

Oral History Interview

with

Omara Khan Masoudi

recorded at the National Museum of Asian Art

Washington, D.C.

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by Azizullah Esfandiari

Interviewer

ESFANDIARI: Thank you for your time. Welcome to the second session of our interview. Yesterday, we discussed the historical background of the National Museum of Afghanistan and the beginning of your work at the museum. Today, let's focus on the period marked by the presence of Soviet military forces in Afghanistan. Can you shed light on when the Soviet forces entered Afghanistan and how their presence influenced the museum and its operations?

MASOUDI: Thank you. I want to mention that the Soviet military units entered Afghanistan in Jādi 1358 [December 1979] at the invitation of the Government and the People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan. They stayed in Afghanistan until Dalw 26th, 1367 [February 15, 1989] – for nine years. In essence, Soviet forces remained in Afghanistan from December 1979 to February 1988.¹

I would like to point out that Soviet forces entered the Afghan territory via both land and air, especially through helicopter transport to Kabul Airport. I recall a significantly high number of flights during that time, shuttling troops to the airport, while at night, they were transferred to military bases in the capital and provinces. Their armored units made their way into Afghanistan through the Hairatan port.

At that time, during Amin's rule, when people in Kabul questioned the purpose of these units and the situation and why planes and military forces were arriving, they were assured that these were friendly forces coming to Afghanistan to support the regime and were urged not to obstruct them. Perhaps there was a protocol regarding the entry of these forces into Afghanistan. However,

¹ February 1989.

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the concern among the Afghan populace was how such a significant force could arrive in the country.

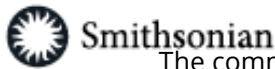
I recall that, at that time, the regime used television broadcasts to advise people not to let light from their homes or television screens be visible at night and to use thick curtains. I'm unsure of the reasoning behind this directive. It's likely that when Soviet units were dispersed to various military bases, the intention was to keep them out of public sight to avoid creating disapproval. I believe that was the rationale behind these measures.

In any case, a major development occurred in Kabul city center on the night of December 27, 1979. Intense military clashes took place between Soviet forces and, presumably, some supporters of the regime change against Hafizullah Amin's government. Amin was the incumbent President residing in Tapa-e Tajbeg. The sounds echoed across Kabul. Fortunately, the area was predominantly military, with Darulaman Palace and Tapa-e Tajbeg situated away from residential areas. Undoubtedly, an extremely fierce battle unfolded there. Most of Hafizullah Amin's presidential guard had been eliminated, except for a battalion in Sar-e Asiab, reportedly retreating towards Reshkhoh. Anyway, during that period, the museum was not located in Darulaman; it had already been relocated. This meant the museum was closed, and we did not have any galleries.

On the night of December 27, we heard Babrak Karmal on Tajikistan radio announcing that the true children of the People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan had assumed power, toppling the despotic Amin regime. They labeled Amin as an agent of foreign powers, and then this event happened. The following day, Babrak Karmal took his seat in the Presidential Palace and continued his subsequent activities from there, without going to Darulaman, neither to the palace nor to Tapa-e Tajbeg.

At that time, the museum's artifacts were stored or deposited in Mohammed Naeem Khan's house until after some time when the ruling party or regime instructed the museum to be transferred back to its original location in Darulaman. Before transferring the artifacts, the museum building, severely damaged during the December 27 coup, was repaired. Subsequently, a plan was devised for the artifact transfer.

At that time, an authorized commission was formed by the ruling regime, comprising esteemed cultural figures and intellectuals of Afghanistan. It was called the Commission for the Revival of the National Museum. As far as I know, the commission members included Mohammad Sediq Farhang, a seasoned historian, scholar, and author of several books; Abdul Hai Habibi, a distinguished scientist and former chancellor of Kabul University and a prominent professor therein; Rawan Farhadi, a respected writer and intellectual; Abdul Rauf Benawa, a former Minister of Information and Culture and ambassador to several countries; Mo'tamedi, who had served as the museum director for an extensive period before retiring and was working at the Academy of Sciences during that time; and Mir Ahmad Joyenda, who held the position of head of archaeology in Afghanistan.



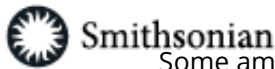
The commission's primary objective was to facilitate and oversee the transfer of artifacts from Mohammad Naeem Khan's house back to the museum's original building in Darulaman. It is important to note that Mir Ahmad Joyenda, apart from his role as an archaeologist, assumed the role of secretary within this commission. The commission collaborated closely with the museum administration and the Ministry of Information and Culture, particularly with the museum administration led by Mohammad Anwar Katwazi at that time.

