

Through the Fog of War in Iraq: Lessons Learned in Heritage Preservation

The news of the looting of the Iraqi National Museum on April 10–12, 2003, was shocking. To professionals involved in heritage preservation it was more than shocking—it shook us to the very core of our existence. It was a violation of what we held sacred. Our hearts reached out to our Iraqi colleagues, and we were frustrated that our hands could not immediately do the same. Donny George, director general, Department of Research and Studies, Iraqi State Board of Antiquities and Heritage,¹ later shared his feelings upon seeing the destruction in the museum: “It felt like I was bleeding, like I had a deep cut in my heart.”²

Even at this early stage in the evolution of the Iraqi National Museum tragedy, some lessons in heritage preservation are emerging from the “fog of war.” Whether the lessons are new to the reader, or old lessons reinforced, they are worthy of study. This essay summarizes the events at the National Museum and the response of professionals in the United States and internationally, and then elaborates on the circumstances that prompted the emergence of the lessons.

A Response to the Looting

Both before the war and in the weeks that followed, professionals had urged their governments and national and international organizations to address looting. Pre-war, several professional societies contacted the Department of Defense about the risk of looting. In January, archeologists, collectors, and curators met with the defense deputy assistant secretary for stability operations to alert him to the risk of looting at Iraqi monuments, museums, and archeological sites. They cited the looting that had occurred at regional museums and archeological sites following the 1991 Gulf War.³ In February, National Public Radio interviewed archeolo-

gists who worried that antiquities would be lost during war.⁴ The Society for American Archaeology sent a letter to the secretary of defense requesting compliance with the 1954 Hague Convention for the Protection of Cultural Property in the Event of Armed Conflict (although the United States is not a party to this convention). It noted that “the artifacts held in museums and that remain to be found in archaeological sites are the documents of a people’s history. Those documents connect people to the past and in so doing connect them to the future.”⁵ In March, the Archaeological Institute of America (AIA) issued and sent its “Open Declaration on Cultural Heritage at Risk in Iraq” to the Department of Defense, stating: “The extraordinary significance of the monuments, museums, and archaeological sites of Iraq (ancient Mesopotamia) imposes an obligation on all peoples and governments to protect them. In any military conflict that heritage is put at risk, and it appears now to be in grave danger.”⁶

In mid-March, the Office of Reconstruction and Humanitarian Assistance (ORHA), charged with helping to rebuild Iraq, sent documents to senior US officials listing 16

institutions that “merit securing ... to prevent damage and pilferage.” The first of those was the national bank; the second was the museum.⁷ In April, a cultural anthropologist with the U.S. military said in a formal press briefing that potential looting is of concern and that the military is interested in coordinating with organizations that are dedicated to the task of preservation.⁸

The fears of the professionals were realized. Looters and vandals ransacked the museum. They also looted the national library, provincial museums and libraries, and archeological sites throughout Iraq. The National Museum, which is the subject of this discussion, received the most immediate and extensive press coverage and became a symbol for critics of the U.S. military efforts to protect Iraqi cultural heritage.

Military spokesmen said that Iraqi forces used the museum as a defensive position. Neighborhood residents corroborated the charges, acknowledging that the Americans had been attacked from inside the museum grounds and that fighting in the area was heavy. When the fighting was over and the Iraqi forces had abandoned the building, looters entered. A museum archeologist, who stayed on the museum grounds during the fighting and the looting, said the looting began when a group of seven men broke the museum’s glass front door and went inside. On the third day of looting, museum staff secured the building and U.S. military personnel arrived four days later.⁹

