

## TREASURES AND PROSPECTS: REMARKS FOR THE ORIENTAL INSTITUTE'S SEVENTY-FIFTH ANNIVERSARY

Robert McC. Adams

What are treasures? While long privately sought and prized, they have tended to be identified with museums ever since museums had their beginnings as the cabinets of curiosities of princes in the sixteenth century. By any definition, broad or narrow, the Oriental Institute's museum is richly endowed with them. In common usage, treasures are identified with considerable antiquity, with the use of precious or exotic materials, with prodigies of craftsmanship, with canonical art styles, although not necessarily of Western origin, and with a unifying—if not necessarily universally appealing—aesthetic vision. But the term is admittedly imprecise, full of idiosyncrasy and affect. Your treasures are not necessarily mine. Treasures move us in a special, personal way. They enrich our lives and find a permanent niche in our memories.

My own approach to treasures tends to be ideational, contextualizing. I value intellectual and literary treasures more than most aesthetic ones. How can they help us better to understand the larger, determining circumstances behind some important historical episode, or achievement, or enduring challenge with which we and succeeding generations will also have to grapple? What reassurance can they provide on the unity of human values and experience? Can they help us to clarify the distance separating us from those who brought us hither?

But beyond any merely personal view, the larger meaning that treasures hold for all of us is that they are one of many indications of how the past *lives* in us. Treasures, after all, do not form a frozen, uncommunicative record. They reach out across space and time to fill us with wonder and surmise about the commonality of human aspirations, values, and standards of excellence. Through treasures, tangible or intangible, the past comes alive in our endless reconceiving of it, in the changing lessons we individually and collectively draw from it.

Like history itself, treasures stand uniquely at a place where facts and values meet. They are a testimony to the past, to be sure. But they are also a testimony to the relationship between the past and the future. No man can have in his mind a conception of the future, as Thomas Hobbes wrote three centuries ago. It is only out of our conceptions of the past that we can make a future. Starting from an entirely

different perspective, the late, great classicist Moses Finley came to a similar view. All interest in the past, he observed, is a dialogue. But as one of the parties to that dialogue, we can only live and comprehend in a contemporary way. Hence, he rightly concluded, it can only be a dialogue in the present, about the present.

Thus the notion of treasures not only is different in each of us but changes through time—in ways about which most of us are insufficiently reflective. I do not think private collectors' ideas about treasures have changed greatly over the years, for example, but the approach of archaeologists and art historians has definitely done so. To tie the change to a definite moment, one might cite the UNESCO Convention of the early 1970s, to which the U.S. was a signatory, that introduced the idea of national treasures or patrimony and barred the movement of undocumented antiquities from their countries of origin into museum and private collections in western Europe, the U.S., Japan, and other countries. I am sorry to say that the illegal flow into private collections has not been greatly slowed, although the U.S. has done more than most to honor the Convention. But most of the great scholarly museums—the Oriental Institute's museum obviously included—have indeed observed its terms in all their activities.

Of course, the concept of national treasure did not originate in the UNESCO Convention, but merely found its final ratification there. It was a product of the ending of colonialism in the post-World War II period, and the attempt of many new nations that had been fairly systematically looted of their heirlooms earlier to acquire some of the symbols of their new nationhood. The Convention in fact paralleled a gradual tightening up of the terms of division of the findings from legitimate excavations on the part of most of the host countries in the Near East in which the Oriental Institute has worked, to the point where essentially nothing falling under the more traditional, private definition of treasures will ordinarily be granted to the institution conducting the excavations. As this new approach has gradually become recognized and general, so also have scholars' ideas of what constitutes a treasure shifted significantly in a less tangible, more intellectual direction. Publishable plans, photographs, and measured drawings, for example, are now recognized to represent artificial findings almost as effectively as the objects themselves. The real treasure is to be found in how originally and compellingly they are interpreted.

