

Extraordinary Treasures of Sumer,  
Assyria, and Babylon from the British Museum



# MESOPOTAMIA



## Inventing our World

Some of the many who made this stunning exhibition a reality reflect on what being part of it meant to them

BY DAVE HOLLANDS

 **O**n a recent trip with my nephew through Toronto's Kensington Market, I came across a laneway richly painted with street art. Brazenly layered overtop, a less articulate graffiti tag had been added—the succeeding “artist” had not only marked the territory, but in doing so had deliberately defaced the earlier work. Perhaps surprisingly to some, it reminded me of a bronze cast of the head of an Akkadian king, Naram-Sin, a particularly important object coming to the ROM from the British Museum this summer as part of *Mesopotamia: Inventing our World*.

The bronze, labelled *Head of an Akkadian King*, is an exact replica of a copper cast of Naram-Sin that was deliberately mutilated in antiquity, likely by a successor at the collapse of empire. The original now resides in the Iraq Museum. Like the graffitied urban laneway, it expresses that human urge to deface and display images of the vanquished. (The urge repeats through history. The ROM has another eloquent

example in its Egypt gallery, where Queen Hatshepsut's relief within a larger scene has been carefully chiselled flat and her visible outline left behind for all to see—and “not see”—on her temple walls.)

I enjoy the fact that the identity of this portrait of an Akkadian king is tentative—while it is generally felt to be the head of King Naram-Sin of Akkad (c. 2254–2218 BCE), grandson of Sargon, the first great Akkadian ruler, it might actually be of Sargon himself. Where some might expect certainty in museum work, the hedge on identification stands for what really happens in modern archaeology, where scholars worldwide constantly are seeking new evidence to update and revise their interpretations of history.

But ultimately, I connect most profoundly with the human hand that damaged this artifact so long ago. The urge to deface the work of the overthrown still reverberates with us today; in that same part of the world some 4,000 years later, we all recall the media images of the toppling of Saddam Hussein's statues following his ouster. In much the same way, this exciting new exhibition threads the connection of ancient Mesopotamia to the present.

Indeed, the exhibition team sought ways to amplify this in the installations so that visitors might recognize something of our own world in those ancient peoples'. I asked some of the members of the exhibition's core team to share with our readers what it is about this exhibition that most resonated with them.



Replica of the head of an Akkadian king with an elaborate hairstyle and one eye gouged out. Mounted on stone.



## Sarah Collins

EXHIBITION CURATOR, THE BRITISH MUSEUM

I feel very fortunate to have this opportunity to display some of the rich Mesopotamian collections of the British Museum at the ROM. I hope that the exhibition will inspire more interest in this important ancient civilization that features the very beginning of the recorded history of our world. A wide variety of different types of artifacts made of different materials have been chosen to illustrate key episodes of ancient Mesopotamian history. My hope is that visitors to the exhibition will be able to relate what they see and learn to their lives today.

One of my favourite objects in the exhibition is a stone monument showing the Assyrian king Ashurbanipal. This monument not only signifies the three great centres of Mesopotamian civilization of Sumer, Assyria, and Babylon that feature in the exhibition, but it also reveals an awareness of the importance of history. Ashurbanipal, who ruled in the 7th century BCE, had this monument carved showing himself in the same pose as Sumerian kings who had ruled more than a thousand years before him. The inscription, that records his building work in Babylon, was written to ensure he would be remembered long into the future. +

