ucked away on the University of Chicago’s historic campus is an archaeological museum like no other in the United States, one whose links to Egypt, Iran, Iraq and Syria stretch back over a hundred years. Although this surprising gem houses some 350,000 artefacts chronicling the art and culture of the ancient Middle East, the Oriental Institute has remained something of a best-kept secret amongst archaeologists and scholars. But this year, its insider status is about to change as it embarks on a series of events to mark the centenary of its birth.

“When James Henry Breasted founded the OI in 1919, it was a very radical idea at a time when Western scholars looked to Greece and Rome for the origins of human civilisation. He believed that who we are today can be traced back to the ancient Middle East, a region he named the Fertile Crescent,” says Jean Evans, while seated in her light-filled office at the Oriental Institute.

Jean Evans, in a dress and shawl by Anke Loh, walks past a spectacular relief from the palace of King Sargon II of Assyria in northern Iraq.

Bazaar meets the chief curator and deputy director of an extraordinary museum collection that’s shedding new light on the ancient Middle East.

Words by ALEX AUBRY
Photography by SEBASTIAN BÖTTCHER
The shelves around her is a priceless collection of books and documents containing research, excavation records and fieldwork from the entire Near East. It’s a critical mass of scholarship that’s unmatched anywhere in the world, and one that sets the OI apart from its larger peers.

At a time when major Western museums are under increasing pressure to return artifacts taken during conflict or from former colonies, the OI is also unique for the way in which it acquired its collection. Most of its materials were largely the result of its own expeditions rather than purchases. Today it’s one of the few museums in the world whose collection primarily came from authorised archaeological projects, where findings were shared with the host countries. In more recent years, Middle Eastern nations have insisted that major artifacts remain in their borders, and the OI continues to operate within these rules. “It’s this reliable provenance that’s helped us become a leading centre for the study of the ancient Near East,” says Jean, noting that the OI has also contributed to our understanding of the origins of human civilizations.

Whether we’re talking about the early establishment of cities or the beginnings of food production, all of these developments occurred in the region we now call the Middle East,” adds the curator, whose love of the region began with the Arab and Persian friends she made while an undergraduate student at Boston University. Her growing interest in the Middle East would lead her to pursue a PhD in Art History and Archaeology from New York University in 2005. While there, she studied under Donald P. Hansen, a leading archaeologist who had worked on digs in Iraq since the 1950s.

“He became my mentor and got me interested in the ancient Middle East,” says Jean, who also served as his assistant, carefully organizing his slides, photographs and field records from numerous digs over the decades. Beginning in 1999, he took Jean on her first trips to the region, where they worked on important excavations at the ancient site of Tell Brak in northeastern Syria. “I have very fond memories of Syria, where we stayed for two months at a time. I used it as an opportunity to visit well-known archaeological sites around the country, as well as cities such as Damascus, Aleppo, Hama and Homs,” says the archaeologist, who worked on digs at other important Syrian sites such as Tell Mozan, Hamoukar and Tell Zeidan.

Jean’s relationship with the OI began long before she came on-board as the museum’s chief curator and deputy director. After her professor and mentor passed away in 2007, she participated in a project to publish the findings from his digs at Nippur in Iraq. “Most of his research and paperwork had been sent back to the OI, where he began his career as an archaeologist,” says the curator, who first came to the museum in 2008 to conduct research. While still a graduate student, she also landed a fellowship at New York’s Metropolitan Museum of Art in 1999. It eventually turned into a full-time position as an assistant curator in the museum’s Department of Ancient Near Eastern Art. She remained at the MET for close to a decade, contributing to exhibitions on ancient Babylon and Mesopotamia.

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The TALKING POINT

While I was there, I worked on major shows where we’d have 52 lenders from 17 different countries. That experience prepared me for my role at the OI today,” says Jean, who sees the museum’s centennial as an opportunity to engage with new and diverse audiences. To make her point, she heads towards an exhibition gallery, which is undergoing a multi-million-dollar renovation. Her first stop is the Egyptian Gallery, where a 17-foot tall statue of King Tutankhamun looms over the refurbished space. Like many of the ancient Egyptian artefacts on view, this particular statue was excavated by the OI at Luxor in 1930.

“I hope it’s the beginning of a new chapter and I’m looking forward to seeing the impact on the museum,” says the curator, noting that the artefacts on display don’t simply speak to a distant past, but convey universal narratives that still resonate today.

