

continued from page 15 >

were too heavy to bear and therefore left behind in the museum were main targets, namely the already beheaded, half statue of the great King Kanishka (from Surkh Kotal, dating from the second century AD), which was better known as 'the feet of Kanishka', and the silent Tepe Maranjan Boddhisattva, dated third to fourth century AD. The objects from the Kabul Museum collection which were stored for security reasons in the Ministry of Information and Culture were also brutally smashed.

Art in Exile

Reflective discussions started immediately after the announcement of the decree and the ensuing destruction. According to international law, cultural heritage material should not be taken out of its home country, not even for safe-keeping. In contradiction to this, UNESCO's general policy has always been to return, if possible, illegally exported items back to the country of origin.³ In the case of Afghanistan since February/March 2001, this policy turned out to be extremely counterproductive. At the same time, stories were circulating about Afghans from all sides having pleaded already for more than ten years with outsiders to take pieces out of the country because they feared for the fate of those artefacts.

Eventually, on 30 March of last year, UNESCO wisely changed its policy and decided to support moving endangered art out of Afghanistan. Subsequently, UNESCO backed the "Afghan Museum in Exile", founded by Mr Bucherer-Dietschi, director of Biblioteca Afghanica, in Autumn 2000 in the Swiss village of Bubendorf. Afghan art rescued or returned by collectors who did not know their pieces had been stolen is safeguarded at this museum. UNESCO also made an agreement with SPACH and the Cultural Heritage Foundation that allowed these organizations to obtain (without payment!) Afghan artefacts and safeguard them until the appropriate time arrived for their return to Afghanistan. A long-existing moral dilemma for SPACH, namely whether it would be right to acquire Afghan art knowing illegal export might be stimulated, was to a great extent solved by this; however, the question remained as to whether such art should be purchased or only obtained for free.

For merchants working in the illicit art market, there was suddenly justification for their activities. They exclaimed that, had they not taken objects, they would have been destroyed! Indeed, this could have happened in the case of several items.

Hence, the time is ripe for UNESCO and others working for the protection of cultural heritage to discuss and find a just policy to prevent possible destruction of cultural heritage in the future. This not only means being on the alert for destructive developments concerning tangible heritage, but also agreeing on rules and regulations that facilitate the temporary export of cultural property if needed, even without the permission of the authorities concerned.

Reconstruction and Return

Life changed after September 11. For Afghanistan, everything turned out for the better. With regard to its cultural heritage, a fact-finding mission by Mr Bucherer-Dietschi⁴ was followed in early January 2002 by UNESCO drafting a new strategy for the preservation of tangible cultural heritage.

Since March 2001, there have been many ideas to rebuild the Buddhas outside Afghanistan. The defeat of the Taliban brought about serious plans to reconstruct the large Buddha back in its own niche. Japan is rumoured to be willing to take the lead.⁵ The Afghan government officially requested UNESCO to organize an international seminar on the reconstruction of the Buddhas of Bamiyan,⁶ which is now planned for May 2002 in Kabul and Bamiyan.

Many questions will arise related to, for example, practical, ethical, and spiritual matters. Primarily, the intention and goals of any reconstruction should be subject to agreement. Should it, for instance, result in a centre for Buddhist pilgrimage, as a major tourist attraction, or as a monument to remember Taliban and al-Qaeda misdeeds? Secondly, should the reconstruction be symbolic, or should a real copy be made? For example, the Buddhas could be rebuilt according to their conditions in the years 1995 or 2000, or even back to their original state about 1500 years ago, when they could be seen with metal masks and gilded all over. What material and what techniques to use in the reconstruction will also be points for discussion.

