

It is Time to Pick Up Stones

Forum >
Afghanistan

There is no doubt that the world community made a tragic mistake (if not committed a crime) when, after the withdrawal of the Soviet troops from Afghanistan, it assumed the position of an outside witness. Not only have thousands of Afghan people died during the war, but a tremendous blow struck the ancient heritage of this country, as well. Fanatical Taliban drew the country into the darkness of the middle ages. Their acts of vandalism reached a peak with a live demonstration: the destruction of the Buddha statues in Bamiyan. And this was not the only act they committed against the cultural heritage of their own country!

By Victor Sarianidi

As we all know, the best pieces of Graeco-Bactrian art were located in Afghanistan. These artefacts were so marvelous that they charmed everyone, the scientist, the connoisseur of art, and the common man alike. Hellenism in the East is one of the brightest pages in the history of mankind. It is a subject that always attracted the interest of various scientists and which is not yet completely studied. One of the recent examples of this were the excavations of the Hellenistic city of Ai Khanum (possibly, Alexandria upon the Oxus). The excavations by French archaeologists headed by Professor Paul Bernard had brought to light the ruins of a typical Greek city. At first, the findings numbered in the dozens, then in the hundreds and thousands. By the end, it became necessary to arrange a special exhibition hall in the Kabul Museum where the marvelous Hellenistic pieces of art could be housed. The displays in the Ai Khanum hall included splendid marble sculptures, architectural details, and monumental sculptures that once decorated the houses, squares, and fountains of the city.

Another gem of the Kabul Museum was the world-renowned collection from Begram found by French archaeologists in the 1930s. It consisted of



Fragment of a terracotta relief showing the bust of a man resting his head in his hand in a gesture expressing contemplation or perhaps sorrow. The garment covers his head. Found at Nejero. Formerly Kabul Museum.

splendidly carved ivories in classic Indian style and Hellenistic artefacts made in different countries of the world. Also worth mentioning is the royal treasure

of the Tilya Tepe (Golden Hill) necropolis in Bactria with its 20,000 gold artefacts (small gold plates, weapons, crowns and so on). The significance of

this unique collection of Hellenistic art objects is great. It threw light on the historic period of mankind which, until then, was called the "dark period" due to the lack of sufficient information. The objects of the collection reflect the synthesis of different art styles and trends. For example, a single object could demonstrate the combination of artistic methods from countries such as Greece, Rome, China, Siberia, India, and Central Asia.

Unlike the collections from Begram or Ai Khanum, the Tilya Tepe collection has never been displayed in any country of the world, even in Afghanistan! Finally, one should not forget that Kushan and Buddhist artefacts from Afghanistan belong not only to the history of this country, but they are part and parcel of the history of the whole of mankind. Scientists from all over the world explore and study them. All of these objects, as well as those not mentioned here, were the best items of the Kabul Museum, a museum that is now ruined and completely looted. We know nothing definite about the fate of these collections. We can just guess that most objects were destroyed during the vandalistic bombardment of the museum, while others were looted and sold in different antique shops and bazaars.

It is absolutely clear that we should immediately launch a worldwide campaign for the search and preservation of what has survived. As a first step it seems necessary to locate the lost collections and then, under the aegis of UNESCO, to set up a bank account where individuals as well as organizations could make donations. Thus, we can arrange a certain pool that can be

used later during the negotiations with different collectors and, probably, museums in our attempts to buy back the collections. At the same time, UNESCO should arrange a tender and select the best project for the construction of a new museum in Kabul. An international organizing committee of specialists on the East should also be formed, and a leading academic, such as perhaps, Professor Paul Bernard (France) approached to head it.