Reserve Marine Colonel Matthew Bogdanos, who was appointed to investigate the looting and coordinate recovery efforts with museum officials, has proffered that the thieves of the museum items appear to fall into three categories—those who sought specific pieces and took some of the most valuable items from the public galleries;

those who stole indiscriminately from the more accessible storage rooms; and those who, with intimate knowledge of the museum and its storage practices, targeted high-value items in unmarked cabinets.¹⁰ The U.S. attorney general has said that evidence indicates a strong case for organized criminal groups doing some of the looting.¹¹ Museum officials agree that some looters sought certain types of items¹² but said that there was no indication that the culprits were officials connected with the antiquities department or the museum.¹³ Additionally, some looters took office equipment and generally vandalized the offices.¹⁴

The New York Times reported the following on April 13:

The National Museum of Iraq recorded a history of civilizations that began to flourish in the fertile plains of Mesopotamia more than 7,000 years ago.... [I]t took only 48 hours for the museum to be destroyed, with at least 170,000 artifacts carried away by looters.... [A] full accounting of what has been lost may take weeks or months.... [W]hat officials told journalists today may have to be adjusted as a fuller picture comes to light.¹⁵

Such dramatic reports galvanized museum and library professionals and archeologists to action. Immediately, UNESCO (the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization) asked American and British authorities to take prompt measures to protect Iraqi archeological sites and institutions.¹⁶ On April 14, the president and CEO of the American Association of Museums (AAM) wrote to the AAM Board saying that the association had been inundated with e-mails and calls asking what can be done. He said that the AAM was working through the

Department of State to try to establish direct communication with museum staff in Iraq to learn of the needs. The secretary of state promised that the United States would embrace the international law that requires an occupying army to safeguard cultural patrimony and retrieve stolen items or prevent them from leaving the country.¹⁷

Within a week, the United States Committee of the International Council on Monuments and Sites (US/ICOMOS), joined by 22 other professional organizations, including the George Wright Society, sent a letter to President George W. Bush calling for protection of sites, protection of Iraqi colleagues, plans to recover stolen artifacts through international cooperation and import/export interdictions, and funds for post-war recovery to support cultural resources. The United Kingdom Committee of ICOMOS (ICOMOS-UK) sent a similar letter to Prime Minister Tony Blair.

On April 15, the U.K. culture secretary announced formation of a culture coalition with specialists from the British Museum and other institutions with large Iraqi holdings, including the Louvre, Berlin Museum, and the Metropolitan Museum of Art.¹⁸ On April 29, the British Museum hosted a meeting of international museum professionals that was attended by Donny George, who, in addition to British Museum officials who had just returned from Iraq, gave a detailed account of the Iraqi National Museum.¹⁹

In the United States, the president of the National Trust for Historic Preservation wrote to the secretary of defense to “strongly urge the Coalition Forces to take full responsibility for safeguarding Iraq’s remaining museum collections and monuments.”²⁰ The Heritage Emergency National

Task Force, a coalition of national government agencies and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), called for immediate assessment of needs and priorities through consultation with Iraqi professionals, followed by a fact-finding trip. Some, including the American Anthropological Association, urged the U.S. administration to offer amnesty and monetary rewards to encourage the return of items.²¹ The Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) announced that it would hunt the museum’s stolen art.²²

Less than a week after the looting ended, international experts met at UNESCO in Paris. They agreed to send an emergency fact-finding mission to Iraq and called for securing of sites, a trade embargo on Iraqi cultural objects, and the development of a list of missing objects to facilitate prevention of illegal export.²³

By the end of April several organizations had established databases to track Iraqi cultural property, including the United Kingdom Department of Culture, Media and Sports²⁴ and the Oriental Institute at the University of Chicago, which assembled a “hot list” of missing items from information contributed by institutions with archival records of Iraqi artifacts.²⁵ In a May meeting at the Interpol headquarters in France, international experts coordinated strategies for recovering Iraq’s looted heritage. They listed the types of artifacts protected by legislation; those banned from export, import, and sale; and those favored by the illegal antiquities markets. The resulting “Emergency Red List of Iraqi Antiquities at Risk” is on the International Council of Museums website.²⁶ It is a tool for customs officials, police officers, art dealers, collectors, and museums to use in recognizing objects that could originate from Iraq.

