

The Middle East Galleries at the University of Pennsylvania Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology, Philadelphia: A Permanent Exhibit

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The University of Pennsylvania Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology, informally called the Penn Museum, occupies a storied place in the development of the discipline of Near Eastern Studies in the United States. Founded in 1887 specifically for objects acquired through excavations in Mesopotamia and housed in its current location since 1899, the museum has a reputation in the field for its research-focused orientation and, since 1970 when it declared it would no longer acquire undocumented materials, its strong ethical stance regarding illicit antiquities.¹ The Penn Museum boasts a collection of Near Eastern antiquities of which more than 90% come from controlled excavations, an achievement shared in North America only by the Oriental Institute Museum of the University of Chicago. It also maintains a close relationship with the different research units of the university, including a tradition of faculty curators that continues today. Well over a century after its founding, the Penn Museum has embarked on a major campaign to transform the museum, both physically, through a reinstallation of all its galleries, and conceptually, in a greater integration of its teaching, research, and public faces. In April 2018, the first phase of this transformation was unveiled with the new Middle East galleries (the Levantine, Egyptian, African, and Mesoamerican galleries are slated for future reinstallation). Occupying 6,000 ft.² in three main spaces, an entirely redesigned and reimagined exhibition space now houses around 1,200 objects from Iran and Iraq.

That almost all the exhibited objects derive from excavations means that the collections are endowed with a rich contextualization that sheds light on social, economic, political, and religious aspects of the ancient societies. Because these excavations were motivated and undertaken by diverse faculty at the University of Pennsylvania and represent individual research interests and agendas, the collection is not, however, comprehensive in either its geographical or its temporal expanses. Sites from which objects were acquired, through the now defunct antiquities law of *partage*, are concentrated

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¹ For an overview of the history of the Penn Museum and discussion of the new gallery exhibit, see Pittman 2019.

in Iraq and Iran. For this reason, the curators opted to highlight individual sites, organizing them chronologically from the Neolithic period through Islamic times. While not every major period finds coverage by a Penn-excavated site (the most notable absence being the Uruk period in the fourth millennium B.C.E.), and not every major historical entity is robustly represented (here, the prime absence is the Assyrian empire in the first millennium B.C.E.), the chronological and geographical spread is nonetheless impressive and provides a coherent backbone for the overarching narrative of human settlement captured in the subtitle to the galleries' name: *Journey to the City* (fig. 1).

Another result of the unique history of excavation at Penn is the emphasis throughout the exhibits on the human beings and societies who made and used the objects on display, rather than pursuit of an aestheticized notion of great artistic masterpieces. There are certainly artistic masterpieces among the collection, such as Queen Puabi's elaborate lapis lazuli, carnelian, and gold ornaments and headdress, and the lapis lazuli, shell, and gold Ram in the Thicket, both from the Royal Cemetery at Ur, which are highlighted in individual display cases that allow the visitor a 360° view of these magnificent and complex creations (figs. 2, 3). Yet even these tours de force of ancient craftsmanship are situated in their ancient contexts of use—in this case, the rich but strange burials of elites accompanied by tens of attendants excavated at the southern Mesopotamian city of Ur. Numerous reconstruction drawings and videos help the visitor visualize the ancient contexts; for example, hung on the wall is the archaeological plan of the so-called Great Death Pit in which the Ram in the Thicket was discovered along with dozens of "sacrificed" attendants, and alongside the plan is a new reconstruction of how the attendants would have appeared in positions immediately prior to death, such as playing lyres (online fig. 1).² Reconstructions can be tricky things, as they venture into the realm of the imagination and speculation, but they are used effectively here especially for audiences who may have limited knowledge of the Near East. Particularly effective, in this reviewer's opinion, is the animated video that takes the viewer through the streets of the Ur III period (ca. 2100–2000 B.C.E.) city of Ur and

into its temple complex, where the fragments of the enormous stele of Ur-Namma (ca. 2100 B.C.E.) were found. Likewise, the resin-cast reconstruction of the stele itself—necessary because the fragility of the ancient pieces prohibits display of all but one large fragment—towers over visitors, providing an excellent sense of its scale and how ancient visitors to the temple courtyard would have experienced it (online fig. 2). The first object to be encountered in the new gallery nicely captures the spotlight on the human element: a brick from the city of Ur exhibiting the impression of a human foot that had stepped upon it more than 4,000 years ago (see fig. 1).

The new Middle East galleries were curated by a team of 10 scholars encompassing a wide range of specialties and with varying amounts of curatorial experience. Among them are art historians, archaeologists, anthropologists, and Assyriologists. One might imagine that so many chefs in the kitchen could have resulted in a messy affair, but for the most part the exhibition comes together in a compelling and informative manner to trace several different strands of human settlement and interaction over the course of 10,000 years. While the galleries opened at the end of April, the curators continue to add informational materials through labels, digital installations, and information kiosks (this reviewer visited in mid May 2018). A display case to the right side as one enters the first room houses what initially appears to be an eclectic mix of materials underneath a short panel of text. The intent of this case is conveyed somewhat obliquely by the text panel above, but it was supplemented for this reviewer by press materials and personal communications—namely, that each object displayed speaks to one of five themes that thread through the entire exhibition: settlement, organization, exchange/connections, technology, and belief.

