Communicating the Thrill of Discovery

Expedition sat down with Julian Siggers during his second week as Williams Director of the Penn Museum. Below are excerpts from that conversation.

Since joining the Penn Museum, what has impressed you as particularly noteworthy about our collection?
I have known of the Penn Museum’s collection for over 25 years, since my first year as an undergraduate studying archaeology in London. The Museum was a mythical place to me. It was a high altar of archaeology, with its storied past, and epic, groundbreaking excavations. And while I have long been familiar with the marquee pieces of the collection—such as the Ram in the Thicket—in the short time I have been here, I have been astounded by the breadth and composition of the collection.

What about the Penn Museum should be preserved?
The core of what we do involves research and our collection. We are a university museum, and that is what sets us apart. While we want to reach new audiences and embrace new modes of communication, it is extremely important that we preserve our academic excellence. We must continue to promote research at the Museum, including graduate and undergraduate students in our efforts. Our research is our primary tool to reach visitors, and it is our research that will enable us to become a true public museum. We have an enormous responsibility to be faithful stewards of our collection, and a duty to preserve and share the knowledge gained through the collection.

How is the experience of visiting the Penn Museum shaped by the collection’s depth and diversity?
Visitors to the Penn Museum are struck by the sheer scope of what we have to show them, which truly is the human story from the beginning to the present. We want our audiences to learn about the process of research—as they do in Expedition magazine—offering them the chance to participate in the thrill of discovery. What this will do is put Expedition into the galleries and into the experience of the Museum. Anthropological and archaeological research offers us a key tool for understanding the cyclical human story. The relevance of what we do and how it applies to the present is something I would like to enhance in our exhibitions, permanent galleries, and programming.

Tell us about your background in archaeology.
I went on my first dig in England when I was 13. They only let me work the [wheel] barrows! I went on to receive a B.A. and M.A. at the Institute of Archaeology, University College, London, which was a very field-based program. While there, I excavated at Boxgrove, a Middle Stone Age site in Britain. During graduate school at the University of Toronto, my research focused on the Neolithic, and I excavated primarily in Jordan. During that time, I worked extensively with the collection at the Royal Ontario Museum (ROM). When I began to work at the ROM in the 1990s, the Discovery Channel asked me to do a weekly column about archaeological discoveries. That was when I realized that the greatest repositories of anthropological and archaeological stories are museums. And I wanted to tell these stories in a museum context.

In the coming weeks, how will you reach out to Museum members, donors, staff, and visitors?
As we work on a new strategic plan, we want to hear from all Museum stakeholders. I encourage all members of the Penn Museum community to attend Museum events and to share their thoughts with me about the direction we should take in the future.