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Afghanistan's Hidden Treasures

How a trove of priceless antiquities survived.

By Roger Atwood

Omara Khan Massoudi knows how to keep a secret. Massoudi is director of the National Museum of Afghanistan in Kabul. Like the French citizens during World War II who hid works of art in the countryside to prevent them from falling into Nazi hands, Massoudi and a few trusted *tahilwidars* - key holders - secretly packed away Afghanistan's ancient treasures when they saw their country descend into an earthly hell.

First came the Soviet invasion in 1979, followed about ten years later by a furious civil war that reduced much of Kabul to ruins. As Afghan warlords battled for control of the city, fighters pillaged the national museum, selling the choicest artifacts on the black market and using museum records to kindle campfires. In 1994 the building was shelled, destroying its roof and top floor. The final assault came in 2001, when teams of hammer-wielding Taliban zealots came to smash works of art they deemed idolatrous. When they finished, more than 2,000 artifacts lay in smithereens.

Throughout those dark years, Massoudi and a handful of other museum officials kept quiet about the hoard of museum artifacts - among them the crown jewels of Afghanistan, the famed Bactrian gold - that they had hidden in vaults under the presidential palace in 1988, as the Soviet occupation gave way to civil war. Researchers the world over despaired of ever seeing the objects again, thinking they'd been sold piecemeal into the illicit antiquities trade or destroyed by the Taliban in their final, iconoclastic frenzy.

By October 2003 - more than two years after U.S.-led forces toppled the Taliban regime - most of the key holders had disappeared or had fled Afghanistan. Massoudi felt it was time to see if the objects had survived the war. When a team of locksmiths wrenched open the safes that month, every last piece of the Bactrian gold was there, trussed in the same tissue paper in which the museum staff had wrapped it. Five months later, researchers opened a set of footlockers stashed in the same underground vault and made another jaw-dropping discovery: priceless 2,000-year-old ivory carvings and glassware that had been excavated in the 1930s from a site known as Begram and given up for lost. Massoudi's staff had cloistered those away too, and they were remarkably well preserved.

"If we had not hidden them, the treasures of Afghanistan would have been lost. That is a fact. Those who knew the truth kept silent," says Massoudi, sipping ginger tea in his spartanly furnished office. His museum - Afghanistan's museum - has been rebuilt with help from UNESCO and other international donors, and it hums with activity now. Exhibit planners stroll from gallery to gallery, taking measurements for future installations; teachers lecture in Dari to groups of schoolgirls in head scarves. At the door, policemen in gray-flannel uniforms keep a close watch. Visitor numbers have inched up to about 6,000 a year. Storerooms are filling with looted artifacts intercepted by customs agents around the world and restituted to Afghanistan, including some 5,000 confiscated artifacts returned from Switzerland and Denmark. More than four tons of loot seized by British police sit in a warehouse in London's Heathrow Airport awaiting repatriation.

In the museum lobby, Massoudi demonstrates what it means to rebuild heritage. Standing in a display case is a life-size statue of a bodhisattva, a type of Buddhist deity, dating from the third century A.D., an era when Afghanistan was a predominantly Buddhist land. Taliban hammers had shattered the fired-clay statue, and museum conservators recently finished reassembling the fragments. A jigsaw of cracks is still visible, but the statue's face again glows with rapturous piety.

"As we finish the restoration of pieces, we bring them out to show the public, one by one. We will be doing this for many years," says Massoudi. Yet the choicest artifacts - the ones he and his staff concealed for so long - won't be on display in Kabul for some time to come. The museum lacks an adequate security system and remains short on staff, while a series of suicide bombings around Kabul have underlined the continuing risks.

Faced with these problems, Afghans have gathered their ancient treasures into a dazzling exhibition and sent it on an international tour. The Afghan government asked National Geographic to inventory the artifacts and help organize the exhibition, which is currently at the National Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C., after a two-year spell in Europe. In addition to safeguarding the treasures, the Afghans hope the exhibit will elevate the image of their country.

