

Oral History Interview

with

Omara Khan Masoudi

recorded at the National Museum of Asian Art

Washington, D.C.

17 Nov 2023

by Azizullah Esfandiari

Interviewer

ESFANDIARI: Following the previous two interviews, we are examining the circumstances surrounding the Afghanistan National Museum during and after the Soviet withdrawal. To commence, could you kindly elaborate on the conditions faced by the National Museum of Afghanistan during the Soviet withdrawal?

MASOUDI: Thank you, Aziz. Before I get into that period, allow me to provide some background. As you know, Afghanistan is a third-world, developing, landlocked country. Alongside religious beliefs, our people have been and remain very committed to cultural traditions and customs. One reason, as you know, is that education has not become widespread, and yet our people do not have access to schooling across Afghanistan. I can even say that in this 21st century, more than fifty percent of Afghans are deprived of literacy. When the literacy level is so low, people's understanding of scientific and cultural issues—they are certainly devoted to their traditions, customs, religious beliefs, and religious rituals. Unfortunately, these religious sentiments have sometimes led to major uprisings, and sometimes their struggles have been exploited negatively. One should view issues in their specific contexts and analyze situations according to those same contexts to obtain better results.

Therefore, I can say that during the reign of His Majesty Mohammed Zahir Shah, the former King of Afghanistan, the political, social, and cultural life of Afghanistan was progressing very evenly; there were no problems at all. Changes were happening in the economic and political affairs of people, as well as in the cultural sphere. You may recall that in the decade of democracy which began in 1964, Zahir Shah's government gave people rights and freedoms of speech, separating the state from government, with the Prime Minister being appointed by the King but confirmed through a parliamentary vote of confidence. This was a very good development and an excellent period.

**Smithsonian**

Most political parties originated at this time, political struggles ensued, and the younger generation was very enthusiastic to take an active part in these areas and social activities.

Unfortunately, these transformations slowly caused conditions that paved the way for political changes, which in my opinion was a series of changes within prominent statesmen or the royal family itself. You know that Sardar Mohammad Daoud Khan, who was the cousin of His Majesty Zahir Shah, had served as Minister of Defense, Prime Minister, and multiple other positions before, but the constitution adopted in the decade of democracy stipulated that no one from the royal family could form a government or hold the power. Undoubtedly, Sardar Daoud Khan was one of the good politicians and a great national figure; he moved madly and obsessively for the progress and excellence of the country. There may be many reasons that do not relate to our discussion, but unfortunately the late Daoud Khan with the coup of July 17, 1973, initiated by the People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan, a left-wing party inclined towards the Soviet Union—backed by the People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan, Daoud Khan managed to transform the system through the white coup, i.e. changed the monarchy into a republic. This was a major shift but unfortunately, the consequences of this coup were not good for Afghanistan; it opened the gates of major political developments and, in my opinion, the society was not mentally prepared to accept such changes. It would be good for leaders to take into account the objective and subjective conditions of society before any changes. In any case, when the coup took place, the monarchical system turned into a republic, and slowly a series of changes began to emerge in society.

I mentioned the decade of democracy earlier.¹ Major movements emerged: the Islamic movement, leftists, and various other parties like the Khalq and Parcham factions of the People's Democratic Party, Shola-e Javid, and the Democratic Party which was known as the "Voice of the Masses". These activities were maturing very slowly but they had not yet reached stability. At this time when Daoud Khan staged a coup and seized power, unfortunately, several leaders who later became jihadi leaders, some supporters of the Islamic movement emigrated to Pakistan, leaving voluntarily. They included Professor Burhanuddin Rabbani who was a professor at the Faculty of Sharia at Kabul University, Engineer Gulbuddin Hekmatyar who was a second-year student at the Faculty of Engineering and, as they say, Ahmad Shah Massoud who was a student at the Polytechnic [University]; they emigrated to Pakistan with some other people. Unfortunately, through contacts that may have been made with the ISI, the ground was paved for them to launch a series of activities inside Afghanistan.

In my view, this period of hardship marks the beginning of unfavorable events that altered Afghanistan's destiny. So, what happened? Well, in 1975, there were unfortunate demonstrations and anti-government actions in some Afghan provinces like Panjshir, Kunar, Laghman, and others. It was kind of like an armed struggle but on a smaller scale. Admittedly, it wasn't a major threat, but it

¹ During the Decade of Democracy, which began in 1964, I enrolled in seventh grade at the Edara-Aamma High School in Kabul and graduated from there at the end of 1969.

