

MIDDLE EAST

# Shattered by ISIS, Iraq's Mosul Museum Is Rising from the Ashes

Iraqi authorities and foreign groups including the Smithsonian have begun restoring the museum, a showcase of the country's pre-Islamic history

By [Jared Malsin](#)

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When Islamic State gunmen stormed the Mosul Cultural Museum and filmed themselves taking sledgehammers to 3,000-year-old Assyrian statues in 2015, museum director Zaid Ghazi watched the images online aghast.

Mr. Ghazi was at his home in Mosul, unable to go to work since the militants had seized the city, one of Iraq's largest, and made it the crown jewel of their self-proclaimed caliphate. He later learned that Islamic State militants had set fire to the museum's library of 25,000 books.

"It was unbelievable," he said. "It showed the deep hatred in their hearts."



A still image from a video reportedly released by Islamic State in February 2015 in which militants were shown knocking over statues in the Mosul Cultural Museum.

PHOTO: AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE/GETTY IMAGES

The museum is a symbol of a multicultural version of Iraqi society that Islamic State tried to obliterate during the three years it ruled Mosul before [being driven from the city in 2017](#). Founded in 1952, the secular, public institution showcases thousands of years of Iraq's history, including extensive exhibits on pre-Islamic times.

Today, Iraqi authorities, along with Mr. Ghazi and international supporters including the Smithsonian Institution, have begun a painstaking process of rebuilding the museum and restoring its place as a vital center of culture in Iraq. The museum has reopened for individual art events since 2019, but is now closed as administrators plan the next phase of its rehabilitation, which is expected to take years. Its reconstruction offers an opportunity to redress the traumas of Islamic State's occupation.



A view of the museum in April 2017 after the Iraqi army recaptured it from Islamic State.

PHOTO: YUNUS KELES/ANADOLU AGENCY/GETTY IMAGES

“Rehabilitating the museum is the best way of declaring the end of Daesh and starting a new period in the current history of Mosul,” said Omar Mohammed, a historian from Mosul and the founder of the news blog Mosul Eye, using the Arabic name for the group. “It’s an opportunity to reclaim the identity of Mosul.”

Recent history shows that rebuilding landmarks can help societies ravaged by war turn a page on trauma. They include reconstruction of the Mostar Bridge in Bosnia in 2004 after the Balkan wars and many buildings in Europe that were destroyed in World War II, such as Britain’s medieval Coventry Cathedral and Dresden’s 18th-century Lutheran church.



Iraqi forces inspecting the damage inside the recaptured museum in March 2017.

PHOTO: AHMAD AL-RUBAYE/AFP/GETTY IMAGES

Islamic State seized Mosul in June 2014 at the height of a military campaign in which the extremist group captured swaths of Iraq and Syria and unleashed a wave of violent attacks across the Middle East, Europe and beyond.

Once a thriving city of more than a million people, Mosul became the heart of Islamic State’s harsh experiment in jihadist governance in Iraq and Syria. It was in Mosul that the group’s leader, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, first proclaimed the establishment of a caliphate, claiming the mantle of Islamic empires from history.

The militants imposed an extreme version of Islamic law that forbade music, alcohol and cigarettes. The group drove out Christians and committed what the United Nations has labeled genocide against the Yazidis, a religious minority in northern Iraq and Syria. It also attacked cultural sites, destroying Roman temples at the ruins of Palmyra in Syria and blowing up the iconic leaning minaret of Mosul’s al-Nouri mosque, which had stood for more than 800 years, in the last days of its rule.



Museum director Zaid Ghazi, right, examining a wood cenotaph in the museum's Islamic Hall in February 2019.  
 PHOTO: SEBASTIAN MEYER/SMITHSONIAN

After capturing the city from the crumbling Iraqi army, Islamic State militants turned to the museum, Iraq's second largest and home to artifacts from the Assyrian empire, a pre-Christian civilization in northern Mesopotamia, and from the Islamic era. In February 2015, the group released a video of its members using hammers and drills to destroy non-Islamic artifacts that they said were blasphemous "idols."

Mr. Ghazi fled Mosul shortly after the attack on the museum, where he had worked since 2001. He smuggled his family out to Turkey and later moved to Baghdad.

He returned to Mosul in 2017 after a nine-month battle in which Iraqi forces backed by U.S. air power liberated the city from Islamic State. He found much of the city in ruins, destroyed by the fighting, and discovered the extent of the destruction at the museum.



Museum director Zaid Ghazi, left, and Brian Michael Lione, the Smithsonian's Iraq program manager, surveyed a destroyed mihrab display in February 2019.  
 PHOTO: SEBASTIAN MEYER/SMITHSONIAN

With fragments of glass and rock crunching underfoot as he stepped into the building, Mr. Ghazi found that Islamic State militants had set off explosives next to a massive stone dais from the ancient Assyrian city of Nimrud. They had blown up a statue of a lamassu, an Assyrian deity with the body of a bull and the head of a human. They used a knife to carve out the eyes of another.

In 2019 a team from the Smithsonian Institution in Washington visited the museum to take stock of the damage and begin making a plan for the reconstruction, part of a project in cooperation with the Louvre museum in Paris, the World Monuments Fund and the Switzerland-based Aliph Foundation.

Richard Kurin, a Smithsonian Institution distinguished scholar and ambassador-at-large who is involved in the Mosul museum project, said the restoration could help Iraqis overcome the destruction wrought by Islamic State.



Museum director Zaid Ghazi, left, and conservator Kent Severson selecting areas for stabilization and recovery efforts in the ancient city of Nimrud.

PHOTO: BRIAN MICHAEL LIONE/SMITHSONIAN

He drew parallels to his previous work on cultural preservation projects launched following disasters like the 2010 earthquake in Haiti and the way people often turn to religion and culture in the aftermath of a catastrophe.

“Culture is so central to the resilience of a people. That’s why ISIS was destroying this stuff,” he said. “It goes to the core of who people are.”

In addition to having to repair the badly damaged building, the team also faced the challenge of identifying and sorting thousands of fragments of various artifacts destroyed by Islamic State militants. The rescue team put a grid on the floor and is tagging each item before taking them carefully to a storage facility, earmarked for future restoration and possible reassembly.

“We treated it like a cold-case crime scene,” said Cori Wegener, the director of the Smithsonian’s cultural-rescue initiative and a former officer in the U.S. Army Reserve who worked on restoring the Iraqi National Museum after it was looted following the U.S. invasion in 2003.



Fragments collected by Mosul Cultural Museum staff have been documented and placed into temporary storage.

PHOTO: SEBASTIAN MEYER/SMITHSONIAN

After having secured the Mosul Museum, repaired the roof—which was struck by mortar fire—and sifted through piles of debris, Mr. Ghazi and his collaborators are now beginning the careful process of planning the next era of the museum, which means wrestling with a set of questions about history, memory and the museum’s place in Mosul.

Administrators must decide whether to acknowledge Islamic State’s occupation of Mosul and assault on the museum in a future exhibit as a way of commemorating its recent trauma.

Mr. Ghazi is against the idea. He argues that it would be better to highlight the thousands of years of rich history that are the museum’s main focus, not dwell on the violent and ultimately brief chapter of Islamic State’s takeover.

“We’re trying not to remind people of the dark side of history,” he said. “We don’t want to plant in people’s minds what ISIS did.”

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