

INTEGRATED DATABASE PROJECT

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For over ninety years the Oriental Institute has been at the forefront of research into the ancient Middle East. In the process it has amassed millions of records, artifacts, maps, photographs, and texts from or pertaining to the region. For decades various attempts have been made to digitize portions of this enormous and immensely important collection, and over the past decade this work has been undertaken in a more systematic manner. The results so far have been 19 terabytes of server space filled with digital files from this collection in addition to the masses of physical documents that still remain.

Unfortunately, the data-management systems in place within the Institute to manage this extremely valuable collection are generally insufficient. A menagerie of database systems and spreadsheets has been used by the different units within the Institute to try and manage their disparate portions of this collection. None of these systems allow for straightforward communication or collaboration between the different units or with the Institute's worldwide audience. Some of these systems are also very antiquated, such as the mid-1980s vintage Dbase III database that was still used as the central Museum Registration database.

To address this critical infrastructural need within the Institute a number of steps have already been taken over the past seven years. These include: (1) an extensive internal-needs assessment undertaken, (2) an intensive investigation of data-management systems being

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used at peer-institutions and museums around the world, (3) development of a detailed document listing the unique requirements for any data-management system that might be considered for adoption by the Institute, and (4) an exhaustive search among data-management system providers to identify those products and companies that could meet the Institute's needs.

This work, diligently chronicled over the past seven years by John Sanders in the *Computer Laboratory* section of the Oriental Institute's *Annual Report*, has led to the identification and purchase of KE Software's EMu database software for this purpose of constructing an integrated database. This is the same software that is used behind the scenes to power museum databases around the world including at institutions such as the Smithsonian, the Field Museum, and the Museum of Science and Industry. The purchase of the software was made possible through generous funding from the University of Chicago.

However, the records don't just magically get into the database by themselves. In addition, a web front end, a series of web pages that will allow users to communicate with the database over the Internet, is needed to facilitate access to the collections stored in the database by users both in the building and around the world. These two tasks, at least for the Research Archives and Museum Registration, is nearing completion after two years of work. This work has been funded by a generous grant from the federal Institute of Museum and Library Services (IMLS) as well as by Aimee Drolet. These first two portions of the overall Oriental Institute collections will be followed in years to come by incorporating portions of the collections such as the photographic archives, Conservation, CAMEL, Museum Education, and eventually the full Museum Archives. Over time, the web front end will be expanded to cover all these various types of digital data and to allow sophisticated queries and collaborations to be undertaken within this valuable and unique collection.

During the past year months of time were spent implementing the database design within EMu for housing the data from the Research Archives and Museum Registration collections (see the separate *Research Archives* and *Registration* sections). The database design was developed based upon existing templates used by similar museums, but was extensively customized to fit the Oriental Institute's unique data sets. The Research Archives proved particularly challenging in this regard. Once the database design was nearly completed, work began on transferring the data into EMu. After extensive work on cleaning up and standardizing the existing data, several rounds of test runs have been completed and tested to ensure the data transfers as easily as possible during the final migration. The final data loads are expected by September. We were aided throughout both of these processes by Jay Kohut, our project coordinator at KE Software.

In addition to the database itself, considerable time and effort went into the design and continuing construction of the web front end for querying the database. A series of evaluation sessions were conducted in October and December, with a range of students, staff, faculty, and members of the public participating (see the separate *Public Education* section). Ideas for the design of the front end were drawn from their analysis and feedback of a number of available websites for serving museum content. These ideas were drawn together into a coherent set of web page designs by Dora Fraeman and Steven Lane, aided by the Integrated Database team (figs. 1 and 2). These designs are being implemented through the University of Chicago's IT Services webgroup, drawing on the lead programming skills of Alan Takaoka, Dora Fraeman, and Rose Pezzuti Dyer. It is expected that the entire web front end will be of-

ficially launched for the Research Archives and Museum Registration collection in October or November of this year.

A project of this size and scope necessarily draws upon a wide range of people in order to be successful. In addition to the designers and programmers noted above, the work of several people should be acknowledged here. The Integrated Database team was directed by

