CULTURAL HERITAGE OF AFGHANISTAN IN CRISIS

By Nancy Hatch Dupree*

Professor Dani has observed in his eloquent programme essay that progress toward civilization occurs when there is a "mixing up" - his term - of people and ideas. Gandhara provides a brilliant example of this. But Professor Dani also explains that this colloquium is being held because the tradition of sharing, of exchanging ideas, has been lost. We owe him a great debt for bringing us together - and mixing us up.

Nevertheless, my remarks this afternoon will emphasize that not only have scholars been lax in coming together among themselves, they have also failed to share their knowledge and enthusiasm adequately with the general public. They have been negligent in seeing to it that government systems convey an understanding of their national cultural heritages through educational curricula and other media, so that each and every citizen may be imbued with pride in his or her past.

You may rightly ask how I presume to speak in this manner. This afternoon I speak as a representative of the Society for the preservation of Afghanistan's Cultural heritage, SPACH, formed in Islamabad in 1994. Having closely observed the situation on the Afghan cultural front since October 1993, it is my sad duty to report that the latest episode in the Gandhara epic being played out in Afghanistan is a tragedy. The significance of Gandhara in the human History of Afghanistan was creative and inspirational, but today that creativity is being subjected to destruction, plunder and loot.

The theft of national art objects is not a new phenomenon and by no means unique to Afghanistan, as Dr. Dar has fully described. What is so regrettable about the situation in Afghanistan is that the Afghans engaged in plundering and looting evidence no feelings of guilt or remorse, being totally unaware that they rob their nation of its identity.

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The root of this problem I sincerely believe lies in the fact that Afghans never have been encouraged to take pride in their heritage. School children are nowhere taught about the richness of their past; before the war few mature adults ever even thought of visiting Kabul Museum and now a whole generation has grown up in exile without the slightest conception.

At the same time, almost twenty years of constant war have introduced an obsessive lust for money - a money culture - which was never before present in Afghan society. This obsession is fueled by outsiders who have a highly developed awareness of the commercial value of Afghanistan's artistic artifacts. The unprincipled desire of collectors everywhere in the world to obtain works of art that no one else possesses operates in concert with this newly developed selfish greed. The combination is disastrous:

In addition to commercial exploitation there is also political exploitation. The most publicized example occurred recently in Bamiyan, a valley in central Afghanistan where the world's largest Buddha figures have stood since the 3rd and 4th centuries A.D (illus. 1). In April 1997 a Taliban commander laying siege to the valley held in opposition by the forces of Hezbe Wahdat announced that upon capturing the valley his first act would be to blow up the Buddhas. There was an immediate outcry from all corners of the world, notably from the governments of India and Sri Lanka, the UN Secretary General and UNESCO's Director-General, as well as a quiet unpublicized plea from SPACH. The supreme leader of the Taliban in Kandahar then publicly announced that it was not Taliban policy to damage the Buddhas, and reiterated an earlier pledge to protect ancient objects and monuments. SPACH also appealed to the Hezbe Wahdat leader to shift ammunition stored in caves at the foot of the Big Buddha. He responded positively and the depots were moved.

Well and good. But one can not retreat into complacency. In August 1997 the Bamiyan valley was bombed on five separate occasions. One bomb left a crater 10 meters away from the head of the Big Buddha, widening a crack at the back of the head. SPACH is now mobilizing a visit by experts to assess the damage. This mission will also investigate the reported sighting by helicopter of a colossal sleeping Buddha first reported by the Chinese pilgrim Hsuen tsung in 632 A.D. Its existence has so far baffled modern archaeologists.

Pakistan has been spared Afghanistan's recent turmoils, but even here one may note a serious indifference on the part of the authorities, despite the laudable
establishment of many museums and extensive excavations such as those that are being so impressively described during this colloquium. Still, several years ago while I was writing a brochure on Gandhara for the PTDC, I visited many excavated sites where I was delighted to meet numerous Pakistani tourists. Few of them, however, had any idea of the history of significance of the sites they were clambering over. When I suggested that the brochure be published in Urdu and Pashto as well as in English, however, there was no response.

So, I believe it is incumbent upon all of us who recognize Gandhara's singular contributions to human history to put our heads together in order to find ways and means of stancing the spiriting away of both Afghan and Pakistani cultural treasures. But more than that, I feel strongly that concerted efforts should be taken to make sure everyone, not only scholars, is given the opportunity to appreciate the past, to understand that illegal diggings and smuggling diminish the entire nation.

That, then, is my message. Now let me describe what is actually happening in Afghanistan. All over Afghanistan archaeological sites of every period are being systematically looted and plundered. Professor Dani and Dr. Dar have mentioned the long legacy left by the Greeks. A prime source of evidence for this is the site of Ai Khanoum on the banks of the Oxus River in northeastern Afghanistan. The easternmost Greek city yet identified, Ai Khanoum was founded in 330 B.C. and destroyed by fire at its prime in 130 B.C. Excavated by the French from 1965 to 1977, this site is today being massively plundered. Commanders controlling the area will happily sell you the right to dig in 5-meter squares. You may use a bulldozer if you wish. Deep tunnels probe far below the surface and we can have no idea what is being retrieved (illus. 2).

