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conservation experts say they are losing the battle to save what is left of the Mesopotamian civilization of 6,000 years ago.

Every day a bit of history is lost as a fragment of a Sumerian tablet disintegrates, ancient mounds are inundated by artificial lakes and priceless artifacts erode.

Some scholars, worried that cuneiform mud tablets will turn into dust for lack of preservative chemicals barred under U.N. sanctions, have suggested they be reburied to save them.

"We have to move quickly," said Dr. Muayad Sa'eed, director general of Iraq's Antiquities Department, which safeguards Mesopotamia's most valuable monuments and excavates ancient sites.

His department has under its jurisdiction about 5,000 buildings and more than 1,500 protected ancient sites, some of world renown.

These range from the southern Mesopotamian sites of Babylon and Ur of 2500 B.C. to the imposing 10th-century structures of the Abbasid Caliphate in Baghdad.

"Conservation work is continuous work," Sa'eed said. "It's like the medical check-ups of an old man."

But he says that for more than two years — ever since the 1990 Iraqi invasion of Kuwait — the historic sites of Mesopotamia, the land between the rivers Tigris and Euphrates, have not been getting the care they urgently need.

Visitors to Ashur, Assyria's religious metropolis 300 km north of Baghdad, now see only half-reconstructed, crumbling monuments covered with nylon sheets to protect them from rain and wind.

nization (UNESCO) to send experts to determine the extent of damage as a result of the Gulf War and international sanctions, but so far UNESCO had not responded.

"We only want UNESCO to see the bitter experience we are undergoing in our efforts to preserve what we can of Mesopotamian heritage," Sa'eed said.

Officials are also considering barring visitors from some of Iraq's more recent treasures, including Mosul, popular among tourists for its leaning minarets and one of the Middle East's best preserved 13th-century towns.

Visitors can no longer enter the shrine of Imam Yahya in Mosul because widening cracks in its ornate gypsum dome threaten the 25-meter-high structure with collapse.

shelved and sacred tombs are reported to be in imminent danger of collapse.

Also at risk, according to recent reports, are 300 ancient mounds, some dating back to 8000 B.C., situated in the basins of rivers on which the government has constructed huge dams.

"The artificial lakes are being filled up with water and scores of mounds are being lost forever," he said.

"Some of the mounds belong to little-known periods and their excavation would have thrown new light on Mesopotamia's immensely long history," Sa'eed said.

The Iraq Museum, one of the largest and richest in the world, is suffering along with the rest of the country.

Before the war, the museum's 150,000 artifacts were transferred outside Baghdad

Most seriously affected, he said, are tens of thousands of undeciphered cuneiform tablets now kept in conditions that will let them decay unless steps are taken to preserve them.

Pianist Pizarro

By SATORU NAGOYA
Staff writer

Fans who want eccentric piano solo performances might be unsatisfied, but those who favor well-controlled musicianship would revere Artur Pizarro, the Portuguese pianist who won the first prizes in the 1987 Vienna da Motta and 1990 Harvey Leeds international piano competitions.

In his recital on Sept. 24 at the Tokyo Metropolitan Art Space, Pizarro enchanted the audience with his expressive yet sensitive touch. The pianist began the recital with Schumann's "Bunte Blätter" (Op. 99) — a piece, according to Pizarro, not very popular despite its real beauty — then played Liszt's "Vallée d'Obermann" and whole of Chopin's 12 Etudes Op. 25.

In Schumann and even in Liszt, Pizarro does not exaggerate tones. Instead, he develops a deliberate but unaffected musical tonality — it would have reminded people that pretentiousness is not essential to virtuosity. As a result, the Schumann piece sounded picturesque and the coda of the Liszt's was yet overwhelming.

Pizarro's pianism was also distinct in his Chopin performance. After such brilliant examples as Maurizio Pollini's, it may be extremely hard for a new pianist to star-

Lüttger featured in art exhibition

The 17th International Art Exhibition will be held at the Tokyo Metropolitan Art Museum from Oct. 5 to 13, featuring Dutch painter Abraham Lüttger and others.

Lüttger was born in Amsterdam in 1944. Since the mid-'70s, he has been working while traveling through India, Germany, Spain and the United States. His earlier figurative paintings featured androgynous characters like dancers. His recent nonfigurative works represent a free atmosphere of deep emotions. His art has been presented so far in Amsterdam, Moscow, New York and other parts of the world.

In the Tokyo exhibition, which aims to promote mutual understanding among Japanese and foreign artists,



Lüttger's "Hangman" (1984)

three of Lüttger's works will be displayed.

The exhibition will start tomorrow at noon, at the museum in Ueno Park. Open from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. For more information, contact the Japan International Artist Club at (0468) 72-1688.