The fact that there are such changes in view emphasizes that the dialogue we conduct with the past is one that is endlessly renewed as its terms of reference change in ways that are responsive to our times, not some eternal standard. The spirit of enhancing a dialogue with the past, and recognizing the endlessly renewed richness of that dialogue, is one I want to emphasize in speaking to you briefly this evening. Dialogues do not generate themselves, nor can they be sustained if we only flutter endlessly around the same unanswered questions. They advance through disciplined study. Old assumptions are tested and found wanting. New hypotheses are put forward. Eternal truth may forever elude us, but by contemporary standards we reach at least provisional closure. Thus the frontiers of inquiry can advance in new directions that for a time have higher priority. And the process of advancing knowledge in this way is embodied in institutions of our own devising that protect its standards, record and disseminate its attainments, and provide the necessary forum for reaching consensus in order to set new agendas. By any reckoning, the Oriental Institute is one of the world's preeminent institutions where these ends are met for the ancient Near East.

For half my life the Oriental Institute was my primary institutional attachment. Despite having been away from Chicago now for a decade, not only with other administrative responsibilities but with research interests that consequently have turned in other directions, I am more conscious than ever of the coherence and persuasiveness with which the Oriental Institute plays the part of a powerful protagonist in a key sector of our dialogue with the past. Hence it was not only with great pleasure, but with a continuing sense of personal involvement, that I accepted Bill Sumner's invitation to speak on this occasion. But I should make clear that there is no longer much that I can add on the matters of substance at the heart of this great and venerable institution.

Were it not for the irregular but cumulative—and as things remorselessly unfolded, clearly not temporary—foreclosing of field opportunities in the part of the world I came to know and understand best, I doubt very much that I would ever have left. That raises a question that needs to be dealt with as we look back at the Oriental Institute's first seventy-five years and think of the three-quarters of a century that now will follow: The last fifteen years or so have seen the dropping of a good functional equivalent of the Iron Curtain on Western research—in Iran in the late 1970s; in Iraq in the 1980s; the gradual onset of a seemingly permanent state of what it has become fashionable to call “low intensity” war in eastern Turkey; a dangerously growing religious terrorism in Egypt; and an enormously destructive civil war in Lebanon from which a recovery is still in early, tentative stages. What future is there, then, for an institution so committed to the disinterested scholarly study of the ancient past of the Near East as a region?

The answer to that question comes in several parts. First, humanistic studies are not experimental disciplines, in which a drying up of new laboratory findings could quickly destroy them. Many thousands of cuneiform tablets and papyri remain unread in museum collections, fortunately having been acquired in great numbers when conditions were different. Dozens of excavation reports remain “in the pipeline,” the fieldwork again having proceeded at a rate that was disproportionate to the size of the permanent staff of scholars who would remain permanently employed to analyze and publish it. Methods of scientific analysis of excavated collections, moreover, continue to advance and offer every prospect of continuing new surprises—and the new perspectives for reinterpretation that will flow from them.

But beyond this, there are many more reasons for hope—indeed, for confidence—in the future. The Cold War has ended in a way that is almost optimal from the viewpoint of allowing the chronically dangerous and destabilizing influence that it long had on Near Eastern politics and economic development to dissipate gradually. Further confrontations with and between local powers no doubt will occur, but without the old ideological stiffening that heightened their pan-regional destructive potential. Difficult as near-term differences remain between Israel and the Palestinians, it seems more clear every day that the movement toward a durable peace is gaining momentum. Granting that misunderstandings, standoffs, and occasional more or less violent disruptions will continue for some time, the likelihood is that this single, most corrosive barrier to more cooperative forms of international scholarship will be of progressively declining importance.