The design team chose a bright, airy, and modern feel with white walls and clean lines, which helps give a sense of spaciousness despite the large number of often fairly small objects on display. Dividing walls and cases have been positioned to guide the visitor through the three rectilinear spaces, moving through time, beginning in the first room with the introduction of agriculture (including a ceramic vessel shown to have contained wine from around 5000 B.C.E.) through the earliest cities. Highlights from the first room include architectural embellishments from a third-millennium temple at the site of Tell al-'Ubaid, including freestand-

² See AJA Online for all online-only figures accompanying this article.



FIG. 1. Rendering of the entrance to the new Middle East galleries at the University of Pennsylvania Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology, Philadelphia (drawing by Haley Sharpe Design, Leicester, U.K.; courtesy Penn Museum, Philadelphia).



FIG. 2. Queen Puabi's burial adornments, from the Royal Cemetery at Ur, ca. 2450 B.C.E. Puabi's adornments include a headdress consisting of more than 12 meters of gold ribbon along with beads of lapis lazuli and carnelian (E. Sucar; courtesy Penn Museum, Philadelphia).



FIG. 3. Detail of the Ram in the Thicket, from the Royal Cemetery at Ur, ca. 2450 B.C.E., gold, silver, lapis lazuli, copper, shell, red limestone, and bitumen, obj. no. 30-12-702. The statuette, one of two excavated by the joint Penn Museum/British Museum expedition (the other resides in the British Museum), would have supported a tray (courtesy Penn Museum, Philadelphia).

ing copper-cast bulls, inlaid friezes, and a mosaic column (fig. 4). At the same time, this first room works to counter the standard narrative of teleological development toward greater social complexity, juxtaposing materials from the urban settlements in southern and northern Iraq with the more pastoral-oriented societies of highland Iran, exemplified by Penn's archaeological work at the site of Tepe Hissar.

The second room is devoted to the city of Ur, a site that yielded outstanding archaeological materials for the third millennium B.C.E. Again shaped by dividing walls and cases, the first and largest part of this space displays the treasures from the Royal Cemetery. In addition to the already mentioned ornaments of Queen Puabi and the Ram in the Thicket is an inlaid panel from a bull-headed lyre depicting enigmatic scenes of animals engaged in human activities, including playing a bull-headed lyre (online fig. 3). Yet also among the displayed items are the skulls of two of the accompanying attendants, crushed by the weight of earth covering them for thousands of years. These skulls exemplify the ongoing research activities that excavated materials

promote: a recent analysis of the skulls using CT scans has revealed that, contrary to the excavator's proposal that the attendants went to their deaths willingly, in fact, they were murdered by blunt force to the back of their heads.³ In the last part of the room, the display clusters around the reconstruction of Ur-Namma's stele and focuses on the city of Ur at the end of the third millennium. Cases displaying cylinder seals are incorporated into this section, whereas the discussion of how seals functioned (shown through a series of ancient clay sealings and illustrations) occupies a case in the first room in conjunction with the administrative advances of late fourth-millennium southern Mesopotamia. For viewers with little background in the ancient Near East, the characteristic but peculiar nature of the cylinder seal might be difficult to grasp given the distance between these two cases.

The third room, roughly partitioned into three sections, moves the viewer from the first millennium

³Baadsgaard, et al. 2011.



FIG. 4. Objects excavated from the temple at Tell al 'Ubaid in modern-day Iraq, ca. 2400 B.C.E. (E. Sucar; courtesy Penn Museum, Philadelphia).

B.C.E. into our current era. The first section presents materials from the northwestern Iranian site of Hasanlu, situating it between two competing empires in the early part of the first millennium B.C.E.: Assyria and Urtu (from neither of which does Penn have any significant excavated objects aside from a carved stone relief from the Northwest Palace of the Assyrian king Ashurnasirpal II [r. 883–859 B.C.E.] at Nimrud in northern Iraq, acquired by the museum in the early 20th century; online fig. 4). The section also covers areas of nomadic dwellers of western Iran and includes some of the few materials not from scientific excavations, such as bronzes from the Luristan region. The following section highlights the Penn Museum's first excavation, that of Nippur in southern Iraq, begun in 1889. While Nippur is particularly well known among Mesopotamian scholars as the source of thousands of important cuneiform tablets, mainly dating to the Old Babylonian period in the early sec-

ond millennium B.C.E. (these and other materials of this date from Nippur are displayed in the central gallery space), here the less studied but equally impressive remains from the late Parthian period are highlighted. An enormous, blue-green glazed “slipper” coffin commands attention in this part of the exhibit. A final section presents the results of a Penn excavation at the early Islamic site of Rayy, Iran, where Abbasid rulers (ca. 750 C.E.) established a mint. This connects then to the early modern period, which is represented in the displays by ceramics and painted manuscripts (fig. 5; online fig. 5). These final items, which derive from heirloom collections, contrast with the excavated materials in the rest of the exhibit. Dimmer lighting due to the sensitive nature of the manuscripts, as well as a narrower range of object types, further set this section apart from the preceding displays, marking the transition to the early modern and modern periods. The story of settlement ends at the far wall, where aspects of the city of Philadelphia are juxtaposed with those of the ancient settlements surveyed in the gallery, for example, modern PVC and ancient ceramic plumbing pipes. In a post-colonial age, it is difficult to construct a chronological narrative that does not appear teleological in outcome and orientalist in character, especially if the exhibit ends with a modern, Western city. However, the focus on the local—Philadelphia—as opposed to Western cities in general, makes sense as part of a larger outreach to the local community and an attempt at making the distant past relevant to the here and now.

