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ROADS OF ARABIA: ARCHAEOLOGY AND HISTORY OF THE KINGDOM OF SAUDI ARABIA

San Francisco's Asian Art Museum offers West Coast audiences a first look at recent archaeological discoveries from the Arabian Peninsula

SAN FRANCISCO, Oct. 15, 2014—In the shifting sands of Saudi Arabia outside the city of Thaj, archaeologists discovered the tomb of a young girl buried nearly 2,000 years ago, uncovering exquisite jewelry, a haunting gold mask and other objects—all made of gold. These funerary treasures are just a few of the surprising discoveries on display in the fascinating exhibition *Roads of Arabia: Archaeology and History of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia*, on view Oct. 24, 2014 through Jan. 18, 2015 at the Asian Art Museum.

The museum will offer West Coast audiences a first look at *Roads of Arabia*, a traveling exhibition originating from the Arthur M. Sackler Gallery in 2012, featuring recent archaeological discoveries that have radically transformed our understanding of Saudi Arabia. The exhibition showcases more than 200 objects, revealing the region's role as a cultural crossroads through trade and pilgrimage over thousands of years. The Asian Art Museum is the final venue for the exhibition's U.S. tour.

Highlights of the exhibition include mysterious stone steles, monumental statues and finely forged bronze figures. A set of gilded doors that once graced the entrance to the Ka'ba, Islam's holiest sanctuary, is also featured.

"The Asian Art Museum is honored to showcase the first international exhibition of art and artifacts from Saudi Arabia during San Francisco's Arab Heritage Month in October," said Jay Xu, director of the Asian Art Museum. "*Roads of Arabia* will introduce and further deepen visitors' knowledge of the rich cultural heritage and history of a region we are continuing to understand."

The exhibition brings to light the Arabian Peninsula's importance in early human history; the impact of the incense trade on ancient Arabia; the rise of Islam and the development

Funerary mask, 1st century CE. Saudi Arabia; Thaj, Tell al-Zayer site. Gold. *Courtesy of National Museum of Saudi Arabia, Riyadh, 2061.*

MORE

of Islamic pilgrimage roads; and the formation of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. *Roads of Arabia* begins in Osher Gallery and continues in Hambrecht Gallery, Lee Gallery and the Resource Center, with artifacts activating North Court. The Asian Art Museum's presentation of the exhibition is organized by assistant curator for exhibition projects Dany Chan.

Osher Gallery (Gallery 1): Prehistoric Arabia and Incense Roads

Saudi Arabia's richly layered past stretches back more than a million years ago. Research has emerged that identifies the presence of early-human settlements across the peninsula. **Choppers and other tools** (catalogue nos. 1–17) found in Arabia date back more than one million years—some of the oldest excavated evidence of human history. Also among the earliest known artifacts from the Arabian Peninsula are three human-shaped **steles** (vertical slabs of stones used for commemorative purposes) (catalogue nos. 27, 28, 29). Dating to some 6,000 years ago, these steles are probably associated with religious or burial practices. The three visually striking figures are quite distinct in their clothing and appearance, which may reflect village or tribal differences.

A major turning point in the peninsula's ancient past is the development of incense trade roads. As early as 1200 BCE, the use of camels revolutionized Arabian commerce, enabling transport of highly valued incense that grew in southern Arabia and east Africa after 800 BCE. Incense was used across the ancient world for everything from sanctifying religious ceremonies to masking the stench of sewage. The region had a near monopoly on the cultivation and trade of frankincense and myrrh incense, bringing tremendous wealth to the area.

The lucrative trade encouraged the creation of a complex network of roads that transported incense across the peninsula and beyond, allowing for a vibrant commercial and cultural exchange with distant civilizations. Objects uncovered in Arabia suggest Arabia's rich linguistic diversity. Religious and secular inscriptions appear on metal and stone objects with carvings on craggy rocks and mountain facades. In Osher Gallery, visitors will encounter nine languages and scripts on various slabs of stone and bronze.

The incense trade routes enabled Arabia to engage in diverse interactions with Mesopotamia, Iran, the Nile River Valley and the Greco-Roman world. In this gallery, a **statue of a man** (catalogue no. 38) recalls Mesopotamian statues. Other works of art uncovered in Arabia such as the **cylindrical vessel with palm tree** (catalogue no. 62) and the so-called **al-Hamra cube** (catalogue no. 102) also show Iranian and Mesopotamian influences, respectively.

Hambrecht Gallery (Gallery 2): Incense Roads

Newly discovered objects along the incense roads, including colossal statues, delicate glassware, and dazzling jewelry, demonstrate the cultural exchange between Arabia and the Nile River Valley and the Greco-Roman world.

Another **statue of a man** (catalogue no. 112) from 400–200 BCE stands at more than 7 feet tall near the entrance of the gallery. This work, discovered in northwestern Arabia, in al-Ula, shows the artistic impact of Egypt and Sudan in its formal, frontal pose and finely articulated musculature—but with a distinct local interpretation.

