

## MEET OUR MEMBERS

### Isabella de la Houssaye

**I**sabella de la Houssaye is a member of the Penn Museum's Loren Eiseley Society and serves on its Director's Council. She is the co-owner of Material Culture, a furniture and antique emporium and auction house in Philadelphia.



Isabella de la Houssaye at Material Culture.

#### **Tell us about your background and how it connects you to the Museum.**

I received my degree in politics and European Cultural Studies from Princeton and an international law degree from Columbia. So I start with an interdisciplinary approach to understanding culture through art, language, history, and politics. That approach has shaped my lens—the way I learn and think about the world and what I do. For seven years I was an international lawyer working in Asia, Europe, and the United States. That lens informed my ability to work and negotiate projects all over the world. After that I was at Lehman Brothers in Hong Kong, London, and New York applying the same skillset to banking.

Now I'm a retailer and auctioneer of antiques and collectibles from around the world. And while on the one hand it is a business, on the other hand, part of our mission is education. What I'm personally passionate about is teaching about the material we sell. I especially enjoy teaching children about different cultures through the material because it opens up their minds to cultural understanding and appreciation. I think it's the path to better international relations and better people relations at all levels. If you can't appreciate a person's culture and perspective, you really can't get to know or understand them.

What is beautiful about the Penn Museum is that it's an open classroom for all people to come and learn about artifacts and history and cultures. It ties completely with what I'm about. At Material Culture we do a lot of that as well: people can touch and feel and learn about the antiques and material culture; it may not be the same ancient authenticity as the Museum offers but it still takes people down the path to understanding and appreciating different cultures. I think kids really need a lot of hands on learning: if you start that at a young age the learning and love of learning really sticks with them.

#### **How did you first get involved in the Museum?**

I first got involved with the Museum by visiting with my children. We moved back to the U.S. in 1997, and, after bringing my children to so many museums and cultural sites abroad, it was natural for us to explore Philadelphia and visit the Penn Museum. Director's Council member Sharon Lorenzo introduced me to the staff, because she knew how much I loved and appreciated the artifacts in the Museum and how closely it tied to my own business and collections. That's how I was introduced and got on the Director's Council. What I love most about working with that group is that it's intellectually very stimulating. I love thinking out of the box. When you've traveled and been around museums as much as I have, you can bring



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LES Members are invited to the annual Loren Eiseley Leadership Giving Society Dinner, to introduce and celebrate plans for the new Penn Museum keystone Galleries of the Ancient Middle East.

THURSDAY, JUNE 2, 2016

5:30–7:30 PM

*Cocktails and Presentation*

7:30 PM

*Dinner*

*Cocktail Attire, Valet Parking*

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ideas to the table, and I love to be able to add value in that way. Julian [Siggers, Williams Director] and the whole team are so open to new ideas—it is so refreshing. You're surrounded in this institution by really bright, passionate people, people who want to teach and want to share. That is such a gift and I'm so happy to be a part of it.

**Tell us more about the kervansaray, or tent, styled after those used by travelers on the Silk Road, that you installed in the Museum on the occasion of the opening of *The Golden Age of King Midas*.**



Isabella de la Houssaye (second from right) at the gala celebration of *The Golden Age of King Midas* with (left to right) Philadelphia Eagles defensive end Connor Barwin, Merle-Smith Director of Learning Programs Ellen Owens, Laura Buscher, and husband David Crane.

We were so excited to be able to participate in the opening of the King Midas exhibition by complementing the ancient artifacts with a more modern view of the region from which they come. We created the kervansaray using 19th and 20th century material—woven tents, carpets, textiles, metal, and glasswork that would have been found and traded in kervansarays along the Silk Road during that time period. In the kervansarays of the Silk Road, people would come together from different cultures, different places, and share stories, share tea, and exchange goods. They were like international cultural exchange depots. I love that the Museum described the kervansaray as an oasis. That's what they were meant to be and that's what we wanted it to be in the Museum. People are so busy, and unless someone stops you and says focus, you see but you don't see. With the kervansaray, it was about getting people to stop and focus, relax and soak up the Silk Road vibe.

You can read about Phrygia or ancient Iraq or ancient Greece; you can read all the books you want. But I continue to believe that most people recall better and learn more when they can have a visual to supplement the words. And that's what the Museum's exhibitions do: feed and stimulate people in a variety of ways so when they leave here, they remember. •