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**Contact:**

Mona M. Rock (<mailto:mrock@thewalters.org>) at  
The Walters Art Museum  
410-547-9000, ext. 277

## Fascinating Art of Ancient Southern Arabia—Largely Unknown in the West—comes to The Walters July 20

### Collection has never been on view to the general public

**Press Preview: Monday, July 14, 10 a.m.–noon**

Baltimore—Visitors can discover the artistic sophistication and visual splendor of South Arabian art through *Faces of Ancient Arabia: The Giraud and Carolyn Foster Collection of South Arabian Art*, on view at the Walters Art Museum, July 20–Sept. 7, 2008. Southern Arabia—now the Republic of Yemen—played a crucial political and economic role during antiquity through the trade in incense and exotic goods, such as spices and fragrances. In biblical times, the territory was known as the Land of the Queen of Sheba, the fabled monarch of one of several kingdoms that ruled the Arabian Peninsula.

*Faces of Ancient Arabia* includes almost 100 ancient sculptures, statues, relief carvings and inscribed blocks—drawn primarily from a recent gift to the Walters of 61 pieces from the Giraud and Carolyn Foster collection. The Fosters lived in Yemen during the early 1960s, where Giraud was the personal physician of Imam Ahmed, the last king of Yemen.

The mostly alabaster artifacts in this exhibition date from the sixth century B.C. to the fourth century A.D. To complement these ancient works, the exhibition will also feature paintings and drawings by world-renowned contemporary Yemeni artists Fuad al-Futaih, Hashim Ali Abdalla and Mohamed Zaidan as well as photographs of the country's landscape, architecture and people by Detlef Michael Noack, retired professor of art from the Academy of the Arts, Berlin.

“Due to the generosity of the Fosters, visitors to the Walters will be able to enjoy the exotic, strangely modern-looking alabaster sculpture of ancient Southern Arabia for years to come,” said Walters Director Gary Vikan. “These impressive artifacts will bring to life the art and history of a fascinating civilization of the ancient world, largely unknown to most Westerners.”

The exhibition will include two- and three-dimensional representations of bulls, antelopes and ibexes—which were likely associated with the gods—funerary sculpture known as stelae, statues of worshipers and ritualists, commemorative monuments and inscribed blocks to memorialize the dead and worship the gods.

The generous support of Kathryn Coke Rienhoff has helped to make this exhibition possible.

**Background**

Ancient Greek and Roman authors wrote about Southern Arabia's immense wealth, huge temples and precious statuary. They marveled at its towering, multi-story houses—the first skyscrapers—and elaborate irrigation systems, including the first known high dam. The ancient Arabian kingdoms, particularly those of Saba', Qatabân, Ma'în, Hadramawt and Himyar, flourished from the eighth century B.C. to the fifth century A.D.

The kingdom's wealth was based on two factors: productive agriculture and precious commodity trade with Egypt, the civilizations of the Near East, and later, with the Hellenistic and Roman empires. The main commercial goods were fragrances and spices. Some were produced in South Arabia and Africa; others were imported from as far as India. The most important of these goods were frankincense and myrrh, which played a vital role in many ancient religions as well as in the domestic life of the upper class; for that reason, the caravan trade route through Arabia is called the “Incense Route.”

“What made long-distance caravan trade in ancient Arabia possible was the domestication of the dromedary, a one-humped camel native to the Arabian Peninsula that can survive without water for up to four weeks and carry 150 pounds,” said Walters Curator of Ancient Art Regine Schulz. “This exhibition will include the oldest known depiction of an Arab camel rider.”

The figurative and decorative art of ancient Southern Arabia evolved over a period of at least 1,200 years. Indigenous types and styles developed, although some motifs could have been inspired by the cultures of trading partners, especially when the art increasingly reflected Hellenistic and Roman influence. South Arabian sculptors worked primarily with indigenous stones, particularly calcite-alabaster and limestone. Ancient civilizations could have associated the translucent quality of the calcite-alabaster, a cream-colored stone, with sunlight.

When South Arabian art first became available on the international market, buyers were enthusiastic about the highly polished, structured pieces. Due to this appeal, illegal excavators and some art dealers cleaned pieces before they were sold, making reconstructions very complicated. Of the works from the Fosters’ collection, the alabaster heads and other statuary pieces are not in their original state. The brightly colored exteriors with inlays are absent; instead, only the alabaster stone surface is present. Today curators and conservators can try to reconstruct the faces by examining the less-polished, smooth parts of the surface, which had been painted areas. These parts usually included the hair, eyebrows, eyes and sometimes the mouth, which were all colored by natural pigments of black, red and yellow. Additionally, the eyebrows and eyes of some statues had inlays of shell, glass or semi-precious stones that did not survive due to theft or loss. Most of these inlays and nearly all of the paint are gone, but the faces are still impressive. Exhibition visitors will have the chance to explore these facial reconstructions on a computer, learning how the objects originally looked.

