

THE ORIENTAL INSTITUTE MUSEUM

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THE MUSEUM is a unique institution, for not only does it serve the research and teaching requirements of the Oriental Institute, but it also acts as a link between the Institute and the general public. This public aspect received a massive stimulus in 1977 as a result of the popularity of the Tutankhamun exhibition at the Field Museum and our own smaller, related exhibition "The Magic of Egyptian Art." More than four times the average number of visitors came to the Museum, and this interest was reflected in a sharp rise in Membership figures and a greatly increased volume of sales in the Suq Shop. Public interest was further aroused by lectures and guided tours, and by the operation of the Culture Bus, linking the Museum to all the other major museums and art galleries in Chicago.

Acceleration of interest in the Museum and its activities demands a positive response on the part of its administration, and it is to this end that most of our energy has been devoted during the past year. In order to sustain public interest beyond last year's fever-pitch, we have begun a series of exhibitions on a wide variety of subjects, of limited scale and duration.

The first was an exhibition of the work of the late Ursula Schneider, for many years photographer at the Oriental Institute, which is described in detail elsewhere in the Annual Report. The exhibition aroused considerable interest, not least of all in the Institute itself, where her early photographs came as a complete surprise to many of her former colleagues. The photographs are of a very high standard, and also furnish a valuable record of life in Germany and Europe in the thirties. To coincide with the exhibition, *Chicago* magazine published a copiously illustrated article on her life and work, by Mark Perlberg.

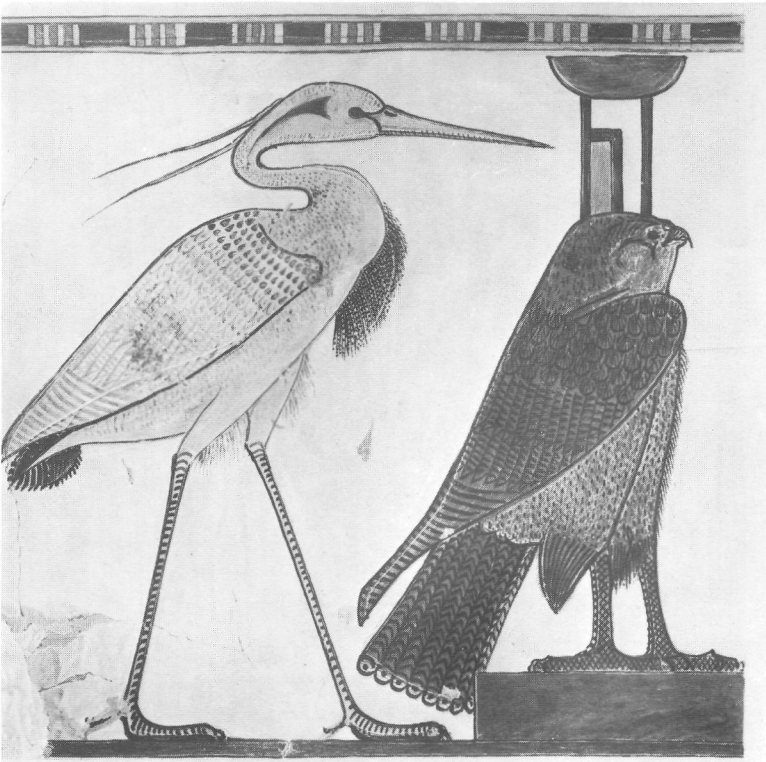
The exhibition was held in the entrance hall of the Museum, and it provided the opportunity to renovate this area. The stonework—Indiana limestone—was in an advanced state of delapidation and indescribably dirty, and the first task was to get it cleaned. Black with grime and disfigured with irregular patches of white efflorescence, the effect of cleaning was nothing short of sensational. Combined with repainting the ceiling, cleaning the brass and other metal fixtures, and the removal of a quantity of extraneous material, the entrance hall is now restored to something like its original condition, as it was in the time of J. H. Breasted. I should report that at an early stage, when faced with a pessimistic supervisor from the Plant Department who assured me it was impossible to do anything “with an old building like this,” I was able to argue that it is, in fact, exactly two weeks younger than I am. . . . We also cleaned the bronze gates leading into the galleries, in spite of the superstition that Breasted’s curse would be on anyone who did so. My initial