Displayed in Hambrecht Gallery are several glass vessels including a small **date-shaped flask** (catalogue no. 198) imported from the Roman Empire. The glassware was used for banqueting ceremonies or to store precious oils and perfumes. Other objects inspired by Greco-Roman models include a **cast bronze head** (catalogue no. 153), a small silver **chalice** (catalogue no. 174) and an exquisitely modeled **statuette of Heracles** (catalogue no. 155).

Other highlights in this gallery are the funerary treasures from a family tomb discovered in 1998 in Thaj. The tomb contained the remains of three men, a woman and a 6-year-old girl, each buried with rich offerings, from a **gold mask** (catalogue no. 231) to an exquisite **necklace** (catalogue no. 234) to carefully crafted gold bracelets (catalogue no. 232). The grave complex probably belonged to a member of the local nobility, who had accumulated considerable wealth through trade and was familiar with Greek luxury items.

Oases, towns and way stations flourished along the incense roads, and bustling markets offered luxury objects created locally and imported from afar. Incense, including frankincense and myrrh, are substances that emit fragrant aromas when burned. Many incense burners were found at Qaryat al-Faw, a major trading center in the southwest region of the peninsula. Several examples (catalogue nos. 142, 145) are displayed in this gallery.

Lee Gallery (Gallery 3): Pilgrimage Roads

Around the 1st century, demand for incense started to decline, and maritime routes across the Red Sea competed with the land routes. With the rise of Islam in the 7th century, the incense roads were slowly replaced by pilgrimage roads converging on Mecca. Pilgrimage trails during the early centuries of Islam led from major cities, such as Damascus, Cairo and Baghdad, to Mecca, the spiritual heart of the new religion.

Mecca itself is represented by a set of 17th-century **gilded doors** (catalogue no. 305) that once graced the entrance to the Ka'ba, Islam's holiest sanctuary. Donated by the Ottoman sultan Murad IV (reigned 1623–1640), the doors were in use until around 1947, when they were replaced by new ones. Mecca is also represented by 18 finely inscribed tombstones from the now-destroyed al-Ma'la cemetery. These inscribed stones lend a human element to the multitudes of Muslims who either lived in Mecca or traveled great distances to reach it. A particularly poignant example memorializes a father and daughter who died on their pilgrimage journey together. These tombstones are displayed in North Court.

Another highlight in Lee Gallery is a large **incense burner** (catalogue no. 308) with delicate inlaid floral decoration, which was commissioned by Murad IV's mother, one of the most powerful royal women of the Ottoman dynasty. The burner attests to the continued importance of incense in the Islamic world.

Resource Center (Gallery 4): Formation of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia

The Resource Center introduces the challenging path to unification of the peninsula and the creation of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia in 1932. Objects like a gold-and-silver sword and a gilded Qur'an offer insight into the personal life of King Abdulaziz, the founder of the present-day kingdom.

Since the country's founding, interest in understanding and preserving Saudi Arabia's ancient and Islamic past has grown steadily. As archaeologists continue to unearth important finds in the peninsula, *Roads of Arabia: Archaeology and History of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia* offers a timely glimpse into the art and artifacts that have shaped perceptions of the region's ancient history.

PUBLICATION

The exhibition will be accompanied by a substantive, richly illustrated catalogue, published by Somogy Art Publishers; available in hardcover, \$68; 608 pages. Available at the Asian Art Museum store: <http://store.asianart.org> or 415.591.3600 or shop@asianart.org.

EXHIBITION ORGANIZATION

Roads of Arabia: Archaeology and History of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia is organized by the Arthur M. Sackler Gallery, Smithsonian Institution in association with the Saudi Commission for Tourism and Antiquities of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. ExxonMobil and Saudi Aramco are gratefully acknowledged as principal co-sponsors of the tour of *Roads of Arabia* in the United States. Sponsorship is also provided by The Olayan Group and Fluor Corporation. The Boeing Company, Khalid Al Turki Group, and Saudi Basic Industries Corporation SABIC granted additional support. Presentation at the Asian Art Museum is made possible with the generous support of Chevron Corporation, Saudi Aramco, The Akiko Yamazaki and Jerry Yang Fund for Excellence in Exhibitions and Presentations, ExxonMobil, and ATEL Capital Group. Media sponsors: ABC7, Examiner, San Francisco magazine.

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

Location: 200 Larkin Street, San Francisco, CA 94102

Hours: The museum is open Tuesdays through Sundays from 10 AM to 5 PM, with extended spring and summer evening hours on Thursdays until 9 PM. Closed Mondays, as well as New Year's Day, Thanksgiving Day and Christmas Day.

General Admission: FREE for museum members, \$15 for adults, \$10 for seniors (65+), college students with ID, and youths (13–17). FREE for children under 12 and SFUSD students with ID. General admission on Thursdays after 5 PM is \$5 for all visitors (except those under 12, SFUSD students, and museum members, who are always admitted FREE). General 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.