

Mesopotamia reigns again at Oriental Institute

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It is well-known that civilization, the rule of law, government, the written word, literature and basic mathematic principles were invented by ancient Mesopotamian cultures in the land that is now Iraq. But it is less well-known that steamy, kiss-and-tell biographies and showboating, ostentatious architecture also first appeared there.

Luckily, the Mesopotamians left behind proof of those seminal civilizing accomplishments, carved into or indelibly painted on stone, metal, clay and ceramic works of art and workaday objects.

■ Outside of Baghdad, few places in the world have accumulated more of those pieces of art and artifacts than the University of Chicago's Oriental Institute.

Off public viewing since 1997 when the museum closed for a construction project, those pieces and many never before exhibited will be on public display Oct. 18. That is when the museum, at 1155 E. 58th St., reopens its largest exhibit space, the Mesopotamian gallery.

The value of the objects on display is underscored by the fact that in many cases they are similar to those that were feared smashed or stolen earlier this year when occupying American troops left the Iraqi National Museum in Baghdad unprotected after ousting Saddam Hussein's regime.

"A large portion of the material in the museum in Baghdad was excavated by Chicago scientists," said Gil Stein, Oriental Institute director.

Most of the objects were excavated in the first half of the 20th Century, when Iraq shared artifacts discovered by foreign archeologists. Iraq took the choicest pieces for its National Museum and allowed the foreign scientists to take home objects when more than one of a kind were found. Iraq has since ended that policy, insisting that no archeological artifacts leave the country.

"The collection we have is very rare," said Stein. "You couldn't duplicate it or do it today."

From the first objects in the first display case to the final artifact 140 feet away at the other end of the gallery, the exhibit takes visitors through the incredible sweep of Mesopotamian history in a way no other museum in the world can.

It begins with one of the museum's most irreplaceable objects, a mysterious, 1-by-1 1/2-inch caveman's ax found in Iraq 50 years ago, stained 150,000 years ago with the earliest known traces of human blood, according to the museum.

The ax is a part of a group of caveman artifacts, including stone knives, bludgeons and arrowheads and spear tips recovered in Iraq, showing the region was home to early bands of prehistoric humans just beginning to master tools.

The artifact at the other end of the hall also is made of stone, but is considerably bigger and far more finely crafted than the bloodied ax.

It is a stunning, 40-ton, 16-by-16-foot sculpture of a winged, human-headed bull carved from limestone 2,700 years ago to grace the entrance of King Sargon II's throne room in a magnificent palace at the center of an extraordinary city Sargon built in celebration of himself.

Sargon's new city turned out to be an ill-fated conceit, but the bull from his throne room is an ageless masterpiece, still dazzling today as an expression of artistic vision and execution.

Between the ax and Sargon's bull, there are 2,646 other artifacts that track the march of humanity out of the caves and into rudimentary agriculture and domestication of wild goats and sheep in the vicinity of the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers.

The artifacts show how early farmers grouped together in rude villages, how the desire to trade for scarce resources from distant lands nurtured some villages into growing into cities and kingdoms.

The cities became hothouses of human thought and invention, setting off the intellectual, technological, political and mercantile flowering of civilization.

"Our archeologists really want to have this display sweep across the development of Mesopotamian culture from the caves to 642 A.D. and the rise of the Islamic culture," said Karen Wilson, the museum director.

The institute's collection is rich in artifacts showing the development of the written word. In the first city, Uruk, traders needed to keep track of transactions and did so at first by devising systems of tokens and, later, pictographic symbols pressed into wet clay.

The symbols, drawn to denote sheep, cattle, grain and other goods, eventually evolved into more abstract symbols much like individual letters, called cuneiform writing.

Developed for commercial record-keeping, cuneiform quickly was adopted for literary purposes, too, and thousands of ancient clay tablets still survive, bearing witness to 5,000-year-old grain sales and tax payments, religious prayers and domestic news.

One of the earliest known literary efforts is the scene of seduction of King Lugalbanda by Ninsun, a clever young woman who became the mother of Gilgamesh, a legendary king who ruled Uruk about 2800 B.C.

The exhibit translates a portion of the tablet telling Ninsun's story:

Ninsun was very shrewd, she stayed awake and lay down at his feet.

Lugalbanda passed his arm around Ninsun, could not resist kissing her on the eyes, could not resist kissing her on the mouth, also taught her much lovemaking.

On display is a portion of the institute's collection of cylinder seals, one of the vital instruments of early commerce. Traders and merchants carried small stone cylinders incised with their personal trademarks.

They would seal vessels or doorways of storerooms containing their goods with wet clay and run the cylinder across the clay to leave their mark.

Once dried, an unbroken seal assured that the contents inside had not been tampered with.

"This is my favorite thing in the exhibit," said Wilson, leading the way to a tiny, carved stone cylinder highlighted in the exhibit, mounted next to an ancient clay seal it had made long ago in Mesopotamia.

It is the only such paired set of cylinder and seal in any museum in the world, Wilson said.

The exhibit brims with other artifacts both prosaic and profound.

There are the earliest wheels ever found, excavated by the Field Museum in the ruins of Kish, as well as toys, potters' wheels, weapons, jewelry, cooking utensils and other accoutrements of developing urban life from Ur, Uruk, Nineveh and Babylon.

Among the most eye-catching are two life-size striding lions beautifully depicted in glazed brick once installed in a long wall in Babylon.

Nothing is more striking, however, than the re-creation of the courtyard outside Sargon II's throne room. It is dominated by the huge human-headed bull, but there are also a series of sculpted, 9-by-9-foot panels, each weighing 15,000 pounds, depicting Sargon's cruel son of biblical fame, Sennacherib.

Monumental as the courtyard was, it was but a small part of a huge palace in a sprawling city built in 12 years to satisfy the remarkable ego of Sargon, who barely lived long enough to enjoy it.

Just as it was being finished in 705 B.C., he was killed, probably by his own men, and the new city fell into slow ruin.

The Mesopotamian gallery is the third of the museum's galleries to reorganize and reopen, following its Egyptian and Persian galleries, which reopened in 1999 and 2000, respectively.

Another gallery displaying Assyrian cultural artifacts and treasures from Syria, Turkey and Israel will reopen next year. The final gallery, a new one dedicated to ancient Nubia, will open in 2005.