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Response to Disaster: USAID and ARCE Assist in the Recovery of Institut d’Egypte Library

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By the early afternoon on the 17th of December word was getting out that the *Institut d’Egypte* was on fire. Located on the intersection of Qasr el-Aynie and Sheikh Rehan Streets, on the southern edge of Tahrir Square, the *Institut d’Egypte* was founded by Napoleon Bonaparte over two hundred years ago as a result of his scientific campaign that culminated in the publication of the famous *Description de l’Égypte* (1809 to 1829). This book is known as “Wasf Masr” in Egypt and no matter the social background, all Egyptian school children learn about this work and its value to Egyptian sciences. Beyond its link to this work, the *Institut d’Egypte* was the home to a collection of over 200,000 books, folios and periodicals and is recognized as the oldest functioning academy of sciences and arts outside of Europe.



Irfana Hashmi, an ARCE Fellow, helping with the stabilization of material from the *Institut d’Egypte* in the garden of Dar el- Kutob. December 2011. Photo courtesy of Irfana Hashmi

That evening horrific images were being aired on State Television of the clashes that led to the deliberate torching of the building earlier in the day and of the desperate effort many Egyptians were making into the night to salvage what they could from the still burning library. Social media was in full action as photos emerged of books that had been pulled from the building.

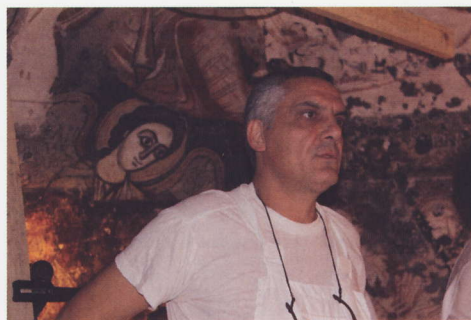
By 8pm that evening a group of tech-savvy Egyptians were hard at work coordinating collection of these books through social media. They had already made contact with the Egyptian Ministry of Culture and the Supreme Council of Armed Forces (SCAF), and had managed to establish a secure drop-off point for salvaged books at two locations: Ewart Hall at the American University in Cairo (across from the *Institut d’Egypte*) and Qasr al-Doubara Church on Sheikh Rehan Street just opposite the ARCE Cairo office. From this point on

and for the next couple of days many brave Egyptian men, women and children worked almost around the clock and under great personal danger to retrieve what they could from *Institut d’Egypte*.

It was agreed that the salvaged books should to be taken directly to the Egyptian National Library & Archives (Dar el-Kutob), situated to the north of Tahrir Square, on the Corniche. The Director of Dar el-Kutob, Dr. Zain Abdel-Hady, estimated that only 15-20% of the collection was salvaged; however, this meant that his staff were faced with the difficult and overwhelming task of trying to stabilize up to 40,000 volumes, as quickly as possible. Of that number it is expected that only 10,000 are in good condition, with the remainder requiring conservation work or otherwise have been

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Luigi de Cesaris working in east semi-dome of Red Monastery in 2010. Photo by Elizabeth Bolman



Luigi De Cesaris

30 November 1961—19 December 2011

Michael Jones

Luigi De Cesaris, the leader of the Italian conservation team that has been working with ARCE since 1996, died suddenly at the Red Monastery near Sohag two days before the end of the Fall 2011 season. His funeral was held in the church of San Luigi dei Francesi on 22 December attended by a large congregation of his family, friends and numerous professional colleagues, including several from Egypt: Fr. Maximous el-Antony, Elizabeth Bolman, Ray Johnson, James Heidel, and Michael and Angela Jones.

Luigi contributed a significant part of his professional life to ARCE's USAID-funded wall painting conservation projects and with his death Egypt, the Coptic Church and ARCE have lost a highly skilled and dedicated conservator, a respected colleague and much-valued friend.

