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Iraq's legacy of neglect and conflict: Interview with the Coalition Provisional Authority's senior adviser for culture, John Russell

The ambassador assesses the situation on the ground and recommends that swift action must be taken if cultural landmarks are to remain

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John Russell (50), professor of archaeology at the Massachusetts College of Art in Boston, has been in Baghdad for seven months. He has served as the acting senior adviser of the Coalition Provisional Authority (CPA) to the Iraqi Ministry of Culture. (The senior advisor has been, by agreement, an Italian, and Professor Russell has been in charge while the post has been temporarily vacant.) Professor Russell has helped to coordinate reconstruction of the National Museum and to improve security at archaeological sites around the country. His tour is about to come to a close, but before his departure from Baghdad, Jason Kaufman of The Art Newspaper spoke with him about the ongoing rebuilding of Iraq's cultural infrastructure.

The Art Newspaper: Considering the reported increase in violence, you must feel constantly

threatened?

John Russell: I feel a general level of danger. We get rocketed frequently. The bombings are directed at the Coalition headquarters, the so-called Green Zone, the main administrative area where we all live. It's a few blocks from the antiquities department complex where I spend a fair amount of time. I'm provided with security outside the Green Zone.

TAN: When you arrived last autumn, how did you decide where to begin?

JR: We made an on-the-spot assessment of the most pressing needs and came up with two large areas: museum refurbishment and archeological site protection. The State Department received an appropriation of \$1 million last year that was restricted to cultural institutions, the museum and the library. Most of that has been spent on the museum building.

There has been an additional half million to the State Department to track and try to eliminate trafficking in archeological objects in Iraq, building a database of known smugglers and looters. The idea is to try to restrict the flow of antiquities out of Iraq using police documentation and techniques.

TAN: What is the state of Iraq's ministry of culture?

JR: The ministry is reconstituted, with a new culture minister Mufeed al-Jazairi, a former expatriate who returned to take up the position. I'm enthusiastic about the way it is working. They have lots of projects and ideas.

The State Board of Antiquities and Heritage is one of 10 divisions of the ministry of culture. The antiquities board remained intact. By and large it's the same staff that was there prior to the 2003 war. Abdul Aziz Hamid, a specialist in Islamic art, has just been assigned from the ministry of higher education to head the antiquities board. They're thinking of how they want to run the museum, what to focus on in excavations and how to preserve historic buildings.

TAN: What has happened since the sack of the Iraq National Museum?

JR: Last autumn, the US State Department's Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs (ECA) sent a team of experts to assess the need for rehabilitation and reconstruction of buildings and infrastructure. Their survey resulted in \$750,000 in contracts for electrical, plumbing, and other building repairs, as well as the installation of a computer network, communications equipment, and other technological improvements. That's virtually finished. Most of the work was

subcontracted to local Iraqi companies. So there will be an official Iraq Museum website, email, and a functioning building back in communication with the rest of the world.

TAN: Who else has contributed funds? Are more needed?

JR: The Packard Humanities Institute, a private US charity, has provided another \$1 million that is being administered by the State Department; \$250,000 went to computer and photographic equipment and furniture for the museum offices. I secured \$1 million from the Iraqi ministry of culture capital improvement budget for security upgrades to the museum.

The Italian government has funded extensive renovation to the conservation laboratory, and conservators are now at work for the first time since the looting, taking care of objects that were returned or damaged in storage. The Japanese pledged \$1 million for an analytical lab, and that work is about to start. The Germans donated cabinets for storage of the cuneiform tablet collection that will be installed in the National Museum. And there have been donations from independent scholars.

TAN: What is the state of the National Library?

JR: The library is getting rebuilt from a worse initial condition than the museum. The ECA sent experts from the Library of Congress last fall to assess damage to the National Library and Archives, which suffered two fires during the looting last year. The team recommended that the library should be relocated and an existing structure—a former Republican Guard Officers Club overlooking the Tigris River—has been chosen, but will need to be converted first. The ministry is preparing a competition for a design. Meanwhile, staff are working in the old building preserving and cataloguing the collections.

TAN: What is the situation at other major museums?

JR: Forget damage from the looting! Saddam had ignored the museums for decades, so 90% of what we have to do is upgrade the infrastructure. The Mosul Museum has just received a \$350,000 contract from the CPA in Nineveh Province to upgrade the security. The Nasiriya Museum has been promised a renovation by the Italian Carabinieri, and the Museum of Babylon, part of which was looted and damaged, has been renovated. It doesn't have its antiquities collections installed yet, but it looks great. I believe that's been done by Coalition forces.

TAN: What is your assessment of the work done?

JR: The general condition of the National Museum and Library has been steadily improving. Looting at archeological sites seems to be decreasing, but it's a job that will take more work. As long as there are poor people in Iraq it's going to be a real challenge—especially while there are people willing to buy at the consumer end. But, as far as I can tell, the looting of sites has improved gradually, thanks particularly to the work of the Coalition, most notably in the Nasiriya province where the Italian carabinieri have made it a priority. Also in Babel province where the local CPA administration has set up an extensive site-protection system with a lot of guards, trucks and motorcycles which seems to have been providing pretty good protection. The CPA has pledged \$1 million in the south central region for equipment to protect sites.

TAN: What are the top priorities now?

JR: I would like to see more resources put into the continued protection of archaeological sites, province by province, until they're all covered. As soon as you push looters out of one province they could go to another. A high priority is the reinforcement of the Antiquities department's security force.

Since Iraq is covered with archaeological sites, many of them undiscovered, I'd like to see all those companies that secure contracts in Iraq have an archaeological monitoring programme attached to avoid sites wherever possible. The State antiquities board seeks to minimise damage from development projects and has introduced reasonable contract language that will ensure the presence of antiquities experts on reconstruction projects.

Another priority would be to continue training and professional development through international exchange programmes. The ECA recently sponsored a five-week training session in the US for staff from the National Museum, and the British have held a training project for conservators in London. The US Agency for International Development has given more than \$4 million to the State University of New York at Stonybrook to help the Baghdad Museum to modernise its archaeology and Assyriology departments.

I'd like to see work at the museum continue, getting it back to a position where it can again play a public role in the life of Iraqis and internationally. And a renewed emphasis on police work to recover the thousands of pieces which are still missing. What we have is largely an estimate for now, until a full inventory can be completed. I think a lot are still in Baghdad and Iraq.

There are substantial offers of assistance, but these need to be fitted into an overall organisational framework that responds to the needs of the museums. In a vacuum where people aren't able to communicate effectively, outsiders come up with all sorts of ideas, but unless you can coordinate with people in the institutions, they remain just ideas.

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