

The Oriental Institute Museum

GUSTAVUS F. SWIFT, *Curator*

I. Progress

Last year's report stressed certain critical needs of the Museum in regard to the housing and preservation of the collection. It is now a pleasure to be able to write that some of these needs are on the way to being met.

Through the generosity of a friend, it has been possible to employ a capable student at part time to begin a reorganization of several parts of the storage area, showing a large and very evident gain in order and economy of space. This work will continue.

At least a glimmer of hope has appeared on the horizon of the possibility of employing a well-trained conservator to begin a much-needed program in the collection.

The Museum has received this spring a grant from the National Endowment for the Arts in the amount of \$9,350, which must be matched by a like amount. The purpose of the grant is to carry out a feasibility study in the areas of climate control, security and storage in the existing building. The stated aim is, once again, the preservation of the collection, but the side effects may well prove to modify exhibition and other aspects of museum management for the better. The NEA grant program contemplates putting the results of the study into effect at a later time; should this come to pass, a far larger sum would be required, toward which the NEA would contribute up to 25 per cent.

II. The Museum's Place in the University

It seems timely for a curator, after three years' tenure, to try to set down his thoughts relating the museum in his charge to the University to which it belongs and to the wider community of which it is a part. In this attempt, perhaps the first things to state and acknowledge are the curator's own qualifications and biases: They are not those of an expert museum administrator, but those of a Near Eastern archeologist (an occupation no longer as rare as it was but a few years ago), those of one who has had a long and enduring attachment to and admiration for the people and the collections of the Oriental Institute, and those of a lifelong Chicagoan.

The minimum definition of a museum requires a collection of some sort, a professional staff, and being available to the public on some regular schedule. These requirements give us no trouble at all, but then, there are by now some six or seven thousand such institutions in the United States. Being a university museum, of which there must be several dozen, at a guess, imposes the graver and subtler burdens of research and education. There is no end to what might be written on these topics, but there will be found in the following a few remarks that seem directly pertinent to the case in hand.

It may be to some extent a more personal conclusion that the justification of a museum at the University of Chicago presents no great difficulties either. One needs to seek, to my mind, no further than our motto: the rationale of the Oriental

Institute Museum has much to do with *vita excolatur* as a consequent of *crescat scientia*, or, for those to whom the Latin may be bothersome, the enrichment of life following from the growth of knowledge.

A brief historical digression will suffice to show that the intention to establish and maintain a museum existed from early days. James Henry Breasted began to collect for the University in the 1890's. Our forerunner, the Haskell Oriental Museum, occupied crowded quarters within living memory. The present building bears a cornerstone date of 1930. Within it, still following the plans of Breasted, roughly half the space, though only roughly 10 per cent of the staff, was designated for museum use. One might add that the cycle of crowding is well on its way toward full repetition.



A part of the Haskell Oriental Museum of the University of Chicago in 1922

The resources of our museum are its various collections, and it is impossible to avoid superlatives in describing them. They arise from the most ambitious plan of excavations and other investigations in the field of ancient Near Eastern studies ever put into effect. They cover all the regions, all the available materials, and nearly all the periods from prehistory to classical



Dr. Breasted opening the gates of the Museum, December 5, 1931. Left to right: Dr. Raymond Fosdick (Chairman of the Rockefeller Foundation), John H. Finley (Editor of the New York Times), President of the University Robert M. Hutchins, and Dr. Breasted

times and beyond. They are unique in this country, and outstanding in the world. Their strength derives in great part also from the availability of information as to the exact origin of the vast majority of individual pieces and of groups. In this connection, the auxiliary collections of many thousands of photographs and excavation records are of the greatest significance.

The curator sees his responsibilities toward these resources as extending beyond custodianship to management in several different modes and directions, and he hopes that a comparison to the activities of many of his astute fellow citizens will be evident. The common factor governing the capacity to move forward in these fields is the availability of sufficient capable staff.

After the care and preservation of the collection, the first concern of a university museum is and should be the furtherance of research. Largely, in the recent past, this has meant the facilitating of the research of others, principally of those responsible for the publication of the Institute's field work. But by now, more than one museum staff member has in hand a research project based wholly or in part on the museum's collections. Other research opportunities spring forth even from



*Gray granite
female head, from the Oriental
Institute's excavation at Medinet Habu
near Luxor. Photo by Luvin Hough*

the museum's problems: the very corrosion products that threaten irreplaceable materials are of interest as to their source and nature, and as to the application and investigation of new and developing techniques of preservation. Research interests now ramify out from our humanistic core into the social, physical and biological sciences, as examples cited below will show. About the usual considerable number of visiting scholars have been assisted in their research problems through contact with our collections in the past year.

It is time, however, for this discussion to confront the issue of the exhibits, in their large and handsome halls, and to examine the very appropriate questions of why, for whom, and how, for it is here, in the meeting of the displayed object with the visitor, that the essence of a museum is present, if we refer back to our original definition.

It could be said, with the fullest respect for my predecessors, that the original plan of the exhibits gives evidence of having been intended as a museum for scholars. There seems also to exist a feeling, in which I can partially share, that these professionals do not really need a museum, on the ground that

those in Chicago are already familiar with the materials, while those in the rest of the world are few and have little opportunity to see them. The product of my own reflections is that both these propositions are only incomplete truths at best; that it would be as foolish to lock away the collections, with access upon application only, as it would be to lock away the publications and the initial works of interpretation; and that the answer to the implied challenge lies in having better exhibits, rather than in having none at all.

