



IMAGE COURTESY OF THE ORIENTAL INSTITUTE OF THE UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO

## FROM THE ARCHIVE PERSEPOLIS, 1935

‘Persepolis paintings perfectly glorious’ was the verdict Prentice Duell cabled from Egypt to James Henry Breasted, founder of the Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago (OI). He had just seen the work American artist Joseph Lindon Smith (1863-1950) created at the ancient Persian city.

Founded by the Achaemenid king Darius I around 518 BC, Persepolis is home to the impressive remains of columned halls and palaces. The buildings were richly decorated with finely carved reliefs that depict processions, gifts being brought to the king, and lions and bulls in combat. It is these two powerful royal animals, as portrayed in the Apadana (the great audience hall), that we see in Smith’s painting above – thanks to the first colour photography of his Persepolis paintings, carried out in preparation for a new exhibition.

Smith, invited by Breasted, visited the OI expedition at the site early in 1935 and produced six large oil-on-canvas paintings:

three bright landscapes showing the ruins in their picturesque setting, and three close-ups of the reliefs that splendidly capture their three-dimensionality and the qualities of the stone. The painting of the lion and the bull in combat is the biggest of Smith’s Persepolis works, measuring 3.65m by 2.14m, and it is remarkable in its precision. Yet Smith did allow himself some selective creative licence. He chose not to execute the stepped line of trees above the sloping diagonal band at the top of the painting in the same level of detail as the main figures, presumably so as not to detract from the dramatic scene.

All six of Smith’s Persepolis paintings are now in an exhibition at the Oriental Institute Museum, curated by Kiersten Neumann. It is the first time all can be seen together since their display at the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, in 1939 – and, for the two largest paintings (including this one), it is the first time they have been unpacked from the box that transported them back from Boston more than 80 years ago. 🏛️

Joseph Lindon Smith: the Persepolis paintings is at the OI Museum, University of Chicago, until 28 August (<https://oi.100.uchicago.edu/ljs>).

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