Making the Middle East Galleries

A Conversation with Julian Siggers, Dan Rahimi, and Steve Tinney

Julian Siggers, Ph.D., is Williams Director of the Penn Museum; Dan Rahimi is Executive Director of Galleries; Steve Tinney, Ph.D., is Coordinating Curator of the Middle East Galleries. They sat down with Expedition’s Editor Jane Hickman, Ph.D., and Associate Publisher, Alyssa Connell, Ph.D., for the following conversation about the making of the Middle East Galleries.

The Middle East Galleries are the first of the Museum’s new signature galleries, to be followed within the next two years by the Mexico & Central America Gallery and Africa Galleries, then the Egyptian Galleries after that. Why start with these galleries?

JS: The Middle East Galleries are part of a sequence of dramatic reconfigurations of the collections. And we chose to do them first for a number of reasons. This is where our Museum started. It’s our first excavation, at Nippur. We then go on to excavate over 40 projects in the region. And, of course, these galleries tell one of the most important stories of humanity. So we felt that for this to be our first new signature gallery was appropriate on multiple levels—the quality and scope of the collection, our long engagement in this region, and the importance of the story the gallery was going to tell.

DR: There also have to be changes to the building in preparation for other galleries like the Egyptian Galleries, but we could implement the Middle East Galleries sooner because we had a beautiful space that was ready for it (the West Wing was renovated in 2011).

What are the Museum’s goals for the Middle East Galleries and the other new signature galleries to come?
“The world-famous sites that we’ve excavated are front and center. That has many advantages, one of which is that we can show off the objects that we found, many of which are absolutely world-famous, not just for archaeologists but for art historians, too. But it also, through the judicious use of digital technology that allows us to update the gallery, shows that there is continual discovery going on at this Museum.”

—Julian Siggers

ST: One of the goals of these and all the other gallery refurbishments is to create galleries of world-class standards, at the highest level of design and production, which would stand muster with museums like the Louvre and the British Museum.

DR: And the wonderful thing is, it’s not just the Middle East collection that can be rebuilt at that level.

JS: We have the material, we have the expertise, we just need the galleries. This is the first of our new signature galleries, and it’s the first of many. And I think it’s fair to say we’ve learned a great deal from this process about what the subsequent galleries will look like—and once they’re opened, we’re probably going to learn even more about how the public uses them.

What was the development process for these galleries?

DR: The Middle East Galleries have been in development about three and a half years. For a year, our curatorial team worked together to figure out what are our stories, what are our themes, what are our objects. And then we brought in an exhibit design firm and we worked with them for a year and a half or so to really nail down the design, then we went into production. Choosing the design firm, Haley Sharpe Design, was a fun part of the

—Julian Siggers

ABOVE: The “journey to the city” starts with a single human footprint left in a paving brick at Ur, Iraq, more than 4,000 years ago, seen here in a rendering of the entrance to the Galleries. Rendering by Haley Sharpe Design.
process. The challenge in finding a designer for a gallery like this is finding a company that has done interpretive archaeological galleries. And many of the questions that our Middle East Galleries are interested in, which are thematic and about daily life, or trade, or inventions, or transformations of materials, are really cool issues that design companies might not usually deal with. We thought it would be nice to invite all staff to participate in the presentations from designers. And we got a really good turnout!

ST: We got quite a lot of good feedback from the staff as well.

JS: Remember that when you have a gallery of this scope, it involves every single member of the staff. I can’t think of anybody who hasn’t had input into this project in some way or another. And we’ve also had the benefit of an extraordinary curatorial team, with all curators from our Near East and Babylonian Sections. It was really gratifying to see how excited all of the curators were about this. Because this kind of permanent gallery is a real marquee project. They saw it as we all see it: a huge opportunity to do something that would set a new standard for what signature galleries look like at the Museum.

“Yes of the extraordinary things about these galleries is that these are excavated collections. So we know exactly where they come from in the ground, and we can say something meaningful about that by their associations archaeologically. This is one of the few places in the world where you can tell a truly archaeological story about the objects that are on display.”

