

Oral History Interview

with

Omara Khan Masoudi

recorded at the National Museum of Asian Art

Washington, D.C.

2 Nov 2023

by Azizullah Esfandiari

Interviewer

ESFANDIARI: Mr. Masoudi, could you please tell us how you came to work at the National Museum of Afghanistan?

MASOUDI: Thank you. Allow me first to briefly introduce the history of the National Museum of Afghanistan. The National Museum of Afghanistan was established in 1919 when Afghanistan attained full political independence from British India. With the creation of the museum, back then commonly referred to as the *Ajayeb Khana* ["House of Curiosities,"], it gained a reputation and was administratively part of the Ministry of Education. Notably, the Kabul Museum's collection, later renamed the National Museum, comprised historical documents, weaponry, traditional attire, gold embroidery, needlecraft, miniature paintings, jihad flags, manuscripts, and more. From 1919 to 1925, these works were housed in what is now called the Bagh-e Bala Restaurant. After six years, due to insufficient space, the collection was moved to the Koti Baghcha Palace in the Presidential Arg. They were kept at the Koti Baghcha Palace for six years, from 1925 to 1931.

Let me point out that, during a period of upheaval in 1930 when Nader Shah aka Nader Khan deposed King Habibullah Kalakani, possessions of the royal palace including furnishings, cash reserves, and other royal properties were looted for three days. Regrettably, the museum artifacts were also plundered. Much of the museum collection housed in the Koti Baghcha of the Presidential Palace was pillaged. That same year, i.e. 1931, the museum was relocated from the presidential palace to the current National Museum building, situated near Darul Aman Palace. The move was supposedly due to a lack of space. The present National Museum building, used as the Kabul municipality office during King Amanullah Khan's rule, was not purpose-built for a museum but rather an administrative office. Since then, the Museum has been housed in this small building. Unfortunately, since 1931 no government has constructed a new structure befitting a museum with proper amenities - large galleries, protected storage equipped with security signals, heating, ventilation, temperature control in the gallery and storage room or the display cases, and so on.



This problem has persisted ever since. Until now, there is no such building. The museum should be in the city center for easy access by visitors. Unfortunately, back then, the museum was established at a distant position, located ten kilometers away in the western part of Kabul City. At the time, lacking public transport, visitors faced difficulties reaching the museum, chiefly relying on primitive modes like horse carriages or having to walk from the city center. As such, people could not access and appreciate the museum and its treasures as they should have.

A fundamental shift in the National Museum's collections began when for the first time in 1922, under King Amanullah Khan's rule, the Afghan government signed an agreement with the French Government to survey and excavate ancient sites. The French Archaeological Delegation led by Alfred Foucher, entering Herat from Mashhad, was welcomed by two hundred horsemen sent by King Amanullah to safely escort Foucher and companions to Kabul. On December 9, 1922, an agreement was signed between the French Foreign Ministry and the then Afghan Education Ministry granting France exclusive excavation rights in Afghanistan for thirty years.

From 1923 onward, The French Archaeological Delegation in Afghanistan surveyed and excavated various ancient sites, with findings equally divided per the agreement, with Afghanistan's portion immediately transferred to the National Museum of Afghanistan. Precious stones and gold objects were considered Afghan property. After that, the National Museum gradually changed from an ethnographic museum to an archaeological one and kept growing with more additions over time. With tens of thousands of ancient artifacts from the Paleolithic era to the 20th century AD, the Afghanistan National Museum grew into one of the region's richest and most important museums.

A key feature of the Afghanistan National Museum's artifacts, besides their antiquity and artistic value, was their uniquely Afghan nature spanning the Paleolithic, Mesolithic, Neolithic, Bronze Age, pre-Kushan, Kushan, Buddhist, Zoroastrian, and Islamic periods. Before the looting and destruction in 1993, about ten percent of the artifacts were on display, the rest in storage. Those ten percent of items were placed in ten galleries inside display cabinets and vitrines. They included 124 display cabinets and vitrines.

At the museum entrance stood several large artifacts - the Surkh Kotal inscription, Kanishka Statue, Kushan Prince, two birds from Surkh Kotal, some stone inscriptions, the five-line Ai Khanum inscription, black marble cauldron from Kandahar, standing statue of Bodhisattva, Lingam, Tagab marble artifact from Hindu Shahis era, the Ghaznavid stucco mosque and the Islamic architectural decorations from Lashkari Bazar with geometric patterns and Kufic calligraphy.

It is important to mention that photos of historical sites from all over Afghanistan were displayed on the first floor on both the left and right sides of the hallway - back then, of course. Also, photos of past kings - Shir Ali Khan, Abdur Rahman Khan, Habibullah Khan, Amanullah Khan, Habibullah Kalakani, Nader Shah, and Mohammad Zahir Shah hung prominently with ornate gold-trimmed frames in Chawk-e Zina overlooking the second floor. These items, displayed in the lower and upper floor hallways, were not part of the exhibits.



Smithsonian

Some major artifacts were also on display in the second-floor hallway, including a schist standing Buddha statue, a Buddha statue praised by the three Kāshyapa brothers, a Brahma statue, a Ghaznavid marble slab with Kufic script and floral motifs, a 13th-century wooden door with Kufic calligraphy and geometric designs, an artifact discovered from Shahr-i-Gholghola in Bamiyan, a raw clay seated Bodhisattva statue, Dipankara Jataka Statue, the 3rd & 5th-century *Shotorak* artifact, Surya the sun god flanked by Danda & Pingala discovered from Khair Khana, and some other pieces, making a total of fifteen artifacts. Unfortunately, a significant portion of these prominent pieces were looted alongside other artifacts from the National Museum.

Regarding the question of when I started working in the Museum, allow me to go back a little bit, if I may.

ESFANDIARI: Please go ahead.

