



KABUL MUSEUM

KABUL MUSEUM, popular name of the National Museum of Afghanistan. The history of the museum is relatively brief. A modest collection of artifacts and manuscripts already existed in the time of King Ḥabīb-Allāh (r. 1901–19). In 1919 an assortment of archival material, regalia, miniatures, and art collected by the royal family was assembled and housed in the Bāg-e Bālā pavilion on a hillside overlooking Kabul. A few years later, King Amān-Allāh Khan (1919–28) moved the collection to the Bāgča, a small building within the grounds of the Royal Palace in the center of the city; and in 1931 the collection was finally installed in a building in rural Darulaman (Dār-al-amān), eight kilometers south of Kabul City. This building had previously served as the Municipality, adjacent to the imposing palace built by King Amān-Allāh in 1923 for the Parliament as part of his vision of a new European-style city outside the overcrowded walls of Kabul. The Palace served for a time as the Ministry of Public Works and during the communist regime (1980-92) as the Ministry of Defense until the destruction of Kabul in 1993. It stood then derelict and deserted, the Kabul Museum in its shadow, surrounded by fields of ruins.

The Museum itself is a two-storey, gray cement building with a network of large basement storerooms. Long symmetrical wings on either side flank the high, wooden entrance door. The ground floor held offices, the library, a carpenter's workroom, conservation and photo laboratories, and more storerooms. A wide, central flight of steps opposite the entrance hall led to a high-ceilinged, open half-landing and a long exhibition room perpendicular to the back of the Museum. The upper floor held offices, storekeepers'



depositories, and nine exhibition rooms displaying the major collections. In the 1970s spacious new rooms were opened at either end of the two wings of the building, one to display recently excavated objects from Ai Khanum ([Āy Kānom](#)) and the other for temporary exhibits. An additional storeroom area lay under the roof.

The museum building, designed as it was in the 1920s to be a government office and not a museum, had adapted its long corridors and small rooms as best it could to serve its purpose. In 1973 a Danish architect was commissioned to draw up plans for a new museum, which would include appropriate exhibition space, storerooms, conservation laboratories, and heating and humidity control systems. That year in a bloodless coup the monarchy was overthrown and the Republic established. Although land was allocated next to the Royal, by then the Presidential, Palace in Kabul City, the museum plans were caught up in events and never carried out.

Archeological missions. From as early as 1833 officers of the East India Company, the Indian Army, and the Afghan Boundary Commission and travelers such as Charles Masson had surveyed the archeological riches of Afghanistan and gathered small collections of lasting importance. The official beginning of archaeology in Afghanistan dates from 1922, when the French government in Kabul signed an accord for cultural cooperation with King Amān-Allāh giving them exclusive rights to survey and excavate in Afghanistan for a period of 30 years. This was renewed in 1952 for a further 30 years but was broadened to allow other missions to participate. More and more archeological delegations began working in Afghanistan, including the Archaeological Survey of India, the Istituto Italiano per il Medio ed Estremo Oriente (IsMEO), the USSR Academy of Sciences, the Scientific Mission of Kyoto University, the British Institute of Afghan Studies, the Smithsonian Institution, the American Universities Field Staff, and other individual scholarly missions, as well as the Afghan Institute of Archaeology founded in 1966. (See [AFGHANISTAN viii. ARCHAEOLOGY](#).) Agreements with the Afghan government and the various archeological delegations originally provided for an equitable division of finds between the foreign institutions and the Kabul Museum. From 1964 on, however, no archeological finds or artifacts were allowed to leave Afghanistan.

In the early 1920s, with the first excavations of the Délégation archéologique française en Afghanistan (DAFA), the spectacular treasures of Afghanistan began to be brought to light. DAFA carried out the pioneering work



throughout Afghanistan, from the Bronze Age site of Mondigak to the Great Kushan sites of Hadda, [Begrām](#), Sorḵ Kōtal, Šotorak and Pāytāva, and [Bāmiān](#), as well as the Kushano-Sasanian sites of Tepe Maranjān and Fondūqestān and Islamic Laškari Bāzār. In 1963 was added Ai Khanum on the Oxus, the easternmost genuine Greek city ever found. In the mid-1950s, IsMEO uncovered the metropolis of 11th-century Ghazni. The British Institute excavated an Alexandrian site in Kandahar. The South Asia Institute of Heidelberg University assembled the ethnographic collection of Kafir (*kāfer*) wooden objects from [Nuristan](#) (Nurestān). Kyoto University excavated at Tepe Sekandar, Hazar Sum (Hezār Som), and Durman Tepe. The last great treasure to come to light was the Bactrian Gold hoard from the Tillya Tepe (Ṭelā Tappa) necropolis in northern Afghanistan, excavated by the Afghan-Soviet Archaeological Expedition in 1978. All these archeological delegations contributed to the collections of the Kabul Museum to make it one of the most opulent small museums in the world.

