The visual heritage of Afghanistan

Photographs which tell of the times before the turmoil in Afghanistan are practically non-existent. Radical ideologists targeted the cultural roots of the country in the past decades and destroyed millions of images to make space for their own beliefs. Today, after thirty-five years of war, exile, collateral and intentional destruction, the country lacks a visual heritage with which it can display achievements of the past to younger generations: something which is worth protecting; something on which a positive national identity can be based upon; moments of pride.

Dominic Wirz, Anke Schürer-Ries and Paul Bucherer-Dietschi

The Swiss Afghanistan Institute

The Swiss Afghanistan Institute (SAI), officially registered as Stiftung Bibliotheca Afghanica, is a politically and religiously neutral institution. Over a period of 35 years, the institute made its mark by systematically researching and documenting Afghan history and culture.

From October 1998 to March 2007, Paul Bucherer, head and founder of the SAI, curated the Afghanistan Museum in Exile. The objects for this museum were transferred to Switzerland by the Taliban to be salvaged from al-Qaeda’s destructiveness.

Moreover, the SAI is engaged in cultural rebuilding on the spot; old photographs from its archives provide the basis for reconstruction of historic buildings and other structures. For instance, the institute’s archive could be of assistance in reconstructing the giant Buddhas of Bamiyan with the help of the only existing high-definition stereo-photogrammetric shots in the world. Other photographs kept at the SAI were previously used to restore the famous Moghul garden Bagh-e Babur, the buildings of the Afghan National Gallery and the Afghan National Museum, and even the oldest parts of the former Royal – now Presidential – Palace.

The primary source for Bibliotheca Afghanica is the institution’s own image archives which comprise approximately 50,000 photographs. In addition to the visual materials, the archives also contain important written documents that were entrusted to the institute by private persons and other institutions. The oldest available images date from 1869 and document the visit to India by the Afghan Amir of the time. As mentioned above, the pre-1978 photographs have almost all been destroyed in their country of origin. So, even recent photographs stored at the institute in Switzerland are of a similar historic value as old ones. The overall significance of the institute’s visual collection cannot be anticipated at present, as many of the collections that have found their way to Switzerland have not yet been catalogued.

The aim of the project is not only the physical safeguarding of old photographs and related documents, but also to create awareness of the rich cultural heritage of the country and to make use of this knowledge for the reconstruction of Afghanistan and its society. Moreover, the SAI is engaged in cultural rebuilding on the spot; old photographs from its archives provide the basis for reconstruction of historic buildings and other structures. For instance, the institute’s archive could be of assistance in reconstructing the giant Buddhas of Bamiyan with the help of the only existing high-definition stereo-photogrammetric shots in the world. Other photographs kept at the SAI were previously used to restore the famous Moghul garden Bagh-e Babur, the buildings of the Afghan National Gallery and the Afghan National Museum, and even the oldest parts of the former Royal – now Presidential – Palace.

Due to such references, and international reputation strengthened by years of experience, the Swiss Afghanistan Institute became a rich source of images and photographic collections on Afghanistan. Today, organisations such as the Afghan Ministry of Culture, the Afghan Ministry of Education and the Swiss Department of Culture are numbered among the institute’s most prominent partners and donors.

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In a first step, the basic archival work includes the conservation of the photographs, the digitisation and long-term preservation. Even more important, the identification done by the Afghanistan Institute serves as a necessary prerequisite to make the above mentioned interpretative connections. The scientific importance of the images lies in the possibility to analyse them according to chronological and geographical criteria, the producer of the images and the subjects and details in the images. It is, however, a major concern of the institute to create a systematic corpus of images as a point of departure for further research questions. For this reason, the Phototheca Afghanica will gradually be made available online. The first 400 images and accompanying data are accessible via an online platform (www.phototheca-afghanica.ch).

The following overview of the preliminary online series highlights the perspectives that could evoke further research and co-operation concerning the photographic collections.

