PERMANENT EXHIBITION NEAR AND MIDDLE EAST, WINDOW YEMEN ETHNOGRAPHY

YEMENI HERITAGE WEEK:
MUSEUMS UNITED FOR YEMEN
April 24-30, 2016
The cultural heritage of Yemen carries the soul of the Yemeni people, reflecting a millennial history that it belongs to all humanity.

Yemen is home to unique heritage sites and monuments from both pre-Islamic and Islamic period – including four UNESCO World Heritage sites, three cultural (Old Walled City of Shibam, Old City of Sana’a, Historic Town of Zabid) and one natural (Socotra Archipelago), recognized for their outstanding universal value. I see all of these as an open book on humanity’s cultural diversity.

The conflict that erupted in Yemen in March 2015 has caused immense suffering and the tragic loss of human lives. It is also placing unique heritage at the risk of total destruction. The Old City of Sana’a has suffered severe damage as a consequence of shelling and explosions. Sana’a has been inhabited for more than 2,500 years and bears witness to the wealth and beauty of all Islamic civilization. I am convinced that this destruction exacerbates human suffering, undermining societies over the long term, weakening the ground for reconciliation and peace.

Whenever culture is attacked, we must stand together and respond with even more culture and knowledge, to foster mutual understanding and safeguard the heritage shared by all humanity. This is the purpose of UNESCO’s global campaign #Unite4Heritage. As part of this campaign, together with 10 leading museums around the world, UNESCO has launched the Yemeni Heritage Week – Museums United for Yemen, to raise awareness about the wealth of Yemen’s culture and history. Partner museums will highlight their collections of Yemeni artefacts and introduce us to their unique beauty, knowledge and wisdom.

I thank you all for sharing and appreciating the outstanding universal power of Yemeni culture – and I call on you all to stand with us to defend the power of heritage for peace. Protecting culture is not about caring for stones – it is about saving and defending the meaning people ascribe to their lives.

Irina Bokova
Ethnographic artifacts from Yemen occupy a special place among the ethnographic collections of the MAE [Bulanova 1970: 262-281; Kisliakov V. and others 2006: 37-50]. The first collection (1976, # 6767, 40 items) was acquired by a Russian diplomat O. G. Peresypkin in the south of the country (Aden, Bayhan) and in the north (Sana’a, Ta’iz). Carefully selected series of artifacts give an impression of the Yemeni traditional clothes, decorations, utensils and occupations. The collector managed to organize transportation of bulky items from Aden to St.-Petersburg, such as a dugout boat, an anchor, a plough, a yoke, a flail, etc. In 1979–1982 the Museum received several artifacts from Yemen and the Socotra Island from Arabists M. B. Piotrovsky (an ammunition belt and a belt used to balance while squatting), M. A. Rodionov (a traditional children’s dress) and V. V. Naumkin (a Socotra’s device for crafting fire and an incense burner). Since 1983 all of them participated in the Russian-Yemeni expedition (until 1991 called the Soviet-Yemeni complex expedition of the Academy of Sciences of the USSR).

Although originally acquisition of ethnographic collections for the MAE was not among the expedition’s goals, the Museum received them regularly due to the enthusiasm of the expedition participants and their cooperation with the Yemenis. Among such artifacts are women’s dresses, shawls, face covers, and decorations from the south-west Hadramawt valley that allow tracing the evolution of the traditional dress and distinguish local features and patterns.

The Museum also possesses folk medical instruments (used for cauterization, extracting teeth, copper cups, etc.), children’s toys that once used to serve as votive figurines for the pre-Islamic prophet Hud (clay figures of a she-camel and horse), musical instruments, and utensils made of clay, wood, tin, leather, palm fibers or leaves (see [Rodionov 1994: 121-136, fig. 9, 16, 24-27, 45-55, 85-93; Rodionov 2007: 126-140, Fig. 21-26, 39-55, 61-76, 85-93; The Land of Incense 2007: 33-35]).

In 2015 the MAE hold 17 collections from Yemen:
1976, # 6767 (40 artifacts) collected by O. G. Peresypkin;
1978, # 6803 (6 artifacts) collected by M. B. Piotrovsky;
1979, # 6804 (1 artifact) collected by M. A. Rodionov;
1979, # 6853 (3 artifacts) collected by V. V. Naumkin;
1982, # 6854 (6 artifacts) collected by V. V. Naumkin;
1983, # 6878 (44 artifacts) collected by M. A. Rodionov;
1984, # 6901 (31 artifacts) collected by P. I. Pogorels’ky;
1985, # 6920 (56 artifacts) collected by M. A. Rodionov;
1986, # 6927 (45 artifacts) collected by M. A. Rodionov;
1992, # 7009 (15 artifacts) collected by M. A. Rodionov;
1995, # 7074 (20 artifacts) collected by M. A. Rodionov;
1999, # 7172 (15 artifacts) collected by M. A. Rodionov;
2003, # 7240 (7 artifacts) collected by M. A. Rodionov;
2005, # 7277 (5 artifacts) collected by M. A. Rodionov;
2006, # 7316 (14 artifacts) collected by M. A. Rodionov;
2012, # 7527 (24 artifacts) collected by M. A. Rodionov;