More worrying is the destruction of scientific evidence that can never be reconstructed. Professor Konishi has so succinctly reminded us that artifacts must be studied in situ so that the dynamics of the culture from which they spring can be understood. Works of art are not produced in a vacuum. This is no longer possible at many sites in Afghanistan.

The fabulous site of Tepe Shotor at Hadda in eastern Afghanistan provided over 30,000 exquisite examples of Professor Dani's mixing up of western and Indian art in the creative tradition of Gandhara. Much of the statuary excavated by the French during the 1920s and again by the Afghans after 1965 was so delicate that it was left in place as a site museum. Niches surrounding stupa courtyards were crowded with a

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profusion of figures formed by layers of gypsum plaster dating from the 2nd to the 8th century, peaking in the 3rd century A.D. In one niche of particular note, Vajrapani holding a thunderbolt in his right hand appears as a typically classic model of "Hercules." Nowhere else in Gandhara have I seen its artistic expression so superbly preserved. Today Hadda is completely denuded (illus. 3).

The Kabul Museum was distinctive in that a majority of its exhibits were scientifically excavated in Afghanistan. This opulent collection exemplified the crossroads trade that contributed to Gandhara's artistic genius and the uniqueness of these objects were renowned throughout the world. Today the Kabul museum is a burned out, empty shell (illus. 4). The building was hit by a rocket which set the roof on fire in May 1993, mixing debris with artifacts as it collapsed (illus. 5). Repeated onslaughts of looting were even more disastrous. Every gallery and storeroom was ransacked Trunks and cases packed with the more valuable pieces were wrenched open, their contents stolen or broken and indiscriminately strewn about (illus. 6). The inventories were burned in the fire (illus. 7), but it is estimated that fully 80% of the collection has vanished; and a good portion of what is left is bits and pieces of fragments. SPACH is assisting in the preparation of an inventory of that remains. It is a task that leaves one with a heavy heart.

Even massive schist reflects and statuary, such as the Dipankara from Shotorak standing 83 cm. tall, were carted away. Almost every large piece is missing, including the Umamaheshvara excavated at Tepe Sikandar in the 1970s by the Japanese Mission under Professor Higuchi. This superb marble from a Hindu Shahi complex with both secular and religious buildings was unique in the small collection of highly distinctive pieces from the 7th-9th centuries A.D, one of the least documented periods in Afghanistan. They are all gone.

Only the rare piece remains. Thankfully among these is the 25-line Bactrian inscription in cursive Greek script from the dynastic temple at Surkh Kotal north of the Hindu Kush. This temple flourished during the reign of the great Kushan King Kanishka, during the 2nd Century A.D Identified accidentally by road builders, Surkh Kotal was excavated by the French between 1952 and 1963, The statue of Kanishka which once stood at the apex of the shrine area happily also survives (illus. 8).

The Afghan landscape is liberally dotted with Buddhist sites. Deep in the mountains south of Surkh Kotal and almost mid-way on the old caravan route to Bamiyan, the monastic complex of Fondukistan flourished during the 7th century.
A.D. The wonders of Fondukistan were accidentally discovered by some children who found a few objects washed free by heavy spring rains. Excavations by the French began in 1937. Fondukistan reveals a moment little known elsewhere in the evolution of Indian art, offering striking similarities to the Gupta school but in an entirely new mode of expression. Fondukistan represents the last flowering of Buddhist art in Afghanistan. The elegant painted statuary made from lightly baked clay reinforced by wooden frames and horsehair were removed from the museum before Kabul fell in 1992 and are still safe (illus. 9). But precious ones survive.

By 1994 looted pieces began to show up for sale in Pakistan. Many were from Kanishka’s summer capital at Begrarn, north of Kabul. Professor Dani was shown 10 ivory panels from Begrarn. The asking price was 250,000 British pounds. An incised ivory jewelry box cover, also from Begrarn, was offered for $100,000. SPACH’s offer of $15,000 was received with derisive laughter.

Although priced out of the market for the Begrarn ivories, Spach has made a few modest purchases, including a collection of eight stucco heads from Hadda (illus 10 + 11), among which a little boy with a distinctive topknot is quite delightful (illus. 12). These were brought to me by a friend in January 1996.

In December 1996, two pieces from Kama Dakka, near Jalalabad in eastern Afghanistan, were purchased (illus. 13). Because our funds are severely limited, however, we have to set priorities. In addition, so great is the market for Gandhara stuccos and schists that the storerooms of stolen art in Peshawar are flooded with fakes manufactured in the Tribal areas and at workshops in Taxila. Of 500 pieces shown to members of Spach in December 1996, only four were genuine. Since all Spach members are volunteers we simply do not have the time to sift through this mass of materials. So we now concentrate our efforts on locating the whereabouts of the museum’s more unique pieces.