"The history of Afghanistan is one of receiving the arts of others, and then turning them into our own way of expression," says Massoudi. He believes the exhibit will help people see beyond his country's recent history of intolerance and isolation to the open, cosmopolitan spirit that long characterized this creative melting pot and hub of the Silk Road trade.

Walk through the bazaars in Kabul or Mazar-e Sharif and you'll see why, for more than two millennia, people have been calling Afghanistan the crossroads of Asia. One face looks Mediterranean, another Arab - or Indian, or Chinese, or eastern European. Eyes range from pea green to chestnut brown to something approaching orange. Successive invasions and influences wove a tapestry of ethnicities and left behind what the exhibition curator, Fredrik Hiebert of the National Geographic Society, calls "some of the most remarkable archaeological finds in all of Central Asia."

The ancient city of Begram supplied many of the luminous objects. Today Soviet-era land mines litter its grassy landscape, and American fighter jets from a nearby air base howl overhead. But 2,000 years ago this was the opulent summer capital of the great Kushan Empire, which stretched as far as northern India. Traders brought ivories and art from all corners of Asia. Courtiers stuffed themselves on local figs, pomegranates, and grapes against the majestic scrim of the snowy Hindu Kush.

When French archaeologists cut into the site in the late 1930s, they found a cache of luxury goods suggesting a vibrant, trade-based economy that flourished while Rome crumbled. Buried under layers of soil were bronze sculptures from Italy, lacquer boxes from China, plaster medallions of muscular Greek youths, and a group of exquisitely painted Egyptian glass vessels depicting, among other things, the Alexandria lighthouse, an African leopard hunt, and a scene from the *Iliad*. Most strikingly, the diggers found stacks upon stacks of carved ivory and bone sculptures, more than a thousand in all, featuring placidly smiling women and mythical river creatures associated with the art of India.

Someone left this impossibly eclectic mix inside two rooms that, around A.D. 200, were bricked shut and abandoned. Dazzled by the find, archaeologists compared it to the discovery of King Tut's tomb 15 years earlier, believing it to be the remains of a royal residence. Researchers now think the structure may have been a warehouse for luxury goods being transported across Asia on the Silk Road or marketed to local elites.

Like Begram, the site of Tillya Tepe ("golden hill") in Afghanistan's northwestern corner yielded treasures - most famously the Bactrian gold - whose legend was only heightened when they disappeared from view. Found by Russian archaeologist Viktor Sarianidi in the 1970s, the hoard tells a uniquely Afghan story of how nomads rode off the Central Asian steppes around the time of Christ, crossed the Amu Darya River, and created a civilization whose art reflects an amalgam of East and West, transience and settled life. From the wilds of Siberia come the animals, such as a bear depicted on a knife handle, dancing and holding a grapevine in its mouth. Greek and Hindu influences merge in a golden Aphrodite with wings and an Indian-style circle on her forehead.

Many objects show a strikingly Western naturalism, such as a ram sculpted in gold that decorated a nomad nobleman's headdress. Only under a magnifying glass can the masterpiece's splendid workmanship be fully appreciated. And a delicate, golden crown tells of a refined culture that had not given up its steppes roots. The crown can be disassembled into six pieces for easy transport, perhaps in a leather satchel on a two-humped Bactrian camel - a perfect accessory for a nomadic princess.

Archaeology is slowly returning to Afghanistan, promising more discoveries and deeper knowledge. New sites are being excavated, and well-known ones are being mapped for reexploration. In the past, American or European researchers played key roles; these days, Afghan archaeologists often lead projects on their own.

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"If this had been discovered during the Taliban's day, it might well have been destroyed," says archaeologist Najib Sedeqi. A few guards keep a close eye on the site with cooperation from neighbors.

Every period in the country's history is opening up to exploration. Afghan and French archaeologists will soon start excavating one of the oldest known mosques in Afghanistan, the No Gonbad ("nine domes"), which stands outside Balkh amid fields of flourishing marijuana plants. With its mighty columns and thick walls, now half-buried in soil and debris, the mosque expresses power and permanence. When Islam came to Afghanistan, it clearly came to stay.

