



THE SOLHEIM FOUNDATION BULLETIN

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Contributions of Archaeology to Civilization

By Cynthia O. Valdes

I was at the Shanghai Museum in October this year 2006. This interesting museum first came into being in 1952. In very recent times, a much bigger building was built at its present location. The moving spirit behind the new establishment was an eminent ceramic scholar, Prof. *Wang Qingsheng*, who unfortunately passed away last year. The museum is a large one, its grounds covering 38,000 square meters. Its vast collections include Chinese bronze, ceramics, jade, calligraphy, ancient Chinese paintings, traditional Chinese furniture, seals, and textiles (including tribal costumes).

These artifacts span a time period from the Neolithic, through the different Chinese dynasties until modern times.

The Museum has opened its doors to include exhibitions from foreign countries. If you happen to be in Shanghai, don't fail to visit. The Museum's address is 201 Ren Min Da Dao, Shanghai 200003, People's Republic of China. For more information, visit its website at www.shanghaimuseum.net.



The Shanghai Museum

The special exhibition on-going in October when I was there featured the British Museum's collections on the Assyrian Empire. The display was extensive and the presentation dramatic. It attracted lots of people. I gently touched the gigantic (bigger than life-size) figures. They were made of Styrofoam. What a little imagination can accomplish at lesser cost!

A publication was available at the Museum Shop but books are so heavy and "excess baggage" really costs a lot! But I have found information on the Assyrians in my other books, most of them acquired here in the Philippines. The Assyrians were a hostile and war-like people who came into power around 1350 BCE. Their territory encompassed what was known as Mesopotamia

(around the Tigris and the Euphrates Rivers), also known as the "Cradle of Civilization" (last I heard, that is!).

Perhaps the greatest contribution of the Assyrians to civilization was the "library" built by one of its great kings, Assurbanipal. Rather than of books, Assurbanipal's library was composed of thousands of clay tablets with inscriptions in "cuneiform".

Cuneiform writing is the "wedge-shaped" script of ancient Mesopotamia. It was brought to Europe for

the first time in the form of bricks picked up from Babylon and Ur by an Italian traveler by the name of Pietro della Valle.

King Assurbanipal enjoyed browsing among his books and discussing them with other scholars of his day. The clay tablets from the library of King Assurbanipal were recovered through archaeology.

Pioneering archaeologists Botta and Layard both

embarked on their ambitious projects in order to recover artifacts for display in museums. Their efforts have managed to provide us with a meaningful glimpse into the life of ancient Mesopotamians.

However, we must understand that from the time of Botta and Layard in the 19th century, archaeology has come a much longer way. The latest "aid" in the retrieval and identification of artifacts being what is now called "earth sciences". Non-invasive and non-destructive methods through "earth sciences" ensure the protection and preservation of delicate and fragile specimens.

The major "archaeology" of Mesopotamia was achieved through the efforts of an English (*cont'd p. 2*)

archaeologist by the name of Austen Henry Layard (1817 to 1894). Although it was another archaeologist by the name of Paul Emile Botta (1802-1870) that initiated the archaeological explorations at Nineveh, it was Layard (an energetic excavator) who, in half a decade of continuous work at Nimrud and Nineveh (modern-day Iraq), succeeded in uncovering the grandeur of the ancient Mesopotamian civilization.

By 20th century standards, both Botta and Layard's "archaeology" would be considered "primitive" in the extreme. Many important artifacts were damaged both during the process of excavations and shipment to London. The artifacts that survived went on exhibit at the British Museum in October of 1848. It revealed to the world the splendor of Assyrian palaces and Assyrian art.

In the mid 19th century, Britain led other industrializing nations. It had emerged as a "world power" eclipsing former centers such as Paris, Russia, Germany. The reign of Queen Victoria (sometimes called the Victorian Age), was a time of great discoveries in science and technology. At the initiative of her husband Albert (a not very popular intellectual), an International Exposition was held at the Crystal Palace in London in 1851. It proclaimed to the world the dynamism of the age. In Europe, the 19th century came to be known as the Age of Progress.

After spending seven days in Shanghai, studying the jade exhibits at the Museum as well as observing modern methods of "working jade" in a government-run jade factory, (my next project is on "Jade"), I proceeded on to Hong Kong where I was able to stay at a student hostel, kindly arranged for me by an old friend, Prof. Peter Lam, Director of the Art Museum of the Chinese University of Hong Kong.

A certification from Dr. Victor Paz, Director of the U.P. Archaeological Studies Program established my status as an "affiliate scholar and member of its Advisory Council". I was then provided access to the library facilities of the CUHK where I managed to read up on the 18th and 19th century European Art Scene. I stayed on campus the entire 6 days I was there except for one outing to attend a meeting of the Oriental Ceramic Society of Hong Kong where the featured speaker was Prof. Peter Y.K. Lam who delivered a scholarly lecture on Kangxi porcelain.

Archaeology as well as its accompanying disciplines (including evaluation, research, and writing, publication and dissemination of information) involve a process. First of all, the individual must want to acquire that information. Then, it involves dedicated and enlightened professionals who can be trusted to disseminate dependable information. Lastly, the public must want to know. The philosopher and savant

Aristotle holds that "it is good for human beings to know, rather than to be ignorant." ☉

References:

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Anne Baltz Rodrick, *The History of Great Britain*, Greenwood Press, London, 2004.

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ANNOUNCEMENT

The Annual General Meeting of the Solheim Foundation will be held on **December 9, 2006** at the **Ortigas Foundation Library**. On the agenda is a recap of the Foundation's activities for the year 2006, planning for the coming year and the Elections for Executive Board Members for the year 2007. A lecture on Jade will follow in the afternoon. For inquiries, please call the ASP at (02) 9241836 or e-mail the secretariat at andrea_malaya.ragragio@up.edu.ph.

The Solheim Foundation Bulletin

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