Conservation is involved very early in the process of creating new Penn Museum galleries and exhibitions. When the curators and designers select artifacts to include, each is reviewed by a conservator to ensure that the object is stable enough for display (or can be made so); to determine what sort of display parameters (light levels and ideal relative humidity) it needs; and whether it will require a mount for conservation reasons. All this information informs the exhibition preparation process. As the necessary treatment begins, the conservators work closely with the collections staff, registrars, and mount makers to make the process as efficient as possible. All of this is true of any exhibition; what has been different about the Middle East Galleries is the scale of the project and the history of the artifacts.

These Galleries contain approximately 1,500 individual pieces: each one had to be reviewed, documented, and treated by a conservator. Starting in July 2016, we added three Project Conservator positions to help deal with this unprecedented volume of work. These conservators—Tessa de Alarcon, Madeleine Neiman, and Jessica Byler—were joined at various times by the rest of the Conservation staff, interns, and part-time volunteers in an “all hands to the pump” effort to get everything ready in time for the April 2018 opening.

The objects included in the Middle East Galleries were challenging to work with because they primarily came from archaeological contexts and had been treated previously, either by non-conservators at the excavation or in the Museum, or by Museum conservators many decades ago. Older adhesives and fill materials were failing and/or causing damage to the artifacts. Previous restoration styles also complicated the process as many of the pieces had been so heavily restored that not even the curators were sure how much of the piece was original. Because of these factors, a large percentage of the artifacts had to be completely disassembled, cleaned, re-mended, and the missing areas filled in with stable materials only where structurally necessary. Even objects that had been on exhibit relatively recently needed more conservation than expected as we wanted to be sure that they would remain stable over the projected 25-year life of the new Galleries.

The conservators frequently confer with curators, pointing out features noticed during treatment or asking for input on how an object should be restored. We also work with the designers and mount makers to ensure that the objects will be secure on display and that none of the materials used in the exhibition furniture will be harmful to the artifacts. Middle East Galleries Project Coordinator Laura Iwanyk has been an invaluable ally in tracking all the artifacts through the process, keeping ever-fluid object lists up to date, and generally keeping things moving. Assistant Registrar Celina Candrella was indispensable in providing access to artifacts from Special Collections. This has been a tremendous project for everyone involved and we are eager to see the end result.

LYNN GRANT is Head Conservator at the Penn Museum.
Conservation in Action

ABOVE: Conservator Julia Lawson working on the Ubaid Standing Bull. The Bull, a rare free-standing statuette excavated by Sir Leonard Woolley at Ubaid near Ur in 1923–24, needed intensive stabilization and reconstruction work to replace old materials and adjust its posture correctly. PM object B15886.

RIGHT: Members of the Penn Museum’s Conservation Department prepare objects for display in the Museum’s new Middle East Galleries, including artifacts found on expeditions to Ur, Iraq and Tureng Tepe, Iran.

OPPOSITE, CIRCLE INSET: Small pieces of Japanese tissue, toned gold with acrylic paint, are inserted inside breaks in a beaded belt for stabilization purposes. This will ensure that the belt is structurally stable for display.