**Smithsonian**

definitely rang alarm bells. These movements even resulted in the tragic killing of Khoram, the Minister of Planning, in his office in 1975 during the late Daoud Khan's time. That was a clear sign of insecurity. The situation continued along these lines. Despite having good plans, Daoud Khan handed over many crucial government positions to the People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan, be it the Parcham or Khalq faction pushing their agendas behind the scenes. However, Daoud Khan was determined to strengthen the army. Back then, Soviet influence in the military was significant because most of the weapons came from the Soviet Union, and a considerable number of young people were sent there for military training. Sometimes, Russian advisers would come to guide the young cadres of the Afghan army in the defense ministry. This increased affinity towards the Soviet Union, and a large number of youths became more inclined towards the Soviet system or the Soviet Socialist Republics.

During this time, the situation gradually unfolded in a way that in 1978, Akbar Khaibar, a significant theorist of the Parcham faction, was mysteriously killed in the Makroyan area. In my perspective, Khaibar's murder acted as a wake-up call, prompting both factions of the People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan, namely Khalq and Parcham, to converge at his funeral in Shuhada-e Salehin. Leaders, party members, and supporters of Mir Akbar Khaibar assembled to lay him to rest, and during the funeral, leaders from both Khalq and Parcham delivered impassioned and revolutionary speeches against Daoud Khan's regime. In the aftermath, Daoud Khan responded by arresting leaders of the People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan, detaining seven or eight of them in Kabul province's detention center, while others remained unscathed. They spent a night there; I recall the next day was a Thursday, marked by massive demonstrations near the Arg in Nader Pashtun Street. The demonstrators demanded the release of their leaders. Despite Daoud Khan not causing any harm to them, merely placing them in detention for investigation purposes, impatience prevailed, and on April 27, 1978, these demonstrations escalated significantly.

At this point, their military branches sprang into action; Hafizullah Amin led the military wing of the Khalq faction; he had not been arrested yet. During these massive demonstrations, their armed forces, including their supporters in the armored and air force units, took measures to prevent incidents and control the sizable gatherings on Nader Pashtun Street. They even advanced towards the Arg. When the presidential staff arrived, they claimed to be there in support of the regime until they entered the Arg. As per what we heard and witnessed, the situation underwent a dramatic change that evening. Military planes took off, and the first bomb was dropped on Nader Pashtun Street, in front of the Ministry of Telecommunications, disrupting the local telephone communication system and cutting off phone connections. Most Afghans relied on Radio Afghanistan; there were no private televisions or radios. Radio broadcasts ceased. It was in the evening of that Thursday, April 27, when a military plane targeted the Delkusha palace of Arg and other parts of the Arg. The next day, Daoud Khan was killed by the military forces supporting the Khalq and Parcham parties.



These challenging circumstances, unfortunately, opened the floodgates of misfortune. Armored tanks arrived to attack Kabul province, aiming to take out leaders of the People's Democratic Party from the detention center and transfer them to Radio Afghanistan, where the situation was equally grim. Regrettably, telephone connections were severed. Daoud Khan's defense minister, Haidar Rasuli, unfortunately, fled from the center toward Division Eight, and in his attempt to reach Rishkhor Division, he was captured on the way and killed by opposing forces.

Certain units demonstrated a stronger inclination towards Zahir Shah and Daoud Khan, as the Afghan army during that time operated through military conscription. Every Afghan individual, upon reaching the age of twenty two, had a mandatory two-year military service. It wasn't a voluntary or salaried army; rather, it was an obligation for every Afghan, particularly the youth who had to serve in the military². They held a deep commitment to their homeland. However, when changes and coups unfolded, such as Daoud Khan's coup on April 27, unfortunately, the patriotic spirit among the soldiers weakened.

