
The Oriental Institute Museum

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The Oriental Institute Museum has had a year of unusual excitement and activity. The summer of 1976 found us heavily engaged in both exhibit planning and construction. The new permanent installation of the Mesopotamian collection, begun in February, 1976, was aiming for partial completion of the hall for a preview in conjunction with the Opening Members' Lecture in early October. Simultaneously David P. Silverman, Project Egyptologist, was working closely with the Field Museum on plans for the jointly sponsored Tutankhamun exhibit which would open in the spring, as well as on a supplementary exhibit to run simultaneously in the Oriental Institute Museum.

In September, the Museum Curator, Gustavus Swift, took a leave of absence due to ill-health and I was asked to serve as Acting Curator. In early October, we were shocked and saddened by the death of Mr. Swift, who had done so much to implement all of the programs in which we were currently engaged, and whose efforts were primarily responsible for Chicago's participation in the Tutankhamun Exhibit.



The entrance to the new Mesopotamian Hall

The Mesopotamian Preview took place on October 5, and its enthusiastic reception by a varied public encouraged us in our efforts to complete the hall as soon as possible.

Construction on the exhibit was interrupted for three months, beginning in January of 1977, for work on our special Tutankhamun supplementary exhibit, designed by Gary Fedota, and supported by a grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities of \$14,752. The entire preparatorial and conservation crew (numbering five people) put its efforts into completing this demanding project on time. The paint was still wet when the press arrived for a briefing by David Silverman on April 12.

The week of this opening marked the opening of the spectacular Tutankhamun exhibit itself at the Field Museum, an event which overshadowed all our other Museum activities. In the excitement surrounding the opening, the Museum was able to accomplish little for weeks besides handling inquiries from interested parties about the exhibits, lectures, and related activities.

The Tutankhamun exhibit has attracted many special groups from Chicago and neighboring states. Many of these groups have taken the opportunity to visit the Oriental Institute as well, and our volunteer guides have been doing a heroic job shepherding these visitors through the Museum, and answering their questions. In the

last months groups have been visiting from Ontario to Alabama, New York to California. Our museum attendance has been about 50,000 since the Tutankhamun exhibit opened in mid-April.

The remainder of the spring was spent in a last frantic effort to finish the Mesopotamian exhibit in time for an opening in early June. On June 6 an opening reception was held in the hall, and on June 8, the Visiting Committee sponsored a dinner in the Museum for over 200 to inaugurate the new exhibit.

The Mesopotamian exhibit is the most ambitious exhibit program which the Museum has undertaken. Supported by a \$26,000 grant from the National Endowment for the Arts, with matching funds from the Institute, the exhibit was designed by Frank Madsen. All case construction and installation was done by our own staff. Preparators were Raymond Tindel, Honorio Torres, Martin Safranek, and William Goodworth, with help from Dennis Collins and volunteer preparator Leonard Byman. Conservation and preparation of objects was done by Barbara Hall and Richard Jaeschke. Janis Boehm was the Graphics Assistant. The project was aided by many student helpers, Oriental Institute staff members, and special volunteers. The regular volunteers included were Mrs. David Hoffman, Mrs. John Livingood, and Mrs. Warner Wick.

A conference on Aramaic studies held in November in the Institute's lecture hall was the occasion for a small temporary exhibit of a number of incantation bowls from Mesopotamia. These were used in the second half of the first millennium A.D. in the Jewish community to ward off the demons who caused marital problems.

Two further projects this year have involved NEA grants: the construction of a room with a special climate-control system for the storage of our metal antiquities, toward which the Endowment contributed about a fourth of the cost; and a grant for the preparation of a series of Museum Guidebooks, towards which the Endowment contributed about \$12,000 with the Barker Welfare Foundation contributing the matching funds. The preparation of the manuscripts of these guidebooks is nearly complete. Each guide will include photographs of the important objects in our collection from one geographical area of the Near East, and will utilize these objects as illustrations to a cultural history of the area. The guidebooks are being written by Paul Zimansky, Margaret Root, Peter Dorman, David Nasgowitz, and myself. Our next goal is to prepare these manuscripts for publication.

Finally, one last NEA grant paid \$2,800 for materials to duplicate valuable old negatives in the museum files which were

rapidly deteriorating. Over 2700 negatives were conserved through this grant which expired in December.

Much work on the Museum photograph files was done by the two Museum Office volunteers, Mrs. Florence Ovadia and Mrs. Ursula Schneider. Since her retirement four years ago after thirty-five years as Museum photographer, Mrs. Schneider has worked long hours as a volunteer. On July 29 of this year she fell seriously ill on her way to work, and died several days later. Those of us who have worked with Ursula for all of our years with the Museum will miss her personally as well as in many aspects of our work.

Many who have been involved in the Museum's work this year have noted a marked change. Several years ago our Museum was a quiet, sedate sort of backwater. One day was very much like the next. During this year things have changed. Everywhere one goes one sees people rushing about, to meetings, to radio and television interviews, or coping with four or five different projects simultaneously. We are getting more attention—from the media, and from the public—and we are trying to involve the Museum in a variety of new programs. Whatever future years may bring, it is possible that the Museum will never be the same.