From the Deputy Director for Academic Programs

For more than a century a core mission of the University of Pennsylvania Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology has been to foster research that leads to new understandings about human culture. For much of the 20th century this research took the form of expeditions to all parts of the globe which brought back both data and artifacts whose analysis continues to shed light on early complex societies. As we move into a new century, indeed a new millennium, Penn Museum seeks to reinvigorate its commitment to research focused on questions of human societies. In order to generate new knowledge and frameworks for understanding, research requires more than data and collections. It depends to an even greater degree on collaboration among communities of scholars investigating shared problems using distinct lines of evidence or different modes of analysis.

As Penn Museum’s Deputy Director for Academic Programs I was given the challenging and important assignment by then Williams Director Richard M. Leventhal to develop a research conference program that would highlight the role of the Museum as a place of intense collaborative research. Following the model of the closed workshop, eight international research conferences have been designed with curators, senior research scientists, Penn faculty, and scholars from outside the university. These have been scheduled between May of 2006 and January of 2008.

The conference structure centers on papers ideally circulated among participants at least a month in advance of the actual meetings. These are the starting point for discussions that address crosscutting issues and conclude with a synthesis of ideas. Following the conference the ideas and deliberations from the gathering are disseminated through three different media. Immediately after the conference, Penn Museum hosts a lecture or forum at which one or several of the participants speak to the interested community and wider public about the ideas discussed at the gathering. Also following the conference a website—accessed through Penn Museum’s home page (www.museum.upenn.edu)—is created to facilitate the distribution of the ideas and thinking to both the general public and interested professional communities. Finally, and most importantly, the participants rewrite their papers taking into account the ideas generated and shared during the conference. This group of papers, edited and introduced by the conference organizers, is peer reviewed and published by the Penn Museum Press in 12 to 16 months.

Funded by a generous start-up grant from the Chairman of the Museum’s Board of Overseers, Michael J. Kowalski, the first four conferences have tackled topics as diverse as Paths and Roads in Anthropological Perspective (May 28–June 1, 2006), Comparative Diplomatics: Historical and Cultural Implications (October 5–8, 2006) Origins of the Mayan State (April 13–15, 2007), and Mapping Mongolia (May 6–11, 2007).

During the fall and winter of 2007–2008 four more conferences will take place: Evolution of Mind (September 26–30, 2007); Gender Justice and the Woman Question in the Middle East (October 23–26, 2007); Experiencing Power: Generating Authority, Cosmos, and Politics in the Ideology of Kingship in Ancient Egypt and Mesopotamia (November 5–11, 2007), and Forces of Nature: Environmental Risk and Resilience as Long-term Factors of Cultural Change (January 29–February 3, 2008). Following each conference a public program will be announced in the Museum calendar.

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