Drawing from the experience of the museum staff in forming committees and handling tasks such as transportation, packing, cataloging, and the transfer of artifacts, specialized committees were established. In 1979, the process of transferring these artifacts from Mohammad Naeem Khan's house to the museum's original building in Darulaman commenced. This process was gradual and time-consuming, spanning about a year. Finally, the exhibition was reintroduced in the museum building in Darulaman, inaugurated in a special ceremony held in December 1980. Following that, the museum was open to visitors and guests; we did not have any problems and the museum's work was proceeding normally.

One very important point I should highlight is that the Law on Preservation of Historical and Cultural Heritage Sites of Afghanistan was adopted for the first time in this year or period. A commission was appointed to draft the Law on Preservation of Afghanistan's Historical and Cultural Heritage Sites. They tried to incorporate applicable procedures, regulations, and previous museum guidelines and related documents on the preservation and restoration of antiquities, and [documents from] the Directorate of Archaeology in Afghanistan – fortunately, this commission initiated the work in the best possible manner. Not only were they successful in drafting this law, but its legal procedures were completed in December 1980 moving from the Ministry of Justice to the Council of Ministers and, upon endorsement by the President, was officially published in the Ministry of Justice's gazette.

This law introduced several significant changes instrumental in safeguarding Afghanistan's historical and cultural heritage. One of its crucial articles specified that Afghanistan's historical and cultural artifacts and mines are considered public property, emphasizing the responsibility of both the Afghan government and its people for their protection. This is a good move. If archaeological sites or artifacts are discovered on private property, regardless of excavations occurring on someone's land, be it residential, agricultural, or public spaces, they do not constitute private ownership. As per this law, they remain state and public property. It is the responsibility of the state and people to jointly work to protect these artifacts.

Second, an organic relationship was established between key agencies in this sector. I think, from a cultural perspective, the museum, archaeology, and the Department for Preservation and Restoration of Historical Monuments in Afghanistan have a very organic connection with each other. A close relationship based on this law came into being, a relationship whose efficacy we would witness in subsequent phases, and even today, this law remains in effect.



Some amendments were made to this law in 2003, which the Ministry of Information and Culture requested from the Kabul UNESCO office on how this law could be harmonized with international laws in the cultural sector through UNESCO Paris and UNESCO offices and branches in different member countries. I clearly remember that the conditions in Kabul were very difficult at that time in 2003. The head of the UNESCO office in Kabul, its country director, agreed to assign one of their staff members – I think a girl from Belgium – to work with me, as I was director of the museum, and Wasi Ferozi, who was head of archaeology. We were tasked with detailing this law in Dari and partly in English. That lady would take notes to later translate from Dari into English. This work was done and sent to Paris, where experts reviewed it and proposed some amendments to this 1980 law on the preservation of historical and cultural heritage.

After making the amendments, they sent it back and work was done on this law again at the Ministry of Information and Culture, taking into account the perceptions of society in accordance with customs, traditions, and the religious requirements in Afghanistan. In this law, some issues were accepted while others were not accepted. Why? The cultural and perceptual settings of society were one of the fundamentals, and finally, a number of changes were introduced to this law which fortunately was adopted again in 2004. The law was relatively good and is still in force.

As far as I know, back then, when the Commission was working and before the adoption of this law in 1980, the Commission had studied the cultural laws of neighboring countries like Pakistan, Iran, and the Republic of Egypt, examining their procedures for protecting cultural heritage overall. Without a doubt, these countries also have rich cultural assets and are wealthy in terms of archaeology. [The Commission] utilized those laws too.

In my view, when the law was drafted it had many benefits. This law envisaged an Archaeological Committee which was formed after the law came into effect. The Archaeology Committee had specific powers and responsibilities. For example, determining antiquity, identifying whether an artifact is ancient– there are two things: cultural artifacts, and underground antiquities which differ from one another. Cultural artifacts can be inherited from father to son and from child to later generations, thus attaining historical provenance and are preservable by law. This law stipulates that anything more than 100 years old is eligible for preservation and safekeeping in the museum, whether private property or [public] – of course, it does not infringe on private property, rather it is the museum's duty to register it, and cooperate with the owners in preserving and safeguarding it. If needed, the artifact's owner can be invited on some occasions and exhibitions to display it, but the work will always be registered in the museum archives under his name and its credit goes to its owner. However, some artifacts that are highly exceptional artistically should be preserved even if they are not yet 100 years old. This is one of the important articles that set the boundary between historical, cultural, and underground antiquities, defining the responsibilities of relevant departments therein.

The second topic is that in terms of composition, the Archaeological Committee, as envisioned here, has specific powers from a professional standpoint. By law, the head of the

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Archaeology Institute is stipulated to be the head of the Archaeological Committee. Members appointed to this Committee can officially gain membership after endorsement by the Minister of Information and Culture – one competent museum staff member with academic qualification, one engineer or architect from the Department for Preservation and Restoration of Historical Monuments, plus two professionally qualified members from the Archaeology Directorate, one historian from the Academy of Sciences, one representative from Kabul University, specifically from the Faculty of Social Sciences' Department of Archaeology and Ethnography. The Committee is activated with these members.

