

Carr, Wendy

Late Hellenistic and Roman Era Collections of the Palmyra Museum: Exhibition design and catalogue publication of Palmyrene funerary portraits in Tadmor, Syria.

Faculty Mentor: Cynthia Finlayson, Art History

The faculty mentor for my project was Dr. Cynthia Finlayson of the Art History Department. The work I proposed to perform with Dr. Finlayson centered around five years of her previous research in Syrian museums. Dr. Finlayson had studied the ancient oasis city of Palmyra in Syria, including the female portrait busts placed at the head of funerary monuments. The ancient city of Palmyra (today Tadmor) contains centuries of history from the Roman occupation and remains today as a melting pot of cultures and peoples.

The research I performed through the aid of the ORCA scholarship varied significantly from my initial proposal because of world travel conditions in Syria. I proposed to travel to Syria with Dr. Finlayson to work in the museum at Tadmor and incorporate a new museum floor design and improve exhibitions and displays. However, as our plans advanced so did the political tensions between the United States and the Middle East. Our plans to research in Syria became impossible, so Dr. Finlayson and I implemented an alternative. In lieu of traveling to Syria, Dr. Finlayson developed a research experience that included travel throughout Great Britain, Copenhagen and Paris.

Dr. Finlayson arranged an abbreviated tour of Roman sites in Western Europe as well as research of Middle Eastern artifacts at several major European museums. I studied several texts before traveling to Europe to acquaint myself with the information to be studied. I read four books while in Europe dedicated to museum politics. We traveled through southern England and central Scotland, visiting the British Museum in London and the National Museum in Edinburgh. We also studied at the Glyptotek in Copenhagen, Denmark and the Louvre in Paris, France. Our primary research centered on the female portrait busts displayed at the museums. We also observed museum design and were able to witness first-hand the behind-the-scenes organization of those major museums. We catalogued and produced digital images of every female portrait bust, which totaled over 250. We also were able to experience many other cultural and geographical rarities of Western Europe.

I continued my personal research upon returning from Europe. I then designed two exhibition boards to be sent to the museum at Tadmor to improve their exhibition design. These boards centered around two research topics that I selected, and focused on Syrian artifacts and history. The two topics I chose to research and present were the Elahbel Tower Tomb and the process of Palmyrene mummification. The Elahbel Tower tomb contained over 300 mummies and their subsequent funerary portrait busts. The mummification process remains unique to the Syrian oasis, yet reveals types of fabrics imported from the time period and even preserved genetic makeup of the wealthy benefactors. The exhibition panels will be sent to Tadmor and will be available to all museum patrons, as the text will be printed in both Arabic and English. This will help the Syrian people realize the significance of their museum and will generate higher enthusiasm for museum conversation and for historical preservation of sites and materials.

I also wrote a twelve-page research paper for Dr. Finlayson, highlighting my museum research and newly acquired knowledge of art history. In October, I was asked to present to a group of Chinese delegates on the details of my research experience and the key role the ORCA grant played in my research possibilities. The cost of traveling to and around Europe would have been impossible without the aid of this grant. The design and production of the museum exhibition panels was also funded through this organization's grant money.

This research served to accomplish the students' goals as well as widen Dr. Finlayson's research base. This experience may provide future research for me in other fields including socio-cultural anthropology, Roman historical archaeology, and Middle Eastern art history preservation, due to the project's eclectic nature and diversity.