

# PUBLIC PROGRAMMING

MATTHEW WELTON, TASHA VORDERSTRASSE,  
AND KATHERINE HODGE

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At the end of the 2023–24 year, we said goodbye to our Youth and Family Program manager, Kate Hodge. Hodge had joined ISAC at the tail end of the COVID-19 pandemic shutdown and was instrumental in bringing back in-person school field trips and public family events after restrictions were lifted. Hodge’s tenure at ISAC culminated with impressive attendance numbers for our annual Haunted Halloween event, proving that the public is excited to join us in person.

Overall, we have seen a steady increase in in-person attendance for public programming since pandemic restrictions were relaxed. During the pandemic, we had begun to offer public livestreaming of most ISAC lectures in real time, a practice that resulted in increased online presence and decreased in-person numbers. This year, to boost in-person attendance, we transitioned to a system in which our lectures were livestreamed exclusively for ISAC members, giving the public the option to watch them on our YouTube channel a few weeks later.

Public in-person events with no livestreaming option continued to perform very well. In addition to our annual Haunted Halloween and Nowruz events, we hosted a musical concert in the Edgar and Deborah Jannotta Mesopotamian Gallery with *qanun* player Firas Zreik that was filled to capacity, as well as successful screenings of the films *Raiders of the Lost Ark* and *Letters from Baghdad* that brought patrons into Breasted Hall. An ISAC Winter Festival focusing on ancient Babylonia inspired area families to explore our galleries, and a bread-making class kicked off what we hope will be a series of public graduate-student workshops in ISAC’s downstairs LaSalle Bank room.

While the bulk of this year’s programming centered on the two special exhibitions, *Back to School in Babylonia* and *Pioneers of the Sky: Aerial Archaeology and the Black Desert*, our monthly ISAC lectures allowed for more variety. This year, we hosted the following guests for these free ISAC lectures:

- October: Susanne Paulus (ISAC), “Back to School in Babylonia: The Aims of Babylonian Education”
- November: Paul Delnero (Johns Hopkins University), “What Did You Learn in School Today? A Day in the Life of a Mesopotamian Student”
- December: Jana Matuszak (ISAC), “Law and Morality in Sumerian Satirical Tales”
- February: Carolina López-Ruiz (University of Chicago Divinity School and Department of Classics), “The Phoenicians Strike Back!”
- March: Claude Rilly (Sorbonne University), “The Decipherment of Meroitic”
- April: Jeffrey Stackert (University of Chicago Divinity School), “Judah in the Shadow of the Assyrian Empire”
- May: Korshi Dosoo (Julius Maximilian University of Würzburg), “Christian Egypt and Its ‘Pagan’ Past”
- June: Daniel Schwemer (Julius Maximilian University of Würzburg), “Living in a Precarious World: Magical Rituals from Ancient Mesopotamia”

In addition to our in-person public offerings at ISAC and our avenues of online engagement through social media and YouTube, we continued to run successful ISAC travel tours that brought members of the public around the world to explore the cultures of ancient West Asia and North Africa. We started this year

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with an ISAC members' tour to Paris, France, that explored the city's fascination with all things Egyptian. Tour participants explored the Egyptian collection at the Louvre, learned about the obelisk in the Place de la Concorde from a member of the French Ministry of Culture's conservation team, visited the traveling Ramesses exhibition, and sampled the streets and cafes of Paris with ISAC's chief curator, Marc Maillot.

The fall saw a return to Egypt on a sold-out grand tour from Cairo to Abu Simbel, granting travelers one-of-a-kind access to the pyramids and sphinx at Giza, the newly opened Grand Egyptian Museum, and ISAC's work at Medinet Habu and Luxor Temple.

In the late spring, travelers had the opportunity to journey the Silk Road with Prof. Gil Stein on a tour of Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan. Tour participants trekked across ancient landscapes and set out into the Fergana Valley to explore traditional crafts and the artisans that produce them, with many of the artisans using techniques that have been passed down from generation to generation.

## ADULT EDUCATION

***Classes, Lectures, and Book Signings***

ISAC saw a strong uptake of adult education classes in 2023–24, particularly in the summer and fall. In summer 2023, Tine Rasalle (PhD, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill) taught the class “Exploring the Dead Sea Scrolls.” In fall 2023, University of Chicago Department of Near Eastern Languages and Civilizations graduate student Didi el-Behaedi taught “Archaeology of Pharaonic Egypt,” which enrolled the largest number of students of any archaeology class ever taught in the program. ISAC Research Archives head Foy Scalf offered a three-class sequence on ancient Egyptian languages, starting with hieratic in fall 2023, followed by Late Egyptian in winter 2024 and Demotic in spring 2024—the first time the Adult Education program has tried a class bundle; the uptake was good enough that we plan to try it again next year with another series of language classes. In winter 2024, ISAC senior conservator Alison Whyte and Adult Education manager Tasha Vorderstrasse cotaught “Color in Ancient Art,” and University of Chicago undergraduate Dani Levy taught the free ISAC class “Tuppi Appreciation Class: Draw Your Own Tuppi!” In spring 2024, Vorderstrasse taught the free ISAC class “Edmonia Lewis: Creating the Death of Cleopatra.”

