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## THE CYRUS CYLINDER AND ANCIENT PERSIA: A NEW BEGINNING

Asian Art Museum presents the Cyrus Cylinder—  
sometimes called the first bill of human rights—in  
U.S. tour

SAN FRANCISCO, July 18, 2013—Modest in size and appearance and made more than 2,500 years ago, the Cyrus Cylinder continues to be hailed as an international symbol of tolerance and justice. In its first U.S. tour on loan from the British Museum, the Cylinder will travel to the Asian Art Museum (along with four other venues) as part of the intimate exhibition ***The Cyrus Cylinder and Ancient Persia: A New Beginning***. On view Aug. 9–Sept. 22, 2013, the exhibition also includes 16 rare artworks from ancient Persia (Iran) during the Achaemenid period (550–330 BCE), providing a context for understanding the Cylinder's cultural and historical significance.

Dating to 539 BCE, the Cyrus Cylinder—one of the most famous surviving icons from the ancient world—was uncovered in 1879 at Babylon (in modern Iraq) during a British Museum excavation. The Cylinder was inscribed in Babylonian cuneiform script on the orders of the Persian king, Cyrus the Great (ruled 559–530 BCE), after he captured Babylon in 539 BCE. It is often referred to as the first bill of human rights, as it mentions Cyrus's return from Babylon of deported peoples to their homelands and his encouragement of freedom of religious practice.

The Cyrus Cylinder is truly an object of world heritage, produced for a Persian king in Iraq and seen and studied for more than 130 years in the British Museum. The values of freedom from captivity and freedom of religious practice proclaimed by Cyrus the Great are the enduring ideas underlying ethical governance that have made the Cylinder a universal icon. Today, a copy of the Cylinder is on display in the United Nations building in New York City. The Cylinder appears on postage stamps issued by the Islamic Republic of Iran, and it was seen firsthand by about half a million people at the 2010–2011 exhibition in Tehran.

"You could almost say that the Cyrus Cylinder is a history of the Middle East in one object, and it is a link to a past which we all share and to a key moment in history that has shaped the world around us," said Neil MacGregor, director of the British Museum. "Objects are uniquely able to speak across time and space, and this object must be shared as widely as possible. I am delighted that it will travel to the U.S. and am hugely grateful to both our U.S. partners and the Iran Heritage Foundation for making this possible."

The exhibition traces the innovations initiated under Persian rule in ancient West Asia (550–330 BCE). The Persian Achaemenid empire was then the largest the world had known. It had a huge impact on the ancient world, introducing changes in ethical behavior as recorded in the proclamation on the Cyrus Cylinder. A gold plaque with the representation of a priest shows the spread of Zoroastrianism, an ancient Iranian religion, at that time. Persian kings also introduced a new writing system, Old Persian cuneiform, as seen on part of a column base from Hamadan, Iran, and on the famous seal of the Persian king Darius (ruled 522–486 BCE). They also developed new forms of luxury goods, including beautifully decorated gold and silver bowls and gold bracelets featuring fantastic animal shapes, some from a stunning collection of 180 gold and silver objects called the Oxus Treasure.

The tour debuted at the Smithsonian's Arthur M. Sackler Gallery in Washington, DC, in March 2013. From there it traveled to the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, and the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, before arriving at the Asian Art Museum. Following the Asian Art Museum's presentation, the tour will conclude at the J. Paul Getty Museum, Los Angeles, in December. A detailed schedule is listed below.

"The San Francisco Bay Area is home to both the signing of the United Nations Charter and the birth of the Free Speech Movement, major pillars supporting human rights and civil liberties. The Asian Art Museum is proud to partner with the British Museum and our U.S. museum partners to bring the Cyrus Cylinder to San Francisco," said Jay Xu, director of the Asian Art Museum. "This important object provides not only a foundation for understanding the ancient world, but also a touchstone for continued efforts to strive for common human freedoms."

