The Berkshire Museum Participates in Project to Provide Access to Ancient Palmyrene Artifacts

Castleton University Digital Archaeology Project will be on site at the museum Tuesday and Wednesday, June 8 and 9

[Pittsfield, MA] – Researchers from the Castleton University Digital Archaeology Project (CUDAP) will document the Berkshire Museum’s collection of six ancient Palmyrene funerary reliefs through a series of 3D scans over the course of two days this week. Work will be completed in the museum’s Feigenbaum Hall of Innovation by professor Matthew D. Moriarty, Ph.D., Director of Grants and Director of Archaeology at Castleton University, and intern Philip Williams of Pittsfield. Members of the press are invited to observe the researchers at work June 8 and 9 by appointment. Please contact Kim Donoughe, Marketing and Brand Manager, at kdonoughe@berkshiremuseum.org or 413.443.7171 ext. 321 to schedule photo opportunities or interviews.

Documenting the Berkshire Museum’s ancient Palmyrene reliefs is just one part of CUDAP’s efforts to explore new avenues in archaeological research and to digitally curate cultural heritage resources. To date, CUDAP has focused primarily on documenting the artifacts from their own archaeological excavations or from private collections in the Castleton and South Lake Champlain area and has just recently begun to partner with museums. According to Professor Matthew Moriarty, Ph.D., the use of 3D technologies is expected to see significant growth in museums, archaeology, and related disciplines in the coming years. The most recent work by CUDAP student researchers can be viewed online at sketchfab.com/CUDAP/collections/recent-cudap-models.
“Recent history at Palmyra makes it incredibly important to make high-resolution 3D models of Palmyrene art and artifacts available to the public and professionals across the globe,” explained Professor Moriarty.

The six Palmyrene busts at the Berkshire Museum are the second largest collection of such works outside Syria after the Metropolitan Museum of Art’s collection of more than 20. The funerary portraits were purchased by Berkshire Museum Founder Zenas Crane from Dr. Azeez Khayat in 1903 to add to the new museum’s growing collection. The pieces are in good condition and considered amongst the finest examples of Palmyrene reliefs outside of Syria, according to expert testimony. Alone, each of the limestone busts are unique, expressive artworks that represent the likeness and status of the individuals they represent. Together, the collection creates a snapshot of Palmyrene culture in the early centuries CE.

Palmyra, which began as a Mesopotamian settlement during the Stone Age, has a storied past. The region was controlled by various nations and empires over the millennia including Aram, Persia, Rome, and later Syria and France and its location at the crossroads of Europe, Africa, and Asia made it a key location along the Silk Road. Because of this, ancient Palmyrene art and culture blended elements of Greek, Roman, Levantine, Persian, Christian, Arab, and Semitic influences. The six busts in the Berkshire Museum’s collection are from sometime between the 1st and 3rd centuries CE, a period in which Palmyra was a part of the Roman Empire. Much of the historical artwork and culture of the region has been destroyed in recent years under occupation by ISIS which makes conservation and accessibility of the surviving works all the more important.

“Museums play an important role in preserving and interpreting the cumulative culture of our world,” commented Berkshire Museum Executive Director Jeff Rodgers. “Through this partnership, we are pleased to make these priceless artifacts available globally.”
The scans captured at the museum this week will be turned into digital 3D models of the reliefs for the dual purpose of preserving global cultural heritage and making these resources available to researchers and educators worldwide. In the months ahead, the museum looks forward to receiving a 3D-printed copy of one of the busts that can safely travel to classrooms and other locations around the county and be used in hands-on learning in order to expand access to the rich collections of this community museum.

About the Berkshire Museum

Located at 39 South Street in downtown Pittsfield, Massachusetts, the Berkshire Museum combines art, science, and history to create thought-provoking experiences for the whole family through interactive programs, interdisciplinary exhibitions, and engaging online series. The museum is currently open 5 days each week. Reservations are highly recommended. Plan your visit at berkshiremuseum.org or go to explore.berkshiremuseum.org to enjoy the Berkshire Museum wherever you are.