

Conservation of the Punic Collection at the Museum of Carthage. Part III – Transfer of Museological Technologies: Establishment of a Conservation-centred Didactic Gallery

Vanda Vitali, Peter Gale and Ursula M. Franklin

Journal of the Canadian Association for Conservation (J. CAC), Volume 26.
© Canadian Association for Conservation, 2001.

This article: © Vanda Vitali, Peter Gale and Ursula M. Franklin, 2001.
Reproduced with the permission of Vanda Vitali, Peter Gale and Ursula M. Franklin.

Images: © Vanda Vitali, 2001.
Reproduced with the permission of Vanda Vitali.

J.CAC is a peer reviewed journal published annually by the Canadian Association for Conservation of Cultural Property (CAC); <http://www.cac-accr.ca/>.

The views expressed in this publication are those of the individual authors, and are not necessarily those of the editors or of CAC.

Journal de l'Association canadienne pour la conservation et la restauration (J. ACCR), Volume 26.
© l'Association canadienne pour la conservation et la restauration, 2001.

Cet article : © Vanda Vitali, Peter Gale et Ursula M. Franklin, 2001.
Reproduit avec la permission de Vanda Vitali, Peter Gale et Ursula M. Franklin.

Images : © Vanda Vitali, 2001.
Reproduit avec la permission de Vanda Vitali.

Le *Journal de l'ACCR* une revue arbitrée qui est publiée annuellement par l'Association canadienne pour la conservation et la restauration des biens culturels (ACCR); <http://www.cac-accr.ca/>.

Les opinions exprimées dans la présente publication sont celles des auteurs et ne reflètent pas nécessairement celles de la rédaction ou de l'ACCR.

Conservation of the Punic Collection at the Museum of Carthage.

Part III – Transfer of Museological Technologies: Establishment of a Conservation-centred Didactic Gallery

Vanda Vitali*, Peter Gale**, and Ursula M. Franklin***

*Royal Ontario Museum, 100 Queen's Park, Toronto ON M5S 2C6, Canada.

**4 Kingsbury Crescent, Toronto ON M1N 1E9, Canada.

***Massey College, University of Toronto, 4 Devonshire Place, Toronto ON M5S 3E1, Canada.

This is the third and final part in a series of articles featuring a multifaceted conservation undertaking known as the University of Toronto-Museum of Carthage Project. The article focuses on the development of a didactic gallery (titled "Science and Archaeology: A Meeting in Carthage") in Tunisia at the Museum of Carthage and the museological approach taken to present the conservation work done during the project. The paper describes: an initial display to inform visitors about the research and conservation conducted at the museum; the development of a museological approach to a permanent educational gallery (the story line and the artifact display); the design of the gallery (the exhibit components, layout, and architecture); and the collaborative efforts of the various partners (including conservators, museologists, local architects, graphic designers, and the Tunisian media). As with the two preceding parts, the article demonstrates the expanding role of conservation projects—and as a consequence, of conservators—to areas well beyond the treatment of artifacts.

Ceci est le dernier d'une série de trois articles consacrés au projet conjoint de l'Université de Toronto et du Musée de Carthage, un projet de conservation à multiples facettes. L'article porte sur la conception d'une galerie didactique (intitulée «Science et Archéologie – Une rencontre à Carthage») au Musée de Carthage en Tunisie et l'approche muséologique adoptée pour présenter le travail de conservation effectué lors du projet. L'article décrit une première exposition visant à informer les visiteurs des travaux de recherche et de conservation menés au musée; le développement d'une approche muséologique pour une galerie didactique permanente (le scénario et la présentation des objets); la conception de la galerie (les composantes de l'exposition, son parcours et son architecture); et les efforts de collaboration des divers partenaires (restaurateurs, muséologues, architectes locaux, concepteurs graphiques et gens des médias). Comme dans les deux premiers articles de la série, cet article démontre que le rôle des projets de conservation—et par le fait même, des restaurateurs—ne se limite pas au seul traitement des objets.

