

Press Contacts

Michelle Perlin
212.590.0311, mperlin@themorgan.org

Patrick Milliman
212.590.0310, pmilliman@themorgan.org

NEW EXHIBITION AT THE MORGAN LIBRARY & MUSEUM EXPLORES THE STORY OF THE GREAT FLOOD AND EARLY MESOPOTAMIAN ANIMAL SCULPTURES

Noah's Beasts: Sculpted Animals from Ancient Mesopotamia
May 26 through August 27, 2017

New York, NY, March 27, 2017 — Everyone is familiar with the story of Noah and his ark. But how many of us have come face-to-face with actual animal depictions from this long ago time?

Noah's Beasts: Sculpted Animals from Ancient Mesopotamia, a new exhibition opening at the Morgan Library & Museum on May 26, offers museum-goers the opportunity to experience the beauty and power of animal representations dating back to 3300 B.C. Bringing together for the first time sixteen works from the Morgan and a host of institutions across the country, the exhibition is a testament to the skill with which early sculptors evoked the animal kingdom in honor of their gods. The exhibition will run through August 27.

"The art, literature, and music represented in the vast collections of the Morgan Library & Museum take root in the culture of ancient civilization," said Colin B. Bailey, director of the museum. "*Noah's Beasts* brings to life one of the best known epics of that time. The sculptures in the show display both an attention to naturalistic detail and individualized stylization that are simply extraordinary."

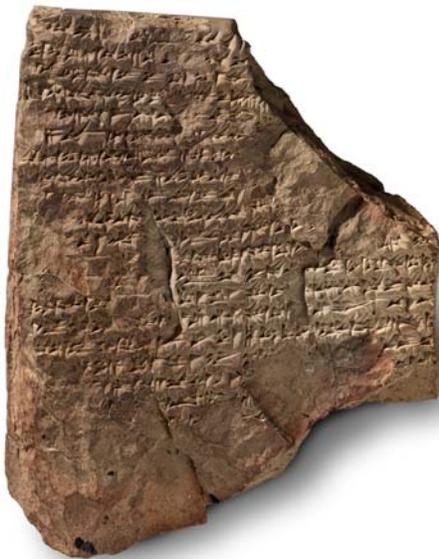


Head of a Lion, Mesopotamia, Sumerian, Ur, PG 800, Dromos of Queen Puabi's Tomb, U.10465, Early Dynastic IIIa, ca. 2550–2400 B.C., Silver, lapis lazuli, and shell, 4 3/8 x 4 3/4 in. (11.1 x 12.1 cm). University of Pennsylvania Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology, Philadelphia B17064.



*The Flood roared like a bull,
Like a wild ass screaming in the winds
The darkness was total, there was no sun...
For seven days and seven nights
The torrent, storm and flood came on...*

—Excerpt translation from the Epic of Atrahasis



Top: Map of Ancient Mesopotamia. Bottom: *Tablet Inscribed with a Fragment of the Babylonian Flood Story Epic of Atrahasis in Akkadian*, Mesopotamia, First Dynasty of Babylon, reign of King Ammi-saduqa (ca. 1646–1626 B.C.), Clay, 4 1/2 x 3 9/16 in. (11.4 x 9 cm). The Morgan Library & Museum.

THE EXHIBITION

In 1872, George Smith, an assistant at the British Museum, astonished the world by translating a tablet from the seventh-century B.C., inscribed with a story of a long ago flood similar to that found in the Book of Genesis. Another much older tablet describing a great flood was discovered in 1898, and Pierpont Morgan, the founder of the Morgan Library & Museum, purchased it shortly thereafter. It dates to the reign of Babylonian King Ammi-saduqa (ca. 1646-1626 B.C.) and forms the centerpiece of the exhibition.

Surrounding the Morgan tablet are sculptures made from stone and metal, which were rare in Mesopotamia. Several incorporate silver, gold, and beautiful inlays of shell and lapis lazuli. All of the pieces had Sumerian cultic functions and were created as a form of worship to the gods. Also included in the exhibition are six ancient cylinder seals with visual connections to the sculptures.

Archaeological evidence for devastating floods has been found at several sites in the flat alluvial plain of southern Mesopotamia, most notably at Ur, located in present-day Iraq. The flood narratives may have arisen as cautionary tales for humanity. The Epic of Atrahasis, an ancient narrative of unknown origin about man's creation by the gods, is probably the source for the flood in the Gilgamesh Epic known from first millennium B.C. copies. Either directly or indirectly, the source for the Biblical flood story (Gen. 5:28–9:17) was likely the Gilgamesh Epic. The flood story is found in Jewish, Christian, and Muslim traditions, occurring in the Koran (Sura 11:25–48).



Left: “*Ram Caught in a Thicket*”: *Rearing Goat with a Flowering Plant*, Mesopotamia, Sumerian, Ur, PG 1237, Great Death Pit, U.12357, Early Dynastic IIIa, ca. 2550–2400 B.C., gold, silver lapis lazuli, copper alloy, shell, red limestone, and bitumen, 16 3/4 in. (42.5 cm). University of Pennsylvania Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology, Philadelphia 30-12-702. Right: *Cylinder Seal with Ewe and Ram Flanking Plant with a Gatepost* (modern impression), Mesopotamia, Sumerian, Late Uruk-Jamdat Nasr, ca. 3300–2900 B.C. serpentine, Serpentine, 5/8 x 1/2 in. (1.6 x 1.3 cm). The Morgan Library & Museum, Seal no. 5 (Acquired by Pierpont Morgan between 1885 and 1908).

