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News & Notes

The Oriental Institute

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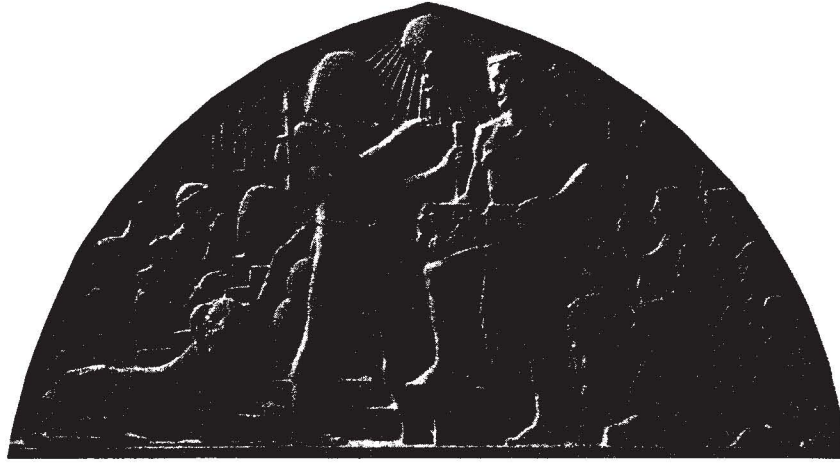
SEASON'S GREETINGS

from the staff of

The Oriental Institute!

* * *

DEC 28 1978



What Does it Mean?—A Key to the Institute's Bas-Reliefs

The first question visitors to the Oriental Institute ask the Museum Docents often concerns the striking pictures carved over the front entrance or the series of bas reliefs on the north face of the building. These images present pictorial allegories, a form of art which is itself of ancient Near Eastern origin. Several such carved "narratives," from Egypt and Assyria, are displayed in the Museum, telling of the heroic exploits of Kings Seti I, Ashurnasirpal II, Shalmaneser III, and others. Like the reliefs outside, these vibrate with symbolic images not necessarily intended to be read as realistic representations.

When James Henry Breasted designed the tympanum relief above the door and those on the buttresses, his intention was to capture the spirit of the Institute he had founded in 1919. The carvings on the new headquarters of the Institute, dedicated on December 5, 1931, contain figures and symbols suggesting the contributions of the Orient to Western civilization (sculptor: Ulric H. Ellerhusen).

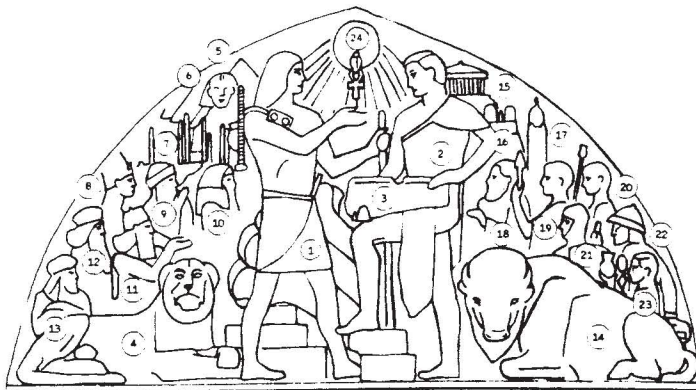
The tympanum is symmetrically divided into two clearly balanced panoramas of the East and the West, drawn together by the central image of the sun. Aligned with the actual compass points, the personification of the East (1) is on the left, shown as an Egyptian scribe with a palette and writing outfit over his right shoulder (similar writing tools are on view in our Egyptian Gallery, Alcove D). He stands among the ruins of the temple of

the fifth dynasty king, Sahure, facing the West (2) to whom he has just given a wall fragment (3), also from the temple of Sahure. The hieroglyphic inscription may be read, "I have beheld thy beauty." This gift is meant to represent the Eastern origin of the Western writing systems. One of the most important types of research sponsored by the Oriental Institute is its work with various ancient Eastern languages and scripts, such as the Demotic Dictionary Project, the Chicago Assyrian Dictionary, the Hittite Dictionary Project, the Sumerian Lexicon, and others.

Behind the central figures, on either side, are symbols of Eastern and Western civilization, including architectural monuments and historic figures. On the left is the Egyptian lion (4) (probably from Amenhotep III's temple at Soleb), the pyramids (5), the Sphinx of Chephren (Khafre) (6), the ruins of Persepolis (a capital of Xerxes' and Darius' Persian Empire) (7). The great men of Eastern history are pictured in chronological order (beginning top left): Djoser of Egypt (8), the great builder, Hammurapi of Babylonia (9), the lawgiver; Tuthmosis III of Egypt (10), the empire-builder; Ashurbanipal of Assyria (11), who collected a great library; Darius of Persia (12); and Chosroes of Persia (13).