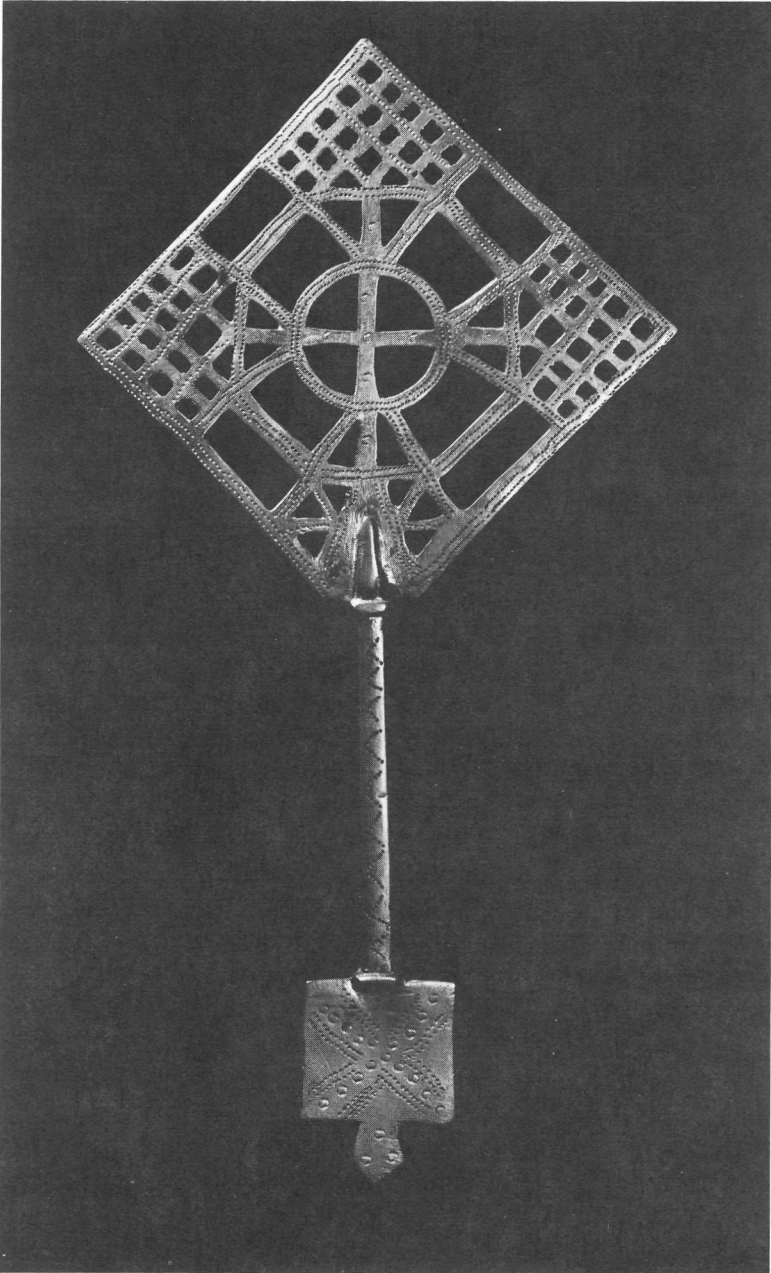
The installation of *A Photographer's World*, showing also the cleaned stonework and new track lighting in the entrance hall



