Ancient Wonders at the Penn Museum

A Brief History of the Penn Museum

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The founding of the University of Pennsylvania Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology was part of the great wave of institution-building that took place in the United States after the Civil War. It was an outgrowth of the rising prominence of the new country and its belief in the ideals of progress and manifest destiny. The 1876 Centennial Exposition, held in Philadelphia, introduced America as a new industrial world power and showcased the city as embodying the country's strength.

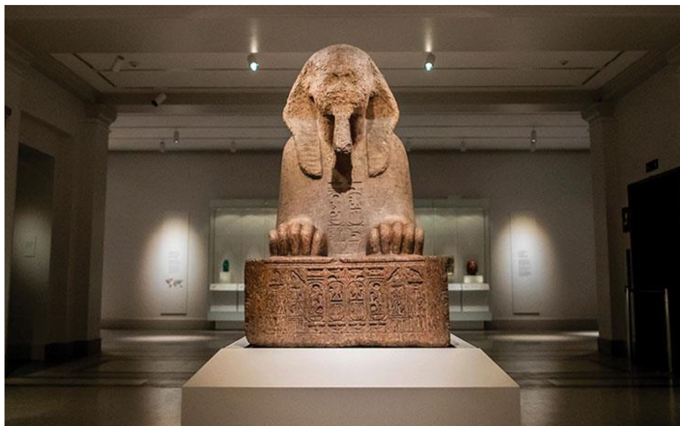
The United States, however, still lagged behind Europe in universities and museums, as well as significant contributions to architecture and the arts. The new wealth created after the Civil War helped to overcome these deficiencies as philanthropy became a means of earning social recognition, and many wealthy and civic-minded Americans thus turned their attention to cultural life and institutions.

Philadelphia was at the center of the industrial and cultural ethos of the times. It was known for its manufacturing, railroads, and commerce, but also for its institutions of learning, such as the American Philosophical Society, the Academy of Natural Sciences, and the University of Pennsylvania.

Securing a Large Audience for the Museum's First Exhibition

The Babylonian Exploration Fund was established in 1887 to assure that an expedition to Nippur would be undertaken. The Board of the Fund agreed to an affiliation with the University of Pennsylvania. It was decided that a library, then under construction, would house finds from the expedition. The first exhibition was scheduled for December 13, 1889.

By late 1889, [Dr. William] Pepper's library building was not yet ready for occupancy, but the work of setting up, organizing and staffing the museum, and building up its collection was well advanced. The old examination hall on the third floor of College Hall was temporarily converted to a museum. Skylights were set into the roof and the room was divided by partitions; the entire hall was painted and calsomined [whitewashed]. On Friday, December 13, 1889, a special exhibition of Maxwell Sommerville's gem collection and the antiquities purchased by the Babylonian expedition opened. As it happened, Amelia B. Edwards and Miss Bradbury of the Egypt Exploration Society were scheduled to speak in Philadelphia the same day…and were expected to draw a crowd. Pepper, though interested in the work of the Egypt Exploration Society, was apparently anxious about the success of the opening of his museum. He wrote to [Francis C.] Macauley [a prominent Philadelphian], "We must make a great effort, and use personal influence, and if necessary physical violence to secure a large audience on Friday." The exhibition was, apparently, successful. The museum in College Hall was formally opened to the public January 2, 1890.



— From "Excavations at Nippur, the University of Pennsylvania, and the University's Museum" in Nippur at the Centennial (1992) by Richard L. Zettler, Ph.D., Associate Professor and Department Chair, Near Eastern Languages & Civilizations; Associate Curator-in-Charge, Near East Section, Penn Museum.

The University, though founded in the middle of the 18th century, was undergoing a renaissance under Provost William Pepper, a physician and medical professor, and under his leadership (1881–

1894), the institution was transformed into a modern university. When in 1887 he was approached to help send an archaeological expedition to Mesopotamia, he leapt at the prospect.

The impetus for the project came from Rev. John Punnett Peters, at the time a Professor of Semitics at the University, who had advocated for an American role in the archaeology of the Near East. In 1887 Peters enlisted the aid of Edward White Clark, a Philadelphia banker, and approached Pepper and other prominent Philadelphia men to finance the endeavor. The group promised to fund the fieldwork, and the University resolved that "all finds which can be exported are to become the property of the University of Pennsylvania, provided the said University furnish suitable accommodations for the same in a fire-proof building…"

In 1889, while the first expedition to the ancient Sumerian city of Nippur was underway, Pepper moved to establish a formal Department of Archaeology and Paleontology at the University. A fund-raising entity, named the University Archaeological Association but independent of the University, was also formed.