Manuscript received April 2001; revised manuscript received August 2001

Introduction

Communication with constituent communities and the general public is central to any museum today. Exhibits and programs represent a museum's main communication tools. While, in the past, the focus of exhibits was centred primarily on historical aspects of collections and the artifacts themselves, museums today increasingly appreciate that their public wishes to learn more about the context that surrounds the artifacts, including information about museum work itself and its contemporary relevance.

The conservation profession has observed the increased popularity of their "open house" initiatives. As well, a considerable number of exhibits across the world have focussed on the technical study of works of art or artifacts, primarily featuring authenticity studies. Exhibits like these have demonstrated the public's interest in knowing more about the conservation of collections as well as the study of works of art and artifacts using various scientific methods and techniques. It became desirable, then, that the University of Toronto-Museum of Carthage Project should include the presentation of its work, and its results, in an exhibit that would reflect current museological approaches to communicating with the public, as well as the particular local circumstances of the Museum of

Carthage, such as its financial resources, its capacity to maintain gallery displays, and the nature of its various audiences.

The Problem and the Context

As described in the first article on the project,¹ the Museum of Carthage in Tunisia (**Figure 1**) is the custodian of the largest assemblage of Punic artifacts in the world, comprising tens of thousands of objects covering the period from the eighth to the second century B.C., mostly excavated from tombs. This collection, assembled principally around 1900 from local sites, and never seen or classified in its entirety, contains an enormous amount of historical and scientific information and represents an important constituent of the world's heritage.

Although many archaeological missions working in Carthage² have developed and sponsored displays of their excavation finds, these presentations have tended to be traditional museum displays, targeted principally at an adult public with an interest in, and a knowledge of, classical archaeology. In part, this is a result of the fact that the cultural heritage of Tunisia, like most of its Mediterranean neighbours, is very rich in archeological material, and is recognized in Tunisia as a major potential source for tourism revenue.



Figure 1. The Museum of Carthage building in the archaeological park of Carthage.

A brief study of the public visiting the museum at the outset of the project was conducted by the project team. Direct observation of visitors and their behaviour in the museum, as well as an analysis of ticket sales, revealed that the principal visitors to the museum were foreign tourists. Local visitors, about 15% of the total number of annual visitors, spent more time visiting the site and enjoying the park with its breathtaking view of the Bay of Tunis and the Cap Bon peninsula, than viewing the exhibit material. School groups represented a very small fraction of the local visitors.

The Origins of the Project

At the beginning of the project, in 1989, the team decided to develop a small display in order to inform professional colleagues and the public about the presence of the project team and the work that was starting. This consisted of two glass cases, which the Director of the museum, Abdelmajid Ennabli, generously placed in a prime location on the ground floor of the museum near the entrance. Developed by members of the team, this modest and unsophisticated display simply focussed on announcing the project and introducing some basic questions that the project was hoping to answer (for example, how to conserve some very deteriorated artifacts, why artifacts were deteriorating, and what technical studies were to be undertaken to answer archaeological questions). The display also presented two conserved (cleaned and consolidated) artifacts—one ceramic and one metal object. The strategy was to update these cases as the project progressed and to demonstrate some of the results as they were achieved.³

The success of this display was considerable and most unexpected. The conservation laboratory started to receive requests for the technical analysis of finds that belonged to other foreign missions in Carthage or finds that had resulted from research projects of various excavators. In addition, it was noticed that local visitors, who usually strolled through the museum, were now spending time examining the conservation display. Finally,

this display brought the project to the attention of local newspapers, which became crucial to the further development of this component of the project.

