

ARTIFACTS ALSO DIE

AN EXHIBITION OF RUINS AND RENEWAL

by Kiersten Neumann

Curating an exhibition of contemporary art comes with the incredible opportunity of collaborating with living artists to realize together how to give voice and vision to their work. *Artifacts Also Die*, the latest special exhibition at the Institute for the Study of Ancient Cultures (ISAC) Museum, provided me with such an opportunity—a most memorable and inspiring one at that! For this exhibition, I had the distinctive fortune to work with internationally acclaimed Iraqi-British artist and academic Dr. Hanaa Malallah in curating a discrete iteration of her larger collaborative project *Ruins, Rubble, and Renewal: Co-existent Ruins—Exploring Iraq’s Mesopotamian Past through Contemporary Art*. Both Hanaa and I saw this exhibition as a truly singular opportunity to bring a selection of artworks from *Ruins, Rubble, and Renewal* into conversation with artifacts and archival documents from the ISAC Museum collections, and with the history, aspirations, and audiences of ISAC more generally. Notably, *Artifacts Also Die* is the first special exhibition to take place under the institute’s new name (formerly *Oriental Institute*), situating this provocative installation within an enlivened period of institutional reflection and transition.

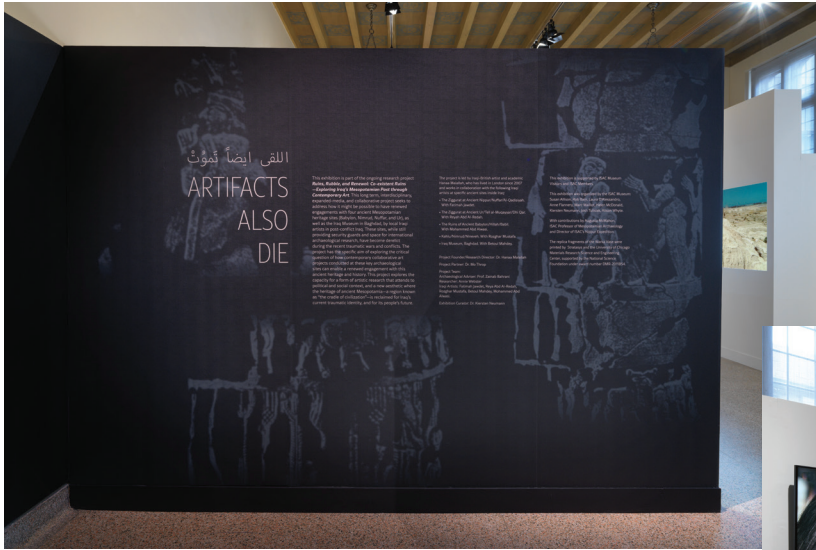
Artifacts Also Die opened to the public on April 5, 2023, bringing Hanaa’s timely and thought-provoking work to the University of Chicago campus and the city of Chicago. As noted, the exhibition is part of the larger ongoing research project *Ruins, Rubble, and Renewal* and features videos, photographs, and drawings created by Hanaa and other Iraqi artists, including Reyah Abd Al-Redah, Mohammed Abd Alwasi, Fatimah Jawdet, Betoul Mahdey, and Rozghar Mustafa (figs. 1–5).

“Ruins” and “rubble” have been something of a constant in Hanaa’s life—they are not only a pair of nouns but also concepts that describe both the physical landscape she experienced during her years in Iraq and the motivations behind much of her past and ongoing work. Hanaa was born in the southeastern province of Dhi Qar—on the outskirts of the archaeological site of Ur—and was raised in the city of Baghdad, where she later worked and taught. Two types of ruined landscapes mark her decades-long experience in Iraq: Mesopotamian archaeological sites and cities devastated by war and conflict. Her first solo exhibition, *Documents of Archaeological Museum Visits*, was held at the Baghdad Museum of Modern Art (named the Saddam Hussein Art Center at the time) in 1991—a year when much of the city was reduced to rubble. When Hanaa fled Iraq—moving first to Paris in 2006 for an artist residency at the Institut du Monde Arab and then to London in 2008—she was afforded a new perspective on these landscapes, and with this came a sense of renewal and its related artistic inspiration.