The expedition to Nippur set a precedent for the growth of the Museum's collections. Although the Museum obtained objects by donation or purchase, a distinguishing factor between it and many other similar museums is that so many of its collections were acquired through fieldwork and are well-documented. Field research has always been important at the Museum, even when the major goal of an expedition was to bring back artifacts.

The curators and board members were constantly seeking out new collections. In its first two decades, while continually struggling to pay its bills, the Museum brought in more objects than it could properly catalog. The continuous collecting forced the Museum to think about a permanent building. In 1889 it occupied space in the University's new library building, now the Fisher Fine Arts Library. The Museum soon took over much of the building, but space was still lacking and some collections were stored and displayed in other buildings on campus. Plans for a museum building began soon after, in 1892, at the behest of Sara Yorke Stevenson, the curator of the Egyptian and Mediterranean Sections and one of the first of many formidable women in the history of the Museum.

In 1894 Pepper obtained land from the City of Philadelphia to erect the "Free Museum of Science and Art." The new name of the Museum reflected that it would be open to the public at no charge (it did not charge admission until 1987), and was also meant to appeal to the politicians and citizens of Philadelphia. This name never caught on, however, and the institution was soon called informally "The University Museum," a name it adopted officially in 1913. The name was changed twice again, in the 1980s and 1990s, and finally came to be called the University of Pennsylvania Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology, or the Penn Museum. A grand structure was envisioned, to be built in sections as money became available, consisting of three domed rotundas and a series of courtyards in front and back. The first section opened in 1899. Built mainly of imported brick, the architecture of the building is nominally Northern Italian Renaissance, blended with eclectic elements to create a unique style. It is embellished with decorative motifs, including glass mosaics under the eaves designed by Louis Comfort Tiffany (son of the founder of Tiffany's) and statues designed by A. Stirling Calder (father of the renowned sculptor Alexander Calder). Additions to the building were erected in 1915, 1926, and 1929, and included the Harrison Rotunda and Auditorium, which boasts the largest unsupported masonry floor-dome in the world.

Women Archaeologists in the early days of the Museum

A portrait of Sara Yorke Stevenson (1847–1921) hangs in the Penn Museum Archives, a tribute to this dynamic woman's crucial role in the Museum's history. The first Curator of the Egyptian and Mediterranean Sections and the first woman to receive an honorary doctorate from Penn (in 1894), she would later serve the Museum as Secretary, and finally, as its fifth and only female President from 1904–1905. Even after she resigned, her career continued, beginning with her appointment as Curator at the Pennsylvania Museum, now the Philadelphia Museum of Art, and later as columnist and literary editor of Philadelphia's Public Ledger.

After her death in 1921, friends and colleagues from several Philadelphia clubs honored her lifelong contributions to science and to the city. Their recollections of her character highlight the contemporary significance of a woman attaining such credentials. Hampton L. Carson, speaking on behalf of the American Philosophical Society, recalled the "peculiar order" of her mind, with "masculine qualities as well as feminine… She did not lose her womanly qualities because of her ability to argue logically and philosophically with the most learned of men." Langdon Warner of the Pennsylvania Museum summarized her influence: "If women today find no difficulty in being

recognized as scholars, and if their counsel is demanded in Museums, it is due to Mrs. Stevenson in a far greater measure than our casual generation will ever know."

Stevenson's illustrious career as an archaeologist never involved fieldwork, perhaps a reflection of the contemporary expectations of women; nevertheless, her ubiquitous influence extended into the field. At a meeting of the Archaeological Institute of America (AIA) in 1900, Stevenson heard a recent Smith College graduate, Miss Harriet Boyd (later Harriet Boyd Hawes), report on her research in Crete. Under Stevenson's arrangements, the Museum collaborated in sending Boyd on her next expedition to Greece, where she excavated at Gournia, a site which would yield a wealth of information on the daily lives of Cretans in the Bronze Age. Her remarkable success and unlikely status as a woman supervising men in the field contributed to a favorable reception from the press. The French newspaper Journal des Savants praised "la libre et hardie Américaine" for "le féminisme intelligent." Another journalist described her "strictly " charm of manner unaltered by the nature of "the masculine work." She was invited to lecture on Gournia to ten regional branches of the AIA, becoming the first woman to speak before the Institute in this capacity.

