



News & Notes

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THE ORIENTAL INSTITUTE MUSEUM - FIFTY YEARS ON

By John Carswell



Art-Deco poster of the early 1930's showing the Berlin head of Nefertiti superimposed over the winged bull from Khorsabad.

The Oriental Institute Museum, completed half a century ago, was the fulfillment of James Henry Breasted's plan that there be a "treasure house of the past" on the University of Chicago campus, to provide a better understanding of "the unfolding life of man". When the museum opened in 1931, it embodied his vision of the past. The organization of a museum, however, is rather like writing history, for each new generation interprets the facts in a different way. In a museum, the objects are the facts, and how they are presented is a basic question that always has to be resolved anew. This is not just a matter of style, for more important is what the museum is trying to say. For presenting changing views of the ancient world, museums have always been powerful didactic tools.

The museum of the Oriental Institute is just such a case in point. It has grown from a modest collection of antiquities assembled at the University of Chicago at the end of the 19th century, to the present collection of over 65,000 registered objects. During this period it has mirrored the interests and preoccupations of the Oriental Institute as a research organization, itself in the process of evolution.

The first collection was presented by Mrs. Caroline Haskell in 1894, to the Haskell Oriental Museum, built in memory of her husband. The same building housed the Departments of Comparative Religion and Semitic Languages. The unexpected addition of the Divinity School severely limited the space left for the museum; nevertheless a small collection was put on display. This included both Near and Far Eastern objects; the Near Eastern antiquities were mostly purchased by Breasted in 1894-5, and supplemented by objects from the Egypt Exploration Fund and the field work of Sir Flinders Petrie, in return for financial support from Chicago. After the first world war, the collection was expanded to cover systematically the whole of the ancient Near East, from the Institute's own field expeditions, and by purchase. Many important items were bought by Breasted himself, who was keenly aware of the importance of material in various dealers' hands.

From the start Breasted realized that while the objects were primarily of scholarly interest, there was a public interest which also had to be considered. Breasted was nothing if not pragmatic and realized how the objects on display might arouse interest, particularly within the University, in the work of the newly-created Oriental Institute.

Old photographs of Haskell Hall in the early days show that the material was decently, if unimaginatively, displayed, following the current precept, which was to have as much material as possible on view. A change came about in 1925, when the Divinity School found new quarters in Swift Hall

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The Oriental Institute Museum - Fifty Years On (Continued)

Haskell Oriental Museum. Interior, Southeast corner of north room with antiquities collected by James Henry Breasted during 1919-20.

and the Far Eastern material also found a new home. This meant that the remaining Near Eastern material could be re-displayed, and new cases were built for this purpose at the Art Institute of Chicago. The new scheme was surprisingly modern for its time, and the enlarged collection now contained Egyptian, Assyrian, Babylonian and Hittite artifacts.

But such was the flow of material from the field expeditions that both exhibition and storage space were quickly exhausted. With characteristic foresight Breasted had already decided that this was the moment to press for the construction of a new museum, and indeed a new Oriental Institute building into the bargain. As he himself phrased it, "the totally inadequate facilities in Haskell Hall, where no central administrative office space was available, seriously hampered efficient work and would soon cripple the growth of the Institute". On a more personal level, he said, "the business papers massed on the Director's desk were excluding the claims of Science."

A saviour was at hand, in the person of John D. Rockefeller, Jr., who was interested in Breasted's work and whose close connection with the Institute was spurred on by a visit in his company to the Near East in 1929, to see the field work in progress. As a result of this trip, a new building was endowed, the staff and scope of the Oriental Institute greatly increased, and a prime site chosen for the new building on the same block as Rockefeller Chapel. Plans were drawn up by the New York firm of architects, Mayers, Murray and Philips, in an eclectic style combining late Gothic, Near Eastern and Art Deco elements. Thanks to the Depression, when building commenced, cheaper costs allowed a much more extensive building than had originally been planned.

