Over the past year, the OI’s communication efforts increased exponentially as we prepared for the kickoff of the official Centennial campaign at the end of summer 2019 and subsequently to celebrate the centennial throughout the 2019–20 academic year. Throughout 2018–19, we continued existing partnerships and developed new ones with teams across the UChicago campus and within the city of Chicago, to assist us with our marketing, public relations, and branding strategies, the overarching goal of which was to raise the awareness and support of the OI locally and internationally. As Steve Johnson so eloquently wrote in his fall 2019 feature on the OI in the Chicago Tribune, “The Oriental Institute has a 100th birthday makeover wish—to no longer be Chicago’s ‘hidden gem.’”

Through the end of 2018, we continued developing new branding and messaging for the OI with central University Communications, UChicago Creative, and consulting firm Lipman Hearne. The product of these efforts is a brand story that effectively and artfully captures the history and romance of the OI, both a pioneering interdisciplinary research center and a world-renowned museum devoted to understanding, revealing, and protecting the earliest civilizations in the ancient Middle East. A visually significant aspect of our rebranding was the creation and launch in April 2019 of a new logo—a new look for a new century! A principal objective in designing the new logo was to increasingly refer to the Oriental Institute as the OI. The term “Orient” originally referred to the OI’s geographical area of research focus—one hundred years ago, the Middle East was known as the Orient, meaning “east” (as opposed to occident, meaning “west”). However, the meaning of orient is no longer part of common American English usage. Our intention is to acknowledge and embrace our heritage and set the stage for our next hundred years. We’re increasingly referring to the Oriental Institute as the OI, similar to MoMA, the Met, and MCA, and the new logo afforded an opportunity to move in this direction.

The completed logo—the bold black “O” and serif maroon “i”—is iconic, representative of the institute, and visually impactful in both print and digital platforms. Inspired by artifacts of the OI Museum collection—beads, cylinder seals, maceheads, spindle whorls, and, of course, the wheel—the “O” acts as both letter and graphic element. The lowercase “i” conveys a feeling of humanity through its serif curve and round dot. The “i” is also reminiscent of the “i” symbolizing “information,” a fitting association for an institute whose mission is to advance knowledge and discovery related to the ancient Middle East. The Gotham font and black and maroon color scheme with which “ORIENTAL INSTITUTE” and “THE UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO” are written situate the logo firmly within broader UChicago branding. The museum logo draws on this same design concept, with
the word “MUSEUM” written in black using the Gotham font. While the OI logo as a whole embraces a sense of the tradition and romanticism of the institute, its clean, modern qualities connect to the present, reflecting an institution whose scholarship and outreach continues to offer new ways of seeing what connects us and why, our lives as humans together. We also designed a special centennial mark to celebrate the OI’s one hundred years of research, fieldwork, and scholarship. The mark is referential to the OI logo, using the same graphic “O.” The horizontal bands employ the maroon and black of the university’s primary palette and the blue and yellow of the secondary palette. The result is a vibrant and contemporary design that stands as a striking compliment to the OI logo.

Coinciding with the unveiling of the new OI logo and centennial mark was the launch of the OI Centennial website (oi100.uchicago.edu). We teamed up with Chicago-based digital branding agency, Sandstorm, to work with us in creating a digital experience to celebrate the OI’s Centennial year, sharing not just the legacy and historical impact of the OI in understanding, revealing, and protecting the earliest human civilizations, but also recognizing that through our ongoing research and public outreach we can offer new ways of thinking about what makes us, us—the beginnings of our lives as humans together. Sandstorm and the OI team underwent a thorough UX and creative UI process, while leveraging the OI’s new branding. The primary goal was to achieve an interactive, high-tech, narrative experience while showcasing the incredible depth of research projects and overall work of the OI. In addition, a key goal was to drive users to engage with the OI: attending exhibits and events (including the Centennial Gala), donating, becoming a member, and visiting the museum. Making sure these
CTAs and conversions link back to the main OI site was key, while also elevating the centennial as a major milestone for the institute. Sandstorm implemented a new Drupal 8 instance for the OI Centennial site and configured the CMS for design flexibility in the future. Over the course of a few months, we worked with Sandstorm to transform key content related to the OI’s history, research projects, fieldwork, cultural heritage initiatives, and museum collection into a well-curated, digital micorsite experience; a key feature is the interactive map that presents a visual navigational tool to explore the OI’s work in different regions of the Middle East. Additional objectives included a mobile-first approach that ensures the user has the same level of interactivity and scanability from any device, and WCAG 2.0AA accessibility standards. The OI Centennial site was recognized with a 2019 Gold MARCOM award by...
the Association of Marketing and Communications Professionals.

In spite of these many efforts, our social media presence did not lapse. We saw a continued increase in our audience engagement across all platforms—Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, and YouTube—throughout the year. On Instagram, we saw an exceptional rise of 485 percent in follower growth. One of our top engaging posts was a photo of the decadent lamassu cake created for the OI birthday celebration on May 13, 2019. Our Facebook base rose 12.4 percent, reaching a total of 26,073 followers; our net page likes (the number of new users who liked our page) rose 144 percent, with a peak in May 2019—also the month of the OI’s actual one hundredth birthday! Our number one most engaging Facebook post was a photo of the world’s oldest known fragment of A Thousand and One Nights (E17618) from the OI Museum collection, which is now on display in the new Islamic exhibit section of the galleries.

Oriental Institute - University of Chicago
May 17 - 🇦🇪
This is the world's oldest known #ArabianNights fragment (E17618, on display) as well as one of the oldest known paper documents from the Middle East. The fragment was re-used in 879 AD, meaning that we know it must date before that time. On the left, we can see the title page which informs the reader that this is “a Book of Tales from A Thousand Nights;” rather than the usual “Thousand and One Nights,” which is what the story is known as in Arabic.
Come see the Arabian Nights fragment which is newly on display at the Oriental Institute!

With the April launch, we were excited to implement our new messaging and visual branding on each of our pages, including the uploading of the new OI logo as our profile picture.

In the first part of 2019, we entered into new partnerships with the Silverman Group, to develop and implement a PR strategy for the centennial year; and Tom, Dick & Harry Creative Co., to design print and digital creative for our centennial marketing campaign. We also continued working with UChicago Creative to develop brand guidelines, stationary, and marketing materials. Guided by these well-curated and strong partnerships, we paved the way for a much anticipated and successful campaign kickoff in August 2019—to be discussed at length in the 2019–20 Annual Report.