Collections. Perhaps the most remarkable aspect of the Kabul Museum is the fact that every object in its possession came from Afghanistan, excavated from Afghan soil. Collections spanned fifty millenniums of the cultural history of Afghanistan, from the prehistoric, Achaemenid, Bactrian, Indo-Greek, Great Kushan, Kushano-Sasanian and Hephthalite, and Hindu Shahi periods through to the Islamic and to the ethnographic present. Accidental finds account for important collections from Tepe Fullol (Follul), Tepe Ḳazāna, Serai Khoja (Serā-ye Ḳvāja), Kandahar, Khair Khana (Ḳayr-ḳāna), Tagāo, and Gardīz, as well as the renowned Konduz, Čaman-e Ḥožuri, and Mir Zakah (Mirzakka) coin hoards. Approximately 600 objects were on exhibit, excluding the coin and ethnographic collections.

In the large entrance hall were exhibited the massive limestone inscriptions in Greek characters in the Bactrian language from the Kushan royal sanctuary of Sorḵ Kōtal (2nd-4th centuries) and the famous standing figure of King Kanishka (Sk. Kaniṣka) with huge felt boots, baggy trousers, and belted coat; from the temple area came reliefs, capitals, and a fire altar. Also on exhibit were two edicts of [Aśoka](#) (3rd century BCE) in Greek and Aramaic, from Kandahar, and a limestone block bearing a list of Delphic precepts, from Ai Khanum (3rd century BCE). Up a few steps were two showcases containing the Tepe Fullol gold hoard (ca. 2500 BCE) and ornamental jewelry of Indian, Roman, Alexandrian, and Central Asian origin. Other objects on exhibit in the central hall included large freestanding schist and limestone Buddhist finds



from Begrām, Čam Qal'a, Serai Khoja, and Kām Zargar, and a Hindu Shahi stone lingam (ca. 9th century) from Tagāo. Another showcase displayed authentic objects of unknown provenance confiscated by Afghan customs over the years.

Large black-and-white photographs of historical monuments and sites were hung along the walls of the corridor to the right. An early Islamic brick and plaster calligraphic frieze and the reconstructed plaster mosque and *mehrab* from 10th-12th century Laškari Bāzār, the winter retreat of the rulers of Ghazni, were built into the walls of the left corridor.

The Ethnographic Room was at the top of the stairs at the half-landing, with 13 showcases containing a wide variety of men's and women's regional dress, wedding costumes, and ornamentation, as well as jewelry, weapons, and wooden objects. Twenty-eight freestanding objects from Nuristan included intricately carved architectural elements and furniture and the unique wooden ancestor effigies from 19th-century Kafiristan (see [PLATE I](#)). During the 1980s the ethnographic collection was moved into a small building in the Presidential Palace intended eventually to become a separate Ethnographic Museum.

In the spacious central staircase hung royal portraits, silk wall hangings, and a collection of 19th-century jezails and other weapons. Two showcases contained smaller ornate weapons and various accoutrements.

Directly ahead on the upper floor was the Begrām Room, with its modern layout and lighting installed by UNESCO in 1957. This collection, in 15 showcases, included finds from one of the most dramatic archeological discoveries of the 20th century, uncovered by DAFA in two small rooms in the citadel of Begrām in 1937: carved ivories from India (see [PLATE II](#); see [AFGHANISTAN viii. Archaeology, PLATE XXI](#)), Alexandrian glassware, Hellenistic plaster medallions, bronzes, pottery, and porphyry vessels from Roman Egypt, a fragment of a Chinese lacquer bowl, all vivid evidence of the movement of artifacts from Rome to China along the caravan highway of the Silk Route at the height of the Kushan empire (1st-3rd centuries CE). A last showcase in the Begrām Room held the standing bearded and cloaked male statue in the form of a herm from Ai Khanum (3rd century BCE; *EIr.* I, p. 531, [PLATE XX/1](#)).

