Aspects of our everyday lives as city denizens have been shaped by—and in some cases, stem directly from—the first cities that sprang up in the Middle East thousands of years ago. Today, we benefit from many of the same urban advantages and face many of the same challenges. In the ancient world, as in the present, access to goods and services and proximity to industry brought opportunity and innovation. Less pleasant aspects of our city, such as overcrowding and crime, were realities in those first cities, too. Understanding that the people who lived then are not so different from us can help to bridge the gaps in our understanding of the past and of the ancient roots of our own experiences. There are many such connections to be made between people of the past and visitors to the Middle East Galleries. Highlighting human stories and emphasizing the influences of the ancient Middle East on our own lives help us make those links.

We know that many visitors are familiar, in the broadest sense, with Mesopotamia. Our new Galleries and related programming will add depth and context to this knowledge. The Middle East Galleries offer evidence of early technologies, such as ceramic production and writing, and present the region as a hub of trade and cultural exchange. The Galleries also offer an inside look into archaeological science, demonstrating how the Penn Museum has expanded our understanding of the Middle East through over 100 years of excavation. Archaeology is a dynamic field of study, and the Museum continues to engage with the ancient past through research and fieldwork.

For students, these Galleries will breathe life into what is often but a brief chapter in a world history class that covers everything from Chinese oracle bones to Egyptian funerary practices. The Middle East Galleries will introduce key terms in relatable ways. Cuneiform writing, for example, is demonstrated using clay tablets written by school children who practiced their spelling and handwriting just like students today. Through professional development sessions, tours, and workshops, teachers will be empowered to guide their students through this important period in antiquity.

For those out of school, the Middle East Galleries offer an opportunity for lifelong learning. The adornments of Queen Puabi, the victims of the attack on Hasanlu, the traders that made Nippur a bustling ancient crossroads—each gallery brings people of the past to life through an exploration of archaeological context and carefully chosen objects. The new Galleries help us step through time and space to understand ancient people at play, at war, and even enjoying early alcoholic beverages. The connections made between the “place between two rivers” and our own home in Philadelphia between the Schuylkill and the Delaware will leave a lasting impression on visitors of all ages.

For information on the Museum’s new Middle East K–12 programs, see Global Classroom on page 104.

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Engaging a Broad Audience

ABOVE: Teachers participate in a workshop that explores ancient adornment and the critical thinking skills used in archaeology. Replicas and interactive activities bring the Museum’s objects to life.

RIGHT: Students learn to write their names in cuneiform to create personalized clay tablets to take home. This very special International Classroom program is taught by a Penn expert and allows present-day students to practice the skills of ancient students.