Vorderstrasse also helped facilitate University College London professor Eleanor Robson's Zoom lecture “Back to House F: Personal Reflections in Research” in January 2024; cosponsored, with the Chicago chapter of the American Research Center in Egypt, the “Neferura: The Pharaoh's Daughter” book talk and signing with author Malayna Evans in February; and organized the ISAC Armchair Travelers lecture “The Egyptian Book of the Dead at the Getty Museum,” presented in February by Scalf and Getty Museum assistant curator Sara Cole, and “Temples in the Farthest South: Natakamani and Amanitore at Wad Ben Naga, Sudan,” given by Czech archaeologist Pavel Onderka in May. Vorderstrasse also played her harp at the ISAC Winter Festival “Stories from Ancient Babylonia” in December 2023.

***University and Other Tours***

University tours continued to be popular during the year, again particularly in the fall because of University of Chicago Core Curriculum classes. Over 500 students took tours of the ISAC Museum led by Vorderstrasse, more than doubling the number of students served in 2022–23. A majority of students took the postcolonial tour of the ISAC Museum. In addition, staff from Registration and Tablet Collection curator Susanne Paulus facilitated object-based learning for some tours, and ISAC archaeologists Bruce Williams and Lisa Heidorn helped make Fourth Cataract pottery from the Sudan available to students to learn more about Nubia. The trend this year was toward more object-based learning activities in Registration and the Archaeology Labs. It remains to be seen whether this trend continues in 2024–25. The number of University of Chicago Laboratory School students also increased; in addition to

object-based learning activities for sixth-grade Lab School students in the ISAC Museum, an Ancient Math tour was developed for fourth-grade Lab School students, who also visited the special exhibitions on separate occasions.

A special Juneteenth tour was developed for the ISAC Museum app (fig. 1). The purpose of the tour was to raise awareness of Black artists', historians', and intellectuals' engagement with the ancient world. The idea for the tour came from the successful Black History Month posts that had been done over the past three years. The aim was to highlight certain objects in the gallery, then provide information about a particular individual and focus on the art, literature, or poetry that individual created. A brochure, put together to help promote the app tour, was funded by the University thanks to a grant from Juneteenth programming funds. It is hoped that the tour can be expanded next year and a small guidebook produced to accompany it.

### Social Media

Social media continued to enjoy strong engagement across all our channels on Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter. ISAC also started a presence on Threads. ISAC now has as many as 39,000 followers on Facebook and 12,900 on Instagram. One reason social-media engagement greatly increased had to do with Susanne Paulus's *Back to School in Babylonia* exhibition. Carter Rote (MA, Center for Middle Eastern Studies), Pallas Eible Hargro (University of Chicago undergraduate), and Sara Ware (University of Chicago undergraduate) wrote posts, and then Jane Gordon (PhD candidate, Assyriology) wrote posts related to the exhibition. The Tuppi-related posts were particularly popular, but so were the videos about the exhibition. Social-media engagement with Museum exhibitions continued during the *Pioneers of the Sky* exhibition, with Vorderstrasse writing posts at the suggestion of exhibition curator Marie-Laure Chambrade that focused on female pioneers of aerial photography. Tablet posts continued to be consistently popular with the social-media audience. Other media outreach included the participation of Maillot and retired ISAC curator Emily Teeter discussing ancient Egyptian cats on the *Brain Scoop* YouTube channel.



Figure 1. Juneteenth tour app.

## YOUTH AND FAMILY PROGRAM

The Youth and Family Program grew this year, surpassing last year's attendance numbers.

### Field Trip Highlights

From July 2023 to June 2024, a total of 2,707 people came to the ISAC Museum for seventy-one educational field trips. These programs were led and taught by a team of five museum educators—lead museum educator Sydney Ginsberg, museum education specialist Samantha Suppes, and museum educators Elena Tiedens, Anika Miro-Quesada, and Yunyi Xing—in addition to Youth and Family Program manager Hodge.

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Six educational programs were offered, all of them standards aligned, engaging, and inquiry based. Three of the programs were standard field trips, one for each age group: Time Travelers (grades K–4), Artifact Analysis (grades 5–8), and Ancient Innovators (grades 9–12). Two field trips were newly added. One was based on this year’s special exhibition *Back to School in Babylonia*. Called “Back to School in Mesopotamia,” this field trip was for grades 5–12. The second, developed in response to popular requests on evaluation forms, focused on the mummification process and was also for grades 5–12. Of the seventy-one educational field trips attended this year, three were Ancient Innovators, ten were Time Travelers, ten were Back to School in Mesopotamia, twenty-one were Mummification, and twenty-seven were Artifact Analysis.