In the exhibition, the work of a *Stela with Female Bust* (1st century B.C.–1st century A.D.), is one of the best of its kind and was probably produced in one of the premier ancient South Arabian workshops. The stela displays the upper torso of a woman emerging from a kind of roundel with an inscription on the base, naming the man who donated the piece to the temple. The figure has raised her right hand, in a gesture of blessing or intercession, and holds in her left hand a wheat bundle, a symbol of fecundity. The interpretation of such female images is still controversial—it is either a priestess, who intercedes to the divinity on behalf of the donor, or one of the very rare human-formed representations of a deity.

The stylized figurative works produced in the early centuries have timeless—even modern—qualities. For example, *Head-Stela with Stylized Face in Raised Relief* (6th–3rd century B.C.) has a highly-stylized, flattish face with features in raised relief, reminiscent of modern art. Sculptured funerary heads and heads carved on stelae were placed into pillars with niches in the entrance areas of tombs and represented the deceased. Only a very few examples of this earliest type of head-stela have been preserved.

### **Contemporary Yemeni Art**

This exhibition will also tell stories of contemporary Yemenis through drawing, painting and photography. Fuad al-Futaih is one of the most famous Yemeni artists. He is known for his experimentations with different materials and colors as he boldly portrays women. He also creates murals, sculptures and graphics as well as children’s book illustrations, stamps and coin medals. Al-Futaih studied art history at University of Cologne, Germany and art at the Academy of Fine Arts in Düsseldorf, Germany. He has exhibited in France, Italy, the United States, Japan and Egypt. In 1989, he received the National Award of Fine Arts from the Republic of Yemen and founded the contemporary art “Gallery no. 1” in the capital of Yemen, San’â’. Two artists who worked and exhibited with him in this gallery are Hashim Ali Abdalla and Mohamed Zaidan. Their works are also well-known in Yemen. In particular, Zaidan’s paintings are so popular that they appear on postcards.

Photographs and video of Yemen by Detlef Michael Noack will also be on view in the exhibition. Noack has traveled extensively in Yemen, and his photography captures the grandeur of the architecture, landscapes and people of the country. Today he lives in Germany and creates documentaries on cultures such as Egypt, Greece and Yemen as well as the influence of ancient world cultures on modern and contemporary art. He studied fine arts, art history and archeology in Berlin and Paris and has taught at universities around the world.

**Publication**

The exhibition is accompanied by a 160–page illustrated catalogue edited by Regine Schulz and Giraud Foster, including comprehensive essays authored by Robert Bianchi, a specialist in Egyptian, Nubian and South Arabian Art and former curator at the Brooklyn Museum of Art, and Antonietta Catanzeriti, a near Eastern Art specialist from the University of Venice, as well as essays by the editors. Distributed by the Walters Art Museum, soft–cover catalogues will be available for \$24.95 in the Museum Store or at [www.thewalters.org](http://www.thewalters.org). The introductory chapters focus on the history of the collection as well as ancient Southern Arabia and its religious art and architecture. There is also a chapter about the Queen of Sheba and the Arabian Incense Route. In addition, works from the exhibition are detailed with descriptions and full photo documentation.

**Admission and Hours**

Admission to *Faces of Ancient Arabia* is free. \*Museum hours are Wednesday–Sunday from 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. The museum is closed on Mondays and Tuesdays and on Independence Day and Labor Day.

**\*Please note: Beginning Wednesday, July 2, the Walters will change its museum hours to 10 a.m.–5 p.m. Wednesday through Sunday, eliminating its Friday evening hours. Instead, the museum will launch a new series—*First Fridays*—which will take place from October–June on the first Friday evening from 5 to 9 p.m.**

**The Walters Art Museum**

The Walters Art Museum is located in Baltimore’s historic Mount Vernon Cultural District at North Charles and Centre streets and is one of only a few museums worldwide to present a comprehensive history of art from the third millennium B.C. to the early 20th century. Among its thousands of treasures, the Walters holds the finest collection of ivories, jewelry, enamels and bronzes in America and a spectacular reserve of illuminated manuscripts and rare books. The Walters’ Egyptian, Greek and Roman, Byzantine, Ethiopian and western medieval art collections are among the best in the nation, as are the museum’s holdings of Renaissance and Asian art. Every major trend in French painting during the 19th century is represented by one or more works in the Walters’ collection.

Peabody Court is the official hotel of the Walters Art Museum. This historic property is just around the corner from the museum and features George’s, a full–service restaurant. For hotel reservations, call 1–800–292–5500 and ask for the special Walters discounted rate.