Luigi was born in Rome and studied at the Università degli Studi 'La Sapienza' and Istituto Italiano d'Arte Artigianato e Restauro, graduating in Conservation in 1985 with the highest score. After several years developing different conservation skills in Italy, Luigi's opportunity to work in Egypt came in 1990, when Paolo and Laura Mora were directing the work of the Getty Conservation Institute at the tomb of Nefertari. For Luigi this was the

beginning of a long and valuable commitment to the conservation of Egypt's cultural heritage. While the work at Nefertari was still in progress, the Moras were approached by Fr. Maximous el-Antony about a potential wall painting project at the old church of St. Antony in the Monastery of St. Antony at the Red Sea. They sent Luigi with his colleague Adriano Luzi. Their tests revealed extraordinarily well-preserved paintings hidden beneath the blackened surfaces. Three years later, USAID and ARCE included the historic church of St. Antony as part of ARCE's Antiquities Development Project. Work started in June 1996 under the direction of Luigi and Adriano, thus beginning ARCE's fifteen-year partnership with Luigi and the Italian conservation team. Luigi had spent the first half of the 1990s teaching at the prestigious Istituto Centrale del Restauro in Rome. His talent as an inspirational teacher would become a vital aspect of the ensuing projects in Egypt.

The results at St. Antony's surpassed all expectations and opened up a new chapter in the study and appreciation of Coptic art. A complete program of wall paintings, dated by inscriptions to AD 1232–1233 and attributable to one group of painters working under a named master could be seen for the first time in many centuries.



Luigi was acutely aware of his own responsibility for how conservation treatment affects the physical appearance of the paintings and also influences the future perception of them. The Italians' approach to the conservation of churches acknowledges that they are important examples of historic religious cultural heritage and simultaneously places of worship; in order to valorize the sacred purpose of the wall paintings and enhance their function as icons, damaged areas are harmonized and integrated with subtle and reversible techniques such as *tratteggio* and 'dirty water'. These are carried out following thorough photographic and graphical documentation of the conditions before treatment, the conservation interventions carried out and the condition after treatment. *Tratteggio* is a method of chromatic reintegration that restores details (where missing parts can be confidently reconstructed) using modern watercolors. Reconstructed areas are marked with fine vertical lines that are only visible close up to distinguish new work from the original. The result unifies otherwise

disturbingly disfigured images and preserves aesthetic integrity. Damaged areas where serious losses have occurred to paint and plaster layers are treated with 'dirty water', not dirty at all, but subtle tones of watercolors harmonizing with the surrounding preserved paint layers, thus reducing the visual impact of damage and connecting intact images. Luigi developed an understanding of Coptic church painting that enabled him to optimize fully the potential of both these techniques of retouching and image reintegration.

The conserved church at St. Antony's was re-consecrated in 2000 and its impact for art historians and the Coptic Church was such that negotiations started with the nearby Monastery of St. Paul for a similar project in the ancient Cave Church of St. Paul. This ran from 2001 until 2005. Adriano Luzi died in 2004 and Luigi took on the role of head of the conservation team with Alberto Sucato and Emiliano Ricchi his leading partners.



Luigi working at St. Paul's Monastery on the Red Sea in 2002. Photo by Patrick Godeau

Luigi working on Coptic Museum niches. Photo by Kathleen Scott

Meanwhile, in December 2002, Luigi and Adriano had made cleaning tests at the Red Monastery church near Sohag. Work started there the following year and has continued every year since, with teams of up to fourteen conservators, a reflection of the immense scale of this project; the church has over one thousand square meters of painted architectural surfaces in four tiers, with four distinct Late Antique

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The conservation team at the Red Monastery. Photo by Michael Jones

Luigi cleaning a section of painted walls at the Red Monastery. Photo by Elizabeth Bolman

painting layers dating mostly from the sixth to ninth centuries. Again, what has been recovered has added new dimensions to the perception of Coptic art, as this is a unique survival of a functioning painted church from this period. As well as rising to the technical challenges, Luigi was brilliant at organizing his large team in a very trying environment, insisting on high professional standards of discipline and dedication. All the conservators worked on their own individual sections, but, like an orchestra, everyone worked together, as Luigi put it, “with one hand”. Luigi was the conductor, asking for discussions and opinions, making sure that everyone understood what was happening and how the technical issues were solved, always generous with teaching and with sharing credit with his team. The atmosphere was always lively and the team members were great fun to be with. Luigi’s empathy with each member allowed him to match consistently high standards in the work with the easy and comfortable environment that everyone who visited commented on.