For the second year, the Youth and Family Program had a pro bono budget to work with during the school year. Thanks to this budget, as well as to partnerships with Communities in Schools, Amplify, Neighborhood School Partnership, Project Exploration, and educators across campus, approximately 495 people in nine groups came for a Youth and Family educational program—a 98 percent increase compared with last year. We look forward to continuing to increase these numbers in the coming year.

### Program Highlights

In addition to field trips, the Youth and Family Program offered weekend workshops and weekend events. Weekend workshops are purposefully designed to be small, intimate learning experiences on a niche subject for students and families with fewer than twenty-five attendees and lasting two hours. Weekend events are designed to be much larger (with more than 100 attendees) and longer (up to four hours) and are designed to be drop-in style with a lot of options. Haunted Halloween and Nowruz are two examples.

In 2023–24, we taught more than 1,666 people during these events. We focused on expanding our four annual weekend events—Haunted Halloween, Nowruz, Ancient Earth Day, and Ancient Game Day (fig. 2). We also continued the pattern of offering weekend workshops once a month on new topics—for example, on ancient languages. This new format was first tried in 2022–23 and, proven successful, was continued this year. As a result, we saw more returning families, as well as a large number of families visiting the ISAC Museum for the first time.



Figure 2. Haunted Halloween, Nowruz, and Ancient Earth Day posters designed by Josh Tulisiak.

Haunted Halloween hosted 1,113 attendees—our largest Halloween event to date. During this event, we offered our first-ever costume contest, engaging directly with guests, encouraging clever costumes, and taking great event photos. The winning family earned a free family membership to ISAC. We continued to offer a lesson on mummification; this updated offering was immensely successful, teaching hundreds of guests through an engaging format in Breasted Hall. We also continued popular activities newly introduced last year, including spooky tours, new craft options in the LaSalle Bank classroom, and the opportunity to help decorate a mural in the hallway.

Nowruz had around 250 attendees, many of them community members and new faces interested in learning about the holiday. We incorporated new activities and crafts, as well as opportunities catering to younger audience members. This year we also used Breasted Hall to screen a movie, and we hope to include a performance next year.

Ancient Earth Day—our second such event—had around 150 attendees. We were excited to engage with guests in the galleries using discovery carts and a new teaching methodology, as well as to help people learn about ancient plants while planting a sustainable garden to take home.

In addition to these four large annual events, the Youth and Family Program organized four weekend workshops. Three of them were brand-new lessons created in 2023–24: Ancient Languages, Ancient Oceans, and Learn Cuneiform. The Ancient Languages program used the Project Archaeology curriculum model to engage students in learning Meroitic, cuneiform, and hieroglyphs. This workshop hosted approximately fifteen students. In partnership with the Shedd Aquarium, the Ancient Oceans program welcomed approximately ten high-school students in a two-part program at ISAC and the Shedd to learn about ancient oceans and waterways. The Learn Cuneiform program was done in partnership with the special exhibition *Back to School in Babylonia* and taught approximately twenty-five students all about cuneiform. The fourth workshop, Ancient Egyptian Murals, continued an existing program that has been consistently popular and that taught approximately fifteen students.

Another new program taught in partnership with Vorderstrasse and the Adult/Continuing Education program was Astronomy Friday. This program used a discovery-cart methodology to engage with audience members of all ages on a Friday evening. Around seventy-five people came over the course of two hours to learn about ancient astronomy in Mesopotamia, Egypt, and the Islamic empire. In addition to Vorderstrasse and Hodge, Metcalf Program education intern Madeleine Roberts-Ganim taught at this new event.

## VOLUNTEER AND DOCENT PROGRAM

ISAC's volunteers and docents remain strong and committed. Since the COVID-19 pandemic, we have not been able to onboard as many new volunteers as we traditionally did, but the few we have welcomed, and all the volunteers who have stayed with us, are cherished and vital members of ISAC. The time each volunteer gives to highly specific projects is essential, as we make our research available to the public at no cost. The work our volunteers do ensures that future generations will have greater access to ISAC scholarship.

In May, the ISAC docents launched a weekly Discovery Tour program. These hour-long, docent-led tours of the ISAC Museum take place every Saturday at 1:30 p.m. The tours meet in Breasted Hall for a brief overview of ISAC's history and work, then head into the galleries to explore our collections. Meticulously planned and managed by two longtime ISAC docents, Marilyn Murray and Margaret Schmid, Discovery Tours have been a successful way to attract new visitors. Whereas most Discovery Tours cover general highlights of the ISAC Museum, a few tours have focused on specific ancient cultures or particular sections of the galleries. Each Discovery Tour has inspired ISAC patrons to explore the ancient cultures we represent a bit more deeply than they might do on their own.

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Throughout the year, we also hosted Volunteer Days at ISAC—a chance for volunteers to get together over coffee and bagels and to meet with ISAC staff and faculty in Breasted Hall and the galleries. This year, highlights included tours of the Museum with chief curator Maillot, curator Kiersten Neumann, and Adult Education manager Vorderstrasse; a talk about cultural heritage with Prof. Gil Stein; special exhibition-related talks and tours; and a town hall with ISAC’s new director, Timothy Harrison.

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