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# Afghanistan: Iconoclastic Fury Unleashed Again

Asian Art >  
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Religious fanaticism has made an indelible mark on what we see – or can no longer see – of art in the past. When, in 1566, what went down in history as the “Iconoclastic Fury” (*de Beeldenstorm*) was unleashed in Holland, hordes of zealous Protestants destroyed the most significant heritage of the Catholic religion that has ever existed in the Low Countries. On 26 February 2001, the Supreme Commander of the Taliban, Mullah Mohamed Omar, decreed the destruction of all the statues in Afghanistan. The political and religious leader thus sought to vanquish every trace of the “idolatries” permeating the country’s millenary history before the advent of Islam. In March 2001, Al-Jazeera, then CNN, and, as a result, the media throughout the entire world broadcast to our astonished eyes how the Bamiyan statues, the largest images of the Buddha in the world, were smashed to pieces.



Courtesy of La Caixa Foundation, Barcelona.

By Sebastian López

In the whole of Europe, one arts centre alone responded to this Taliban aggression. When the decree was issued, and before the Giant Buddhas were destroyed, La Caixa, a foundation in Barcelona, began to prepare *Afghanistan, a Millenary History*, an exhibition meant to offer a balanced view of Afghanistan’s artistic past. It has already been shown in La Caixa’s Cultural Centre in Barcelona, and it was on display in Paris at the Musée National des Arts Asiatiques (MNAAGuimet) in February 2002.

The initiative is even more praiseworthy in the sense that La Caixa is not an arts centre devoted to Asian art. Unlike France, Denmark, Japan, and the United States, Spain has no Afghan art collections with works from Gandhara, Hadda, or Kafirstan, a fact that merits attention given that there are hundreds of centres and institutes in Europe that do spe-

The statue which Malraux refers to as “the Genius of the Flowers”. It represents a Bodhisattva holding a spouted flask. *Afghanistan, Hadda, 3<sup>rd</sup> to 4<sup>th</sup> Century AD, stucco, 55cm x 34cm x 19cm. Florence, Malraux Collection.*

cialize in Asian art. The destruction of the two Giant Buddhas generated such a wave of solidarity, however, that it was possible to organize such an imposing exhibition in just months, thanks to La Caixa and loans made by museums and private collections alike. The exhibition displays works belonging to the Harvard University Arthur Sackler Museum; the Musée de l’Homme, the Musée National d’Histoire Naturelle, and the MNAAGuimet, in Paris; the Musée des Arts Asiatiques, in Nice; the Museum für Indische Kunst, in Berlin; and the Hermitage Museum in Saint Petersburg.

*Afghanistan, a Millenary History* provides a two-part testimony: it starts with a broad documentation of the Afghan artistic heritage destroyed by the Taliban, and follows with a series of rooms with reconstructions of some of Afghanistan’s most splendid moments of artistic creation, organized by period, geographical location, and artistic school: Mundigak and Bactrian art from the Bronze Age, the art of the Kushans, Bamiyan art, the relationship between Afghanistan and Turkmenistan (Xinjiang); the reaction of Islam to invasions by the Mongols, Timurids, and Nuristanis.

The sections entitled “Art of the Kushans” and “Hadda, the Greek-Afghan School” are some of the most fascinating in the exhibition, due to the quality of the pieces and to the theories that have developed around them. Both render accounts of the artistic wealth generated by the cross-breeding of several artistic, religious, and cultural traditions. The first section contains pieces of early Buddhist art, in which the Buddha appears in human form and, as Pierre Cambon, curator of the exhibition, so aptly states, “is to transcribe in an almost definitive manner the golden legend of the historical Buddha, just as he continues to be portrayed throughout the whole Buddhist world.” In 1889, the Englishman Vincent Smith suggested that the sculptures of Gandharan art bear a parallel with those of classical Rome. Alfred Foucher, for his part, supported the thesis of a ‘Greek-Buddhist’ art in 1900. There is no doubt that, during the Kushan period, the Greek-Bactrian, Nomadic and Hindu traditions forged a dynamic relationship, something which is clearly visible in Gandharan sculpture. For Cambon, the excavation sites in the enclave of Hadda, near Jalalabad, “demonstrate the expansion of Gandharan art throughout the Afghan land (...) a purely local school, clearly Greek-Afghan, much more Hellenic than might be expected.”