The group’s reputation was now established. They completed other, smaller projects, including two in Old Cairo; one at the Coptic Museum to prepare painted niches from Bawit and Saqqara for display in the refurbished galleries, and another on a thirteenth century apse painting discovered in the Church of Abu Serga during

renovations. From 2005 to 2008, Luigi, with Alberto and their colleague Cristina Tomasetti, and in collaboration with Chicago House, directed work on the Roman Tetrarchic frescos in Luxor Temple. Finally, in 2010, Luigi, Alberto and Emiliano carried out an investigative short season in the painted church of St. Matthew the Potter at Dayr al-Fakhuri near Esna.



At the same time as work in Egypt occupied a major part of Luigi’s life, he maintained important projects in Rome. These included a long association with the French properties including the Villa Medici which has housed the French Academy in Rome since 1803, the church of Trinità dei Monti where he worked on the famous ‘Descent from the Cross’ by Daniele da Volterra, and the chapel of San Luigi in San Luigi dei Francesi. Another important conservation work, with Adriano Luzi, was the ‘Ecstasy of St. Theresa’ by Bernini in the Church of Santa Maria della Vittoria. Among other notable projects are the sixteenth century ciborium in the Church of St. Mamas at Morphou, Cyprus and two that he had only just started, at Qusayr Amra in Jordan (in collaboration with the Istituto Centrale del Restauro) and at Fontainebleau Palace in France.

Luigi will be remembered for his skill as a conservator, as a man of enormous energy and



generosity, and for his idiosyncratic and very expressive use of English. Visitors arriving on site were greeted by Luigi ready to lead a tour. He would apologize for his English, ask Alberto to translate from Italian, and then launch into an animated and eloquent explanation in both languages that took his audience to the heart of the conservation practice. His hospitality towards visitors to Rome was equally expansive as he organized visits to his own projects, to other important and often little known or unexpected sites and devised ways in which his visitors could experience his own city. Luigi was not outwardly religious but he was endowed with a deep personal faith that connected him to the Church and its artistic heritage on a profound level. It was also the source of his intense and natural sincerity.



My last memories of Luigi were sitting with him and other colleagues on the scaffolding high up in the Red Monastery church discussing the next steps leading to the completion of the project. A major concern is how to devise a

method to present the much-damaged paintings in the eastern apse in a way acceptable for both the believers and the scholars for whom these unique paintings are hugely significant in very different ways. The challenge is to make them 'readable' without obscuring detail and information. The conversations on the scaffolding, in the presence of these unique Late Antique paintings, were typical of Luigi; animated, vibrant and energetic, eager to reconcile differing opinions, drawing on the expertise of his colleagues and insisting on the highest standards of conservation.



Luigi showing visitors conservation projects in Rome. Photo by Kathleen Scott

A typical animated discussion with Michael Jones at the Red Monastery in December 2011. Photo by Elizabeth Bolman

ARCE's USAID-funded conservation projects in which Luigi played a key role are:

- St. Antony's Church, St. Antony's Monastery: 1996-1999.
- The Cave Church of St. Paul, St. Paul's Monastery: 2001-2005.
- Paintings from the Monasteries of Apa Jeremias at Saqqara and Apa Apollo at Bawit now in the Coptic Museum, Cairo: 2004-2006.
- Roman wall paintings in Luxor Temple: 2005-2008.
- Church of Abu Serga at Old Cairo: 2005.
- Wall paintings from the temple of Amunhotep III at Wadi al-Sabua now in the Egyptian Museum, Cairo: 2008-2009.
- Monastery of St. Matthew the Potter near Esna: 2010.
- White Monastery, Sohag: started in 2006 and ongoing and Red Monastery near Sohag: started in 2002 and ongoing.

Luigi discussing conservation work with Michael Jones and Alberto Sucato in 2011. Photo by Elizabeth Bolman