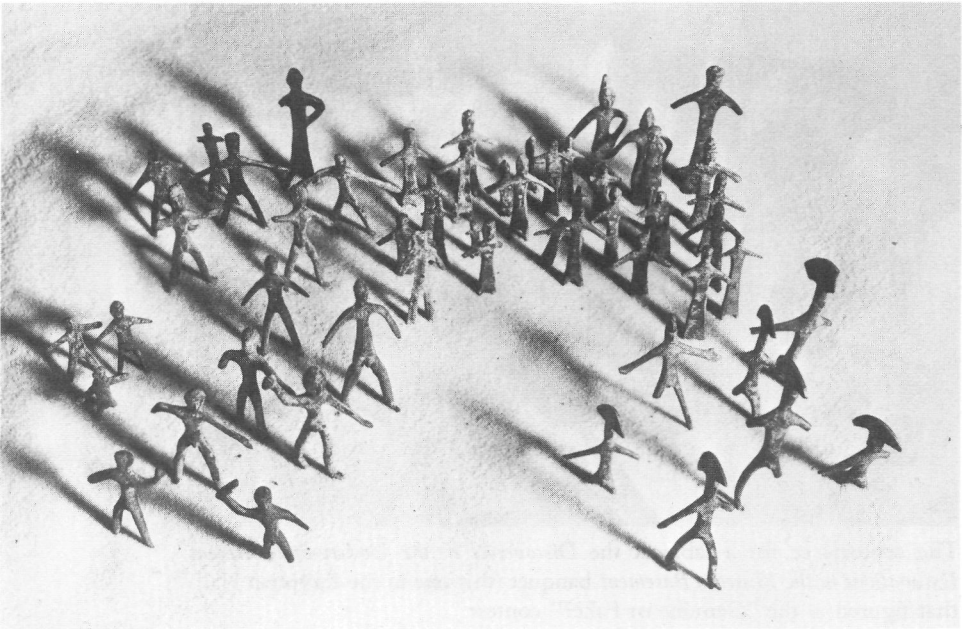
Artists in Egypt, 1920–1935, viewed through the freshly-polished bronze gates of the Museum halls



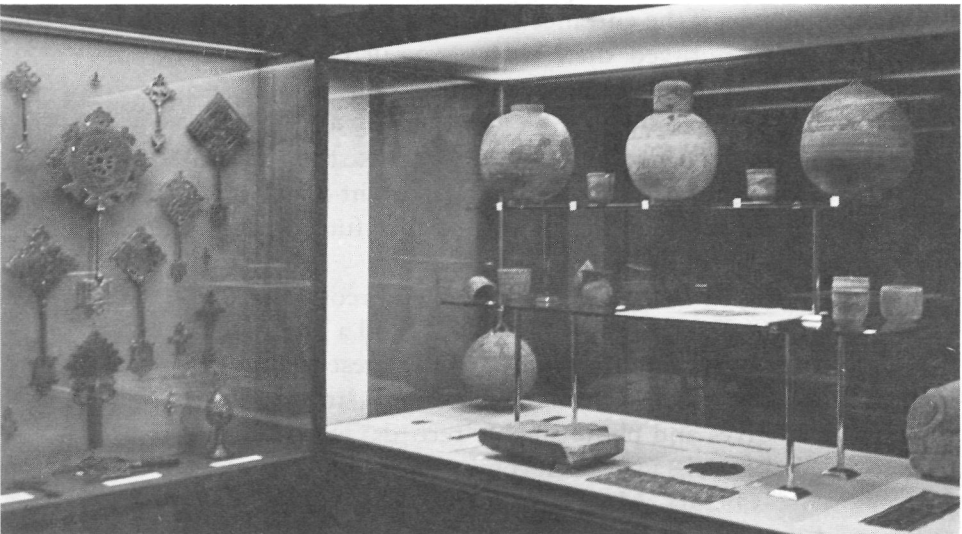
“Three Vignettes,” painting by Nina Davies, 1932, after the Tomb of Queen Nefertari



An Ethiopian bronze cross, lent by Mr. & Mrs. Gene B. Gragg



Etruscan soldiers displayed in *Discoveries in the Underworld*



A corner of *Coptic Art*, showing (left) Ethiopian crosses and (right) Nubian pottery and textiles



The centerpiece for a table at the *Discoveries in the Underworld—Recent Excavations in the Museum Basement* banquet (this one in the Egyptian Hall) that figured in the “Genuine or Fake?” contest

apprehension was allayed by Mrs. Swift, who told me that in her opinion, curse or not, they were just plain dirty!

On the Suq side of the entrance hall, the removal of panels which had long outlived their utility revealed a doorway which had once been the entrance to a telephone booth, and which now restored completes the facade as it was originally designed. A new brass sign in Arabic to advertise the Suq was added as a final decorative note. Most important of all, track lighting has been installed in the area so that future exhibitions can be properly lit.

