

Transcript: Museums in Iraq - Interview with Paul Collins

Mehiyar 0:00

Welcome to the Nahrein Network podcast series. My name is Mehiyar Kathem and today we'll be speaking to Dr. Paul Collins, curator for ancient near east at Ashmolean Museum. Hello, Paul.

Paul Collins 0:12

Hello.

Mehiyar 0:13

Good to see you again.

Paul Collins 0:14 Thank you very much, wonderful to be here. Mehiyar 0:16 What do you actually do at the Ashmolean Museum? Paul Collins 0:18 So I'm the curator for a collection of material from the ancient Near East, which covers about 10,000 years, and we have material ranging from western Turkey all the way across to Afghanistan. Ashmolean is probably one of the few places in the world where you can tell the story of the cultures and societies, or at least many of them, from the ancient world, over that vast period of time.

Mehiyar 0:47

And you're the current chair of the British Institute for the Study of Iraq.

Paul Collins 0:50

Yes, indeed, yes. So the British Institute for the Study of Iraq, is UK's only charity devoted to promoting the research and education of the arts, humanities and social sciences in Iraq. So we work with colleagues both in the UK and in Iraq to promote the understanding of cultures, societies, histories of that country.

Mehiyar 1:17

And thirdly, now you're also the co PI, principal investigator, of the Nahrein Network.

Paul Collins 1:23

And so this is a wonderful overlap of opportunities in a way because we're all in these various different groups, working towards the same aim of both promoting research and supporting colleagues and activities in Iraq.

Mehiyar 1:39

There's a really lovely piece on your website, Ashmolean Museum website, on the Nahrein Network. It describes Nahrein Network as a project working to support Middle East communities and reclaiming their ancient heritage. Could you tell us a bit more about that?

Paul Collins 1:51

Well, I think the idea of reclaiming heritage, people's own heritage is immensely important. And we're seeing this, in many ways is a revolution within Museum Studies, which is my main focus, where increasingly, the 19th century approaches to museums about simply collecting objects from all over the world, and were driven largely by sort of colonial enterprises, is now being completely reversed. And we're beginning to think about the objects that were collected as having huge emotional value to, of course, the people of the country that they originate. And so we need to be thinking around museum displays as places where we can invite people in the UK or from across the world, to begin to think about the narratives, the stories that these objects can help tell, in terms of local heritage, local communities, local narratives, in Iraq itself. So it's a living heritage, and it's therefore an immense privilege to to be responsible for looking after them. But we have to make sure that relationship with the living world of Iraq is emphasized and maintained.

Mehiyar 3:07

And you've been working in Iraq for some time now.

Paul Collins 3:10

Yes, I mean, my first visit to Iraq was some, well, 10 years ago, when I worked with a group of people coming from the British Museum to identify a building that could be used as a museum in Basra, working with initially, actually, the British army, which of course, were occupying southern Iraq, in 2008. This subsequently developed into an initiative to support the State Board of Antiquities in developing a local museum in southern Iraq for local people. So again, thinking about the stories that are appropriate for that institution, and supporting our colleagues there in helping to deliver that.

Mehiyar 3:58

And you've been working with the Basrah Museum in particular-

Paul Collins 4:01

yes,

Mehiyar 4:02

Tell us about that.

Paul Collins 4:02

-at least I've been working through the British, British Institute for the Study of Iraq and working with the Friends of Basrah Museum, which is a UK based charity, which has been raising funds to help open new galleries in this building, an old palace of Saddam Hussein, which is being repurposed as a museum for the people of Southern Iraq, for Basra first, then Iraq more, more generally, to tell their stories. And so working closely with the immensely dynamic director of the Basrah Museum, Qahtan Alabeed, who is really leading this initiative from the ground up, and helping him where possible to enable this to happen. So you know, we're helping to facilitate, I hope, but this is very much an Iraqi project.

Mehiyar 4:55

How important are museums in Iraq?

Paul Collins 4:58

Well, I, as a curator, of course, would argue that they're immensely important and in many ways this is an enormous question, which is not just limited to Iraq, what is the role of museums more generally? And I think, you know, we can think about them as places where spaces where we can think about heritage, and people's connections to their own past, to their own stories, their own place in the world, and places where debates can be had around whose stories those are, whose stories should we be telling? And of course, there are multiple stories that are possible. Now, I think in that way, museums can be a place where people can come together, almost a safe space for, for thinking about difficult questions, in many respects over the great depth of time. And in Iraq, of course, that depth of time is millennia of new people moving into the region, terrible conflict, but also extraordinary intellectual and cultural developments. And all these things can help in terms of cohesion. But also we can think of museums,

of course, very much from an economic perspective of tourism, both internal to the country, but also foreign visitors coming to understand those stories of Iraq's past, but also think about Iraq's present through the people and the narratives that will be represented in those stories. And they, of course, come with money to spend, and museums in that sense, can help build the stability, inclusiveness and the economy of the country.

Mehiyar 6:37

And the museums in Iraq are currently telling the story of each province. I mean, there are provincial museums-

Paul Collins 6:42

Well, the tradition of museums in Iraq has been one that's been driven largely from the center and by the state. So the National Museum in Baghdad, tells a single narrative of development from pre-history through the Sumerians, the Babylonians, to the Islamic period. And it was that very simple narrative of cultural developments and celebration, that was then dispersed to the provincial museums almost as a sort of set of objects, which told the same story. So you didn't get in that narrative an insight into the diversity and complexity and excitement that is represented by Iraq's history. And I think now that's changing. Certainly, in my work with the Basrah Museum, I'm seeing a real clear interest in telling local stories, in a sense for local people, something that they will be familiar with, and have a great emotional attachment to, and it is at the end of the day, I think, through museum displays that emotional attachment, which is so important. And that's true anywhere in the world. And so people can relate directly to their own pasts, their own heritage, they can understand it, they can value it, they can appreciate it, and therefore want more and keep coming back for more. And again, acting as that sort of cohesive driver towards a sense of identity.

Mehiyar 8:10

This is very important in Iraq, in terms of community based organizations and museums are actually community based organizations that are working to with the local population to negotiate their own history and their own presence in, currently in Iraq. This is something new for Iraq, isn't it?

Paul Collins 8:26

It's very much new for Iraq. And I think in many respects, it's new for museums across the world, but particularly important, of course, in post-conflict areas and, and trying to, again, reengage with a sense of identity. And so museums can play a role in that. But it has to be as part of, of conversations, community engagement, collaboration

around what those stories are, that are being told, not just a simple narrative directed from the center.

Mehiyar 8:56

Thank you very much for your time. We're here at the Ashmolean Museum and it's lovely to see you again.

Paul Collins 9:02

Great pleasure. Thank you very much. Thank you very much.

Mehiyar 9:04

Bye.