

# Out There



A street-smart guide to Chicago news and newsmakers

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**No bull** *Iraq's museum head speaks on stolen goods (p.6)*

# The artifacts of life

Former Baghdad museum director Donny George Youkhanna heads to Chicago to talk shop. **By Madeline Nusser**

Curator Donny George Youkhanna begged American forces to stop the 2003 looting of the National Museum in Baghdad. He couldn't prevent the theft of more than 15,000 antiquities, yet he still returned to work the next day. But when he received a warning package with a bullet meant for his son's head, he hit his limit. In 2006, he traded in his much-loved job as an archeologist and museum director for a gig teaching archeology at Stony Brook University in New York. On Tuesday 6, he comes to Chicago's Oriental Institute Museum to give tours of the Mesopotamian collection, the largest in the Western hemisphere.

## Why are you giving these tours?

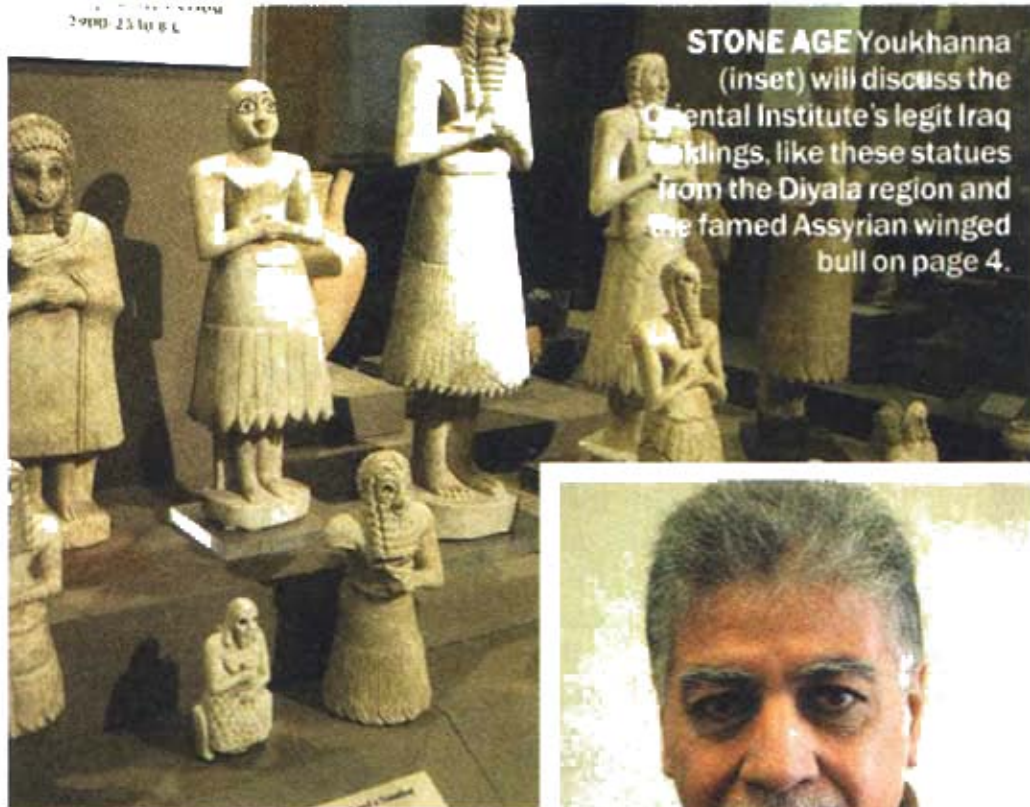
SAFE [Saving Antiquities for Everyone] has been very active in retrieving the Iraqi antiquities, and they asked me to give tours. I agreed immediately because the Oriental Institute Museum is one of the best. What they have has come to them in a legal way. In previous times, the Iraqi law of antiquities let expeditions keep 50 percent of what they'd find in Iraq.

## What happened to the stolen materials from Baghdad?

Well, only 50 percent have been returned. We are always finding Iraqi things—even these days with heightened security. There was a Sumerian sculpture in an auction house in Paris. Then the French authority asks for proof [that it's owned by Iraq], and of course you cannot find this because it was looted material.

## Do any museums in Chicago display looted Iraqi artifacts?

Yes—leading museums. But I don't want to mention them.



**STONE AGE** Youkhanna (inset) will discuss the Oriental Institute's legit Iraq findings, like these statues from the Diyala region and the famed Assyrian winged bull on page 4.

## Do you still have connections to the museum?

Yes. I hired the current director. But I had to retire from there. My family was threatened. It was the place where I worked for over 30 years—not just a place I worked, but a place that I loved. So of course, it was a big shock.

## What was it like to go through that?

We'd follow our kids with cell phones on their way to school, on their way back. Every single day, I wouldn't know if I'd make it to the museum or if I'd make it back. I would never go the [same] route.

## Is it true the Baghdad museum will be reopening soon?

It's not a real reopening. What they are doing is refurbishing the lighting and some exhibit material in the Assyrian gallery and the Islam gallery... everything in these galleries is huge in scale, and fixed to the floors or walls. All the small items were evacuated.



## I'm guessing you're not going to tell me where?

No—they are stored in very safe places.

## What do you think of the state of Iraq today?

They say everything is calming down, but if you watch the news, you will see that they are always bombing and shooting and killing people. I always say that the museum should be the last building to be open to the public after everything is secured in the country.

## Do you see that happening?

Being an archeologist, I know that the country has gone through these types of periods. But these always have finished and everything calms down. Even after two, five, ten years, this will come.

*See Around Town daily listings for tour details.*