

Relics of Antiquity Find a Home on the Plains

By ROBYN BODIN

When visitors to the University of Oklahoma's Stovall Museum of Science and History pause before showcases containing the relics of bygone civilizations, their faces usually betray their thoughts. They marvel at the beauty, the uniqueness of these artifacts. They wonder about the long-vanished artisan who made them, the men and women who owned and used them. They long for the stories these remnants of antiquity could tell.

A few of the more perceptive visitors may even think to ask how this remarkable collection of ancient art and archaeology could have survived the ravages of the centuries. And having survived, how did such treasures manage to journey half way around the globe to a permanent home in a small museum in the American Southwest?

"The stories of how these objects came into the possession of the museum are as fascinating as the objects themselves," says A. J. Heisserer, a curator dedicated to informing the world of the exceptional quality of the collection he manages.

Heisserer began collecting anecdotes behind the acquisition of Stovall's ancient artifacts as he researched his recently published illustrated catalogue, *Classical Antiquities*. Correspondence with the collection's first curator, H. Lloyd Stow, and others revealed an early history shaped by professional dedication and personal generosity, accented by incidents of bureaucratic bungling, legislative witch-hunts, smuggling and other curious tales.

As might be expected, Stow's most vivid memories, as told to Heisserer, are of the more colorful episodes which



Black-figure vase, Athens, 5th century B.C.

he and his successor, Henry S. Robinson, encountered in building a teaching collection worthy of display.

Stow found an opportunity to add a significant artifact to the collection in 1947 through the purchase of an ancient Greek vase. Little did the curator know that a ridiculous bureaucratic entanglement would hamper his efforts to buy this rare object and try his patience to the limit.

The vase, an Athenian black-figure eye-cup, was one of a sub-class characterized by a horseman on either side and rarely found in North American collections. The vendor was Jacob Hirsch, a well-known New York collector of antiquities. The price was \$700, miniscule in today's market but quite large in those Spartan days.

Determined to find the money, Stow put a hold on the vase until he could formally submit an order. J. Willis Stovall, then director of the museum which would later bear his name, thought the vase so important that he and the other curators agreed to allocate the entire acquisitions budget toward its purchase, but it was not enough. Scrounging for funds from every other available source eventually produced the necessary amount, and Stow placed the order through the University's purchasing department.

Many weeks passed as Stow anxiously awaited the arrival of the precious vase. When he could no longer bear the frustration of waiting, the curator tramped over to purchasing to confront the director.

"But sir," the purchasing official explained, "we have only one bid for that order, from the owner Mr. Hirsch, and of course, we must have a total of three competitive bids from three manufacturers."

In vain Stow tried to enlighten the agent about the nature of this purchase. The man only shook his head sadly, promising to see what could be done about the situation, but without giving Stow much hope.

Again many weeks passed, and still no Greek eye-cup. A letter from Hirsch did arrive from New York, however, much to the relief of the anxious curator. Enclosed was a detailed form which had been sent to Hirsch by OU Purchasing. The form requested that the original manufacturer of the Athenian vase sign and swear before a notary public that the item under consideration, now offered for sale second-hand, was priced at no more than its original sale price.

An amused Hirsch probably had chuckled all the way to the post office. Stow, on the other hand, was livid. He stalked to the purchasing office, fire in his eye.

"This is beyond belief," the curator scolded the purchasing agent. "The vase being purchased is over 2,500 years old! If this form were signed by the original maker before a notary public, the document itself would be unique!"

"Ah," responded the agent, the light dawning. "You mean it's an antique!"

In exasperation, Stow pointed to the order form on which was printed the description "6th century B.C., Athens." After some careful thought, the purchasing agent grabbed the order form and quickly scribbled something on it. He confidently presented it to the curator.

"That should take care of things," the agent declared. "I have named Hirsch as the original manufacturer since the real one is dead, so he now can fill this out."

"That will *not* take care of things," Stow replied, gathering what little composure he had left. "Mr. Hirsch then will be falsely swearing under oath that the vase is a forgery! The money is in our museum account. Please make out an order and send the check at once!"

The purchasing agent relented, finally abandoning bureaucratic policies in favor of the irate curator. The coveted vase eventually arrived and now graces the permanent exhibit of ancient art and archaeology at the Stovall Museum.