—Dan Rahimi

ABOVE: Early storyboards show the development of the hand-drawn animation that takes visitors from the river through Ur, up to the ziggurat.
ST: It’s important also to acknowledge that we were able to involve a number of graduate students in the process, who in some cases ended up writing labels for the gallery, so this is professional training for them. We also had the benefit of consulting with some outside experts. The overall effect is that there’s a tremendous breadth and depth of experience, all of which has been translated into these very publicly accessible galleries.

**Why are the Middle East Galleries important?**

JS: This is a part of the world that sees some of the greatest innovations at the earliest timeframe anywhere. They’re some of the most important behavioral transitions that we as a species have undergone. I think these galleries are important for everybody.

ST: Worldwide, more and more people live in cities, and the commonalities between the ancient cities that we present, the Islamic cities, and the contemporary cities are striking—they’re not universal, but they are very informative and relevant.

**What makes these galleries unique?**

JS: Running through the galleries are the great excavations of Penn—95% of the material on display in the Middle East Galleries was excavated or collected by Penn. And so the world-famous sites that we’ve excavated are front and center. That has many advantages, one of which is obviously that we can show off the objects that we found, many of which are absolutely world-famous, not just for archaeologists but for art historians, too. Highlighting Penn excavations also, through the judicious use of digital technology that allows us to update the gallery, shows that there is continual discovery going on at this Museum. Every summer, something new is being found out about the ancient past in this region, and those discoveries will be included in the galleries.

ST: The great thing we have is the excavated material from Ur, and there are only a few places in the world where you can see that. One is London and another is
Baghdad—or Philadelphia. And we’ve not only given consideration to the fabulous artworks that were in the royal graves, but we’ve also focused on the living people and tried to create an understanding of how they lived in private houses in an interactive section called “Meet the Citizens.”

DR: One of the extraordinary things about these galleries is that these are excavated collections, as Julian and Steve said. So we know exactly where they come from in the ground, and we can say something meaningful about that by their associations archaeologically. This is one of the few places in the world where you can tell a truly archaeological story about the objects that are on display.

JS: When the “Ram in the Thicket” was not here, when we lent it, we really viscerally saw how people come from all over the world to see this one object. Now imagine what it will be like to see it in the context not only of Ur but in the whole grand story that we’re trying to tell here. It’s a much bigger time spread than Iraq’s Ancient Past, our previous exhibition that featured material from the Royal Cemetery at Ur—it’s a much bigger canvas being painted. No other university museum could tell this story at this scale and scope.

How do these galleries accommodate families and school groups differently than the other galleries?

JS: What makes this process that Dan and Steve led so different from that of our other galleries is that they very much had a range of audiences in mind. First and foremost, there’s the K–12 and family audience. And this is one of the first galleries where the Museum’s Learning Programs Department was involved in the design of the galleries themselves.

ST: We considered gathering places in the galleries that could accommodate 30–35 students, for example. We also thought about the fact that many families visit the Museum together, so all of the text that’s on the walls had to be grasped quickly and effectively by the adults who are interpreting for their kids. Because that’s obviously an important component of the social aspect of museum-going, and we wanted to make sure we facilitated that.

What are some major themes of the Middle East Galleries?

DR: Urbanism is the grand theme.

ST: One of the big overarching themes that works as a thread through the three galleries is the scope of connec-

RIGHT: Julian’s favorite object is one he has long admired: Ram in the Thicket, Ur, Iraq, ca. 2450 BCE. PM object 30-12-702.
tions—or, to put it another way, globalization. So, in the very first room of the Galleries, we explore small obsidian trading networks. By the time you get to the second room, Ur is trading with or obtaining by other methods raw materials from all over its known world—Iran, India, probably the shores of the Mediterranean. And then in the third room, the story accelerates and takes on a whole different scale through a series of empires that increase the size of the world, effectively, until we have China connected through the Middle East to Europe and the colonial U.S. So that’s one of the thematic arcs, that globalization has actually been happening for a very long time.