Hadda is also an important crossroads for the Indian universe. Essential in helping to understand this art and its cultural cross-breeding, Hadda was host to several dozen Buddhist monasteries, and the Monasteries of Tope Kelam and Bagh-Gai provide some of the exhibition’s most fascinating pieces.

*Genius of the Flowers* (3<sup>rd</sup> to 4<sup>th</sup> Centuries), part of the André Malraux collection, is a moving masterpiece. In 1931, Malraux himself wrote in the *Nouvelle Revue Française* about this sculpture in stucco: “enigmatic crowns, familiar features to be found for the first time in Asian sculpture, the nature of the mystery engulfing this statue, unique in the world, as it stands now.” What Malraux wished to demonstrate was the artistic parallel between this sculpture and Gothic art. “It is customary to say,” he stated, “that similar causes produce similar effects: the two Gothics, this one (*Genius of the Flowers* is an exponent) and that of Rheims, show us the transformation of classical art through a religious spirit dominated

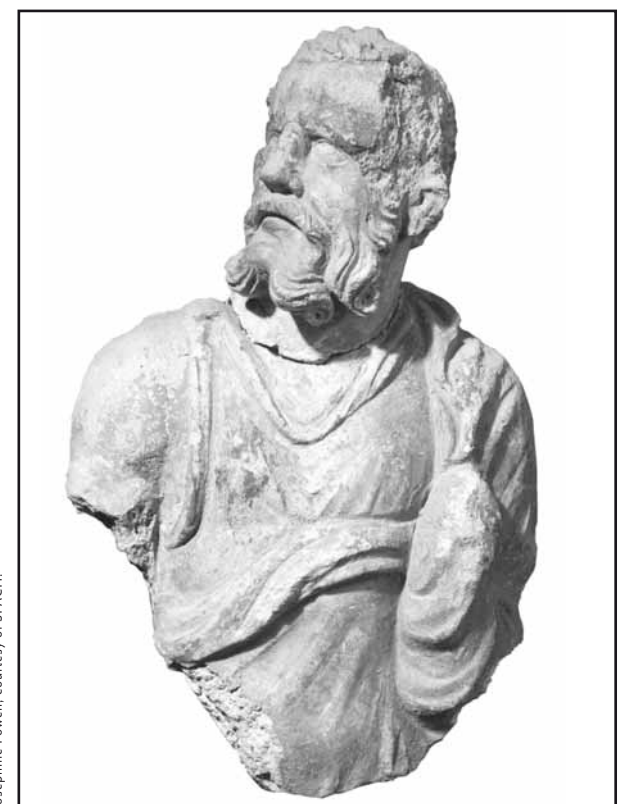
by piety.” This text by Malraux is one of many attempts to describe the art of Afghanistan, as others have referred to other countries in Asia, by making a series of comparisons based on “chronologies” and “styles”, following European art canons. In a way, the exhibition and its lavishly illustrated catalogue continue to discuss the works under display in these same terms. In spite of “stylistically” refuting Malraux, Pierre Cambon concludes that *the Genius of the Flowers* is “Gothic without being Romanesque”.

Today, when the world of contemporary art is busy translating so-called “transcultural” and “multicultural” issues into nationalistic readings, it is good to take a look at the fertile valleys of long ago in Afghanistan, where Greek-Roman bronzes stood side-by-side with Alexandrian ceramics, Chinese lacquers, and Indian ivories, following the flow of travelers, conquests and migrations. As Luis Monreal points out in the catalogue, “in the main enclaves of the silk route, the local coins show sphinxes of Greek, Iranian, and Hindu divinities. The uniqueness of such cultural cross-breeding has obliged historians to invent such terms as ‘Greek-Buddhist’, ‘Hindu-Greek’ or ‘Turk-Mongol’, attempting to apprehend the extraordinary artistic originality of Afghanistan, which finds its maximum expression in the Buddhas with ‘Apollinarian’ features and the classicism of Herat tiles.” <

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## Exhibition >

**Afghanistan: A Millenary History**, was exhibited at La Caixa Foundation in Barcelona from 3 October to 23 December 2001. From 28 February to 27 May 2002, it will be on display at the Musée National des Arts Asiatiques (MNAAGuimet), Paris.



Bust of a man with moustache and curly beard, his left hand raised in front of the chest. Wears a pleated upper garment across the left shoulder. Stucco? Hadda, size unknown. Ca. 4th cent. AD Formerly Kabul Museum.

... see this issue’s theme section, pp. 8-16.