On April 23, U.S. officials reported

that although many valuable pieces were lost, others remained in storage, and many stolen items had been returned via local mosques.²⁷ U.S. military officials worked to establish priorities with Iraqi museum officials who requested replacements for lost equipment, digital cameras, scanners, and computers, as well as conservation supplies.²⁸

Congress is considering two bills relative to the protection of Iraqi cultural heritage. H.R. 2009, introduced in May, provides for the recovery, restitution, and protection of the cultural heritage of Iraq by imposing indefinite import restrictions on archeological and cultural materials that were illegally removed from Iraq since August 2, 1990. It also amends the Convention on Cultural Property Implementation Act (implementing the 1970 UNESCO Convention in the United States) to change the time limit for emergency import restrictions on archeological and ethnological materials under bilateral agreements from five to ten years, and allows emergency import restrictions to be applied to countries that are not party to the 1970 UNESCO Convention. The minimum age for covered archeological materials changes from 250 to 100 years. Other proposed legislation, S. 1291, introduced in June, authorizes the president to impose emergency import restrictions on Iraqi archeological or ethnological materials until normalization of relations between the United States and the government of Iraq, but no later than September 30, 2004. The archeological community generally supports H.R. 2009, whereas the AAM sees H.R. 2009 as supplanting the established process for protecting cultural antiquities and supports S. 1291.

In May, the U.N. Security Council adopted Resolution 1483 lifting Iraqi economic sanctions and giving mem-

ber states the responsibility of taking all possible measures to facilitate the safe return of Iraqi stolen cultural property and other items of archeological, historical, cultural, rare scientific, and religious importance to Iraqi institutions and prohibiting trade in or transfer of such property.

During May, June, and July, the press was filled with wildly disparate reports on the numbers of National Museum items looted and recovered. Recoveries included items returned under the amnesty program established by Colonel Bogdanos, items seized, and items found secure where they were put for safekeeping by the museum staff. For example, staff placed the Treasure of Nimrud and objects from the royal cemetery at Ur in a Central Bank vault in 1990, before the Gulf War. The basement of the bank flooded, and it was not until a *National Geographic* reporter arranged to pump the water out of the building that the items were confirmed to be safe.²⁹ The press gave increased attention to the thousands of archeological sites subject to unabated looting. The losses of items from sites are basically unknown and generalized in the tens of thousands. Headlines indicated that looters had “riddled ancient sites with holes.” Additional information emerged regarding looting at provincial museums, such as at Mosul, and damage at the National Library and provincial libraries. The National Library and Archives burned beyond recovery, but staff estimated that 50 percent of the collection was safe and held in three separate locations. The inventories were destroyed.³⁰

Worldwide professional response to the looting and devastation of museums, libraries, and archeological sites in Iraq was spontaneous and strikingly swift. Meetings and fact-finding tours continue. U.S. authorities and the museum staff are daily revising the

inventory of missing and recovered objects. Additional assistance is on the horizon. The Department of State has announced several U.S. initiatives, including, at an appropriate time in the future, the establishment of a U.S. overseas research center in Baghdad and a special institute to train Iraqi graduate students for museum and library careers. U.S. government agencies are offering grants and other support for projects to document, preserve, and revitalize Iraq's museums, libraries, and archeological sites.

The National Endowment for the Humanities has announced a grant program to assist in preserving cultural collections and rebuilding Iraq's cultural heritage infrastructure. The National Endowment for the Arts will partner with other federal agencies and NGOs to restore Iraq's artistic legacy, including the documentation, preservation, and exhibition of works of art. The Institute for Museum and Library Services will support American librarians and museum professionals in partnership with their Iraqi counterparts to create and share digital content and develop educational resources. The National Science Foundation is offering support for the identification, recovery, preservation, and conservation of scientifically relevant archeological and other cultural heritage artifacts. The U.S. Agency for International Development will establish a prioritized list of buildings (including museums and libraries) and equipment to be reconstituted. The Library of Congress will coordinate the effort of libraries to re-build Iraqi collections and modernize Iraqi library systems.