In 2016—while creating the video “Drone Hits the Ziggurat of Ur” (fig. 3, second from left)—Hanaa was inspired to foster a group research project through which she would bring together Iraqi artists to collectively explore new ways of reengaging with archaeological sites and local museums in post-conflict Iraq. Artistic drive and curiosity motivated her to attempt to answer the question: What does a local interpretation of Iraq’s heritage and history look like? The title of the project that resulted from this initiative perfectly captures its disparate yet complementary sentiments—ruins, rubble, and renewal. The project, Hanaa says, “engages with ancient heritage as a reciprocal relationship with the unbroken continuity of its history; where ruins and its attendant rubble enable creative responses, where past and present merge into new possibilities, as renewal.” Here, Mesopotamian ruins are presented as a life-giving force, monuments and materials that emote a positive and transformative energy and that contrast with the undertone of disintegration of modern urban landscapes upended by recent wars and conflicts. Through an assortment of media (videos, photographs, and drawings), research papers, workshops, exhibitions, and site performances, Hanaa and her team recontextualize these ancient Mesopotamian sites, offering new interpretations and visual expressions through innovative and distinctive artistic responses.

Babylon, Nimrud (ancient Kalhu), Nuffar (ancient Nippur), and Ur are the four archaeological sites that inspired the media exhibited in *Artifacts Also Die*. Additional content connects with the collections of the Iraq Museum as well as a Victorian painting (the *Portrait of Lady Layard*) that includes a depiction of a jewelry collection crafted of Mesopotamian seals. For example, drone footage, a symbol of the present digital age, captures Reyah Abd Al-Redah praying on the summit of the ziggurat at Ur, a third-millennium BCE monument excavated in the 1920s and restored in the 1960s (fig. 6). Through photography taken inside ISAC’s excavation dig house at Nuffar, Fatimah Jawdat assimilates her own identity and embodied experience as a local inhabitant into this site’s complex history (fig. 7). Another photograph shows Mohammed Abd Alwasi wearing assorted headgear (a military helmet, an aristocrat’s hat, and traditional Iraqi headgear), mimicking a scene in a 1917 archival film in which British troops, upon entering Babylon, wave their military helmets, while the Iraqi site guard next to them could not (fig. 8).

Alongside these artworks, *Artifacts Also Die* uniquely presents artifacts and archival documents connected with ISAC’s archaeological excavations and research in Iraq, dating from the 1920s to the present. Accompanying the installation on Nimrud, for example, is



TOP TO BOTTOM: Figures 1-5. Installation photographs of *Artifacts Also Die*, 2023.

