

THE LOTUS, ACROSS WEST ASIA & NORTH AFRICA

ISAC Article, Spring 2023

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In April of this year, the Institute for the Study of Ancient Cultures, West Asia & North Africa, launched a new logo alongside its new name (see Theo van den Hout's article on the name change, isac-uchicago.edu/name-change-information). The design process for this ambitious graphic endeavor started in fall 2022. Inspiration was first drawn from the veritable diversity of the regions and cultures studied by ISAC and the artifacts that make up the ISAC Museum collections. The decorative motifs and design elements that mark the very skin of ISAC's Neo-Gothic building provided complementary motivation. Ultimately, we embraced the lotus as the graphic mark for ISAC's new logo (**Figure 1**).

Artisans and craftsmen across West Asia and North Africa employed decorative floral motifs on an assortment of materials, ranging from portable luxury items to modest furnishings and monumental architectural decoration of the third millennium BCE through the first millennium CE. Inspiration was no doubt drawn from the variety of vegetation supported by such life-giving bodies of water as the Nile, Euphrates, and Tigris Rivers. Many of these floral renderings continue to generate both curiosity and uncertainty regarding their precise botanical identity and/or cultural significance and meaning. While imagery of the flowering aquatic lily commonly known as the lotus (of the *Nymphaea* species) is less of a challenge for the former, it is not always the case for the latter. Drawing on both iconographic and textual evidence, we can recognize with relative certainty representations of the lotus—a blue or white flower with a yellow center radiating yellow petals that is revealed when the flower is open during the day, and hidden when it closes at night. The lotus motif is broadly representative of abundance, fertility, and nature throughout West Asia and North Africa; yet some renderings and references reveal that the lotus also symbolized individual deities, mythological elements, and powerful concepts such as creation, rebirth, eternity, and kingship. What is more, the form of the lotus varied considerably. Reproduced either as a stylized open blossom or a closed bud—or as the combined bud-and-blossom motif—and in assorted color schemes, the lotus was often connected to carefully articulated stems, tendrils, disks, palmettes, and pillars.

Lotus imagery is attested in ancient Egypt throughout the pharaonic period and beyond, as are textual references to this plant, making it one of the most ubiquitous for the region (**Figure 2**). One version of the Egyptian creation myth tells of the sun god arising from a lotus blossom that bloomed from the primeval mound that emerged from the waters of chaos, after which ensued the rest of creation. The plant's yellow center was thought to symbolize this first (and subsequent daily) act, while the combination of lotus and solar imagery reiterate this relationship iconographically. The lotus blossom was also personified as the god Nefertem, who was principally depicted as a young man with a lotus headdress; the blossom could also be combined with the *ankh* sign meaning "life," thereby aligning it with concepts of eternity. The Pyramid Texts of Unas, preserved in the burial chamber of his Old Kingdom pyramid at Saqqara, speak of the king himself as both the lotus and



Figure 3. Sculpture of a head emerging from a lotus. Wood, stucco, paint. New Kingdom, Eighteenth Dynasty (fourteenth century BCE). Egypt, Thebes, Tomb of Tutankhamun (KV62). Excavated by Howard Carter in 1924. Egyptian Museum, Cairo (JE 60723).



Figure 4. Painting of a scene from the tomb of Djehuty, Thebes (Fifteenth century BCE), showing Djehuty, who smells a lotus blossom, and his mother, who holds and wears lotus blossoms, receiving offerings. Norman de Garis Davies, 1907–8. Rogers Fund, 1915. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York (15.5.8).

the god Nefertem (Utterance 249). This association is evoked in a wooden sculpture of the young King Tutankhamun, whose head is shown emerging from a lotus flower—in the guise of the god Nefertem—that rises from the primeval waters, symbolized by the sculpture’s blue base (**Figure 3**). Apart from its mythological and divine symbolism, the lotus was also valued for its olfactory, medicinal, and nutritional properties, owing to its sweet fragrance, pain-relieving and possibly psychoactive abilities, and seeds (which were used in bread making), respectively (**Figure 4**). Egypt was not the only Nilotic culture whose visual culture included lotus imagery, of course; this distinctive motif also appeared farther south in Nubia. Stylized lotus motifs often appear, for example, amid the unique and playful designs of Meroitic ceramics, rendered in red and black (**Figure 5**). Interestingly, another type of lotus that originated to the east, *Nelumbo nucifera* (common names include Indian lotus, Chinese water lily, and sacred lotus), was likely introduced into North Africa when the region was under the control of the Achaemenid Empire (sixth–fifth centuries BCE), though it is no longer attested in the area today. While this botanical specimen traveled westward, Egyptian lotus imagery itself moved in the opposite direction, in much earlier periods, the plant’s stylized form and life-giving symbolism making its way up through the Levant and beyond.