Now that plans for recovery are beginning to take shape, we can step back and consider, from the viewpoint of a cultural heritage professional, what new lessons might be learned, or old lessons reinforced, from this

tragedy.

Some Lessons Learned

After lending a helping hand in a disaster, a natural response is to consider, "What if this happened to us? How would we fare? What lessons can be learned?" Professionals managing museums, libraries, archeological sites, and other heritage resources, who ask these questions and look through the "fog of war" in Iraq, will find many poignant lessons emerging. Beyond the six lessons suggested below, additional heritage preservation lessons will emerge for those who seek them from the events in Iraq. Whether the lessons are new or old, they are worthy of review and contemplation in the context of the preservation of Iraqi cultural heritage.

Lesson 1: Museums, libraries, and sites are symbols of authority. As symbols of the ruling authority, museums, libraries, and historic sites are targets for those fighting against that authority. Although personal profit motivated much of the looting at the Iraqi National Museum, anger at Saddam Hussein's regime and the Ba'athist Party was also a factor. As Donny George said:

The people saw the Americans firing on the gates of Saddam's palaces and then opening the doors to the people and saying: 'Come and take this stuff, it's yours now.' So they started, and it became a sort of rage as they attacked every government building. I don't make excuses but, you know, after 30 years of a regime like that, pressure builds up on people. Most of them were not educated, and to them the museum was just one more government building. They didn't just take antiquities but 95% of the office furniture, all computers, most of the cameras. My office was two

feet deep in papers; my desk was broken into three pieces and I found my chair 100 yards away.”³¹

As symbols of authority throughout history, museum collections have been traditional war booty. Saddam Hussein demonstrated this lesson when, six weeks after invading Kuwait, Iraq seized collections from the Kuwait National Museum and shipped them to Baghdad for storage in the Iraqi National Museum.³² Iraq subsequently returned the collections under terms of a United Nations resolution.³³ After castles, many of which have become museums, museums became the traditional place to store a national treasure. There can be little doubt that they are symbols of the ruling authority.

Similarly, archeological sites are part of a country’s cultural patrimony; they are protected by law and are symbols and targets. Saddam Hussein left little doubt about his understanding of this principle, when he rebuilt the ancient cities of Babylon and Nineveh in an attempt to validate his regime. When he learned that original Babylonian bricks were stamped with the name “Nebuchadnezzar II” and the equivalent of “605 BC,” he wanted a similar statement on reconstruction bricks acknowledging his role. They say, “In the reign of the victorious Saddam Hussein, the president of the Republic, may God keep him, the guardian of the great Iraq and the renovator of its renaissance and the builder of its great civilization, the rebuilding of the great city of Babylon was done in 1987.”³⁴

Following the events of September 11, 2001, the U.S. National Park Service (NPS) greatly increased the security at its iconic sites, such as the Statue of Liberty, Independence Hall, and the Washington Monument, which are highly vulnerable symbols

of the United States. In recent years, managers of museums and national sites have needed no reminding of this vulnerability. Likewise, the museums in Iraq learned this lesson long ago. The staff has evacuated the collections of the National Museum many times, beginning with the Iran–Iraq war in the 1980s.³⁵ Although U.S. museums and sites have increased their security, few would be able to implement evacuation plans on the scale of and in the timeframe demonstrated by the Iraqi National Museum.

Lesson 2: Early news of war or disaster is often wrong (in unpredictable ways). “It is very common for the first information following a crisis to be wrong, and when I say wrong, I mean wrong. So let us all try to be responsible in how we speak about this issue until we know the facts, and let us dedicate ourselves to gathering the facts as expeditiously and efficiently as possible,” said the secretary general of the International Criminal Police Organization (ICPO)–Interpol when he addressed the May 6 meeting on cultural property looting in Iraq.³⁶

Acting precipitously based on early news can be a political liability, a step in the wrong direction that will have to be retraced, and a catalyst for disharmony with other parties who are critical to the resolution. All of these mistakes occurred in the Iraqi National Museum case.