The move to the new building also heralded an awareness of the multiple functions of the museum within the framework of a research institute. Much thought was given in the planning to ancillary services, such as space in the basement for registration, exhibition preparation, storage, photography and study areas. In the galleries, instead of cramming as much as possible into the cases, the objects were displayed in spacious and attractive surroundings. The philosophy behind this might be called the "Winged Victory" approach; as in the Louvre, the eye is caught by a single large piece of sculpture, to act as a focus for the whole gallery. In the Oriental Institute museum, the fixed points became the Assyrian winged bull, a Khorsabad relief, the Ishtar Gate, and the bull's head from Persepolis.

The remainder of the galleries was divided with a series of alcoves, with permanent partitions just above head height, allowing the maximum amount of display space whilst still leaving the sense of the gallery as a whole unimpeded. The installation of elaborate polished brass gates at the entrance created a dramatic effect - rather like the entrance to a bank vault. The space was further enhanced by specially designed neo-oriental "Tiffany" lamps, suspended on chains from the concrete ceiling beams, themselves elegantly stencilled with oriental patterns. To the extent that the original layout still survives, especially in the Egyptian Hall, it was clearly successful; a large amount of material was displayed in dignified and visually impressive surroundings. Indeed, when the museum opened in 1931 it was such a success that over 50,000 visitors came in the first six months, completely exhausting the resources of the staff to deal with them. It was as a solution to this unexpected flow of visitors that Breasted hit on the idea of a "talkie", - "The Human Adventure", - a moving-picture ac-

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The Oriental Institute Museum - Fifty Years On (Continued)

count of the Institute's work in Chicago and throughout the Near East. This would be shown to visitors on arrival and help them to orientate themselves in the galleries, by explaining the context from which the objects had come.

Of most interest today is the manner in which the space was apportioned. The galleries were divided into five geographical or cultural areas: Egyptian, Assyrian, Assyro-Babylonian, Persian-Moslem, Hittite and Palestinian. A guide published in 1932 makes clear Breasted's intention; inside the cover is a map of the Middle East, with the Fertile Crescent hatched in prominently and large stars to mark the site of the Institute's field operations. The introduction states,

"It will be seen that these staffs in Western Asia, operating from six centers, are disclosing the Highland civilization of the north and, on the south of it, the various cultures of the Fertile Crescent from those of the Hebrews and their predecessors in Palestine on the west to those of Assyria and Babylonia in the east. The interplay of cultural influences between the peoples of the Highland Zone and those of the Fertile Crescent eventually produced a composite Near Eastern civilization which, in its turn, was from the beginning interpenetrating with Egypt."

The museum was thus to be an expression of Breasted's view of human evolution from prehistoric to Islamic times. Nor was the actual conduct of research neglected; the Persian-Moslem Hall contained displays of field operations in progress, with photographs and plans and even details of the excavators' living accommodation. And in the last alcove of the Palestinian-Hittite hall, the visitor saw massed before him all the scholarly publications of the Oriental Institute, which by coincidence is the same place chosen for the current special exhibition of recent similar publications ("Publishing the Past", April-June 1982).

What Breasted intended was that the visitor should become immersed not only in the material remains of the ancient world, but also in the Institute's role in deciphering the interpreting the evidence. Quite early on, he realised that one of the major difficulties, as far as the mass of the public was concerned, was the distance of the Institute from the center of Chicago. One solution, like the "talkie", was both ingenious and characteristic. A poster was produced, not only advertising the museum, but also drawing attention to other aspects of campus life; Rockefeller Chapel with its carillon and organ recitals, walks round the Quadrangles, and important lectures to attend, all dominated by the image of Nefertiti - and the Oriental Institute. A journey to the Oriental Institute was transformed into a package deal.



Haskell Oriental Museum Interior, view of North Egyptian room, looking north.



Cover of the promotional pamphlet which advertised "The Human Adventure", about 1934.

