

## MANIAL PALACE MUSEUM RE-OPENS by Nevine Aref

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At the southern tip of Roda Island in Cairo stands Manial Palace, its exquisite early 20th-century architectural style welcoming visitors. Closed for ten years for restoration, the palace has now regained its original splendour.

The site combines Fatimid and Mameluke styles, as well as Ottoman elements and features drawing on Persian, Andalusian, Syrian and Moroccan architecture, as well as European rococo.

Prime Minister Ibrahim Mehleb, Minister of Antiquities Mamdouh Eldamaty and Prince Abbas Helmy, grandson of the Manial Palace's builder, Prince Mohamed Ali, cut the ribbon last week to mark the reopening of the palace to the public.

During the opening ceremony, held in the Golden Hall of the palace, Eldamaty said the restoration was carried out within the framework of the ministry's mandate to preserve the country's heritage and protect it for future generations.

Ahmed Sharaf, head of the Museums Department at the ministry, told the Weekly that the restoration project cost LE61 million and included the main building of the palace as well as its gardens, mosque and clock tower.

The buildings were consolidated and cleaned, and new ventilation and lighting systems installed in the palace and gardens, he said. An important part of the restoration was the strengthening and restoration of the ceiling of the palace's Throne Hall, built in the 1940s, to reduce the load on the original ceiling.

As part of the site's return to its earlier glory, an adjacent hotel, built in the 1960s by the Egyptian Organisation for Tourism and Hotels (EGOTH), was removed and the garden fountains restored.

The basement of the Golden Hall was converted into a storage space, Sharaf said. A new building housing a tapestry museum, a laboratory and administration offices was constructed in the gardens.

All decorative elements found at the palace, including manuscripts, carpets, textiles, brass work and crystal pieces, have been restored.

Mohamed Abdel-Aziz, head of the Historic Cairo Rehabilitation Project, said the palace was built in 1901 by Prince Mohamed Ali, son of Khedive Tawfiq and cousin of King Farouk I, in a revived Islamic architectural style, unlike the European style usually employed for the royal family's palaces.

The prince chose Roda Island because of its beautiful foliage, including Banyan trees, cedars, royal palms and Indian rubber trees, part of the Bostan Al-Kebir (the large gardens), established in 1829 by the prince's great-grandfather, Ibrahim Pasha.

"Prince Mohamed Ali went on a mission to resurrect the old gardens in a large dedicated enclosure henceforth known as Manial Palace," Sharaf said. Rare species from around the world were introduced to the gardens.

The prince thought of the palace as a haven for Islamic art. Its façade and gates are reminiscent of a Fatimid fortress, while the main entrance uses a 14th-century Iranian design. The two towers are in the style of Fatimid minarets.

Elements of Mameluke architecture can be seen in the palace's saray al-iqama (domestic spaces), especially in the main gate, as well in its use of mashrabiya and the glass-embedded windows that overlook an Andalusian-style fountain. The palace's mosque is built in the Moroccan style, while the Throne Room is in the Ottoman style.

The latter style dominates the interior of the palace, which boasts a rare collection of 350 Turkish carpets, Turkish chandeliers, shell-encrusted arabesque ensembles, exquisite wall ceramics and a sun-ring motif decorating the ceilings.

"The palace is also home to a rare collection of antiques that the prince collected from different parts of the world or picked out of the rubble of collapsing Mameluke and Ottoman houses," Abdel-Aziz told the Weekly.

He said that the prince was keen to turn his palace into a museum, and in 1908 registered it on Egypt's Heritage List for Islamic Monuments. He devoted the annual revenue from some 2,213 feddans of arable lands to its maintenance, but this was sequestered after the 1952 Revolution.

"The palace itself was never sequestered, being registered as an antiquity," Abdel-Aziz said, adding that in the prince's will he gave directions to convert the palace into a state museum.

However, in 1965, ten feddans of the palace gardens were brought under the jurisdiction of the Tourism Authority and its affiliate company EGOTH, which leased the land to a French company that constructed two-storey wooden chalets on the land.

The company filled in a lake and cut down trees to provide its new hotel with a swimming pool and tennis court.

In 1984, a ministerial decree designated the palace and gardens as an antiquity, but the company did not vacate the gardens until 1994, when EGOTH started to look for another company to lease the land.

In 1997, a renovation plan was launched for the re-opening of the then Manial Palace Hotel. A ministerial decree was issued that same year, stipulating the removal of the hotel and all encroachments on the building and gardens.

Negotiations between the EGOTH and the Ministry of Culture resulted in the latter winning the argument over the building's future. In 2000, the ministry cleared the site of 18 bungalows, a complex with a capacity of 300 rooms, and the hotel's kitchens and swimming pool.

A restoration project was then launched, but major work on the palace's restoration only started in 2005.