Harriet Boyd Hawes's prominence as an acclaimed archaeologist was exceptional—not all contemporary archaeologists accepted a female presence in the field. Concerns about women traveling for and working on expeditions were not uncommon through several following decades. In 1926, Museum Director George Byron Gordon questioned the appropriateness of women working in the field in written correspondence with Sir Leonard Woolley, who was excavating at Ur. Gordon had received reports that were primarily concerned with the presence at Ur of Mrs. Katharine Keeling, a widow in her 30s, and he worried about the potential for bad press. He wrote, "I have very grave doubts which amount to a conviction about the wisdom of having any volunteer assistants on the expedition." Woolley dismissed Gordon's concern, responding that he appreciated any free contribution of useful work, and that her influence kept the site workers "up to standard." Whether or not the reports were founded is impossible to know—Mrs. Keeling remarried and became Mrs. Woolley. — Alexandra Fleischman

World Research

Under George Byron Gordon, the Museum's first full-time director (1910– 1927), research was conducted all over the globe, from Siberia to the Amazon, at major sites in Egypt and Guatemala. But the most acclaimed Museum project of the time was the excavation at Ur, in Iraq. This was a joint expedition with the British Museum (1922–1934), led by the great English archaeologist C. Leonard Woolley, and it produced spectacular jewelry and other objects from the "Royal Tombs" (2650–2550 BC). Only the discovery of the tomb of Tutankhamun received more acclaim at the time.

Items not obtained through excavation were purchased from dealers and collectors. When few museums were collecting Chinese art, Gordon cultivated relationships with individuals such as C. T. Loo, a prominent dealer of Chinese art and artifacts in the first half of the 20th century. Gordon's coup was the acquisition of two of the six reliefs of horses commissioned by Emperor Tang Taizong, founder of the Tang dynasty, for his mausoleum. Eldridge Johnson, the founder of the Victor Talking Machine Company, paid $125,000 for the reliefs in 1920 and presented them to the Museum. Gordon also obtained masterpieces of Benin art from W. O. Oldman of London and collections of pre-Columbian gold from South America.

Recognizing that expeditions required trained academics, Gordon also began a program of instruction in anthropology and archaeology. Previously, in 1893, Sara Yorke Stevenson had tried to lure Franz Boas, the founder of academic anthropology in the United States, to the Museum, but his salary demands could not be met. Boas became the dominating influence on American anthropology, introducing empiricism into the discipline, and the concept of cultural relativism.

With its emphasis on fieldwork, the discipline of anthropology as practiced by Boas was no longer the sphere of museums and artifact collections. The University Museum's object-based approach to archaeology came to be seen as limited and old-fashioned; though good for educating the public in a general way, it could not produce future specialists in the discipline. A schism arose between the Museum and the Anthropology Department which lasted until the 1950s.

Gordon died in 1927, and the Stock Market crash of 1929 and the ensuing Great Depression left the institution reeling. Horace H. F. Jayne, appointed as Director in 1929, soon found himself cutting staff and trying to keep the Museum afloat. The University of Pennsylvania was forced to intervene and become financially responsible for the institution. Another casualty of the Depression was the original plan for the building, which was never completed.

In spite of the retrenchment, money from endowments continued to be available for expeditions. Highlights include the first American excavations in Persia (Iran), the excavations at the Maya site of Piedras Negras (Guatemala), Kourion (Cyprus), Tepe Gawra (Iraq), Minturnae (Italy), Meydum (Egypt), and the excavations of Edgar B. Howard in the American Southwest, which uncovered evidence of some of the earliest humans on the continent.

One of Jayne's lasting contributions was the founding of the Women's Committee, a volunteer group that continues to this day to help raise funds, plan grand events, and stimulate interest in the Museum's research and educational programs.

After World War II, the Museum blossomed once again with the appointment of one of its greatest directors, Froelich G. Rainey, known as "Fro." Rainey had distinguished himself in the archaeology of Alaska, and in his almost 30 years as Director (1947–1976) he presided over great changes. The shift to academic anthropology, against which Gordon had tried to fight, was embraced by Rainey. Curators were given teaching appointments in the University, and original field research became the mission of the institution. Field projects included Gordion, Turkey; Hasanlu, Iran; and Tikal, Guatemala, among many others. Excavations were carried out in lesser-known areas of the globe, such as at the site of Ban Chiang, Thailand, where the discovery of early metallurgy revolutionized our conception of the origins of civilization in this part of the world.