MASOUDI: When I completed my primary education in my hometown, which was a distant place. There were no middle or high schools in our area at the time. Typically, students graduating sixth grade would come to the center i.e. Kabul, and take an entrance exam to enroll in a middle or high school, which fortunately I passed; I enrolled in a night school. I attended school from 1964 to 1969 and graduated. Luckily, our school was near Darulaman, right next to the archaeology building and museum, barely two hundred meters behind the Museum Building; Mahmud Tarzi and the Public Administration high schools were located there. For six years, I studied there. I was familiar with its signboards. On Fridays when we had off, we would often visit the museum building, and tour the museum. Museum tickets cost two Afghanis then. On weekdays, individual visitors had to buy tickets, and as schoolboys, we couldn't afford it. So, we would visit it for free on Fridays, which grew my interest in the museum, the antiquity, and the artistic value of the historical artifacts.

After graduating the school and passing the university entrance exams, I studied history and geography at the Literature and Humanities Faculty of Kabul University. In 1975, I was appointed a teacher at Ibn-e Sina High School, one of the best schools where students from provinces across Afghanistan studied and lived. I truly enjoyed teaching then, very satisfied. As a recent graduate and with dedicated, mostly underprivileged students from remote areas, I keenly began teaching. I used to teach various history and geography subjects. I believe I was pleased with my students and students were satisfied with my teaching until April 1978 when the Saur [April] Coup happened on the 27th of April, unfortunately disrupting things; revolutionary circumstances emerged, altering the teaching dynamic. After the April 1978 coup, it became common for students involved in youth groups, political organizations, or affiliated with the People's Democratic Party to gain authority. A series of changes—appointments of party members occurred across institutions.

I recall students had three exams: quarterly, semiannual, and annual. When the quarterly exams began, many politically involved students often skipped classes and participated in political activities in city squares or crowded areas. School management would direct us to give [unearned] grades to the students with organizational affiliation or members of the People's Democratic Party.

**Smithsonian**

Naturally, each teacher has their teaching style—students who worked hard—I was one of the teachers who did not like this instruction. Students must study for their future, not ditch classes for outside business. They [teachers] were told if they refused to inflate grades, students must have the right to cheat—open books. I did not do that; I would not allow it. Well, certainly the students would be upset. The quarterly exams were over. Before the semiannual exams began—those teachers who did not give unearned grades to students were not viewed favorably by students; they usually complained. The complaints filed by these young students led to some authorities—security—investigating one teacher after another. I felt this at Ibn-e Sina High School; some Ibn-e Sina teachers were punished.

In that situation, I decided that I couldn't continue there as a teacher; I needed to change my profession. Fortunately, at that time, I shifted from the Ministry of Education to the Ministry of Culture and Information. My initial appointment was in August 1978. I joined the Kushan International Research Department, at grade four as the head of research for the Far East. However, the department was almost inactive. After four months at the Kushans Research Department, I was transferred to the National Museum, which was my field of interest. Thankfully, I secured a grade six position in one of the departments. Once I joined the museum, my work aligned with my field of study, and there were growth opportunities. After a while, in 1979, when the new year's staffing structure was set up, I was promoted two grades higher and started working in a grade-four position as head of artifacts visa and control where I continued my duties. The situation at the museum at that time was good; it wasn't bad.

ESFANDIARI: Very well, Mr. Masoudi. You mentioned you started working after the 1978 political change, you were transferred to the Ministry of Information and Culture. What is your assessment of the museum around the years you began working there?

MASOUDI: Very good. When I started at the museum, it was a general directorate with a small structure with around forty-five total personnel. It was led by the museum's general director and operated within the framework of the Ministry of Information and Culture. I mean organizationally, the museum had just transferred from the Education Ministry to the Information and Culture Ministry.

The active departments around the time I started working included the Museology Department, truly the heart of any museum. The Museology Department's duties included registering artifacts delivered from the Archaeology Institute, other entities, or institutions. Per prevailing regulations then, a commission of museology members and other departments deemed necessary by museum leadership would register each item, recording key information about the piece on an individual card. This data included a photo, archaeology number, excavation number, collection number, museum registration number, artifact size, discovery location, physical condition, and delivery authority details – we would call this a card catalog system.



For each collection, besides the card, an additional photo album was set up. The photos were organized in an album by their serial number. For checking the actual item, it was not necessary to visit the storage; one could reference the album to select a piece for external display or research. Indeed, collection items were serially registered and the *Motamid's* [trustee] signature was required, under a custodianship system known as "*Tahvildari*". Following this process, the items were officially recorded by the Museum administrative management and handed over to the goods storage office to be kept by a custodian ("*Tahvildar*"). There were two processes: the card cataloging system at the Museology Department and the goods offices, regularly controlled and monitored by the Ministry of Finance. This was done at the administrative office. This is how the museum functioned during that time.

Other departments also existed. The museum conducted specialized professional work internally with some authority, but externally it held no jurisdiction whatsoever. Alterations and changes to exhibitions, registration, and cataloging of artifacts inside the museum fell under the museum authorities. To briefly cite other active departments then: Conservation, National Museum Photography, Prehistory, Numismatics, Ethnography, Exhibitions, and Administrative Management handling office tasks. More could be said about each department, but this encapsulated workflows, with ten active departments at that time.

ESFANDIARI: Excellent, just one—

[Recording paused]

ESFANDIARI: Let me ask a related question. When you started working at the museum, to what extent was the government willing and prepared to provide resources, finances, human resources, and other technical matters, etc. to advance museum work, better preserve artifacts, and expand facilities in case more discoveries arose? Overall, how committed was it in terms of budget and provisions for the museum?