This Committee always decides on very important issues. One of this Committee's powers was its members' decisive opinion by majority vote regarding an artifact's authenticity or lack thereof. This is the ultimate authority that the law has given to the Archaeological Committee. Second, the Archaeological Committee as composed here can agree to select Afghanistan's artifacts for exhibition overseas. If this Committee does not approve, the government does not have the authority. When this Committee agrees, the Ministry of Information and Culture makes the proposal to the Council of Ministers, and once approved there and endorsed by the President, it can pave the way for exhibitions of artifacts of the National Museum or provincial museums to be held abroad. But domestically, the museum administration itself has the authority.

The third issue is that the Archaeological Committee has the authority to send museum artifacts abroad for restoration or research purposes. Why? It is difficult for the museum administration, with its existing deficiencies, to have adequate technical and professional capacity and expertise in artifact restoration. Although such matters have been implemented on a small scale, still this is part of the Archaeological Committee's authority as mandated by the law.

The fourth issue that the Committee has authority over is to decide whether the museum can exchange or barter some of its artifacts with another museum. This is a common practice that museums can have a bilateral agreement to provide some of their artifacts to one museum and receive some artifacts from it in return. Although this has not been put into practice in Afghanistan so far, the law has provided for it, which is good as, in some cases, the unknown sides of the history of a country may be illuminated by these artifacts, but so far in Afghanistan the need for this has not arisen.

The excavations undertaken in Afghanistan from 1922 up to now in various provinces and ancient sites by foreign and Afghan teams have fortunately systematically uncovered relics representing a very orderly historical sequence. We do not see any gap in representation from any period, whether the Stone Age, Chalcolithic Age, Bronze Age, pre-Kushan and Kushan, Hephthalite, and finally the Islamic era up to the present – chronologically we have this timeline embodied in our artifacts which we take pride in, with absolute authenticity of cultural and artistic identity. In my opinion, this law had these advantages, while its other articles were also well stated. The Archaeology Committee still exists to date and is active. This is one of the merits of this 1980 law,

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which was revised in 2004. This law serves as a guiding torch or roadmap for cultural activities across Afghanistan and fortunately, it is enforceable.

During the Soviet occupation—you know that people never agreed to foreign military forces occupying their country. When these forces entered Afghanistan, reactions emerged among the Afghan people stemming from ideology, patriotism, or any way you describe it, as people stood up against the occupation. The role of some Islamic groups is certainly prominent here, using religious preaching and symbols to say the country is occupied. Opposition gradually emerged in villages and districts in provinces, which slowly also reached the center. The main problem we faced at that time, during the presence of Soviet forces in Afghanistan, was that some of our provincial museums were endangered. At that time, we had local or provincial museums in five provinces and ensuring their security was difficult. Besides bilateral firing, sometimes heavy weaponry and rockets were also used in battles, which would damage these assets. In 1981, the Council of Ministers decided that artifacts of provincial museums should be transferred to the center for better preservation and safekeeping as the capital was secure at the time, although opponents' rockets would occasionally land in parts of Kabul. It was common then for Grad rockets with ranges of 10 km, 20 km, or 60 km [to land]. The government made efforts to maintain the security of Kabul city at all costs. It created three cordons so that long-range 60 km Grad rockets would not harm Kabul. Well, that's not our discussion topic here. The main question is the transfer of provincial museum artifacts.

When the Cabinet issued guidance to the Ministry of Information and Culture and the museum directorate at that time, specific committees were formed for each province to transport provincial museum artifacts to the center based on the Cabinet's directive and presidential decree since the vulnerability was high. A three-member team of museum staff was assigned to each province. The Nangarhar Museum [artifacts] were transported by an employee who was the museum's curator or head of one of the museum departments, Mr. Hassan Shor. I along with two assigned colleagues from the museum went to Kandahar Museum. Assigned to the Mazar-e-Sharif or Balkh Museum was one of our good colleagues, the late Syed Ghulam Sakhi Badr, who unfortunately is no more, he was the museology director there. The late Syed Mohammad Younus Mashfeq, may his soul rest in peace, was assigned along with two other museum employees for artifacts of the Ghazni Museum. One museum colleague was also assigned to Herat Museum. When the teams went [to the provinces], the Herat people did not agree to hand over the artifacts, they gave a negative response, but artifacts were transported from the other four provinces to Kabul.

