

November 13, 2008

## ***Babylon: Myth and Reality at the British Museum***

**November 13, 2008 – March 15, 2009**

The city of Babylon (in modern-day Iraq) has engendered a rich legacy in art and thought, from great paintings to contemporary film and music. This exhibition brings together such works of imagination with archaeological treasures from ancient Babylon, to reveal the reality behind the legends. *Babylon* will look at the famous myths and stories about the city that are familiar to all whether they are fact or fiction: the Tower of Babel, the Hanging Gardens, Nebuchadnezzar's madness, the Babylonian Captivity and the city's infamous fall. *Babylon* will show how the enduring power of the city's reputation in all its richness has inspired great art and works of imagination. It will go on to examine how Babylon's reputation lives on, changing and evolving, influencing modern art and design concluding with a brief look at Babylon's recent history.

The exhibition will take a focused look at this important city under the rule of King Nebuchadnezzar (605-562BC), telling the story through 100 objects from stunning loans from Paris and Berlin and the Museum's own collection. These include glazed brick panels from the Ishtar Gate and Processional Way at Berlin, not seen in Britain before; together with important cuneiform tablets that bear on the history of the period, such as that listing subsistence rations for Jehoiachin, the exiled king of Judah. From Paris comes the famous tablet describing the dimensions of the ziggurat that provided the inspiration for the Tower of Babel, and another describing the New Year celebrations that took place in and around the Processional Way. Other loans include a newly-excavated Stela of Nabonidus from Saudi Arabia which exemplifies the vengeful destruction wrought on Babylonian monuments by the later Persian administration.

Art is of equal importance to Babylon's story, the show will include oil paintings and prints side by side with ancient sculptures and clay tablets. Key works include William Blake's *Nebuchadnezzar*. John Martin's *Belshazzar's Feast*, several important sixteenth century Flemish and Dutch Tower of Babel paintings, including one by Lucas van Valckenborch, and from the Musée d'Orsay a newly acquired and highly revealing study by Degas for *Semiramis construisante Babylone*. These works will be presented in a new light, looking at their relationships with the ancient sources and the new uses to which their creators put Babylon's history and fame.

Some Babylonian achievements are with us still. The sixty-part division of the minute and the hour, the zodiac and astrology and even concepts still valid in mathematics and astronomy are all due to ancient Babylonian thinkers. The exhibition explores these ideas and their transmission into the modern world. Sometimes the most humble objects are the most interesting, a narrow strip of battered Greek papyrus proves that Greek astronomers copied their tables from Babylonian tablets.

The exhibition concludes with a brief consideration of Babylon's recent history. Since the First World War, the ancient city has been used as a state icon, and selected modern Iraqi material including stamps and banknotes that make use of Babylon's image will be on display. Finally, the exhibition will consider the physical harm that the site of Babylon has suffered as a result of contemporary events and war.

The exhibition is supported by the Blavatnik Family Foundation.

### Press Contacts

Stan Neve  
Brunswick Group  
+1 212-333-3810  
sneve@brunswickgroup.com

Brunswick Group  
James Olley  
+(44) 207-404-5959  
jolley@brunswickgroup.com