Preservation and identification of the visual materials

So far, selected collections have been scientifically identified, and currently comprise approximately 5,000 photographs. The vast cultural richness in the photographs, as well as the manifold interdisciplinary relations, soon became obvious as the identification proceeded. The visual documents raise questions of historical, cultural and political significance, including questions of media relevance and regarding the history of technological development.

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While Burke's photographs were commercially successful, the military photographs remained undiscovered in private albums, official documentation or had disappeared into state archives as confidentially classified material. The Afghanistan Institute processed this photographic collection together with Brigadier Woodburn, he himself a former Royal Engineer. It may be of interest to note that John Burke, a famous professional photographer, had accompanied the expedition too. One could maintain that Burke, already a war correspondent for some time, had anticipated the circumstances of the reception in 1886. Brought to the colonies from metropolitan Europe, he had established diplomatic ties with the oriental country an unknown actor on the diplomatic stage; few governments had ever heard of the Amir who was given away as a keepsake, comprising 51 high-quality prints of Afghan scenes assembled in a booklet, each photograph printed on postcard-paper. The act of taking a photograph reflected to some degree the polarity of domination and subordination. Today, due to the work done at the Afghanistan Institute, the photographs can be read as visual documentation of the troop movement again. In co-operation with Brigadier Woodburn, and with the help of military maps and reports, the institute succeeded in recovering a chronological order, naming the places and identifying key personalities shown in the photographs. Now the collection tells us how the army advanced into the embattled country, crossed rivers, received the Amir and his delegation, and coped with the daily challenges that life in a foreign country brought with it. The identification process also made it possible to draw parallels to the reports in the press. An interesting aspect was the comparison of the official military photographs and the exaggerated engravings that were based on the sketches done for The Illustrated London News by William Simpson, who accompanied the troops moving toward Kabul as a war correspondent for some time.

However, although some unknowns are being solved, the process has also raised some questions. For example, questions about the technical and aesthetic conditions of war photography of the time, as in the case of the Royal Engineers who were assisted by Burke; or those concerning the social meaning of the photographs for a colonial power such as Britain; and what about the media implications regarding different forms of realisation through photographs, or engravings based on sketches; and of course questions of cultural correlation.

Photographic technology was unknown to the Afghans in 1878. Brought to the colonies from metropolitan Europe, photography was only known by sight in Afghanistan. The series – based on works by Afghan artists only – was composed and edited by the Afghan ambassador in Paris in 1924. In those days, the recently independent Afghanistan was an unknown actor on the diplomatic stage; few governments had established diplomatic ties with the oriental country at the time. Consequently, little was known about the country itself, and therefore the ambassador considered it his duty to introduce Afghanistan to his guests and acquaintances. The Souvenirs d’Afghanistan was given away as a keepsake, comprising 51 high-quality prints of Afghan scenes assembled in a booklet, each photograph printed on postcard-paper.

There's no doubt that the editor, the Afghan ambassador, had always born the distribution factor in mind, and that he had anticipated the circumstances of the reception in Europe. To demonstrate the country's status as a modern and up-and-coming nation, photographs corresponding to a European sense of 'modernity' were selected. Interestingly, the propaganda focussed on technological progress. In particular, the collection comprised shots of buildings, cars, and bridges. People were hardly shown, and if so, they belonged to the royal household and were dressed in Western apparel.

Sample collection 2: photographs as an expression of Afghan self-representation

The series Souvenirs d’Afghanistan gives evidence of an idiosyncratic variation of cultural interdependencies. The series – based on works by Afghan artists only – was composed and edited by the Afghan ambassador in Paris in 1924. In those days, the recently independent Afghanistan was an unknown actor on the diplomatic stage; few governments had established diplomatic ties with the oriental country at the time. Consequently, little was known about the country itself, and therefore the ambassador considered it his duty to introduce Afghanistan to his guests and acquaintances. The Souvenirs d’Afghanistan was given away as a keepsake, comprising 51 high-quality prints of Afghan scenes assembled in a booklet, each photograph printed on postcard-paper.