Excavations of eastern Mediterranean sites have uncovered an assortment of carved ivory inlays—which once decorated wooden furnishing—whose motifs and styles attest to a multidirectional exchange of materials, craftsmanship, and artistic traditions connecting North Africa and West Asia, especially during the Late Bronze Age (the “international period,” sixteenth–twelfth centuries BCE) and continuing into the Iron Age. ISAC’s excavations at Megiddo, for example, found many twelfth-century ivories of an Egyptianizing style, their designs often including a lotus motif; the surface of two such examples—with lotus-and-palmette motifs and now in the ISAC Museum collections—also preserve black and blue paint (**Figure 6**). Similar lotus-bearing ivories were excavated at other Levantine sites, including Ugarit and Byblos, as well as farther north at Hadātu (modern Arslan Tash), where Iron Age examples were found.

Wall painting fragments showing lotus blossoms from Tell Sakka near Damascus—and interestingly much farther west at Triana on the island of Rhodes—attest to the use of this Egyptianizing motif in large-scale form already in the Middle Bronze Age (National Museum, Damascus, 8290; Archaeological Museum of Rhodes, 864), while stone sculpture from the Levant shows its continued use during the Late Bronze Age. Such Late Bronze Age examples include King Ahiiram’s stone sarcophagus from Byblos and King Kilamuwa’s stele from Sam’al (modern Zincirli) (dated to the tenth century and ninth century BCE, respectively), both of which show the figure of the king holding lotus flowers in one hand (**Figure 7**). Cypriot visual culture also confirms the continued popularity of the lotus motif into the Iron Age, with both glyptic scenes and Bichrome Ware vessels including stylized lotus blossoms in their visual repertoire (**Figures 8–9**).

A fourteenth-century BCE lotus-flower ornament from Shapinuwa (modern Ortaköy), a major Hittite religious and administrative center east of the Hittite capital of Hattusa, attests to the comparable circulation of Egyptianizing lotus imagery farther north, moving into Central Anatolia, during the Late Bronze Age (Çorum Museum, 28-1874-90). Here too the floral motif continues in



Figure 5. (a) Bowl with a band of lotus flowers. Baked clay, paint. Meroitic Period (first to third century CE). Sudan, Meroë. Excavated in 1909–10. Musée du Louvre (AF 12840). © 2003 Musée du Louvre / Christian Décamps; **(b)** Cup with alternating lotus blossoms and buds. Baked clay, paint. Meroitic Period (first to third century CE). Egypt, Ballana. Excavated by ISAC, 1963–64. ISAC Museum (E22909).



Figure 6. Inlay with lotus and palmette motif. Ivory, paint. Late Bronze Age (twelfth century BCE). Israel, Megiddo. Excavated by ISAC, 1936–37. ISAC Museum (A22215).



Figure 7. Relief carving from the sarcophagus of Ahiem showing the king holding a lotus flower. Limestone. Lebanon, Byblos. Iron Age (ninth century BCE). National Museum of Beirut (KAI 1). Wikimedia Commons, Elisa Ziade.



Figure 8. Cylinder seal and modern impression: procession of two male figures carrying vegetation, the first a large lotus. Stone. Early Iron Age (ca. 1000–800 BCE). Cyprus, Enkomi. Excavated in 1949. Musée du Louvre (AM 2358). © 2010 RMN-Grand Palais (musée du Louvre) / Franck Raux.



Figure 9. Cypriot Bichrome Ware tripod krater with animal handles decorated with geometric motifs and stylized lotus blossoms. Baked clay, paint. Cypro-Archaic I (ca. 850–600 BCE). Cyprus. Purchased in 1890. Musée du Louvre (AM 230). © 2021 RMN-Grand Palais (musée du Louvre) / Sylvie Chan-Liat.