Recovery in Kabul has been more encouraging. In April 1995, during the tenure of President Rabbani, the government set up a 25-member Commission for the preservation of Afghanistan’s Cultural Heritage parallel with Spach. They appealed for the return of looted objects, offering a small reward in recognition of patriotic cooperation to those returning objects. Others who came to Spach in Peshawar claiming to be holding artifacts still in Afghanistan were referred to the Commission in Kabul. By September 1992 when the Taliban replaced the Rabbani government, over 1500 objects had been recovered, some by the Commission, some through confiscation,
and still others purchased in Kabul by Spach members and donated to the commission.

Spach enjoys cordial relations with the Taliban government which has also appealed for the return of objects. Instead of offering a token reward, however, the Taliban warned those possessing museum objects that they were liable to punishment according to Shariat Law. No pieces have been returned since the Taliban takeover.

In April 1997, however, Spach made a purchase of singular importance following a year of patient negotiations. Included in the purchase were six plaster matrixes from Bagram. About fifty plaster casts taken from the central disks of classical Greek silver salvers were among the prize exhibits in the museum. These medallions are examples of Roman workmanship of Greek facsimiles and date mostly from the 1st Century A.D. Many of the originals of these replicas have never been found. They formed part of a treasure excavated by the French in the 1930s that included Chinese lacquers, Graeco-Roman bronzes, porphyry and alabaster vessels, Roman glassware from Alexandria, and carved and incised ivories from India. Together they represented one of the more spectacular archaeological finds of the 20th Century.

The six medallions purchased by SPACH exhibit various motifs such as the goddess Selene visiting the peasant Endymion, a boy with nursting, Athena, a male nude, a bacchanalian group, and sinuous vines hung with grapes (illus. 14-15). Also included in the purchase were two ivories from the Greek site of Ai Khanoum described above; one is a lion's head (illus. 18), the other that of a bull.

Two other pieces in this purchase are Bronze Age seals from the site of Shortugai, not far from Ai Khanoum. One, a Harappan seal with rhinoceros, is of inestimable importance as it is the only physical evidence of Harappan trade yet recovered in northern Afghanistan (illus. 19).

The second seal is made of white gypsum, handsomely engraved with a stylized ibex motif. It is 5 cm. in diameter and from a slightly later period than the Harappan seal (illus. 20).

SPACH has thus contributed in a very minor way to the recovery of objects. But there is still so much missing. Where are they? Are they being hidden by dealers in Pakistan? Are they still in Afghanistan? Have they left Pakistan? If so, who has them? SPACH constantly receives reports that pieces are being offered for sale in London, Switzerland and Japan. But no specifics are provided. How can SPACH
persuade those spreading such rumors to come forth with the details?

Occasional, rare sightings are reported. A black and white photograph of a large and stellar stucco teaching Buddha seated on a lotus throne from Hadda was shown to a member of the Kabul Commission in March 1996 (illus. 21). The price was too high and the Taliban arrived before negotiations were concluded. The Commission is now disbanded and I do not know where this piece may be, nor how to find its owner.

In August 1997 I was informed that a major schist bas relief weighing 125 kgs is in Hayatabad. Again, the asking price is $100,000. SPACH does not have this kind of money, nor do we believe it is morally correct to reward looters to that extent.

So while pieces surface gradually, the whereabouts of most prized Gandhara artifacts - not to mention those of equal importance from the prehistoric, the Neolithic, the Bronze Age, the Mauryan, the Hindu Shahi and the Islamic - remains a mystery. This is a dilemma on which I should value your counsel. We now have at our disposal unimagined technologies - webs and nets and so forth. The question is, how can we use them most effectively.

SOME SOURCES FOR FURTHER READING

There is a wealth of literature on the archaeology and history of Afghanistan. Sources listed below were selected specifically for reference to this presentation. Most include extensive bibliographies.


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SPACH NEWSLETTER. Subscriptions c/o ARIC, U.P.O Box 1084, University Town, Peshawar.

ILLUSTRATIONS

From the SPACH photo Catalogue to Archaeological Sites and historical Monuments.


6. Kabul Museum. Storerooms ransacked. Photo:

8. Kabul Museum. King Kanishka from Surkh Kotal. 2nd Century A.D.  
   Photo: NH Dupree, 1996.

9. Fondukistan. Deva. 7th Century A.D.

    Photo: Ingo Guhr

11. Hadda. SPACH Acquisition, 1996. Head. 2nd-5th Century A.D.  
    Photo: Ingo Guhr

    Photo: NH Dupree

13. Karna Dakka. SPACH Acquisition, 1996. 3rd-8th Century A.D.  
    Photo: Ingo Guhr


21. Hadda. stucco Seated Buddha teaching. 2nd-5th Century A.D.

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