MASOUDI: You raised an excellent point. As I mentioned introducing the museum, the Museum building is quite small. For all the rich archaeological sites in this country [the Museum] was brimming with artifacts from excavations. Scientific methods were barely heeded and the economy perhaps did not prioritize constructing an entirely new or vastly expanding structure for the expansive National Museum. However, the National Museum Administration was genuinely active, positive, and diligent.

When I joined the Museum, I underwent a training course along with other newcomers. I recall Museology Director Karim Barekzai, a respected, eminent scholar running our museum education sessions. He gave us a great advice. At the end of a session, he tasked us to contemplate two questions at home and assess if we could commit to museum work, otherwise, we would be wasting everyone's time and effort. What he meant was we should adopt to museum work style, if we wanted to stay there. And if we wanted to use the Museum as a launchpad and move to a different place, it would be a waste of time and we should not do that. I remember him telling us

**Smithsonian**

two simple, precise concepts: self-respect and work aptitude. Well, self-respect encompasses integrity and honesty, plainly put. Work aptitude was the other dilemma. We went home and returned the next day. When the class started, I told him I had both qualities but asked him to elaborate further. He said the Museum was a national institution, and a museum employee who deals with the artifacts or an archaeologist who works at excavation sites or has access to the artifacts, should understand the artifacts are priceless items; you should never let need steer you towards misuse, not even if your child was dying of hunger while you handled the museum's gold and some enticement surfaced to save them using an item; instead, allow your offspring to die but forswear that unfaithfulness. Second, the work aptitude. There were only basic amenities; artifacts were stored in depots, cabinets, or boxes, and packaging material was either cotton or shredded paper; dust is prevalent in Afghanistan and would infiltrate the depots. If the Museum administration gives you a task or assigns you to a depot, if you are wearing fine attire, a grey suit with a red tie and a white shirt, once you get out of the depot, you are covered with so much dust that you would not know whether your suit was grey or navy blue. This affects your mind - you need to embrace museum principles. This was quite enlightening and we affirmed we possessed those attitudes.

Afterwards, he held training courses for us which were quite valuable. Museum staff were and are highly dedicated; some people have been working in their field since old times. Another relevant point - upon our arrival, we heard that Museum staff were given an additional stipend on top of their salary but it had been discontinued. Since the museum's establishment when Faiz Mohammad Khan was Education Minister early in Zahir Shah's reign, professional museum employees received a 250 Afghani salary plus a 500 Afghani stipend. The reason was that museum employee should have, at least, a modest standard of living so poverty would not break them, impede their research, or affect their institutional commitment. I believe this payment continued for a long time and was meant to be an incentive. That indicated the Government's support. However, no practical preservation work was done; [the Museum] remained at the tiny building which I call a matchbox. The building was cramped because you compress tens of thousands of artifacts in it; it was against museum management principles. However, to mention some achievements, thirty-nine museum collections were cataloged, and the depots were organized according to museological principles. Other collections had yet to be cataloged. Unfortunately, when I joined the Museum, the country already faced turmoil, and situations were evolving rapidly, including transferring the Museum by late 1978; based on a government order, the artifacts were to be transferred to Kabul, i.e. the center. It seemed to be a good idea to move it to Arg. Please let me talk about the transfer of the Museum, the third transfer.

ESFANDIARI: Please go ahead.

MASOUDI: As mentioned, the Museum was originally housed in Bagh-e Bala. The artifacts were initially transferred to Koti Baghcha, and then to Darulaman. Now comes the third relocation: from the National Museum, the Museum goes to Naeem Khan's residence, Foreign Minister under Daoud

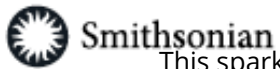


Smithsonian

Khan. I should note when I was appointed, astonishing changes happened because of decrees issued by authorities. I can name the decrees issued by Noor Mohammad Taraki—he issued several important decrees one after the other—, land reform, restricting dowries to three hundred Afghanis—societal culture was not ready for it. One of those decrees ordered the museum to be moved from Darulaman to central Kabul. Supposedly, they wanted the Museum to be relocated to the presidential palace. I remember, one day, in late 1978, Cabinet members headed by Defense Minister, Aslam Watanjar, toured the National Museum. They visited the National Museum. The then Museum Director, Nazar Mohammad Azizi, briefed them, guided their tour, and answered their questions. At the conclusion, the defense minister instructed Azizi, the Museum Director, to prepare for transferring the artifacts to the presidential palace. He said the presidential palace would be designated as the museum and renamed the “People’s Museum”.

This raised alarm bells; it was a warning. It sounded wonderful. We were happy the Museum would move out of this small building and be housed at Arg, a historic building with ample space for ideal exhibits more accessible to the public. But the downsides were unclear then. Upon hearing the directive, the museum director consulted the Information and Culture Minister who involved higher leadership asking about the order and extent of preparations. They told him to wait; we will update you with more instructions about any possible changes. Still, the museum management acted proactively. The director held meetings with department heads to analyze any potential upsides and drawbacks, asking for contingency plans to be ready. After deliberations about the circumstances and following several meetings with the heads of the departments, the museum decided to begin preparations. Various committees were formed. I remember committees like artifact registration, transport, monitoring and supervision, packaging, etcetera. Committee members were the Museum staff; they were assigned to different sections. Colleagues from the Archaeology Institute, too, were assigned to committees. This was a great initiative; they got it approved by the authorities.

After a few days, strict instructions came from higher authorities that the transfer must occur. This was a revolutionary order. By the four pm closing most employees had left; we were at home. Mobile phones did not exist, there was just one landline telephone. Azizi, Director of the Museum, was at the minister’s office. He was told to start transferring the artifacts immediately. He told them he was alone and he could not do it. They told him he should start moving, at minimum, shifting his office items. They provided him with a vehicle. Left with no options, he came to the Museum—it was a standard practice then as now to assign an employee on rotating duty every day and night - one officer and one janitor always remain inside. While external security is kept by the police/security guards, one museum employee shall remain on duty on a rotating basis. It was common practice then for museum contractor staff to live in nearby neighborhoods to readily report to work and leave later if need be. Azizi was compelled to start the work using the two vehicles provided by the ministry. He had asked them where to take the artifacts; the order was to Naeem Khan’s residence. We returned to work only to see it was a done deal.