I remember that transporting the artifacts was very difficult. In some provinces, it was done by military forces, in some [provinces] via Ariana Airlines planes, and some overland to the center. I have an unpleasant memory of this mission in 1981 from Kandahar. We went in June, conditions were extremely difficult, and the security situation in Kandahar city was dire, I don't know if it was our fate or God's help that we survived those terrible conditions – in twenty five days we cataloged and packed Kandahar museum's artifacts. With cooperation from provincial authorities and Kandahar security command, considering their security measures at that time, [the artifacts] were

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transported to the airport and loaded into a Soviet military cargo plane – those were very large aircraft – [to be flown to Kabul]. I remember trying hard to protect the artifacts from damage. Whether it was the pilot or an officer, whoever it was, he spoke Russian and I spoke Farsi. Eventually, despite my repeated emphasis, clear communication did not occur.

They put all our cargo loads in the aircraft and covered it with a cargo net. Maybe it was deliberate that he seated me at the very back of the plane saying “Here are your artifacts”. They put two of my colleagues each in a different section while I was right at the end. When the plane took off, it was a one-hour distance and I felt like I saw the apocalypse. My brain felt pierced by rods from the deafening roar, although they say there were also seats in the front we were not seated there. When we landed at Kabul airport, the museum administration was informed and cars came to transport us. I was incapable of speaking, not just me but all my colleagues too. We took the artifacts to the museum and organized them, of course with Motamid’s approval and signature. Representing each province, their respective Motamids also came to Kabul to store artifacts, seal and lock, and ensure [all was accounted for] before returning to their provinces. Mazar-e-Sharif Museum had fewer historical artifacts but numerous books and cultural objects. Ghazni Museum had a large number of artifacts mostly from the Islamic period, predominantly ceramics, and very few Buddhist-era relics, including an extremely valuable one called Durga which still exists. Fortunately [that piece] was transported from the Ghazni Museum. Similarly, artifacts from the Nangarhar Museum [were transported].

This was one of the difficult tasks undertaken, but unfortunately, a large number of those artifacts were also looted from the National Museum during the civil wars. At that time, they were transported from the provinces for safety but during the civil war not only could we not protect them at the National Museum, but we also lost our own artifacts – an immense cultural loss that can never be compensated. However, there are solutions to find out how these artifacts may be recovered, which is a separate discussion we will have. These were the security issues that occurred then. I remember damage was inflicted on Herat province’s historical sites – Herat’s Mosalla Complex, its minarets... There’s a saying, “One can’t make war with rose water”. Unfortunately, in the wars in Afghanistan, both parties of conflict paid little heed to this principle. In principle, wars should not be waged in civilian areas, vulnerable places, [areas] with historical relics, ancient sites, museums or archives or hospitals – battles should not occur in such places.

If I may, I would like to share with you a memory. In 2003, a symposium was held in Bonn about the Baghdad Museum, Afghanistan’s National Museum as well as museums in Bosnia and Herzegovina. From Afghanistan, I was invited as museum director and Abdul Wasi Ferozi as head of Archaeology. And from Iraq’s museum was Donny George – a great scholar, may his soul rest in peace, he passed away – who was their museum director, plus a lady who was the director of Bosnia and Herzegovina’s Museum. At this symposium, each one presented about their museum. Unfortunately, when I did my presentation, believe me, the scholars and experts were moved to

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tears by the catastrophe that had befallen Afghanistan's National Museum. The Baghdad Museum had suffered less damage compared to Afghanistan's National Museum. [cough] Excuse me.

In her presentation, the director of the Bosnia and Herzegovina Museum said that their museum was in good condition, it had not been looted, even though the war continued in their country for five or six years but they had no problems. I don't know why they had invited her. [cough] A question arose for me: if there is a war in this country, how come the historical relics, museums, and archives have not been damaged? I did not dare to raise my hand in front of these scholars to ask a question, but coincidentally we were at the same lunch table. I asked her how come your museum had not been destroyed, and what was the reason for that. She said, 'Mr. Masoudi, why didn't you ask this question in the general assembly', I said I didn't know English, and it was a mistake not to ask. She said it's a very good question, the reason is that our people possess a good level of cultural knowledge, both supporters and opponents consider them national assets or national capital, and under no circumstances do they wage any war in places where historical relics, ancient sites or museums or archives are located or other places where cultural objects are preserved.

Unfortunately, in Afghanistan, neither yesterday did anyone pay attention to this principle [nor today], the reason behind this is cultural and knowledge poverty; the literacy rate remains low. What our law has envisaged is that underground and cultural artifacts are state and people's property, it belongs to the nation; unfortunately, we have not absorbed this. They mostly prefer their personal interest, greed, and ambition; that is why we have suffered more damage. If I compare the National Museum of Afghanistan over the difficult years of war with the Baghdad Museum, the damage to our museum is extremely high, unmatched in the world. When we say seventy or eighty thousand artifacts have disappeared and been looted from the National Museum alone, this is no small matter. Add to that number the artifacts that have been looted from the Archaeology Depot of Afghanistan, between fifteen to sixteen thousand [artifacts], and from the Seraj-ul-Amara building in Nangarhar—these have been tremendous losses. In any case, this is one of the unforgettable memories in the history of Afghanistan. The present generation and the present and future governments of Afghanistan must make better efforts to return these artifacts, and I know that there is a way to return them. Although a series of attempts have been made which I will discuss at future sessions.

