

The World's First Museums

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In 1160 B. C., Shutruk-Nahhunte, King of Elam in the mountains east of Mesopotamia, campaigned triumphantly through Agade, Kish, Sippar, and other towns of ancient Babylonia. He returned to his capital at Susa with a rich haul of loot, which he offered up to the god who had led him to his victory. In all probability many a conquering monarch before him had done likewise; it was an appropriate gesture, and just about became standard procedure in later ages. Shutruk-Nahhunte's instance is notable only because it is the first of which we are sure: ancient records report that he presented his booty to the Elamite deity In-Shushinak and placed it on display in his temple.¹

Since a museum is by definition any "room, building, or locale where a collection of objects is put on exhibition," whatever part of In-Shushinak's temple happened to be used qualifies as a sort of museum, one of war trophies—but just barely. For a museum that approaches what we generally mean by the term, we must go back in time to the first half of the sixth century B. C., to the reign of Nebuchadnezzar II of Babylon. The Babylonian rulers of this age were particularly interested in the past. They studied archaic inscriptions; they restored old buildings; they even conducted archaeological excavations to locate the foundation stones of ancient temples. So it comes as no surprise to discover that Nebuchadnezzar II installed in his palace a collection of objects originating in bygone days.²

We have a fair idea of what it was like, since excavators have unearthed a good part of the contents. The earliest piece was over 1500 years old, an inscription of 2400 B. C. from Ur. There was a statue of a ruler of Mari in upper Mesopotamia of 2300 B. C., a clay spike from Isin in lower Mesopotamia of 2100 B. C., a club of 1650 B. C. which had once been wielded by a Kassite, one of the peoples who ruled Babylon until the Elamites took over. There were Assyrian pieces dating from 900 to 650 B. C.: inscriptions, reliefs, monuments, clay cylinders. There were a few Aramaic pieces—a statue of a weather god and some stone bowls dating from ca. 700 to 600 B.C. There were contemporary artifacts, some clay cylinders of Nebuchadnezzar himself. Obviously he was following in the footsteps of Shutruk-Nahhunte and the others who had amassed displays from the spoils of war. But his collection, though acquired for the most part in the same way, was deliberately selected

1 E. Unger, *Assyrische und babylonische Kunst* (Breslau, 1927), 62–63; *Cambridge Ancient History*, 3rd ed. chapter 31, section 1, and chapter 32, section 1.

2 On Nebuchadnezzar's museum and its contents, see Unger, *Assyrische und babylonische Kunst*, 63–66; idem, *Babylon, die heilige Stadt* (Berlin and Leipzig, 1931), 224–28.

