



## **Smithsonian and Singapore Organize World Tour of Shipwreck Treasure**

*Exhibition Highlights One of the Most Important Marine Archaeological Finds of the Late 20th Century*

*Singapore, 27 July 2010* - The Freer Gallery of Art and Arthur M. Sackler Gallery of the Smithsonian Institution in Washington, D.C., the Singapore Tourism Board and the National Heritage Board of Singapore today announced a partnership to organize the first exhibition and international tour of one of the oldest and most important marine archaeological finds of the late 20th century.

The exhibition will focus on the 1998 discovery of a ninth-century shipwreck and its astonishing cargo of about 60,000 objects from Tang dynasty China, ranging from mass-produced ceramics to rare and extraordinary items of finely worked gold. The cargo had lain undisturbed on the ocean floor for more than 1,100 years until sea-cucumber divers discovered it off the coast of Indonesia's Belitung Island. The ship, an Arab *dhow*, and its contents confirm the existence of a direct maritime trade route (alluded to in ancient Chinese and Arabic texts) from China to the Persian Gulf and beyond—well before the Portuguese set sail in the 15th century.

The discovery offers scholars and scientists an unprecedented time capsule of knowledge about the period and a wealth of unanswered questions that will fuel research for decades to come.

The grand opening of the exhibition will take place in Singapore in late 2010 or early 2011. The Sackler Gallery will host the U.S. premiere in spring 2012, coinciding with the museum's 25th anniversary celebration. The exhibition is expected to travel for about five years to major museums in Asia, the United States, Europe, the Middle East and Australia.

"We are grateful for the opportunity to collaborate with Singapore on this historic project," said Julian Raby, director of the Freer and Sackler galleries. "The exhibition and tour will enable people around the world to connect with these extraordinary artifacts and feel the impact of a remarkable story that forever changes our view of ancient global trade. Singapore has acted with great understanding and forethought by protecting and preserving

these objects collectively as a world treasure and for generously presenting them to the public in the form of an international travelling exhibition.”

The cargo, known as the *Tang Shipwreck Treasure: Singapore’s Maritime Collection*, was purchased by Singapore with the support of the estate of Tan Sri Khoo Teck Puat shortly after its discovery but has never been publically displayed on a large scale. In the years following their recovery from the sea the objects have remained in private storage, where they have been studied and carefully restored.

“The *Tang Shipwreck Treasure* has a special meaning for Singapore,” said Aw Kah Peng, chief executive of the Singapore Tourism Board. “Its compelling story resonates with Singapore’s growth into a premier port and trading hub. Situated at the crossroads of the East and West, Singapore has always benefitted from the cultural exchange created through trade among the Chinese, Middle Eastern and Southeast Asian civilizations, and maintains the same cosmopolitan outlook today. We are particularly honoured to join with the Smithsonian’s Freer and Sackler galleries to develop this important exhibition.”

The cargo will provide the focal point for an exhibition of dramatic scope, illustrating the dynamic interchange of ninth-century geopolitical powerhouses along the maritime silk route from Changan (modern Xian) to Baghdad, as well as the human stories of those who toiled in China’s factory-like kilns and the ship’s crew, whose few surviving belongings provide clues to their multi-ethnic identities.

The exhibition will reflect the range and size of the find and its significance, as the largest consignment of Tang Dynasty export goods ever discovered: lead ingots, bronze mirrors, spice-filled jars, thousands of glazed bowls, ewers and other fine ceramics, including some of the oldest cobalt-blue-and-white ceramics made in China. Among the anticipated highlights of the exhibition is a small cache of spectacular, intricately worked vessels of silver and gold, unparalleled in quality and design. Why they were carried by the ship and who was destined to receive them are among many questions provoked by the find.

“The extraordinary story of the cargo—a testament of cultural exchanges and interactions in Asia via the Maritime Silk Route—resonates with our work to promote understanding of the rich cultures that make up Singapore’s multi-ethnic society,” said Michael Koh, chief executive of the National Heritage Board. “Through our partnership with the Freer and Sackler galleries, this remarkable story can now be presented to a wider audience, both locally and internationally.”

Often referred to as the Belitung Shipwreck, in reference to the nearby Indonesian island, the *dhow*, approximately 21 feet wide and 58 feet long, is the only vessel of Arab

origin ever found in Southeast Asian waters. Although the goods carried by the ship originated in China, the ship is similar to a type built in the Middle East during the period and for centuries thereafter. The port of departure and destination are unknown, but scholars believe that the ship was bound for the Middle East with a full load of goods from a southern Chinese port, possibly Guangzhou. An accurate reproduction of this vessel, sewn together without the use of a single nail, has been made in Oman and was recently presented by the Sultanate of Oman to the government and people of Singapore. Named *The Jewel of Muscat*, the vessel sailed from Muscat Feb. 16 and arrived in Singapore on July 3.

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The Singapore Tourism Board ([www.stb.com.sg](http://www.stb.com.sg)) is an economic development agency for tourism, one of Singapore's key industry sectors. The National Heritage Board ([www.nhb.gov.sg](http://www.nhb.gov.sg)) promotes the development of Singapore's cultural and heritage sectors.

The Freer and Sackler galleries are the Smithsonian's museums of Asian art, located on the National Mall in Washington, D.C.

For more information about the Arthur M. Sackler Gallery and the Freer Gallery of Art and their exhibitions, programs and other events, the public may visit [www.asia.si.edu](http://www.asia.si.edu). For general Smithsonian information, the public may call (202) 633-1000 or TTY (202) 633-5285.

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