ESFANDIARI: Thank you. We will discuss the situation of the museum after the withdrawal of Soviet forces in the next session, but when the Soviet forces were present, did it ever happen that the Museum's activities were suspended due to the wars between the Mujahideen and the Soviet forces and the Soviet-backed government? Was there any damage inflicted on the museum and cultural artifacts?

MASOUDI: Fortunately, when the Soviet forces arrived, the museum was closed. When it was relocated to its original building, the exhibition reopened, and fortunately, no damage occurred to the National Museum of Afghanistan as a result of the war. There was no kind of intervention



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either. As I mentioned, in some rural areas and districts, our historical sites were damaged, and I can provide you with an example. A series of reports reached the center that illegal excavations had taken place in some areas. In some cases, migrants coming from villages and rural areas to provincial cities due to security issues were not receiving proper attention per international laws, as it was necessary. They were compelled to temporarily settle in some safe areas.

For example, in Helmand Province, reports indicated that Afghan migrants who had moved from multiple districts were pitching tents and cultivating in ancient sites, irrigating them, which scientifically was incorrect and would damage what lies underground. We could notice these problems. Moreover, unfortunately, in Herat Province as well, significant damage was inflicted upon historical relics. Even one of the minarets was hit by cannon fire, leaving a very large hole that remains a major loss to this day. And the Jām minaret [was also damaged]. It's natural that when there is conflict in an area, even minor bullets cause damage to artifacts. In some provinces, pre-Islamic historical relics were also damaged. The Ministry of Information and Culture later took some actions to restore and prevent further destruction, but across the country, the problems are exceptionally vast and cannot be compared to the resources available to the relevant authorities.

ESFANDIARI: Very well! One phenomenon that typically emerges after regime changes, especially ideological governments, is the use of museum artifacts to display or reflect their political agendas. During the Soviet occupation, did the museum's activities or exhibitions undergo any changes that might reflect government policies or at least show an attempt to employ cultural artifacts as a tool to demonstrate the ideology or policies of the government?

MASOUDI: Thank you. That's a very good question. From the external side, meaning from the Soviets, I didn't see any form of interference. The government at that time, for certain special occasions—one is a gallery inside the museum that remained open to viewers permanently, but on some occasions, temporary exhibitions were held in Kabul city, in one of the government halls. I remember an exhibition taking place in the Kabul Municipality Hall. During national events, it was a common practice to hold temporary exhibitions which didn't present any issues. However, what I must emphasize about that time is when the Tillya Tepe excavations concluded, its artifacts were organized and the album was prepared, the Soviet government expressed an interest in coming to Kabul and creating an exhibition from the Bactrian Treasure and other artifacts there. Of course, in agreement with the government, in coordination with the Ministry of Information and Culture and the museum staff.

I remember Vinogradov who was one of the most skilled archaeologists of the Soviet Union, he came to [Kabul]—he had conducted excavations and surveys of ancient sites in northern Afghanistan—and Sarianidi who discovered the Tillya Tepe. They had an interest. Before the protocol was signed, they brought some wooden crates of various sizes to transport artifacts. When the two sides spoke, committees were appointed and artifacts were selected. They were most interested in the Bactrian Treasure or Tillya Tepe. Alongside those, they also selected other precious artifacts from the Buddhist and other eras, some of which were very fragile and dangerous, but they



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were keen [to select them], including very valuable artifacts from Fondukistan related to the Buddhist era made of unfired clay, they selected these artifacts.

The problem that arose was regarding insuring the artifacts. In principle, according to our law on the preservation of historical and cultural artifacts as well as international laws, when an artifact goes from one country to another it must be insured, not only by the relevant museum since most small museums do not have this capability, but the government or large insurance companies must insure artifacts that are sent for exhibition. At that time, we worked [to insure] each artifact separately which is not the actual value of the artifact but insurance is necessary that at minimum our artifact was insured for several hundred thousand dollars to several million dollars as listed. This was not approved by the Soviet delegation. They wanted [to say] that they guarantee, they are a government, they have discovered [the artifacts], they defend the ruling regime and the culture of Afghanistan. But the rationale was that our law did not allow this, we had to act according to our laws and regulations, and based on ownership of artifacts that belong to us, the artifacts' insurance must be included by any possible means, if you agree that is good if not, we will not agree with the exhibition and for [uninsured artifacts] to go to the Soviet Union.

