



A TALE OF THE PALESTINE ARCHAEOLOGICAL MUSEUM

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Abdullah Jaddallah was a native of Jerusalem. He was a devoted husband and father to seven children. Highly favored for his education, Jaddallah was employed by the British army during the years of British Mandate rule in Palestine. Following a successful career with the British military, in which he traveled across the Middle East on various assignments, Jaddallah permanently settled in Jordan. Jaddallah enjoyed drinking his black tea with milk, a ritual adopted during his tenure in the military; tea with milk would become a fond family tradition upheld by successive generations. Two generations later, and from a much farther distance, I was transfixed by the story of my grandfather, a man that I barely knew. Immersed in his memory, my practice as an artist evolved into one that traced lineage, familial histories, and, subsequently, the geopolitical forces which catalyzed our migration. I was left to wonder: What historical circumstances created these conditions? What constraints did he endure, and how did it impact his movement? How am I implicated within this meshwork of history, chance, and fate? Meditating on his story and the complexities of these intersections, a larger research project unfolded; while its major thrusts are historical, it still resides between the poles of fact and fiction.

In 2014, I stumbled upon the story of the Palestine Archaeological Museum; however, the brief history that I encountered felt wholly insufficient. While the Israel Antiquities Authority foregrounds central figures who oversaw the erection of the museum (like John D. Rockefeller and Henry Breasted, whom I introduce later in this essay), these historical accounts neglect to acknowledge the violent seizure of land that altered the fate of [this institution](#). It is through colonial theft that a more complex picture emerges of the Palestine Archaeological Museum; however, extant histories proffer a depoliticized image of the museum impacted by the occupation of Palestinian land. Meditating on the erasures in the museum's history, I could not help but feel that this story was an allegory for larger, more persistent efforts to suppress Palestinian history.

This spurred the creation of A Partial Restoration of the Palestine Archaeological Museum (2014–19), a multimedia project that restores the memory of the former Palestine Archaeological Museum in Jerusalem, an institution entrenched in geopolitical turmoil and precarity. A Partial Restoration of the Palestine Archaeological Museum is presented as a museological installation, with an exhibition space formerly held online. Before embarking on this project, I had never been to Palestine, nor to the museum, and so my research and art making was carried out at a distance. Due to these constraints, imagination served as a vehicle that stitched together an otherwise fragmented history. Suddenly I stepped into the role of a collector, driven by an impulse to salvage any valuable material I could find. This collection became a bridge to a site that I could not physically access.

A Partial Restoration of the Palestine Archaeological Museum is composed of this makeshift archive; the collection also contains personal, familial heirlooms. By juxtaposing these intimate mementos with historical ephemera, I reclaim authority over personal experience, validating its role in the production of knowledge. Furthermore, it is through these personal histories and experiences that cultural memory is shaped and transmitted. Hours were spent mining and excavating hidden corners of internet marketplaces. I purchased photographs, stamps, and pamphlets from independent eBay and Etsy merchants. Some merchants sold aged books and press clippings as their official business line. Others sold more sporadically, auctioning off junk culled from drawers and cabinets. This collection does not, in fact, belong to the Palestine Archaeological Museum proper; however, it became a speculative archive for the "restored" iteration of the museum that I introduced to the public. Digitized portions of this collection were shared on an exhibition webpage [no longer online]. This website played an integral role in the afterlife of the installation, connecting me to other Palestinian artists, researchers, and writers, all producing their own unique historical and archive-based research projects.

(In 2019, I received a note from Yazan Kopty, a writer, oral historian, and National Geographic Explorer. Kopty is currently the lead investigator on an archive-based research project titled *Imagining the Holy*, which examines images of historic Palestine from the National Geographic Society archive. Kopty makes space for the Palestinian community, providing opportunities to collaborate and restore Indigenous knowledge and narratives to the images in the archive. The photographic archive can be accessed on Instagram via @imaginingtheholly.)

The story of the Palestine Archaeological Museum begins with its founding mission: preserving and recording the diverse cultures of the region. However, this vision was stymied in its infancy. By engaging the fraught trajectory of the museum, my project questions the ways that didactic institutions are implicated in the erasure of subjugated peoples and histories. Furthermore, the project confronts the colonial legacies of the institution as we know it. A Partial Restoration of the Palestine Archaeological Museum considers the rich possibilities in creating our own imaginative histories, institutions, and archives to bridge gaps in history and distance.