Thirdly, although it is of paramount importance what the Afghans themselves want, the ideas of Buddhists should also be taken into consideration. According to Buddhism, everything is transitory, so whether the Buddhas should be resurrected at all could also surface as an issue. On the other hand, in Buddhism the circle of life exists: every construction depends on destruction, every destruction depends on construction.⁷

In my opinion, a copy, especially one of such an histori-

cally and spiritually significant monument, made under difficult circumstances, will not even have a spark of the power of the original. To have an empty niche might be preferable as an object of meditation and as a symbol of all that is precious that we lost over the centuries, and as a warning for generations to come.

Not only is a rebuilding of the Buddha being planned, but the reconstruction of the museum is also being considered. When will the time be ripe for the return to Afghanistan of those objects scattered out over the world? Yet, history tends to be repeated time and again, and true commitments, "what-if" scenarios, and other securities will need to be considered.

It is important to be aware that the main destruction and plunder of the Kabul Museum and many other sites did not take place only during the Taliban years, but also, and especially, during the Mujahideen years (1993-1996).

Most of the Kabul Museum's collection that remained in Afghanistan has been destroyed. However, the precious Bactrian hoard of Tilya Tepe consisting of 20,000 gold objects of immense value, excavated just before the Soviet invasion by an Afghan-Russian expedition in 1978, is presumably still in the underground vaults of the Presidential Palace in Kabul. For safety reasons, UNESCO intends to keep them there for the time being.

The organizations that made agreements with UNESCO will surely return their artefacts as soon as this is feasible. Hopefully, other institutions and individuals will feel the same responsibility and return items belonging to Afghanistan, irrespective of whether those items were legally or illegally acquired. To this end, Afghanistan will at least have to ratify and enforce the legal instruments concerning protection of cultural heritage (e.g. the 1954 and 1970 UNESCO Conventions),⁸ and, in this way, Afghan authorities will be able to put more pressure on those keeping Afghan artefacts and better control the illicit export of its cultural heritage.⁹

Conclusion

The people involved in Afghanistan's cultural heritage went through many ups and downs this past year: from horror and shock in February/March, to mixed feelings about policies in general, to relief and hope since November. In spite of the destruction of the Buddhas, the situation of Afghanistan's cultural heritage appears more promising now when compared to one year ago, among which is the already mentioned strategy drafted by UNESCO concerning Afghanistan's cultural heritage for the coming years. Another, and one of the most positive plans, is the expansion of cultural heritage industries, in which local people use their traditional skills to restore damaged objects.

If Afghanistan's rich cultural heritage can indeed be enjoyed again by Afghans and others in Afghanistan itself, the Buddha's will not have perished in vain. <

Jet van Krieken, MA is a lawyer and art historian who works for the Society for the Preservation of Afghanistan's Cultural Heritage (SPACH).

E-mail: vkrieken@xs4all.nl

Notes >

- 1 *IIAS Newsletter* 23, p. 14, and in the IIAS Website Newsletter archives at <http://www.iias.nl/iiasn/23/index.html>
- 2 Decrees by Mullah Omar, July 1999: (a) Concerning the Protection of Cultural Heritage, and (b) Concerning Preservation of Historic Relics in Afghanistan. In the latter decree it could be read: '...The Taliban Government states that Bamiyan shall not be destroyed but protected...'
- 3 UNESCO 1970 Convention on the Means of Prohibiting and Preventing the Illicit Import, Export and Transfer of Ownership of Cultural Property.
- 4 Practical detail: he had the remaining stones of the Buddhas (the debris with traces of original sculpture were already taken away to be sold) covered with fiber-glass sheeting to protect them against the harsh winter.
- 5 The exact measurements, the only ones known in the world, are in the Afghanistan Institute and Museum in Bubendorf, Switzerland.
- 6 The International Charter for the Conservation and Restoration of Monuments and Sites (The Venice Charter 1964 and the Nara Declaration on Authenticity (1994) will play a major role.
- 7 This was also the Buddhist view I encountered at a seminar on the Buddhas of Bamiyan 17-19 September 2001, Nehru University, New Delhi.
- 8 At least the Convention for the Protection of Cultural Property in the Event of Armed Conflict (1954) and the Convention on the Means of Prohibiting and Preventing the Illicit Import, Export and Transfer of Ownership of Cultural Property (1970).
- 9 In January 2002 alarming stories reached SPACH on the revival of the plundering of sites in the town of Balkh. Concerned Afghans try to stop this development, others simply state that if they can make money by looting in order to be able to get the daily food, they do not worry about history.