Of course, this created some reactions. From a psychological perspective, the people of Afghanistan, especially in the cultural sphere, were not interested in these artifacts going there (the Soviet Union). Undoubtedly, the ruling regime at the time also took these views into account. When this request was sent—without a doubt, the Soviet embassy in Kabul was also very interested in this exhibition. The then President Dr. Najibullah gave an absolute order that under current circumstances this exhibition should be canceled and he did not agree for these artifacts to go on exhibition. In that case, they did not dare suggest anything but they were interested; the artifacts were not sent.

Yesterday in my interview I said that, in 1963, during the reign of the late King Zahir Shah, the father of the nation, artifacts from the National Museum came to America, they were exhibited in two states and several other countries, but in 2005, we sent the Bactrian Treasure on exhibition with some other artifacts to an international exhibition and they were returned after thirteen years. One of the main activities of museums is to hold exhibitions. One is permanent exhibitions at the museum itself and another is a temporary exhibition held at home or abroad. This serves two purposes: culture is introduced in this way. One of the main duties of museums is the preservation and introduction of artifacts. The best way to introduce a country's artifacts, a country's history to the outside world is through exhibitions, where materials are published, pamphlets are printed, brochures are printed, and the audience directly sees [the artifacts], books and treatises are written which play a very valuable role in introducing a country's culture. We saw the value of the Bactrian Treasure exhibition at the global level and its very positive reflections, which we will elaborate on later.

ESFANDIARI: Thank you. In our previous interview, you provided an overview of the Bactrian Treasure. Today, you spoke about its exhibition. Overall, how significant were these

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exhibitions, or the Bactrian Treasure itself, in elevating the National Museum of Afghanistan's position? How effective were they in capturing the attention of both the public and the international community to the National Museum of Afghanistan, ultimately boosting the museum's reputation?

MASOUDI: Undoubtedly. One of the impacts of the Bactrian Treasure domestically is that people say they are golden artifacts. For a museum curator, gold and ceramic shards, and copper coins have no difference whatsoever. Artifacts preserved in a museum, registered, and maintained should be studied from three perspectives. First, in terms of historical antiquity. Second, in terms of artistic value. Third, which part of the country's history does this artifact illuminate and complete? From this viewpoint, it undoubtedly is valuable; this is an academic perspective. Why are our people interested in Tillya Tepe? Because there are many golden pieces but in terms of antiquity, too, it has value, belonging to the 1st century BC and 1st century AD, which are over two thousand years old—and the artistic value employed in these artifacts, regardless of being gold, the precious stones used in those, this adds to the value of these artifacts. In terms of quantity, it is a large number, and in terms of quality, it has special value.

In my opinion, other Afghan artifacts, like the Bagram treasure, Ai Khanoum artifacts, Mundigak artifacts, Hadda artifacts, or other artifacts found in Afghanistan's ancient sites, are in no way of less value than Tillya Tepe. Anyway, the value of the Bactrian Treasure artifacts rose globally when the museum was looted and fortunately the Bactrian Treasure which is mostly jewelry and gold was not looted, it had been preserved. This was kept secret by museum staff so that no damage comes to these artifacts, until finally in 2003 the President announced that the Bactrian Treasure exists and disclosed its location. Interest grew greatly after that until finally, the international exhibition tour happened; it undoubtedly had great value. It had several impacts, apart from generating some revenue for the Afghan government—the Bactrian Treasure exhibition generated millions of dollars of income. Second, immense publicity happened, it changed people's perception of the art, culture, and history of Afghanistan.

Right now, especially at that time, it used to be said Afghanistan is the place of terrorists, war, violence, and killing. These were the topics the world used to hear in the media. World media mostly gave this coverage, there was always war, very dreadful wars against foreign forces during which people gave millions of martyrs and disabled in the name of Jihad. I remember on a trip I had to Japan, a very elderly lady, perhaps seventy five to eighty years old, said whenever they see Afghanistan on television, they get terrified, people have protested that news about Afghanistan should not be broadcast on TV before children's bedtime, [she said] it has impacted their people's psyche. This itself was great advertising at that time that showed Afghanistan as a land of war, violence, killing, rockets, bombings, and various such activities. But the Bactrian Treasure depicted the real face of Afghans, the history of Afghans, and the artists of Afghanistan. Millions of people saw the artifacts in person or online. This is one of the most valuable beauties of the history of people and cultural artifacts of the National Museum of Afghanistan.



ESFANDIARI: Thank you. You touched on this briefly, were there any efforts by the Soviets, the Afghan government at that time, or the museum administration itself to undertake further excavations or develop the museum?