The first news reports, on April 12 and in the weeks following, erroneously reported that looters had taken 170,000 artifacts from the National Museum. This figure was followed by reported figures of 50,000, 270,000, 90,000, 200,000, 1,200, 10–15%, and fewer than 100 before U.S. and Iraqi museum officials clarified the original misunderstanding. By mid-May Colonel Bogdanos called 170,000 a “gross, if dramatic, exaggeration.”³⁷

Museum authorities were reported as “blaming shoddy reporting amid the ‘fog of war’ for creating the impression that the majority of the institution’s 170,000 items had been looted.”³⁸ As Donny George explained:

There was a mistake. Someone asked us what is the number of pieces in the whole collection. We said over 170,000, and they took that as the number lost. Reporters came in and saw empty shelves and reached the conclusion that all was gone. But before the war, we evacuated all of the small pieces and emptied the showcases except for fragile or heavy material that was difficult to move.³⁹

Following these announcements, the numbers on missing items that U.S. and Iraqi museum authorities cited were similar, and evolving at the same rate. As of the end of July, that figure was estimated at 13,500⁴⁰ and remained at that level into September.⁴¹

Within a week of the looting, three members of the president’s Cultural Property Advisory Committee had resigned. The chairman’s letter of resignation cited “the wanton and preventable destruction” of Iraq’s National Museum of Antiquities.⁴² Immediately, following the first news, scholars sought to explain the magnitude of the looting of the National Museum by comparing it with other major cultural disasters. It was called the greatest cultural disaster of the last 500 years. Several scholars said that not since the Mongol invasion of Baghdad in 1258 had there been looting on this scale.⁴³ The American Schools of Oriental Research compared the museum looting to “the sack of Constantinople, the burning of the library at Alexandria, the Vandal and Mogul invasions, and the ravages of the conquistadors.” One commenter

said it is “a tragedy that has no parallel in world history; it is as if the Uffizi, the Louvre, or all the museums of Washington DC had been wiped out in one fell swoop.”⁴⁴ Now that the figures have been drastically revised downward and the “fog” is beginning to clear, some have expressed second thoughts about these comparisons.⁴⁵

Some journalists—and, according to reports, at least one professional colleague—have been critical of the Iraqi museum officials for not correcting the misunderstanding about the 170,000 items sooner. A defensive backlash from some parts of the press sought to discredit both the Iraqi museum authorities and the scholars who had commented on the early news, and even pit one against the other. A few individuals took the bait and some strong words were exchanged. One journalist reported, “[Donny] George is now quoted as saying that that items lost could represent ‘a small percentage’ of the collection and blamed shoddy reporting for the exaggeration.” A scholar, who heard Donny George speak at the British Museum at the end of April, commented, “Is it not a little strange that quite so many journalists went away with the wrong impression, while Mr. George made little or no attempt to clarify the context of the figure of 170,000 which he repeated with such regularity and gusto before, during, and after that meeting.”⁴⁶ Other scholars responded in letters to the editor:

[The reporter] would have us believe that unscrupulous, Ba’athist curators of the Iraq museum in Baghdad have deliberately overplayed the pillaging and destruction on April 9-11.... At no time did George claim ... that the entire contents of the museum had gone ... our high opinion of the character of Dr. George and his

colleagues has been formed over two decades of working with them.... George deserves the world's praise, not its condemnation, for saving so many of Iraq's treasures....⁴⁷

Cultural heritage professionals are in the position of both releasing information to the press, as the Iraqi museum authorities did, and reacting to information that others release, as American, European, and other scholars and professionals did in response to the news of the Iraqi museum looting. Care must be taken not to succumb to the immediate questions of the press seeking to fill the public's 24/7 appetite for facts, figures, and opinions, especially ones that create "shock and awe" and will make headlines. Knowing that the first news is often wrong, waiting for the "fog of war" to lift before making definitive decisions or statements may be prudent. If, however, a statement is incorrect or misinterpreted, an immediate correction is in order to avert the ballooning of misunderstandings and hard feelings. In addition, designating a single person or office in the museum as a primary point of contact with the press is essential to ensure consistency of information.