The outlook for the years immediately ahead, in other words, is that we no longer need to wait passively for an onrushing tide to reverse itself. It has already begun to do so. The remaining period of enforced idleness in some areas is likely to be brief enough that the real need now is to take advantage of it urgently and wisely:

- to systematize and complete work on existing backlogs, at all times considering what further lessons and opportunities can be drawn from them;
- to seek out new perspectives from comparative studies, especially by taking a less narrowly defined view of what constituted the ancient Near East as a region of significant interaction, for example by adding the Arabian peninsula, the Caucasus and central Asia, the Indus borderlands, and the Indian Ocean itself to our field of study;
- to refine new interdisciplinary approaches and methods, and acquire the equipment and training to make use of them;
- to keep open such bridges as are possible with scholars from Near Eastern countries, especially younger scholars; and
- to take leadership—something that has been conspicuously lacking in the Near Eastern field generally—in acknowledging the progress that has been made on the old Palestinian problems by drawing Israeli scholars—and now one hopes Palestinian scholars as well—more conspicuously into all aspects of American studies of the ancient Near East, and not merely regionally isolated ones.

We should act upon the confidence, in short, that precisely our superior interdisciplinary capabilities and the new, endlessly changing questions that they encourage us to ask, our continuing flow of splendid graduate students from all parts of the world including the Near East, our unmatched understanding of the enormous potential of bringing together philological and archaeological perspectives in the training of those students, our greater affinity for broad regional and interregional perspectives in the absence of overriding national or ethnic identities, and the strength of the entire infrastructure of unmatched research universities on which we can draw, will in the end reopen the pathways to new knowledge in the field.

The Oriental Institute is not large as research institutes go—certainly not so by the standards of the sciences. But equally certainly, the faculty who are the principal embodiment of it—its major treasures, if you will—are as diverse and independently minded—sometimes ferociously independently minded—as any I can think of.

But along with this independence of outlook (and corresponding durability of differences) goes a durability of vision. This is a quality, I regret to say, that is becoming an anomaly in most fields of research. No doubt the Institute owes a great deal to its founding spirits in this respect: James Henry Breasted had the confidence and courage to lay out what might have seemed to most of us who confront conditions today a hopelessly overambitious program. John D. Rockefeller deeply understood what Breasted's dream presupposed if it succeed, and made it breathtakingly possible for him and the Institute to set out on that great journey. Between them they launched a tradition which has somehow remained a vital part of the credo of this place, even if the outcome of the struggle to find the material resources to sustain it has become increasingly problematical.

Major, lasting increments of new knowledge require that truly great scholars be encouraged to strike out in new directions. Not infrequently interdisciplinary teams have had to be assembled and held together for this purpose, their complementary skills and insights needing to be patiently honed until they fit together and achieve their full potential. Standing out today as monuments of humanistic research among many examples of Institute programs that share the common quality of perhaps having seemed to belong in that hopelessly visionary category at the outset, are the

Chicago Assyrian Dictionary and the Epigraphic Survey. A number of splendid archaeological projects are illustrations of another kind. They have led the way in combining new questions with exacting new methods, and hence in transcending narrow descriptions of artifacts and architecture in order to come to grips with ancient institutions, life-ways, and environments.

Taking a long view is a trademark of the humanities. Asking great questions frequently requires team efforts like these, but even more commonly it tends to demand one or more academic lifetimes. There is a danger of intellectual fragmentation and obsolescence in that kind of single-minded devotion, to which the Institute needs to be attentive. But I must concede that greater danger almost certainly lies in the opposite direction. Today consensus is all the rage. Come to an agreement, impose a compromise, don't be caught for long in a minority position as its numbers dwindle, and move on. Never look back. That may be largely because research funding could not keep pace as needs for expensive research apparatus have soared and as the ranks of researchers have multiplied. Dozens and sometimes even hundreds of specialists collaborate on a single project at a great particle accelerator like Fermilab. Here at the Oriental Institute I can only hope you will be able to maintain a proper, long-term balance of individual and team efforts. It has been an important source of your success.