MASOUDI: For excavations, undoubtedly the situation was not conducive, and no excavations took place. Foreign delegations that operated in Afghanistan, after the April 1978 coup, these activities were largely stopped. DAFA had excavations for many consecutive years; in 1982 their activities stopped. The Archaeology Institute independently conducted some excavations on a small scale in some areas, even those opportunities were lost in the provinces. Archaeology staff could not carry out excavations in Afghanistan's provinces. The security situation was bad, only Kabul was relatively safe which later also became unsafe. When Soviet forces left, the regime tried very hard, while many problems arose, they maintained security in Kabul which unfortunately, with all its magnificence, was destroyed in the civil wars like other provinces. Kabul also lost its glory and turned into absolute ruins.

Fortunately, after the new regime was established, a series of development works took place over the past 20 years but Kabul no longer has that old authentic look. Progress has occurred and the museum was functioning. It was open, we had exhibitions, everything, until 1989 when the security situation severely deteriorated. The President ordered the museum galleries should be taken down and its artifacts should be stored; the museum closed again. The reason was the security situation. Rockets were coming from all sides of Kabul city, we feared a rocket might hit the museum building, and there was a possibility that besides rocket destruction, a fire could break out. For that reason, a year later, we transferred some artifacts to other locations. And in the civil wars in May 1993 when a rocket hit the museum building roof, most of our galleries were on the second floor, and the building caught fire in the evening. We heard from the BBC at 8 pm. I still remember when they said, until today, the people of Afghanistan buried their children – in war – but today, unfortunately, the museum building caught fire, they buried their history. This sentence is very shocking. At that time, the ruling regime did not have fire services. From evening to dawn, everything on the second floor burnt and turned to ashes which fortunately did not spread to the first floor where the storerooms were and some artifacts that survived the looting remained safe, comprising about thirty percent of artifacts. This is a huge cultural loss.

At that time, the regime instructed us to close the galleries. The reason was insecurity and rocket hits, it was not the laziness of the museum staff; it was good and had positive results. Our artifacts getting looted was beyond our and the ruling regime and opposition's control. We were unfortunate that the ruling system and its opposition did not understand this heritage and significance. These artifacts are my own property; they are the pride of my ancestors and descendants. They are linked to me and the future generations. It is the responsibility of our present generation to preserve them; it's a historical trust that we must pass on to future generations. Unfortunately, we failed in this regard. We pillaged it ourselves; we destroyed these things ourselves, and due to our ignorance of our artistic and historical values, we inflicted this damage

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upon our country's history and culture during the internal conflicts. In my opinion, these people should forever carry this shame, and history should not forget it. The history must be recorded.

ESFANDIARI: Thank you. Tell us about your activities during the Soviet presence, what responsibilities did you have during those eight to nine years?

MASOUDI: Let me tell you that in the museum works are not done individually. The museum, in general—during the thirty-seven years I've worked there—always functioned as a team. It was team-oriented work. There existed and still exists an organic and close relationship between departments within the museum. If this relationship did not exist, work would simply not progress. From the moment an artifact enters the museum or is preserved in the depot, or even when displayed, it follows these professional chains of custody that aren't specific to a person or a department. Leadership undoubtedly plays a role, which is the leadership of the museum director. They must possess the skill to foster sincere and professional coordination among the members. Their management role is crucial. But we worked day and night, even during the internal conflicts, I worked with lanterns and gas lamps. We breathed in that dust and dirt. We considered it our duty, and no museum staff ever sought any kind of privilege. If necessary, I can show you the pictures depicting the conditions under which we worked. When we cataloged the artifacts, animal remains were present in our depots, skeletal remains of humans who had been killed were there in our depots, their bones were there, and their clothing was there. We worked amidst blood and a realm of filth. Even animals like dogs and cats were found there. It is not easy to pull all those artifacts from under the debris. But the museum staff did it. I take pride in my work, and every colleague of mine takes pride in their work.

In my opinion, the most deserving people in Afghanistan are the museum and the archeology professional staff who worked side by side. We didn't tire of our work. Moving a museum isn't an easy task, especially transferring it within forty days and then bringing it back safely. Managing exhibitions and similar tasks are extraordinarily exhausting tasks. Government employees had no special privileges except for the specified overtime some of them might have received. They protected [the artifacts] as they do their skin, flesh, and lives, just like the pupil of their eyes, because it belonged to the nation and was our national pride. It had and still holds a sense of honor and dignity for us. I appreciate the work of the staff, those before me, and those currently there—individuals who have been professionally trained and have performed their duties for years. There might be an employee who comes and quits in two days or is politically appointed, but the dedication of the National Museum of Afghanistan staff, including Afghan archaeologists, is commendable.

ESFANDIARI: What positions did you hold during those years? What was your role?