Ellen M. Raven,

Guest Editor

People >

Dr Ellen M. Raven is an Indologist and art historian who, since January 2002, teaches South Asian art and material culture at the Faculty of Arts of the Universiteit Leiden. She received her academic training at the Kern Institute of Indology at Leiden. Among her teachers were Dr Inez During Caspers (archaeology), Prof. Theo Galestin and Dr Hedi Hinzler (art history) and Prof. J.G. de Casparis (ancient history).



Tanja Chute

In her early post-graduate period she published on iconographic issues of early Indian art, such as the representation of *guhyakas* and *kimnaras*, specific groups of mythic creatures. For eight years she was also employed at the specialized Kern Institute Indological library.

Dr Raven's interest in the mythology and iconography of the Garuda bird in the Indian arts of the Gupta period led to a specialized study of the Garuda-banner in the design of the gold coins of the Gupta kings. This focus rapidly developed into a deep involvement in the study of Gupta period coins, which resulted in several research papers and a two-volume PhD thesis on *Gupta Gold Coins with a Garuda-Banner* (Groningen, 1994). As a follow-up, she is now preparing for a long-term project which aims at redefining the classification of Gupta gold coinage and at tackling issues of chronology and minting history.

In 1999, Dr Raven coordinated the organization (together with Prof. Karel van Kooij and Prof. Hans Bakker) of the 15th International South Asian Archaeology Conference in Leiden, hosted by the IIAS.

From 1996-2001, Dr Raven was the coordinating editor for South Asia of the annotated online database for South and Southeast Asian art and archaeology, the ABIA Index (at www.abia.net) in an international project initiated by the IIAS with support of the Gonda Foundation and the Faculty of Arts of the Universiteit Leiden. Since January 2002, she is the ABIA Index's general editor for Western publications on South and Southeast Asia. Dr Raven is married and has one son, Thomas, now 9 years old. <

Have you checked your ABIA today?

www.abia.net

(also see p. 51 in this issue – "A Giant's Step to Sri Lanka")

Josephine Powell

Most of the photographs in the theme section showing items from Afghanistan's cultural heritage were taken between 1966 and 1975 by a remarkable lady named Josephine Powell. She is a professional American photographer and ethnographer living in Istanbul. Her architectural photos have been widely published, with most of her work having been done in Asia, North Africa, and southern Europe. In the 1960s, she became intrigued by the nomad and village cultures of Afghanistan and she spent several years photographing and gathering ethnographic objects and textiles, unknowingly adding to local lore about a mythical American woman travelling fearlessly on horseback into the most isolated parts of the country. She also prepared a documentary on women in the village of Aq Kupruk in northern Afghanistan in 1972. She planned exhibitions on Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Morocco for the KIT Tropenmuseum in Amsterdam and the Ethnographic Museum in Rotterdam. – (EMR) <



Tanja Chute

The IIAS Newsletter Editors would like to thank the Kern Institute in Leiden, and particularly Gerda Theuns-de Boer, project manager of the photographic database of art and archaeology at the Kern Institute. Besides its specialized library, extensive collections of rare books, manuscripts, and epigraphical rubbings, the Kern Institute possesses 70,000 nineteenth- and twentieth-century photographic prints. Gerda Theuns-de Boer, pictured here in the archives, brought to our attention the photographic prints of artefacts in the Kabul Museum taken by Josephine Powell that you see throughout the preceding pages. What we have published here is but a small sampling of the rich collection of historical images which can be found there. [See p. 32 in this issue for more about Gerda's work with the photographic prints at the Kern Institute, Leiden.] – (TC)