This sparked many troubles. The previously formed committees mobilized and we had to start working. Artifact transport poses its own challenges, needing packing supplies and crates. Fortunately, around then, an American woman named Carla Grissman with the Asia Foundation had previously visited the Museum. When asked how she could assist, Carla offered to provide all necessary packing items, containers, and stuff like stationery through the Asia Foundation Office. Luckily, they did this which greatly facilitated the third museum move, to Muhammad Naeem Khan's residence. Notably, Carla facilitated the provision of all the packaging items, stationery, wooden and metal crates - anything required to move artifacts from the National Museum to Naeem Khan's home in Kabul. May she rest in peace. Her contribution was greatly appreciated and it made our job easier. If the required items were supposed to be provided by the government—packaging supplies—looking at government procedures, it would have been very difficult and time-consuming.

The assigned committees started the transfer of artifacts with great dedication, even working late into the night. I remember working until ten pm, twelve am, and even two am. One reason for the haste was the directive that said Saur [April] Revolution anniversary in 1979 should be celebrated in various districts. When we were young, Afghanistan's Independence Day was always celebrated with military parades, student processions, and sporting events in Chaman Hozori. The second day was celebrated by students. But I don't know why the decision was made to celebrate the 7th of Saur in twelve districts. One of these districts was District six. Up until now, the Afghanistan National Museum has been related to the Police District six or Kabul Municipal District six. Because it was a vast area, they said we should also celebrate the 7th of Saur there, and the artifacts needed to be moved before that. Hence, we were in a rush to complete the transfer by the 7th of Saur.

Despite the huge number of artifacts in the museum, we completed this process in less than forty days. These tens of thousands of artifacts were recorded by the committees, based on essential information for each piece, sorted by zone, depot, cabinet number, and trustee ("*Motamid*") inventory—we carbon-copied the inventory in three records. At that time, there were typewriters; computers didn't exist. We noted everything down by hand; we had to use carbon paper to create three copies, which made the process difficult and time-consuming. Out of these three copies, one was kept in the box with the artifacts to show the number of pieces in the box, the archeological site, the assigned trustee ("*Motamid*"), where it was taken from (gallery or depot), and which cabinet it came from. Another copy was given to the assigned trustee, and one was retained by the Museology Department. It was an arduous task, but fortunately, it was executed excellently.

At that time, I remember transportation means were very limited—there were two very small Russian-made vehicles, one with a half body and one with a tarpaulin. With these two, we transported artifacts. All these tasks were performed by museum and archaeology institute employees. Why? According to the principles at that time, outside laborers couldn't handle an artifact with the necessary care. These tasks were only done by museum employees, and it yielded very good results for us. This process was very exhausting, and fortunately, museum staff—we

**Smithsonian**

believed there were over one hundred thousand pieces of artifacts in total at that time—relocated them to different sections of Sardar Mohammad Naeem Khan's residence. It's worth mentioning that this house was a concrete structure with three floors, two floors and one basement, a servants' quarters, and a very large courtyard. Artifacts were placed in these rooms, vitrines, cabinets, and the servants' quarters. However, all furniture, cabinets, and items that were not considered artifacts but were related were placed in the courtyard of the house. Unfortunately, due to exposure to sunlight, snowfall, and rain, these museum properties remained there for a year. Subsequently, the items that were outside suffered damage and decayed, but fortunately, the artifacts remained entirely intact—none were lost, destroyed, or damaged.

After the happening on the 6th of Jādi [Dec 27, 1979], the system changed, and the then-government under the leadership of Babrak Karmal decided to move the museum artifacts back to its original building in the outskirts of Darulaman, which is a separate process that we will discuss later. However, at that time, we were very much heartbroken about why this action was being taken. On one hand, we were pleased that the Royal Palace would house the museum. But this did not materialize, and we were directed to Naeem Khan's house. However, the great tragedy that occurred in that area was that when Hafizullah Amin eliminated Taraki, Hafizullah Amin moved his center of governance from the Royal Palace to the Darulaman suburb and took residence at the Taj Beg Palace. All meetings were held there, the Ministry of Defense was in the Darul Aman Palace, and the museum's building was just a few meters away from the Ministry of Defense. After the museum was relocated, the Ministry of Defense's immobile communication department was based at the museum building.

Certainly, on the 6th of Jādi [Dec 27th], when the Russians—before the 6th [Dec 27th], Soviet forces were coming to Kabul through land and air. I remember helicopters in Kabul's airspace, landing at the airport. They used to transport troops, in addition to some weaponry; armored tanks passed through the Hairatan Bridge, the land border, and came to Kabul, and were stationed at military units overnight. When the government was asked about it, the authorities would say that those Soviet divisions had come to protect and support the ruling regime and to strengthen it against the opposition. But we didn't understand. When the 6th of Jādi [Dec 27th] happened—on the 6th of Jādi 1358 [Dec 27, 1979], a serious clash took place; Soviet forces and supporters of the Parcham faction of the Democratic People's Party of Afghanistan acted against Amin. A very severe war ensued, where not only Amin but also all his guards were eliminated. After some time, when the government changed and Karmal came to power, he again chose the Presidential Palace or the Royal Palace as his center of power. After some time, by late 1358 [early 1980], it was directed that the museum should be relocated again, a separate process, but the outcome was very positive. The museum was moved, and the artifacts remained unharmed, but the furniture and display cases were damaged. However, if the museum had stayed there, it would undoubtedly have caught fire, and because of the clashes, it could have been devastated and probably looted. This was the result or achievement of these changes. This is a short version of the story.