Figure 10. Carved orthostat relief with seated figure holding a lotus flower. Basalt. Neo-Hittite (late tenth to ninth century BCE). Syria, Guzana. Rogers Fund, 1943. Walters Art Museum (43.135.1).

use into the Iron Age. A well-preserved monumental example is the Neo-Hittite carved orthostat relief from Guzana (modern Tell Halaf): the scene shows a seated, robed figure holding a lotus flower to his nose, preceded by mythological figures and a winged disk (**Figure 10**).

As we move eastward, we encounter lotus imagery in the visual repertoire of additional prominent cultures dating from the second half of the second millennium BCE onward, whose peoples would have no doubt been familiar with Mesopotamian creation myths that, like in Egypt, included primeval plants and concepts of aquatic vegetation as being life-giving and regenerative. Wall paintings preserved at both the Mitanni site of Nuzi (in the fifteenth-century BCE governor's palace) and the Middle Assyrian site of Kar-Tukulti-Ninurta (decorating the thirteenth-century BCE palace terrace of Tukulti Ninurta I)—include stylized lotus blossoms that echo the forms previously discussed; yet those of Kar-Tukulti-Ninurta are repeated in bands, alternating with palmettes and rosettes (**Figure 11**). This patterned rendering gains notable popularity in the first millennium BCE.

Kings of the Neo-Assyrian Empire (ninth to seventh centuries BCE) were the first to cover the walls of their palaces with monumental stone orthostats carved in relief and painted, displaying scenes of both a royal and mythological nature, as well as inscriptions of an idealized and repetitive form. Complementing these relief panels were vibrant wall paintings and glazed-brick panels. The Assyrian “plant of life” (*šammu balāṭi*) is evoked across these media, taking on various forms and styles; the lotus motif ought to be counted among this broad category. The relief panels from King Sargon II's palace at Dur-Sharrukin (modern Khorsabad, northern Iraq)—excavated by the French expedition in the mid-nineteenth century and ISAC's expedition in the first half of the twentieth century—show the king and court officials with variations of the lotus in hand (**Figure 12**). Wall paintings from an Assyrian palace at Til Barsip (modern Tall Ahmar, Syria) included bands repeating the lotus bud-and-blossom motif (**Figure 13**). Portable luxury items recovered from Assyrian sites were similarly decorated with lotus imagery, including colorful glazed ceramics, cylinder seals, and carved ivory inlays of the same type as the Late Bronze Age examples discussed above (**Figures 14–16a**). In addition to examples crafted in typical Assyrian style, some ivories show influences from neighboring cultures, including an inlay executed in a Phoenician style that was excavated in the Northwest Palace at the Assyrian capital of Kalhu (modern Nimrud, northern Iraq) (**Figure 16b**).

The lotus's visual appeal, alongside its life-giving symbolic associations, is also evident during the first millennium BCE northeast in Urartu and northwestern Iran broadly, south in Babylonia, and west in Persia, being employed similarly as an isolated form and as a repetitive motif for decorative bands. A gold plaque with repoussé designs—with stylistic similarities to Assyria, Syria, Urartu, and Scythia and reputedly from the village of Ziwiye in northwestern Iran—exhibits a series of stylized trees that include lotus blossoms and buds (**Figure 17**). Of a grander scale is the throne-room façade of Nebuchadnezzar II's Southern Palace at Babylon that was decorated with glazed bricks showing a stylized garden scene: rosettes and palmettes dominate much of the design, framing a row of striding lions at the bottom and a series of abstract palm trees higher up; yet linking the tops of the trees are tendrils connected to stylized lotus blossoms (**Figure 18**). The lotus similarly marks Achaemenid state-sponsored architecture—appearing in the hands of officials and kings in the sculptural

