

Discovery, Collection, Memory: The Oriental Institute at 100

September 16, 2019 through December 13, 2019

Introductory Panel

The Archaeology of an Institution

The Oriental Institute (OI)—one of the world's leading centers for the study of ancient Middle Eastern civilizations—is celebrating 100 years of excavation, research, and scholarship. On May 13, 1919, Egyptologist James Henry Breasted of the University of Chicago founded the OI with the support of John D. Rockefeller, Jr. It was the first interdisciplinary research center in the United States devoted to the origins of human civilization and the ancient world.

Piecing together the OI's past involves sifting through its archival history. The archive is where the multiple iterations and narratives of an institution live. The information and objects found there are continuously transformed by scholars and staff, the implementation of new technologies, and ongoing discoveries at home and abroad. Preserving, maintaining, and studying its archives are critical to remembering, understanding, and empathizing with the people behind the OI's legacy, the scholarly work of the Institute, and the cultures represented in its public museum.

Today, OI scholars and staff focus on the geographical areas of Afghanistan, Egypt, Iran, Iraq, Israel, Jordan, Libya, Palestine, Sudan, Syria, Turkey, and Yemen. They work intensely to discover new sites of cultural heritage, decipher ancient languages, reconstruct the histories of long lost civilizations, and preserve these collections for future generations. During the 2019-2020 academic year, the OI celebrates its centennial, the progress that has been made since Breasted's original vision, and the future of ancient Middle Eastern Studies.

Acknowledgement Panel

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Case 1: James Henry Breasted

Born in Rockford, IL in 1865, James Henry Breasted was appointed to the first professorship in Egyptology in the United States at the University of Chicago in 1905 by University President William Rainey Harper. His connection to the University of Chicago began when he earned a master's degree at Yale University from 1890 to 1891. It was there that he met his mentor, William Rainey Harper, who encouraged him to study Egyptology in Berlin under the leading Egyptologist of the day, Adolf Erman. While completing his doctorate in Germany he met and married Frances Hart in 1894. Their honeymoon was spent in Egypt acquiring artifacts for the Haskell Oriental Museum, work that was commissioned by the newly appointed president—and mentor of Breasted—William Rainey Harper. Upon returning to Chicago, they had three children together: Charles, James Jr., and Astrid, but their married life was always entwined with Breasted's scholarly pursuits. Hart, a trained musician herself, supported her husband's career by documenting it closely and traveling with him to sites across the Middle East whenever possible. Approximately one year after her death, Breasted married her sister, Imogene. It was upon returning to the United States, after their honeymoon trip, that Breasted contracted the streptococcus virus (strep throat) and died in New York on December 2, 1935. The professional and personal relationships that Breasted fostered nationally and internationally were significant for the scholarly landscape of the university. It is because of these partnerships, the creation of the Haskell Oriental Museum, and ultimately the OI in 1919 that the study of Egyptology and the ancient Middle East flourished at the University of Chicago throughout the twentieth century.

Case 2: The Haskell Oriental Museum

The Haskell Oriental Museum was created with a donation from Mrs. Caroline E. Haskell in memory of her late husband, Frederick Haskell. Until 1896, when the Haskell Oriental Museum was completed, the study of the ancient Middle East did not have a dedicated home on campus. The dedication of the Haskell Oriental Museum occurred on July 2, 1896 during the quinquennial celebration of the University of Chicago.

The museum's first director was William Rainey Harper, while James Henry Breasted acted as assistant director. The collections in the museum were displayed in the ground floor galleries and consisted mainly of plaster-cast reproductions and small exhibition cases in which visitors could view an assortment of antiquities. The Egyptian collection was strong, most of which was the result of purchases made on Breasted's honeymoon trip to Egypt from 1894-1895. Interest for such work in Chicago was great and this collection grew rapidly thanks to donations from the Chicago Society of Egyptian Research (established 1897) and a subscription to the Egypt Exploration Fund. Enthusiasm for field work during this period began to grow. By 1901, William Rainey Harper was so fully committed to his responsibilities as university president that James Henry Breasted was appointed director of the Haskell Oriental Museum. It was his passion and scholarship that would move ancient Middle Eastern studies at the University of Chicago forward in ways not yet imagined.

Focus Panel

The term 'Orient' originally referred to the OI's geographical area of research focus — 100 years ago, the Middle East was known as the *Orient*, meaning 'east' (cf. Occident meaning 'west'). Though this meaning of the term is no longer part of common American English usage, it is still associated with some well-known institutes and museums, as in the case of the OI.

