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The Oriental Institute Museum

John Carswell The past year has seen the beginning of a long-term series of changes, within both the structure of the museum and its ancillary services. That we have been able to initiate these changes at all is largely due to a grant of \$15,000 from the Institute of Museum Services, and to the proceeds from the Members' Dinner of 1978. Many of these changes have taken place behind the scenes, and are therefore not visible to the general public; but they are fundamental to the efficient operation of the museum.

High up on the list of priorities has been the reorganization of the basement: the rationalization of the pattern of storage, preservation, registration, photography, and space for research and teaching. A new room has been constructed for the overhead projectors, and the entire entrance area cleaned and redecorated. The Registrar's quarters have been tidied up and painted and the Preparator's area judiciously rearranged, and a start has been made in extracting strayed scholars and irrelevant equipment from the closed storage area to provide better security. All the staff in the basement have been involved in this process, but it particularly owes its success to our Conservator, Barbara Hall, who has devoted a great deal of energy and enthusiasm to it, far beyond her immediate responsibilities for conservation. It is a pleasure to note that Barbara Hall has been promoted to Associate Curator in recognition of her services.

We have also been fortunate in the appointment of a new Registrar, Anita Ghaemi, who took up her position last October. Mrs. Ghaemi came to us after several years' experience working at the Metropolitan Museum and in Iran, and immediately applied her talent for organization and knowledge of Near Eastern material to the

daunting topic of our registration. In practical terms, this has meant substituting an accession year/lot/individual number system for all newly-registered material, instead of the inappropriately archaic numerical sequence system followed by the Institute since its inception. This was swiftly followed by a new system for the location of objects so that they can be tracked down immediately in their progress around the building for study, conservation, exhibition, or loan. New cards have been devised for registration, reattribution of objects, and loan forms. Nearly two hundred objects have been registered and catalogued from the Bab edh-Dhra excavations, and almost as many from Fustāt. In the past 8 months alone, 28 scholars and students from the United States and abroad have been accommodated, some for as long as a month. In all of this she has been greatly assisted by a number of volunteers and graduate students.

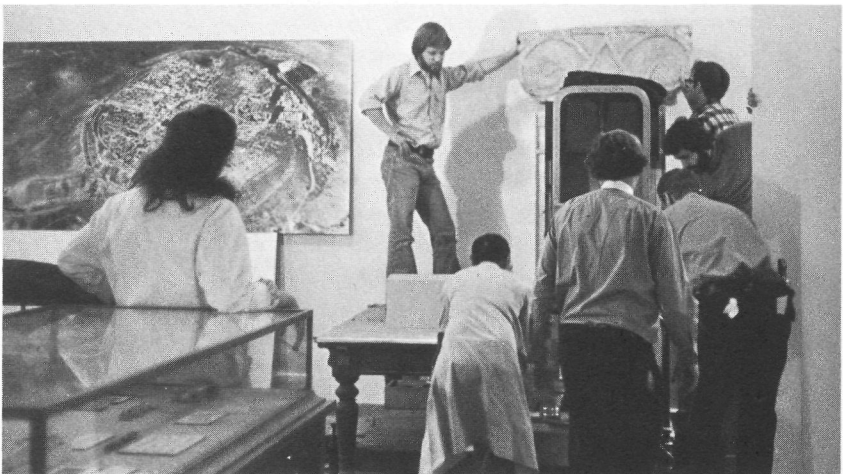
A second new staff member, Ronnie Burbank, joined us as Archivist last September. She is a graduate of Barnard College, Columbia University, and the University of Chicago, and has previously worked in the Museum of the City of New York and The American Museum of Natural History. The archives of the Oriental Institute have been gathering an undue amount of dust in recent years, and are also long overdue for a strategic reorganization. The archives comprise two basic collections of photographic and archeological records, interdependent on each other and closely related to objects in the Museum collection. The photographic collection consists of some 64,000 photographs, 43,000 negatives, and 19,000 slides and is widely used both within and outside the Oriental Institute. Many of the older photographs need attention, and a start has been made toward their preservation. The old glass slide collection has been revised and moved to the basement where it is now accessible as a valuable archive; the 35mm collection has also been put in order and a new system introduced for borrowing the material, with forms and cards to keep track of the slides. The demand for photographs from outside is on the increase, and strenuous efforts have been made to expedite orders as quickly as possible. As for the archeological records, a detailed plan has been



made of their present location, and a start made boxing the material in acid-free containers. Mrs. Burbank attended a regional meeting of Archivists in Chicago in May, and is now preparing a grant proposal to cover the preservation and basic reorganization of our archival material.