After Breasted died in 1935 his all-embracing view of the Institute and its activities suffered a reverse, as a result of a drastic cut-back in funds. Resources were concentrated on research and publication, and the public program limited to the maintenance of existing facilities and the general lecture series. After the second world war, a major rearrangement of the museum was undertaken by Pinhas Delougaz, assisted by Helene Kantor. A second change was the total redesign of the Mesopotamian Hall, under Judith Franke's direction, which was completed in 1976. Since then, the Palestinian Hall has been redisplayed and modified so that it can also be used for special exhibitions. Work has begun throughout the museum, cleaning the galleries and improving displays, lighting and security.

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May 1, 1930. Beginning work on the construction site for the New Oriental Institute Building.



Main entrance of The Oriental Institute Museum building, including new "Special Events" sign, installed Spring 1981. Photograph by Jean Grant

Almost as soon as the Oriental Institute was completed in 1931, plans were made to enlarge it, and as early as 1933 a scheme was drawn up to extend the building on the south side. After the war, a further plan was made by an Italian architect to split the Institute in two horizontally, with the insertion of a mezzanine floor, and a roof over the central courtyard. Fortunately nothing came of the Italian project, which would have devastated the interior of the building.

What does the future hold? That the museum, and the Institute as a whole, has gradually grown over the years until it is now desperately short of space is self-evident. At least for the short term, a more effective use of the existing premises is desirable. That more efficient use can be made has been proved by the recent adaption of storage and working areas. The Suq shop has greatly expanded its commercial operation through judicious planning of the tiny space it occupies; in addition, the late Dr. Fazlur Kahn was responsible for Skidmore, Owings and Merrill preparing an entirely new plan, which it is hoped will one day be implemented.

As for the museum, the primary concern will always be the preservation of the collection, for study and research by future generations of scholars and students. Increasing sophistication in scientific investigation of ancient artifacts makes it imperative that they should be kept in optimum condition. Organic material only has a limited life span, and inorganic material, such as metal and stone, is equally vulnerable to the vicis-

situdes of climate and atmospheric change.

But apart from conservation, for the museum there is another obligation as well. The majority of the objects on display are detached from their original Near Eastern environment, and if they are to make any sense at all to the general public, they must be explained in relation to the ancient cultures which produced them. In this act of interpretation, the Volunteer docents are invaluable, acting as a vital link between the scholars at the Oriental Institute and the general public.

An elderly curator at the British Museum once defined the art of display as putting an object in the middle of a case in natural light with the label neatly centered below. We have come a long way since then. It is the aim of the Oriental Institute museum to progress further still, in maintaining its unique collection in the best possible condition, and assuring that the knowledge of the past inherent in each object is expressed in the most coherent and effective way.

John Carswell is Curator of the Museum and Research Associate (Professor) at the Oriental Institute. Born in London, he lived in the Near East for over twenty-five years before coming to Chicago in 1977. Besides his activities as a scholar and archaeologist, he has mounted numerous exhibitions throughout the world.



Tuesday, May 18, the Museum will celebrate "Museum Day in Illinois" by offering free films on the ancient Near East. These include selections from our regular Sunday free film series: "Egypt, Gift of the Nile," "Iraq, Stairway to the Gods," "Iran, Landmarks in the Desert," and "Turkey, Crossroads of the Ancient World." These half-hour films will be shown in Breasted Hall at 10:15, 11:45, 1:15 and 2:45. The special feature film at 3:30 will be a 1934 documentary conceived by James Breasted, "The Human Adventure." Contemporary publicity described it as "an eight-reel talking picture sketching Man's Rise from Savagery to Civilization." It features the work of field expeditions of the Oriental Institute in Egypt, Palestine, Iraq and Iran in the 1930's, as well as research ongoing at the time at the Oriental Institute in Chicago. It is also a fascinating early documentary of interest to film historians everywhere.

MAY LECTURES

Henri-Paul Francfort of the CNRS in Paris will present an illustrated lecture on *Recent Archaeological Investigations in Afghanistan*. This lecture will be presented on Monday, May 3 at 8:00 P.M. in Breasted Hall.