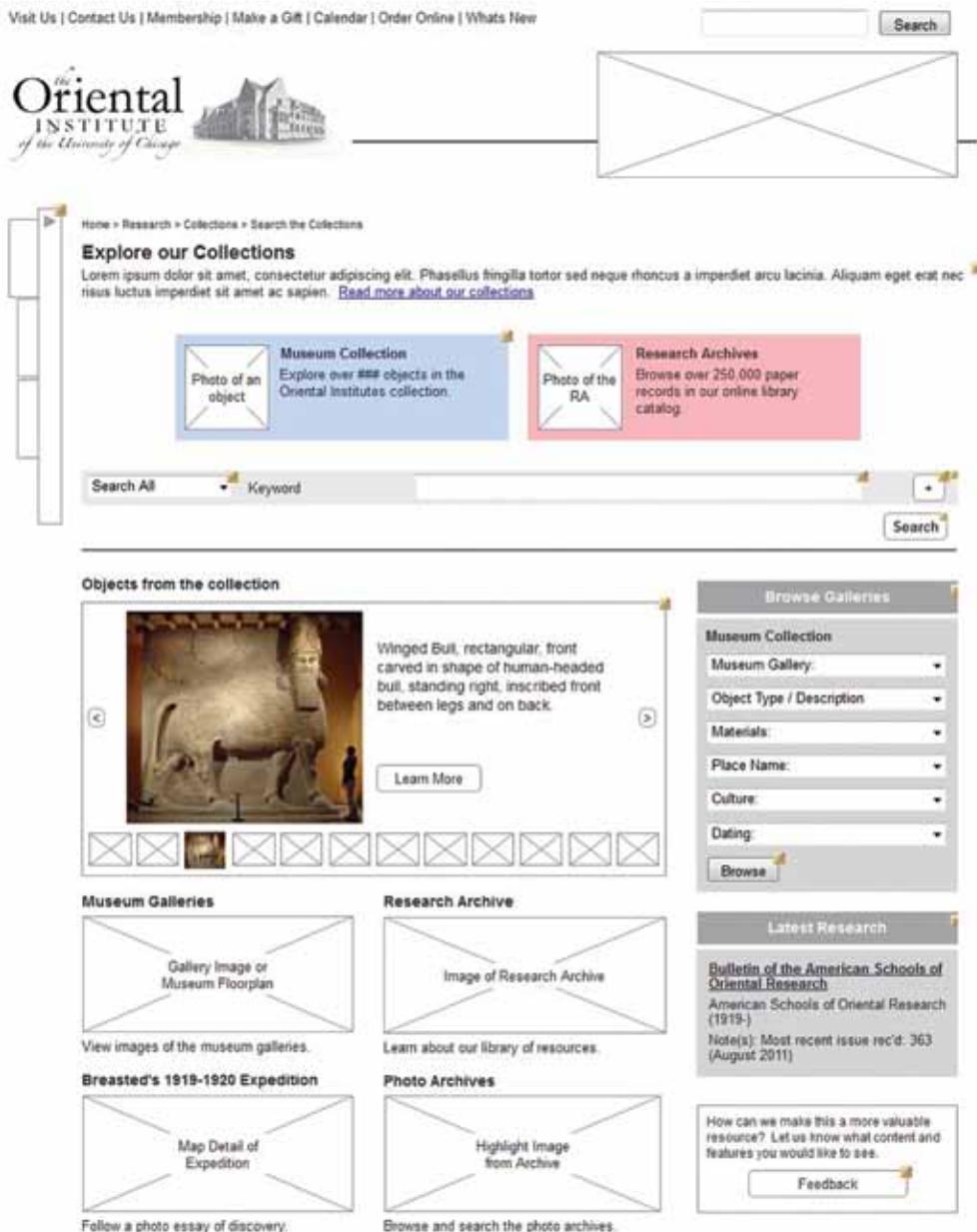


Figure 1. A copy of the working design for the main query page that is being built into the new web pages for the front end of the Integrated Database. The final web pages will provide access to the database and our collections from both the Research Archives and Museum Registration

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Figure 2. A copy of the conceptual design behind one of the query results web pages for the new Integrated Database. The final web page will allow people to sort their results by collection or by various refinement tools applicable to the data that they are trying to find out more about

Scott Branting and John Sanders, along with our external project manager Angela Spinazze. Angela brings a wealth of experience to our efforts, having assisted a number of other institutions through similar processes. Wendy Ennes played an instrumental role in coordinating the web front end focus groups and design process, aided in the former by an external evaluator, Julia Brazas. Individuals who participated within the focus groups were: Susan Bazargan, Mary Cobb, Andrew Dix, Andrea Dudek, Michael Fisher, Margaret Foorman, Terry Friedman, Sue Geshwender, Petra Goedegebuure, Kathryn Grossman, Lindsay Johnson, Janene Maclin, Maryhelen Matijevic, Nadine Moeller, Yorke Rowan, Jeff Sadoff, George Sundell, Monica Swope, Karen Wilson, and Arne Wossink as is described in more detail in the *Public Education* section of this Annual Report. Wendy also coordinated the pending follow-on IMLS grant to help fund the forthcoming second phase of the Integrated Database project. George Sundell, a volunteer who has played an instrumental role in the project since its inception seven years ago, provided important database expertise and assistance in both the data migration and customization processes. Jack Green has come on board this year and provided oversight and encouragement as members of the Museum staff, especially Helen McDonald and Susan Allison in Registration, dedicated an enormous amount of time to implementing the Integrated Database within their collections. Helen and Susan were aided in this effort by Courtney Jacobson, George Sundell, Abbas Alizadeh, Tasha Vorderstrasse, and Bruce Williams as is described in more detail in the *Museum Registration* section. Foy Scalf undertook the enormous task of implementing the Integrated Database for the Research Archives collection and was aided in this effort by Jill Waller, Ahmet Sun, Laura Holzweg, and Taylor Coplen as is described in more detail in the *Research Archives* section of this *Annual Report*. Funding for the Integrated Database project has been very generously provided by the Institute of Museum and Library Services (IMLS), the University of Chicago, and Aimee Drolet.
