



THE UNIVERSITY OF ARIZONA

ARIZONA STATE MUSEUM

ASM and Its Place in Museum History

Irene Bald Romano, Ph.D., Professor of Art History and Anthropology, University of Arizona; Curator of Mediterranean Archaeology, Arizona State Museum

Published Sept 2017 in *Glyphs*, the monthly newsletter of the Arizona Archaeological and Historical Society 68, 3, pp. 12-14.

The Arizona State Museum (ASM), celebrating its 125th anniversary in 2018, was originally established by the Arizona Territorial Legislature as the Arizona Territorial Museum, nineteen years before Arizona became a state. The University of Arizona (UA), founded in 1885 as Arizona's land grant university in sparsely populated Tucson, and ASM were inextricably bound from the museum's inception in 1893. The museum was set up in UA's one and only building at that time, "Old Main," and was, for administrative purposes, made part of the university. The museum's founding mission, as stated in the Territorial House Bill 42 introduced by territorial legislator (later governor) George W.P. Hunt, was for the "collection and preservation of the archaeological resources, specimens of the mineral wealth, and the flora and fauna of the Territory." The early collections of the museum were a hodgepodge of natural history specimens and archaeological artifacts, both from the Southwest and representing the great civilizations of the Old World, including Near Eastern cuneiform tablets, Egyptian amulets, and Greek and Roman coins. When Byron Cummings became director of ASM in 1915 the mission of the museum turned exclusively to anthropology. As a professor of Greek and Latin, Cummings continued to appreciate the value of acquiring comparative collections from the Mediterranean world, as donors offered them.

There were a handful of unique museums that were founded in 18th century America, most notably Charles Wilson Peale's Philadelphia Museum founded in 1786. It was, however, in the last quarter of the 19th and beginning of the 20th centuries, aptly called the first "Golden Age of Museums," that many museums were founded with lofty goals of bringing culture and education to the rapidly growing populace in increasingly industrialized American cities. In the same year as the founding of ASM, the Columbian Exposition was held in Chicago to herald the 400th anniversary of Columbus' discovery of the New World. Though ASM's birth was one month before the world's fair opened, the Columbian Exposition was in many ways a watershed moment in the cultural history of America and had a profound influence on museums and museum concepts, giving birth to important museums,

including the Field Museum of Natural History, and generating an interest in places and peoples beyond America and Europe.

In Europe, England, as well as in America, the concept of natural history and archaeology/anthropology museums was already well known by the time of ASM's founding. The Smithsonian Institution had been established in 1846, following the 1829 bequest of James Smithson to the U.S. government; its first building, the Castle, opened in 1849, and its first collections comprised an eclectic mixture of natural history specimens and works of art. In the 1860's New York's major public institutions, the American Museum of Natural History (1869) and the Metropolitan Museum of Art (1870), were built on opposite sides of Central Park, delineating their broad collecting interests -- natural history/anthropology versus art. The Museum of Fine Arts in Boston was founded in that same year, though the nearby Peabody Museum at Harvard had its inception a few years earlier (1866); it is one of the oldest museums in America devoted exclusively to anthropology, with strengths in North American archaeology and ethnology. The University of Pennsylvania Museum had its origins in 1887 and became one of the largest university museums in the world devoted to archaeology and anthropology. Shortly afterwards, ASM became the first anthropology museum to be founded in the Southwest--- responding to and, in some ways, competing with the museums founded by elite east coast universities. Today, the Peabody Museum, the Penn Museum, and ASM are the three premier university anthropology museums in America in terms of the scope, size, and importance of their collections. ASM, however, has the rare distinction of being both a university museum and a state museum, Arizona's official state repository for archaeological collections.

For more on the history of ASM see:

Martha A. Brace and Nancy J. Parezo, "The Arizona State Museum," *American Indian Art Magazine* Winter 1984, pp. 24-31.

Alan Ferg, *Images of America: Arizona State Museum*, Arcadia Publishing, 2014.

Irene Bald Romano, "Old World Meets New World: Biography of an Egyptian Collection in the Sonoran Desert," *Journal of the Southwest* 58:2, 2016, pp. 189-236.

David R. Wilcox, "Creating a Firm Foundation: The Early Years of the Arizona State Museum," *Journal of the Southwest* 47:3, 2005, pp. 375-410.

Carleton S. Wilder, "The Arizona State Museum, history," *Kiva* 7, 1942, pp. 26-29.

Kirsten E. Winter, *More than 100 Years of Digging: A History of the Arizona State Museum*. M.A. thesis: University of Arizona, 1999.