

A New Name for the Next Century

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On May 2, 1919, John D. Rockefeller sent James Henry Breasted a famous letter, in which he confessed to be “greatly interested” in Breasted’s “plan for the organization of an Oriental Institute at the University of Chicago.” In a parallel letter dated the very same day to University of Chicago President Harry Pratt Judson, Rockefeller pledged the sum of \$100,000 over five years to support the “project.” Within weeks, the University’s board of trustees followed suit, and on May 19 the Oriental Institute was a fact.

At that point in time, calling the new institute “Oriental” was entirely appropriate. *Webster’s New International Dictionary of the English Language* of 1934, for instance, defined “Orient” as “The East; eastern countries, . . . esp. the countries east of the Mediterranean . . . ; also, the countries of Asia generally.” The word thus encompassed the whole of Asia, from Japan and China all the way to Mesopotamia and Turkey, a view that persisted into the 1960s. It was not until 1966, for instance, that the University of Chicago’s Department of Oriental Languages and Civilizations was divided into the now-separate Departments of East Asian, South Asian, and Near Eastern Languages and Civilizations (EALC, SALC, and NELC, respectively). In fact, when Breasted started his Oriental Museum in Haskell Hall (the Haskell Oriental Museum), one could find the statue of a sitting Buddha right next to a Neo-Assyrian relief. Additionally, the capital *A* that precedes all Oriental Institute Museum registration numbers for objects not coming from Egypt (which all start with an *E*) from the very beginning stood and still stands for “Asian.”



But meanings change. Many a visitor to the OI is surprised to find a collection that focuses exclusively on the ancient *Middle East*. Buddha statues no longer grace our collections. Meanings sometimes also change for the worse. If “Oriental” may have been a purely geographical term when Breasted named his institute, it has since taken on an often derogatory connotation. On May 20, 2016, almost exactly ninety-seven years after the founding of the OI, President Barack Obama signed a new bill, unanimously passed in Congress, amending two federal acts and banning, among other terms, the use of the word “Oriental” as insensitive and outdated.

These two considerations—the general association of the word “Oriental” with the Far East and its negative connotation—prompted the OI faculty in June 2020 to decide to “change the name of the OI and enter into a discussion to find a suitable name.” To lead that discussion, a committee was formed on March 25, 2021, to explore the various issues surrounding such a momentous change, to consult all major stakeholders, and possibly to “provide several options for a new name.” The committee was chaired by associate professor Hervé Reculeau and was probably the broadest the OI had ever seen, with no fewer than thirteen representatives from the OI, NELC, and Center for Middle Eastern Studies faculty; OI staff; OI advisory council members; and PhD students. The committee submitted its findings on December 15, 2021. Among them was the suggestion to rename the OI as the Institute for the Study of Ancient

Cultures, or ISAC, followed by a tagline defining the area of ancient cultures that we study: West Asia and North Africa. “West Asia” is a non-Eurocentric designation that brings us at least as far as Iran. “North Africa” includes Egypt, Sudan, and Libya. In their meeting on June 29, 2022, the faculty of the OI voted to adopt this name.

Ever since that June meeting, we have been preparing for all possible implications of the name change, be they legal, financial, or related to information technology, social media, signage inside and outside our building, communications, or publications. We formed a working group of faculty and staff that discussed and guided all these issues. The group consisted of Brendan Bulger (associate director of administration and finance), Logan Conley (IT user support specialist), Bill Cospers (director of development), Kiersten Neumann (OI Museum curator), Mehrnosh Soroush (OI faculty member), Josh Tulisak (manager of exhibition design and production), Theo van den Hout (OI faculty member and interim OI director), and Matt Welton (associate director of communications, marketing, and programming).

One of the challenges for the group was the development of a logo to go with the new name. We started with a poll on October 7, 2022, asking the entire OI community for “suggestions that may evoke, relate to, and represent the full breadth of the mission and history of the Oriental Institute,” and walked through the museum with the UChicago Creative team for further inspiration. A clear favorite was a floral element, the lotus flower, that can be seen throughout our building, both in the original 1929–30 architecture and in the OI Museum, as explained in the contribution of Kiersten Neumann in this same issue. After several sessions with the OI working group, Laurie Buman of UChicago Creative designed a new logo that adheres to the standards imposed on all University of Chicago units.



Changing our name after almost 104 years is a huge step. Thanks to the rigorous and often revolutionary research of past generations, “OI” became a brand, a mark of the highest quality in scholarship. Giving up that brand is not easy, but we have to keep up with modern developments. As an institute, we are devoted to history: as Leo Oppenheim, the longtime editor-in-chief of the Chicago Assyrian Dictionary, once said, “Only millennia matter here.” But we study history for the future. Standing on the shoulders of our predecessors, we pass on knowledge about our deep past to the generations to come, convinced that the past matters to all of us. Just as the ancient cultures we study changed through the millennia, we are changing as well and adding another page to the history of our institute. It’s up to us to make “ISAC” into the new brand.