"The Athenian black-figure eye-cup is probably the single finest item in the collection today," Heisserer insists. "Similar specimens are known to exist at only five other museums—the Louvre, Toronto, Copenhagen, Hamburg and Orvieto."

Heisserer says that a similar vase recently offered for auction was valued at approximately \$65,000. "It would be totally beyond the financial resources of the museum to acquire such objects on the international market nowadays."

Several years after the Athenian vase incident, the University of Oklahoma, along with other state institutions of higher education, came under

legislative scrutiny, accused of extravagant spending. In 1951, lawmakers launched an inquiry into the University's expenditures. They singled out a number of doubtful items for further investigation, including two purchases for the Stovall antiquities collection.

The objects in question were a pair of Egyptian earrings and an original Roman bronze brazier, used in ancient times to hold burning coals for household heat. Such an acquisition from a highly respected art dealer in New York normally would not have attracted public attention. However, the *Oklahoma City Times* gave front page coverage to the purchases in its report on the legislative probe.

Apparently, the same legislators who had examined every item in the University's budget with a magnifying glass had failed to enlist the aid of a

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dictionary. The *Times* duly reported that the wicked institution down in Norman was spending the taxpayers' money for "earrings and brassieres."

The controversy subsided with time, but not before the legislature summoned President George L. Cross to a hearing to explain these and other "questionable" purchases. OU's financial vice president, Roscoe Cate, accompanied Cross. In his book, *Letters to Bill*, Cross recalls an encounter outside the hearing room between Cate and a Tulsa journalist.

Questioned about full disclosure of University spending practices, Cate quipped, "With the exception of the brassieres, we're going to make a clean breast of the whole thing." Fortunately the reporter kept Cate's remark off the record.

About the same time, the collection's second curator, Henry Robinson, found himself in a dilemma over an ancient vase he wished to donate to the

museum. Robinson was conducting research in the Mediterranean area when he bought an elegant black-glazed vase, distinguished by the carefully incised grooves on all portions of its perfectly intact body. Although the vase might or might not have originated in the country where he had purchased it, the curator feared that customs officials might refuse to let him take it home to Stovall.

By coincidence, OU history professor Leslie Smith and his wife Liv were touring the Mediterranean at the same time. Smith entrusted the vase to his wife, who was returning to the United States while he completed his research abroad. With great nonchalance, Liv Smith packed the contraband vase among the unlaundered undergarments in her suitcase for an uneventful journey to the Stovall Museum.

The clandestine arrival of the black-glazed vase from the Mediterranean contrasted sharply with the dramatic appearance of two enormous slabs of Antioch floor mosaics a few years earlier. The sheer physical size of the two pavements challenged the resourcefulness of Stow and Robinson when it came to finding the pieces a permanent home in the museum.

The train carrying the 4,800 pounds of Roman mosaics chugged into Norman's Santa Fe depot in May of 1950. The pavements were routinely transported to the museum, housed then as now in the old ROTC building and its adjacent horse stable and gun shed.

As the story goes, a group of football players was enlisted to haul the smaller of the two mosaics, a geometric-patterned piece, up the stairs to the second floor of the museum. The larger piece, a panel depicting the female personification of the second century Roman province, Cilicia, of which Antioch was the ancient capital, presented a greater challenge.

Nearly a foot thick with its Roman concrete base intact, the pavement could not be carried, shoved or wished onto the second floor. It could, however, be dropped. A crew set to work removing part of the second story wall. A derrick then was used to hoist the mosaic up and into the space where it is exhibited today.

"The Roman floor mosaics from



Stow battled the bureaucracy for this 6th century B.C. Athenian eye-cup, still the collection's finest item.

OU Western History Collections



Lloyd H. Stow
Curator 1939-1952



Henry S. Robinson
Curator 1953-1958



This fire shovel was used to heap coals into a Roman brazier of the type purchased for the Stovall collection in the mid-'50s, causing something of a furor in the Oklahoma legislature.

Photos of the collection by A. J. Heisserer.

Antioch could never have been acquired without the professional contacts maintained by Stow and Robinson," Heisserer contends.

A number of institutions, led by Princeton University, participated in the excavation of the pavements, each contributing to the expense in return for a portion of the material unearthed. In his book, *Antioch Mosaic Pavements*, Doro Levi makes reference to these prestigious institutions—the British Museum, the Louvre, the Metropolitan in New York and Princeton, all of them depositories of the mosaics allowed to leave Turkey. Nowhere, though, does Levi mention the University of Oklahoma.