Case 3: 1905-1907 Trips

The intellectual and financial support of field work increased around 1900 and President Harper and Breasted embraced the chance to begin expeditions abroad. In 1903, John D. Rockefeller, Sr. gave \$50,000 in support of their research. His support, along with a number of other donations, allowed the university to organize its first expedition to the Middle East. President Harper created an “Oriental Exploration Fund of the University of Chicago” in 1903 and began an expedition that resulted in an excavation at the site of Bismaya in central Iraq, which was directed by Edgar J. Banks. The artifacts discovered there formed the core of the Haskell Oriental Museum’s Mesopotamian collection. In 1905, focus shifted to Breasted and Egypt. The remaining exploration fund was dedicated to an epigraphic survey of Egypt and Nubia headed by Breasted. During the first season (1905-06), he traveled with his wife Frances and eight-year-old son, Charles to southern Egypt. The second season was more tumultuous. Accompanied by the artist Norman de Garis Davies, the team traveled south to the temples of Nubia. This trip was complete with 135- degree temperatures, sand storms, and a shipwreck. Breasted kept copious notes of these two seasons of exploration from 1905-07. The goal of these trips was to record the architecture of this area and copy inscriptions found there. It was during this time that Breasted developed epigraphic techniques that created a foundation for the ones used today at Chicago House in Luxor, Egypt. These trips resulted in invaluable reconnaissance work for future expeditions and the creation of over a thousand photographs, which still exist in the OI’s archives today.

Case 4: The Creation of the OI

As interest in the study of the ancient Middle East grew, Professor Breasted became increasingly aware of his need for a patron who would provide him dedicated funds to pursue his research. President Harper and John D. Rockefeller, Sr. had an essential alliance that allowed the University of Chicago to flourish in its early decades. Breasted and John D. Rockefeller, Jr. found their common ground through a mutual appreciation of the subject at hand. Direct contact between these two men, however, did not occur until Breasted decided to seize the possibilities afforded by the end of WWI and apply for a grant to survey the Middle East. The grant he applied for was sponsored by the Rockefellers. In support of his Institute, Breasted laid out an intricate and practical plan. The metaphor that ran through his plan was a celestial one and the idea that would be at the foundation of his Institute was that of a vast archive. Evoking images of the stars, Breasted claimed that you cannot have the OI without its archive because the true dream of the scholar who studies the ancient Middle East is of a central repository where artifacts, documents, photographs, ephemera, and texts could be gathered together under one roof, much like an astronomer's observatory. He writes, "It is evident that the methods and the equipment of the natural sciences should be applied to the study of man, and that the vast body of documents he has left behind must be as systematically gathered, filed and employed as are the observations of the astronomer." (Breasted, February 18, 1919). Rockefeller agreed and with his support, Breasted and President Harry Pratt Judson established the Oriental Institute in 1919.

Case 5: 1919-1920 Reconnaissance Trip

In August of 1919, Breasted and four companions began the first expedition sanctioned by the newly minted Oriental Institute. He put together a team consisting of students and former students, Ludlow Bull, William Edgerton, Daniel David Luckenbill, and William Shelton. Together they traveled through Egypt, Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, and Israel. Their goals were two-fold: collection and connection. They were tasked with purchasing antiquities to study and display in Chicago while also forging new professional relationships and developing networks that would lay the groundwork for future excavation at sites in these areas. This group included some of the first American archaeologists to survey the Middle East at this time. Breasted was very cognizant of the significance of this trip for the future of the Institute. As such, he worked hard to keep this not so merry band of travelers in good spirits as they encountered difficult traveling conditions, little sleep, and scarce food resources. Breasted himself struggled with loneliness as they traveled from England to Cairo through Egypt on to Bombay, then to Basra, Iraq, Beirut, Damascus and back to London via Cairo. At the age of fifty-four, Breasted had finally seen most of the sites that he had written about in his twenty-five-year career as an Egyptologist. It was during this trip that he purchased the Milbank papyrus, cuneiform tablets, Mesopotamian statuary, and cylinder seals, to name only a small portion of the objects that are still in the museum's collection today.

Case 6: Groundbreaking: The Making of an Institute

Ground was broken at the corner of East 58th St. and University Ave. in April of 1930 to build the new “headquarters” of the OI. Since its founding in 1919, field expeditions had expanded rapidly to include Anatolia, Luxor, Megiddo, and Persepolis. At the same time, a number of philological projects like the Chicago Assyrian Dictionary had begun, making Haskell Hall too small to accommodate all of the Institute’s needs. Breasted writes, “For the first time in the history of modern research, the synthetic study of early man himself has been granted a home beside the laboratories of the natural sciences in a correlated effort to reconstruct through pure research the epic of mankind’s long and mysterious development.” (*Third Handbook*, 1931). With Rockefeller’s support, the building was designed by Oscar H. Murray of the firm Mayers, Murray, & Phillip and every detail was carefully considered and designed. Breasted organized a Symbolism Committee and together they constructed models of design features that could be represented throughout the interior of the neo-Gothic building. Many of these designs were taken from *Assyrian Sculptures: Palace of Sinacherib*; *Die Kunst des alten Orients*; and *Atlas de L’Histoire de l’Art Égyptian*. In the end, many of Breasted’s ideas were simplified for the sake of economy, but they include the Tympanum over the front doors entitled, “East Teaching the West,” the lion heads on the main staircase, which are a nod to the lion statues that guarded the Ishtar temple at Nimrud, and the ceiling cornices in the lobby, which depict a pattern of Egypto-Assyrian floral friezes. This vision endures today as the headquarters of an ever-expanding Oriental Institute and museum.

