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**SACRED WORD AND IMAGE: FIVE WORLD RELIGIONS  
ON VIEW AT PHOENIX ART MUSEUM**

*Opens January 4, 2012*

PHOENIX (December 8, 2011) – *Sacred Word and Image: Five World Religions*, an exhibition opening on January 4, 2012 at Phoenix Art Museum, features the written word and painted image as expressed in the cultures of Buddhism, Hinduism, Islam, Judaism and Christianity throughout the past 1500 years. The exhibition, on view through March 25, 2012, draws from the collections of Phoenix Art Museum and several prominent private collections, and includes a variety of materials used to document mankind’s significant thoughts and beliefs, including everything from paper, palm leaf and vellum, to wood, lacquer, metal and ivory.

Commented Dr. Janet Baker, Curator of Asian Art, Phoenix Art Museum, “In some instances, complete illustrated manuscripts allow us to understand the original artistic and literary vision of the scribe and illustrator. Other examples preserve the decorative and illustrative images, which tell a visual story that is linked to one of the major tenets of a religious faith. These sacred objects were created to be used as part of rituals and celebrations within their religious traditions.”

The exhibition is presented through five thematic topics:

*SACRED SPACES AND PLACES*

The veneration of holy relics has a long tradition in Christian and Buddhist practices. Depictions of religious structures associated with events in the lives of Jesus, Buddha or Mohammed are often shown on reliquaries, and represent places to which adherents hope to make pilgrimages. In Islam, prayer mats or rugs create a holy space for the sacred act of devotion by an individual wherever they may be at the time of daily calls to prayer. In Buddhism, reliquaries were made to enshrine sacred relics of the Buddha. In 7<sup>th</sup> century Japan, the imperial sponsorship of Buddhism led to the creation of one million examples of small wooden multi-tiered pagodas in which a printed prayer was placed. These printed prayers now constitute one of the oldest examples of printing in the world.

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### *LANGUAGE AS TRANSMISSION*

In Islam, the original language of the prophet Mohammed is Arabic, and it is the only one acceptable for use to maintain the perfection of the divine word as transmitted from Allah. Likewise, in Sri Lankan Buddhism, Pali script is used for sacred texts though the spoken language of the people using them today is different. The Jewish prophets wrote in the Hebrew Bible about the covenantal relationship between the people of Israel and God as well as other major events in their history. The writers of the Gospels and other New Testament books of the Christian Bible recorded events such as Christ's birth, teachings, crucifixion and resurrection. Early Buddhist writers recorded the major events of the Buddha's life, such as his birth, departure from his home, and his quest for enlightenment.

### *OTHERWORLDLY VISIONS AND MIRACULOUS EVENTS*

In much of Christianity, Islam and Buddhism, the belief in the life to come following our earthly existence has resulted in heavenly visions of places where suffering and evil are replaced by experiences of eternal peace, joy or enlightenment. The lives of Jesus, Mohammed and Buddha are filled with miraculous events that transcend ordinary human experience and mark these individuals as divinely inspired beings. In Catholicism, the elevation of the Virgin Mary's status led to the creation of icons and the practice of supplication to her for the alleviation of sins and suffering. This concept of compassion is echoed in the Bodhisattvas of Buddhism, whose multiple eyes or hands represent their super-human abilities to observe suffering and thus grant blessings upon devotees.

### *SYMBOLS OF POWER*

During much of the history of the world, literacy was very limited. Thus, images and symbols became powerful tools to bring understanding of abstract concepts, divine beings and narrative stories to a greater number of potential believers. In Buddhism, the lotus flower is a symbol of purity, and the footprint of the Buddha is a symbol of his divine presence. Other motifs, such as the cross in Christianity, symbolize the pivotal events such as Christ's crucifixion for the redemption of mankind. High-ranking Buddhist monks wear crowns to imbue them with special powers, while Christian bishops and priests may wear crowns to indicate their status within the church hierarchy.

### *DIVINE BEAUTY*

Hinduism, Buddhism and Christianity use images of perfected or transcendent human beauty and specific physical features to convey the divinity of spiritual beings. Judaism and Islam are traditions which include fewer figurative images in sacred art because of the Second Commandment, which prohibits the creation of any idol in the likeness of created things. In Hinduism, deities portrayed with animal features and multiple arms or heads are based on literary traditions that describe their super-human personalities and powers. In Buddhism, the image of the historical Buddha conforms to specific

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texts that describe the ideal proportions and features of the Buddha. The Christian ideals of beauty as depicted in images of the Virgin Mary and infant Jesus are imbued with purity, maternal femininity and child-like innocence and divinity.

To document this special exhibition, an electronic catalogue has been created. This will allow the maximum number of interested “visitors” to appreciate the riches of the written word and image and how it shapes our understanding of ourselves in both historical and current perspectives.

Interpretive and contextual materials have been created by the project directors, Dr. Janet Baker, Curator of Asian Art at Phoenix Art Museum, and Dr. Claudia Brown, Professor of Art History, School of Art, Herberger Institute for Design and the Arts at Arizona State University (ASU). Other faculty at ASU in the Departments of Art History, Religion, and Languages and Literature, as well as scholars elsewhere, are involved. Catalogue essay writers include Dr. Stephen Batalden, Director of the Melikian Center for Russian, Eurasian, and East European Studies Center at ASU; Dr. Sherry Harlacher, Director, the Denison Museum, Ohio; and Dr. Zsuzsanna Gulacsi, Professor of Asian Religious Art at Northern Arizona University. In addition, graduate students in related areas are being offered the opportunity to undertake research on objects in the exhibition through a seminar conducted by Dr. Claudia Brown. The creation of an ongoing website and its design will be undertaken by students at ASU.

*Sacred Word and Image: Five World Religions* is organized by Phoenix Art Museum. The exhibition is presented by U.S. Bancorp Foundation and U.S. Bank Private Client Reserve. Support provided by Amy S. Clague, Coleene and Barry Fernando, Dr. Dhira Mahoney, and Ana and James Melikian.

Admission to the exhibition is included in general museum admission, which is \$12 for adults, \$10 for senior citizens (65+), \$10 for full-time college students with ID, \$6 for children ages 6-17 and free for children under 6 and for museum members.

Phoenix Art Museum is located in downtown Phoenix at the corner of Central and McDowell Road. Museum Hours are Wednesday, 10:00 a.m. – 9:00 p.m., Thursday through Saturday, 10:00 a.m. – 5:00 p.m. and Sunday, Noon – 5:00 p.m. The museum is closed on Mondays, Tuesdays and major holidays. Admission is free on Wednesdays from 3:00 p.m. – 9:00 p.m. and for everyone on First Fridays, 6:00 p.m. – 10:00 p.m.

### **About Phoenix Art Museum**

Phoenix Art Museum is the Southwest’s premier destination for world-class visual arts. Popular international exhibitions are shown alongside 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 vibrant destination for over fifty years, Phoenix Art Museum presents festivals, live performances, independent art films and educational programs that enlighten,

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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 Palette, the Museum’s restaurant, and shopping at The Museum Store. To learn more about Phoenix Art Museum, visit [PhxArt.org](http://PhxArt.org), or call the 24-hour recorded information line at (602) 257-1222.

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