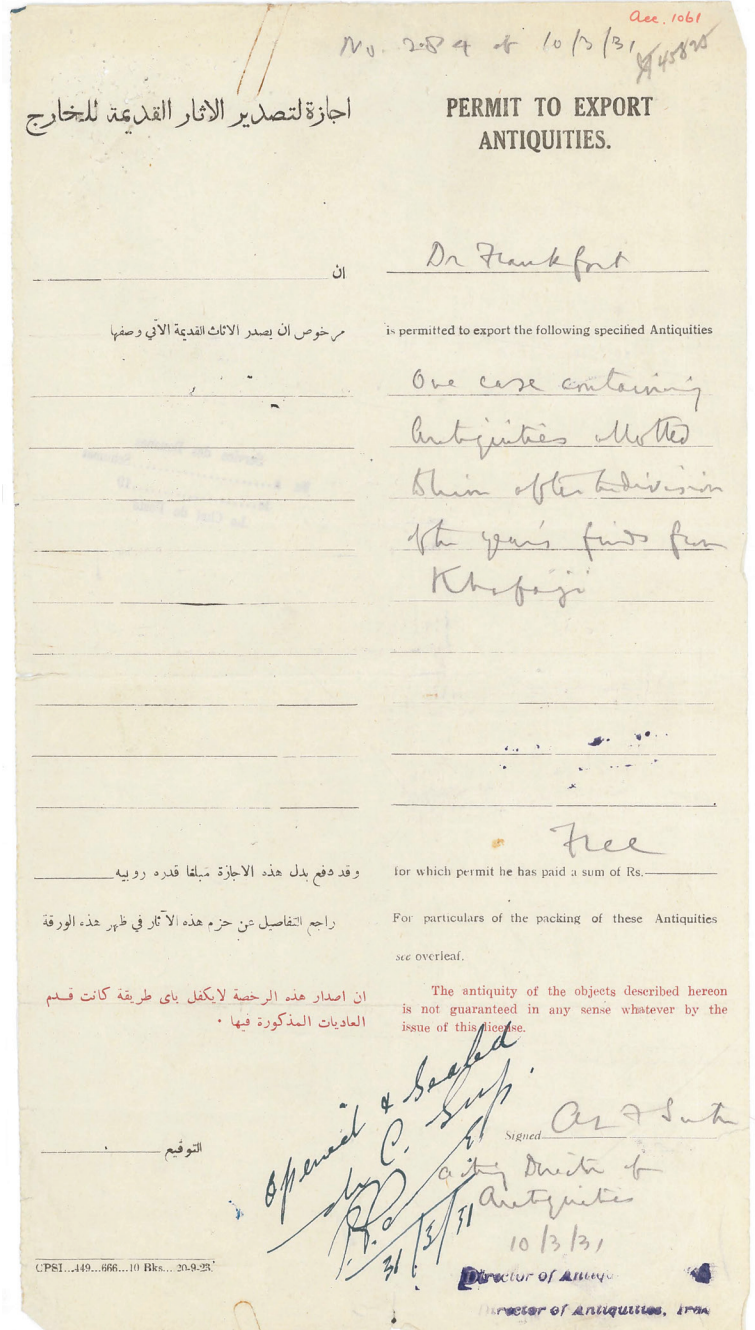


an inscribed Assyrian wall relief fragment from Khorsabad (ancient Dur-Sharrukin) (fig. 9): this artifact resonates with the damaged, inscribed relief panel of an *apkallu* (mythological figure) shown in the video “Walking the Path” by Rozghar Mustafa (fig. 2, right of center). The installation “Archaeological Archival Coding,” which includes photographs of artifacts from the Iraq Museum with registration numbers, also displays a group of numbered objects and archival documents (e.g., an export permit and customs form) from the ISAC Museum (fig. 10); these documents speak to the movement of these artifacts from Iraq to Chicago between the 1930s and 1950s as part of the division of finds from ISAC’s Iraq Expedition. The installation of the *Portrait of Lady Layard* includes Hanaa’s edited version of the painting, which shows Lady Layard wearing the “Bomb Wreck Jewelry” made by Dutch jewelers in collaboration with Dutch visual artist Jonas Staal and created from the wreckage of two car bombs that exploded on Al-Mutanabbi Street in Baghdad on March 5, 2007 (fig. 11, left). Helping to visually articulate these works are cylinder and stamp seals from the ISAC Museum that are arranged in the shape of the painted necklace; an additional pair of seals have gold suspension loops of modern origin (added prior to the seals’ acquisition by ISAC), similar to the gold settings of the seals for Lady Layard’s jewelry (fig. 11, right).

An additional part of *Artifacts Also Die* is displayed in the ISAC Museum’s orientation area: an installation focused on the fourth-millennium BCE alabaster Warka Vase (fig. 12). Named after the archaeological site where it was excavated in the early twentieth century, the vase is one of the earliest preserved examples of sculptured narrative works from Mesopotamia. Here, visitors experience two large-scale banners of the vase, a video showing the vase falling to pieces, and replica fragments of the vase (3D printed and to scale) scattered across a large print of the archaeological site. Through these works, Hanaa interrogates our relationship with the planet, both emphasizing the vase’s depiction of the Mesopotamian ecosystem and symbolic renewal and challenging the present disregard and destruction of the planet’s natural system.