Smithsonian
ESFANDIARI:

Thank you, Mr. Masoudi. Let's quickly go back to the previous topic. You mentioned the "Tahvildari" [custodianship] system at the National Museum of Afghanistan. Could you elaborate on the characteristics of this system? How does it work? How did it originate?

MASOUDI: As far as I remember, from the very beginning of the museum, not only in the museum but in all government offices, the *Tahvildari* system existed, and it still exists. However, the museum's *Tahvildari* system is entirely different from other offices. In other offices, usually the furniture and some purchased items, based on work requirements, are listed under a trustee's [*Motamid's*] name who is responsible for their protection and care. According to the procedure, the used item is added to his negative balance. When an item is used, it is approved by a verification committee, added, and then subtracted. Unfortunately, in the museum, the same system was followed, due to the lack of educated individuals at that time, i.e. those who graduated from university. The way the government worked was that they would hire graduates based on need. When they graduated, they were recruited into various departments according to their field of study. For the *Tahvildari* system in the museum, from the beginning, those employed were mainly illiterate or uneducated. But one important thing was that at that time, the *Tahvildars* had to formally and legally deposit a certain amount of their personal property, either in cash or kind, as a security to the government. In case of any incident, that security deposit would be used to compensate for the damage. Even though historical artifacts are of infinite value.

The Historical and Cultural Heritage Preservation Law passed in Nov 1980 was the first law where it was mentioned that the value of registered museum artifacts is infinite. UNESCO laws also confirm this. Why? Because it's something that can't be recreated. An artwork created by an artist two thousand years ago, if lost, we can't have that artist revive and recreate it for us. That's why it holds more value. Those responsible for its care should pay attention and be cautious. Another good aspect of this law was that certain matters were clearly defined and given a legal aspect. The *Tahvildars* at that time—from the day I started working at the museum until 2008, this system was in place. Until I went on some trips and saw museums abroad. In those museums, the curator system is in place. A curator is someone who works within the museum, is responsible for a section of the museum's collection, takes care of it, or as our people say, the artifacts are entrusted to him. This person must work there, research, write about the artifacts, better present the artifacts, and be knowledgeable about their characteristics, knowing when an artifact deteriorates, and when it needs restoration, preservation, or cleaning.

Unfortunately, our *Tahvildars* [custodians] didn't have this knowledge. But the system that was established was excellent, in my opinion. Its excellence lay in the fact that the *Motamid* [trustee] is responsible for the artifacts when entrusted with them, had the keys to their respective depots, but under no circumstances had the authority to open the depot or display cases. A delegation should have been appointed, suggested by the Museology Department; the delegation members were chosen by the museum director or manager. They would jointly open the depot in the presence of the *Motamid* [trustee] and perform the duties formally assigned to them. When they left,

**Smithsonian**

they were obliged to seal the depot gate. Usually, our depots at that time, and still do, have two locks: one is a built-in lock and an additional latch with a large lock. They would affix the date, their name, and signature to the lock, keeping those signatures untouched for as long as needed.

One of the responsibilities of the on-duty employee, both day and night, was to control the seals of the depots. They also had to look after the seals of the galleries. At that time, as was common in all museums, each gallery had a guard who sometimes wore a uniform, when I joined. However, later, the uniforms were removed and they had to put on government uniforms, much like a police guard, but, in reality, they were watchers ensuring no harm came to the artifacts, and the seals and locks of the display cases didn't get damaged. This responsibility was officially handed over from the day watchman to the night watchman and vice versa; there was a booklet. These actions were very good in terms of security. But outside the museum, it was the police's responsibility.

The *Tahvildari* system continued until 2008, which, in my opinion, was very effective and a good system, in terms of security. After I took charge of the museum in 2002 after the fall of the Taliban, I continued this system until I retired, and for now, this same process is ongoing. This means that, in terms of protecting artifacts, both in the depots and on display, it has yielded very favorable results. But another problem was where the poor *Tahvildar* [custodian] would keep the keys. There were many boxes of keys, reaching hundreds and a thousand keys, and there was no organized system for storing these keys. But as far as I see and have observed in foreign museums, the curator has full authority. Because they are the persons with a record and experience, officially appointed and dedicated to this field, conducting research; these are academic people. Fortunately, this was rolled out, and hopefully, it will produce the desired result.

The young employees hired at the Museum have graduated from the field of archaeology in the social sciences department. They have been employed in line with their field of study. This is a separate discussion on how we transformed [the system] and created opportunities; we will discuss it at the right time. The *Tahvildari* system existed from the establishment of the museum until 2008, after which the curator system was introduced, and all the *Tahvildars* [custodians] who held artifacts under their names officially handed them over to the curator. Currently, the curator system is being implemented in the museum. We will discuss this further in subsequent discussions.

ESFANDIARI: Thank you. Could you please elaborate—I know you briefly mentioned it—the galleries at the time you started working in the museum. How the galleries were set up, how the artifacts were categorized, where the exhibitions took place, how large they were, and what amenities were available?

MASOUDI: Very well. Thank you, that's a very good question. As I mentioned before, the museum has a very small building, does not have large galleries and some essential elements that a museum should have, both back then and now. For instance, there's no centralized heating system, no security signals, and we lack large display halls in this museum building. And most importantly,

**Smithsonian**

we don't have secure depots. Preventing dust and dirt infiltration is crucial for a museum because they're primary enemies of artifacts, and the National Museum of Afghanistan has a notably weak system. Despite some actions taken, they haven't been sufficient. At that time, artifacts unearthed from archaeological sites, considering the site's extent, and the number of artifacts, were designated to a depot named after that archaeological site. Likewise, the exhibited artifacts were named after the archeological site. Certainly, there was categorization—artifacts belonging to the same or nearby periods were stored in a related depot, kept by the same *Motamid* [trustee] and even displayed in the same area.