Lesson 3: Complete and updated documentation that is duplicated and dispersed is essential for accountability. We now understand, from press reports, that the Iraqi National Museum has 170,000 entries on its inventory. In addition, we have learned that the museum housed thousands more artifacts that had either not yet been catalogued or had been set aside in a ground-floor "study collection" storeroom for researchers to examine. One of the looted ground-floor storage rooms included about 10 steel trunks containing as-yet unnumbered material from recent digs.⁴⁸ The total collection may consist of 500,000

objects (plus or minus), due to lot cataloguing wherein one inventory item, or lot, may account for multiple items.⁴⁹

First reports implied that inventory records were lost. Some said the museum records were burned.⁵⁰ Museum officials countered that they have good records and the reports are not true: "A lot of our paper records are safe. Most of the computerized data we had backed up."⁵¹ One report noted that creating a reliable inventory is complicated by the museum's lack of detailed records.⁵² Another stated that the museum staff is methodically going through the catalogue of the collection—index card by index card—without benefit of computers.⁵³ Questions have arisen as to when objects may have disappeared from the museum. Reports have suggested that some missing objects may have disappeared long before the looting on April 10–12.⁵⁴ Although the institutions that have partnered with the Iraqi National Museum on archeological projects are working to reconstruct databases that may assist the museum in its inventory, it appears that the index cards at the museum are the most complete record of the collections.

Documenting the loss of an item that is not inventoried on a list is virtually impossible. Documenting the loss of an item that may be on a list but is not catalogued, described, photographed, or illustrated is challenging. Catalogue records and inventory lists must be updated each time information about the object changes, such as its condition or location. Museum record-keeping tasks are enormous and on-going. Similar documentation needs apply to the recording of archeological and other cultural sites, although the items buried in the sites remain unrecorded until the site is excavated, and their loss, prior to sci-

entific excavation, is particularly poignant.

Cataloguing refers to assigning and applying a unique number to an object or group of objects and recording descriptive and documentary data on a museum catalogue record that is maintained in both electronic and paper copy. The cataloguer may supplement the record with photography, and digital images can be maintained with the electronic record. Copies of the electronic and paper records should be stored in at least one off-site location. Museums should do annual inventories that involve a verification of the objects and their records. For example, an annual inventory might involve a 100% survey of the most significant and high-value items and a random sample of the remainder of the collection. Such annual inventories help to spot damage and losses that may have occurred without the curator's notice. They also serve to eliminate suspicions that missing objects may have gone unreported prior to a disaster such as the looting of the Iraqi National Museum, which requires a full accounting.

When disaster strikes, having electronic and paper copies of the catalogue records (or archeological site records) that can be recalled from another location is critical to recovery. Most museums maintain this kind of duplication, but often in the same city. With a widespread disaster, such as struck the Iraqi National Museum, duplicates in other locations in Baghdad may not have helped. Multiple copies and wide dispersal of such copies are advantageous. Depending on the risk, museums may need to entrust these copies to museums in other countries.

Placing catalogue records and images on the web for public access is one way to duplicate and disseminate catalog information. Although sensi-

tive information, such as provenience data, and management information, such as maintenance cycles, are not appropriate for public access, basic identification, dates, descriptive information, and photographs are of great educational benefit in providing public access to the collections. They also support recovery efforts if items are missing. Had such a website existed for the Iraqi museum collections, the lists needed by the police, customs, military, and the press would have been instantly available. Similarly, the posting of statistics about the collections on the web can help to eliminate misunderstandings during the "fog of war," or the "fog" of other disasters. The website would need to be mirrored on servers, or backed up on high-capacity tapes, in additional and remote locations to avoid catastrophic loss of data and address loss of power and functionality at the primary site.

