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Under the
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Artist Giuseppe Fanfoni at the BA

IDENTITY PRESERVATION IN RENEWED USES OF ANCIENT MONUMENTS

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Giuseppe Fanfoni

Painting, sculpture, interior designing, architecture, restoration, civil engineering, construction, material experimentation, and supporting archeological missions, are all fields in which Italian restoration expert and artist Giuseppe Fanfoni¹⁾ spent long years of passionate and continuous commitment that bears the name "Art".

As he spoke at the Bibliotheca Alexandrina (BA), on 16 January 2011, about identity preservation in renewed uses of ancient monuments, he affirmed that the identity of a monument is essentially definable by its technical, visual and cultural aspects. His lecture was followed by an exhibition entitled "Visual Arts and Restoration", displaying his art and images from his restoration projects.

Fanfoni expounded some reflections on fronting the problems of a restorative and conservation operation on ancient monuments in the respect for their identity, referring to the recovery and the current reuse of the *Sama'khana* (Hall for Listening) building in Egypt, and of a part of the *Sunqur Sa'di Madrasa*, which is antecedent and underlying. The buildings are placed in the great Architectural Complex of the Mevlevi Dervishes, which is at the foot of the Cairo Citadel and near the Sultan Hassan Mosque, and occupies a wide area of about 7500 m, which was donated in 1607 to the confraternity of the Mevlevi Dervishes, who built there the *Takiyya* (monastery).

The *Sama'khana* is a domed place, with a singular spherical structure where the Dervishes performed weekly, on Friday evening, the *Sama' rite* (that is of "listening to the cosmic harmony"), by a characteristic, slow, rhythmical and rotating movement on a circular course. The significance and the performance of the rite, which is expressed by the circulating movements, accompanied by music and followed by spectators placed all around, are origin and development for the architectural and special planning of the building itself. As to the *Sunqur Sa'di Madrasa* (dating back to the 14th century), whose some ruins were reused for building the overlaying *Sama'khana*, is an important building as well, both with regard to the historical elements and to the artistic peculiarities.

The restoration expert spoke about the technical identity of the buildings, stating that it is recognizable in the structure and in the support of the shape and of the image of a work. "I have given great attention to keeping the original technical elements of the buildings, in order to give the possibility of deeper research, by future and more modern systems and instruments of analysis."

The *Sama'khana* dome, existing in a frail wooden structure of 10 cm only, and open by dangerous fissures, was hooped with a sliding band on brackets fixed to the centers; its shape was recovered to the original aspect by particular technical devices, and strengthened by a light wire-netting, which was incorporated in the external covering and grants unity to the whole of the dome. As to the totally wooden structure of the gallery floor, as it was provided for a more numerous audience than in the past, it was suitably reinforced. New and differently painted, bearing beams were added to the ancient ones. Finally, a framework in the roof

binds on the outside walls, in order to keep together the structure elements, in case of seismic movements. Also, those strengthening and safety devices were carried on by differentiating the added elements, and preserving the original parts in their structure and technical function identity.

Fanfoni stated that the most complicated problem regarding the survival of the *Sama'khana* appeared, since the beginning of the intervention, in the fact that it had been built over a part of the ruins of the *Sunqur Sa'di Madrasa*, which is one of the most ancient Islamic monuments in Cairo, and of great historical and architectural importance. "We fronted the situation with a long, careful and gradual operation of excavations and supportings; without removing any part of the restored *Sama'khana*. It allowed light into the central courtyard with the former fountain and the surrounding cells of the *Madrasa*," he explained. Currently, the *Sama'khana* is supported by a metallic construction which was designed to be insulated from the hanging area in correspondence with the upper central board for the *Sama'* performance, in order to avoid vibrations to the original wooden structure of the *Sama'khana* dome.

Fanfoni also spoke about the identity of the visual form of the work. He mentioned that the intervention concerning the dome was directed both to the recovery of the original formal identity, and to the conservation of the documents recording the most significant moments of formal changes. The check pointed on the stopping up of the windows were detached, applied on special frames and replaced in the original site. Now a special mechanism produces a simultaneous rotation of the frames and allows again the daylight illumination from outside, so that it gives again the image of their symbolic significance to the open windows.

¹⁾Giuseppe Fanfoni is a Restoration Expert of the University of Rome "La Sapienza", and Professor of Projects of the National Art Institute in Rome (Istituto Statale d'Arte). In Egypt, former professor of Methodology & Restoration Techniques of Cairo University, and founder of the Italian-Egyptian Center for Restoration and Archaeology.



Visitors attending the exhibition

The excavated area of the Sunqur Sa'di Madrasa appeared seriously damaged because of the time and the Mevlevi reuse; therefore, its formal recovery was carried on with much discretion for expository purposes and comprehension of the monument.

"In the courtyard zone, the most important discovery resulted in the *fskiyat* (fountains) which had been used "in situ" during the Tulunide Period. The perimeter has been recomposed, and the whole central part of the courtyard with the archeological remains, has been isolated and separated from the path of visitors".

Fanfoni affirmed that the cultural identity is definable by the origin of a monument, and by the utilization in its social context, and in the historical development.

The Sama'khana was built during the Nineteenth Century as the place for the performance of the Sama' rite, which is peculiar to the confraternity of the Mevlevi Dervishes, which was founded by the famous mystic poet Jalal-al-Din Rumi. "That is why it is inspired by a deep spiritual and religious feeling, which was supported by a sound philosophical culture referring to the literary and poetical works of the Founder of the Order," he said. "The architectural features of the Cairo Sama'khana reflect, better than any other among the remaining few ones, the symbolism and the spiritual message of the rite, which it was conceived and planned for: a rite so rich of worth, that it has been currently included by UNESCO in the list of the immaterial cultural heritage to be preserved".

On 18 January 1998, after 50 years of abandonment, and on the proposal of the Turkish and Egyptian Ministries of Culture, it was performed again in the Cairo Sama'khana. It resulted in a touching occasion, which recurred many times afterwards, and in the most proper, but not frequent use of the building.

The bare exterior of the masonry of the southern wall, reused in the Sama'khana, documents the chronological and historical sequences of life and utilization changes in the building. "Inside, in the cells of the ground-floor of the Madrasa, we placed some showcases with archeological materials, which we found in the area, by placing them so as not to disturb the frontal view of the cells from the court. Also, in the opposite area of the northern cells, we placed other showcases at a lower level than the

remaining and rebuilt ruins of the wall, to avoid any interference in the view of their facade, which had been graphically reconstructed symmetrically with the southern side of the court," said Fanfoni.

The artist also declared that the recovery and reuse of the whole area has been linked as well to more complicated didactic and original activities, by preserving the original character and aims which the buildings were projected for, and by granting proper use and protection.

Fanfoni concluded that the present reuse of the Sama'khana is impressed by an identity as a place of cultural activities and historical knowledge, in addition to being a source for recovering worthiness which seems lost now.

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