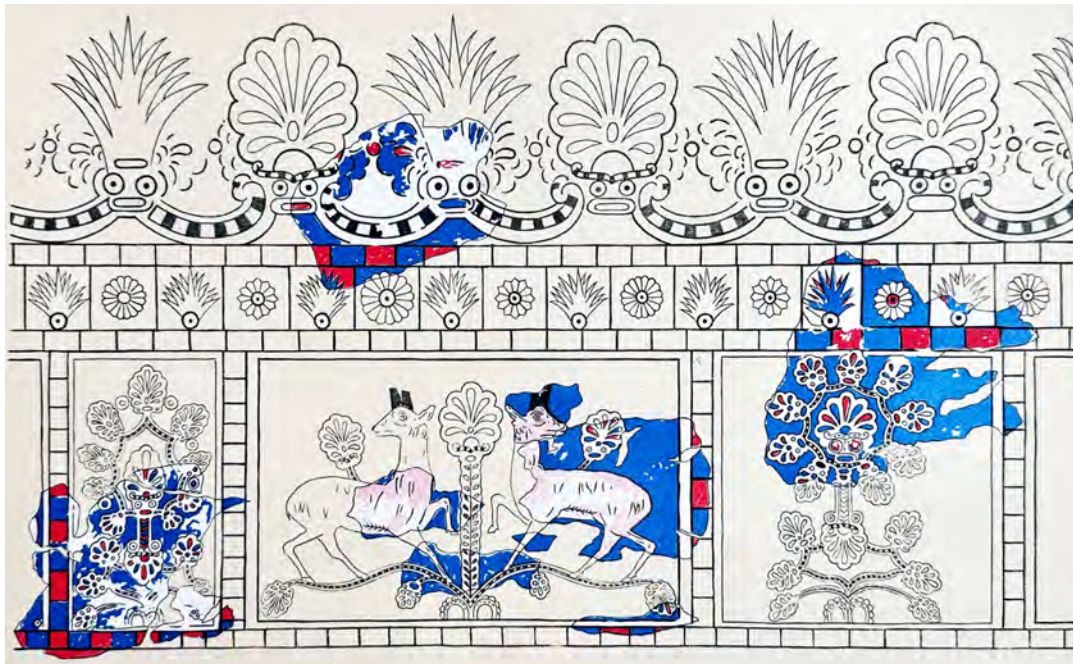


Figure 11. Reconstruction of a Middle Assyrian wall painting at Kar-Tukulti-Ninurta, Iraq, showing animals and floral motifs (thirteenth century BCE). Walter Andrae, *Coloured Ceramics from Ashur* (1925).



Figure 12. Relief panels from Sargon II's royal palace at Dur-Sharrukin. Gypsum. Neo-Assyrian period (721–705 BCE). **(a)** Excavated in 1843–44. Musée du Louvre (AO 19872). © 2012 RMN-Grand Palais (musée du Louvre) / Thierry Ollivier. **(b)** Excavated by ISAC, 1929. ISAC Museum (A7359).



Figure 13. (a) Reconstruction of a Neo-Assyrian wall painting from Til Barsip, Iraq, showing winged figures and floral motifs (eighth century BCE). Musée du Louvre (AO 25067 B). © 2005 Musée du Louvre / Martine Beck-Coppola; **(b)** Wall painting fragment showing a winged figure with lotus in hand. Painter plaster. Iraq, Til Barsip. Neo-Assyrian period (850–650 BCE). Excavated in 1929–31. Musée du Louvre (AO 23009). © 2008 RMN-Grand Palais (musée du Louvre) / Franck Raux.



Figure 14. Paintings of glazed vessels from Aššur, Iraq, showing the lotus bud-and-blossom motif. Walter Andrae, *Coloured Ceramics from Ashur* (1925).



Figure 15. Cylinder seal and modern impression: stylized tree and winged disk flanked by a worshipper and royal stele, as well as an unfinished goat and two lotus motifs. Iraq, Dur-Sharrukin. Neo-Assyrian period (721–705 BCE). Excavated in 1849. British Museum (BM 89502). © The Trustees of the British Museum.



Figure 16. Carved plaques showing: **(a)** the lotus bud-and-blossom motif. Ivory. Iraq, Dur-Sharrukin. Neo-Assyrian period (721–705 BCE). Excavated by ISAC, 1935. ISAC Museum (A17586A); **(b)** a lioness biting a male figure with rows of lotus and papyrus flowers. Ivory, gold, lapis lazuli, carnelian. Iraq, Kalhu. Excavated in 1954. British Museum (BM 127412). © The Trustees of the British Museum.



Figure 17. Plaque with bands of striding mythological creatures and stylized trees. Gold. Iran. Iron Age (ca. eighth to seventh century BCE). Ann and George Blumenthal Fund, 1954. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York (54.3.5).