Case 7: Human-headed Winged Bull

This winged-bull, known as a *lamassu* from textual sources, was given to the OI by the Department of Antiquities in Iraq. The Assyrian sculpture was discovered in northern Iraq when archaeologists from the OI, including Edward Chiera, were excavating at Khorsabad (Dur-Sharrukin) in 1929. It originally guarded the throne room of Sargon II, King of Assyria (721-705 BC). The *lamassu* is a mythological hybrid, a protective deity known to “turn back an evil person,” that is composed of the head of a human, the body of a bull, and the wings of a bird. These figures are depicted in the *Epic of Gilgamesh*, one of the textual sources for the iconography of these figures.

The OI’s *lamassu* has five legs, which was typical for those created during Sargon II’s reign. This “double-aspect” causes the figure to appear to be standing or walking when viewed either from the front or the side, respectively. This winged-bull is almost five meters (16 feet) tall and weighs approximately 40 tons. The large sculpture fragments that were excavated at Khorsabad were packed in crates and transported to Chicago, where they were brought into the OI Museum through the wall of the gallery as it was being built in 1930. It was then restored and assembled on the same spot. Its massiveness required the floor to be reinforced and the building to be built around it, which ensures that the OI’s *lamassu* will never be moved to another spot in the museum or loaned to another institution.

Case 8: The Colossal Statue of Tutankhamun

From 1926 to 1933, the OI excavated at the Egyptian site of Medinet Habu, from which it was able to acquire over 8,000 artifacts for the museum. The colossal statue of Tutankhamun was one of these. The original statue stands at over 5 meters (16.4 feet) tall and weighs approximately 6 tons. It was created during the reign of Tutankhamun (1355-1346 BC) and holds the distinction of being the tallest ancient Egyptian statue in the Western Hemisphere. When OI archaeologists, including Uvo Hölscher, made this discovery in 1930, the statue was found in three pieces, namely the crown, head, and torso, which were gifted to the OI by the Egyptian government. The statue has an almost identical twin found at the same mortuary temple of Ay and Horemheb. This second statue, which was more complete, is now located in the Egyptian Museum in Cairo. Both statues are made of quartzite with some paint from modern restoration. After being brought to the OI, the pieces were mounted on a metal framework and joined together. The legs and base were constructed using man-made materials so that the statue could assume its original height. All of the missing features, arms, legs, neck and chin are also modern restoration. It was good fortune that the statue in Cairo was more complete, as it provided a reference from which to work. All of the restoration work took place at the OI from 1933-34 and was completed by Donato Bastiani and Maurice Bardin.

Case 9: Colossal Bull Head

The site of Persepolis was a great dynastic center of the Achaemenid Empire and is located approximately 400 miles south of present-day Tehran in the Southwestern Province of Fars. The OI excavated there from 1931-39. This Colossal Bull Head was discovered at Persepolis during the 1932-33 season by OI archaeologists under the direction of Ernst Herzfeld. The building to which it belonged, the Hundred-Column Hall, was built during the reigns of Xerxes and Artaxerxes (485-424 BC). This figure is one of a pair of guardian bulls that flanked the hall's entrance and its features are characteristic of the Achaemenid court style with its curved, smooth face, sharp-edged eyelids, and tightly curled hair. The other bull head is still at the site of Persepolis where it has been restored on top of its body at the entrance to the Hall. Made of limestone and weighing approximately 10 tons, the OI's Colossal Bull Head was brought to Chicago in fragments. It underwent a significant amount of restoration including the top of the head, horn bases, both eyes, minor sections around the mouth and all of the neck. It was restored on site by Donato Bastiani and reconstruction was supervised by the second director of the OI, John A. Wilson.

Case 10: Fragments of an Institution

In its permanent galleries, the OI museum displays 5,000 items from the regions of ancient Egypt, Nubia, Persia, Mesopotamia, Syria, Anatolia, and the Levant. What you see in this gallery is a tiny fraction of the OI's total collection which numbers around 350,000 objects, mainly excavated by OI archaeologists. The items below represent the galleries, but would normally be in storage and not on display.

Similar to these objects, the archival history of the OI represented in this exhibit is fragmentary. If it were not on display in this exhibit, it would be safely stored behind the closed doors of the archive. Access to these materials here provides an introduction to the pieces of history found in the archives. As a living institution, the OI is not simply a collection point for information and objects, but a place where discoveries—old and new—are made every day.

The OI provides access not only to a world-renowned collection of objects and information, but also provides a glimpse at how people forged identities—collective and individual—while confronting their own issues of autonomy, diversity, and unity. As the OI celebrates its centennial during the 2019-20 academic year, its commitment to interdisciplinary research will evolve in bold new ways. And its tradition of discovery, understanding, and the interpretation of what binds us all together will continue to advance into a new century.