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PREMIERE PRESENTATION

Holy Image, Hallowed Ground: Icons from Sinai
At the J. Paul Getty Museum, the Getty Center, November 14, 2006–March 4, 2007

LOS ANGELES—In the shadow of the rugged Mount Sinai in Egypt lies Saint Catherine's, the world’s oldest continuously operating Christian monastery, established in the sixth century. Artistic treasures from this ancient site will travel to Los Angeles for Holy Image, Hallowed Ground: Icons from Sinai, at the J. Paul Getty Museum, the Getty Center, November 14, 2006–March 4, 2007. The exhibition offers an unprecedented look at some of the oldest surviving icons from the Byzantine world, and provides rare insight into monastic life, past and present, at the remote, historic monastery. This Premiere Presentation is one of the most ambitious and important projects ever undertaken by the J. Paul Getty Museum, which is the sole venue for the exhibition. The exhibition has been organized by the J. Paul Getty Museum in partnership with the Holy Monastery of Saint Catherine at Mount Sinai and the Supreme Council of Antiquities, Egypt.

The works on view were commissioned by the monastery or acquired as gifts over more than a thousand years, and have been in the continuous care of generations of monks at Saint Catherine's. Featured in this exhibition are 43 icons—holy pictures or emblems regarded as sacred in the Greek and Russian churches—six manuscripts, and four liturgical objects used by the monks. These illustrate the central role of the icon in religious practice and introduce the public to the compelling history of Saint Catherine's. Standing at the center of an international crossroads, the monastery functioned as a place of cultural exchange, attracting pilgrims throughout the Middle Ages, and continues to do so to this day.

“This exhibition presents an unprecedented opportunity to enter the world of Saint Catherine’s without venturing to Sinai. But this experience will still feel like a pilgrimage,”

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says Michael Brand, director, the J. Paul Getty Museum. “To see these works in the flesh is to make a direct connection to the traditions that have been carried on over centuries at one of the world’s most holy sites.”

A ten-minute documentary film, *Holy Image, Hallowed Ground*, commissioned to complement the exhibition, explores the integration of art and liturgy at the monastery. Against the breathtaking backdrop of Sinai, viewers will see Saint Catherine’s unbroken tradition unfold in scenes of the Orthodox Easter service, along with interviews that will shed light on life at the ancient site.

The present fortress and basilica were founded when the Byzantine Emperor Justinian commissioned its construction at the foot of Mount Sinai in the sixth century. Even with the arrival of Islam in the seventh century, the monastery continued to operate and to attract pilgrims from both the Byzantine East and the Latin West. Because of its isolated geographic location, it was unaffected by iconoclasm, when icons in Constantinople were destroyed in the eighth and ninth centuries. As a result, the monastery possesses the finest and most extensive collection of icons dating from the sixth century to the present. These include some of the earliest and most profound examples of Christian art.

The exhibition examines the enduring tradition of Saint Catherine’s in three sections, opening with an exploration of the icon as a holy object in the Orthodox Church. On view are objects depicting narrative scenes and individual saints from both the pre- and post-iconoclastic periods, foremost among them a sixth-century icon of the apostle Peter.

The second section examines the role of the icon in prayer and liturgical rites. To convey a sense of how these objects sanctify the space of the church, an area of the exhibition has been designed to evoke the main basilica at Saint Catherine’s.

The exhibition closes with a look at Saint Catherine’s as a pilgrimage site with icons and manuscripts depicting the monastery as well as saints and holy figures that have special significance for the site. Included are manuscripts by the seventh century abbot of Sinai, John Climacus, and images of Moses, the Virgin of the Burning Bush, and Saint Catherine. Demonstrating Sinai’s role as a site of cultural exchange, this section will also include an illuminated manuscript written in Arabic and several icons by western Crusader artists.

The co-curators for *Holy Image, Hallowed Ground: Icons from Sinai* are Kristen Collins and Robert S. Nelson. Kristen Collins is assistant curator in the department of manuscripts, the J. Paul Getty Museum. Robert S. Nelson is Robert Lehman Professor of the History of Art at Yale University.

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Note to editors: Images available on request.

**MEDIA CONTACT:** Miranda Carroll
Getty Communications Dept.
310-440-6427
mcarroll@getty.edu

The J. Paul Getty Trust is an international cultural and philanthropic institution devoted to the visual arts that features the Getty Conservation Institute, the Getty Foundation, the J. Paul Getty Museum, and the Getty Research Institute. The J. Paul Getty Trust and Getty programs serve a varied audience from two locations: the Getty Center in Los Angeles and the Getty Villa in Malibu.

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