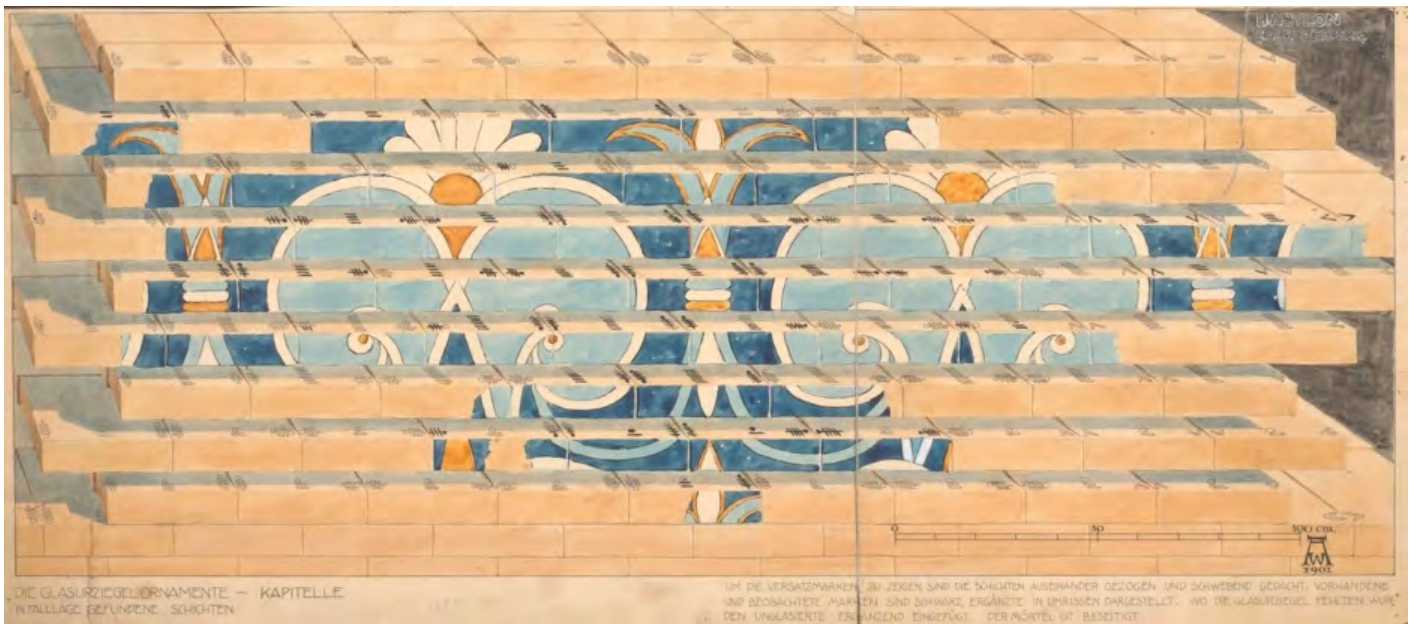


Figure 18. Partial reconstruction of the throne room façade from the Southern Palace, Babylon, showing floral designs and fitters' marks on the glazed bricks, by Walter Andrae. Watercolor on paper. Deutsche Orient-Gesellschaft, Berlin (ArDOG V.28.18). © Deutsche Orient-Gesellschaft, Archiv; Photo: Olaf M. Teßmer.

program of Persepolis, for example—in addition to serving as a decorative motif for portable materials, including metalwork (**Figures 19–20**). The motif continues in popularity in the Parthian and Sasanian periods. Worth noting is that in this eastern region of West Asia, both the western lotus (*Nymphaea* species, or water lily) and the eastern lotus (*Nelumbo nucifera*) ought to be considered as botanical inspirations for the lotus motif. The native range of the latter reaches into present-day Iran and, as noted above, it was even introduced into Egypt during the Achaemenid period. Concurrently, the Achaemenid dynasty employed the visual traditions of the cultures within its imperial reach in its own art and architecture and thus is known to have also drawn on imagery that was inspired by the western lotus.

While by no means geographically or temporally exhaustive, the discussion and examples presented here showcase the veritable breadth of distribution, forms, uses, and meaning of lotus imagery across West Asia and North Africa. Its exact symbolism remains something of a mystery for many cultures, yet it suffices to say that this aquatic plant was valued, having both culturally unique and shared symbolism. Similarly, we will never pinpoint the exact reasons for where and when it appeared and/or its modes of circulation, understandably being a mix of independent creativity and cultural diffusion and contact.

