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Relics of its golden past, Mosul's trains left to rust

Nearly a century ago, Iraqis and Westerners stood here with tickets to Berlin, Istanbul or Venice. Today, the rusting tracks and overturned carriages of Mosul's train station betray the city's isolation. Battered by sanctions against the old regime of Saddam Hussein, back-to-back conflicts and little investment, the once grandiose train station in the Iraqi city's western half is a shadow of its former self. The first train rumbled into Mosul station in 1940 from the capital Baghdad, then roared out to Istanbul to join the celebrated Orient Express—taking passengers as far as Paris, 4,400 kilometres (2,730 miles) away.

In the 1950s, novelist Agatha Christie arrived at Mosul station, which later featured in her detective stories. Mosul was an essential stop in the Iraqi Republic Railway system, which for decades linked Baghdad to 72 locations every day via 2,000 kilometres of tracks. "Every day, there were either passenger trains or cargo trains," recalled Amer Abdallah, 47, who worked as a train conductor in Mosul up until a decade ago, when the last train pulled out of town.

At the bombed-out station, the father of five caressed a rusting locomotive, his face contorting into a grimace. "My darling," he said, his nickname for this train engine. Abdallah and others have fond memories of trips west to Syria or

south to Basra, bridging cities and peoples that now feel brutally blocked off from one another. "For just 1,000 or 2,000 dinars (around \$1), we could go to Baghdad or elsewhere in Iraq," said Ali Ogla, a father of seven who used to take the train regularly. "It was a comfortable way of travelling for sick or handicapped people. When it comes to the cargo, we'd be sure it would arrive on time and in good shape," Ogla said.

No money, no maintenance

The station was more than just a transport hub: it was Mosul's economic engine and a source of national pride. "The station hosted one of Mosul's oldest hotels, coffee shops, gardens, a garage for horse-drawn carriages and later, for cars," said railway engineer Mohammed Abdelaziz. Railway and station employees, businessmen, restaurant and cafe owners and taxi drivers all made a living from the train traffic through Mosul, Abdelaziz said. King Faisal II, toppled in the bloody coup of 1958, had his own reception room within the station.

Egyptian musical diva Umm Kulthum passed through it and in 1970, the station agreed to silence its bells and whistles during a concert by Lebanese singer Sabah. But in the 1990s, crippling international sanctions made it hard to get parts to maintain the trains



and in 2003, the US-led invasion opened the door to a wave of bombing then sectarian violence across the country. Still, trains roared out of the Mosul station every week, either 400 kilometres south to Baghdad, west to Syria or north to the Turkish border city of Gaziantep.

On May 31, 2009, a truck bomb destroyed much of the station and in July 2010, the last train left Mosul on a one-way trip to Gaziantep. But things got even worse: in June 2014, the Islamic State group overran the city and declared it the Iraqi capital of its so-

called "caliphate". The station, until then left rusting in the sun, became a battlefield. "Eighty percent of it was destroyed," said Qahtan Loqman, deputy head of Iraq's northern railway. Iraqi security forces won Mosul back in 2017 but reconstruction of the city has been slow, with thousands still waiting for compensation for homes destroyed in the fighting. The state has been unable to rake in enough oil revenues to break even and has halted infrastructure investment. "There is no money and no schedule to repair the complex," said Loqman.

'Beautiful days'

Mosul was Baghdad's gateway to Turkey, and on to Europe. Without this way station, the capital is now cut off from the north: trains from Baghdad only head to Fallujah further west, or Karbala and Basra. Today, rust eats into the fading red, yellow and green paint of an overturned carriage, its cogs and axles spilling out onto the track as if it had been disemboweled. Misshapen carriage doors hang off their hinges and the old columns on the platforms have been ripped apart by gunfire or tagged with black graffiti.

The intricate floral mosaics of the gallery have been blown to smithereens but part of the rose-coloured stone entrance is still standing, a tribute to a glorious past. Nur Mohammad, a 37-year-old housewife, recalled walking through the doors with her grandmother almost a generation ago. "I was 10 years old. We all left together: family, friends, neighbours. We watched the countryside pass by through the train windows," she said. "Those were beautiful days. And I hope we'll find them again."—AFP



Proceeds from Banksy's 'Mediterranean Sea View 2017' will benefit the Bethlehem Arab Society for Rehabilitation hospital.—Getty Images

Banksy to donate sale of artwork to Palestinian hospital

British street artist Banksy is to donate the proceeds from the auction of one of his works, valued at over \$1 million, to a Palestinian hospital, one of his collaborators told AFP on Monday. Titled "Mediterranean Sea View 2017," the work was auctioned yesterday at Sotheby's in London, said Wissam Salsaa, director of the Walled Off Hotel which Banksy helped set up in 2017 in the Palestinian city of Bethlehem in the Israeli-occupied West Bank.

The work comprises three oil paintings depicting views of raging seas and shoreline littered with orange life jackets and buoys, alluding "to the lives lost at sea during the European migrant 'crisis' of the 2010s", according to the description on the Sotheby's site. The work, which used to hang in the entry of the hotel, is valued at \$1.5 million, according to Salsaa. All the proceeds will go to a

hospital in Bethlehem to build an acute stroke unit and buy children's rehabilitation equipment, Sotheby's said.