The archaeological work of excavation, as a topic in itself, is highlighted throughout the galleries, including a display immediately to the left of the entrance devoted to current archaeological projects by the university's affiliated researchers. The case has been positioned such that a visitor might not notice it when first entering the exhibition space, as the diagonal direction of the first wall leads the viewer to the right. However, because the galleries terminate at a dead end and require the viewer to return through the three rooms, it catches the eye and brings the departing visitor up to the present day.

There is no catalogue for the new galleries, but a recent issue of the museum's journal *Expedition* is devoted to the reinstallation.⁴ An interview with Julian

⁴*Expedition* 2018.



FIG. 5. Islamic luxury ceramics manufactured in Iran, mid 12th to early 13th centuries C.E. (R. Berberian; courtesy Penn Museum, Philadelphia).

Siggers, the museum director, Dan Rahimi, the executive director of galleries, and Steve Tinney, the coordinating curator, provides a useful introduction to the thinking that went on behind the scenes of the reinstallation. Short essays offer overviews with excellent accompanying images of important themes from the exhibit, including the history of excavations at the major Penn sites, the uses of writing, Mesopotamian city life, interactions between the highlands and lowlands, and nomadic groups. The journal, however, does not cover everything found in the exhibit; for example, there is very little written there on the Parthian period at Nippur, aside from a short piece discussing conservation training for students using pieces of slipper coffins. The journal publication is also less useful for identifying specific objects found on display. However, the Penn Museum hosts an excellent online “digital museum” that provides background information as well as detailed object information for all its objects.⁵

As it contains many more objects than are exhibited, the digital museum requires some knowledge before using it and is most easily searched if one knows the accession number. Digital kiosks that allow visitors to touch on images of displayed objects in order to learn more about them are placed throughout the galleries, although not all of them were fully functional when this reviewer visited.

The curatorial and design team has taken great effort to target the new gallery to a range of different audiences, from the scholarly expert doing research to local Philadelphia residents. In particular, as part of the major transformation campaign intended to revitalize the entire museum, attention has been paid to young learners and school groups. Tinney explains in the *Expedition* interview that spaces in each room were designed to accommodate groups of 30 to 35 school children. The museum offers group tours for 10 or more people that can be customized for adults, families, or school children. Likewise, the museum has produced a wonderful children’s guide with activities for young visitors. Modern reproductions of ancient

⁵ www.penn.museum/collections/

objects that children (and adults) can touch, such as obsidian and woven textiles, have been placed throughout the galleries. These not only help engage audiences of all ages, they also signal the importance of touch in our experience of the world, both past and present.

Opening new galleries displaying cultural artifacts of the Middle East immediately raises the question of the current threat to cultural heritage in that part of the world. The University of Pennsylvania and the Penn Museum (through the Penn Cultural Heritage Center) are actively involved in efforts to document and curtail cultural heritage destruction, so it is fitting that a special exhibit on the floor above explicitly addressed these issues. “Cultures in the Crossfire: Stories from Syria and Iraq” ran through 25 November 2018. It displayed historical materials as well as contemporary artworks by the Syrian artist Issam Kourbaj that respond to the current situation. In addition, an innovative new museum program employs “Global Guides”—recently resettled Iraqis and Syrians who have been hired and trained to use their personal experiences of the region in their tours of the Middle East galleries. Beginning this past May, four Global Guides—Abdulahdi Al-Karfawi, Yaroub Al-Obaidi, and Ali Arif, all from Iraq, and Moumena Saradar from Syria—have shared their personal stories in order to connect life today and in the ancient past.

The Penn Museum is unusual in its history of excavation and collection of provenanced antiquities. While lacking the comprehensiveness of universal museums, it offers a critical perspective on both the ancient past of the Middle East and the history of excavations during modern times. The curators of the new Middle East galleries have capitalized on this special feature, which very few other museums in North America can equal. The exhibition, focusing on the human element—both in the past and in the present—

serves as a model for future installations. One looks forward to the forthcoming reinstallation of the rest of the Penn Museum collections with the expectation that they will match that of the Middle East galleries. Even more significant is the commitment to bringing in and engaging a broad public at a time when this part of the world is facing tremendous turmoil and its cultural heritage is under threat. The collections at the Penn Museum have always been worth a visit for scholars of the ancient world, who value their excavated contexts and their role in ongoing research activities. Now, with the carefully thought out and beautifully planned new galleries dedicated to excavated materials from Iraq and Iran, one hopes their reach will extend well beyond the gaze of specialists.

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