I believe these should be the first, urgent steps if we all realize and agree that the time has come to pick up stones. <

Professor Victor Sarianidi was born and raised in Tashkent (Central Asia), graduated from the University there and then moved to Moscow, where he started to work as an archaeologist in the Institute of Archaeology of the Academy of Sciences of Russia, and where he still works. He started his excavations in Central Asia more than fifty years ago, specializing in the prehistoric period. From 1978-79, he excavated six tombs in Afghanistan, which date from the first century BC to the first century AD and which contained 20,000 gold items. The fate of this Tilya Tepe treasury is unknown. Thirty years ago in the Kara-Kum desert of Turkmenistan, he excavated a civilization yet unknown to scientists, a civilization of ancient Mesopotamian type. These excavations in Margiana are still going on. The last year, during the excavations of the Gonur necropolis, he found a cylinder seal with a Sumerian inscription on it. His next field season will start in April this year. E-mail: veronica1674@hotmail.com

The Buddhas of Bamiyan [continued]:

A Turn-Around for Afghanistan's Cultural Heritage?

"...It seems, nevertheless, a miracle that these incredible Buddhas have more or less survived in a country in which they have become strangers who were not able to flee..." wrote Juliette van Krieken in *IIAS Newsletter* 23 (March 2001). As the world watched, the Buddhas have since been destroyed, but their story and that of SPACH and others involved continues. Below, Juliette van Krieken deals with the destruction and the aftermath.

Forum >
Afghanistan

By Juliette van Krieken

Destruction

On 26 February 2001, Mullah Omar, the official leader of the Taliban movement in Afghanistan, issued the following decree:

"In view of the Fatwa [religious edict] of prominent Afghan scholars and the verdict of the Afghan Supreme Court, it has been decided to break down all statues/idols present in different parts of the country. This is because these idols have been gods of the infidels, who worshipped them, and these are respected even now and perhaps may be turned into gods again. The real god is only Allah, and all other false gods should be removed."

To most, this statement came as a shocking surprise, but to others, it was not totally unexpected. Nevertheless, it was a chilling development, particularly since, shortly before the date of the above decree, the Society for the Preservation of Afghanistan's Cultural Heritage (SPACH) had been assured that the Taliban would respect Afghan cultural heritage. The same Mullah Omar had, in fact, previously issued several decrees on preservation.²

Such a policy change can only be interpreted as a victory for the hardliners within the Taliban and was certainly the

result of the influence of, as we now all know, al-Qaeda representatives. The Taliban's decision on the destruction was answered by an outcry from around the world, including from many Islamic countries. Kofi Annan, Secretary General of the UN, condemned the decision, and UNESCO sent a UN special envoy, Mr La France (a former Chair of SPACH), to Afghanistan. But despite all the efforts, the Buddhas were most cruelly blown up in early March 2001.

At the exhibition last autumn called "Afghanistan: A Millenary History" in Barcelona (to be shown this spring in Musée Guimet, Paris; see p.45), a video recording of this moment was shown every two minutes and, with each replay, the spectator got an icy feeling and reactions ranged from despair to anger and even fear. It is a tragedy for the world, especially the Buddhist world, but particularly for the Afghans themselves. They have lost almost everything, and now they have even been robbed of the outstanding monuments of their rich past by a temporary, foreign influenced, oppressive regime.

There are two especially grim facts that should be noted. Firstly, according to the Taliban, the decree to destroy idols was based on Islamic law. This claim, however, is only true in the context of the purist views subscribed to by *wahhabi* Muslims, who condemn every depiction of living beings.

According to other interpretations of the Qur'an, every depiction created before Islam emerged (as was the case with the Buddhas) should be respected. Perhaps it is also needless to add at this point that Buddha is no god and that there were no Buddhists left in Afghanistan. Therefore, even on restrictive religious grounds there was no reason for the destruction of the Buddhas. Secondly, following September 11, it became clear how 'easily' the Taliban could be conquered. This made one realize even more how useless this destruction had been. It also showed how easily manipulators can take away such a long-standing, inspiring, and strengthening monument in but a very brief moment.

Luckily, the publicity that followed was enormous and positive. Memory of the Buddhas did not perish into an obscure corner. Ironically, their destruction made them even more famous than they would ever have been without this tragedy.

