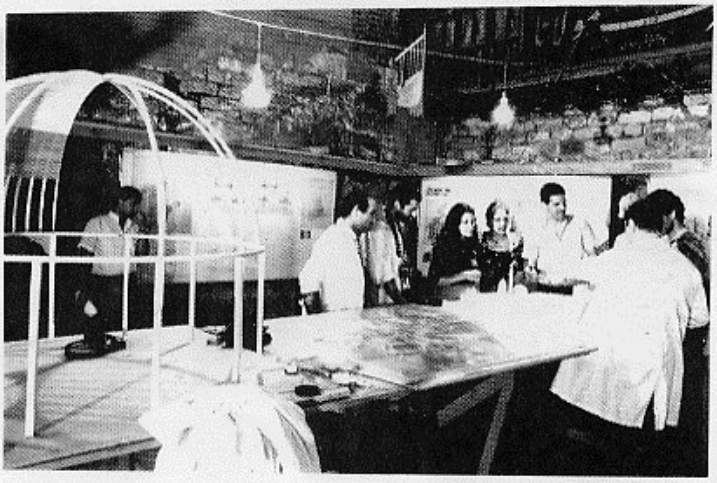
A.C.C

THE WORK-SHOP

"It should be understood that every serious restoration requires much time and patience. It is essential to start by studying the material originally used, be it for the construction, the paintings or the woodwork..." declared Professor Giuseppe Fanfoni, referring to restoration works undertaken to the present on the site of the Whirling Derwishes Theater.

It has been decided to establish the workshop-school on the site of this theater to allow for a "serious restoration". In accordance with this plan, experts from Italian universities, research centers, arts and crafts schools have taken part in developing the various aspects of the project, closely collaborating with their Egyptian counterparts. Labs installed on the site are provided with appropriate equipment for scientific, archaeological, technical and artistic research. Because of these facilities, it was possible, for example, to determine the number and composition of the layers of paint inside the dome.

Professor Fanfoni explains the work which has been achieved as follows: *"...Regarding the paintings of the dome, I had to work with ultraviolet light, which enabled me to discover how often these paintings had previously been restored. I discovered that the initial layer was white. I found, in fact, many stages of restoration, and, after having subjected the paint to the process of stratigraphy, I discovered that the initial layer being white, this was followed by a first layer of paint and two restored layers. We could never have known all these details, if it were not for the scientific process which we applied. We are also indebted to scientific restoration for being able to reconstruct the different periods of edification of the building itself..."*

The workshop-school, officially known as "The Italian-Egyptian Center for Professional Training in Restoration and Archaeology" is unique in Egypt. Its program provides a one-month scholarship allowing students and specialists to visit Italian research and restoration workshops, at the end of each year. Furthermore, at the end of the first year of training, scholarships for studies and for advanced research are granted to Egyptian students for a period of several months.

The aim of the Center is not only scientific restoration and the training of students, but also upkeep of the site. The directors plan to prepare capable personnel to follow up this kind of restoration work at other archaeological sites, in order to safeguard the Egyptian architectural heritage. **A.C.C.**