McGuire Gibson, Professor at the Oriental Institute and the Department of Near Eastern Languages and Civilization, will present an illustrated lecture *Assyrians at Nippur* on Wednesday, May 19 at 8:00 P.M. in Breasted Hall.

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A Bouquet of Summer Courses at The Oriental Institute



THE LIFE OF THE COMMON MAN IN ANCIENT EGYPT

In studying ancient Egypt we usually focus upon royalty, political history, religion and the pyramids, while neglecting the lives of the common people. This course will consider the various aspects of society which affected the lives of the common people, focusing on such topics as the structure of Egyptian society; the Egyptian educational system and the opportunities it presented to the lower classes for advancement; Egyptian occupations and industry; medicine in Egypt; the position of women in society including social equality and women's rights; love and marriage; legal aspects of marriage; organization of labor; building techniques; mathematics and astronomy; and the Egyptian legal system with regard to crime and punishment.

Lecturer: Peter Piccione

THE SEA PEOPLES: WHERE, WHO, HOW, WHY?

"Northerners coming from all lands. . .no country could stand before their arms. . .their league was Shardanu, Peleset, Tjeker, Shekelesh, Denyen." So wrote the scribes of 19th Dynasty Egypt, but the Egyptian records give us only tantalizing glimpses, not a full account, of the mysterious, militant group of homeless wanderers known collectively as the Sea Peoples. They appear in the eastern Mediterranean at a time when established societies of the Late Bronze Age world were beset with tremendous external and internal stresses, stresses

The Museum will be open on the Memorial Day holiday, Monday, May 31, from 12 noon until 4:00 p.m., to help the CTA inaugurate another season of Culture Bus operation. Departing from the front of the Art Institute at Michigan and Adams, the Culture Bus will make southside runs every Sunday and holiday through late spring and summer. For Culture Bus information, call the CTA at 836-7000.

that for some proved ultimately fatal. It was an era that saw the collapse of the wealthy and complex Mycenaean civilization, the disappearance of the powerful Hittite empire, the destruction of countless cities and towns along the Levantine coast and on Cyprus and the advance of foreign invaders to the borders of Egypt. Were the Sea peoples the authors of this chaos, or were they its victims, just as were the last inhabitants of Mycenae, Hatti, Ugarit and Enkomi? The course seeks to answer this and other questions about the Sea Peoples by examining the archaeological, historical and textual evidence bearing on them and on the Late Bronze Age peoples with whom they came in contact: Greeks and Hittites, Syrians and Cypriots, Egyptians and Canaanites.

Portions of three lectures will be devoted to gallery tours and museum and basement laboratory sessions, to illustrate with artifacts the ancient cultures being discussed.

Lecturer: Joe Greene

INTRODUCTION TO EGYPTIAN HIEROGLYPHS

We again are offering our popular introductory course in Hieroglyphs. These classes will give the beginner a good introduction to the writing and grammar of the language.

Lecturer: John Larson

All courses are held on Saturdays from 10:00 to noon in the Oriental Institute. The courses will start on June 19, 1982 and will last for eight sessions. No courses are scheduled for the July 4th weekend.

Tuition is \$50 for members or \$70 for non-members (which includes a membership in the Oriental Institute).

REGISTRATION FORM

Please register me for the following Members' Course

- The Life of the Common Man in Ancient Egypt (\$50 tuition)
- The Sea Peoples: Where, Who, How, Why? (\$50 tuition)
- Introduction to Egyptian Hieroglyphs (\$50 tuition)
- I am a member
- I am not a member, but enclose a separate check for \$20 to cover a one year membership

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Please make all checks payable to THE ORIENTAL INSTITUTE. Please register by Thursday, June 17, 1982.

MAIL TO: Membership Secretary, The Oriental Institute, 1155 E. 58th St., Chicago, IL 60637.



The Oriental Institute

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