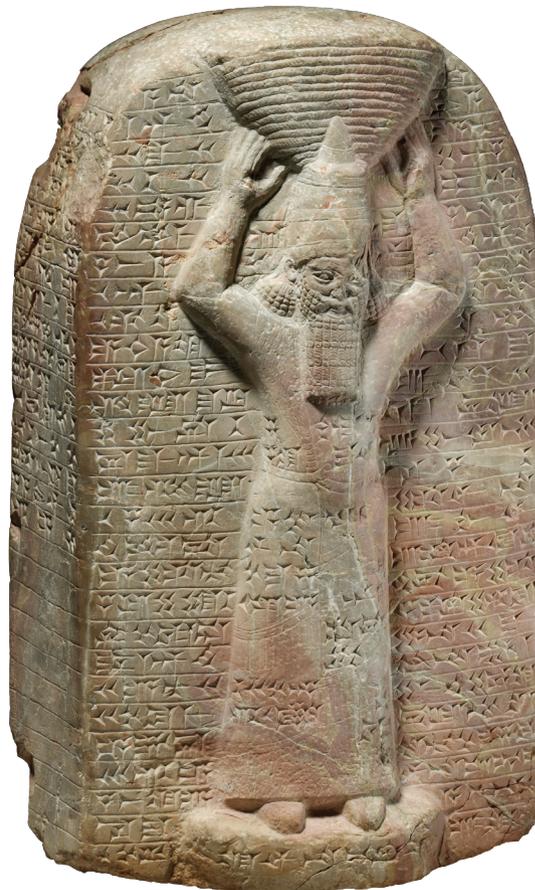


## Clemens Reichel

ASSOCIATE CURATOR,  
ANCIENT NEAR EAST, ROM

The challenge for all of us here at the ROM was how to adapt this exhibition, which was created by the British Museum, to our Museum and our audience. We are fortunate to have been able to augment the exhibition's scope by adding spectacular materials from several North American collections. I am particularly pleased that we were able to add some truly iconic artifacts from the Penn Museum in Philadelphia, the Oriental Institute Museum in Chicago, and the Detroit Institute of Art. This exhibition also gives us a chance to highlight some of the ROM's own artifacts from ancient Iraq, which might be largely unfamiliar to a wider audience.

The exhibition is overflowing with impressive artifacts made of gold, silver, and precious materials. And yet, for me, often it's the more mundane artifacts that tell a compelling story. For instance, among the more intriguing pieces from the British Museum are two clay tablets dating to around 600 BCE. They show ancient renderings of cuneiform signs (equivalent to what we would consider to be "pictographic" signs, early writing, dating somewhere between 3000–2800 BCE), accompanied by a "translation" into Akkadian. What this suggests to me is their active engagement with the past; scholars were reading, or at least trying to



King Ashurbanipal depicted as a builder carrying a basket on his head. The text records his good works within Babylon.

read, ancient inscriptions. We know that rulers of Babylonia and Assyria dug up ancient temple foundations. Indeed, King Nabonidus of Babylonia was such an avid digger that he is often referred to as the first Mesopotamian archaeologist. The interest they demonstrated was not entirely unselfish, of course. In part, these rulers were attempting to affiliate and align themselves with famous ancient rulers, thus legitimizing their own regimes.

Archaeology is never about "that one artifact"—it's about the stories that they relate. And these stories are uncovered through the relations that objects have to each other in both archaeological and functional contexts. As my most iconic artifact, I should single out *The Ram Caught in a Thicket* from the Penn Museum—the figure of a ram jumping up against a bush or tree. Made of silver, gold, shell, lapis lazuli, and carnelian, it is a truly striking experience—one of the most famous pieces from the Royal Cemetery of Ur. The name that the original excavator gave to it is a reference to the Biblical Abraham/Isaac narrative, but there is obviously no real relationship with this story. Instead this ram and its equally impressive counterpart at the British Museum were probably supports for small offering tables. The dynamic elements of its display and the lavishness of materials used in its fashioning epitomize the technological and artistic achievements of early Mesopotamian art. +

Photos: Sarah Collins by Nigel Tallis. Stela of Ashurbanipal. 90864. ©The Trustees of the British Museum.



**Dominique Picouet**  
MANAGER, FRENCH LANGUAGE SERVICES, ROM

**M**esopotamia has special appeal to me because it is a turning point in human evolution with, among other achievements, the emergence of writing, growth of complex cities, the codification of laws, and the first empire. This region has contributed so much to our civilization, and the exhibition offers a much-needed perspective on Iraq, now and then. Unlike recent exhibitions, *Mesopotamia* strongly links the past and the present, life 5,000 years ago to now. Visitors are invited throughout the exhibition, especially in the cubes, to reflect on the passage of time and the continuum of human experience, to draw parallels and understand the relevance of the ancient Near East to our world today.

I was fortunate to see some monumental reliefs at the Louvre when I was a child, and am absolutely delighted to see more with adult eyes. I am particularly looking forward to seeing *The Ram Caught in a Thicket* (actually a goat) from the Royal tombs of Ur. Rich in symbolism (royalty, deity, fertility), this strikingly beautiful artifact made of gold foil, lapis lazuli, shell, and carnelian illustrates both the mastery of Mesopotamian artisans and the emergence of long-distance trade. +



Statuette of rearing goat with flowering plant (*The Ram Caught in a Thicket*).



Statue of King Ashurnasirpal II.