The conscription principle persisted until the arrival of the Mujahideen. The Afghan people served in the military, police, and security forces. Initially, individuals were required to fulfill this duty between the ages of 22 and 24. However, as conflicts arose, the norm changed, and the minimum age for military service dropped to 16. Even 16 and 18-year-old students and school pupils were enlisted. During Daoud Khan and Zahir Shah's era, if someone was a student, they could delay military enrollment until completing their education. Afterward, they were obligated to undergo military service. Notably, teachers were exempted from military service because they served society, just like doctors actively contributing to societal well-being. Doctors who dedicated six years to their profession were exempted from military service. Similarly, teachers fulfilling a six-year commitment to education were spared from military duty. These exemptions were considered essential for societal well-being. Both health and education experienced significant growth. Unfortunately, in my perspective, the coups during that time brought misery to the people of Afghanistan.

During that time, I recall that people consistently tuned in to Radio Afghanistan. On the evening of April 27, Aslam Watanjar from the Khalq faction made an announcement that marked the collapse of Daoud Khan's regime. He stated that the republican regime, associated with the royal family and deemed traitorous, had come to an end. Power was then transferred to the revolutionary council of the People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan. This coup on April 27 signified the shift of authority from the late Daoud Khan to the People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan. Regrettably,

² At that time, teachers and doctors were exempt from military service. These professions were considered sacred and respected, as they played vital roles in educating the country's youth and maintaining public health. University graduates with bachelor's degrees or higher were required to complete military courses, initially lasting three months and later extended to six months. Upon completing the six-month training, they received a valid certificate as reserve officers. High school graduates were recruited into the police force and served for two years as soldiers in law enforcement across all provincial and municipality districts, and urban areas. Unfortunately, after the Mujahideen government came to power in April 1992, mandatory military service was abolished, and both the army and police became voluntary.

**Smithsonian**

the self-proclaimed revolutionaries, driven by their revolutionary zeal, failed to consider the societal conditions—both objective and subjective. Their hasty issuance of decrees stirred people's emotions with abrupt actions. As mentioned earlier, some supporters of the Islamic movement relocated to Pakistan and initiated provocations against Daoud Khan's regime. Upon the ascent of the People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan to power, a series of reforms and decrees were introduced by Noor Mohammad Taraki. Numerous decrees were issued continuously, but their practicality in society was questioned. The consequences of these actions were not fully grasped by those in power.

As an example, one of the decrees focused on the reform of private lands. During that period, there was a narrative that the government was under the influence of feudalism. It's worth noting that Afghanistan did not have significant landowners at the time, nor does it today, compared to some other countries. Those who possessed 50 or 100 jeribs, or even two hundred jeribs of land, usually inherited it or acquired it through their efforts. In my opinion, corruption and such issues were relatively limited during that era. However, the government began seizing the lands of these individuals, arguing that land should belong to those who worked on it, implying that it should be taken from the owner and given to the farmer since the farmer was the one cultivating it. The rationale behind this was seen as addressing exploitation, but it turned out to be a significant mistake that fueled internal divisions among the people. The farmers who acquired the land of their landlords often couldn't cultivate it. This was contrary to the societal mindset. Otherwise, Afghanistan remains an agricultural country with ample arable land and abundant water resources.

They didn't have to implement these reforms or agitate matters, provoking sentiments against themselves. Instead, those without land should have been provided with land. Vast plains in different provinces that remained undistributed could have been allocated willingly—a commendable deed they failed to undertake. While other state properties were referred to as royal property or considered state property—during Zahir Shah's time, as he was considered the shadow of God, people held immense respect for public properties, and no one dared to usurp them. However, instead of the decree yielding positive results, it had a negative impact. Another of Noor Mohammad Taraki's orders intruded into people's personal family lives, particularly in matters of marriage. While addressing the issue of excessive bride prices (walwar or toyana) in Afghanistan was valid, determining a fixed amount of 300 Afghanis as *mahr* was not well-received. When people held ceremonies and weddings, the government deemed the spending unnecessary and resorted to drastic actions such as tipping over cauldrons, raiding, and punishing the wedding host. These actions went against the established norms of society.