In May, a new work by Banksy paying tribute to Britain's health service and medics battling the novel coronavirus pandemic was installed in a hospital in southern England. It will later be auctioned to raise money for charities connected to the country's National Health Service (NHS). The artist, whose true identity remains a secret, has unveiled multiple works in Bethlehem, home of his Walled Off Hotel where all rooms overlook a concrete section of the barrier built by Israel to cut off the West Bank from its territory. Israel says the five-metre (16-foot) concrete barrier is needed to protect it from attack by assailants coming from the West Bank.—AFP

Picasso murals removed from Oslo building damaged by Breivik

Despite protests, the removal of two murals designed by Pablo Picasso began on Monday from an Oslo government building damaged in right-wing extremist Anders Behring Breivik's 2011 attack, a project manager said. The "Y Block", a government building complex named for its shape, is scheduled to be demolished to make way for a new government complex building. The building suffered external damage from explosives that Breivik set before going on a shooting rampage, killing a combined 77 people. On its grey cement walls are two drawings by Picasso that were sandblasted by Norwegian artist Carl Nesjar, who collaborated with the Spanish master painter. On the facade facing the street, "The Fishermen" depicts three men hauling their oversized catch onto their boat. In the lobby, "The Seagull" shows the bird, its wings spread wide, devouring a

fish. On Monday, the works, weighing 250 and 60 tonnes respectively, were enclosed in massive metal supports to be transported away and stored nearby, according to Statsbygg, the public agency in charge of overseeing the demolition. "The operation is very slow" and should be completed by Thursday or Friday, site manager Pal Weiby told AFP. The plan is to integrate the works into a new government building scheduled for completion in 2025.

Opponents of the project, both in Norway and abroad, have been mobilising in recent years to save the building, calling for it to be renovated and preserved as has been planned for its neighbour, "Block H". "Block H" was home to the prime minister's offices until Breivik blew up a van loaded with 950 kilograms (2,100 pounds) of explosives at its base, before he went on to carry out a

mass shooting on the island of Utøya.

Kjersti Hembre, an architect who was one of founders of the Save The Y-Block protests, told AFP that one of the main points of contention was that the decision was made without there ever being a serious investigation into whether it could be integrated in the new governmental quarter. According to Hembre, the fact that the murals would be incorporated into the new structure demonstrated a "lack of understanding" of the works which not only adorn the building but are part of its load-bearing structure. "It's a violation of the works that are integrated into the building architecture in an inseparable way" Hembre told AFP.—AFP



In this file photo People pass Picasso's mural art work "The Fisherman" (left) on the government quarter's 'Y building' in Oslo, Norway.—AFP photos



The mural "The Fishermen" by Pablo Picasso and the Norwegian artist Carl Nesja is scaffolded at the Y-block in the government quarter in Oslo.

SWISS ALPS ALIVE WITH SOUND OF MUSIC AT DRIVE-IN FESTIVAL

Honking horns and flashing headlights made for an original form of applause Sunday at a Swiss classical music festival staged before a drive-in audience in the heart of the Alps. The Festival du Lied, which for nearly two decades has brought symphonies and

concertos to the region, hit on the drive-in format as a way to allow concertgoers to attend safely during the coronavirus pandemic. On Sunday, the second day of the week-long festival, dozens of cars filled a large lot in the idyllic village of Charmey in western Switzerland with the

Alps providing a dramatic backdrop.

With their windows rolled down, some occupants closed their eyes while others were brought to tears by renowned tenor Ilker Arcayurek's moving rendition of Schubert's Frühlingsglaube. "This is an extraordinary concept," retiree Willy

Boder said through his car window. Considered at risk of complications if he contracted COVID-19, he had remained stuck inside for months, Boder told AFP. "Here, I had the opportunity to come and see a concert without risking going into a concert hall," he said. "It is really very well done."

'Such a treat'

Marie-Claude Cudry, a middle-aged journalist and film director, agreed. "A lot of people, myself included, have really missed live music," she said. "It is such a treat being here." Cars could have no more than four occupants, who must stay in the vehicles, while up to another 100 people could opt for seats, spaced far apart, to enjoy the concerts in the open air. The festival, created in 2001 by mezzo-soprano Marie-Claude Chappuis, was reimagined to fit the new COVID-19 reality. "It is very important to continue mak-

ing music, but also to continue being careful," Chappuis told AFP, adding that the organisers had striven for a balance between the two. "The emotions derived from music and art in general are something we have all been missing greatly during this period."

The programme this year includes classics performed by international artists such as opera stars Rachel Harnisch and Marina Viotti, and Baroque recorder virtuoso Maurice Steger. Audiences will also be treated to traditional chants in a local dialect, as well as jazz classics by the likes of Ella Fitzgerald and Nina Simone. The cars are parked in a lot used in winter for skiers waiting to be taken up the mountain towering above. A large outdoor stage is supplemented by a giant screen to ensure that performances are visible to all.—AFP



Austrian Turkish-born opera singer Ilker Arcayurek performs on stage during the classical music "Drive-in Festival du Lied". —AFP photos



Spectators attend a concert during the classical music "Drive-in Festival du Lied".