Changing Times

The world was changing as well. In the decades following World War II, most countries established cultural patrimony laws forbidding the export of antiquities. This made the continued acquisition of artifacts difficult, but Rainey simply decided that collecting objects was no longer a priority. In fact, he observed that collecting was often at odds with archaeology, especially if it encouraged the looting of archaeological sites. Rainey took a decisive step to help curb the illicit trade by presenting the "Pennsylvania Declaration" at the 1970 UNESCO Convention on the Means of Prohibiting and Preventing the Illicit Import, Export, and Transfer of Ownership of Cultural Property. The declaration, the first by a museum, discouraged acquisition of objects with no known collection history. Rainey also pioneered the new fields of underwater archaeology and the application of natural sciences to archaeology. He appointed George F. Bass to head an underwater excavation at Cape Gelidonya, Turkey. This was the first excavation to adapt the standards of land archaeology to underwater remains. In 1961 Rainey established MASCA, the Museum Applied Science Center for Archaeology. MASCA ran a radiocarbon laboratory and was involved in developing and testing remote sensing equipment such as magnetometers, and engaged specialists in physics, chemistry, archaeobotany, and other sciences.

Rainey helped popularize archaeology with an early television program called What in the World?, soon imitated by the BBC's Animal, Vegetable and Mineral. Featuring a panel of three expert contestants and a moderator, the aim was to identify interesting and obscure objects from the Museum's collection in an entertaining yet learned fashion.

In his zeal to transform the Museum into a research institution, however, Rainey neglected aspects of the buildings and Penn Museum collections. The succeeding administrations (Martin Biddle, 1977– 1981; Robert H. Dyson, Jr., 1981– 1994; Jeremy A. Sabloff, 1994–2004; Richard M. Leventhal, 2005–2006; and Richard Hodges, 2007–2012) have aimed at professionalizing the institution, renovating the building, and bringing the collections into the digital age. The year 2002 marked the opening of a state-of-the-art, climate-controlled building, the A. Bruce and Margaret R. Mainwaring Wing, to house the most perishable collections of the Museum.

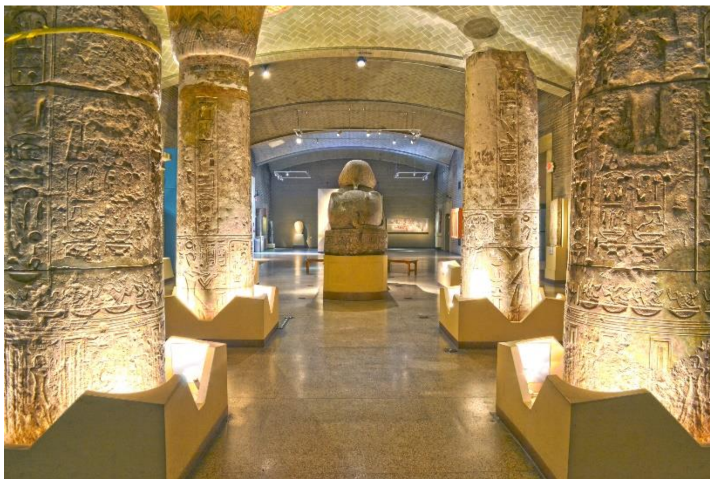
In the process of taking stock of its collections, the Museum has also rediscovered them. The 1980s saw the revitalization of the Museum's exhibition program and the creation of its first traveling exhibitions. More recently, with the implementation of the North

American Grave Protection and Repatriation Act in 1990, the Museum has reconnected with Native American communities, establishing ties with the groups whose ancestors created the artifacts in the Museum's collection.

Now in its 13th decade, the Museum continues to grapple with its past and its future. Restoring the building, publishing its excavation results, cataloging its collections, digitizing its records, and making them accessible online are the goals. In addition, issues of cultural patrimony and repatriation are of worldwide concern. Who says object collections are a thing of the past?

