

## MEET THE CURATORS

# Holly Pittman

CURATOR,  
NEAR EAST  
SECTION

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**H**OLLY PITTMAN, CURATOR in the Near East Section and Deputy Director for Academic Programs at Penn

Museum, discovered her passion for ancient glyptic art (carved symbols) through an unexpected convergence of travel experiences, job opportunities, and field work. What journey took Pittman from being an undergraduate

chemistry major to a specialist in iconography (images and symbols) and its role in the political and economic administration of early Near Eastern civilizations?

Pittman entered Bryn Mawr College in 1966 interested in chemistry, but she rapidly discovered ancient history. During her junior year, she took a break and went to work in New York City. With money saved from her job, she then traveled throughout Europe for five months, visiting more than a dozen countries. Two experiences were especially pivotal in developing her career interests—the discovery of the impact of art and imagery while in Florence, Italy, and her informal participation on an archaeological project in Crete. Pittman realized that ancient history and archaeology could be melded together as a career, with the additional benefit of doing research outside the U.S.

She completed her undergraduate degree at the State University of New York at Binghamton in 1971 and entered Columbia University to pursue graduate work in Art History and Archaeology. While at Columbia, she completed her M.A. thesis on the metalwork of the steppe nomads who ranged from the Altai in Siberia to Bulgaria and southern Ukraine from the end of the 8th century BC to the 1st century AD. During this time, Pittman took a position as a curatorial assistant in Ancient Near Eastern Art at the Metropolitan Museum of Art. Her job at the Met, where she worked as a curator for 15 years, offered unparalleled opportunities for fieldwork,



Holly Pittman standing in front of the step trench excavated to investigate the stratigraphy of the citadel mound at Konar Sandal South, Iran.



In February 2004, Pittman attended a presentation to the workmen and their families of the Konar Sandal South excavations.

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affording real-life experiences to complement her graduate classes at Columbia. Projects during these years took Pittman to Melissa in Cyprus, Erbaba in Turkey, Tal-i Malyan in Iran, and Tell Leilan in Syria. Her work at Tal-i Malyan was particularly significant, leading to her Ph.D. research on the structure and function of glyptic images.

Pittman came to Penn as an Associate Professor without tenure in the History of Art Department in 1989. She was promoted to Associate Professor with tenure in 1993 and to full Professor in 1996. In 2000 she was appointed the College for Women Class of 1963 Endowed Term Professor in the Humanities. At the same time, she also became a Curator in the Museum's Near East Section, taking on the additional role of Deputy Director for Academic Programs at the Museum in 2005.

The glyptic art of seals and seal impressions is the evidence Pittman uses to reconstruct the visual culture of ancient Near Eastern societies. She is particularly interested in how this



Holly Pittman and Dr. Youssef Madjidzadeh were the subject of an Iranian documentary by Shahram Derekshan (behind the camera).



This cylinder seal impression (mf 623), dating to the Proto-Elamite period (ca. 2900 BC), was discovered in Operation ABC at Tal-i Malyan, Iran.

imagery functioned during the 3rd millennium BC in Early Bronze Age administrative systems. Her current work on glyptic imagery includes seals and seal impressions from Tal-i Malyan in Iran, Tell Brak in Syria, and Arslan Tepe and Hacinebi Tepe in Turkey. There are some 2000 seal impressions from Arslan Tepe alone which record the different functions of seals (e.g. jar sealings, basket sealings, etc.). The

iconography and styles of these seals and their impressions are distributed in patterns among the different levels of an administrative hierarchy. This patterning can be interpreted to better explain how 3rd millennium BC administrative communication occurred. Ironically, Pittman found that one of the seal impressions with the greatest ideological value for researchers today—a priest-king pulled on a sledge—is actually rarely used in the administrative contexts so far known.

Since 2000, Pittman has pursued fieldwork in Iran, where she collaborates with Dr. Youssef Madjidzadeh of the Iranian Cultural Heritage and Tourism Organization on research in the Jiroft region of south-central Iran. Her first season there took place from January to March 2004, followed by a second season from December 2004 to March 2005. This research has revealed a previously unknown Early Bronze Age civilization which had far-flung interactions with Mesopotamia, Central Asia, and the Indus Valley region of Pakistan and northwest India. Much to Pittman's delight, about 150 seal impressions have also been discovered, allowing her to continue research on imagery in economic administrative contexts. She looks forward to the next season in the Jiroft region, currently scheduled for the Fall of 2006. 🏠

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