

## COURTAULD INSTITUTE EXPERTS REVEAL THE FULL BEAUTY OF PETRA'S 2,000-YEAR-OLD CAVE PAINTING



Detail of a putto playing the flute,  
before and after cleaning  
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Experts from London's Courtauld Institute of Art recently completed the conservation of a rare and exquisite Nabataean wall painting at the World Heritage site of Petra in Jordan, for the Petra National Trust. Conservators Stephen Rickerby and Lisa Shekede from the Courtauld's Conservation of Wall Painting Department worked on the project for three years.

The remarkable painting, that can now be clearly seen for the first time in many years, was unveiled on **Wednesday 18 August 2010** in a ceremony marking the conclusion of the fifth and final phase of conservation work. HRH Prince Raad Bin Zaid, Chief Chamberlain and Petra National Trust Chairman, Minister of Tourism Suzanne Afanah, and Petra Development Region Tourism Authority Chief Commissioner Nasser Shraideh attended the ceremony.

Dating from around the 1<sup>st</sup> century AD, the painting is the most important surviving example of Nabataean wall painting and a unique *in situ* example of figurative painting from the culture of the Nabataeans who were among the most successful merchants of their day. Although originally a nomadic people of ancient Arabia, they built the spectacular city of Petra as their capital. A UNESCO World Heritage site since 1985, Petra flourished as an economic and religious centre from the 3<sup>rd</sup> century BC for some 400 years and was at an important crossroads for the silk, spice and other trade routes that linked China, India and Southern Arabia with Egypt, Syria, Greece and Rome.

The paintings, among Petra's most remarkable treasures, are in a cave complex at the canyon of Siq al-Barid in Beidha, known as 'Little Petra', about 5 km away from the main site. They are located within a 'biclinium' which comprises a principal chamber and a recess, where ritual dining is thought to have taken place. The most outstanding painting covers the vault and the walls of the recess. When the Courtauld team started work, it was in a state of severe deterioration, blackened by smoke from fires lit when Petra's caves were inhabited by local communities. It was also damaged by graffiti and attempted thefts of sections of the vault painting had led officials to fence off the cave.

The painting was extremely fragile and susceptible to damage and it was believed that cleaning the mural would be impossible so the programme focused on stabilisation as the highest priority. However, in a major breakthrough in 2008, a safe and effective means of cleaning was developed by the British conservation specialists.

The Courtauld conservation expert Stephen Rickerby described what has emerged from the blackened layers as "really exceptional and staggeringly beautiful, with an artistic and technical quality that's quite unlike anything else". Three different vines, grape, ivy and bindweed, all associated with Dionysus, the ancient Greek god of wine, have been identified, while the birds include a Demoiselle crane and a Palestine sunbird with luscious colours. The scenes are populated by putti, including one cloaked in a fur-skin, playing a flute while seated in a vine-scroll. Others pick fruit and fight off birds pecking at the grapes.

The painting is exceptional in its sophistication, extensive palette and luxurious materials, including gold leaf. The use of gilding to highlight the autumnal leaves of the vinescroll decoration was an outstanding discovery, adding to the unique quality and value of the painting. Rickerby said: "The painting shows a lot of external influences from the ancient world and is as good as, or better than, some of the Roman paintings you see, for example at Pompei... This has immense art-historical importance, reflecting a synthesis of Hellenistic–Roman cultural influences."

Professor David Park, Director of the Courtauld's Conservation of Wall Painting Department, said: "Petra is a vast site at the cultural crossroads of the eastern Mediterranean and among the rock-cut tombs and temples the survival of a fragile wall painting that decorated a dining hall is extraordinary... The quality of the painting is matched by the luxury of its materials, including gilding and translucent glazes. It is the only surviving *in situ* figurative wall painting from the Nabataean civilisation that created Petra and provides an incredibly rare insight into the lifestyle of this ancient and little-known civilisation."

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For further information and images please contact:

**Sue Bond Public Relations**

Hollow Lane Farmhouse, Thurston, Bury St Edmunds, Suffolk IP31 3RQ, UK

Tel. +44 (0)1359 271085, Fax. +44 (0)1359 271934

E-mail. [info@suebond.co.uk](mailto:info@suebond.co.uk), [www.suebond.co.uk](http://www.suebond.co.uk)

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