

Trapped up in history

Experts in Rome lovingly packaged antiquities for summer vacation in Montreal

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Text and photos by Jeff Heinrich
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Museum staff walk along a courtyard arcade to their studio at the Museo Nazionale Romano, in Rome

ROME – The centurion lost his head.

He had survived almost 1,800 years more or less intact, his fine white marble Roman head resting squarely in a recess between his armored marble shoulders.

But this spring, he lost it, for a short while – all because of a trip to Montreal.

He lost it to the busy hands of Emanuela Franco and Simonetta Riccio, two white-smocked art restorers at the Museo Nazionale Romano, the Italian capital's principal warehouse of Greek and Roman sculpture.

The two women decapitated the officer to ready him for the longest voyage he's ever undertaken: he and 201 other pieces – most of them from the Museo – will

be seen by some 200,000 people at Montreal's Palais de la Civilisation this summer.

Some of the marble and bronze statues were disassembled for the trip. The centurion was originally sculpted in two pieces, and it's safer to "break" such statues, the experts say, than to risk new breaks and cracks during the shipping.

On a sunny morning two weeks ago, I was introduced to Franco and Riccio by the museum's director of sculpture, Daniela Candilio, who will be coming to Montreal today.

The museum workers allowed me to watch as they prepared some of the pieces for travel, working in a building behind the Museo's main courtyard and displays, through a maze of lanes and gates of what was once the Baths of Diocletian.



Daniela Candilio, the museum's director of sculptures, with a bronze of Dionysus

The ruins of the Baths are still visible all around. Nearby, by contrast, is the city's main train station, Termini, grandiose and modern.



Art restorers Emanuela Franco and Simonetta Riccio work on the Roman centurion, minus the head

Franco and Riccio carefully cleaned the statuary, brushed away dust and dirt, and coated trouble spots with acrylic resin. Three stories above us, stray birds drew patterns in the dusty sunlight, under a ceiling gracefully vaulted with brick.

The women had been working on their centurion in two pieces, just like the unknown sculptor who created it early in the 2nd century A.D. On a table inside their lab, they worked on his well-weathered head, its hair short on top and its neck standing thick below. On a pedestal nearby, they worked on his torso, a cloak thrown jauntily over his left shoulder and the folds of a toga gracing what would have been his upper thighs.

Around us, wrapped in protective plastic, dozens of his compatriots, also bound for roads out of the Imperial City, watched silently.

Some of the art works coming to Montreal are travelling outside Italy for the first time. Others, including works from the recently-excavated religious sanctuary of Ariccia near Rome, have never before been exhibited to large crowds.

But Franco and Riccio are glad to see their charges get a bit of fresh air. "You get to know them pretty well when you're working on them, and it's just as well to get them out to see the world a bit," Franco said.

The Roman National Museum lends works from its collection to foreign museums year-round. But more objects will be going to the Montreal show than to any other event in the museum's history.

"The Montreal show is very important for us, and I expect, for your people as well," Candilio said.

"In the past, we've sent off particular pieces for display: terracotta, glass, busts. But this will be a much larger exhibition that talks of the breadth of Roman history and the beginning of our civilization."



Plastic-wrapped marble statues await shipment to Montreal

After our visit, Franco and Riccio put the centurion in a box for his voyage across the Atlantic. As Object Number 170, he is one of 178 works of art from the museum's vast collection that will be shown here.



Simonetta Riccio (left) and Emanuela Franco bring the head of the Roman centurion to be reunited with his body, temporarily, for a photo op

The first of six tonnes of art for the show arrived Tuesday evening at Mirabel Airport; some was unveiled the next morning for the media. The rest, including the centurion, is to arrive here today.

At the Palais this week, the centurion's head will be fitted back into its recess above his impressive marble breastplate.



After mounting his head on his armour-clad body, museum staff Simonetta Riccio (left) and Emanuela Franco pose with the newly restored marble sculpture of a Roman centurion

That armor is what makes the statue historically valuable – more than the head, which is typical of the realistic busts the Romans were fond of copying from the Hellenistic Greeks whose empire preceded theirs.

Over the breastbone, the armor is decorated with a small face of Medusa (who herself was beheaded, in Greek myth). Over the abdomen are two griffins dancing around a candelabra and under them, sprigs of acanthus, a prickly Mediterranean herb. Across the centurion's groin is a string of little animal heads in half-circles, hung like charms on a belt.

By the time the show opens next Friday, the centurion will find his place as Display No. 68 and look out from atop his pedestal among other statues illustrating the public and cultural life of ancient Rome.

These works are, of course, irreplaceable. The Palais is paying Lloyds of London \$82,000 to insure them for a total \$35 million, and will spend another \$400,000 for security over the six months of the show.

One work of art – a large Etruscan bronze called The Orator, from the Florence Museum of Archeology – almost never made it.

A finicky Florentine official visited the Palais last week to inspect the platform built for the statue (it's surrounded by air jets to keep off dust and humidity).



"The Orator"

Only after the official approved the setup, with a phone call back to Italy, was the statue shipped. Its container was hermetically sealed; if the plane falls into the ocean today, the crate will float and be easy to find.

Kid-glove treatment may seem obsessive for objects that have survived millenia, through war and burial and neglect. But if the people who preserve art don't worry about these things, who's going to?

Candilio, who has come to know the works intimately over her 12 years at the museum, said there is a certain emotion every archeologist feels when one-of-a-kind treasures leave home:

"Travel is always risky, even if you're prepared for everything. But Montreal gave us assurances they will be in good hands, and I don't think there will be problems."

Still, the Romans haven't taken any chances. After touching up, restoring and readying each object for travel, they wrapped them up and placed them in foam-insulated wooden crates molded to fit snugly around the art works' contours.

Then they were sent packing. The Roman firm Montenori Imballaggi took care of the first part. British-based speciality shippers MSAS Cargo International are seeing the works get overseas.



Museum staff walk through the studio where Roman antiquities are being readied for an exhibition in Montreal

The first of 39 crates for the Palais show were sent Tuesday. With sirens screaming, escorts of Roman carabinieri (police) funnelled them through the city's congested streets to Fiumicino airport.

It took six hours to stow the crates in the cargo hold of an Alitalia Boeing 747. Fog delayed the flight into early Wednesday morning.



Antiquities are carefully packed in wooden crates for shipment to Montreal

The crates arrived at Mirabel eight hours later. A few crates went missing for an hour in the terminal, but otherwise there were no hitches. RCMP and Sûreté du Québec cruisers escorted the convoy to the Palais, where the crates were wheeled in under guard.

The voyage – the second and last batch arrives today – comes at some expense. The Palais is paying MSAS

\$277,000 to get the art works here and back safe and sound. The Alitalia bill comes to \$58,000.

All that's left now is for Montrealers to see what all the fuss has been about.

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Rome: 1,000 Years of Civilization runs from May 8 to Sept. 27 at the Palais de la Civilisation on Île Notre Dame. Hours: 10 a.m. to 10 p.m. Tickets cost \$12.50 for adults; \$10 for students aged 16 and over, seniors and the disabled; \$8 for children and teenagers aged 5 to 15. Free admission for children under 4. Family rate is \$35. Call 872-ROME or (if you're outside the Montreal area) 1-800- 363-ROME, for more information.



Museum director Daniela Candilio admires a terracotta bust of the Roman goddess Demeter