'In Between'

Apart from the fate of the Buddhas, there were many other cultural tragedies that resulted in various dilemmas. Mullah Omar's devastating decree of February 2001 was not only directed at the Buddhas of Bamiyan, but at all objects of cultural heritage in Afghanistan that depicted living beings. After many years of plunder and inflicted damage, the Kabul Museum once again fell victim. Two valuable statues that were too heavy to bear and therefore left behind in the museum were main targets, namely the already beheaded, half statue of the great King Kanishka (from Surkh Kotal, dating from the second century AD), which was better known as 'the

continued on page 16 >

continued from page 15 >

feet of Kanishka', and the silent Tepe Maranjan Bodhisattva, dated third to fourth century AD. The objects from the Kabul Museum collection which were stored for security reasons in the Ministry of Information and Culture were also brutally smashed.

Art in Exile

Reflective discussions started immediately after the announcement of the decree and the ensuing destruction. According to international law, cultural heritage material should not be taken out of its home country, not even for safe-keeping. UNESCO's general policy has always been to return, if possible, illegally exported items back to the country of origin.³ In the case of Afghanistan since February/March 2001, this policy turned out to be extremely counterproductive. At the same time, stories were circulating about Afghans from all sides having pleaded already for more than ten years with outsiders to take pieces out of the country because they feared for the fate of those artefacts.

Eventually, on 30 March of last year, UNESCO wisely changed its policy and decided to support moving endangered art out of Afghanistan. Subsequently, UNESCO backed the "Afghan Museum in Exile", founded by Mr Bucherer-Dietschi, director of Bibliotheca Afghanistanica, in Autumn 2000 in the Swiss village of Bubendorf. Afghan art rescued or returned by collectors who did not know their pieces had been stolen is safeguarded at this museum. UNESCO also made an agreement with SPACH and the Cultural Heritage Foundation that allowed these organizations to obtain (without payment!) Afghan artefacts and safeguard them until the appropriate time arrived for their return to Afghanistan. A long-existing moral dilemma for SPACH, namely whether it would be right to acquire Afghan art knowing illegal export might be stimulated, was to a great extent solved by this; however, the question remained as to whether such art should be purchased or only obtained for free.

For merchants working in the illicit art market, there was suddenly justification for their activities. They exclaimed that, had they not taken them, these artefacts would have been destroyed! Indeed, this could have happened in the case of several items.

Hence, the time is ripe for UNESCO and others working for the protection of cultural heritage to discuss and find a just policy to prevent possible destruction of cultural heritage in the future. This not only means being on the alert for destructive developments concerning tangible heritage, but also agreeing on rules and regulations that facilitate the temporary export of cultural property if needed, even without the permission of the authorities concerned.

Reconstruction and Return

Life changed after September 11. For Afghanistan, everything turned out for the better. With regard to its cultural heritage, a fact-finding mission by Mr Bucherer-Dietschi⁴ was followed in early January 2002 by UNESCO drafting a new strategy for the preservation of tangible cultural heritage.

Since March 2001, there have been many ideas to rebuild the Buddhas outside Afghanistan. The defeat of the Taliban brought about serious plans to reconstruct the large Buddha back in its own niche. Japan is rumoured to be willing to take the lead.⁵ The Afghan government officially requested UNESCO to organize an international seminar on the reconstruction of the Buddhas of Bamiyan,⁶ which is now planned for May 2002 in Kabul and Bamiyan.

Many questions will arise related to, for example, practical, ethical, and spiritual matters. Primarily, the intention and goals of any reconstruction should be subject to agreement. Should it, for instance, result in a centre for Buddhist pilgrimage, as a major tourist attraction, or as a monument to remember Taliban and al-Qaeda misdeeds? Secondly, should the reconstruction be symbolic, or should a real copy be made? For example, the Buddhas could be rebuilt according to their conditions in the years 1995 or 2000, or even back to their original state about 1500 years ago, when they could be seen with metal masks and gilded all over. What material and what techniques to use in the reconstruction will also be points for discussion.

