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## NOTES ON THE RESTORATION OF 'THE SMALL THEATRE OF THE DANCING DERVISHES' AT SHARE HELMEIA IN CAIRO

Carla Maria Burri and Giuseppe Fanfoni

For a long time now the Archaeological Department of the Cultural Institute has nurtured the idea of restoring an Islamic monument in Cairo. The idea has been to insert these restorations into the context of a much more comprehensive campaign involving all the archaeological organisations resident in Egypt, with the aim of making both Egyptian and international public opinion more fully aware of the grave problem of the decay of Islamic Cairo. This decay has become progressively more pronounced in recent years.

This particular monument, consisting of a theatre, a monastery and two connecting mosques, was chosen because it is a rare example of Islamic architecture with a unique beauty. It is also situated in the midst of an area extraordinarily rich in other artistic monuments and is, therefore, particularly suited to other future projects.

Professor Giuseppe Fanfoni and the Egyptian Antiquities Department are involved, not only in the restoration and preservation of the monument, but in considering its possible future use within the framework of the community to which it belongs. It is hoped that the aspect of combining restoration and modern utilisation will throw a new light on the project and will encourage the Egyptian authorities to favour the scheme and to encourage more of such interventions, so saving the remaining parts of historic Cairo.

The Archaeological Department of the Cultural Institute provided an initial photographic and architectural documentation of the entire project and later started restorations of some of the more damaged parts, starting with the dome and reinforcing the whole theatre with wooden interlays.

Extensive research, detailed articles and proposals have formed the basis of this project with special attention being given to the maintenance and resistance of the stones, which cover the outer surface of the mosques. Further reports are being prepared concerning the *in situ* restoration of the numerous paintings which decorate the dome.

In the next three years Professor Fanfoni intends to complete his studies and the various stages of restoration. My own task will be to organise theatrical events and exhibitions which could take place in this new cultural centre, which will be opened in an area full of historic memories and suggestions, close to the mosque of Ibn Tulun and in the very heart of the Cairo which flourished in the time of Sultan Hassan.

The architectural site of the 'Theatre of the Dervishes' is to be found in the old quarter of Kalifa, in the ancient

part of Cairo, and forms part of a group of buildings which comprise the theatre of the Dervishes Mavlevi (18th century), the mosque of Madrasa di Sunkur Sa'di (early 14th century), and the mausoleum of Hasan Sadaqa (14th century).

For a long time this historic monument was left in a deplorable state of neglect. The first investigations were made in 1975 (thanks to the initiative of the Italian Cultural Institute and the keen participation of the Department of Ancient Egypt). Research was started on the structural condition of the buildings and plans on the different stages of restoration were drawn up, at least as regards the theatre where an urgent intervention seemed of particular importance.

A scaffolding was required which would enable us to reach the top of the dome from the inside as well as from outside. This scaffolding was constructed according to local standards and consisted of wood and vegetable fibre cords. Special care was taken that no unnecessary metal clamps were used during erection; hammering was avoided in case it caused dangerous vibrations which could have damaged the painted plaster of the dome which was already in parts detached from its webbing.

Once the weak structural points had been singled out, special attention was given to the interior of the first floor ceilings and floors. Reinforcements were placed in key positions to provide sufficient stability and to ensure the smooth running of the various phases of restoration. Then work started on the external walls, where the cracks were more apparent. In order to avoid further disintegration the supporting arches of the dome were reinforced with steel ropes, c. 1.50m. from the base, and the walls were provisionally covered with a plasticised material to a height of 3m. to protect them from humidity.

When all risks of further collapse had been dealt with, examination of the paintings on the internal walls began. The centre point of the vault (A) was decorated by an oil painted canvas, about 5m. in diameter, with gold painted inscriptions on a blue background which carries the date 1274H (1857 A.D.). The lower part, which is the area forming the base of the vault, is covered with urban scenes, interlined by decorative motifs (C) and dominated in the background by a sky covered with flying birds, all in distemper.

Overhanging this, an oil painting, 42cm. in height, is decorated with inscriptions and framed by floral designs (D). The spaces between the various arches are orna-

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mented with floral designs centred by a medallion (E). Each of these medallions features the names of dervishes and in one particular case (No. 12), a name which is assumed to be the artist's — an Iranian:

- |                           |                    |
|---------------------------|--------------------|
| 1. Sen El Abdin           | 7. Ali El Taki     |
| 2. Oh! Hasan (invocation) | 8. Mo'ammed Taki   |
| 3. Oh! Hasan (invocation) | 9. Ali Adler       |
| 4. Ali                    | 10. Musa Kasem     |
| 5. Mo'ammed Ma'di         | 11. Jafar Sad'ek   |
| 6. Hasan El Askari        | 12. Mo'ammed Baker |

The state of disrepair of these paintings depends largely on where they are situated. Zone A, although the surface is damaged and cracked in various places, is in fair condition and restoration should be reasonably 'easy'. Zones B, C and E are in a more precarious condition. The paintings are reduced to frail, dried flakes, peeling and curling off the plaster, the result of severe climatic conditions. Climatic changes and the penetration of humidity are responsible for the cracks in the dome and the plaster on the outside walls. Surface D is subject to lacerations due to the general state of disrepair. Structurally it is heavily damaged at several points; the plaster covering the summit of the dome seems particularly vulnerable. Paintings showed strong signs of discolouring and in various places distinct dirt-

marks were apparent where rainwater had filtered through.

A preliminary solution has been found to protect zone A. A start has been made in zone C, as well as on the more damaged parts of zones B and E. Sections of the flaky surface were dampened with a 5% paraloid solution and while the resin dried the flakes were stuck back on to the supporting wall, effecting an initial restoration. The surface concerned, an area about 200m. sq., will be cleaned and restored phase by phase. Various tests have been conducted to find the most suitable solutions for cleaning the paintings. Further cleaning tests were made on surface D which brought to light paintings rich in colour and gradual shades. The structural sandstone walls have also been examined as to the appropriate method to reinforce and clean them.

The results of these tests will enable us to prepare a more detailed report on how the various operations are to be carried out. The outer protective layer of the dome might have to be removed as it presents an additional weight on the dome's already precarious stability. All the wooden parts will be repaired and those beyond repair will be exchanged. The same operation will apply to the ceilings. Finally, the protective coating will be reconstructed and at the same time all restoration of the paintings will take place.

View of the theatre and convent.

