



## **A Meeting of Minds and Histories—Ancient and Modern**

**Kiersten Neumann** | Oriental Institute, University of Chicago

*The Secret Lives of Objects: Counter Histories and Narratives*

*Saturday, November 14, 2020*

This year's iteration of "The Secret Lives of Objects" explores how different types of object narratives and counter histories are established by cultural institutions, exhibitions, research, education, and publications, and how the reception and meaning of objects can change as a result of mode of presentation, perspective, and voice. In this talk, I introduce this theme before turning to a case study at the Oriental Institute Museum, which, in 2019, took the opportunity of its centennial and the completion of a multiyear gallery renovations project to introduce new contemporary voices into its exhibition space. Works of two living artists—Michael Rakowitz and Mohamad Hafez—were incorporated into an historic environs on the University of Chicago campus whose permanent exhibitions have primarily focused on communicating and displaying the history and materials of the great civilizations of the distant past. These contemporary pieces added a polychromatic vibrancy and unique materiality, as well as an auditory element to the museum space. Much like the permanent exhibitions, these installations addressed questions of context, destruction, and preservation of cultural heritage in regions of the Middle East that are the focus of the OI's work. In addition, they expressed in a powerful way present-day cultural connections, providing a voice to the histories and memories of the communities impacted by present-day issues and crises in the region—the loss, displacement, and nostalgia, but also hope for the future. This paper looks at the reception and impact of these contemporary pieces on visitors—how they lend themselves to discussions and awareness of the present and how they inform modes of viewing and engaging with materials of the past.