Representing the West are a bison (14) (a popular civic symbol of early 20th century America; it frequently appeared on stamps, coins, and monuments); the Parthenon of Athens (15), a European cathedral (16) (not identified), and a modern "skyscraper tower" (17) (the state capitol at Lincoln, Nebraska, which was designed by Goodhue Associates, as was the Institute building itself).

The six famous Western men are Herodotus (18), the Greek historian; Alexander the Great (19), empire-builder; Julius Caesar (20); a crusader (21); a modern excavator leaning on his spade (22); and a modern archeologist (23) at work with his lens.



Key to the tympanum.

SJ Fisher

AUTHOR'S NOTE: *This information was gathered from the first Oriental Institute Handbook and Museum Guide, 1931, and from Egyptologist Klaus Baer, who stood on the front doorstep in the icy cold with me late one afternoon, patiently explaining the Egyptian symbols, for which much thanks!*

—Shirley Fisher

In the top center we see the Aten sun disk (24), the symbol of Pharaoh Akhnaten's universal deity (14th century B.C.), its rays ending in blessing hands, with a protective uraeus serpent and ankh (the Egyptian hieroglyph meaning "life") before it.

Around the central bas-relief are smaller figures. In the center is an Egyptian-styled winged sun disk with uraeus serpents. To the left, an Egyptian pharaoh makes an offering to the gods and another

pharaoh rides into battle in his war chariot. To the right, a troop of Assyrian warriors march past palm trees above the image of a Phoenician ship. The Egyptian-styled sphinxes (lower left and right) hold, respectively, a small god figure (unidentified) with the inscription "The Good God [name undeciphered], Given Life," and the emblems of kingship (crook, flail, and scepter) with the inscription "Magic, the Great God."



1

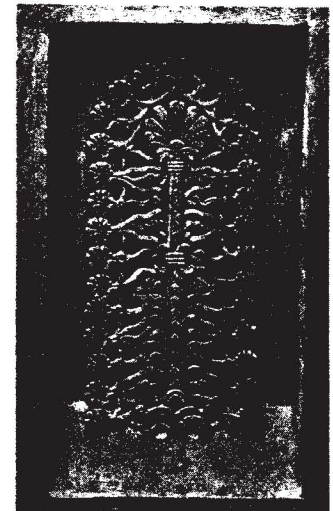
1) Far above the entrance is the figure of the God, Heh, the "Egyptian genius of duration," holding the symbols of eternity (palm rib hieroglyphs), as depicted in the tomb of Tutankhamun.

Across the north wall, from West to East:



2

2) The ancient Egyptian symbol of the unification of Upper and Lower Egypt, symbolized by the lotus and papyrus being tied together by two Nile gods.



3

3) The Assyrian "tree of life."



4

4) A Phoenician merchant ship (from a Sidonian sarcophagus of the 6th century B.C.).



5

5) The "Babylonian genius or demon of the early Sumerian cities, called Im-dugud."



6

6) The seven-branched Jewish candlestick, as represented on the Column of Trajan, the Roman despoiler of the Temple in Jerusalem.



7

7) A Hittite king or god, from a gate at Boghazkoi, Turkey.

New Year to Bring Changes in Palestinian Gallery

Some of the Institute's most prized objects, including the Megiddo Ivories, will have a new setting this January. The remodeled Palestinian gallery will be more flexible and open, making use of natural diffuse window lighting and track lights for emphasis. New displays, including early Christian and Islamic material from the Institute's collection, will be mounted in movable Kensington cases, to allow more freedom in accommodating temporary or traveling exhibitions.

A newly acquired collection of Early Bronze Age pottery will be on view, consisting of more than 100 pots from excavations at Bab ed-Dwa, Jordan. Bought from Jordan's Department of Antiquities, these pots are to be shown much as they were found. Another new exhibit will trace the development of Palestinian pottery, using chronologically arranged examples drawn from the Institute's own collections.

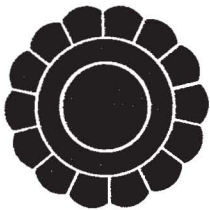
The Megiddo Ivories, one of the more popular and important holdings at the Institute, will be on display again in a new format. The story of the Institute's excavations at Megiddo will be illustrated (including an aerial photo-



*THE FINAL TOUCHES:
John Carswell prepares for the opening of
"In a Syrian Suq."*

graph of the site) and integrated with newly written descriptions of the objects themselves.

Back on display again will be the Dead Sea Scroll material, a group of religious artifacts (including the Baal figures), and the limestone capital from Megiddo, with a smaller painted model showing its original coloration.



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