Unknown to all but a few, the two Oklahoma curators carried on a lengthy correspondence with the dig's director, an old acquaintance from Princeton. Through that correspondence, the Stovall Museum was allowed to join these world-renowned repositories of ancient artifacts for an extremely modest price.

In recent months, Julie Droke, collections manager of the Stovall Museum, has corresponded with holders of two other mosaic panels from the House of Cilicia—Smith College and the Detroit Institute of Arts. Comparison with a photograph in Levi's book shows the Smith and Detroit slabs originally were adjacent to Stovall's geometric panel.

"Knowledge of our holdings traveled by word of mouth," Droke says. "We'd also like to know who has the others."

The exchange of such information among museum professionals is important in developing a total picture of the history of ancient artifacts. Ad-

ditionally, contacts with colleagues can mean the acquisition of artifacts not normally available to holders of smaller collections, such as the Stovall Museum.

For instance, when Robinson became curator in 1953, his professional contacts in Greece made it possible for the museum to purchase 32 Greek vases from a collection in Cyprus. Many of the vases dated as far back as the Bronze Age (3000-1000 B.C.).

The museum bought the vases in two groups, paying \$65.80 for the first group of 15 and \$24.80 for the remainder. Some of the pieces sold for as little as 45 cents, 70 cents and 80 cents apiece. The value of those same pieces in today's market would be nearly impossible to estimate. Even a conservative ten-fold figure would be an under-evaluation.

As these anecdotes illustrate, a great deal of luck and coincidence as well as professional expertise and imagination have gone into the development of the Collection of Ancient Art and Archaeology. The first stroke of good fortune came in 1937 when Lloyd Stow joined the University faculty as a professor of Greek. Two years later he became the collection's first curator.

One of Stow's most valuable assets was his wife, Hester. With her Harvard University doctorate in classical archaeology, Hester Stow ably assisted her husband in his efforts to assemble a collection with true academic and exhibition merit.

Funds for emerging museum collections were not an issue then; they were non-existent. The University of Oklahoma was in financial distress and in



This lost fragment of a cuneiform tablet cut in Mesopotamian script was returned recently to Stovall after 30 years in a collection at Yale.



A 5th century B.C. black-glazed vase arrived at Stovall wrapped in unlaundered lingerie.

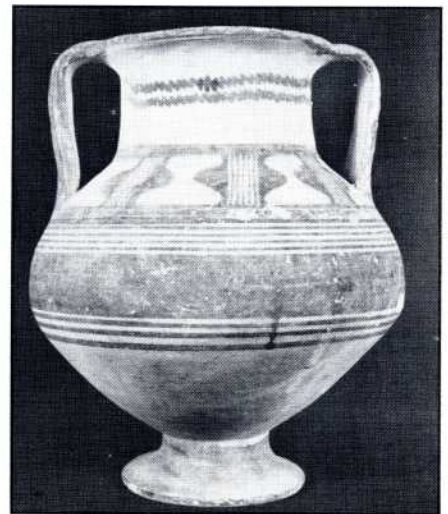
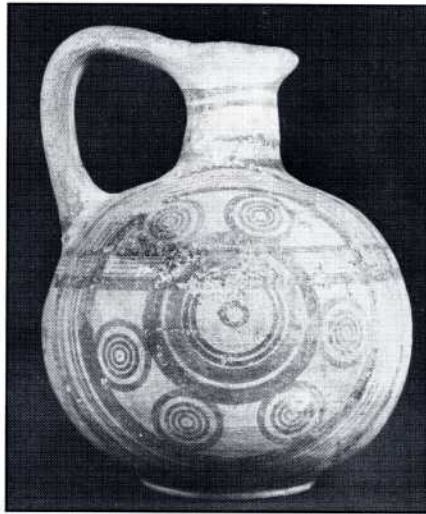
disfavor with the legislature. Rumors circulated that President William B. Bizzell was about to be fired, and the country braced itself for what seemed an inevitable involvement in the war in Europe. Undaunted by the discouraging atmosphere, the Stows persevered.

The couple personally donated various artifacts they had accumulated in their travels. However, it was Hester Stow's prior contacts as a researcher at Harvard's Fogg Art Museum and as a staff member at the Boston Museum of Fine Arts that brought many of the original items to the OU collection.