Recognizing the importance that the Tunisian authorities have placed on education, it was decided, in consultation with the Canadian Embassy in Tunis, that Tunisian and Canadian government officials should be approached for support to develop a permanent, educational gallery at the museum that would centre on the conservation work of the project. This type of informal education request was very unusual for both governments as far as development efforts in Tunisia were concerned. It was necessary to introduce in the proposal the notion that museums are principally educational institutions, and to argue that today's museums are concerned with issues that are relevant to the present and not just to the past. With the support of the Director of the museum, Tunisian cultural authorities, and the local media, the project succeeded in convincing the Tunisian Ministry of Economic Development and the Canadian International Development Agency of the importance of the educational gallery as a development initiative. Funds were subsequently allocated for the design and realization of the exhibit and the reconstruction of a part of the museum that would serve as a gallery for the display.

Thus the project acquired an additional component, the development of a museological exhibit, in addition to the assessment and classification of the collection, salvage conservation, and conservation training. For the realization of this task, the project set up a new, bilingual team composed of two Canadian lead museologists, Peter Gale, from the Art Gallery of Ontario in Toronto, and Michel Barry from Parks Canada in Québec City, to work with three Canadian conservation trainers, Vassilike (Bessie) Argyropoulos, Marylene Barret, and Ieva Ozola; two Tunisian conservation trainees, Sihem Roudesli and Hedi Zouaoui; a local graphic design firm, Advertising and Communications S.A.; a local architectural team led by Ajmi Mimita; and a local construction team from the firm Bohrane Langher. This museological component of the project was supervised by the project's field director, Vanda Vitali, and by the Director of the Museum of Carthage, Abdelmajid Ennabli.

The Museological Approach

Just as the project developed a particular approach to the transfer of conservation technologies appropriate to local circumstances and needs, it was necessary to develop a gallery that would be accessible and appealing to a broad local audience. That would mean an exhibit that draws upon current museological practices such as: a clearly articulated story line that is apparent and comprehensible to all visitors through large introductory and sectional text panels; the presentation of a limited number of objects with short, legible texts that convey key points of the story line which might otherwise be unclear or obscured if a large number of items with small labels was on display; and a gallery design and layout that support the unfolding of the exhibit's key messages and the presentation of the individual objects.

The Story Line

Consultations with local media, local cultural centre leaders, and museum visitors suggested that most of the archaeological heritage was viewed by people in Tunisia and elsewhere as something that belonged to the past, with very little relevance to the present. Thus the aim of the gallery, besides demonstrating the work of the conservation laboratory and its achievements, is to underline the contribution of archaeological discoveries and their technical study to current concerns. The main title of the gallery was chosen to summarize, with four key words, the subject of the display: “Science and Archaeology: A Meeting in Carthage.”

The museological “scenario” developed for the gallery to communicate the relationship between science and archaeology has three principal objectives:

1. to demonstrate the kinds of work that the conservation laboratory is doing and its purpose and challenges—illustrating the cleaning, consolidation, and treatment of metal corrosion, for example;
2. to indicate the kind of questions that the technical study of artifacts can answer about the objects and the society that produced them—such as the dating of artifacts, the determination of the provenance of objects, and the study of the technologies of artifact production and their implications for an understanding of the structure of the society that produced the objects, their links to other cultures, the role of imports and exports, and the transfer of knowledge;
3. to give examples of the usefulness of the information obtained through the technical study of materials—such as information on the stability and durability of objects, or on their environmental sensitivity—that are important and relevant to today’s materials and current questions.

The Artifact Display

In keeping with evolving museological practice, the points above were to be illustrated with a minimum of objects and short text panels and labels that would convey key points and brief supporting information. The goal was to create a gallery that would “speak” by itself, directly and clearly, to a broad range of visitors and would lead to a fundamental understanding of the subject of the gallery without the need for a specialized guide. For instance, in the section that demonstrates the conservation work of the laboratory, the cleaning of artifacts was illustrated with only one object—one half of the object was cleaned, the other half left as found—accompanied by a brief, straightforward text pointing out the essential aspects of this conservation procedure. In the section on the technical study of artifacts, a single metal urn was selected, composed of parts that were cast as well as worked. The different metal working techniques were illustrated by microphotographs of the metal grain structure. The use of different technologies made visible in the microphotographs was reinforced by the explanatory text. This stated that the presence of more than one method of production for different parts of a single object suggests a complex production technology and thus, the social organization of workshops in antiquity. In the final

