

The Cyrus Cylinder travels to the US

'First declaration of human rights' to tour five cities in the United States

The British Museum today announces that one of its most iconic objects, the Cyrus Cylinder, will tour to five major museum venues in the United States in 2013. This will be the first time this object has been seen in the US and the tour is supported by the Iran Heritage Foundation.

The Cyrus Cylinder is one of the most famous objects to have survived from the ancient world. The Cylinder was inscribed in Babylonian cuneiform (cuneiform is the earliest form of writing) on the orders of the Persian King Cyrus the Great (559-530BC) after he captured Babylon in 539BC. It is often referred to as the first bill of human rights as it appears to encourage freedom of worship throughout the Persian Empire and to allow deported people to return to their homelands. It was found in Babylon in modern Iraq in 1879 during a British Museum excavation and has been on display ever since.

The Cyrus Cylinder is truly an object of world heritage, produced for a Persian king in Iraq and seen and studied for over 130 years in the British Museum. It is valued by people all around the world as a symbol of tolerance and respect for different peoples and different faiths, so much so that a copy of the cylinder is on display in the United Nations building in New York. The Museum has previously lent the Cylinder to the National Museum of Iran in 2010 - 2011 where it was seen by over one million people. This tour will provide the first opportunity for a wide US audience to engage with this unique object of world importance.

The Cylinder will travel with an exhibition of sixteen objects under the title 'The Cyrus Cylinder in Ancient Persia'. The exhibition shows the innovations initiated by Persian rule in the Ancient Near East (550 BC-331 BC). The Persian Empire was then the largest the world had known. It had a huge impact on the ancient world, introducing changes in terms of ethical behaviour as witnessed in the proclamation on the Cyrus Cylinder. A gold plaque from the Oxus Treasure with the representation of a priest shows the spread of the Zoroastrian religion at this time. Persian kings also introduced a new writing system, Old Persian cuneiform, as seen on part of a column base from Hamadan, and on the famous seal of Darius (522-486 BC). They also developed new forms of luxury goods including beautifully decorated gold and silver bowls and sumptuous gold bracelets featuring fantastic animal shapes, some of them from the Oxus Treasure.

The tour will debut at the Smithsonian's Arthur M. Sackler Gallery in Washington DC in March 2013 before travelling to the Museum of Fine Arts in Houston; The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York; the Asian Art Museum, San Francisco and will conclude at the J. Paul Getty Museum at the Getty Villa Los Angeles in October (full dates below). The exhibition is curated by John Curtis, Keeper of Special Middle East Projects at the British Museum and curatorial colleagues at each of the venues.

Neil MacGregor, Director of the British Museum said, "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. 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 US and am hugely grateful to both our US partners and the Iran Heritage Foundation for making this possible."

John Curtis, Keeper of Special Middle East Projects at the British Museum said "The Cyrus Cylinder and associated objects represent a new beginning for the Ancient Near East. The Persian period, commencing in 550 BC, was not just a change of dynasty but a time of change in the ancient world. Some of these changes and innovations are highlighted in the exhibition."

Alireza Rastegar, Chairman of the Board of Trustees of Iran Heritage Foundation America, said "Iran Heritage Foundation is proud to be partners with the British Museum and leading US venues in bringing this magnificent exhibition to the United States. The Cyrus Cylinder and its message of respect for diversity and universal human rights carries a timely message about tolerance for all of us today. We are very grateful to the Iranian American community who have supported us in this endeavour and are looking forward to a positive reception as the Cylinder tours the US."

Julian Raby, the Dame Jillian Sackler Director of the Arthur M. Sackler Gallery and the Freer Gallery of Art said "For thousands of years, philosophers viewed Cyrus the Great as the paragon of the 'Virtuous Ruler,' and the Bible refers to him as 'the anointed' of the Lord, crediting him with permitting Jews to rebuild their Holy Temple in Jerusalem. This magnanimous image inspired even the Founding Fathers of the United States. One of the goals of this exhibition is to encourage us to reflect that relations between Persians and Jews have not always been marked by the discord that disfigures the political map of the Near East today."

Gary Tinterow, director of the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston said "The Cyrus Cylinder tells a great story of human history. We are thrilled to be able to bring this touchstone of ancient civilization to Houston, and to present the Cyrus Cylinder and related objects in the context of our collections."

Thomas P. Campbell, Director and CEO of The Metropolitan Museum of Art, said: "The new world view enshrined by the Cyrus Cylinder and the objects in this exhibition remains as relevant today as it did several millennia ago. The tolerance embraced by the Cylinder's text has been applauded throughout history and we at The Metropolitan Museum of Art are proud to share this message with our diverse international audience."

Jay Xu, director of the Asian Art Museum, said, "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 US museum partners to bring the Cyrus Cylinder to San Francisco. This important object not only provides a foundation for understanding the ancient world, but also a touchstone for continued efforts to strive for common human freedoms."

Timothy Potts, director of the J. Paul Getty Museum, said, “The Cyrus Cylinder is one of the most important artefacts to have survived from the ancient world and we are delighted that it will be on view next fall to visitors at the Getty Villa, where it will be shown in the context of other artefacts and inscriptions from the period of the Achaemenian empire. More than any other document from the ancient world, this declaration by King Cyrus of the return of conquered nations to their settlements, has a continuing relevance to the peoples of the Middle East and indeed throughout the world. As home to the largest community of Iranian Americans in the United States, I have no doubt that Los Angeles will be thrilled by this once-in-a-lifetime opportunity.”

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Notes to Editors:

Tour Dates

Smithsonian’s Arthur M. Sackler Gallery and Freer Gallery of Art, Washington D.C.,
9th March – 28th April 2013
Museum of Fine Arts, Houston
3rd May – 14th June 2013
The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York
20th June – 4th August 2013
Asian Art Museum, San Francisco,
9th August – 22nd September 2013
J. Paul Getty Museum at the Getty Villa, Los Angeles,
2nd October – 2nd December 2013

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Iran Heritage Foundation is the leading supporter of Iranian studies in the UK. It promotes academic research through fellowships, grants, scholarships and publications. In association with museums and leading institutions, the IHF organises exhibitions and convenes conferences on the history and contemporary

culture of Iran. IHF America, launched in 2012 as a US based non-profit organisation, administers a number of grants to North American institutions and is the core funder of the tour of the Cyrus Cylinder.

Further information on the Cyrus Cylinder:

The Cylinder is 22.86cm in length, is barrel-shaped and is made of baked clay. It is inscribed all the way round with a proclamation in cuneiform script. Originally it was inscribed and buried in the foundations of a wall after Cyrus the Great, the Persian Emperor, captured Babylon in 539 BC. The cylinder is written in Babylonian cuneiform by a Babylonian scribe. It records that aided by the god Marduk Cyrus captured Babylon without a struggle, restored shrines dedicated to different gods, and repatriated deported peoples who had been brought to Babylon. The text does not mention specific religious groups but it is thought that the Jews were amongst the peoples deported by Nebuchadnezzar (the previous ruler of Babylon) who were now allowed to return home. The Bible reports that the deported 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 enshrined in the cylinder proclamation. These were enlightened acts, rare in antiquity.

In 2010 the British Museum discovered two fragments of tablet in its extensive collection of cuneiform tablets which had also been found in 19th century British Museum excavations in or near Babylon. These fragments were identified by experts at the Museum as being inscribed with parts of the same text as the Cylinder but do not belong to it. They show that the text of the Cylinder was probably a proclamation that was widely distributed across the Persian Empire.



'The Cyrus Cylinder', 539-538 BC, Achaemenid, clay