In the galleries themselves, the most important activity has been the redisplay of the Palestinian collection, and the reorganization of the gallery itself. The museum has always lacked sufficient space for temporary exhibitions and the new gallery has been planned in such a way that it can be quickly transformed into a suitable space for large or small-scale exhibitions. The permanent partitions have been removed and a single, unified space created. The windows have been screened so that there is now diffused, natural lighting supplemented by an extended network of spotlights. The Palestinian collection has been redisplayed using a combination of refinished older cases and new cases made in our own workshops, by Ray Tindel and Honorio Torres. The Bab edh-Dhra pottery has been integrated into the collection and a novel feature, unique in the United States, is a linear sequence tracing the development of Palestinian pottery from the earliest Neolithic period right up to medieval times. A simulated cave has been constructed for our Dead Sea Scroll material, using a color

Museum crew installing a display in the Palestinian Hall.



Workman demolishing an old partition in the Palestinian Hall.

photograph of the Judean hills taken by the Chairman of our Volunteers, Peggy Grant. The quest for verisimilitude, incidentally, led Barbara Hall, Ray Tindel, and myself to make a winter expedition, through deep snow, to the largest tambourine factory in the world, in search of real parchment!

Our first exhibition in the newly cleaned Palestinian gallery, "From a Syrian Suq," consisted of a full-scale reproduction of part of a *suq*, complete with shops and goods for sale. This ran for a month at Christmas, the shops being stocked with material specially purchased the previous spring in Aleppo and Damascus. Again in the quest for authenticity, graffiti on the walls of the *suq* were provided by students in Carolyn Killean's first-year Arabic class. A direct result of the exhibition was a 25 percent increase in museum attendance, in spite of very bad weather. An indirect result was the redesign of our Suq shop by the architects Skidmore, Owings and Merrill. This was thanks to the distinguished engineer, Dr. F. R. Khan, who visited the *suq* exhibition, and was sufficiently intrigued by it to offer the services of his firm for a nominal fee. This luckily coincided with an anonymous gift of \$1,000 specifically donated to the Museum for this purpose. We are now looking for a donor who will help us to realize the ingenious and practical architectural design that has been prepared.

The second exhibition was a show specially mounted for the Demotic Dinner. This consisted of Egyptian and Greco-Roman artifacts, covering the period when the Demotic language was used, as well as a photographic sequence explaining the dictionary project. The Museum staff was also involved in other aspects of the dinner including the decoration of the galleries, the production of Demotic marriage contracts and proverbs from the Wisdom of Onchsheshonqy as souvenirs, publicity, and the provision of an Oriental dancer for after-dinner entertainment. Projected exhibitions in the process of negotiation include "Excavations at Carthage, Then and Now" (1980); "The Arts of the Mamluk Dynasty" (1981); and an exhibition of our own Islamic bookbindings (1981).

Among other improvements in the public area have been the provision of a map showing the sites in the



"From a Syrian Suq," Fall, 1978.

Near East with which the Oriental Institute has been specially associated; a new plan for the museum, to orient visitors; the redecoration of the lower basement area and washrooms; and the provision of a ramp for disabled visitors, and a new wheelchair. The new colophon of the Oriental Institute, the result of a competition won by Jean Grant, has been adapted and used with great success on the title-page of Institute publications and on museum cards and documents; it is currently in production for tote bags and a T-shirt for sale in the Suq.

A new fascicle of the University of Chicago Press's text-fiche series has been prepared by David Nasgowitz, on Professor Carl Kraeling's excavations at Ptolemais in Libya. Mr. Nasgowitz has participated in the training of museum docents through gallery talks and a lecture on Syro-Palestinian archeology. He has also looked after the arrangements and insurance for a number of loans to other museums. In the past year, we have lent material to the Nubian exhibition at the Brooklyn Museum; the Jacksonville Museum; the Peabody Museum at Yale;

and the Field Museum in Chicago. In addition to the textiles themselves, we loaned more than two hundred objects to the Nubian Textile exhibition at the Art Institute of Chicago.

In the Museum office, a recorded message has greatly alleviated the torrent of phone calls demanding general information. All the same, our secretary, Myrna Simon, tells us that our most common phone call is for an appraisal of an ancient Japanese scroll! Information about our slide-lecture programs on Egypt and Mesopotamia, mailed out with tour confirmation cards, has resulted in a large increase in lectures. To date, thirty-four lectures have been given, as well as nine film shows. Museum attendance dropped in January because of the blizzard, but increased by nearly six hundred in March. Since July 1978, we have given 493 guided tours to groups coming from as far afield as Iowa, Missouri, California, Wisconsin, Michigan, Indiana, Tennessee, New York, Minnesota, and Hawaii. Visitors to the Museum came from many countries and included twenty Chinese, the Director of the Iraq National Museum, an East German cultural delegation, the Director of the Kuwait Development Fund, the Finance Minister of Abu Dhabi, the Curator of the Al-Azhar Museum in Jerusalem, the Minister of Culture from Algeria, the Director of the Iran-Bastan Museum in Tehran, and a group of Russian immigrant teenagers.