Thirdly, although it is of paramount importance what the Afghans themselves want, the ideas of Buddhists should also be taken into consideration. According to Buddhism, everything is transitory, so whether the Buddhas should be resurrected at all could also surface as an issue. On the other hand, in Buddhism the circle of life exists: every construction depends on destruction, every destruction depends on construction.⁷

In my opinion, a copy, especially one of such an historically and spiritually significant monument, made under difficult circumstances, will not even have a spark of the power of the original. To have an empty niche might be preferable

as an object of meditation and as a symbol of all that is precious that we lost over the centuries, and as a warning for generations to come.

Not only is a rebuilding of the Buddha being planned, but the reconstruction of the museum is also being considered. When will the time be ripe for the return to Afghanistan of those objects scattered out over the world? Yet, history tends to be repeated time and again, and true commitments, "what-if" scenarios, and other securities will need to be considered.

It is important to be aware that the main destruction and plunder of the Kabul Museum and many other sites did not take place only during the Taliban years, but also, and especially, during the Mujahideen years (1993-1996).

Most of the Kabul Museum's collection that remained in Afghanistan has been destroyed. However, the precious Bactrian hoard of Tilya Tepe, consisting of 20,000 gold objects of immense value, excavated just before the Soviet invasion by an Afghan-Russian expedition in 1978, is presumably still in the underground vaults of the Presidential Palace in Kabul. For safety reasons, UNESCO intends to keep them there for the time being.

The organizations that made agreements with UNESCO will surely return their artefacts as soon as this is feasible. Hopefully, other institutions and individuals will feel the same responsibility and return items belonging to Afghanistan, irrespective of whether those items were legally or illegally acquired. To this end, Afghanistan will at least have to ratify and enforce the legal instruments concerning protection of cultural heritage (e.g. the 1954 and 1970 UNESCO Conventions),⁸ and, in this way, Afghan authorities will be able to put more pressure on those keeping Afghan artefacts and better control the illicit export of its cultural heritage.⁹

Conclusion

The people involved in Afghanistan's cultural heritage went through many ups and downs this past year: from horror and shock in February/March, to mixed feelings about policies in general, to relief and hope since November. In spite of the destruction of the Buddhas, the situation of Afghanistan's cultural heritage appears more promising now when compared to one year ago, among which is the already mentioned strategy drafted by UNESCO concerning Afghanistan's cultural heritage for the coming years. Another, and one of the most positive plans, is the expansion of cultural heritage industries, in which local people use their traditional skills to restore damaged objects.

If Afghanistan's rich cultural heritage can indeed be enjoyed again by Afghans and others in Afghanistan itself, the Buddhas will not have perished in vain. <

Juliette van Krieken, MA is a lawyer and art historian, specialized in the protection of cultural heritage. She is one of the founding members of the Society for the Preservation of Afghanistan's Cultural Heritage (SPACH) and publishes and lectures widely about the problems especially related to Afghan cultural heritage. E-mail: vkrieken@xs4all.nl

Notes >

- 1 IIAS Newsletter 23, p. 14, and in the IIAS Website Newsletter archives at <http://www.iias.nl/iiasn/23/index.html>
- 2 Decrees by Mullah Omar, July 1999: (a) Concerning the Protection of Cultural Heritage, and (b) Concerning Preservation of Historic Relics in Afghanistan. In the latter decree it could be read: '...The Taliban Government states that Bamiyan shall not be destroyed but protected...'
- 3 UNESCO 1970 Convention on the Means of Prohibiting and Preventing the Illicit Import, Export and Transfer of Ownership of Cultural Property.
- 4 Practical detail: he had the remaining stones of the Buddhas (the debris with traces of original sculpture were already taken away to be sold) covered with fiber-glass sheeting to protect them against the harsh winter.
- 5 The exact measurements, the only ones known in the world, are in the Afghanistan Institute and Museum in Bubendorf, Switzerland.
- 6 The International Charter for the Conservation and Restoration of Monuments and Sites (The Venice Charter 1964) and the Nara Declaration on Authenticity (1994) will play a major role.
- 7 This was also the Buddhist view I encountered at a seminar on the Buddhas of Bamiyan, 17-19 September 2001, Nehru University, New Delhi.
- 8 At least the Convention for the Protection of Cultural Property in the Event of Armed Conflict (1954) and the Convention on the Means of Prohibiting and Preventing the Illicit Import, Export and Transfer of Ownership of Cultural Property (1970).
- 9 In January 2002 alarming stories reached SPACH on the revival of the plundering of sites in the town of Balkh. Concerned Afghans try to stop this development, others simply state that if they can make money by looting in order to be able to get their daily food, they do not worry about history.