The beginnings of the discipline of Mesopotamian archaeology cannot be divorced from European and American colonialism. Colonial frames of reference and Western-centric viewpoints have therefore often led the conversation and presentation of the history of this region. *Artifacts Also Die* seeks to shift this tradition by offering different, renewed, and reengaged perspectives of this heritage through the work of local Iraqi artists and researchers, both in Iraq and in the diaspora. On view to the public exactly twenty years after the United States–led invasion of Iraq, this exhibition connects visitors not only with the Mesopotamian past but also with the present and future of Iraq and its people. Hanaa explains: “Our artistic explorations therefore allow another relation to time, one where we can imagine a future in which our past always intervenes and mobilizes us. Our Mesopotamian ruins now allow us to time-travel and imagine different futures.”

For additional content and visitor information, visit the special exhibition webpage: isac.uchicago.edu/artifacts.



OPPOSITE TOP: Figure 6. Screenshot from the video "Drone Circumambulation." Reyah Abd Al-Redah, 2019.

OPPOSITE MIDDLE: Figure 7. "Dig House at Nuffar." Fatimah Jawdat, 2018.

OPPOSITE BOTTOM: Figure 8. "Accumulated Headgear." Mohammad Abd Alwasi, 2017.

ABOVE TOP LEFT: Figure 9. Inscribed relief fragment from Khorsabad. ISAC Museum (A58018).

ABOVE BOTTOM LEFT AND ABOVE RIGHT: Figure 10. (a) Gypsum sculpture fragment from Khafajah. ISAC Museum (A12431). (b) Permit to Export Antiquities excavated at Khafajah, 1931.



