MUSINGS AND VISIONS FROM THE DIRECTOR'S DESK

The University of Pennsylvania Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology’s collection of materials from the excavations in the Royal Cemetery at Ur is among the most celebrated of the Museum’s illustrations holdings. “The Ram in the Thicket,” for example, is illustrated in Janson and Janson’s well-known History of Art, now in its fifth revised edition (1997). The Jansons note that “The animal, marvelously alive and energetic, has almost a demonic power of expression as it gazes at us from between the branches of the symbolic tree.” They also illustrate the inlaid panel from the bull-headed lyre (see cover). These are just two of the pieces that are among the most renowned objects from antiquity.

Much of our archaeological and anthropological collections has come from more than 350 significant field projects that the Museum has sponsored over the 111 years of its existence. People who are unaware of the breadth and depth of our collections are often taken aback when they visit us. For instance, I have been told that some years ago an eminent visitor, after viewing the Ur exhibit, commented admiringly on how well done the replicas were. When informed that the pieces were real, he was speechless.

The archaeological value of the Ur objects, however, lies not only in their remarkable aesthetic qualities. Of equal importance is the information about their contexts contained in the superb field notes, plans, maps, and photographs from Sir Leonard Woolley’s excavations that are housed in the Museum’s archives. Such data are as priceless as the objects themselves. As the reader will see in the informative articles in this special issue of Expedition, the objects and their associated contextual data allow scholars to make insightful inferences about the objects and the ancient Mesopotamian civilization that produced them.

The Museum is proud of the traveling exhibition of our Ur materials put together by Professor Richard Zettler, Associate Curator-in-Charge of the Near East Section, and his curatorial colleagues in Jardin, the Assistant Director in charge of Museum Services, and her colleagues in Exhibits, Registrar’s Office, Photographic Studio, and Conservation. This show will allow people all across the country to see and appreciate the cultural accomplishments of the ancient Sumerian civilization. For those people who see the show in its various venues and even for those who are unable to visit the traveling exhibition, we hope this issue of Expedition and the extensive catalog that accompanies the exhibition will serve to heighten their enjoyment or act as helpful surrogates.

Jeremy A. Sabloff
The Williams Director

TRAVELING EXHIBITION VENUES FOR “TREASURES FROM THE ROYAL TOMBS OF UR”

10/99/8 – 1/3/99 The Bowers Museum of Cultural Art, Santa Ana, CA
5/30/99 – 8/5/99 Dallas Museum of Art, Dallas, TX
10/17/99 – 1/17/00 Arthur M. Sackler Gallery, Washington, DC
2/20/00 – 4/23/00 Cleveland Museum of Art, Cleveland, OH
5/30 – 9/00 Pierpont Morgan Library, New York, NY
10/01 – 1/01 The Oriental Institute, Chicago, IL
2/01 – 5/01 Detroit Institute of Art, Detroit, MI

Introduction

Few sites possess the lure and mystique of the ancient Near Eastern mound of Ur, with its imposing zigurat and its so-called Royal Tombs rich in gold and silver treasures. Sometimes it can be hard to see beyond that bright and potent vision to a more nuanced picture of Ur as a vital, long-lived city-state where people lived and died, worshiped their gods, made art, played music and danced, went to school, farmed and fished, and traded, and just went about their daily business.

The University of Pennsylvania Museum’s traveling exhibition is centered on the most beautiful objects from the Royal Tombs—the “treasures”—and the catalog includes fine images of each object. This companion issue of Expedition includes a sampling of those treasures, but tries as well to contextualize— to cover the technical studies and epigraphic and ethnoarchaeological research that bring out the stories the objects have to tell, to follow them from the earth through the laboratory into the exhibit case.

Lee Horne sets the stage with her introduction to the site of Ur, its place in Sumerian history, and Sir Leonard Woolley’s excavations there. Anne Drafkorn Kilmer contributes a discussion of Mesopotamian music and what can be learned of ancient scales, tuning, and melody from the unique stringed musical instruments found at Ur. Maude de Schaumaise’s account of the silver boat-shaped lyre (which is not traveling with the exhibit) ties closely with Kilmer’s article in exemplifying how meticulous study with modern imaging technology can contribute to our understanding of the way in which ancient instruments were made and strung.

Edward Ochsengelacher describes an ethnoarchaeological study he headed up in the 1960s and 1970s. He examines in particular the way in which modern-day Iraqi villagers used the same raw materials— mud or clay, reeds, wood, cattle and sheep, bitumen—employed by the Sumerians in the 3rd millennium BC. It would be unwise to simplify the two different cultures separated by four and a half millennia: one is largely documented through finds in graves, the other is a living society of herders and farmers. Yet the parallels in each culture’s use of locally available materials are striking.

Ur is also the locale where thousands of clay cuneiform tablets were found, and Steve Tinney summarizes the on-going research into how Sumerian youths learned to write and read cuneiform. Photographs of the tablets, some published for the first time, clearly show how the budding cuneiformist progressed from practice single strokes to combining the strokes into signs and then to copying simple literary texts.

Surely the single best-known object from Ur is the so-called Ram in the Thicket. Yelena Rakic ponders its meaning and significance as she takes us through the story of its recovery from the “Great Death Pit.” This is the same tomb where the silver boat-shaped lyre was found. Like the lyre, the “Ram” was recently re-conserved. A photo-essay on that reconstruction, as related by conservator Tamsen Fuller, underlines the critical role such support personnel play in the success of any public exhibition. It is due in large part to their expertise and vision, as guided by the curators, that the visitor to the exhibition can experience the treasures in all their gleaming magnificence.

Helen Schneck, Editor