Phoenix Art Museum

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ILLUSTRATIONS BROUGHT *RUBAIYAT* TO LIFE, REVOLUTIONIZED PUBLISHING INDUSTRY

Phoenix Art Museum Presents Elihu Vedder's Drawings for the Rubáiyát of Omar Khayyám Direct From the Smithsonian American Art Museum

PHOENIX (October 22, 2008) – On Saturday, November 15, 2008 Phoenix Art Museum presents one of the greatest achievements in American Art, *Elihu Vedder's Drawings for the Rubáiyát of Omar Khayyám*. Organized by The Smithsonian American Art Museum in Washington, D.C., the exhibition showcases 54 complex drawings made by artist Elihu Vedder to accompany Omar Khayyám's classic 12th century Persian poem, the Rubáiyát. The combination of Vedder's hauntingly beautiful images with Khayyám's profound poems resulted in one of the most popular books ever published, a publication that made Vedder famous and revolutionized the publishing industry.

From the moment of its publication, Elihu Vedder's *Rubáiyát of Omar Khayyám* achieved unparalleled success. Released in 1884, the first edition sold out in six days. Critics rushed to acclaim it as a masterwork of American art, and Vedder as the master American artist. Vedder created designs for the entire book -- its cover and lining paper, its compelling drawings, and its eccentric hand-drawn letters. Made with ink, chalk, pencil and watercolor, the highly imaginative, dream-like illustrations provide an early example of the swirling, curvilinear Art Nouveau style.

"Vedder's illustrations, or 'accompaniments' as he preferred to call them, are an excellent and heralded example of 19th century American art," commented Jerry Smith, curator of American art, Phoenix Art Museum. "We are thrilled to partner with The Smithsonian American Art Museum to bring this tremendous collection to Phoenix. It is a true privilege to introduce these works to a broader audience."

The *Rubáiyát* (the plural form of quatrain, or a verse unit of four lines) was written around 1120 by the Persian mathematician, astronomer, and poet Omar Khayyám. He left upwards of 1,000 epigrams on the transience of existence and the uselessness of mathematics, science, or religion to untangle the knotted meaning of life. In the mid-nineteenth century Edward FitzGerald created the first English edition by translating 75 quatrains from various Persian manuscripts of the *Rubáiyát*. Although FitzGerald's edition of the *Rubáiyát*, which appeared anonymously in 1859, was a commercial failure, the poem was embraced by young Pre-Raphaelite artists such as Dante Gabriel Rossetti and aesthetic-movement writers including Algernon Swinburne. In England and America, the slim volume was handed from artist to artist, and it served as a touchstone for the spiritual and poetic in a time of strident materialism.

Vedder was among the artists who became ardent admirers of the verses. He was known as a "visionary" artist who had no peer in depicting unusual, esoteric subjects. His work took on a peculiar, antiquarian aura that complemented the *Rubáiyát* and his interest in the book went beyond the aesthetic to the personal. The tragic deaths of his sons and concurrent births of two more children in the 1870s were remarkably explained; it seemed to Vedder, by the poet's message of undiscoverable fate, death and renewal of life. He included images of himself and his family in several of the drawings.

Drawings for the Rubáiyát of Omar Khayyám features the entire set of Vedder's original illustrations with the exhibition of a small publisher's mark. *The Cup of Death*, 1885-1911,Vedder's mystical oil painting inspired by one of his Rubáiyát drawings, is also included. The exhibition marks the fist time this collection of works has been shown in the Southwest.

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Exhibition Details
Elihu Vedder's Drawings for the Rubáiyát of Omar Khayyám is organized and circulated by the Smithsonian American Art Institute. The exhibition's tour is supported in part by the C.F. Foundation, Atlanta and the William R. Kenan, Jr. Endowment Fund.

This exhibition is presented at Phoenix Art Museum in the Harnett Gallery, November 15, 2008 through February 8, 2009.

Admission to the exhibition is included in general museum admission, which is $10 for adults, $8 for senior citizens (65+), $8 for full-time college students with ID, $4 for children ages 6-17 and free for children under 6 and for museum members. Admission is also free on Tuesdays from 3:00 p.m. – 9:00 p.m. and for everyone on First Fridays, 6:00 p.m. – 10:00 p.m.

Phoenix Art Museum is located in downtown Phoenix at the corner of Central and McDowell Road.

Museum hours are Tuesday, 10:00 a.m. – 9:00 p.m. and Wednesday – Sunday from 10:00 a.m. – 5:00 p.m. The museum is closed on Mondays and major holidays.

Elihu Vedder's Drawings for the Rubáiyát of Omar Khayyám at Phoenix Art Museum is supported by Robert and Joan Cremin, Meridian Bank and Roswell Bookbinding. Promotional support has been provided by Westcor Shopping Centers, Barnes & Noble Booksellers, Latino Future Magazine, Yelp.com and Scottsdale, Glendale, Mesa, Chandler, and Phoenix Public Libraries.

Phoenix Art Museum is offering a full schedule of programs and events relating to the exhibition, including:

- **Beginning Drawing - Saturday, November 15 & Sunday, November 16, 10am – 4pm**
  Learn how to transfer what you see onto paper! Even if you have never drawn before, this class helps you have success from the very beginning. After touring *Elihu Vedder's Drawings for the Rubáiyát,* students explore various drawing techniques and methods for creating a realistic image. Includes instructor demonstrations and hands-on practice. No experience necessary; materials included with tuition. Cost: $150 for Museum Members, $180 for non-members. For more information or to enroll, contact Scottsdale Artists' School at (480) 990-1422 or visit www.ScottsdaleArtSchool.org.
- **Movies at the Museum** - **Sunday, November 30, 1 p.m.**
  The Keeper: The Legend of Omar Khayyám. The narrative of this film combines a based-on-history tale of the Rubáiyát's author, Omar Khayyám, with a contemporary link to the director's ancestors. Filmed almost entirely on location in Samarkand and Bukhara, Uzbekistan. Director Kayvan Mashayekh and Michelle Milosh, production designer, introduce the film and answer questions after the screening.
- **ArtBreak** – Saturday, December 13, 11am
  Jim Ballinger, the Museum's Sybil Harrington Director, chats about Vedder, one of his favorite artists, and the haunting works on display in the special exhibition.

Additional information regarding public programs can be found on the Museum Web site, www.phxart.org.

About Phoenix Art Museum
Phoenix Art Museum is the Southwest's premier destination for world-class visual arts. Popular exhibitions featuring artists such as Rembrandt, Norman Rockwell, Annie Leibowitz and Monet are shown along side the Museum's outstanding collection of more than 18,000 works of American, Asian, European, Latin American, Western American, modern and contemporary art, and fashion design. A community epicenter for nearly fifty years, Phoenix Art Museum presents festivals, live performances, independent art films and educational programs that enlighten, entertain and stimulate. Visitors also enjoy PhxArtKids an interactive space for children, vibrant photography exhibitions through the Museum's landmark

partnership with the Center for Creative Photography, the lushly landscaped Sculpture Garden, dining at Arcadia Farms at Phoenix Art Museum, and shopping at The Museum Store.

To learn more about Phoenix Art Museum, visit PhxArt.org, or call the 24-hour recorded information line at (602) 257-1222.

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