MASOUDI: If I may, I'll mention the names of the depots and galleries.

ESFANDIARI: Please, go ahead.

MASOUDI: I can say that the depots of the National Museum and the galleries of the National Museum were usually named after significant archaeological sites. For instance, the Surkh Kotal depot, whose artifacts were unearthed from the Surkh Kotal archaeological site, and whose artifacts were usually displayed in the museum's entrance hallway. Two. The Prehistoric depot; and its gallery was referred to as the Prehistoric Gallery, covering crucial archaeological areas like Mandigak, Deh Murasi Ghundi, and other areas related to prehistoric periods. These artifacts were displayed in the Prehistoric Gallery and stored in the Prehistoric Depot. Then there was the Hadda Depot or Hadda Gallery. Hadda is a very important site of the Buddhist era situated in Jalalabad. It had a large number of artifacts and a separate depot named after it. The Ai Khanum Gallery: a significant ancient site in northern Afghanistan, it had a gallery established in 1980 and its depot was known as the Ai Khanum Depot. Another gallery we had was known as the Bagram Gallery. Bagram is a highly valuable ancient site dating back to the first, second, and third centuries AD, and its artifacts were stored in the Bagram depot. We also had a Numismatics Gallery. I remember that the coins were stored in Bagram Depot; it had an excellent gallery. We had a small chamber named the Numismatics Gallery, where artifacts from various periods, including coins from the early period until the 20th century, were displayed. Another Gallery was named Shortughai.

Another gallery that was established during my time was called the Smuggled Artifacts Gallery, and it was a majestic gallery. Other galleries included Shotorak, Pai Tava, Bamyān, and Fondoqestan. We had about ten galleries, each dedicated to an archaeological site. However, it didn't mean that the Bamyān gallery solely contained Bamyān artifacts. Artifacts from various sites or eras around that region were displayed in the same gallery with appropriate captions. Indeed, we had ten artifact depots and ten chambers. Currently, this system has changed, it has expanded and is no longer confined to archaeological zones. Changes occurred in our galleries after 2002. Overall, this was how it worked at that time. If you're interested, we could discuss each of them in more detail.

The *Tahvildari* system was as I described earlier. I am satisfied with the current combination and believe it shouldn't change until society is entirely prepared for it. The museum staff is

**Smithsonian**

prepared, I believe in that. I don't see any issues with the museum staff. However, the societal mindset should be ready so that the professional work is done effectively. It's good to have a mixed approach. Today, if we explain to some non-Afghan friends what a *Tahvildar* means, it would be very interesting for them.

[END OF TRACK FSA.A2024.03_NMAOH_2023.11.02_01]

MASOUDI: But this principle of the museum operation remained with us until 2008.

ESFANDIARI: Thank you. At the beginning of the interview, you mentioned that the excavation work was delegated to France for a specific period, and the French Archaeological Delegation in Afghanistan was conducting these activities. When you started working, how active were the archaeological excavations, in which areas, and by whom were they conducted?

MASOUDI: Very good. When I came to the museum, even before that, DAFA [La Délégation archéologique française en Afghanistan], officially began its work in 1922. The French Archeological Delegation in Afghanistan, referred to as DAFA, was active until the Second World War. It means that excavations were exclusively carried out by the French team, and, I guess, this was not unique to Afghanistan; our neighboring country, Iran, had a similar arrangement. The agreements of Afghanistan and Iran with the French Archaeological Delegation were almost similar. They had begun excavation work during the Qajar period, and we started later. Our museum has a history of almost 104 years, established very late. But when the French began their work, undoubtedly, the excavations conducted anywhere were undertaken in the presence of the museum staff. The Institute of Archaeology was established in 1966. After that, the excavation works shifted from the museum administration. Back then, the Museum administration, Archaeology, and Historical Antiquities worked under the Museum's umbrella. Work was progressing well, and the individuals working at the museum had professional expertise. Especially, the directors or heads of the museums were incredible personalities. Mr. Zeyaie, may his soul rest in peace. The renowned historian of our country, I just forgot his name—Kohzad—understood foreign languages, French and English, and collaborated with the French. He used to send his team with the French for excavations until the Institute of Archaeology was established in 1966. During that time, the museum had various responsibilities. I believe things were progressing quite well at that time.

MASOUDI: I forgot the question.

ESFANDIARI: I repeat the question, in what areas these excavations were conducted when you began working at the museum?

MASOUDI: When I started working, both joint and individual excavations were ongoing in some archaeological sites. By individual, I mean independent work by the Institute of Archaeology. Referring to independent excavations, when the Institute of Archaeology was established, the archaeological excavations were conducted in Hadda of Nangarhar by the French archaeological team and the museum staff. When Mr. Shahi Bai Mustamandi was appointed as the Head of Archaeology, they continued their independent excavations in Hadda until 1978 when the security

**Smithsonian**

situation worsened, and their excavations were halted. Secondly, the Institute of Archaeology had independent excavations in other sites as well, including one at Tapa-e Maranjān. Tapa-e Maranjān was among the places where independent archaeological excavations were conducted. In other locations where new sites were discovered or arbitrary excavations were reported, the Institute of Archaeology had the authority to go there, continue excavations, and retrieve artifacts from those sites. Even initially, museum staff conducted independent excavations and did not have joint excavations with DAFA. These [independent] excavations continued. However, in subsequent years, as long as DAFA was active in Kabul, their joint excavations also continued.

