

43 BC

Marcus Tullius Cicero, Roman orator and politician is assassinated in Formiae

1909

Inventor Leo Baekeland patents the first thermo-setting plastic, Bakelite, sparking the birth of the plastics industry

1941

Imperial Japanese Navy with 353 planes attack US fleet at Pearl Harbour Naval Base, Hawaii, killing 2,403 people



1988

PLO delegation lead by Yasser Arafat proclaims the State of Palestine

Reuters | Sawfar, Lebanon

Dotted with bullet holes and scarred by war, a once iconic hotel in Lebanon abandoned for more than 40 years is coming back to life through the paintings of an artist on a mission to revive the memories of its glorious past.

British artist Tom Young studies the history of abandoned buildings in Lebanon, many of them a reminder of the country's civil war, and creates paintings based on old photographs, stories, architecture and their surrounding environment.

His exhibitions, held in the abandoned buildings, are free of charge and include community events to help stir public interest in their history.

"These great places ... are just sleeping and in many ways with my art I am hoping to perhaps wake them up and make them relevant for the present day and the future," said Young, who has been living in Lebanon for the past nine years.

Lebanon has no law to protect historic buildings and many have been demolished to make way for modern apartment buildings and offices.

In the capital Beirut the number of historic buildings has dropped to about 250, down from 4,200 in the 1990s, according to campaign group Save Beirut Heritage.



Visitors look at Tom Young's painting inside the Grand Sofar Hotel, Sawfar, Lebanon

Young's latest project is the Grand Sofar, a 75-room hotel built in 1892 under Ottoman rule that was bustling with famous people from Egyptian actor Omar Sharif to diplomats and generals who shaped the history of the country and region.

The hotel, about 30 km away from Beirut, became a casualty of the country's 15-year-long civil war, which began in 1975, the year the hotel closed its doors.

One of the owners, Roderick Sursock Cochrane, whose family built the hotel, wanted to bring its history back to life through Young's "out of the ordinary"

exhibition.

"Every painting which you see here depicts an event which happened in the hotel. And that is very, very important I find, because people just don't come and see regular paintings but they also come and learn what has happened in this place," he said.

One of Young's paintings is based on a photo he found of 80-year-old Samira Sayegh on her wedding day standing with her husband on one of two grand staircases at the entrance of the hotel.

"It was so emotional because I went 52 years back (to) the day of my wedding," Sayegh said with a smile, remembering when she first saw Young's painting.

"The young generation, they don't know what is the Grand hotel. Since 1975 it (has been) hidden — now it's coming back."

Cochrane plans to use the old hotel as a wedding venue and cultural center for local artists, and he hopes to encourage young people to appreciate historic buildings.

"Old does not mean necessarily that it has to be destroyed for something new to come instead of it," said Cochrane, sitting outside the hotel.

Naji Raji, founder of Save Beirut Heritage, a local organization fighting to save architectural heritage in the capital, said buildings like the Grand Sofar are under threat.

"There is no law protecting heritage buildings in Lebanon. The dangers of removing these historic buildings

Inside the abandoned century-old hotel, paintings of the Arab world's once powerful and famous hang around a worn poker table, testimony to its glamorous past before the civil war. Built in 1892 under Ottoman rule by Lebanon's wealthy Sursock family, the forgotten hotel was hub to which Arab diplomats, French and British officers, but also Egyptian film stars all flocked before the 1975-1990 conflict forced it to close down

to the building to be used as a public cultural center for three years before becoming the residence of the head of the European Union delegation to Lebanon.

"Really our memories, our history is what gives us our identity, and in Lebanon that identity is under threat because of this destruction of both architecture and human memory," he told the Thomson Reuters Foundation in the Grand Sofar hotel.

In several of his exhibitions, including in the Grand Sofar, he teaches art classes to refugee children and orphans to show how art can be used to revive memories and history in derelict buildings.

Learning about history through art helps young people to connect to their identity, a different experience than through history books, said Young.

He hopes his next exhibition will be in Beirut's Holiday Inn, a hotel that once exemplified the city's glamour and became an icon of the civil war only a few weeks after it opened.

It was the military headquarters of whichever militant faction was winning the war over the next 15 years, and it is still not open to the public.

"I hope that a transcendent public art event can help all those involved and transform a place of unresolved trauma into a site of culture and creativity," said Young.

means losing identity and common memory," said Raji.

In 2013, Young found an abandoned 19th century mansion in central Beirut that was left in ruins. He brought it back to life with his paintings and through partial renovation.

But what mattered most to the 45-year-old is that his exhibition led



Visitors explore the artworks during an exhibition as part of Beirut International Art Show 2015 organized by the United Nations Information Centre (UNIC) Beirut and Beirut Art World NGP, in Beirut



Visitors walking through a hallway at the Grand Sofar Hotel, the venue of an art exhibition that tells the story of the building

TE STORY

Puppeteer hopes to save his art

Shadow theatre has secured a coveted place on the UN's list of world treasures



Shadi al-Hallaq is seen next to a disabled child during a performance

father, a famed storyteller who performed in one of the capital's oldest coffee shops.

"There are no regular shows anymore, though I have given performances in a few places over the past years," said the puppeteer, who previously worked as a taxi driver.

The advent of digital entertainment as well as mass displacement due to conflict have contributed to the gradual decline of the art in Syria, the United Nations says.

Only a few such performers existed in the country before the war broke out in 2011, and a leading shadow puppeteer has since gone missing.

Traditionally, shadow plays were held in coffee shops.

A bright light would project the silhouettes of the puppets onto a silk screen, usually accompanied by dialogue and music.

Often including humorous social commentary, they would star Karakoz and Eiwaz, as well as female characters and talking animals.

Hallaq's characters are crafted from cow leather,

their clothes cut out with decorative patterns and painted with watercolours "so the light can shine through".

Karakoz is short and dons a large red hat, while Eiwaz sports an elegant moustache.

As they move around before an arched alleyway, their witty banter entertains all generations.

"My audience are old and young -- from three years old to old men in coffee shops," Hallaqa said.

The art form is said to be centuries old, long before the war that has killed 360,000 people and displaced millions from their homes.

Some say Karakoz and Eiwaz are typical Syrians from Damascus, while others say they are in fact originally Turkish.

Since the United Nations cultural agency UNESCO classified his art as "in need of urgent safeguarding", Hallaqa said things are looking up for his art and its two stars.

"I thought I would have to bury them" away, he said. But now "a bright future awaits them in Syria. I will tour with them all over the country."