“We’re ultimately telling human stories that transcend time and geography. Whether you’re studying economics or politics, these artefacts point to people dealing with similar issues thousands of years ago,” says Jean, as she enters the Mesopotamian Gallery, whose cuneiform is in a cuneiform written ball with a human head dating from 721-705 BC. The 40-tonne, 16-foot tall sculpture was excavated by the OI at Khorsabad in northern Iraq from 1928-29. Today the museum is home to the one of the most comprehensive displays of ancient Mesopotamian art outside of Baghdad. “The university’s first archaeological excavations in Iraq were conducted in 1930, and pre-date the founding of the OI,” says the curator, as she walks past a spectacular relief from the palace of King Sargon II of Assyria dating from 721-795 BC.

When asked to share her favourite items on display, she turns to smaller objects used by people on a daily basis. They include a 6000-year-old grooming kit, a clay boat marked with fingerprints from 2350 BC, as well as cosmetic pigments housed in shell containers. “The history of Mesopotamia tends to be told from a bird’s-eye view, emphasising larger events that impacted entire societies. Yet these quotidian objects not only demonstrate how we’re addressing these challenges as an institution,” says the curator, noting that many important Mesopotamian artefacts remain in Baghdad. “When looters destroyed and damaged the contents of the Iraq Museum, the OI’s staff quickly mobilised to create a centre for crisis management. It set about using its own records from decades of excavations and other resources to help with the re-documentation of the Iraq Museum collections.

In the aftermath of the crisis, the OI’s scholars and artefacts also became frequently quoted figures in the media to bring attention to Iraq’s cultural heritage. In addition, they worked with organisations such as UNESCO to call for an international ban on trading artefacts from the country. It became a duty for many of the OI’s faculty and staff, who’d worked in Iraq for many years. The contents of the Iraq Museum are part of our shared history because Mesopotamia was the cradle of human civilization,” says Jean, noting that archaeologists see this kind of activism as part of their job in a rapidly changing world.

Towards the end of the day, Jean’s eager to show off a new gallery installation inspired by Cosmopolitan City, a 2015 exhibition at the museum. It shed light on the multicultural city of Fustat, the capital of medieval Egypt and a predecessor to modern Cairo. Governed by Muslim rulers, the city’s neighbourhoods were populated by a patchwork of religions, languages and ethnic communities. The exhibition examined how they lived together and melded traditions to create a thriving metropolis from the 7th-12th centuries AD. “It was an incredibly successful exhibition, but what’s even more astounding is that only a fraction of the objects had ever been shown in public,” says the curator, who set about creating a permanent display of Islamic artefacts from the museum’s collection.

Out of boxes and drawers in its storage rooms have emerged ceramic plates, textiles, jewellery and architectural fragments. Many of the artefacts were excavated at Fustat by the American archaeologist George Scarlom between 1964-65, and reveal how the boundaries between communities blurred. “Seen together, these objects encourage us to ask questions about tolerance, discrimination, diversity and globalisation,” says Jean, noting that the concept of multiculturalism isn’t a new one. “Among the most striking Islamic treasures, is a fragment of a page from the 1001 Nights. Acquired by the OI in 1947, it’s believed to be the earliest example of the famous tales and one of the oldest existing Arabic literary manuscripts.”

“Although we’ve known for ancient Mesopotamian and Egyptian artefacts, most people aren’t aware that the OI is also a pioneer in early Islamic archaeology,” says the curator, who’s focused on telling these forgotten histories as well as engaging with audiences from the Middle East and its diaspora. “When an Egyptian student studying in the US or an Iraqi-American looks at these artefacts, they’re going to have a very different relationship to them than myself.”

Jean observes that museums can take an inclusive approach to displaying collections that speak to diverse audiences.

“The OI’s chief curator is also exploring future collaborations with Middle Eastern artists. “Many of them are responding to cultural heritage issues, the displacement of communities and even the refugee crisis. One shouldn’t be surprised to find these same concerns highlighted alongside the museum’s ancient artefacts,” says the curator, who hopes to create links between the region’s past and present. “It’s important to humanise this history, so that people realise these 5000-year-old objects come from the Middle East today.

“A flag that has flown over our world for centuries,” notes Jean, of her vision for a new institution that’s entering its 100th year.