An Unfortunate Event Concerning the Chinese Camels

With the repeal of the Prohibition Law in 1933, another warming influence crept into the Museum climate: the serving of restoratives at occasional events of a social flavor. Then came the special opening of an exhibition early in 1940. More than eight hundred guests turned out. "One of the most successful receptions ever held in the Museum," it was called in the minutes of the next board meeting. But the minutes added: "It is needful to report that towards the close, two guests had the misfortune to knock over and damage two pottery Chinese tomb figures of camels…" A less restrained account had it that a pair of ladies, perhaps emboldened by good champagne, had tried to ride the camels, which, being hollow, collapsed in ruins under them. (The writer remembers only one lady and one camel being involved, but defers to the record on this point.) The Museum's gifted restorers made the camels as good as new, but Thomas S. Gates, president of the University, put the cork back on the serving of spirits in the building. The drought lasted about six years and severely limited entertainment in the Museum. — From Men in Search of Man: The First Seventy-Five Years of the University Museum of the University of Pennsylvania (1964) by Percy C. Madeira, Jr., President of the University Museum 1941–1962.



The Everyday Life of an Archaeologist

In a 1951 letter to Ken McDonald, Carleton S. Coon described the life of an archaeologist as he knew it. Ken, a high school senior at the time, had read about Coon in a Life magazine article. He had written to the famous archaeologist inquiring about the profession. Sixty years later, McDonald contacted the Penn Museum and offered to send us Coon's original letter, which now resides in the Museum Archives. Perhaps it was the reference to dysentery, but Ken McDonald did not study archaeology. He became a commercial mortgage and real estate broker.

…The everyday life of an archaeologist depends on who he is and what he happens to be doing. If he is in the field he probably gets up around 5 AM, kicks a number of colleagues out of bed, shouts to the cook to get breakfast, does about 50 errands and things that should have been done the night before by someone who forgot, goes to his site, tells the men to get moving, gives pills to some workman who is sick, chases off a few rude visitors with a stick, tries valiantly to keep the sherds from level B separate from those in level A, eats a hurried lunch, breaks up a fight in the trench, carries bags of specimens down the hill to his storage place, goes home, washes, eats supper, and falls asleep about 8 PM, if he is lucky.

If he is at home he goes to his office or laboratory and works, just like anyone else. At night, he comes home and works some more. He always works, he rarely goes to the movies, he does not need to read detective stories because what he is doing is more interesting anyhow. He either (a) lives to a ripe old age because of his outdoor life, or (b) is buried in an early grave because (b-i) a rock falls on his head, or (b-ii) he gets a bad case of chronic dysentery which ruins his digestive system. — Carleton S. Coon
https://www.penn.museum/sites/expedition/a-brief-history-of-the-penn-museum/

A new study seeks to establish ethical collecting practices for US museums

The Penn Cultural Heritage Center's three-year national study amplifies ongoing calls for transparency and will provide a collecting framework

Annabel Keenan, 29 October 2024

As calls for the restitution of looted objects spread across the industry, the Penn Cultural Heritage Center (PennCHC) at the Penn Museum in Philadelphia is launching a study that will examine collecting policies and practices at US museums and encourage transparency and accountability in the sector. Launching today (29 October), the "Museums: Missions and Acquisitions Project" (dubbed M2A Project for short) will study over 450 museum collections to identify current standards and establish a framework for institutions to model their future practices.

“There have been many discussions about the generational shift in museums that is triggering conversations on ethics, as well as a groundswell of early-career professionals who know something needs to give,” says Brian I. Daniels, the PennCHC’s director of research and programmes, and the M2A Project’s principal investigator. “It’s time for us to push forward on research that takes stock of collecting practices and plants the seed for the transformation that’s required in the sector.”

The PennCHC has been supporting ethical collecting since its founding in 2008, including working closely with local communities in countries around the world to identify and preserve their cultural heritage. “US museums have historically acquired objects that were removed from these countries illegally or through pathways now considered inequitable,” says Richard M. Leventhal, the executive director of the PennCHC and co-principal investigator for the M2A Project. “The M2A Project is asking a very simple set of questions about these types of objects: Are US museums still acquiring them? And if so, why? Recent seizures of looted property and calls to decolonise collections force us to reconsider whether acquisitions best serve the missions of museums and the interests of their communities.”

The M2A Project evolved from the PennCHC’s Cultural Property Experts on Call Program that launched in 2020 in partnership with the US Department of State’s Cultural Heritage Coordinating Committee to protect at-risk cultural property against theft, looting and trafficking. Through this programme, the PennCHC collaborated with more than 100 museums and universities to study and document the trade in illicit artefacts.