Lesson 4: An emergency operations plan is critical. An emergency operations plan is critical to ensuring that emergencies do not turn into disasters. Not only do staff and visitors need to know what to do and where to go, but also staff needs to know how to protect the collections. Parts of emergency operations plans are often confidential, so that other professionals and the public are unlikely to see the full scope of a museum's plan. Sometimes evacuation is appropriate, sometimes protecting the collections in place is best.

The staff of the Iraqi National Museum is experienced in both evacuating and protecting collections in place. As the museum authorities noted, the experience of recent wars had made them experts in safeguarding antiquities. They evacuated the museum many times. Their strategy was never to tell other staff—"not even the minister of culture"—when or where they were moving items. In the

past, only 10 people who were under oath knew. This time, five were under oath.⁵⁵ In the 1970s and 1980s, the collections of the National Museum of Beirut largely survived the fighting because of the successful strategies of deception and physical protection that the museum's director adopted: he announced the removal to safe storage of material that was still, in fact, in the museum's basement.⁵⁶ The Iraqi museum staff removed easily portable items from the galleries, and secured and padded others. The staff also moved some items from museum storage to off-site locations. Clearly, the damage and loss would have been much greater had all the collections been housed in the museum.

Large museums are vulnerable. They are big targets and evacuation is challenging. Museums must identify, in advance, evacuation locations and means of transportation to those locations. If they can disperse their collections into multiple locations as a part of their regular operations, they lessen the risk of a catastrophic loss. The architecturally imposing building that generally houses the exhibits is the symbol of authority and the prime target. Storage and work areas that are physically separated from the main building are at lower risk. Museums also spread their risk by lending large portions of collections to other institutions on a long-term basis for use in exhibits and research.

Lesson 5: A broad-based constituency reduces risk of loss. Citizens who have a sense of pride and ownership in a museum, library, or archeological site are more likely to protect it than attack it. Even if they do not visit the museum or read the library's books, they may appreciate its role in the community and the cultural heritage that it preserves. When the librarian at Basra's Central Library knew she had only a few hours left to

salvage the remaining books that had not yet been systematically evacuated, she turned to the owner of the empty restaurant next door and asked for help. He and his brothers and employees, and soon other shopkeepers, began moving the books and ancient manuscripts into the restaurant and other shops. The library later burned, but 70 percent of the collections had been saved. The librarian said, "The people who carried the books, not all of them were educated. Some of them could not write or could not read, but they knew they were precious books."⁵⁷ Likewise, the Baghdad neighborhood that guarded boxes of manuscripts clearly had a sense of ownership in its cultural heritage.

At the pillaged archeological site of Nimrud, a U.S. sergeant asked a guard, "Why, now that people are liberated, would they want to destroy the history of Iraq?" The guard's response: "We asked them the same thing. They said this nation gave them nothing. They cursed its history."⁵⁸

The message is clear. Cultural heritage preservation depends on its ability to serve and build constituencies in the population at large. No group should feel disenfranchised or left behind. Cultural heritage preservation, to be successful, must have meaning for everyone and be the concern of all.

Lesson 6: When all else fails, follow your heart. In Baghdad, many were motivated to steal because they could not bear to watch the destruction of their history. Just over two weeks after the looting, Donny George reported that up to 50 objects a day, which local people "removed for safe-keeping," were being returned to the museum.⁵⁹ Early reports said that museum staff members took some of the more valuable items home and returned them as the situation began to stabilize,⁶⁰ but Donny George later

clarified that staff members had not taken items to their homes for protection.⁶¹