And let there be no mistake: the success has been extraordinary. This body of scholars has cast as long a shadow across the whole length of its field, and for a far longer time, than any comparable institution I can think of in any field. Paradoxically, in view of the vigorous individuality of the views of its faculty, the mark its reputation has left has been on the whole a very consistent one. Not all the qualities that are almost universally associated with the Oriental Institute are without some countervailing drawbacks, but the balance of attributes unquestionably identifies a truly remarkable edifice of scholarship:

- unhurried perfectionism—sometimes with a lot of stress, to be sure, on the *unhurried* part;
- accompanying this, or perhaps explaining it, is the sense that getting the details of a particular transliteration, translation, or interpretation right, with full mastery of all of the variant readings and parallel occurrences, comes overridingly *first*—not only before, but often even to the exclusion of, drawing a more inclusive, synthetic, but to that degree also more speculative picture;
- a penchant for the pursuit of primary data, especially through a continuing commitment to fieldwork long after most colleagues elsewhere have settled into a sedentary middle age (the splendid example of the Braidwoods!);
- a respect, even a reverence, for traditional learning of the kind of encyclopedic, truly penetrating knowledge that in the humanities is, on the whole, correlated with—indeed, almost synonymous with—years of dedicated study and hence also age (I acknowledge the tolerance of a great university in repeatedly agreeing, during my own tenure here, to break every rule in order to keep on the active roles a Benno Landsberger, an Arnaldo Momigliano, and many others); and, finally,
- to reemphasize a point made earlier, a quality as unique as it is crucial in the humanities, a commitment to, even a reverence for, the long-term, truly monumental undertaking that lies entirely beyond the capabilities—I am tempted to say, even the imagination—of the Oriental Institute's institutional contemporaries in this country.

This stress on the long-term aspect of truly great humanistic scholarship—perhaps even *most* scholarship in every field—is crucial. Yet I regret to say that is something that may be slipping away from us, with insufficient notice being taken by public bodies of what is at risk of being lost. As the great American research universities find their freedom of action eroded by increasing cost pressures from every direction, there is less and less that they can sustain on their own initiative. All of them are finding they must rely on the National Science Foundation, and the now seriously endangered National Endowments for the Humanities and the Arts, for an evermore decisive share of the support needed for their faculties' research.

Peer review, competitive peer pressure in assessing not merely the quality but the priority of research programs, is the principle on which those great national programs have to be based. This is an indispensable principle for any competition among heterogeneous scholarly competitors. As the process has been conducted and refined for two generations and more, it deserves as spirited a defense as universities can give it. But it has one fundamental drawback, a tendency to overvalue novelty under the rationale that only the novel can constitute the "cutting edge" of worthwhile discovery.

The federal government finds other ways to provide long-term support for mega-projects—the great accelerators like Fermilab, the mapping of the human genome, the indefinitely extended pursuit of fusion power. But most of academic science, and all of the humanities, are not on this scale. There is some real danger that too large a share of our most vital research, and our best researchers, will succumb to a drift toward shallowness of time-perspective as these pressures intensify.

I have had many occasions to reflect on this during my last decade in Washington. In most respects, the Smithsonian is a very different kind of institution than a research university. On the National Mall in Washington, in effect the U.S. National (complex of) Museums, it is directly and continuously embedded in American life. There is no filter on the constituencies who participate, comparable to the screening that goes on during the matriculation process that defines the standards of admission to a university community. Everybody is free to enter, and indeed welcomed. Every taxpaying citizen can even claim a sense of sharing is its proprietorship—and many do!

The Smithsonian has a primary, direct responsibility for speaking to, and of, this country's diverse cultural as well as scientific composition and traditions, and if people disagree with the way we are doing it we hear from them. Most important, it is much more difficult for the Smithsonian to maintain a stance of scholarly detachment from the immediate demands of our currently polarized political and cultural processes.