Unfortunately, the exclusive arrangement terminated when the Second World War ended. Archaeologists from various countries signed protocols with the Institute of Archaeology and participated in excavations in various archaeological sites, including foreign archaeologists from countries like America, England, India, Japan, Germany, and Italy. Excavations were under French monopoly for thirty years, and after the Second World War, they lost the privileges they once had. There was no equal sharing of artifacts or possessions; all artifacts belonged to Afghanistan, and the foreign archaeological missions only had the right to publish them. They paid their own expenses, which was a significant advancement for the museum and archaeology. Much of our history became illuminated and introduced, enriching the museum's collection. It reached a point where, when I joined the museum, the museum administration didn't have the capacity to receive all those artifacts. The artifacts acquired by the Institute of Archaeology were stored in the Sarāj al-'Amārah Palace, and some other artifacts were brought to Kabul and stored in the Institute of Archaeology building, as I mentioned earlier. It means the Museum was not able to receive the artifacts. I remember, approximately fifteen to sixteen thousand artifacts were stored in the Institute of Archaeology building. Unfortunately, during the wars, when security conditions deteriorated, they were looted. It's worth noting that in 1980, the Hadda artifacts, our most valuable artifacts kept in the Sarāj al-'Amārah building, were tragically looted; the building was then set on fire. Additionally, we had a very beautiful and precious non-transferrable museum in Hadda that I had visited twice. It was a magnificent museum that was first looted and then burned in 1980. This was when insecurity in Afghanistan, particularly in the countryside, escalated significantly. They used these as tools for propaganda under the guise of Islam. Unfortunately, we suffered a cultural catastrophe that ultimately reached the center, and the National Museum of Afghanistan caught fire in 1993. This is a tragedy, a disaster, a loss that cannot be compensated for.

ESFANDIARI: That is unfortunate. Thank you. You mentioned the Institute of Archaeology. Since you started working at the museum, what collaborations or joint projects did the Afghan government have with foreign entities, to enhance the abilities of museum staff and to organize exhibitions abroad, as well as to promote the significance and activities of the National Museum of Afghanistan?

MASOUDI: Since I came to the museum, significant events occurred: the transfer of artifacts to Shahr-e Naw in Kabul and their subsequent return to the museum; excavations shrank somewhat



Smithsonian

because the security situation in provinces and districts was not favorable, but, in the meantime, some significant excavations were conducted. I already mentioned the independent archaeological excavations by the Institute of Archaeology; the French were conducting excavations as well. The museum's activities were also evolving and progressing.

[Mobile phone message sound]

One of the very significant excavations that took place during my time at the museum was a joint work by the Soviet delegation led by Viktor Ivanovich Sarianidi and the Afghan archaeological team. They excavated the Tillya Tepe [Gold Hill] site in northern Afghanistan, in Jowzjan province, about five kilometers northwest of Sheberghan, in 1979. As a result of the joint excavation, the best artifacts from the first century BC and AD were discovered, including 21,618 pieces of various objects, with most being golden artifacts. The Institute of Archaeology directly handed over these artifacts, under Sarianidi's supervision, to the museum. I remember when these artifacts were brought to the museum; they were stored in the depot, entrusted to a *Motamid* [Trustee] of that time, and well preserved. In the following year, 1981, Sarianidi assembled a team of photographers equipped with advanced gear, cameras, and lighting at the National Museum. They meticulously photographed each artifact. The Museum administration appointed a three-member delegation, including the Museology director, Ghulam Sakhi Badar—may he rest in peace—, Hasan Shor, presently residing in England, and myself. We collaborated with Sarianidi. Over three months, they professionally captured images of all the objects, transported the photographs to Moscow, and compiled a comprehensive album detailing these artifacts. These albums remain accessible at the National Museum and stand as exceptional sources and references.

Based on an agreement, a considerable number of these albums—I can't recall the exact count—were submitted to the Ministry of Information and Culture. The Ministry of Information and Culture then handed them over to the Baihaqi Directorate of the Ministry, who sold these albums through their shops and bookstores. Each album was priced at two hundred Afghanis. Later, the museum administration stopped these sales, for reasons I'm aware of, gathered all the catalogs, and brought them to the National Museum. These catalogs were fortunately not looted during the war. The reason was that they were placed in a paper box, and kept with a *Motamid* in the depot, so no one noticed them. Thieves, seeing them, assumed they were books and didn't bother opening them. The catalogs contained photos of golden objects but they never opened them. These albums are the best source. Even if we compare, exhibition catalogs of the Tillya Tepe artifacts were printed in the United States, the Netherlands, and France. I think the Russian catalog, if it doesn't outweigh others, isn't any less. Fortunately, we have them.

There were joint excavations. You asked about the exhibitions. No international exhibition was held, except in 1963. During the late Zahir Shah's time, the museum's artifacts were displayed in four countries, including the United States of America, Japan, Italy, and Pakistan. Several artifacts from various historical sites, selected from the Islamic, Buddhist, and earlier eras, were displayed. The book published about this exhibition is a very good source; Kohzad has translated it from

**Smithsonian**

English into Dari. This book is an excellent source showing the artifacts displayed in four countries.

But our next exhibition in 2005 was a very extensive one. It not only displayed these artifacts but also had additional artifacts that were incomparable. At that time, the government's resources were limited or it was less interested. After the fall of the Taliban and following the establishment of the interim administration, the National Museum of Afghanistan gained global attention due to the news of looting, museum fires, and artifact smuggling. This drew greater international attention to the National Museum. Fortunately, afterward, the museum emerged from the rubble, was reconstructed, and organized, and artifacts were rearranged, cataloged, and digitized. These are the subsequent actions that we'll discuss at the appropriate time. But the longest exhibition of the museum's artifacts is a separate discussion. These artifacts were on tour for thirteen years, a comprehensive thirteen-year exhibit. I believe it's the longest exhibition globally.