What about ISAC's building, the second inspiration for ISAC's new logo? Conceived of by the Symbolism Committee—presided by James Henry Breasted and Professor John S. Shapley, head of the University's art department—and realized by the architects, Oscar Harold Murray and F. Hardie Phillip, and sculptor, Ulric Ellerhusen, the design details of the 1931 building are similarly grounded in visual imagery of the ancient world and early publications of such materials (**Figure 21**). Yet in this building these ancient elements were embellished with an Art Deco flair, inspired by the displays of the 1925 Exposition Internationale des Arts Décoratifs et Industriels Modernes held in Paris (**Figures 22–23**). So, when you next walk through the galleries of the ISAC Museum, take a moment to appreciate your many encounters with the lotus—as a motif that decorates the artifacts as well as the modern built environment.



Figure 19. Relief panel showing the king and crown prince holding lotus flowers, Persepolis, Iran. Achaemenid period (ca. 522–465 BCE). Excavated by ISAC, 1933–34. ISAC Museum Archives (P. 57121).



Figure 20. Bowl with lotus motifs. Silver. Iran, Luristan. Achaemenid period (550–330 BCE). Purchased in 1981. Musée du Louvre (AO 13921). © 2015 Musée du Louvre / Antiquités orientales.

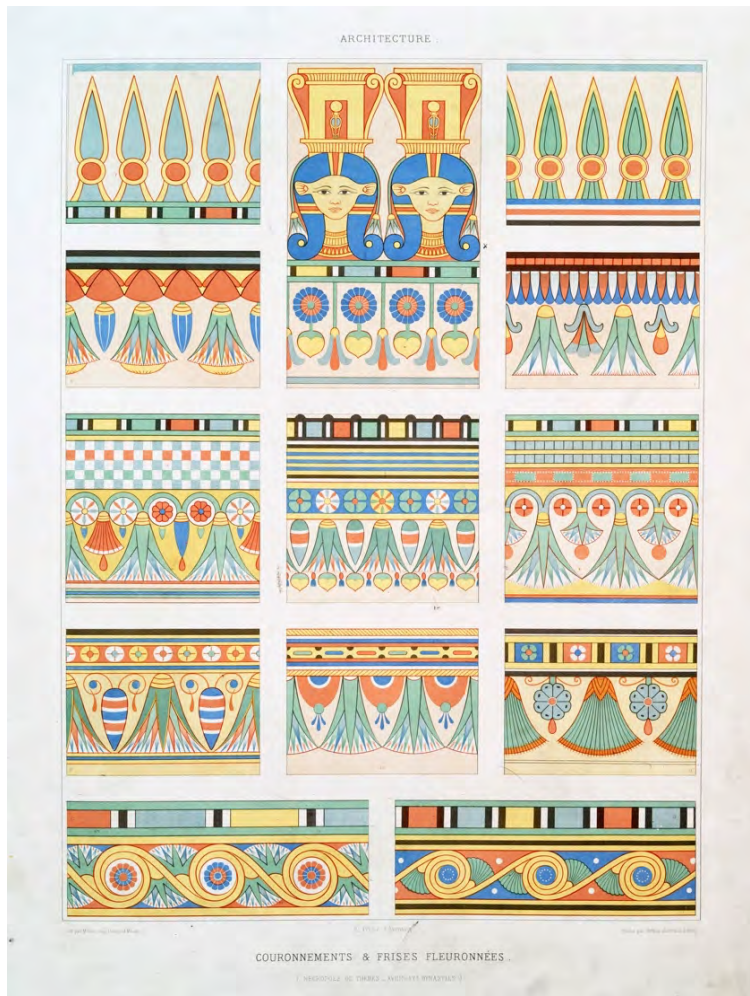


Figure 21. Plate from Emile Prisse d'Avignes et al., *Histoire de l'art égyptien d'après les monuments* (1878).



Fig. 22. Models for the ISAC building, by architects Mayers, Murray & Philip, 1931. University of Chicago Photographic Archive, apf2-05498r, Hanna Holborn Gray Special Collections Research Center, University of Chicago Library.



Figure 23. Entrance to the museum galleries, 1931, showing floral motifs on the bronze gates and stenciled ceiling beams. University of Chicago Photographic Archive, apf2-05444, Hanna Holborn Gray Special Collections Research Center, University of Chicago Library.