“We realised that we are sitting on a rich dataset,” Daniels says. “After years of seeing where illegal imports were going, identifying collecting problems and understanding the intellectual needs of museums and their audiences, we realised the PennCHC is particularly equipped to look at the future of collecting.”

Funded by a $1.1m National Leadership Grant from the Institute of Museum and Library Services (IMLS), the M2A Project will include one-on-one interviews and workshops with stakeholders at US museums. The team will also survey existing information, such as tax documents. They expect their methods to evolve as research develops and they better understand the current state of collecting and identify areas in need of further investigation.

Many of the institutions in the study, which includes art, archaeological and ethnographic museums, have had long relationships with the PennCHC and are already interested in confronting issues of ethical collecting. The M2A Project will provide a framework to deepen and align these partnerships and ongoing research. This work will help institutions communicate what ethical ownership looks like within the field and how to share this message with museum audiences.

“The question we hear most often from colleagues is how to get organisations to have uncomfortable conversations,” Daniels says. “These conversations may be happening internally, or at a philosophical level externally, but they are not happening in a way to evolve as a field. This project isn’t to create ‘gotcha’ moments, but rather to recognise that museums are at an inflection point.”

The team plans to host workshops and panels to share information as research evolves and will publicly publish its findings online by 2027. This work will benefit institutions across the nation and guide workers, leaders, grant makers and policymakers on what strategies could be implemented or investigated further. It will also inform further studies on how the issues impact the entire cultural sector and how museums can support ethical collecting by working together.

"The PennCHC is an important partner in our proactive approach to collections practices: how we acquire, steward and repatriate cultural objects," says Christopher Woods, the director of the Penn Museum. "The M2A Project will provide much-needed baseline information about collection practices that will serve as a future guide to help these museums address the cultural heritage in their care in a more ethical manner."

The Penn Museum found itself at the centre of many debates about collecting practices and stewardship in 2021. In spring of that year, the museum recommended repatriation and reburial of more than 1,000 human skulls in its collection. Later that year, an independent report condemned the University of Pennsylvania, the museum and two of its anthropologists for "extremely poor judgment and gross insensitivity" in the handling of human remains of victims of a police bombing and the ensuing fire in Philadelphia in 1985.
https://www.theartnewspaper.com/2024/10/29/penn-cultural-heritage-center-ethical-collecting-museums-study

Greece at the Penn Museum

Representing the history and culture of Greece from 3000 to 31 BCE, the objects in this gallery also come from colonies in southern Italy, Sicily, Libya, and Cyprus, among others.

During the height of Greek civilization, their city-states dominated the economy of the entire Mediterranean region from southern France to Asia Minor and the Black Sea. The Greeks were pre-eminent merchants, and their pottery was exported throughout the Mediterranean world. The strikingly painted red- and black-figure vases give a glimpse into the lives of the ancient Greeks, depicting vivid scenes of hunting, athletics, warfare, and religion.

The collection also boasts examples of fine marble statuary, struck silver coins, weapons and armor, votives, jewelry, grave markers, and metalwork. While some of the objects in the Museum's Mediterranean collection were excavated, many were donated by collectors who had acquired the objects in the late 19th and early 20th centuries.

What's on View

Coin, 405-345 BCE

This silver "decadrachm" was worth 10 drachms—a very valuable coin—and was made in the ancient city of Syracuse in Sicily between about 405 and 345 BCE. One side shows a four-horse racing chariot, a common symbol for coins from Syracuse because of civic pride in the locally trained chariot teams' victories in the Panhellenic festivals of mainland Greece.

Amphora, 540-530 BCE

In the Greece Gallery, there are many vases like this one, which was made in Athens around 535 BCE. It shows the death of Achilles during the Trojan War, a story which remains familiar today from Homer's Iliad. Although the amphora (or vase with two handles) was made in Athens, it was found in Orvieto, Italy, showing how Greek pottery circulated throughout the Mediterranean Greek world.

Grave Stela, 350-300 BCE

Made of marble, this Grave Stela (stone slab) is treated as an architecturalized niche, framed by pilasters, a lintel and an architrave carrying a flat tiled roof. Two men stand by a seated woman named Krinylla, daughter of Stratios, according to the epitaph still faintly visible on the architrave. The bearded man in the center is Naukles, son of Naukrates of Lamptrae, while the man on the right is Naukrates, son of Naukles of Lamptrae, which was a district or deme of Attica.
https://www.penn.museum/on-view/galleries-exhibitions/greece-gallery