MASOUDI: I'd be delighted to delve into those details. But first, if we may, let's take a short break for a few minutes. If necessary, we can discuss this further afterward.

[recording paused]

ESFANDIARI: Mr. Masoudi, you mentioned the Tillya Tepe artifacts. In 1979, when these artifacts were discovered, were they brought to the museum and stored in the depots, or were they put on display?

MASOUDI: Thank you for the excellent question. When the Tillya Tepe artifacts [were discovered]—we currently call it the Bactrian Treasure, why? Tillya Tepe is a small place, meaning the Gold Hill. Bactrian Treasure, however, signifies a larger concept about northern Afghanistan, the ancient Balkh, it suggests a value—once the artifacts were handed over to the museum and after completion of photography and preparation of the album, the museum administration received a letter from the Ministry of Information and Culture directing them to exhibit the Tillya Tepe artifacts. The museum displayed a number of valuable Tillya Tepe artifacts in the Bactrian Chamber in newly built showcases ordered from the Jangalak Factory. I remember, at that time, Majid Sarboland served as the Minister of Information and Culture; he was also the Deputy Prime Minister. He was not present at the inauguration of this exhibition. When the exhibition opened, many spectators and enthusiasts visited it. He was on a trip, outside the country. When he arrived, it was 4 p.m. Because he was aware of this directive, he came to see the Tillya Tepe exhibition—he had heard its name but hadn't seen the artifacts—and informed the then-museum director, Anwar Ketawazai, that he would visit the museum. They told him the staff were leaving. He said, "Tell some related staff members to stay until I see the Bactrian Treasure or Tillya Tepe Exhibition." The museum director instructed the relevant *Motamid* [trustee], the Museology director, and a few others, including myself, to stay. After a few minutes, the minister arrived. When they turned on the lights and he saw the exhibition, you must admit it was a magnificent exhibition. Not only the Tillya Tepe artifacts but also other objects from northern Afghanistan, related to the greater Bactrian region, from ancient times to later periods, coming from different archaeological sites, were put on display. It included some of the best frescos from the northern regions of Afghanistan; unfortunately, when the museum caught fire,



Smithsonian

they were set ablaze. We couldn't store them; they were very large. The minister was astonished and asked who had directed them to display these golden objects in this condition. The museum director said a letter had come with your signature, an official written order. He [the director] gave him a tour of the museum. He saw the exhibition and said, "Close down the exhibition right now." He [the director] said, "Not until we get a written order," he said, "Within half an hour, you will get it". Anyway, it was impossible. Four people couldn't take them down. The museum procedure had to be followed. The next day, we came and took the artifacts down and transferred them to the respective depots. It's unimaginable that such valuable golden objects be safeguarded in such physical condition and the country's precarious security situation.

In fact, in 1983 or 1984, the museum administration decided to transfer the artifacts from the museum to the Koti Baghcha Palace in Arg. At that time, our ethnography museum was housed at Koti Baghcha of the presidential palace, under the museum's supervision. All the golden artifacts were moved to Koti Baghcha in Arg, where they were genuinely preserved. The ethnography museum was also there, not for display, but solely as a storage space for the artifacts. However, in 1989, when the Russian forces withdrew, it was another matter of how we decided to move other artifacts to a safe place. They were taken to the Central Bank of Arg. This exhibition was magnificent, and fortunately, no tragedy occurred, and no mishandling took place. May the enemies always be kept at bay; they didn't notice it. Our cultural heritage has numerous ill-wishers at home and abroad. They failed to have access to it, and these artifacts have been preserved until now. However, a number of Bactrian Treasury artifacts have been plundered, most of which were not golden artifacts; they were silver pieces or some other artifacts that existed in the museum. In total, I believe, around 20,578 golden artifacts and some iron, wooden, and ceramic artifacts are remaining. I think close to a thousand Bactrian Treasury artifacts have been looted, which were not golden artifacts.

However, certain works were done in the museum. I can mention another valuable repository, we call it the Ceramic Depot. The Ceramic Depot was created for research purposes. French archaeologists, notably the distinguished scientist and ceramist Bartel Leone, who conducted excavations in Afghanistan, collaborated with a colleague from DAFA and the Archaeology and Museum staff. Together, they established a repository of ceramic artifacts from various regions of Afghanistan in the basement of the National Museum's eastern annex, a notably large hall. Wooden showcases were crafted to suit the different types and forms of artifacts, spanning various archaeological sites from the Neolithic to the Paleolithic periods—when pottery was invented—and up to the twentieth century. They meticulously arranged artifacts from all archaeological sites, with a dedicated chamber allocated for the Hadda archaeological site. The remaining artifacts were housed in the depot specifically for research purposes, not for public display. It stands as a commendable effort. We have a department called Ceramology, responsible for depot preservation; Any scientist intending to conduct research can visit, select an artifact, and utilize it for their research within a specified area. This initiative was a significant and valuable undertaking. This gallery was constructed in 1980, despite ups and downs. The Ai Khanum Gallery was another magnificent addition in 1982.

**Smithsonian**

Unfortunately, the DAFA office closed in Kabul in 1982, and the French archaeologists left Kabul, subsequently limiting activities. The contributions of the French archaeologists in Afghanistan remain highly commendable.

ESFANDIARI: Thank you very much for your time. If there's no additional points, we may conclude today's interview.

MASOUDI: If you have any questions, I will be happy to answer. Otherwise, these were just brief and passing references to these topics. If we delve into the details, there could be further discussions.

ESFANDIARI: Hopefully, we'll follow up on this topic in the next sessions. Thank you for your time, I appreciate it.

MASOUDI: Thank you, and stay well, Mr. Esfandiari.

[END OF TRACK FSA.A2024.03_NMAOH_2023.11.02_02]

[END OF INTERVIEW]