The Prehistoric Room, with eight showcases, displayed objects from the Middle



Paleolithic (50,000-30,000 BCE) through the Upper Paleolithic, Mesolithic, and Neolithic periods to the Iron Age. On exhibit were Middle Paleolithic to Neolithic bone, pottery, and stone tools; Bronze Age implements, seals, painted sherds with geometric, animal, and floral designs, and two “Mother Goddess” figurines in terracotta; and Iron Age grave furniture. Sites represented were Dara Dadil, Qara Kamar, Āq Koprük, Bābā Darviš, Nād-e ‘Ali, Šamšir Ġār, Deh Morāsi Ġonday, and Mondigak. A small limestone object, probably a human head, from Āq Koprük (15,000 BCE) was the oldest sculpture specimen found in Asia (*EIr.* I, p. 539, PLATE XIX/1).

In the right corridor was the Šotorak and Pāytāva collection (2nd-4th centuries) with 18 freestanding schist sculptures depicting various scenes from the life of Buddha, seated Bodhisattvas, several reliquary pedestals from Šotorak and Kām Zargar, and elements from a lion throne. A painted clay Buddha head from Tepe Kalān (6th-7th centuries) and massive schist bas-reliefs of the Adoration of the Kaśyapa Brothers, the Dīpankara Jātaka, and the Great Miracle of Śrāvastī, from Šotorak, were displayed in the corridor. In the other wing of the upper floor were two unbaked clay Bodhisattvas from Tepe Maranjān (4th century) and a standing stucco Buddha from Hadda (2nd-5th centuries), all outstanding examples of the prodigious fusion of Hellenistic and Indian influences that created the school of Gandharan art and, for the first time, the depiction of the Buddha in human form.

Across the hallway was the Islamic Room, also modernized by UNESCO in 1958, with 10 showcases containing bronzes, lusterware, mural paintings, pottery, ceramics, and marble sculptures from Ghazni (11th-13th centuries). The metalware from Afghanistan, Iran, and south Central Asia was considered to be among the finest in the world. The palace complex of Laškari Bāzār contributed ceramics, mural paintings, marble reliefs, and pottery. The display area in the hallway outside held marble and wood sculptures from the Ghaznavid and Ghurid periods. In a small annex were three showcases of miniatures from the Herat and Mughal schools. All Korans, miniatures, and manuscripts were transferred in mid-1980 to the National Archives in Kabul City.

In the left corridor the two Hadda Rooms, with six and nine showcases, displayed the astonishing variety of stucco, clay, and limestone heads from the vast monastic complex of Hadda which covered 15 square miles and yielded tens of thousands of objects from its stupas, monasteries, and caves. They range from meditating Buddhas and Bodhisattvas to small heads of grimacing



demons, monsters, penitent donors, helmeted warriors, noblewomen, heads of lions, elephants, winged tritons, and bacchanalian scenes, attesting to the vibrant artistic production of this great Buddhist pilgrimage site.

Across the hall was the Bāmiān Room, with six showcases containing frescoes and clay heads and masks from Bāmiān and Kakrāk (2nd-8th centuries), including a circular fresco of a seated Buddha surrounded by eleven smaller Buddhas (*EIr.* I, p. 536, PLATE XXIII/1), thought to be one of the earliest known examples of cosmic mandalas. A last showcase held 8th-9th century Hindu Shahi objects: white marble sculptures of Śiva, the Goddess Durgā, and the Sun God, Sūrya, from Khair Khana, Gardīz, and Tagāo. Individual objects from Kama Dakka, Kohna Masjed, and Qol-e Nāder were also on exhibit.

The Fonduqestān collection (early 7th century), with four showcases, included frescoes and polychrome clay figures from the remote monastic site mid-way on the old pilgrim route between Kabul and Bāmiān. Very different from the earlier schematic use of schist, these graceful clay figures of youthful Buddhas, Bodhisattvas, Devas, and Devattas with elongated torsos, elegant languid gestures, and sumptuous jewelry and hairstyles reflected strong Indian influences (*EIr.* I, p. 536, PLATE XXIII/2; p. 538, PLATE XXIV). Objects from the Buddhist monastery of Tepe Kāzāna (5th-7th centuries), in two showcases, included small sculptured terracotta heads of Buddhas and Bodhisattvas.