#### **Further Information on the Cyrus Cylinder**

The Cylinder is nine inches (22.86 cm) in length, barrel-shaped and made of baked clay. The original function of the Cylinder was as a foundation deposit—an object buried under an important building to sanctify it. The Cylinder was never intended to be seen or used again.

The Cylinder is inscribed all the way around with a proclamation in the Babylonian language using Babylonian cuneiform script. It was buried beneath the inner city wall of Babylon during the rebuilding program undertaken by Cyrus the Great after he captured the city in 539 BCE. It chronicles how Cyrus, aided by the god Marduk, gained victory without a struggle, according to the text; restored shrines dedicated to various gods; and allowed deported people to return to their homelands. The text does not mention specific religious groups, but it is thought that the Jews were among the people forcibly brought to Babylon by Nebuchadnezzar II (the previous ruler of Babylon) and then allowed to return home. The Bible chronicles that the Jews returned from Babylon at this time and

rebuilt the temple in Jerusalem. Indeed Cyrus is revered in the Hebrew Bible because of the qualities of tolerance and respect documented in the Cylinder's proclamation. These were enlightened acts, rare in antiquity.

In 2010 the British Museum discovered in its extensive collection of cuneiform tablets two fragments that had also been found in 19th-century British Museum excavations in or near Babylon. Experts at the museum identified these fragments' inscriptions as parts of the same text as the Cylinder. These striking commonalities indicate that the Cylinder's text was probably a proclamation that was widely distributed.

#### **Exhibition Schedule**

- Arthur M. Sackler Gallery, March 9–April 28, 2013
- The Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, May 3–June 14, 2013
- The Metropolitan Museum of Art, June 20–Aug. 4 2013
- The Asian Art Museum, Aug. 9–Sept. 22, 2013
- The J. Paul Getty Museum, Oct. 2.–Dec. 2, 2013

[www.cyruscylinder2013.com](http://www.cyruscylinder2013.com)

#### **PUBLICATION**

The exhibition will be accompanied by a substantive, richly illustrated catalogue, edited by John Curtis. Hardcover, 9 x 11 in., 144 pages. Available at the Asian Art Museum store. \$40. For more information, call 415.581.3600 or email [shop@asianart.org](mailto:shop@asianart.org).

#### **EXHIBITION ORGANIZATION**

This exhibition was organized by the British Museum in partnership with the Iran Heritage Foundation and the Arthur M. Sackler Gallery, Smithsonian Institution. The exhibition is supported by an indemnity from the Federal Council on the Arts and the Humanities. The exhibition at the Asian Art Museum is generously supported by Tina and Hamid Moghadam, Bitā Daryabari and Dr. Reza Malek in collaboration with the Public Affairs Alliance of Iranian Americans.

#### **ABOUT THE ASIAN ART MUSEUM**

The Asian Art Museum–Chong-Moon Lee Center for Asian Art and Culture is one of San Francisco's premier arts institutions and home to a world-renowned collection of more than 18,000 Asian art treasures spanning 6,000 years of history. Through rich art experiences, centered on historic and contemporary artworks, the Asian Art Museum unlocks the past for visitors, bringing it to life while serving as a catalyst for new art, new creativity and new thinking.

Information: 415.581.3500 or [www.asianart.org](http://www.asianart.org)

Location: 200 Larkin Street, San Francisco, CA 94102

Hours: The museum is open Tuesdays through Sundays from 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. From February through September, hours are extended on Thursdays until 9 p.m. Closed Mondays, as well as New Year's Day, Thanksgiving Day and Christmas Day.

General Admission: FREE for museum members, \$12 for adults, \$8 for seniors (65+), college students with ID, and youths (13–17). FREE for children under 12 and SFUSD

students with ID. Admission on Thursdays after 5 p.m. is \$5 for all visitors (except those under 12, SFUSD students, and museum members, who are always admitted FREE). Admission is FREE to all on Target First Free Sundays (the first Sunday of every month). A surcharge may apply for admission to special exhibitions.

Access: The Asian Art Museum is wheelchair accessible. For more information regarding access: 415.581.3598; TDD: 415.861.2035.

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