section of the exhibit, one display case featured a Punic object made of glass paste juxtaposed with a modern glass nuclear waste container. A brief text stressed the importance of researching long-lasting archaeological specimens for technical information that would assist with the development of new glasses, particularly those used for storage of hazardous materials that need to stand the test of time. Such focussed means of presentation convey essential aspects of the project to the general visitor and illustrate current museological methods as applied to the presentation of conservation treatments and technical studies.

The Design of the Exhibit

Layout and Components

The organization of the space of the gallery and the design of its two- and three-dimensional elements (glass cases, text panels, illustration aids such as instruments, etc.) were developed in keeping with the key messages that the gallery was to illustrate.

The gallery space was divided into four parts: a general introduction to the installation and its subject, and sections for each of the three principal sub-topics (the conservation of the collection; the technical study of artifacts; and the relevance of this work to contemporary concerns). The visitor path was suggested by placing partitions and text panels to direct the visitors through the gallery. The text panels were kept very brief and never exceeded 90 words. The textual information was structured on three levels (main panels devoted to the explanation of the three main topics, secondary panels dedicated to general information related to each of the display cases, and labels dedicated to specific information inside the glass cases). As the gallery was intended to be of interest and informative to the local public as well as to tourists, the text was presented in three languages (French, English, and Arabic) in three different colours, one for each language. The main title panel for the gallery, “Science and Archaeology, A Meeting in Carthage,” was placed at the entrance and again at the exit of the gallery to remind visitors of the essential theme of the display.

Objects other than archaeological artifacts were used, when necessary, to illustrate the subject matter. For instance, when discussing conservation, tools used in cleaning, consolidation or other treatment were displayed.

All of the display cases and the text panels were built of durable materials requiring low maintenance because of the cost that upkeep represents for the museum’s small budget. For instance, text panels were silk-screened with paint used for highway signage to allow for simple, wet-cloth cleaning.

The Architecture of the Gallery

The Director of the Museum of Carthage, Mr. Ennabli, allocated a space of some 160 square metres for the gallery on the ground floor of the monastery that today serves as the museum building. Although a prime space, it had been used as a storage area and needed considerable consolidation and reconstruction.



Figure 2. Construction of vaulted ceiling sections according to traditional Tunisian construction methods.

Ajmi Mimita, the project architect, who is known for his use of traditional Tunisian architectural features, created a space characterized by four ceiling vaults that correspond to the four sections of the narrative. Their design incorporates the traditional vaulted structures of Roman and Arab architecture to reflect the heritage of the country (**Figure 2**). The floor is covered with marble-like local stone, which is particularly suitable for the climate, and the choice of a beige colour helps to hide the sand dust that visitor traffic brings into the museum. **Figures 3 to 5** illustrate specific aspects of the gallery design and its displays.

The design and the progress of the building of the gallery and its display were followed closely by the local and international media, and the museological approach taken for the gallery was discussed in detail in the Museum of Carthage bulletin.⁴

The Collaborative Effort

The six month realization time for the gallery was extremely short, even for experienced exhibit developers. The gallery team, which comprised some thirty Tunisian colleagues, two Canadian



Figure 3. Entrance into the “Science and Archaeology: A Meeting in Carthage” gallery.



Figure 4. General view of the gallery showing the architecture and the organization of the space.

museologists, and three conservators worked tirelessly to finish the gallery on time. Input from all participants was sought and encouraged throughout the process. Only the energy that comes



Figure 5. Vanda Vitali, field director (left), and Ajmi Mimita, chief architect (right), in conversation with visitors at the opening of the gallery.

out of the spirit of close and inspired collaboration could have delivered this project within the constraints established by the project's timeline. All multicultural team efforts involve learning about each other's customs and ways in addition to addressing the task at hand. It is under these special circumstances that strong collegial bonds are built. There were many, now amusing, but then serious, events which the project team members still recount when they meet.