But fortunately, there is another side to the coin, a respect in which the comparison with the Oriental Institute becomes more operative. There are a number of first-rate Smithsonian research programs that receive little public attention because their audience typically numbers in the thousands rather than the millions. Yet in a few key areas the Smithsonian has found a way to share with the Oriental Institute the capability for really long-term, committed scholarship. This is true, for example, of the Smithsonian Astrophysical Observatory, its laboratories maintained jointly with Harvard University in Cambridge, and its instruments in Arizona—and, soon to open, Hawaii. Or the multidisciplinary Tropical Research Institute in Panama, the greatest of its kind in the world. Or of fundamental work in systematic biology at the

National Museum of Natural History, carried out on upper floors while vast crowds mill through the exhibits below. And in our art and history museums as well.

This matter of long-term commitments that are needed to study giant, slow-moving processes—in cosmology, in evolutionary biology, and in human affairs as well—is not one to be passed over lightly. *La longue durée* has become a watchword for archaeologists as well as historians. In field after field, the lament is heard that scholarship today tends to come in smaller and smaller bites—not only more specialized but foreshortened in scope, ambition, imagination, and synthetic power. To take just the ancient Near Eastern field, I had the pleasure of participating not long ago in a conference on the centenary of William F. Albright's birth, and was struck by the pessimistic tone that was repeatedly and independently sounded in a whole succession of papers: "... a barren theoretical moment"; "... no secret that ancient Near Eastern studies are in danger in American universities"; "... Why this avoidance of interpretation? ... Where are the grand designs? Where are the synthetic thinkers?"

I tend to think there is a kind of Gresham's Law operating here, the one that tells us bad money drives out good. Short-term, quickly and neatly completed undertakings, "normal science" in Thomas Kuhn's sense, in the mainstream of their disciplines, are not bad money, to be sure. But in any consensual view that is reached by those who are constrained to carry out these kinds of undertakings only, such proposals have an inordinate rate of success. In a world of scarce resources, that success is at the expense of others whose visionary qualities offer greater prospects of altering our fundamental understandings, but which are correspondingly more needful of long-term support and less assured of immediate success.

Yet it is also true that, in a time of chronically declining resources and soaring needs, a field of scholarship cannot succeed against other claimants by narrowing its reach and influence—by preaching only to declining numbers of the converted. From that perspective, I would like to urge that there is a place for a greater effort to identify—and for a wider audience—the significance of the past for the present. In the present climate of budgetary deficits and resource constraints, it is difficult for me to see how, otherwise, we can prevent the study of ancient Near Eastern civilizations from simply beginning to wither.

This is not a matter of offering a commentary on the massive sea-changes in institutions and relationships that are going all around us today. The University of Chicago is amply provided with other scholars who make this their primary business. But there is room for a greater effort to allow people to see that there was more to the ancient past than the production of timeless artistic monuments that can be left by and large to speak for themselves.

Consider the enormous changes that have gone on in a single generation in the role of women in this society. Was the ancient Near East as totally, almost stereotypically, different as the textbooks usually describe it? What and how do we know about real gender differences—and more importantly, the variability that went on around those norms—in status, role, and behavior? What are the limitations of our sources on the subject?

Or again, consider the tremendous importance we are currently attributing to ethnic and group identities. Has it always been thus? What are the classic problems when elements of human individuality are forced into the straitjacketed stereotypes of group identities? I, personally, will never forget the evocative power of

Momigliano's discussions here in this university of the mutual perceptions of Greeks and Jews and Persians as an introduction to the common humanity of Ancients and Moderns.

One could go on at length in this vein—as, indeed, did some of our distinguished forerunners in this venerable institution. What were visions of the Good Life? What were the torments of the Righteous Sufferer? How did the defeated, or the merely wretched, impoverished, and enslaved, apprehend the hierarchies of power, and often the tyranny, from which they generally could not escape? With what resignation or anguish did they come to terms with illness and death? How far, from the other direction, was the written corpus manipulated as a mechanism of social control (as Mario Liverani argues may have happened unconsciously earlier, but by Old Babylonian times may have become a self-conscious intention)?