Notable among the works on view is *Head of a Lion* (ca. 2550-2400 B.C.), one of a pair of attachments found in the dromos, or passageway, of Queen Puabi's tomb at the Royal Cemetery at Ur. The locks of hair indicate the beast's mane. The face is composed of bold, simple sculptural forms, round for the ears and face, triangular for the nose and muzzle. Incised striations for whiskers augment the fleshiness of the upper lip. The slightly open mouth suggests an incipient snarl, while the deeply inset, slanted eyes arrest a viewer's attention. The entire piece is a masterful interpretation of the lion's mesmerizing power.

Another splendidly preserved sculpture on view is among the most famous objects from the Ur excavations, called by the excavator “*Ram Caught in a Thicket*” (ca. 2550–2400 B.C.), alluding to an evocative passage in Genesis 22:13. The animal is actually a goat on its hind legs, resting its hooves on the branches of a plant. The gilded cylinder projecting from the goat's neck originally supported a small tray indicating that the sculpture was an example of ritual temple furniture. The bud in the center will blossom, representing Inanna, the Sumerian goddess of love, wisdom and fertility. The male life force, represented by the goat, is eternally linked to the female life force, represented by the rosettes of the goddess. The composition embodies the interdependence of plant and animal fecundity essential for the survival of Sumerian agricultural society.

The group of accompanying cylinder seals shows animals in many forms. On one piece from the Morgan's collection, *Ewe and Ram Flanking Plant with a Gatepost* (ca. 3300–2900 B.C.), the creatures are depicted in a kind of garden, nourished by a plant laden with fruit. With its entryway

bracketed by bundles of marsh reeds, the seal references a space sacred to the goddess Inanna, the queen of heaven, and foreshadows the idea of the Biblical Eden.

In addition to works from the Morgan's collection, *Noah's Beasts* also includes pieces from the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the Yale University Babylonian Collection, the Kimbell Art Museum, and the University of Pennsylvania Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology.

Public Programs

LECTURE ***Noah's Beasts: Sculpted Animals from Ancient Mesopotamia***
Sidney Babcock

Join Sidney Babcock, Jeannette and Jonathan Rosen Curator and Department Head of Ancient Near Eastern Seals and Tablets, for an illustrated lecture providing an overview of the exhibition and an in-depth exploration of two sculptures on view from the early third millennium B.C.: the kneeling silver cow and the iconic, so-called "ram in the thicket" from the Royal Cemetery at Ur. Babcock will also discuss the symbolism depicted on the cylinder seals and explain their relation to the sculptures with which they are paired.

Wednesday, May 31, 6:30 pm*
Tickets: \$15; \$10 for members; free for students with valid ID.

*The exhibition *Noah's Beasts: Sculpted Animals from Ancient Mesopotamia* will be open at 5:30 pm for program attendees

GALLERY TALK ***Noah's Beasts: Sculpted Animals from Ancient Mesopotamia***
Sidney Babcock, Jeannette and Jonathan Rosen Curator and Department Head, Ancient Near Eastern Seals and Tablets

Friday, June 2, 6 pm
Tickets: Free with museum admission; no tickets or reservations necessary.

GALLERY TALK ***Noah's Beasts: Sculpted Animals from Ancient Mesopotamia***
Sidney Babcock, Jeannette and Jonathan Rosen Curator and Department Head, Ancient Near Eastern Seals and Tablets

Friday, July 14, 1 pm
Tickets: Free with museum admission; no tickets or reservations necessary.

Organization and Sponsorship

This exhibition is organized by Sidney Babcock, Jeannette and Jonathan Rosen Curator and Head of the Morgan's Department of Ancient Near Eastern Seals and Tablets.

Noah's Beasts: Sculpted Animals from Ancient Mesopotamia is made possible by Jeannette and Jonathan Rosen, and assistance from The Frederick and Diana Elghanayan Family Foundation.

The programs of the Morgan Library & Museum are made possible with public funds from the New York City Department of Cultural Affairs in partnership with the City Council, and by the New York State Council on the Arts with the support of Governor Andrew Cuomo and the New York State Legislature.



The Morgan Library & Museum

A complex of buildings in the heart of New York City, the Morgan Library & Museum began as the private library of financier Pierpont Morgan, one of the preeminent collectors and cultural benefactors in the United States. Today it is a museum, independent research library, music venue, architectural landmark, and historic site. A century after its founding, the Morgan maintains a unique position in the cultural life of New York City and is considered one of its greatest treasures. With the 2006 reopening of its newly renovated campus, designed by renowned architect Renzo Piano, and the 2010 refurbishment of the original library, the Morgan reaffirmed its role as an important repository for the history, art, and literature of Western civilization from 4000 B.C. to the twenty-first century.

The Morgan Library & Museum
225 Madison Avenue, at 36th Street, New York, NY 10016-3405
212.685.0008
themorgan.org