

Spanish matador Alberto Lopez Simon performs a pass to a Jandilla's bull during the fifth corrida of the San Fermin Festival in Pamplona. The festival is a symbol of the Spanish culture that attracts thousands of tourists to watch the bull runs despite heavy condemnation from animal rights groups.—AFP

Van Gogh's 'suicide gun' on display at Amsterdam museum

Amsterdam's renowned Van Gogh Museum unveiled a new exhibition yesterday focusing on Vincent's final 18 months of mental anguish before he shot himself in 1890, including the suspected gun he used in his suicide. Called "On the Verge of Insanity", the exhibition seeks to answer questions like why Van Gogh cut off his ear, and the precise nature of his mental illness that ultimately led to his death in Auvers-sur-Oise near Paris at the age of 37.

One of the most interesting exhibition pieces is the small-calibre revolver believed to have been the actual weapon Van Gogh used to shoot himself in the chest. "The small, badly corroded revolver from a private collection and being

shown for the first time, might be the weapon with which Van Gogh sought to end his life," the Van Gogh Museum said. Vincent shot himself on July 29, 1890 and managed to stumble back to the inn where he was staying before succumbing to his wound 30 hours later. At the time the suicide weapon was not found.

Around 1960 an Auvers farmer working on his land discovered the rusty gun, a 7.0 mm pocket revolver of the "Lefaucheu a broche" type in the fields where Van Gogh shot himself. "The degree of corrosion suggested that the weapon lay in the ground for 50-60 years," the museum said in a statement. "Its limited firepower offers a possible explanation

why the bullet fired at close range glanced off Van Gogh's rib," it added. "The bullet was deflected downwards and was lodged too deep to be removed without danger, as a result of which Van Gogh died of his wound some 30 hours later."

Another fascinating exhibition piece is a recently-discovered letter from doctor Felix Rey, the physician who treated Van Gogh in hospital after he cut off his left ear while living in the southern French town of Arles. "Rey's letter includes drawings showing that Van Gogh cut off the whole of his left ear and not, as was long believed, just part of it," the museum said. "The discovery brings to an end a long-standing biographical

question," it added. Van Gogh's portrait of Rey is also on display for the first time at the museum, as well as a raft of previously unexhibited documents about his illness. "On the Verge of Insanity" however shows that Van Gogh's art "ought not to be viewed as a product of his illness, but arose in spite of his condition," the museum said. The exhibition runs from July 15 to September 25. — AFP

Hidden angel mosaic at Bethlehem shrine sees the light

It was hidden for decades at the church on the site where Jesus Christ is believed to have been born until conservationists uncovered it—an ancient mosaic of an angel. Since 2013, Italian restorationists have been working with the Palestinian government in a mammoth effort to restore the Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem in the occupied West Bank—hailed by Christians as built on the site where Jesus was born.

The roof and windows have been restored and mosaics that had become barely visible over centuries have been painstakingly brought back to full color, one tiny tile at a time. In the course of the work they were surprised to uncover an angel that had been hidden under plaster for decades. With thermal cameras, similar to those used by

the military at night, they scanned the walls to see if there was anything behind them, said Giammarco Piacenti, CEO of the Piacenti restoration company which is leading the work. "In that part it was completely different, you could see the angel. We said 'what is this? It can't be an angel!'" he told AFP.

After peeling back the plaster they uncovered the mosaic, bringing the number of angels in the church to seven. Its outstretched hand is pointing in the direction of the cave where Jesus is believed to have been born. And the discovery has already spawned a myth after the excavator who discovered it, who happened to be Piacenti's niece, became pregnant shortly afterwards. "All the family speak about how the angel (blessed her)," he laughed.

The church, which sees more than two million visitors on good years, was originally built in 339 AD but rebuilt in the sixth century after being destroyed in a fire. Infighting between the three churches involved in running the site had prevented redevelopment, with the last renovations taking place in 1478, according to Piacenti.

Limited funding

"From a historical, artistic and spiritual point of view, it is everything," said Piacenti. "The centre of the world—this is everything." Issa Hazboun, a Christian Palestinian engineer and a member of the project construction management team, says the redevelopment of the site is a source of "pride" not just for him but for Christians across the Middle East. Christians have been targeted in Syria, Iraq and other parts of the region in recent years, with millions fleeing their homes.

Palestinian Christians, too, complain of ill treatment by Israel, and Israeli forces recently began extending a separation wall through the West Bank in the area near Bethlehem. "Of course (Christians across the region) will be very happy—the birthplace of the Messiah is being renovated," Hazboun told AFP. "We are happy they are going to see how the work is going."

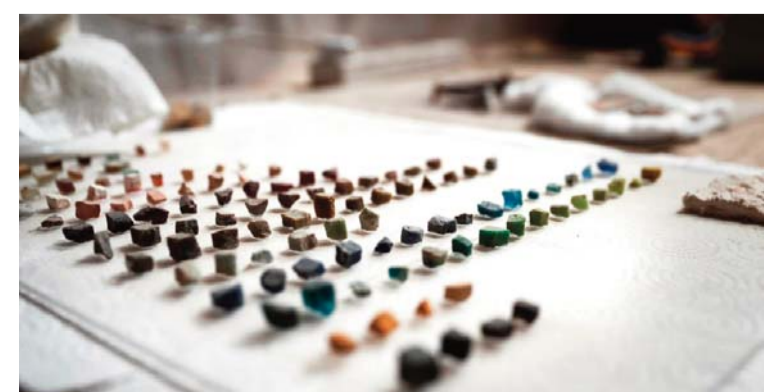
The ongoing restoration, however, is threatened by limited funding, with the Palestinian authorities looking for a further 7.5 million euros (\$8.3 million) on top of the nearly 10 million euros (\$11 million) already received. There are 50 sixth-century columns to be restored, most of which have barely visible paintings of crusader figures, with wealthy donors being asked to "adopt a column", Piacenti said. Ida Molinaro, a restorer, is painstakingly bringing back the color to one column. Each costs 50,000 euros (\$55,000) to restore. Because of the religious importance of the site, it has not been closed down during the work, so renovators have to work around throngs of tourists and monks, a situation she admits can be tough. "Living in a restoration site 24 hours per day in contact with tourists and priests of different religions is challenging, both psychologically and in terms of work, but at the end it gives you a lot," Molinaro said. If the necessary funding is found, the renovations are due to be completed in 2018. — AFP



An ancient mosaic on a wall in the upper part of the Church of the Nativity, which was uncovered during restoration works by Italian experts at the site, in the biblical West Bank town of Bethlehem. — AFP photos



Giammarco Piacenti, CEO of the Piacenti restoration company, inspects a renovated mosaic wall inside the Church of the Nativity.



A close up shot shows mosaic cubes used to renovate the antique walls inside the Church of the Nativity.



An Italian expert renovates an old painting on one of the major columns inside the Church of the Nativity.



An ancient angel mosaic on a wall in the upper part of the Church of the Nativity.