As mentioned earlier, the people of Afghanistan have always held and continue to hold deep respect for religious beliefs and societal traditions. Unfortunately, the government's actions deepened the divide between the state and the people. This created a significant opportunity for those fighting in the name of the sacred religion of Islam. Opponents declared jihad, and village mullahs and religious scholars rallied together. The anti-communist movement rapidly gained momentum, reaching its peak in villages and towns within one to one and a half years, becoming

**Smithsonian**

highly successful. At this juncture, the People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan sought assistance from the Soviet Union to sustain itself, given their shared ideological system. The arrival of the Soviets acted as a catalyst, intensifying anti-government struggles, akin to pouring petrol on burning wood. The situation worsened day by day, with rockets fired, and the security situation in the provinces deteriorated. Villages and towns transformed into battlegrounds for guerrilla warfare rather than conventional battles. Government forces and even the Russians suffered substantial losses. Large territories fell into the hands of the opposition, with a pattern emerging where the government ruled during the day, and the opposition gained control at night.

These conditions extended from the provinces to the cities, prompting the Council of Ministers in 1981 to decide on transferring artifacts from provincial museums to the center³. Unfortunately, this situation resulted in some damage to the cultural sector. When clashes occurred between the opposition and government forces, they lacked the consciousness to refrain from fighting in densely populated areas and locations with artifacts, or residential areas. What became highly dangerous was the manipulation of propaganda that vehemently urged boycotting the People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan's government. It falsely labeled anyone working with the government as an infidel, irreligious, and a supporter of the Soviets. Contrary to this portrayal, our military was conscripted and considered the service as their national obligation, not loyal to any specific party. As Dr. Najib mentioned, the People's Democratic Party had a membership between one and a half to two hundred thousand, a limited percentage compared to the total population of thirty or thirty-five million. It appears that the goals were largely influenced by neighboring countries⁴. A massive number of people migrated, security situation deteriorated, with nearly five million refugees heading towards Pakistan and an equal number towards Iran. Western countries provided substantial assistance to support the Mujahideen, arming them in their struggle.

This is the point where the conflicts spiral out of control, leading to the unfortunate situation where even cultural organizations face significant damage. Numerous examples abound, not only of historical relics being harmed but also of illegal excavations in ancient sites starting during this period. Afghanistan's adversaries exploited these situations in various ways, and the museum faced major threats.⁵ During these challenging times, the museum continued its normal activities, but as threats approached the Kabul center, the museum staff felt a profound responsibility to take action. I believe it's not just the staff of the National Museum of Afghanistan but museum staff worldwide should be vigilant, assessing and analyzing situations, and making efforts to safeguard these

³ The Council of Ministers decided to transfer artifacts from provincial museums to Kabul solely for their protection, as Kabul was secure at that time while the security situation in the provinces was poor. This decision aimed to safeguard the artifacts from potential destruction.

⁴ This statement refers to both neighboring countries, Pakistan and Iran, as well as other regional, Arab, and Western countries.

⁵ When security deteriorates, opportunistic individuals often exploit the situation to illegally excavate archaeological sites, particularly those that have already been identified. This smuggling of artifacts primarily occurred in the southeastern, northern, central, and western provinces of Afghanistan.

**Smithsonian**

invaluable cultural works. Similar incidents occurred during the Second World War and the Cambodian War, resulting in substantial damage to cultural properties. Unfortunately, Afghanistan became a victim of these undesirable consequences. Subsequently, we witnessed similar tragic events in Syria and Iraq, where historical relics suffered severe damage due to wars, with opportunists taking advantage of the insecure situations. In my view, Afghanistan endured the most significant damage in the world due to these insecurities.

During this period, rockets were launched from the surrounding areas towards Kabul, which had been relatively safe until then. Unfortunately, Grad rockets with various ranges, such as ten km, twenty km, or sixty km, were fired into Kabul, causing explosions. The Pamir Cinema building was the first place to be hit. Despite the government's decisions and efforts, this served as an alarm for the museum staff. I recall Mohammad Anwar Katawazi, the museum director, holding meetings with the museum leadership, consisting of department heads, as the situation rapidly deteriorated. The pressing question was how to secure the museum.⁶ The vulnerability of the museum was twofold. Firstly, the risk of rocket strikes was significant, and a direct hit could result in extensive damage, including the potential for fire. Secondly, the museum's proximity to the Ministry of Defense heightened its vulnerability. In my opinion, museums should be situated far away from military areas, yet Afghanistan's museum was merely one hundred meters away from the Ministry of Defense. This vulnerability increased during this time, exacerbated by the fact that the Afghanistan museum lacked a shelter or an alternative location for preserving artifacts. Unfortunately, its building was not purpose-built for a museum, amplifying the threats it faced. After several meetings, a decision was reluctantly made under the leadership of the museum director. At that time, I headed the prehistoric department, and it was decided to propose to the government the transfer of some museum artifacts to a more secure area.