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The visual heritage of Afghanistan continued

The project was commissioned by the Afghan Ministry of Education in 2008 and opened in July 2010 at the German High School in Kabul. It was devised by the Swiss Afghanistan Institute and financed by the governments of Germany, Liechtenstein, and Switzerland. The first exhibition turned out to be a real attraction as students started to take pictures of the historical photographs with their mobile phones. Even President Karzai was deeply moved when he looked at the first prototype of the exhibition.

From this point of view, the collection Souvenirs d’Afghanistan serves as a prism, refracting both an Afghan particularity of photo art and an Afghan perception of (Western) ‘modernity’. On the one hand, the scientific importance of this collection is manifested in the aesthetic contrast that the Afghan photographs enunciate, in comparison to European images. On the other hand, the photos document former heydays, for instance by showing magnificent buildings that have been reduced to rubble since then. In close co-operation with the French Afghanistan expert May Schinzau, the history of some of these buildings could be retraced, which shows baffling parallels to the facades of British buildings of that time, as observed in photographs from The Illustrated London News.

Sample collection 3: A German ambassador behind hostile lines

The collection of the German ambassador, Werner Otto von Hentig, tells a completely different story. In 1915, his expedition to and through Afghanistan ended in “one of the most adventurous undertakings you have probably ever heard of”, as the Berliner Illustrirte reported in 1918. Up to this time, the country at the Hindu Kush had been sealed off from the outside world by Great Britain. During the First World War the German emperor, Wilhelm II, ordered an undercover diplomatic and military expedition to the Afghan Amir Habibullah Khan, suggesting an attack on British India. Therefore, von Hentig travelled to Kabul, keen to learn about the country, and open-minded as a petitioner always has to be.

Meanwhile, photographic technology had made some progress, which allowed von Hentig to take photographs more spontaneously. Von Hentig’s collection, however, yields another remarkable difference compared with the British collection: due to von Hentig’s good relationship with his Afghan hosts, they provided him with prints from the Amir’s own photo studio. The lion’s share of the collection originates from this photo studio and was assembled from the archive of Mahmud Tari, who was the editor of the first illustrated weekly journal in Afghanistan Sn rif al-akhbar (in English, “The Great Light”). These photographs are among the very earliest Afghan images that have been preserved to date. They embody the Afghans perspective of their own country, expressing the upcoming interdependencies between an Asiatic culture and European technology.

A race against time: few witnesses to history remain

At the age of at least 94, Werner Otto von Hentig personally handed over his archive to the Swiss Afghanistan Institute (SAI). The photographs are considered to be significantly important to Afghan history. Furthermore, the detailed explanations provided by von Hentig’s notes and oral anecdotes were an unusual blessing for the researchers when identifying the photographs.

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This example illustrates how witnesses to history are crucial for the SAI’s work with historical photographs. Destroyed monuments and buildings – as well as personalities – often cannot be identified and localised unless someone is alive who is able to recall what and who is shown in the pictures. The SAI counts on those witnesses to history every time its own archive and its own experience reaches certain limits. In view of a further cultural rebuilding, the preservation of knowledge will be crucial to the re-establishment of Afghanistan’s heritage.

Besides the scientific aim to document the visual heritage of Afghan history, at present the photographs provide the young generation with access to the pre-war life of Afghanistan. Each photograph shows a fact, a building, a landscape, or a detail on a piece of clothing, what counts for Afghan people is the fact that an element of the old tradition, a moment of former Afghan life, has survived as a testimony of an otherwise unimaginable world.

This, too, is a reason why the homepage of the Phototheca Afghanica is designed not only to meet scientists’ needs, but to also provide access for a broader audience interested in its own lost achievements, or its parents’ and grandparents’ world.

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