The Results

The gallery was inaugurated on Canada Day, July 1st, 1992. Its appeal to the press and the media was overwhelming, resulting in newspaper articles, interviews, and lectures at local cultural clubs.

The number of visitors to the museum more than quadrupled immediately after the opening of the gallery (a one-day attendance record of 1596 visitors was reached on July 25, 1992—previous record attendance was 383 visitors). Unfortunately, the team could not stay in Carthage to conduct continuing visitor studies.

Most importantly, a visit to the gallery is now included in the academic curriculum for all levels of science and history. Students throughout Tunisia come to visit the gallery and the museum. In combination with the video documentary⁵ on the project, described in the second article of this series,³ the gallery has greatly extended the outreach of the project and of the museum itself. Today, the documentary is still being shown on Tunisian television, preparing visitors for the didactic approach which characterizes the gallery.

Conclusion

The project proved successful in developing a museology suited to local needs and the development of a local public, especially students, as well as a diverse audience from outside Tunisia. Finding ways of communicating the contemporary relevance of heritage material continues to be a challenge of current museology.

Although the museum would require additional resources for research and training before mounting other similar exhibits, it is hoped that the gallery will help to encourage this type of presentation at the museum and elsewhere in Tunisia.

For those in conservation and science who were associated with the project, it was important to note the public's growing interest in knowing more about the process of caring for collections and the research that is associated with that work. It became clear that displaying objects, regardless of their specific importance or fascination, is not sufficient. Furthermore, the conservator's role should be viewed as including the possible development of exhibits based on museological concepts that communicate clearly and effectively to diverse audiences.

The results of the University of Toronto-Museum of Carthage Project clearly indicate that conservation laboratories and conservation science centres would benefit greatly from an ongoing dialogue with the public. This could be achieved either through the continuing presence of conservation and conservation science research as components in all museum exhibits, or through specialized exhibits developed at conservation centres which the public could come and visit. For travelling exhibits, a well-researched generic component on conservation science and its applications could be made that subsequently could be augmented by local institutions hosting this type of exhibit. Raising the public's awareness and knowledge of conservation and the technical study of artifacts is a crucial step in promoting the discipline and assuring its support.

Acknowledgements

The work reported here has been done as a collaborative effort among the University of Toronto, the Museum of Carthage, and the conservators, museologists, exhibit designers, and architects mentioned in the article. The project was partially funded by the Canadian International Development Agency and the Tunisian Ministry of Economic Development. Their support is gratefully acknowledged.

The additional team members of the University of Toronto-Museum of Carthage Project who conserved and studied the artifacts were Jim Allert, Caroline Jackson, and Alistair Pike.

References

1. Vitali, Vanda and Franklin, Ursula M., "Conservation of the Punic Collection at the Museum of Carthage. Part I – Mapping the Collection: Methodology, Classification, and Assessment," *Journal of the Canadian Association for Conservation*, vol. 24, 1999, pp. 29-41.
2. Ennabli, Abdelmajid, ed., *Pour sauver Carthage: Exploration et conservation de la cité punique, romaine et byzantine* (Paris: UNESCO et Tunis: Institut national d'archéologie et d'art, 1992).
3. Vitali, Vanda and Franklin, Ursula M., "Conservation of the Punic Collection at the Museum of Carthage. Part II – Transfer of Conservation Technology: Establishment of a Salvage Conservation Laboratory," *Journal of the Canadian Association for Conservation*, vol. 25, 2000, pp. 37-41.
4. Barry, Michel, Gale, Peter, and Vitali, Vanda, "Un modèle de muséologie didactique à Carthage," *Centre d'études et de documentation archéologique de la conservation de Carthage*, vol. 13, 1993, pp. 7-9.
5. Ben Ammar, Abdellatif, *Les témoins du passé*, documentary film (Tunis: Musée de Carthage, 1992).