

The Register-Guard

The new exhibit at the Hallie Ford is very old and very beautiful

Salem exhibit goes way back to unearth art

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Almost anything that is really old is really interesting. Art that is really old — and by “really old,” we are talking thousands of years — is downright fascinating.

An exhibition that just opened at Salem’s Hallie Ford Museum of Art brings together, for the first time anywhere, some of the best small artworks made in the ancient Near East and now held in American collections.

“Breath of Heaven, Breath of Earth: Ancient Near Eastern Art From American Collections” represents a decade-long labor of love for John Olbrantz, the museum’s executive director. He curated the show with the help of Trudy Kawami, director of research at the Arthur M. Sackler Foundation.

Although Olbrantz runs the best little art museum in Oregon, he admits that in his chest beats the heart of a frustrated archaeologist. (He even owns, he confesses, a fedora and a leather jacket.)

In 2002, he and his best friend, Jim Romano — then curator of Egyptian, classical and ancient Middle Eastern art at the Brooklyn Museum of Art — put together for the Hallie Ford “In the Fullness of Time,” a similar exhibition of ancient Egyptian art from American collections.

Ever since the lavish “Treasures of Tutankhamun” exhibition brought millions of visitors to the British Museum when it opened there in 1972, creating the concept of the blockbuster exhibition, museums have loved big, flashy antiquities.

The Egypt show was a success, and the following year Olbrantz and Romano began plotting a second one, this time looking at antiquities from the Near East. The two men had just started envisioning the new exhibition in 2003 when Romano was killed in a car accident and the project was put on hold.

Olbrantz and Kawami revived the idea six years ago. They began researching significant American collections of ancient Near Eastern art. In the end they borrowed 64 objects from 21 lenders, making the exhibit just the right size for the Hallie Ford’s small space.

The divine to the bovine

The curators present the pieces thematically, dividing the works into representations of deities, representations of humans — rulers, for the most part — and representations of animals.

When you enter the exhibition, you start in the realm of the divine. One of the most haunting pieces here is identified as a head of a goddess; it was found in Ur, an important ancient city in what is now Iraq, and is believed to be a few centuries more than 4,000 years old.

I’m no archaeologist, so I’m going to have to accept that the head represents a goddess; to my eye, it’s the doll-like face of a young girl. Made from marble, with inlays of lapis and shell, the figure has a strange sweetness that is hard to associate with ancient gods and goddesses.

Either way, it’s a beautiful piece.

The goddess is surrounded by objects even smaller — especially, several cylinder seals, the kind you roll onto wax or clay to form an impression. All are impressive if only for the technical skill it would take to carve anything so small and precise.

Human figures tend to be kings. One of the most memorable is a head of Gudea, who ruled southern Mesopotamia about 4,100 years ago.

Carved from diorite, a dark stone that is difficult to work but wears well, the portrait is more stylized than naturalistic; it probably was part of the king's efforts to extend his legacy. In fact, Gudea left behind inscriptions about importing the diorite from Oman.

The animal realm probably will delight most viewers, children and adults as well.

When ancient artists depicted animals, their work wasn't subject to the vanity and stylistic conventions that restricted sculptures of gods and kings. As a result, the animals here are much livelier than their human counterparts.

Some, such as a bull-shaped Persian vessel from early first millennium before Christ, will remind you of Picasso. But others remind you of nothing more than the animals themselves.

A sheep carved from dark stone 5,000 years ago in what is now Iraq makes it clear that sheep, and their personalities, have changed little over the millennia. And a 2-inch-tall carved figure of a monkey, an animal not indigenous to Iran, shows that the ancient Persians were just as amused and bemused by monkeys then as we are today.

Digging Agatha Christie

Among the events associated with the exhibition, which runs through Dec. 22, will be the screening of four movies based on mysteries by Agatha Christie.

"Murder on the Orient Express," "Murder in Mesopotamia" and "Death on the Nile" were based on Christie's real-life experiences working with her archaeologist husband, Sir Max Mallowan, whom she met while visiting a dig in Ur in 1930.

In fact, while giving a tour of the exhibition, Olbrantz pointed out a tiny goddess dug up near Ur on one of the digs where Christie and husband worked together.

Now that is history.

Bob Keefer reviews the visual arts for The Register-Guard. Reach him at bob@bkpix.com.

ART REVIEW

Breath of Heaven, Breath of Earth

When: Through Dec. 22

Where: Hallie Ford Museum of Art, 700 State St., Salem

Hours: 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. Tuesday through Saturday and 1 p.m. to 5 p.m. Sunday

Admission: \$6, \$4 seniors, \$3 students, free for 17 and younger