Perhaps the story that best illustrates the lesson of following your heart is that of a 33-year-old Iraqi pianist who watched in horror as looters ransacked the museum. He said he decided to do the same—not for personal gain, but to hide the antiquities until they could be safely returned. He said he remembered lessons in Iraqi history from his school days. He recognized the statue of Assyrian King Shalmaneser III. It lay in fragments, which he collected. He and two relatives filled two vanloads. At home he wrapped the objects to protect them, then called Donny George, who told him to keep them until the museum was secure. “I am so happy,” said George, patting his heart with affection for the pianist.⁶²

Lessons Applied

The mission to preserve the world’s cultural heritage is a daunting race against time. War, pests, and environmental factors take their toll. The role of the cultural heritage professional is to minimize that toll so that the greatest number of generations can enjoy and benefit from the record of the past. We have heard of the Basra librarian who passed books over a

back wall as the war surrounded her, the Baghdad citizens who kept a neighborhood watch on boxes of manuscripts, and the difficulties in recovering items when inventories are missing or incomplete.

These lessons remind us that complacency, born of familiarity with our shortcomings, is not acceptable. We may advance the preservation of the world’s heritage if we take these lessons to heart and act upon them. Can we afford to tolerate a backlog of sites to be surveyed and recorded or collections to be catalogued when we know that looting and theft are occurring even without war? We have learned our lessons and we know the answer. As cultural heritage professionals we need to share these lessons from Iraq with government leaders, those who sponsor heritage preservation work, and the general public and ask them to help us to shorten the gap in the race against time.

Author’s note: The information for this article has been taken from press releases and news articles through September 2003. As the “fog of war” lifts, some of the reports may prove to be inaccurate or misleading. I trust that the lessons learned will remain valid although the examples continue to evolve.

Additional Sources of Information

The following websites provide reports and links to other websites with information on Iraqi cultural heritage.

- AAM: www.aamus.org/hottopics.cfm?mode=list&cid=24
- AIA: www.archaeological.org/webinfo.php?page=10129
- ICOM: <http://icom.museum/iraq.html>
- UNESCO: www.unesco.org/culture/iraq

Endnotes

¹ Donny George is now acting director general, Museums Department, Iraqi State Board of Antiquities and Heritage.

² Roger Atwood, “Inside Iraq’s National Museum,” *Art News Online*, Summer 2003.

³ Andrew Lawler, “Mayhem in Mesopotamia,” *Science*, Vol. 301, August 1, 2003.

- 4 National Public Radio, "Protecting ancient history in Iraq," *Morning Edition*, February 20, 2003.
- 5 Robert L. Kelly, "Letter to Secretary of Defense on Protection of Antiquities in Iraq," Society for American Archaeology, February 27, 2003.
- 6 Archaeological Institute of America, "Open declaration on cultural heritage at risk in Iraq," March 19, 2003.
- 7 Paul Martin, Ed Vulliamy, and Gaby Hinsliff, "U.S. Army was told to protect looted museum," *The Observer*, April 20, 2003.
- 8 Martin Bailey, "U.S. Officer warned that there was a risk the museum would be looted," *The Art Newspaper*, n.d.
- 9 Atwood, "Inside Iraq's National Museum."
- 10 International Information Programs, U.S. Department of State, "Thousands of missing artifacts from Iraqi Museum recovered," Washington File, September 10, 2003.
- 11 Interpol, "Prepared remarks of U.S. Attorney General John Ashcroft," Interpol press release, Meeting on Cultural Property Looting in Iraq, May 6, 2003.
- 12 Alex Spillius, "Media blamed for exaggerating loss of antiquities," *The Daily Telegraph*, May 22, 2003.
- 13 Martin Gottlieb, "Campaign starts to help Iraq rebuild cultural institutions," *The New York Times*, April 30, 2003.
- 14 Dan Cruickshank, "Return to Baghdad: The cost of war at the Iraq Museum," *BBC History*, June 9, 2003.
- 15 John F. Burns, "Pillagers strip Iraqi Museum of its treasure," *The New York Times*, April 13, 2003.
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