Simultaneously we embarked on a general reorganization of the Museum offices on the second floor, and a rationalization of the somewhat haphazard plan of the present arrangement. Here much work remains to be done, particularly in sorting the archives and photographic records; we are fortunate to have the assistance of several volunteers, including Mrs. Florence Ovadia, Mrs. Ann Riehle, Miss Claire Oxtoby, and Elliot Lax. In the process of moving things around a number of drawings and paintings by artists employed by the Oriental Institute in Egypt for the Epigraphic Survey

came to light. They provided the material for another exhibition, running for three months through the summer, entitled "Artists in Egypt, 1920-1935." This was held at the end of the Palestinian gallery, in the space created by dismantling "The Magic of Egyptian Art"; again, existing lighting was supplemented by a new installation. The exhibition was accompanied by a 48-page illustrated catalogue. For the opening, we were fortunate in having Charles K. Wilkinson, Curator Emeritus of the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, to lecture on the subject of "Western Artists in Egypt in the 1920's." He traced the history of visual recording in the Near East, and gave us a fascinating account of life in Egypt in the twenties based on his personal recollections. He and his wife, Irma Bezold Wilkinson, spent several days with us; Mrs. Wilkinson was formerly Bursar at the Metropolitan Museum, and co-author of the handbook of every museum official, *Museum Registration Methods*; they both spent much time discussing our problems in the light of their own combined experience.

A third exhibition was held in April to coincide with the Fifth International Congress of Ethiopian Studies, held at the University of Chicago. For this we were able to produce a surprising number of Coptic objects from storage, including painted pottery from Nubia, jewelry, ostraca, manuscripts, carvings, and Coptic textiles specially washed and mounted for the occasion by our Conservator, Barbara Hall. These were supplemented by the loan of a magic scroll and a number of early printed books from Regenstein Library, thanks to the assistance of Mr. Robert Rosenthal, Curator of Special Collections. A striking Ethiopian painting of St. George was lent to us by Professor and Mrs. Robert J. Braidwood. The texts accompanying the show were supplied by Gene Gragg and Bruce Williams. Professor and Mrs. Gragg also lent a magnificent collection of bronze crosses and a number of other items.

Finally, we have made a start on the reorganization of the basement so that it may be used more efficiently for research and teaching, and provide better facilities for storage, conservation, photography, registration, and the preparation of exhibitions. During the process a number of unusual objects

have come to light. A selection of these provided us with our fourth exhibition, "Discoveries in the Underworld—Recent Excavations in the Museum Basement." This was held for one night only, on the occasion of the Members' Dinner organized by the Visiting Committee and this year attended by a record number of guests. Among the objects on display were pages from the third-largest Qur'an in the world, an army of Etruscan warriors and other bronzes, mummified birds and a toy crocodile with a movable jaw, illuminated manuscripts and painted Persian pen-cases, and the American flag that flew above Breasted's houseboat on the River Nile in 1911. The tables were decorated with some of the more convincing fakes from our reserve collection, and included one genuine object. A prize was given for the correct identification of the latter, and was won by Cyrus Adams III. When he was asked how he knew it was real, he said it was quite simple—it was the only *granite* piece, and no dealer would go to the trouble of carving granite to produce a fake.

Another find in the basement was the Moritz collection of Islamic leather book-bindings. More than seventy in number, they were acquired by the Oriental Institute in 1929, when the Moritz collection was split up. The subject of a thesis some years ago by Gulnar Bosch, now Professor Emeritus at Florida State University, the bindings have been re-examined with Professor Bosch; and thanks to Professor Robert Adams, we have tracked down the other half of the Moritz collection, to the East Berlin Museum. We are now exploring the possibility of a joint exhibition. Other exhibitions planned for the immediate future include a Christmas show of ethnographic material, specially purchased in the suqs of Aleppo and Damascus last March, and a display of contemporary children's cut-out paper toys from Damascus.

Finally, thanks to the enlightened policy of the Jordanian Department of Antiquities, the Museum has been able to acquire an important group of Early Bronze Age pottery, from the excavations at Bab edh-Dhra. This consists of more than two hundred pots, from a tomb and a charnel house, and will make a most valuable addition to our permanent collection.