Ruminating on my grandfather's story and the course of his career, it became more pressing to consider how colonial entanglements played out across personal, political, and cultural registers. This led me to broader questions about archaeological practice, soft power, and Western cultural hegemony, and how this impacted Palestine in particular. These forces undoubtedly led to the erection of the Palestine Archaeological Museum. This museum was only one chapter within a larger history of

extractive archaeological projects taking place in the Middle East at this time, initiated under the jurisdiction of colonial governments. James Henry Breasted, America's first formally trained Egyptologist and a professor at the University of Chicago, spearheaded the [birth of the museum](#). Breasted also founded the Oriental Institute at the University of Chicago, with generous philanthropic support from John D. Rockefeller. Breasted and Rockefeller formed a mutually beneficial relationship; between 1924 and 1927, Rockefeller supported Breasted's archaeological projects in the Middle East. Breasted insisted that archaeological artifacts had a home in the heart of Jerusalem. Following an unsuccessful attempt to open an Egyptian antiquities museum and research center in Cairo, Breasted [proposed opening](#) the Palestine Archaeological Museum in Jerusalem. In January 1927, Rockefeller approved the museum's initial development plans, allotting two million dollars to subsidize construction costs and operating expenses. The British government provided necessary approvals for Breasted and fellow organizers to erect the museum. Austen St. Barbe Harrison, the architect at the helm of the project, combined contemporary European design with local architectural traditions, a style later defined as Mediterranean Modern-ism. The fusion of these aesthetics asserted British cultural prestige and further expressed its paternalistic role as a [colonial occupier](#). The Palestine Archaeological Museum was built on a hill overlooking the northeast corner of the Old City, officially opening to the public on January 13, 1938.

The museum endeavored to catalog and preserve the rich diversity within the region. But as political tensions heightened, the museum's mission was further out of reach. On April 1, 1948, the British government closed the museum to the public. The high commissioner assembled an international board of trustees to preside over the institution. The makeup of the board traced back to Britain and France, with members also recruited from various antiquities departments across Syria, Egypt, Jordan, and Lebanon, among others. The international board remained effective until November 1966, when King Hussein of Jordan nationalized the museum. During the Six-Day War of 1967, Israeli military forces seized control over the Old City of Jerusalem, and, as a result, the Palestine Archaeological Museum was captured and relinquished to the Israel Antiquities Authority. Bullet holes still line the library walls, serving [as a memento](#) from the battle. Following the end of the war, the institution was officially renamed the Rockefeller Museum. It remains unclear who authorized changing the identity of the museum. However, the decision to rename the museum has remained a point of contention. The Rockefeller Museum continues to operate today, instilling a new collective memory throughout the region, one that undermines histories of Palestinian indigeneity.

In 2017, I left Ohio and journeyed to the Rockefeller Museum, which still stands on that hill overlooking the Old City. The edifice is officially deemed a historical landmark; old etchings, markings, and carvings

on the muse-um's facade reveal its conflicted past. Exterior entrance halls direct visitors to the Government of Palestine Department of Antiquities offices. Upon entering through the front doors, patrons encounter the building's floor plan, guiding them to the exhibition halls. Above the map reads "Palestine Archaeological Museum," its maiden name hand-carved into the limestone wall. Wandering through these hallways, the museum felt virtually untouched—its interior halls unfixed and unchanged from the photographs I examined in the archives. While these appearances remained frozen on the surface, the wall text was quietly confrontational, promoting a narrative positioning Palestinians as "visitors" of their native land. The story of the Palestine Archaeological Museum is a painfully layered one, replete with the haunt-ings of colonial power and historical erasure. In many ways, its story is only a modicum of the more pervasive effacement of Palestinian historical and cultural memory that occurs ad infinitum. This institution was born out of a deep entanglement with colonialism and Western expansion, only to become the spoils of its new colonial occupier. Palestine was forcefully re-moved from its name, much like our names on villages, streets, and maps effectively erased by the violent workings of a settler-colonial regime. Re-claiming this institution's fraught history opened a pathway to creating A Partial Restoration of the Palestine Archaeological Museum, an imaginative space that reclaims and resuscitates the elisions of history.

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