

INTRODUCTION

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When in his introduction to the annual report of the academic year 2019–20 Christopher Woods wrote that it had been “the most singular year in the Oriental Institute’s long, one-hundred-year history,” little did we know how even more singular the academic year 2020–21 was going to be. The university had to continue the lockdown all through the next year because of the COVID-19 pandemic. Most classes were taught remotely, with only first-year students being allowed to live on campus. The OI was closed in early spring of 2020, and as of September an occupancy rate of twenty-five percent was allowed, with a staggered schedule of staff and faculty present. When visiting the OI this past fall or winter, it looked deserted—like a ghost town. Only now, as I write this in late August 2021, do more people return, and the university expects everybody back on campus at the start of the new academic year in September. Deputy director Jean Evans expertly coordinated all things COVID, keeping us safe and informed on the latest rules dictated by the university administration and preparing us for the new year.

It was a sad and difficult year, a true *annus horribilis*. We lost some extraordinary members of our community. First, Margaret Foorman, head of our docent library, passed away in September 2020, followed by docent coach and mentor Roberto Cepeda; and Research Archives volunteer George Thomson in October; the incomparable Carlotta Maher, and Norman Golb, Ludwig Rosenberger Professor of Jewish History and Civilization—both in December 2020. On July 25, 2021, professor Robert Ritner, Egyptologist and beloved lecturer, died after a long illness. Finally, our enthusiastic, invaluable director of development, Wally Verdooren, passed away on August 26, 2021. Brief obituaries of each follow this Introduction.

Another shock went through our community when around the turn of the year director Chris Woods announced he was going to leave the OI to become the Williams Director of the University of Pennsylvania Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology. Of course, we are proud that an OI director was chosen for such a distinguished position, and we are happy for him, but it adds a distinct note of sadness to the past year. I’m deeply grateful to Chris for his guidance and wisdom, and for his leadership of the OI since 2017. We wish him great success in Philadelphia and hope to see him back in Chicago frequently! We also had to say goodbye to Charissa Johnson, managing editor and head of our Publications Office. Thank you, Charissa, for all the great work you did, and good luck in your future endeavors!

The OI was affected by the pandemic at every level. Excavations and survey expeditions had to be canceled. Even the Epigraphic Survey team was forced to stay home. The OI Museum and the Suq closed, and tours were suspended. But as this report makes clear, that didn’t mean, that no work was done. On the contrary, study seasons were held “at home” and publications prepared, tours went virtual, museum staff and faculty conducted their work from home. Behind the scenes, numerous requests from outside for information were fulfilled and the collections maintained. Laura D’Alessandro, Helen McDonald, and Rob Bain, along with other museum staff, maintained an on-site presence for collections care. Together with the museum staff, Tasha Vorderstrasse successfully curated the photo exhibit dedicated to the Armenian-Iranian photographer Antoin Sevruguin. The Publications Office, where Steve Townshend has now taken over as interim head, produced the

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beautiful catalog accompanying the exhibit, as well as many other impressive publications, among them the annual report in your hands right now. During lockdown, our security staff led by Vick Cruz remained on-site in their essential roles. The financial and administrative offices with Brendan Bulger, Tauresha Florence, Matt Perley, and Mariana Perlinac assured everything continued to run smoothly. Meanwhile, scholarly output in the form of books, articles, and conference presentations, one of the few “hard” measures of our research productivity, continued unabated. And productive we were, with five books and almost forty articles having been published in the past year! Our Research Archives played an essential role in all of this by providing the necessary literature. In the challenging year that we have behind us, our collections were inaccessible, but Foy Scalf, head of the Research Archives, and his staff nevertheless delivered books and journals through PDFs, or sometimes also the physical copies. Thanks to them for that amazing service!

Despite the pandemic, our membership continued to grow, thanks to Matt Welton, Ali Mallett, and Steve Townshend providing an ever-increasing array of podcasts on YouTube. Videos of all kinds and posts on social media kept our members informed and engaged. Because of their efforts the OI even won the university’s Best in Class Digital Programming Award in 2021! Wally Verdooren and Polina Kasian shifted development activities to remote. Sue Geshwender kept the volunteers engaged and ready to reenter the OI through virtual Volunteer Days, book club discussions, and lectures. The same is true of adult education under Tasha Vorderstrasse, which gave people an opportunity to temporarily escape stressful daily life under a pandemic. School field trips and family programs continued to be offered virtually.

Essential support for all of the above activities, the research and public outreach, came from Knut Boehmer, the OI’s IT manager, who kept faculty and staff informed, digitally updated, solving crises, and keeping us digitally safe.

All in all, staff and faculty more than rose to the numerous challenges that the year 2020–21 threw our way. As a result, we’re ready for what will hopefully be a less singular year where we can live and work again as a real community.