Despite the progress, huge challenges remain. Crime, looting, and the threat posed by Taliban insurgents could snuff out Afghanistan's nascent cultural revival at any moment. At Tillya Tepe villagers looking for antiquities and building material have practically leveled the "golden hill." At Ai Khanum, where Alexander the Great built a city on the banks of the Amu Darya, archaeologists found baths, Hellenic lettering, and other traces of an outpost of Greek culture on the doorstep of China. Since then, unemployed fighters for local warlords have started to pillage the site, turning it into a lunar landscape of pits and tunnels. At Begram, looters who were once moonlight scavengers have become bolder and better equipped.

"We were patrolling the site one evening when we heard a gunshot, and then I realized that we were the target," said Aynadin Sodeqi, the mustachioed commander of the Begram unit of a new police force charged with protecting Afghan archaeological sites.

He and his men had stumbled upon a group of looters who were digging treasures to sell in the antiquities trade. The looters escaped, but Sodeqi and his men found at least part of their stash: 28 ancient coins and a stone tablet decorated with lotus flowers. Sodeqi also found a piece of equipment that the looters presumably planned to use that evening. What kind of equipment? He answered with a pantomime, holding out his fists and vibrating them up and down: a jackhammer.

"The looters know the value of the things they pillage," says Nadir Rassouli, director of the Afghan government's Institute of Archaeology, which has final authority over the country's 1,500-plus known ancient sites. "They are armed, and no matter how many officers we place at sites, they attack them and drive them off. Then they loot."

At Rassouli's prodding, the Afghan government created the archaeology police force in 2004, starting with about 200 men. It has grown to 500, but Rassouli says it would take many times that number to cover the entire country. Most lack training and weapons. The first sustained attack on the new force came in August 2006 at the legendary Silk Road outpost of Balkh, whose towering walls protect the remains of millennia of history. Four officers were killed by antiquities hunters in that incident, and at least six more have since been murdered in the line of duty.

Tons of Afghan loot are believed to be circulating globally. Coins have a particularly avid market, and Begram has long been known for huge caches embedded in its soil, attesting to its role as a major trading point in antiquity. A British traveler in 1833 reported that local people dug up 30,000 coins every year. He carried off 2,000 for himself.

Today it is land mines that stud Begram's fields, as members of Sodeqi's police unit know. Among protruding sherds of Kushan-era pottery, lines of red stones mark the dangers; a closer look reveals innocent-looking plastic disks lurking in the grass like discarded toys. Such is the poverty and desperation - and such are the profits to be gained from antiquities - that not even land mines deter looters.

Land mines, a resurgent Taliban, suicide bombs, the searing memory of war - the obstacles bedeviling Afghans as they try to put their country back together are daunting. "The biggest thing that's broken in Afghanistan isn't the buildings, or the roads, or even the electrical system. It's the broken psychology," says curator Hiebert. "Twenty-five years of war is hell. Not only were tons of artifacts stolen, so was the Afghans' history, their heritage. Afghan children no longer know Afghan folk songs. How can they get their pride back?"

There are many answers to that question. One is on view in Kabul, where an Afghan national treasure is receiving a makeover. In the early 1500s, the Mogul emperor and famed memoirist Babur laid out a 20-acre garden on a hillside and planted it with his favorite trees. Babur's garden had become an overgrown lot by the time the Aga Khan Trust for Culture began restoring it a few years ago. It is now Kabul's finest public space and a glowing symbol of the tentative, post-Taliban cultural flowering.

At the top of the garden stands Babur's restored white-marble tomb. Not far away, builders have erected a full-scale reproduction of a caravansary, a lodge where Silk Road caravans would spend the night, on precisely the spot where one stood in Babur's day. The day I visited, the caravansary's big courtyard echoed with the sparse, haunting sounds of a traditional stringed instrument known as the sarinda.

The man playing it, Kaka Qader, may be one of the few sarinda masters still alive in Afghanistan. But he won't be the last: A bright-eyed music student watched transfixed as the master played. Then the young man took the instrument, a tabla drummer joined in, and the courtyard resonated with the hopeful sound of a new generation of Afghans playing their music.