

# cincinnati art museum

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**\*Images Available Upon Request**

## **Cincinnati Art Museum's reimagined Ancient Middle East gallery to open December 18, 2021**



**CINCINNATI—** Significant physical changes to the Cincinnati Art Museum's existing 2,800-square-foot ancient Middle East gallery are currently underway and are set to open to the public beginning December 18, 2021. The new space will showcase works from across the ancient Middle East, including the most significant collection of Nabataean art in the United States.

The new galleries will be arranged thematically and incorporate contemporary reflections on ancient pasts, encouraging visitors to rethink the way a

twenty-first century museum interprets ancient Middle Eastern art.

The reinstatement includes objects displayed for the first time alongside much lauded strengths of the permanent collection to celebrate the art, innovation, and human endeavor from this vast region. This approach presents political, religious, economic, and cultural connections between the network of empires and city-states of the ancient Middle East. The objects and architectural material in the collection represent centuries of trade and cultural exchange that are formative in our understanding of how the region developed.

Architectural changes include new visitor pathways through the space, the addition of LED lighting, and new custom-built casework. In addition, new windows allow for more natural light and provide a spectacular view of both the front-facing grounds and interior Alice Bimel Courtyard. Adjacent galleries of South Asian art and the art of the Islamic World are also being renovated with updated lighting, casework, and interpretative approach. They will reopen in the spring.

The ancient Middle East is a vast geographic area that stretches from Turkey to the Indus Valley of present-day Pakistan, and from the Caucasus region to the Arabian Peninsula. The term "ancient Middle East" is often applied to objects made between the Neolithic period (eight millennium BCE) and the end of the Sasanian empire (mid-seventh century AD).

The project team is led by Dr. Ainsley M. Cameron, Cincinnati Art Museum's Curator of South Asian Art, Islamic Art & Antiquities, alongside two Andrew W. Mellon Foundation Curatorial Research Fellows, PhD candidates at the University of Cincinnati and Hebrew Union College, respectively. Other significant collaborators to the project beyond the museum include constituents from the Islamic Center of Greater Cincinnati, the Harvard Museum of the Ancient Near East, the Metropolitan Museum of Art, and the University of Oxford.

According to Dr. Cameron, "The new galleries do not provide a chronological, geographical, or materially complete presentation of history, nor does it hold those modes of presentation as a goal. Rather, it is a view into the ancient world that is representative of how we see, embody, feel, and experience these ancient civilizations today, located in the American Midwest and situated in a globally connected world."

Commissioned by the museum and inspired by the objects on view, the galleries will also feature a new artwork by the artist Shahzia Sikander, titled *Caesura*. The monumental painted glass commission will occupy the clerestory windows across both sides of the gallery and create dynamic connections between past and present.

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Sikander is known for innovative works that engage playfully with scale, religion, culture, histories, and iconographies of power. While her own identity connects with Pakistan rather than the countries of the modern Middle East, her practice mines cultural influences and forms that play across this vast region.

“By incorporating a contemporary commission into these ancient galleries, we encourage multiple ways of seeing, reading, and understanding cultures—just as Sikander’s layered work suggests movement, color, density, gesture, and ever-shifting light,” said Dr. Cameron.



The museum’s ancient Middle East collections number more than 1,000 objects, with the monumental architectural fragments from Khirbet et-Tannur, a large Nabataean temple complex located 70 miles north of Petra in present-day Jordan, at its center. The museum is honored to steward the largest collection of Nabataean sculpture outside of Jordan. Khirbet et-Tannur was excavated in 1937 by the Department of Antiquities of Transjordan in collaboration with archaeologist and Cincinnati native Dr. Nelson Glueck.

Relief sculptures depicting deities, carved floral ornamentation, an arch from the central shrine, and terracotta works entered the museum’s collection in 1939, while complementary collections are in The Jordan Museum and the Jordan Archaeological Museum in Amman. Other highlights of the museum’s ancient Middle East collection include lavish royal goods, intricate votive objects, and architectural fragments from the Assyrian, Achaemenid, and Sasanian civilizations, among others.

The majority of the collection has been in storage since 2004 awaiting new gallery space. Constituents are eager to have the collection return to view, particularly the faculty and students at the University of Cincinnati’s Department of Classics, the Nelson Glueck School of Biblical Archaeology at Hebrew Union College, as well as visiting scholars and academics from around the world. The museum has long-standing ties with the government of Jordan and has collaborated often with Jordanian scholars and officials to represent the Nabataean civilization to our audiences. Cincinnati has official “Sister City” status with Amman, Jordan.

The museum is working with the architectural firm GBBN to complete this transformation; Turner Construction is the construction firm. Funding for this major project is made possible by the museum’s [A New View](#) campaign. In 2018, Cincinnati Art Museum received a Infrastructure and Capacity-Building Challenge Grant for this project from the [National Endowment for the Humanities](#) (NEH). Additional support is provided by The Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, Drs. Fuheid and Ingrid Daoud, Daniel and Susan Pfau, Barbara M. Weyand, The H.B., E.W., and F.R. Luther Charitable Foundation, The Louise Taft Semple Foundation and The Thomas J. Emery Memorial. A free 80+ page catalogue, generously funded by the Mellon Foundation, will be available to visitors and for inclusion in university libraries across the world.

## About the Cincinnati Art Museum

The Cincinnati Art Museum is supported by the generosity of individuals and businesses that give annually to [ArtsWave](#). The Ohio Arts Council helps fund the Cincinnati Art Museum with state tax dollars to encourage economic growth, educational excellence and cultural enrichment for all Ohioans. The Cincinnati Art Museum gratefully acknowledges operating support from the City of Cincinnati, as well as our members.

Free general admission to the Cincinnati Art Museum is made possible by a gift from the Rosenthal Family Foundation. Special exhibition pricing may vary. Parking at the Cincinnati Art Museum is free. Visit [cincinnatiartmuseum.org](http://cincinnatiartmuseum.org) for more information.

Image 1: Rendering of reimagined Ancient Middle East gallery from GBBN

Image 2: *Eagle Wrestling with Serpent*, 101–200, Khirbet et-Tannur (Jordan), Nabataean Kingdom (300 BCE–106 CE), limestone, Cincinnati Art Museum; Museum Purchase, 1939.222