The Fogg Art Museum loaned OU some impressive artifacts for the Stows' first exhibit and also donated a number of small objects—shards of pottery, Greek and Roman lamps, some semi-precious gems and a couple of pieces of marble statuary. The Museum of Fine Arts, not to be outdone, donated over 30 items, including rare coins, gems and casts of famous original marble statues.

An additional arrangement with Gisela M. A. Richter at the Metropolitan Museum of New York City secured an indefinite loan of over 40 very fine artifacts, which became the core of the first exhibit. The loan lasted for eight years, from 1940 to 1948.

The Stows built the first display cases with their own hands. Retrieving discarded bookcases from the University's warehouse, they applied paint, then lined the shelves with ponce they had dyed a Greek blue on their kitchen stove. The cases were transported to the basement of Mon-



Pictured above are two of 32 very valuable specimens of Greek pottery, many dating back to the Bronze Age (3000-1000 B.C.), which were purchased by Henry Robinson from a Cypriot collection, several for as little as 45 to 80 cents.

net Hall (the old law school) where Stovall was attempting to unite the campus' various independent collections into a legitimate museum.

In 1941 Stow and the collection experienced more good fortune when Robinson arrived as a research associate. Remarkably, Robinson's wife Rebecca, like Hester Stow, also held a doctorate in classical archaeology. And, like the Stows, the Robinsons also gave generously of their time, efforts and personal holdings. The Robinsons, who became closely associated with the American excavations in the Athenian Agora, donated lamps, loomweights and terra-cotta figurines.

Soon thereafter, Stow and Robinson initiated a vigorous policy of purchase

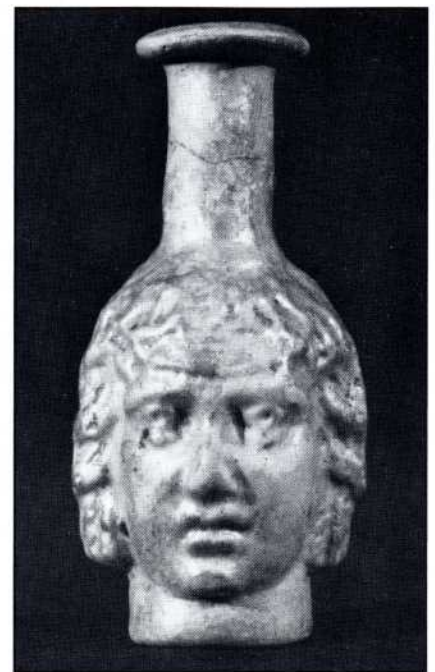
and gift solicitation. Their efforts produced a dramatic increase in the number and quality of items in the collection. They likely persuaded President Bizzell to donate his one Babylonian inscribed clay cone. Subsequently six more Babylonian inscribed clay tablets were purchased through a modest budget that had been established for the newly consolidated museum.

Professor Joe Smay, a member of the School of Architecture faculty, periodically loaned items from his private collection for display by the fledgling museum. Included were ancient sculptures, terra cottas, clay vessels.

By 1945 the museum had developed an acquisitions program primarily financed by the Alumni Development



Largely dormant for many years, Stovall's antiquities collection has been revitalized by the enthusiastic professionalism of current curator, A. J. Heisserer.



The double-head flask of white, opaque glass is typical of the 3rd century A.D.



In addition to the antiquities in Heisserer's book, the collection includes an important group of 38 replicas of Roman silver dating from the birth of Christ.

Fund, the annual gifts campaign of the University of Oklahoma Alumni Association. Such assistance made possible the purchase of a most outstanding object, the Attic Black-Figured Neck Amphora by the Diosphos Painter (ca. 500 B. C.). Vases by this painter were rare in the North American continent, and acquisition of the relic added prestige and character to Stovall's other-

wise modest collection.

When Stow left the University in 1952 to become chairman of a department in another state, Robinson carried on the development of the antiquities collection as its curator. Robinson's subsequent departure in 1958 to become director of the American School of Classical Studies in Athens brought progress to a halt. The collec-

tion languished for many years. However, due largely to the unselfish involvement and professionalism of Heisserer, the present curator of ancient art and archaeology, the antiquities collection is flourishing again.