Tanja Chute

Ellen M. Raven

People > Guest Editor

Dr Ellen M. Raven is an Indologist and art historian who, since January 2002, teaches South Asian arts and material culture at the Faculty of Arts of the Universiteit Leiden. She received her academic training at the Kern Institute of Indology at Leiden. Among her teachers were Dr Inez During Caspers (archaeology), Prof. Theo Galestin and Dr Hedi Hinzler (art history) and Prof. J.G. de Casparis (ancient history).

In her early post-graduate period she published on iconographic issues of early Indian art, such as the representation of *guhyakas* and *kinnaras*, specific groups of mythic creatures. For eight years she was also employed at the specialized Kern Institute Indological library.

Dr Raven's interest in the mythology and iconography of the Garuda bird in the Indian arts of the Gupta period led to a specialized study of the Garuda-banner on the gold coins of the Gupta kings. This focus rapidly developed into a deep involvement in the study of Gupta coins, which resulted in several research papers and a two-volume PhD thesis on *Gupta Gold Coins with a Garuda-Banner* (Groningen, 1994). As a follow-up, she is now preparing for a long-term project which aims at redefining the classification of Gupta gold coinage and at tackling issues of chronology and minting history.

In 1999, Dr Raven coordinated the organization (together with Prof. Karel van Kooij and Prof. Hans Bakker) of the 15th International South Asian Archaeology Conference in Leiden, hosted by the IIAS.

From 1996-2001, Dr Raven was the coordinating editor for South Asia of the annotated online database for South and Southeast Asian art and archaeology, the ABIA Index (at www.abia.net) in an international project initiated by the IIAS with support of the Gonda Foundation and the Faculty of Arts of the Universiteit Leiden. Since January 2002, she is the ABIA Index's general editor for Western publications on South and Southeast Asia. Dr Raven is married and has one son, Thomas, now 9 years old. <

Josephine Powell

Many of the photographs illustrating the theme section showing items from Afghanistan's cultural heritage were taken between 1966 and 1975 by a remarkable lady named Josephine Powell. She is a professional American photographer and ethnographer living in Istanbul. Her architectural photos have been widely published, with most of her work having been done in Asia, North Africa, and southern Europe. In the 1960s, she became intrigued by the nomad and village cultures of Afghanistan and she spent several years photographing and gathering ethnographic objects and textiles, unknowingly adding to local lore about a mythical American woman travelling fearlessly on horseback into the most isolated parts of the country. She also prepared a documentary on women in the village of Aq Kupruk in northern Afghanistan in 1972. She planned exhibitions on Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Morocco for the KIT Tropenmuseum in Amsterdam and the Ethnographic Museum in Rotterdam. <



Tanja Chute

The IIAS Newsletter Editors would like to thank the Kern Institute in Leiden, and particularly Gerda Theuns-de Boer, project manager of the photographic database of art and archaeology at the Kern Institute. Besides its specialized library, extensive collections of rare books, manuscripts, and epigraphical rubbings, the Kern Institute possesses 70,000 nineteenth- and twentieth-century photographic prints. Gerda Theuns-de Boer, pictured here in the archives, brought to our attention the photographic prints taken by Josephine Powell of artefacts in the Kabul Museum that you see throughout this issue's pages. What we have published here is but a small sampling of the Kern Institute's rich collection of historical images. [See p. 32 in this issue for more about Gerda's work with the photographic prints at the Kern Institute, Leiden.] – (TC) <