At the end of the corridor was the Coin Room, with four showcases containing the coin hoards from Čaman-e Hožuri, Tepe Maranjān, Konduz, and Mir Zakah. Altogether it contained a large number of coins from the 3rd century BCE through to the present time. The Čaman-e Hožuri hoard was made up of Greek coins from Athens and other Greek city-states, Achaemenid Persian coins, and the crude rectangular bent-bar coins, which are the first evidence of the pre-Alexandrian Persian monetary weight system in Afghanistan. The Konduz hoard of over 600 coins, masterworks of the engraver's art, was the finest collection of Greco-Bactrian coins ever recovered and included the largest silver coins minted by an ancient Greek king. The Mir Zakah hoard consisted of over 12,000 Indo-Greek, Indo-Scythian, and Kushan coins from the 4th century BCE to the early 3rd century CE. The collection also included a large number of Kushan, Kushano-Sasanian, and other pre-Islamic and Islamic coins.

In 1979 the Soviet-Afghanistan Archaeological Expedition brought the fabulous Bactrian Gold treasure from Tillya Tepe to the Kabul Museum; but,



owing to the Soviet takeover, it was never exhibited.

Recent History. The Kabul Museum had known pilferage from the storerooms and even from display cases since it was first established in 1919. Yet nothing equaled the devastation it suffered between 1993 and 2001, which left the museum building partially destroyed and bereft of its identity, much of its collections looted and dispersed, and its staff cut off from the world and any professional contact for 23 years (see [PLATES III, IIIa, IIIb](#)).

Beginning with the Saur Revolution (initiated 27 April 1978), it also suffered a series of uprootings. In 1979 the museum building was taken over as an annex to the Ministry of Defense in the Darulaman Palace, as the whole area became a military zone. The collections were packed up and moved to what had been the private house of the brother of the deceased President Daoud (Dā`ud) in the center of Kabul City, where they were stacked up to the ceilings in every available space. A year and a half later the contents were moved back to Darulaman and the collections reinstalled in their original rooms, having miraculously suffered little damage. Several new exhibits were opened, namely the Delbarjin wall paintings, finds from Ai Khanum, and a Hindu Shahi white marble Sūrya uncovered by Soviet soldiers in Khair Khana.

While Afghanistan was being systematically destroyed during the early years of the Jihad (1980-89), Kabul, as well as the Kabul Museum, remained relatively intact. In the autumn of 1989, however, the communist government of President Najibullah (Najib-Allāh), fearing for the safety of the exhibits, so vulnerable on the outskirts of Kabul, closed the Museum and ordered all objects from the exhibition rooms to be packed and taken for safekeeping to two locations in Kabul City, that is, the Central Bank Treasury in the Presidential Palace and the Ministry of Information and Culture. The massive schist sculptures and inscriptions were left *in situ*, along with the vast DAFA ceramic collection and the contents of the various storerooms on the ground floor and in the basement. All gold and silver coins and gold objects from Tepe Fullol were also deposited in the bank vault at the Presidential Palace, along with the Bactrian Gold hoard from Tillya Tepe.

The tragic years of 1992–95 saw the devastation of Kabul as well as of the Museum in Darulaman, exposed as it was on the front line. Looting began in 1993, while factional fighting isolated the area and museum staff was unable to reach Darulaman for months at a time. Every time the area changed hands there was further looting. In 1993 the museum building was shelled; the roof



and top floor were destroyed and left open to the elements. The ground floor rooms were deep in rubble and shattered objects; storerooms in chaotic disorder; trunks and cases pried open; shelves pulled out and their contents strewn about or stolen. The Delbarjin frescoes and Islamic metalware were burned, along with documentation, registers, inventories, and photographs. The world-famous collection of 35,000 coins had vanished. In early 1994 UNCHS (United Nations Centre for Human Settlements) weatherproofed the upper floor, installed steel doors on all the lower storerooms, and bricked up the windows. Yet looting continued.