Following in the footsteps of Stow and Robinson, Heisserer has revived correspondence with colleagues and communication with the public. His efforts have sparked renewed interest in the collection, culminating in donations of many fine articles. Most recently, Norman residents Russell and Nel Long gave the museum a collection containing two large terra-cotta Greek figurines, Roman coins, a Roman lamp and jug handle, inscribed pre-Islamic alabasters from South Arabia and a lovely south Italian Greek bronze statuette.

A professor of ancient history in the University's department of history, Heisserer became involved in the collection in 1976 through the efforts of Candace Greene, former curator of collections for the Stovall Museum. He credits Greene with the recent revival of activity surrounding the collection. With the aid of a 1979 grant from the Institute of Museum Services, Greene arranged for a history major, William Kamp, to systematically organize the collection.

Shortly thereafter, Heisserer began



Both sides of a bronze coin issued in A.D. 64-66 by the Roman emperor Nero are pictured at left, the bronze coin at right by the emperor Vitellius in A.D. 69.

President Bizzell donated this Babylonian inscribed clay cone, ca. 2100 B.C.

to research his book, *Classical Antiquities: the Collection of the Stovall Museum of Science and History*. He learned the whereabouts of curators Stow and Robinson through Norman resident Harriet Peterson, a long-time friend of the museum. The three men began a correspondence rich with anecdotes. Stow became so enthusiastic as he recounted past events that he was moved to add to his earlier contributions a gift of 29 silver and bronze coins from Roman Judaea.

"It's surprising how any collection in a museum grows and increases its holdings," Heisserer says. Over the past few years Leslie Smith, now retired and living in Norman, donated 61 bronze Roman coins which had been given to him by a former dean of arts and sciences at the University of Maine. The dean had considered these coins rejects from his collection; however, several were of genuine value.


Coincidence continues to play its role in the collection's development. Consider, for example, the case of the long-lost cuneiform stone fragment. In 1954, the director of Bizzell Memorial Library, Arthur McAnally, discovered the fragment, cut in Mesopotamian cuneiform script, in a file cabinet drawer in the library. The fragment was added to 27 other clay cuneiform tablets in Stovall's collection.

Sometime later, Robinson sent the entire lot of clay documents, including the stone fragment, to a specialist at Yale University for examination and analysis of their content. The specialist later returned the documents with his descriptions, but he apparently overlooked the single stone fragment.

Forgotten in time and assumed to be lost, the fragment later appeared in correspondence among Heisserer, Daniel C. Snell, who teaches ancient near Eastern studies in OU's history department, and the curator of the Yale Babylonian Collection. The Yale curator mentioned that he possessed a curious small fragment with a strange accession number unrelated to accession numbers in the Yale holdings. That number was precisely the same as the one that had been assigned to the stone fragment found in the OU library nearly 30 years before.

The fragment, along with the other cuneiform inscriptions, is once again part of a collection that represents virtually every ancient classical and Near East civilization. Its holdings of more than 1,000 authentic objects and nearly 250 replicas include Greek and Roman coins, vases, terra cottas, Mesopotamian cuneiform inscriptions, Syro-Palestinian glassware, South Arabian antiquities, Etruscan bronzes and jewelry. Thanks to Heis-

serer's extensively illustrated catalogue, the presence of this collection in Oklahoma is attracting considerable attention in the museum world—and not a little amazement.

How do such relics of a bygone age find their way into museums? It takes luck, audacity, coincidence and the determination of professional scholars and curators who wish to preserve the past for what it can teach the present. The result is a collection that is unique to the Southwest and irreplaceable to the people of Oklahoma. 

The anecdotal material contained in this article resulted from research conducted by A. J. Heisserer in the preparation of Classical Antiquities, the illustrated catalogue of the classical holdings of the Stovall Museum of Science and History (University of Oklahoma Press, 1986). Editor Heisserer, who also authored much of the contents, was ably assisted by OU honor students Barbara L. Gunn and Frederick L. Brown; OU associate professor of history Daniel C. Snell; Mario A. Del Chiaro, professor of art, University of California at Santa Barbara; A. Jamme, faculty, Catholic University of America; and OU photographer Gil Jain. Publication was made possible in part by grants from University of Oklahoma Associates Research/Creative Activity Funds and the University of Oklahoma Foundation Inc.