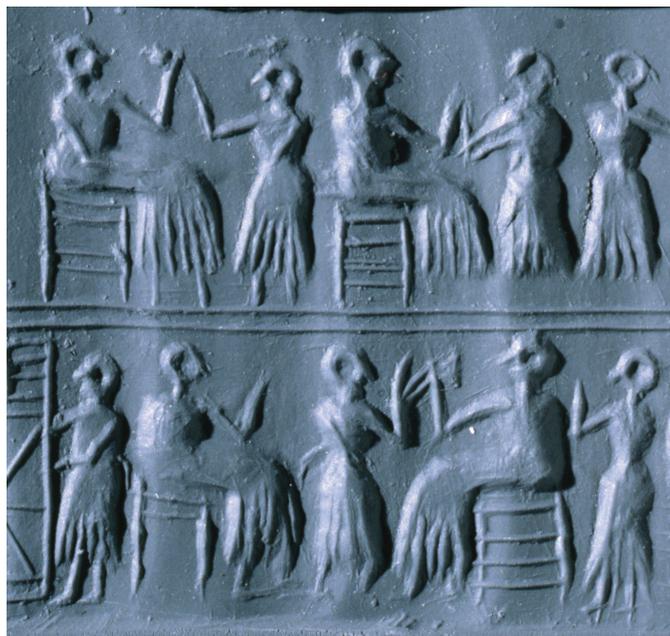
**Tamara Onyschuk**  
MANAGER, EXHIBITIONS, ROM

**A**s manager of the Exhibitions department at the ROM, I have certain criteria when choosing our future major exhibitions. Above all, the exhibitions need to be interesting, tell a great story, and appeal to a large audience. From that vantage, *Mesopotamia* promises to be a thoroughly engaging show. After all, the British Museum is one of the world's great institutions and its collection from the Middle East is spectacular.

There are two different displays that I find most captivating. First, the statue of King Ashurnasirpal II makes quite an impact. It is an example of an Assyrian statue in the round, which I gather is quite rare. His strong stance, groomed hair and beard, and fearsome weapons evoke a powerful man. Particularly, I find the detail of his beard interesting. Because of this extraordinary detail, you feel you get a good sense of what this ruler actually would have looked like thousands of years ago.

Second, I find the cylinder seals captivating—the craftsmanship and thought put into creating these small seals is quite mind-boggling. It may sound silly, and maybe it's because I'm a mom, but I see a connection between the ancient seals and the patterned moulds and rollers my kids use when playing with playdough. +





Modern Impression of lapis lazuli Cylinder Seal, found in the Royal Cemetery of Ur. The two registers on the seal feature Sumerians in a banquet scene.



**James Nixon**  
PROJECT MANAGER, ROM

**W**hen we are in the midst of building an exhibition, one of my favourite things to do is visit the studio of the ROM's in-house artist Georgia Guenther. She is responsible for creating tactile reproductions, the intricately faithful "copies" designed and built expressly to serve the needs of our visitors with visual impairments, allowing everyone to appreciate the extraordinary artifacts on display. I know from experience that tactile repros mean a great deal to all our visitors, who get to touch and feel objects that are almost always out of reach.

Among the repros we are developing for *Mesopotamia*, a real standout, I feel will be a reproduction of a cylinder seal impression on loan from University of Pennsylvania. Georgia is making a model of the seal itself plus a model of the seal impression, which everyone can touch. I expect people will really enjoy being able to touch and feel it. We will also have a three-dimensional scan of the seal made that will be installed on the adjacent wall as a very large graphic. Visitors will be able to touch this large-scale version as well. What impresses me about it is not only how beautiful a "signature" was then, but also how similar it is—in both a legal and personal sense—to how we use signatures on documents today. +