My sense is that, if we look back with any honesty at the discussions of these and similar themes that were almost an obligatory part of general works on the ancient Near East of, say, two generations ago, we will find ourselves at least faintly uncomfortable. We are no longer so accepting of narrow moral rectitude and prudishness, of a resort to comfortable platitudes. From another direction, we are also more aware of the obscurities, ambiguities, and imperfections of all communications systems that distort or interrupt the purportedly smooth sequence as thought is translated into message, as that is transmitted, received, and interpreted, and as the instruction or intention is finally reflected in some consequent action or response. Our own experience in the world as we know it brings us continuously face to face with such complexity and diversity that we are enmeshed in impossible contradictions of thought and behavior to which those older precepts provide no adequate guide, or even compass. But still more troubling is the fact that today it has become so rare even to try to look at the past in terms of present sensitivities.

The Smithsonian counts some twenty-eight million visitors a year as they enter the doors of its fifteen museums, at our best guess some nine million or so individuals each making several such entries. We know something about visitors, and about how their attitudes are changing. One thing we know is that the public no longer takes the authority of specialists for granted. Now partly, this is a destructive attitude—a corrosive suspicion of all knowledge and of the fruits of education and disciplined work. But it is also partly a valid reflection of the advance of knowledge itself. It is an advance that has brought us face to face with the reflexive as well as contingent character of all of the methods we use and the assumptions we make and the fragile structures of hypothesis we erect on “facts” that for a time we treat as both solid and significant.

Skepticism is the order of the day among modern museum-goers. How do you know that? What are your own biases? Why do you give so much emphasis to such-and-such, and not to the more basic questions that disturb and interest viewers like me? Why can't a museum be a place of dialogue, a forum for the asking of questions and the exchange of views rather than a temple where we can only silently read your *ex cathedra* pronouncements on your exhibit labels? In archaeology and ancient history, of all subjects, where the empirical base for virtually everything you are telling us is so slender, why can't we learn more about how contingent knowledge is produced, and challenged, and changed?

We must continue to emphasize, in other words, that the Oriental Institute is a museum as well as a research institute. For there to be an effective dialogue with



the past, the two functions should be seen as elements in a common design and certainly not be fashioned in isolation from one another. Both are repositories of treasures that can speak to the world. But we should not be surprised or disappointed if, at least in the first instance, the messages the world receives are not the same as the messages we think we are transmitting.

Another issue on which present sensitivities would suggest that more can be said is the environment. We are preoccupied, of course, with the fateful, disturbing place that we humans now occupy in it. Natural resources are not really natural at all, as Carl Sauer once said: they are cultural appraisals. The same is true of the whole, complex ecosystems in which we insert ourselves, then belatedly becoming conscious of the effects of our having done so. What were the selective ways in which the ancients perceived, and used, and misused, both the resources and the larger settings of their environments? We can dispose at once of the idea that the world of the past was benign, and that all that is shortsighted, destructive, and predatory is recent. Then and only then will this aspect of the past begin to live for us.

A special function of studies of the ancient Near East, it seems to me, involves the contribution it can make to the general standards of education of our time. We live in a society that exhibits an absolutely alarming sense of indifference or amnesia even about its own recent past. There is a casual preference for irresponsible myth-making rather than for the rigors and inevitable ambiguities of critical history. Questions of change and continuity are manipulated for partisan ends today, not systematically—and often not honestly—addressed. Looking to the remote past, and especially to a past where continuities were taken on faith even as the content within them may have undergone change without people having recognized the changes, can make a contribution here. It is a way, I would hope, to reawaken an interest in the more responsible study of our own past—not only how it continues to shape our own perceptions, aspirations, and actions, but also how we continuously reshape its meaning.

---