



Background of The Morgan Library & Museum's Ancient Near Eastern Seals and Tablets Department

The Morgan Library & Museum's seals collection is one of the most distinguished in the United States and among the best known in the world. Generally only an inch in height, engraved seals are among the smallest objects ever produced by sculptors. They were carved in great detail with simple tools on semiprecious stones. These engraved objects provide a continuous artistic and chronological sequence of more than three thousand years. The seals collection covers all the significant styles of Mesopotamian engraving from the end of the fifth millennium B.C. to the fourth century B.C. as well as most of the styles of other countries of the ancient Near East. Areas of particular strength include seals of the second millennium B.C. made outside southern Mesopotamia (Cappadocia, Syria, and Mitannia) as well as Old Babylonian and Neo-Assyrian seals. The Middle Assyrian seals are among the finest in any collection.

Pierpont Morgan (1837–1913) collected nearly three thousand cuneiform tablets, the bulk of which are now in the Babylonian Collection at Yale University, which he founded. A small number, however, was retained at the Morgan along with a few outstanding art objects from the ancient Near East.

Between 1885 and 1908, the American collector William Hayes Ward assembled, probably on Pierpont Morgan's behalf, a collection of 1,157 seals that became the core of the Morgan's holdings. Mr. Ward was the first American scholar to realize the importance of cylinder seals to Near Eastern archaeology. He summarized Pierpont Morgan's intentions as follows:

It is the chief project, as I understand it, of Mr. Morgan in bringing to this country the written and figured monuments of the early East, such as tablets, seal cylinders, bas-reliefs, or statues, to put within reach of American scholars the material necessary for adding to the knowledge of the world.

The seals were first exhibited at The Morgan Library & Museum in 1948 by Edith Porada. She became Honorary Curator of Seals and Tablets in 1956 and remained at the Morgan until her death in 1994. It has been fifty years since the publication of her beautifully printed volumes on the seals of the Morgan, *Corpus of Ancient Near Eastern Seals in North American Collections* (Bollingen Series XIV, 1948, Washington, D.C.). These volumes remain the standard work on seal descriptions today.

Two additional major gifts—the collection of Robert F. Kelley, given by his sister Caroline M. Burns in 1977, and that of Jonathan P. Rosen, given in 1986—have enhanced the Morgan’s holdings in this area.