The content of the exhibits is in considerable part a collection of works of art which, in kind, quality and extent, cannot be matched in this country. The remainder of the exhibits is mainly concerned with the nuts and bolts—or the pots and pans—of the same culture or group of cultures, and covers them with equal distinction. I would maintain that each of these, visual art and daily life, is a mode of perceptible reality fully as valid as the pursuits of literature and science, and I would claim further, on the basis of comparison with the great museums of this city or elsewhere in the world, that the potentiality for concentration upon and presentation in depth of a chosen area is the peculiar opportunity of a museum situated in a distinguished branch of a major university. One has a choice in expressing the values which these exhibits are meant to convey. It may be said that they speak for one of numerous known systems of human development; that they are distinguished by the completeness of the written and material record within a defined geographical region; and that they happen to constitute one of the major roots of our western civilization.

The facts show that the existing exhibits are of much interest to others than scholars. An exhibit area of about 16,000 square feet is not to be compared with our great local museums; our location is relatively remote and not outstandingly well served by public transportation or parking facilities, and benefits from a minimum of publicity. Yet I feel, without having worked out the figures, that our mean annual attendance of over 50,000 will stand up, foot for foot, with the large museums having numbers in the millions and far greater resources. Another measure of effectiveness is the near doubling, in the past year, of the number of part-time volunteer guides who do so much to make a meaningful visit possible. As an asset to the University, the museum must rank at or near the top as the point where the greatest number of visitors enters voluntarily for educational

purposes, and surely stands nearly alone as a focal area for visual communication.

The makeup of the museum's attendance is a matter worthy of further study. Far in the lead, however, must be the groups of elementary school children for whom the volunteer guides' services are essential, and the next most numerous are probably high school groups—all from the Chicago metropolitan area. After these, estimates are more difficult: there are undergraduates from our own campus and within a radius of over one hundred miles; there are family groups and organized groups from outside the city; there are lay and scholarly individuals for whom the Oriental Institute collections are among Chicago's strongest attractions. Plans for a systematic sampling of these populations are being considered.

There is an additional important educational function that risks being overlooked. An archeologist learns nearly as much of his trade through his tactile sense as through the visual. There are, in the parts of the museum invisible to the public, laboratories where experience of this kind is available to students, but they are limited by considerations of space and staff. Apart from these limitations, graduate students, undergraduates and even selected secondary school groups could be exposed to close contact with appropriate portions of the collection.

The "how" of the museum exhibits is more easily expressed than accomplished, given the forty-year age of the original displays, the advances in technique that have meanwhile occurred, and the amount of labor involved in effecting perceptible change. The policy for the foreseeable future must apparently be to renovate permanent exhibits rather than to increase temporary ones. The aims of the process are simple: the first is clarity, whether viewed as the rearrangement of materials, the updating of labels or the improvement of illumination. The second is to add some measure of depth to the comprehension of the visitor. The three-dimensional antiquity should always occupy the forefront, but it can be supported and interpreted by the written word, and, more than at present, by photograph, chart, map or other means.

III. The Sweet Uses of Adversity

A curator who becomes ill in November and convalesces through March, and who returns to find projects moving ahead

of schedule, has a staff to be thankful for. I can only acknowledge my gratitude to all those who are mentioned below and who are listed on a following page.

Only a sampling of the more unusual activities of the year can be mentioned.

In early November, Dr. John D. Cooney, Curator of Ancient Art in the Cleveland Museum of Art, surveyed the major part of our Egyptian art collection and gave valuable advice on a proposed revision of its exhibition. Mr. David P. Silverman was of particular assistance in this project.



Rayy Minai type circular bowl. Iran, 13th century. Loan for special exhibit, courtesy of the Art Institute of Chicago (gift of Mrs. Andrew Dole). Photo by Ursula Schneider

As a contribution to the celebration of the twenty-five hundredth anniversary of the Persian Empire, a special exhibit of the art of Islamic Iran was opened in March. It was planned with the expertise and willing assistance of Professor Pramod Chandra of the Department of Art, the University of Chicago, and greatly enriched by loans of illuminated manuscripts, textiles and pottery by the Art Institute of Chicago. The exhibit was executed by Mr. Robert H. Hanson and Miss Judith A. Franke.

Dr. Radomir Pleiner of the Archaeological Institute of Czechoslovakia, The Academy of Sciences, Prague, made a study of the early specimens of iron in the collection. His special interest

was in the quality of product which the ancient smelter and toolmaker could achieve.

Professor Daniel Zohary of the Hebrew University, Jerusalem, examined and confirmed or corrected the identification of many of the samples of ancient seeds in the collection.

Mr. James P. Allen, and then Mr. Raymond Tindel, continued work on the conservation of the cuneiform tablet collection. Mr. Albert Leonard, Jr., gave valuable assistance to Miss Franke in the reorganization of the storage areas. Mr. Honorio R. Torres has brought the exhibition halls up to their former standard of appearance.

Mr. David W. Nasgowitz has obtained in his own name a grant from the National Endowment for the Arts. This will enable him, in the coming year, to collate and duplicate the collection of photographs at Chicago House, Luxor, for use here, and to travel in Egypt and other parts of the Near East.

Mrs. Linda T. Kastan, Reference Secretary, has become a valuable addition to the office staff, completed by Mr. Nasgowitz, Mrs. Allen, and Mr. Silverman. Mrs. Schneider has continued to contribute her experience as photographer.