It is Time to Pick Up Stones

A Turn-Around for Afghanistan’s Cultural Heritage?

By Victor Sarianidi

As we all know, the best pieces of Graeco-Bactrian art were located in Afghanistan. Those artifacts were so marvelous that they charmed everyone, the scientist, the connoisseur of art, and the common man alike. Afghanistan, 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 was the excavations of the Hellenistic city of Al Khanaum (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 Al Khanaum 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 splendidly carved ivories in classic Indus style and Hellenistic artefacts made in different countries of the world. Also worth mentioning is the royal treasure of the Tillya 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 Al Khanaum, the Tillya 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 those collections. We can just guess that most objects were destroyed during the mass destruction of the Buddhist monuments, 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 protohistoric 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 4,000 gold objects. The fate of this Tillya Tepe treasure is unknown. Thirty years ago in the Karo-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, during the excavations of the Gorur necropolis, he found a golden ceremonial with a Samaritan inscription on it. His next field season will start in April this year.

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The Buddhas of Bamiyan [continued]:

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By Juliette van Krieken

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.1 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, the Qadera 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 brutally caved in early March 2001.

At the exhibition last autumn called “Afghanistan: A Millenary History” in Barcelona (to be shown this spring in the city of Chicago and the Louvre, Paris), 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 an irreplaceable event 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 waliabhi Muslims, who condemn every depiction of living beings. According to other interpretations of the Qur’an, every depiction created before Islamic emerged (as was the case with the Buddha) 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 targeted: a statue of the great King Kanishka from Sirkh Kotal, dating from the second century AD, which was better known as the
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 safekeeping. UNESCO’s general policy has always been to return, if possible, objects taken out of the country of origin.1 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 paid between ten to fifteen US dollars to outsiders to take pieces out of the country because they feared for the fate of those artefacts.

Ever since the end 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 Burcher-Dietrich, director of Bibliotheca Afghanica, 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 arrangement with the International Charter for the Conservation and Restoration of Monuments and Sites that allowed those 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 preserved temporarily outside Afghanistan.2

For merchants working in the illicit art market, there was suddenly justification for their activities. They exclaimed that, had they not taken these artefacts, they would have been destroyed already, 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 and effective system of safeguarding tangible 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, 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 Burcher-Dietrich was followed in early January 2001 by UNESCO drafting a new strategy for the preservation of tangible cultural heritage in the future. 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 of Bamiyan.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 paid between ten to fifteen US dollars to outsiders to take pieces out of the country because they feared for the fate of those artefacts.

Many questions will arise related to, for example, practical, ethical, and spiritual matters. Particularly, the intention and goals of any reconstruction should be subject to agreement and consultation with the parties involved. The most important condition 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 preserved temporarily outside Afghanistan.

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