

The Kabul Museum: victim of war and iconoclasm

A collection with six artefacts

Text & photography by Gitta van Buuren

Once the Afghanistan National Museum, more commonly known as the Kabul Museum, exhibited her extraordinary collection of artefacts of thousands of years of human culture. Today the museum is the sad reflection of human acting of the past thirteen years.

Recently Gitta van Buuren travelled to Kabul. In the museum she found what was left of the once so rich collection. She also met the passionate but extremely cautious director. Together with his employees and the international museum world he wants to re-establish the past glory in the museum.

A museum is subject to the whims of mankind. In good times it shows the rich history and thus glorifies a society. In bad times it is used as a mean to display power and for self-enrichment.

During the civil war from 1992 onward, the Kabul Museum came in the midst of the heaviest battle-lines. One year later it was hit by a missile and a fire. What remained of the collection became a prey to looters. The staff managed to bring in safety as many artefacts as possible at the Ministry of Information and Culture. Unfortunately, that did not offer protection against the religious purging of the Taliban. Apart from modern media - television, film, photography – the Taliban also banned pictures of living creatures, which they regarded as sacrilege. Today's director of the Kabul Museum, the historian Omar Khan Massoudi, works already for 23 years in the museum. For months he lobbied with the Taliban for the salvation of statues and other artefacts. After they put him aside as director, Mullah Omar, the leader of the Taliban, issued a decree on February 26, 2001 in which all scandalous artefacts were "denounced": the beginning of the "Afghan iconoclasm". Neither the museum nor the Ministry of Information and Culture appeared to be safe for the demolition hammers and hatchets. However, having a feeling of approaching doom – and without the knowledge of the Taliban – Omar Khan Massoudi and his employees managed to hide many artefacts at secret locations. This rescue operation could have cost their lives.

Remains and fragments

When I visit the museum early May 2003, it is officially still closed for the public. Most rubble is cleared and a few repairs carried out. Despite this, the museum makes a sad spectacle. On the upper floor only the walls remain while grass grows in the corridors. Big holes in the walls offer a cheerless view on the surrounding bombed and flattened area Darulaman, in West-Kabul. Around 75% of the original collection happens to be stolen or destroyed. Soon after the first lootings in 1993 the news

got around that artefacts from the museum were for sale at antique shops in Peshawar, just across the border in Pakistan. Indeed I have seen artefacts there which could originate from the museum, or at least would have a suitable place in a reopened Kabul Museum.

Other artefacts supposedly landed in private collections and with antique dealers around the world. The museum has only six artefacts on show at the moment. Remarkably, two of them are non-islamic, namely one stone plaque with Bactric inscriptions (of Greek-Asian cultural origin) and a shivalingam, a masculin hinduistic fertility symbol, from the 9th century AD.

In the garden the damaged statues of two lions, a horse and a few pedestals of pillars can be found. Depots in the museum contain crates full of fragments of what was left behind after lootings and destructions.

"Somewhere else" the saved artefacts should be located. For security reasons the museum does not reveal where. The museum is now in fact largely closed. For the moment the perseverant visitor will only see those remaining artefacts, a few posters in the entrancehall and the postcards at the informationdesk, where friendly ladies like to display them.

Promises

In the meantime the Kabul Museum has been promised support from various sides. UNESCO has taken care of the repair of windows and watersupply, the Japanese government delivered digital photography equipment, the Greek government financed the renovation of several depots and the United States are financially contributing to further restorations this year. For the continuation they will supply US\$ 100.000,-. ("Museum Journal" reported that the Japanese Foundation Cultural Heritage and the Swiss Afghanistan Museum in Bubendorf have bought artefacts found in the art trade, with the intention to keep them and later give them to the Kabul Museum – Editor)

The British Museum has given money and support for the opening of a new restoration workshop and the organisation SPACH (Society for the Preservation of Afghanistan's Cultural Heritage) of Nancy Dupree has taken care of the electricity in the building. SPACH also delivers documentation for the implementation of a stock-taking of the museum collection and the possible return of artefacts to the museum.

Although our country via ISAF, the international peacekeeping forces, is temporarily present in Afghanistan, the contribution towards Afghan cultural heritage remains limited.

Willem Vogelsang of the National Museum for Ethnography in Leiden will travel later this year to Kabul to assess the founding of a new ethnographic museum. Vogelsang can not be blamed for this, but the Kabul Museum is no part in this initiative.

Despite the international promises to the museum it is probably too soon to draw up the balance of the actual implementation of international support. And for security reasons the director does not reveal about support already taking place behind the scenes. The presence of almost every self-respecting international, governmental and non-governmental aidorganisation can not prevent that – after the second Gulf war in Iraq – the reconstruction of Afghanistan is less prominent on the political agenda. Director Omar Khan Massoudi keeps meaningfully silent when I

ask him if the fading international attention affects the museum as well. Fact is that the museum still needs a lot of financial and material support, next to museum expertise. At the same time, security and stability in Afghanistan remain necessary requirements for the reopening.

The author can put interested museums in touch with the director of the Kabul Museum.

Websites

The most spontaneous, visible and accessible support the Kabul Museum received so far, comes from a surprising quarter. On internet various sites can be found with photos of the former collection and sometimes even the interior. The oldest of these sites by the Afghan brothers Mustafa, Abdullah and Mir Abubaker Qazi, is already seven years online. Other initiators are also non-Afghans, who want to keep the memory of the museum alive, at least until the Kabul Museum can open its doors for the public again.

Qazi Brothers: the history and many photos of artefacts of the Kabul Museum
<http://www.geocities.com/CapitolHill/8117/home.html> (situation before 1997), and
<http://www.afghan-web.com/kabulmuseum> (situation after 1997)

Photos since 1969, including the interior:

<http://www.thewalt.de/afghanistan>
<http://www.ct.astate.edu/wallen/digits/kabul.htm>

Other articles about the museum:

<http://www.rawa.org/museum.html>

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Update Kabul Museum, March 2005

Prince Claus Award for Omar Khan Massoudi

After publication of my article in "Museum Visie" in October 2003, the editor, Mr. Chris Reinewald, decided to submit it to the Prince Claus Fund in The Hague (The Netherlands).

The Prince Claus Fund annually grants awards to individuals, groups and organisations, to support artistic and intellectual initiatives of high quality and strong social commitment. In December 2004 Omar Khan Massoudi was one of the laureates of the Prince Claus Award.

For more information on his award:

http://www.princeclausfund.nl/source_eng/news/awards2004/2004_awards_eng.html#omara

Although the Prince Claus Fund never reveals their sources of information on nominees and laureates of the award, editor Chris Reinewald, who attended the award ceremony, informed me that the speech for Omar Khan Massoudi clearly quoted the article.

Famous Bactrian Gold Treasure

The National Geographic Magazine of December 2004 reported that the famous Bactrian gold treasure emerged from from six locked safes in a vault at the presidential palace in Kabul, Afganistan. In 1978 Soviet archaeologists found six thombs of Bactrian nomads, consisting more than 20.000 golden artefacts. The treasure was brought to the Kabul Museum, but in the course of years of civil war vanished at a particular moment and was feared missing.
