

AUB museum society marks 30 years of promoting archeology

The friends of the AUB Museum marked 30 years of tireless and uninterrupted archeological and cultural activities, during a ceremony held on May 18 coinciding with International Museum Day.

"We are proud to be pioneers in Lebanon and in the Middle East in many fields, being the only organization to have continued with its cultural and archeological activities even throughout our years of war," said Nabil Nahas, president of the Society of the Friends of the AUB museum to a large audience of museum members, faculty members and friends of the museum, including AUB President Peter Dorman, a historian and archeologist himself.



The society was founded in 1980.

Nahas listed a number of "firsts" that the society had achieved over the past three decades: The museum society was the first in Lebanon to present archeological exhibitions on different themes and also host regional exhibitions with the participation of Syria and Jordan. It was also the first to introduce a comprehensive and brilliantly designed children's archaeological program. It also launched the first guided tours in Lebanon and the Near East for children with special needs—blind and deaf...

These, as well as archeological trips to sites in various countries, have helped open up the world of archeology to the Lebanese community, said Nahas.

Arda Ekmekji, Executive Committee member of the Society of Friends of the Museum and dean of the School of Arts and Sciences at Haigazian University, recalled the early days of the museum when it was first founded in 1868. The AUB museum, housed in Post Hall, is the third oldest museum after Cairo and Constantinople.

Before 1980, when the society was established, the AUB museum was "friendless," said Ekmekji. Since then, the society has been working to promote the museum to the public.

Ekmekji highlighted the main achievements of the society in the last 30 years. The "Founding Era" (1980-1982), as Ekmekji referred to it, with Huda Khoury as president, witnessed three exhibitions, including one on Islamic Coins in 1982, as well as visits to China, Jordan, Palmyra and Tell 'Arqa. The Children's Program organized a trip to Byblos—an ideal study site for archeologists, according to Ekmekji.

"The Survival Era" (1982-1992) was "the worst era in the history of modern AUB," said Ekmekji. The AUB museum was a "war victim" between 1989 and 1991, with rockets hitting the AUB museum, and in November 1991, the College Hall explosion left the AUB community shattered.

However, despite those tragic events, the Society organized multiple activities from exhibitions to trips and children's programs. In 1985, in collaboration with the Louvre Museum, the 'Art of Writing' exhibition took place, and in 1991, a children's tour to the 'Huda Institute for the Blind' was organized.

"The Development Era" (1992-1998) was the era of fundraising. The Society started reviewing models for the renovation of the AUB museum and held a fundraising cocktail in 1997. Exhibits, trips, and children's programs developed, too, and the excavation of downtown Beirut began in 1994.

The highlight of the "Expansion Era" (1998-2000) was the Arabic Calligraphy exhibition held in 2000.

"The Consolidation Era" (2000-2003) saw increased fundraising activities, and society president Samir Thabet organized a donors' lunch. Trips to countries as diverse as Vietnam and Ehtiopia were organized under Thabet's mandate. "The uniqueness of the AUB museum trips is that members could hear [archeological] accounts first-hand from the master's mouths," noted Ekmekji.

Nora Joumblat was president during the "Golden Renovation Age," which witnessed the inauguration of the new museum in June 2006. Several lectures, such as "The Seven Wonders of the World" and "Becoming an Archeologist" were delivered. During that period, archeologist Peter Dorman, now president of AUB, spoke on the "She-King Hatshepsut."

The AUB museum has grown significantly since the society was established in 1980. Activities have increased in number, membership has grown and the society's newsletter has also "come a long way," according to Ekmekji.

The "engineers have invaded the upper campus," noted Ekmekji, referring to Nahas' attempts at modernizing the way museum tours are conducted. Nahas has merged the "Paleolithic with Rocket Science; numismatics was replaced by credit cards and epic narration by ipods and ear phones," said Ekmekji.

The 30 years of achievements of the Society of the Friends of the Museum would not have been possible, noted Ekmekji, without the tireless work of volunteers, sub-committees, treasurers, activity planners, writers, editors and advisors.

The six former presidents of the society, namely, Huda Khoury, Josette Kettaneh, Rima Shehadeh, May Richani, Samir Thabet and Nora Jumblat, were honored at the ceremony. Leila Badre, director of the AUB Museum, who formerly taught archeology at AUB, was honored by Nahas who called her "the pillar of the [AUB] museum."

Badre, the founder of the Society of the Friends of the Museum in 1980 and founder of the national committee of ICOM (the International Council of Museums), is poised to become part of the 140 committees in the world. She was the first in 1990 to hold ceremonies celebrating 'International Museum Day' at the AUB museum.

“Thanks to her discoveries in the downtown Beirut center, Beirut is now a recognized Phoenician city, adding several new pages to the history of Beirut,” noted Nahas. Badre has raised the AUB Museum to international standards, added Nahas.

Badre commended Nahas’ efforts “to move the society to the utmost high-tech [level] of the 21st century.” Nahas’ crowning achievement has been the introduction of an audio-guide to the AUB Museum, noted Badre.

The Executive Committee Members of the Society were presented with medals as a token of appreciation for their hard work. A reception on the museum premises followed.