These collections contain 388 exhibits, 332 of which (in 12 collections) were acquired by the Soviet-Yemeni complex expedition of the Soviet Academy of Sciences, and the Russian-Yemeni Expedition of the Russian Academy of Sciences that succeeded it, as well as Yemeni expeditions organized by the MAE after 1999. Participants of these expeditions also collected rich illustrative materials.

At present, the Hadramawt Valley is perhaps the most well-explored ethnographically South Arabian area, while once it used to be known outside the Arab World only because it was mentioned in the Old Testament [Genesis 10: 25-28]. This is to a large extent due to the Russian-Yemeni complex expedition, and, in particular, its linguistic-ethnographical division among whose participants were researchers from the Peter the Great Museum of Anthropology and Ethnography (Kunstkamera) M. A. Rodionov and P. I. Pogorels’ky, a researcher from the Institute of Oriental Studies of the Russian Academy of Sciences S. N. Serebrov, and a linguist from the St.-Petersburg State University O. I. Red’kin. This team also cooperated with Yu. E. Kožgin, an architect from the Institute of Fine Arts, Sculpture and Architecture named after Repin, and V. S. Terbenin, a photographer working in the State Hermitage.

Most artifacts in the Yemeni collections were received as gifts. Their value cannot be measured in money terms, as traditional household utensils from a peasant’s home or a Bedouin tent are sometimes of more interest and importance than luxurious objects from a palace. The local people shared with us their memories of their ancestry, hoping that our Museum will preserve them in a worthy manner. We are thankful to a woman from the Sayyid clan of Bin Sheikh Abu Bakr (from the al-Quza village, Hadramawt) who donated to us her mother’s wedding dress; to Atif Ba Rushaidi (from the town of Sif, Hadramawt) who gave to us his grandfather’s arms – a powder-flask and a sword (collection # 6927-16, 17); and to Mansur Ahmad Ba Tays who donated to us an antique spear (collection # 6986-20). The abovementioned artifacts from the clans
of Ba Rushayd and Ba Tays can be seen on the permanent exhibition of the MAE called “The Culture of the Near and Middle East”, and, along with other exhibits, such as the ammunition belt, the bullet mould and the wick musket (collection # 69-20-12, 20, 21) represent a warrior’s gear that has preserved almost intact until the beginning of the Second World War.

The international community of museum workers of the whole world appeals to everyone to help protect the cultural heritage of Yemen, that today is in unprecedented jeopardy.

Bibliography


Rodionov M. A. Cultural Memory and Rhythmical Speech of the South Arabia: Hadramaut. SPb, MAE RAS, 2014. 154 P. (Kunstkamera Petropolitana) — In Russian.


Powder-horn container – mazhara.
Hadramawt Governorate.
The first half of the 20th century.
Metal.
MAE # 7440–3

Pot – burma.
Hadramawt Governorate.
The first half of the 20th century.
Stone.
MAE # 6986–6
Horse figurine.
Hadramawt Governorate.
The second half of the 20th century.
Clay.
MAE # 6927–4

Mortar for coffee – minhaz.
Hadramawt Governorate.
The first half of the 20th century.
Wood, metal.
MAE # 6901–28
Oil lamp – shama’a.
Hadramawt Governorate.
The beginning of the 20th century.
Metal.
MAE # 6986–19

Women’s hat – mizalla.
Hadramawt Governorate.
The second half of the 20th century.
Palm fiber.
MAE # 6878–6
Participating Museums

1. Freer/Sackler, Smithsonian - USA
2. The Walters Art Museum - USA
3. The Metropolitan Museum of Art - USA
4. The Ashmolean Museum - UK
5. The British Museum - UK
6. Musée du Louvre - France
7. Polo Museale del Lazio, Museo Nazionale d'Arte Orientale 'Giuseppe Tucci' - Italy
8. Peter the Great Museum of Anthropology and Ethnography (Kunstkamera) - Russia
9. The State Hermitage Museum - Russia
10. The State Museum of Oriental Art - Russia
Peter the Great Museum of Anthropology and Ethnography (Kunstkamera) 
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