MASOUDI: I've worked in various departments of the museum. I served as the head of the prehistoric department, then as the exhibition manager, and was even a deputy director for a while. During the Taliban era, I temporarily stepped away from my duties. After the fall of the

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Taliban, I was self-employed, and the Ministry of Information and Culture saw it fit to call upon me and entrusted me with the responsibility of the museum. From late December 2001, when the Taliban fell and the interim administration was established, with the formation of a new cabinet and the arrival of a new minister, I was obliged to serve as the head of the museum. Until March 2015, I served as the director of the museum. Ultimately, the work that has been done, I wouldn't say it was mine, but rather that of my team, and the collaboration

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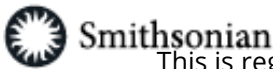
of some cultural institutions that enabled us to revive this ruined museum and set up its exhibition. It was inaugurated in September 2004 and opened to the public, with the then-President Mr. Karzai taking part in its inauguration. Slowly, through a systematic program, the museum and its galleries were completely restored, albeit with positive changes compared to the past. We were fortunate to receive assistance from various institutions and countries. A relationship developed between the National Museum of Afghanistan and other museums, especially after the Bactrian Treasure exhibition; our relations became exceptionally close. We learned and gained experiences, gradually implementing in the museum what we learned. I'll talk about those changes in future sessions.

ESFANDIARI: We discussed the preservation methods. Yesterday, we talked about the Tahvildar [custodian] system in the National Museum of Afghanistan. Could you elaborate on how the Nokarivali [watchman] system operates in the National Museum of Afghanistan?

MASOUDI: Thank you, that's a very good question. The museum's security regime, as far as I have observed some museums around the world—there's a dedicated security team trained in this field, working in perfect coordination with the museum management, either a company or trained individuals. However, in Afghanistan, from the beginning until now, the National Police has been responsible for the museum's physical security. They oversee the museum's physical security.

But a system that was common before, during the thirty seven years I worked in the museum and remains in effect today, is that we had a Nokarival [watchman] inside the museum. The watchman is a museum staff member along with a member of the service personnel; the two people serve as night watchmen in the museum. It's scheduled in a structured timetable, maybe once a month or once every one and a half months, depending on the team size. These individuals are responsible for safeguarding the exhibition halls and depots inside the museum. All seals and locks of the exhibition halls are handed over from one watchman to another, from day watchman to night watchman, and vice versa.

During the day, too, we have watchmen; one employee and one contractor are usually at the entrance gate. They monitor incoming visitors. Each exhibition hall has a guard. Any suspicious movement, whether it's about theft or any unwanted action, is immediately reported to the security officials. [Visitors] are inspected by the security authorities before they enter the museum. And, when they leave, given these difficult situations, they are checked again by the watchman.



This is regarding the security regime. In case of fire, may it never happen, the watchman inside the museum must contact not only their supervisors but also the ministry officials and authorities such as police, firefighting services, and other relevant agencies predefined in the regulations. They use a landline and mobile phones for this purpose.

Unfortunately, what is disturbing in Afghanistan, and it should be, is that our museum does not have a standard building. During winter, we use wood or even diesel for heating, which is absolutely prohibited for a museum, but there's no solution. The museum lacks a heating system because it wasn't constructed with the museum in mind. These issues are things that the watchman deals with day and night inside the museum. They are also in contact with the police security officials outside [museum] but they lock the gate from inside. Under no circumstances, does anyone have the right to enter the museum after four pm when museum employees are dismissed, without prior official notification from the ministry authorities or other high-ranking officials. Not even the museum director or the Minister of Information and Culture are allowed to enter the museum unless specific duties are assigned to them officially and communicated via an official letter. In such a case, the museum director can enter [the museum] along with the staff members required.

I recall, whenever artifacts were delivered or received from security authorities, it always involved formalities. Upon our arrival, the ministry was notified, and the watchman was informed; they were contacted to indicate specific artifacts were being delivered, requiring their cooperation. Subsequently, the watchman would open the gate for us. We would place the items and then the museum gate would be locked again. This organic relationship concerning security was very effective and must continue forever, in my opinion. Why? Sometimes paying attention to small things yields excellent results. In some cases, the smallest negligence can have very adverse consequences and rightfully be punished. When I or others were on night watch, even the slightest shortfall resulted in severe consequences.

ESFANDIARI: Thank you. If there's anything else you'd like to discuss regarding the National Museum of Afghanistan during the Soviet presence, please feel free to share.

MASOUDI: Thank you. I believe I've covered most of what comes to mind. If there's something I missed, we can discuss it in the future to complete this conversation. Fortunately, the museum remained operational during that period, but starting from 1368 [1989], due to security concerns, we intentionally closed it as per the authorities' guidance. This prolonged dormancy lasted until 2004, marking an unprecedented closure of a country's museum without visitors for over twenty years—a rather unique case in world history.

ESFANDIARI: Your time and explanations have been invaluable. Thank you.

MASOUDI: Take care. Thank you.

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