In 1994 the Society for the Preservation of Afghanistan's Cultural Heritage (SPACH) was founded in Islamabad, with part of its assistance efforts going to the Kabul Museum. Also that year, a UNESCO grant enabled a member of the Guimet Museum to go to Kabul for two weeks to assist the museum staff to prepare a plan for taking an inventory of what remained in the storerooms. Due to the lack of security at Darulaman, the Ministry of Information and Culture of President Rabbāni's government (1992-96) was anxious to safeguard what could be rescued from the Kabul Museum. The deserted Kabul Hotel in the center of Kabul City was chosen to temporarily house these objects, as well as the 71 museum staff members.

The museum staff labored to carry out the inventory under extremely difficult, even dangerous, circumstances. The Museum was without electricity or water; work was carried out by the light of kerosene lamps. Darulaman as well as Kabul suffered daily rocketing and shelling. Salaries were not paid (the director's salary: USD6.00 a month). Two weeks before the arrival of the Taleban at the end of September 1996, over 500 trunks, crates, and boxes containing 3,000 objects were shifted to the Kabul Hotel. The new Taleban Ministry of Information and Culture immediately sealed the Kabul Hotel premises, and no museum staff was allowed to go to Darulaman.

From 1997 to 2000 the Museum staff, now numbering only 20, continued sporadic work on the inventory with the support of the Taleban Deputy Minister of Culture. Restoration of the ground floor and façade of the Museum was carried out. As the Taleban needed an official guesthouse, the objects stored in the Kabul Hotel were, yet again, shifted, this time to the ground floor of the Ministry of Information and Culture. Weeks were spent sifting through the rubble, which again littered the floors.

In June 2000 a Taleban decree was issued in Kandahar by Mullah 'Omar



protecting all cultural and historic relics of Afghanistan and making illegal excavations and smuggling of artifacts out of Afghanistan punishable by law. That same year, to commemorate Afghan independence in August, the Kabul Museum was ceremoniously opened for four days, with a one-room exhibit of confiscated Islamic artifacts and a variety of objects that were still in place in the entrance hall of the Museum. The event also served to exhibit for the first time the 2nd-century Rabatak inscription, unearthed in 1993 and recently brought to the Kabul Museum, which contained highly significant references to the genealogy of King Kanishka and complemented the inscription from Sorḡ Kōtal. At the end of 2000 the completed rudimentary inventory of what remained at the Kabul Museum totaled 7,000 objects, mostly fragmentary, from 50 sites, not including the DAFA ceramics still intact in the basement of the Museum.

On 26 February 2001 Mullah ‘Omar reversed his earlier decree, and the world watched in impotent shock as the Taleban dynamited the Bāmiān Buddhas, destroyed major pieces in the Kabul Museum, and vandalized the ministry and museum storerooms. The few moderate Taleban officials who had supported cultural activities were shifted to another ministry, and the extremist element took control. The Taleban were expelled in November 2001, and Afghanistan became the Transitional Islamic State of Afghanistan. In the spring of 2003, the wooden crates, cartons, boxes, and tin trunks containing the contents of the Museum were shifted, for the sixth time, from the ground floor to the fourth floor of the Ministry of Information and Culture, as the space was needed for a media center.

In 2000 the Afghanistan Museum in Exile was established outside Basel, Switzerland, to receive donations of objects for safekeeping and eventual return to Afghanistan (see [PLATE IV](#)). In 2002 Afghanistan became a member of Interpol, which undertook a database of objects looted from the Kabul Museum. DAFA reopened its offices in Kabul, and its scholarly library of 17,000 volumes was again open to the public. Electricity and water were partially restored to the Museum in June 2003; the ground-floor rooms were plastered and painted; windows were installed; the museum library was reassembled. International funding was provided for the reconstruction of the upper floor and roof. A conservation laboratory became functional; Musée Guimet experts restored the Tepe Maranjān Bodhisattva and the much-loved statue of King Kanishka, smashed by the Taleban. Young Afghan staff members, who never knew the Museum before its destruction, were sent



abroad for training. The Tillya Tepe Bactrian Gold treasure was found intact in the bank vault at the Presidential Palace. Despite the large number of pilfered objects appearing on the international market, the full extent of the loss, through looting or destruction, cannot be ascertained until the contents of the sealed trunks in the bank vault and the ministry are brought to light. It is to be hoped that the Kabul Museum has indeed turned towards a future where it will again take its place alongside its sister museums of the world.

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