

News Release

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Images Available Upon Request

Contact: Jordyn Strange, Marketing and PR Coordinator, jstrange@putnam.org, (563) 336-7285 ex. 268

Brand New Discovery at the Putnam Museum and Science Center

“Magic Mirror” rediscovered within the Putnam collection after over 100 years in storage

DAVENPORT, Iowa (February 25, 2024) - The Putnam Museum and Science Center unveiled an amazing discovery at the fundraising gala Mysteries at the Museum last night. For over 100 years the Putnam has had a “Magic Mirror” from Japan sitting in collections without realizing it. Nora Moriarty and the Putnam curatorial team discovered the mirror in 2022 and after a lengthy authentication process, the museum is ready to bring the mirror to the public.

The magic mirror is a bronze mirror that is engraved on the back in Chinese characters reading “Homage to Amitābha [Buddha]”. But what is so special about this mirror is that when light hits it at just the right angle, an image that would otherwise be completely hidden to the naked eye is projected onto the wall. These mirrors were popular in Japan during the Edo and Meiji periods, and are exceedingly rare as they were difficult to make and possibly expensive to purchase. As of today we know of only three of this type of incredible mirror in the United States: this mirror, one at the Cincinnati Art Museum, and one at the Metropolitan Museum of Art.

“This is a significant find not only for the Putnam Museum, but for the world as well” shared Nora Moriarty Curatorial Project Coordinator. “There are very few of these mirrors currently identified, and a new addition like ours may help scholars learn about where and when they were created.”

This mirror was purchased in 1904 in Japan by Charles Ficke who brought it back to his home town of Davenport and later included it in a large donation to the Putnam Museum. In his records, Ficke lists this mirror as a “Magic Mirror” but over time that knowledge was lost to the Putnam Museum records until one Friday afternoon when Nora Moriarty began to become curious about the bronze mirrors in the Putnam collection after reading about one recently discovered at the Cincinnati Art Museum. After some trial and error with a flashlight, the team saw evidence that this mirror might truly be magic. With the help of Genesis Health System the museum was able to perform a CT scan on the mirror so that they could see the layers inside. What was found was an amazing image of Amitābha Buddha between the layers of the mirror that can only be seen under perfect lighting conditions.

“It was an exciting moment, illuminating the mirror in the darkness with a flashlight. I thought I saw the image of a buddha that day, but I wasn’t sure. Seeing my suspicions confirmed in that CT scan was beyond exciting. I knew then that we truly had something special here at the Putnam Museum” shared Nora.

The Magic Mirror will be on temporary display beginning Tuesday February 27 for a limited time at the Putnam. It will eventually be moved to a permanent display during a separate project at

the museum connected to the capital campaign. Interested parties can visit the Putnam's website to find out more about the specifics of the mirror.

Thank you to Jordan Voigt, Brandi Eriksen, Vanessa Fowler of Genesis Health System for donating their time and equipment to help authenticate this discovery. Special thanks to Dr. Hou-Mei Sung and Kelly Rectenwald of the Cincinnati Art Museum, and Janet Leigh Foster of the University of London for sharing their expertise.

###

About the Putnam: The Putnam Museum brings to life a sense of place, time and purpose to ignite human potential and inspire our diverse community to learn about and care for our world and all its people. For more than 150 years, guests have experienced the Putnam's permanent exhibits ranging from Unearthing Ancient Egypt to our family-favorite science galleries, as well as an array of programs and internationally recognized traveling exhibits. The Putnam is dedicated to helping guests discover and explore in a friendly and engaging atmosphere, including wheelchair access throughout the museum and theater, sensory friendly maps and backpacks, and wheelchairs available to borrow upon request. For more information about events, exhibits, and accessibility visit putnam.org.