ART INSTITUTE OPENS THE MARY AND MICHAEL JAHARIS GALLERIES OF GREEK, ROMAN, AND BYZANTINE ART ON NOVEMBER 11

More Than 550 Works on Display in Inaugural Installation: Of Gods and Glamour

Special Exhibition Treasures From the British Museum

Showcases 51 Works Rarely Seen in the U.S.

Four thousand years of artistic achievement in the ancient Mediterranean world will be on display at the Art Institute of Chicago this fall in the beautiful new Mary and Michael Jaharis Galleries of Greek, Roman, and Byzantine Art, opening to the public on November 11, 2012. These dramatic new sunlit spaces, situated in McKinlock Court (G150–154), a strategic crossroad of the museum, have been fully re-imagined to present some of the Art Institute’s oldest and most significant objects in fresh and compelling new ways. With over 150 exceptional loans from private collections and public institutions around the world complementing the museum’s own rich holdings, the inaugural display, titled Of Gods and Glamour, allows the Art Institute to tell the rich story of lives led in the ancient and medieval Mediterranean world. Life-size marble sculptures of goddesses and portraits of emperors and empresses speak to worldly religious and power beliefs, while the humans and gods who cavort on ancient Greek pottery speak to more human pleasures and earthly delights. Dazzling jewelry and shiny silver tableware give an indication of the “good life” lived hundreds, even thousands, of years ago. The unveiling of the Jaharis Galleries also includes an inaugural celebratory exhibition of 51 incomparable works of late Roman and early Byzantine art loaned by the British Museum, many of which have never before traveled to the United States. The artworks in the exhibition reflect the splendor of privileged
households and important ecclesiastical sites between A.D. 350 and 650, and include opulent silver vessels, carved ivories, and gem-encrusted jewelry. *Late Roman and Early Byzantine Treasures from the British Museum* will be on view in McKinlock Court through August 25, 2013.

Designed by the museum’s Department of Ancient and Byzantine Art and Kulapat Yantrasast of wHY Architecture, the new galleries, including state-of-the-art display cases built by Goppion Museum Workshop in Milan, Italy, were made possible by the generosity of the *Jaharis Family Foundation, Inc.* Mary and Michael Jaharis’ gift of $10 million to the Art Institute in February 2011—the largest gift ever received by the museum in support of ancient Mediterranean and Byzantine art—will also be used to enhance the Art Institute’s acquisitions, exhibitions, and educational programs, and has even allowed for the creation of a new curatorial department at the museum.

“The generosity of Mary and Michael Jaharis has allowed us to reconceive our presentation of ancient and Byzantine art in a way never before possible in the museum’s history,” said Douglas Druick, President and Eloise W. Martin Director of the Art Institute. “And critically, these new galleries represent the last phase of the complete reinstallation of the museum, begun in 2008 and occasioned by the construction of the Modern Wing. Building a better relationship among the collections and the revitalization of McKinlock Court have now finally been realized.”

“It is a tremendous honor to work with such a rich collection of works,” said Karen Manchester, chair and curator of Ancient Art, Department of Ancient and Byzantine Art. “The gift from the Jaharis Family Foundation has allowed the Art Institute to literally re-present our Greek, Roman, and Byzantine works of art—from how and where they are displayed to how they are interpreted. It is fitting, too, that these galleries have been constructed at the intersection of many of our outstanding collections, allowing us to show the lineage of art from the ancient Mediterranean world in the abstractions in the Modern Wing, the neoclassical sculpture in our American collection, and the sculptures from the kingdom of Gandhara in our Alsdorf Galleries of Indian, Southeast Asian, Himalayan, and Islamic Art.”

The 13,707-square-foot galleries encircling the museum’s McKinlock Court take visitors on a journey through the beginnings of Western art. Opening the installation are the rare Mesopotamian *Statuette of a*
Striding Figure from 3000/2800 B.C. and the sublimely abstracted Cycladic Female Figure from 2600/2500 B.C., both serving as potent reminders that early Mediterranean art was part of an artistic continuum going back to the highly developed cultures of the ancient Near East and Egypt and forward into 20th-century modern art. From these anchors, a chronological display follows—from beautifully decorated Greek vases and the precious treasures of the Hellenistic period to Etruscan metal work and terracotta vessels through to the opulent décor and realistic portraiture of Rome, which gave way to a new Byzantine aesthetic around the turn of the fifth century A.D. More abstract and spiritually charged, early Byzantine art had a meaningful impact on European art until the Renaissance, when the art of ancient Greece and Rome once again provided a powerful artistic influence.

The 51 masterpieces on display in the special exhibition Late Roman and Early Byzantine Treasures from the British Museum bear witness to the profound transformation that took place over three centuries (from A.D. 350–650). During this time, the political center shifted from Rome to Constantinople; Greek eclipsed Latin as the administrative language of imperial rule in the East; and Christianity became the official religion of the Empire. A gilded silver chest for bathing accessories and perfumed oils that belonged to a Roman noblewoman named Projecta, for example, stands as an eloquent witness to the intersection of classical iconography and Christian belief in the fourth century A.D.; a seductive image of the goddess Venus appears just above an inscription indicating that its owner was a Christian. The gradual stylistic shift from a Greco-Roman naturalism towards a more Byzantine aesthetic can be seen in the Reliquary of St. Menas, carved in ivory during the sixth century. The more abstract and static imagery of the saints’ martyrdom on the reliquary is markedly different than that of the silver chest for bathing accessories, which predates the reliquary by almost 200 years. For its part, The Lycurgus Cup vividly exemplifies the refinement and spectacle of lavish tableware proudly used throughout the late Roman Empire. This extraordinary fourth-century cup appears green in reflected light but turns a brilliant red when light is transmitted through it, thanks to the addition of gold and silver particles to the molten glass. The Art Institute is proud to be the sole venue for this special presentation.

The Jaharis Galleries’ stunning display of the museum’s permanent collection is enriched by two additional resources. One gallery offers a look into the fascinating preservation and conservation work performed on the objects newly on display, while LaunchPad: Ancient and Byzantine Art, a new
interactive multimedia program stationed at 16 kiosks throughout the galleries, provides a wealth of information on selected objects on display. This information ranges from basic introductory facts to in-depth details on the artworks' function, form, subject matter, historical context, technique of manufacture, and relationships to particular people, places, and objects. Also available is a richly illustrated publication, Recasting the Past: Collecting and Presenting Antiquities at the Art Institute of Chicago, authored by Karen Manchester, chair and curator of the Department of Ancient and Byzantine Art, with an essay by Karen Alexander. The book will be available in the Museum Shop for $24.95.

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Programming in the Educational Gallery is supported by the Perucca Family Foundation. The new interactive program LaunchPad is supported by a grant from the Community Associates Long Range Fund. LaunchPad was originally conceived for the galleries of European Decorative Arts by Melinda Martin Sullivan and was created with a grant from her late mother, Eloise W. Martin. Funding for the catalogue was provided by an anonymous donor.

Images:

Bust of Athena (detail), c. 2nd century A.D. Roman. Anonymous loan. Photo by Erika Dufour.

Rendering of the Mary and Michael Jaharis Galleries of Greek, Roman, and Byzantine Art. Courtesy wHY Architecture.

The Lycurgus Cup. Late Roman, fourth century A.D. The British Museum. Purchased with the assistance of the National Art Collections Fund.

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