ESFANDIARI: When was this decision made?

MASOUDI: This was around the time when the Soviet forces were withdrawing from Afghanistan; the withdrawal of the Soviet forces occurred on February 15, 1990. Despite the withdrawal, the threat of incoming rockets persisted, putting the museum and its artifacts at risk. Unfortunately, during this period, on March 7, 1990, a coup led by General Shahnawaz Tanai, the defense minister under Dr. Najibullah, took place. The Darul Aman Palace served as the headquarters of the Ministry of Defense. When the defense minister initiated the coup, which, fortunately, failed, damage was inflicted on the National Museum of Afghanistan. During the coup attempt, two shots from heavy tanks struck two of the display rooms, specifically the Hadda and Confiscated Smuggled Artifacts exhibition halls. This unfortunate incident destroyed numerous artifacts, vitrines, and museum furnishings, including some of the finest silk rugs. Following the failure of Tanai's coup, the defense minister fled shamefully to Pakistan, escaping by plane and later

⁶ The discussions focused exclusively on the safety and protection of museum artifacts through various methods and strategies.



Smithsonian

joining Gulbuddin Hekmatyar's Hezb-e-Islami party. Such actions were disgraceful for a defense minister.

Considering the threats faced, the museum staff, under the guidance of the museum director, took the initiative to address their concerns. They presented a plan to the Minister of Information and Culture, emphasizing the vulnerability of the artifacts due to the ongoing risks. They expressed their desire, pending approval from the President and the Minister, to transfer some artifacts away to a less-risky place in the city center. The staff clarified that the safety of the artifacts was of utmost importance, and in the event of damage at one location, they would be preserved in a second, third, or fourth location, considering the available resources. While they couldn't explicitly state an anticipation of a change in the political system and a potential power vacuum, there were strong indirect reasons for their concern. We are very pleased that the then Minister of Information and Culture, Mr. Bashir Roygar, accepted this. He was someone who understood the value of Afghanistan's cultural artifacts. After accepting this proposal, he discussed the matter with President Dr. Najibullah, who also agreed. Dr. Najibullah expressed readiness to order the transfer of museum artifacts to any location deemed safe by the museum staff within the city. With this approval, a team from the museum was assigned to survey all government offices in the city center, evaluating their security strengths to select the most secure location.⁷

I recall that colleagues from the museum were assigned to conduct the survey, and some of our friends and colleagues, who have unfortunately since passed away, were tasked with inspecting the basements of government buildings, including the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Prime Minister's office building, and other government facilities. Eventually, they received a signal to explore a highly secure location—the Central Bank within the Presidential Palace compound. This Central Bank, supervised by Da Afghanistan Bank, served as the storage place for money and banknotes brought from outside, as well as reserve funds. According to information received, the building was constructed during Zahir Shah's time by the Germans and was reputed to withstand bomb and rocket attacks without sustaining damage. I don't know who provided this information, but that's what we heard. The museum administration proposed this location to the Ministry and the President's office, advocating for the allocation of space in what was perceived as the most secure place. Dr. Najibullah instructed that two small rooms, almost like cubicles, on the first floor of the Central Bank building be made available to the museum.

Afterward, specific committees were appointed by the museum administration, consisting of staff from the National Museum and colleagues from the Archaeology Institute. Once these teams received authorization from the Ministry of Information and Culture, we kicked off our efforts to relocate some artifacts based on the capacity of the designated location. During this period, we

⁷ I was not part of that team. The responsibility for this task fell to the Museology and the Artifact Restoration Departments, as it was aligned with their duties, under the direction of the museum administration.