DR: That’s a very nice illustration of the pervasiveness of these themes, because they start early on with that obsidian trade, which is really significant: people were carrying rocks on their backs, essentially, from Anatolia to lower Mesopotamia. That’s an amazing thing that humans did, to develop that kind of trade.

ST: One of the things we’ve really tried to do from almost the first thing that visitors see is to bring to life the cultures of the people from which these objects came. So you walk into the gallery and see a drawing of life in an early agricultural village. You look to your left and you see a three-dimensional model of a house at Gawra, where an extended family is carrying out a variety of craft activities, and you can see how the objects are distributed around the house. Throughout the gallery we’ve tried to do that: put the objects back in the hands of the people who used them, in the places they lived.

Along with the “Meet the Citizens” section mentioned above, what are some other interactive elements that will allow visitors to delve more deeply into the galleries’ objects and themes?

DH: The most dramatic, perhaps, is the projection of a journey through the city of Ur, where you start on the river and come into the town, then you make your way through the city up to the ziggurat. It will be a very compelling visual story, and it’s all hand-drawn.

ST: The animation is done by selectively rendering elements of static drawings with 3D techniques. It’s really impressive. There are also a number of kiosks which are child-accessible and which tell subsets of the galleries’ stories like spinning or winemaking with a very simple touch interface—touch an object to see how it was used, that kind of thing.

DR: For example, in the early agriculture case, a drawing of a prehistoric village shows someone weaving, someone harvesting, someone else herding animals. And you can touch them to learn more. For the hotspot to explore spinning yarn, for instance, we actually used a Watson Kintner film that was made in Iran in the early 1960s of an Iranian woman in the countryside spinning with a drop spindle. So we’re drawing on other assets we have at the Museum, in the Archives, to expand the gallery experience.

ST: We also have 11 touchable objects—reproductions of artifacts made from materials that make the experience of touching them very similar to touching the original
objects. They are located in key points of the gallery where they’re able to reinforce parts of the story; they’re also at a level fully accessible to people in wheelchairs and explained with braille labels, which makes the gallery more accessible. One, for example, is a brick stamp that is a powerful touchable because the cuneiform is very large, and it’s raised, so you can feel it very easily.

DR: They’re key objects that tell important stories. Some are made for us by craftspeople—for example, a local weaver is replicating ancient techniques to make samples of wool for us, some of which will also be dyed using original dyes and techniques.

What do you hope visitors to these galleries will learn from them?

JS: We want them to come away with a completely different understanding of where they fit into the larger human story. We have an audience on the campus and from the scholarly world who come here with an existing interest in the past that has been ignited way back. It would be great if we could provide that initial spark of fascination with the past for everyone, to turn people on to the fields we spend every day exploring.

DR: My dream is that someone comes out of this and says, “Wow, that object is 5,000 years old, and it’s really not so different than today.” And if someone could make that kind of simple statement, it would be fantastic.

JS: To build on what Dan was saying, not only is it not that different from today, but we’re facing the same issues as urban dwellers. In fact, the story we’re telling here is that urbanization is actually intensifying, so it’s an ongoing story that is by no means finished.

What is your favorite object in the Middle East Galleries?

ST: My two favorite objects in the gallery are the “first day of school” tablet, which I think says so much about writing and knowledge and learning and cuneiform, and says it so succinctly, because there’s only one wedge on it, 360 times. The second favorite is the silver lion’s head. I’m a cat person, so it’s a natural. Julian, on the other hand, is a dog person…

JS: There is, in fact, in the galleries a footprint left by a dog in a brick—and I just love that. 3,500 years ago, a dog did just what my dog did the other day: step in wet pavement. It’s so evocative. And, predictably, I love the “Ram in the Thicket,” because it was in the first book of archaeology that I ever had.

DR: I love all of the objects in the case right at the beginning. And you’ll see why! They’re chronological. The first is an obsidian core, which is just fantastic. The second is a figurine from Khafaje, a votive figurine, he’s just a stern guy. The third is the lion’s head Steve mentioned. The fourth is a tablet spreadsheet, which looks like a spreadsheet! And the fifth is a beautiful polychrome painted Islamic dish. And for me personally, any of those objects would be my favorite. •

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