

Lebanon's oldest heritage on display

Museum objective is to make artifacts accessible to adults, and learning more fun for children

By **Chirine Lahoud**
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BEIRUT: Tucked between Monnot Theater and St. Joseph Church is a treasure trove. The Museum of Lebanese Prehistory, the trove's more mundane name, gathers a wide assortment of artifacts, ranging from the Paleolithic era to the Chalcolithic.

Founded 13 years ago, this museum was born from the research of the Jesuit priests, as well as that of such foreign archaeologists as Frenchman Francis Hours. The MLP's main objective is to make these eras more understandable and accessible to adults, and learning about them more fun for children.

Periodically, school kids from around the country receive informative museum tours with an eye to providing better knowledge of archaeology – which is part of their studies.

Scientific director Maya Boustani explained the importance of keeping such science alive, since, as she put it, it is "the oldest heritage of our country."

About 99 percent of the time, she said, the items on show at the museum are not mock-ups but original pieces. They have been unearthed from the more than 400 prehistoric sites around Lebanon, including Ras Beirut, Antelias and Jeita.

The museum's first floor is devoted mainly to prehistoric tools, along with the environmental changes that affected them. "The objective of prehistory is not only to study mankind" alone, Boustani said, "but the environment as well."

From simple stone tools to two-faced ones, people will see how evolved early humans were – hostile situations notwithstanding – and how they use nature's riches to improve their way of life. One exhibit has these tools arrayed beneath their contemporary counterparts, demonstrating how prehistoric knives, say, can cut as well as the ones we use today.

Since sometimes there is no information on an artifact, Boustani explained, the museum occasionally uses experimental means to explain certain phenomena. Each section of the space is accompanied by French and Arabic texts in order to ease the



Contemporary tools are shown with their prehistoric equivalents.

understanding of such processes.

Although a small museum, the MLP is replete with the most up-to-

date data on the objects on display.

The underground space is devoted to habitat, agriculture, the importance



This Homo habilis skull is estimated to be 1.5 to 2.5 million years old.

of fire, death rituals and sustenance. Visitors will see schematics explaining how each part of an animal is used for something in particular. Horns were used to build tools, for instance, while skins were employed for clothing.

A model of the habitat explains clearly how folks lived in prehistoric "Lebanon." There was the cave, a tent (probably animal skin) outside and a shelter under some rocks.

The museum team enriches its permanent exhibition with seminars, conferences and periodic shows.

These are keyed to research projects near the Bekaa Valley community of Labweh. Apparently Lebanon's oldest settlement, it is festooned with prehistoric artifacts.

The MLP also welcomes archeologists interested in research. Artifacts considered too fragile to exhibit (but which attest to the diversity of this region's prehistoric heritage) are stored in a back room. Everything is organized, from maps locating the different sites, explicative texts, tours to outdoor projects.

The museum is a wondrous cave of information about the prehistory of a region whose history is often a trifle tiresome. Even cynical journalists can be amazed by the variety of artifacts this land has thrown up.

For more information on the **Museum of Lebanese Prehistory**, please call 01-421-860.