**Right:** Glazed brick wall relief of a lion, from the facade of the throne room of the palace of Babylon.

**Opposite:** Bird's-eye view of ancient Babylon, from the exhibit's 3-D fly-through.

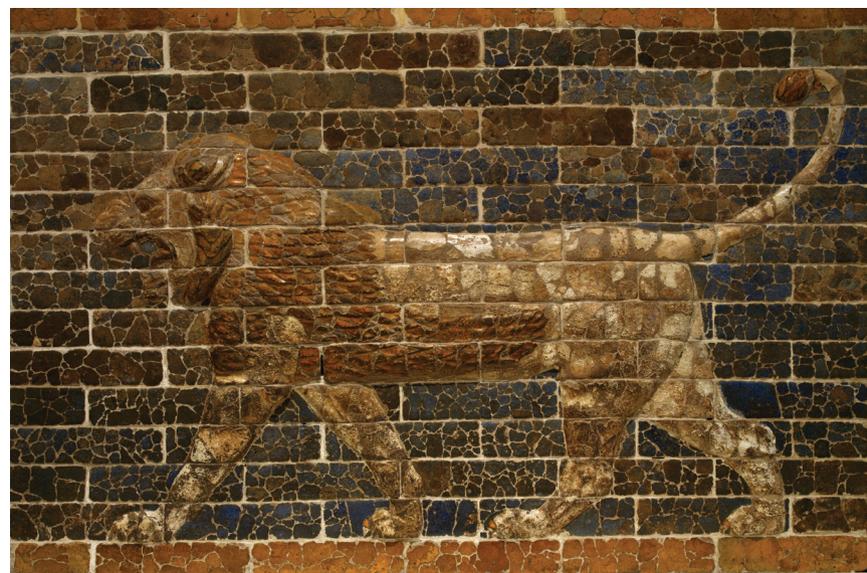


**Richard Lahey**  
INTERPRETIVE PLANNER, ROM

**A**ny time I have the chance to contribute to a project associated with the renowned British Museum it is a professional honour for me. I had the opportunity to tell a great story around its artifacts once before, when *Eternal Egypt: Masterworks of Ancient Art from the British Museum* was featured at the ROM in 2004.

For me, the Babylonian lion that actually belongs to the ROM is my favourite piece in the exhibition. This lion, ceramic on brick, was an interior decor piece in King Nebuchadnezzar's Palace in Babylon, the world's largest and greatest city of its time, some 2,600 years ago! And when Alexander the Great conquered Babylon and he lived in this palace, likely passing by this very lion on a daily basis. He died in that palace in 323 BCE, but we have the lion still with us today. Amazing!

What an incredible artifact, to be seen on a dramatic long view, positioned as a culminating piece within the third main section of *Mesopotamia*. And when the exhibition moves on to another venue from the ROM, this artifact stays here—part of the ROM's permanent collections to be looked upon daily by visitors, just as Alexander the Great did millennia ago. +



Photos: James Nixon and Richard Lahey by Wanda Dobrowlanski. Seal impression, J52081; courtesy of the University of Pennsylvania Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology, Philadelphia, P.A., J52081. Relief of lion, ROM 937/4.1.



## Rob McMahon

A/V PRODUCER, MAJOR EXHIBITIONS, ROM

**W**hat has been intriguing for me on this project is the way in which we have been drawing lines of connection between ancient Mesopotamia and our world today. It was fascinating to look at innovation then and now. To think they were addressing many of the same challenges that we face now, be they about mathematics, the law, business or agriculture, literature, and communication. For instance, consider the Hammurapi stele upon which is written their legal code. It really serves as a window into that distant world and yet is so like ours; it's all about the social contract, determining how people can relate to one another. It is about trust, loyalty, betrayal, about honesty and dishonesty. And in totally practical ways it is about the ownership or exchange of goods, about how to conduct business. All those same worries in that ancient time are what we are faced with today.

From an A/V professional's perspective, I am incredibly excited about a large-scale animation we're doing—a fly-through of the ancient city of Babylon. Rendered in 3-D, it will be as if you were in a helicopter, flying in from the desert and over and down into the ancient city, through the Ishtar Gate, circling above legendary sites like the Tower of Babylon and the Hanging Gardens. It makes this mythical or abstract notion of what Babylon was quite real: an actual city in an actual place with ordinary people living their everyday lives in their houses—a real place with real people. †

**Any student of art will recognize** a few of the key pieces in the exhibition. The gold and lapis lazuli-decorated *Ram Caught in a Thicket* is among the celebrated artifacts of this story. The British Museum is not travelling this iconic piece, which has pride of place in their permanent galleries. It is, however, one of a matched pair, and the Penn Museum has loaned us the other one for the exhibition.

When I finally met up with the British Museum piece last fall I found it like many encounters with a celebrity—it was the masterpiece anyone had ever described it to be—just a little shorter than I had imagined! —DH ○

From June 22, 2013 to January 5, 2014, the ROM hosts the North American premiere of *Mesopotamia: Inventing our World*. To highlight the extraordinary achievements of this ancient society, more than 170 priceless objects from the British Museum's collections—most never before seen in Canada—are augmented by artifacts from the ROM's own collections and those of the Oriental Institute Museum (Chicago), the Penn Museum (Philadelphia), and the Detroit Institute of Arts.

*Mesopotamia* is presented by the British Museum in collaboration with the ROM.



Photo: Rob McMahon by Wanda Dobrowlanski. copyright. 2013. Babylon Animation by A. Tayfun Oner