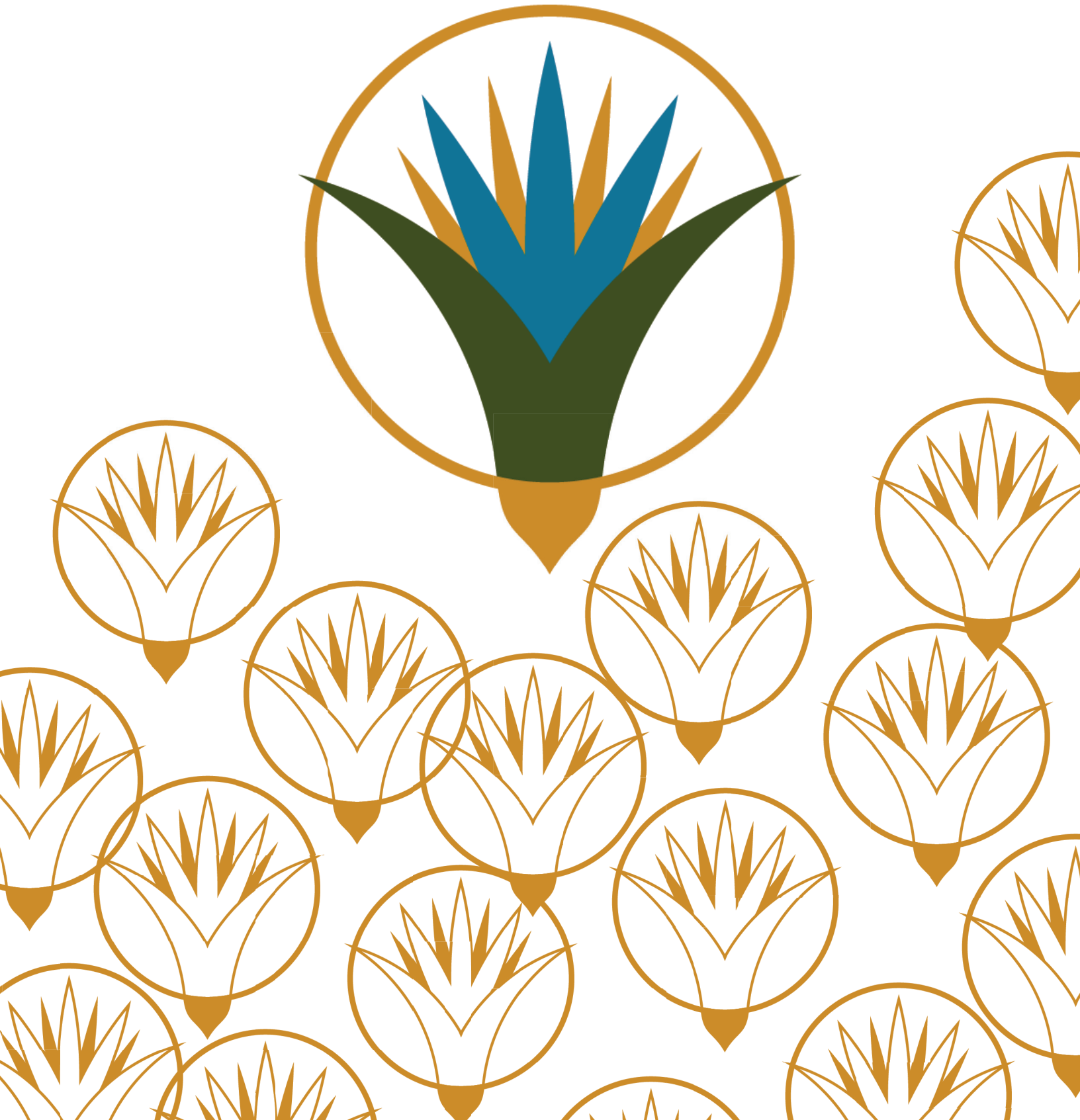
TOP: Figure 11. Installation of the *Portrait of Lady Layard* by Vicente Palmaroli y González, 1870 (© The Trustees of the British Museum, BM 16,1-12-1980) and the version edited by Hanaa Malallah to include the “Bomb Wreck Jewelry,” 2021, alongside cylinder and stamp seals from the ISAC Museum.

BOTTOM: Figure 12. Warka Vase installation.

News & Notes

MEMBERS' MAGAZINE

ISSUE 254 | SPRING/SUMMER 2023



IN THIS ISSUE

INSTITUTE FOR THE STUDY OF ANCIENT CULTURES

ISAC Name Change Reception	4
A New Name for the Next Century	6
Theo van den Hout	
The Lotus across West Asia and North Africa	8
Kiersten Neumann	
Explaining the Words "Orient" and "Oriental"	18
Tasha Vorderstrasse	
Benno Landsberger	20
Peter Raulwing and Luděk Vacín	
Artifacts Also Die	26
Kiersten Neumann	
Events & Screenings	31
Interview with Marc Maillot	32
Shirlee Hoffman	
The Kiosk Project	34
Marc Maillot	

1155 EAST 58TH STREET
CHICAGO, ILLINOIS 60637

WEBSITE

isac.uchicago.edu

MEMBERSHIP INFORMATION

773.702.9513

isac-membership@uchicago.edu

MUSEUM INFORMATION/HOURS

isac.uchicago.edu/museum-exhibits

SUQ GIFT AND BOOK SHOP

773.702.9510

isac-suq@uchicago.edu

ADMINISTRATIVE OFFICE

773.702.9514

isac-administration@uchicago.edu

CREDITS

EDITORS: Matt Welton, Rebecca Cain, Drew Baumann, and Tasha Vorderstrasse

DESIGNERS: Rebecca Cain and Matt Welton

News & Notes is a quarterly publication of the Institute for the Study of Ancient Cultures, printed exclusively as one of the privileges of membership.

ON THE COVER: The ISAC logo