**Smithsonian**

carefully packed and transported these artifacts under secure conditions.⁸ The decision was made to prioritize the transfer of artifacts that, while taking up less space, held significant artistic and historical value.⁹ Initially, it was agreed to move all the artifacts that were previously on display, excluding the larger pieces. As I mentioned earlier, the increased threat of rocket attacks and Defense Minister Tanai's coup heightened the vulnerability of the Museum. In 1989, before the transfer of artifacts, an order came from the president's office to shut down the exhibition and store the artifacts. Why? The reason was the vulnerability of the current National Museum building, constructed as the Kabul Municipality Office during Amanullah Khan's rule, with its combination of mud walls and a wood roof. At that point, our exhibition artifacts, which represented ten percent of the total collection and included some of the best pieces and unique masterpieces, were put into storage. The museum administration decided to prioritize the relocation of these unique masterpieces. Where to? They were moved to the Central Bank at the Arg, taking into account space capacity as well as the careful packing, registration, and record-keeping of these valuable artifacts.

When we took this step, another challenge arose – gaining the consensus of those responsible for storing and recording the artifacts. As mentioned earlier, we had four custodians, one of whom had the responsibility of protecting and storing artifacts from the Islamic period – some of the most precious pieces, the best items, and the richest collection. He, rightfully so, did not agree. He expressed his concern, saying, "There's no way I'll agree to let these artifacts, which I'm entrusted to protect and are under my custody, be moved from here to a second or third location. I'm uncertain if they'll be preserved safely there." The museum administration, respecting his stance, did not exert much pressure on him. However, three other custodians, including Mullah Yaqub, a respected cleric – may he rest in peace if he has passed away. He was also responsible for the Tillya Tepa artifacts. Their perspective was different – they believed that as custodians if they were overseeing the artifacts, the museum staff, understanding the value and caring deeply about them, would ensure their safety wherever they were moved. Our two other custodians, Shirazuddin Saifi, and Abdullah Hakimzada, overseeing the exhibition artifacts, also gave their approval for the transfer. This marked a highly positive step as these three custodians agreed for the artifacts under their care to be transferred. The artifacts were duly registered, carefully packed, and moved to a

⁸ The National Museum was situated in the Darulaman area, next to the historic Darul Aman Palace, which was then the headquarters of the Ministry of Defense. The museum's location in a military zone, approximately 15 kilometers from Kabul city, was unsettling. In my opinion, the Central Bank in the Presidential Palace was the safest location, and the Ministry of Information and Culture building in downtown Kabul was also relatively secure compared to the National Museum.

⁹ The identification and selection of artifacts were managed by the museum administration, particularly the Registration Committee, which played a major role in determining which artifacts should be transferred. The Packing Committee was responsible for packaging, while the Transfer Committee oversaw the safe transfer of artifacts. Committee members were proposed by the National Museum administration to the Ministry of Information and Culture, which provided approval. The committees then began their work, as the museum staff had greater knowledge about the artifacts compared to any external sources.

**Smithsonian**

secure location. However, one custodian, Sayed Juhar Shah – May his soul rest in peace – who later passed away in Iran, did not agree with the decision.

A significant portion of the Islamic-era collections unfortunately were lost during the museum's looting and burning from late 1992 to 1994. However, the artifacts previously transferred to the secure location at the Presidential Palace or Central Bank of the Presidential Palace have been effectively preserved. Despite the space constraints, we successfully moved over 22,000 pieces to this secure location, ensuring their protection. I must express my gratitude for the cooperation of the Central Bank, Da Afghanistan Bank, and the bank's board of directors during this operation. Without their collaboration, the transfer of these artifacts would not have been possible. The artifacts transferred by the museum remain in two rooms, sealed and controlled by museum staff. Without the cooperation of the bank's board of directors and by order of the President, museum staff is unable to access the secured location. Similarly, bank staff does not have access to the two rooms under the control of museum staff, where the transferred artifacts are kept. This arrangement ensures that these artifacts are preserved, for now, God willing^{10 11}.

ESFANDIARI: Thank you, sir. That's very interesting. Regarding the same issue you discussed, the transfer of artifacts, a question arises. Since coins generally occupy less space and considering the limitations at the Central Bank, why weren't the coins transferred to the secure location?

MASOUDI: Thank you for your insightful and relevant question. At that time, the National Museum of Afghanistan housed between forty to forty five thousand coins, with the majority securely stored in the depot. I can still vividly picture the shelves before me. We had three coin cabinets donated by UNESCO. The entire coin collection was meticulously stored in these cabinets, each containing small boxes. Dozens and hundreds of these boxes held the coins, and this laborious task involved not only museum staff but also international experts. These experts had carefully examined, categorized, and classified the coins chronologically, based on eras, kings, and the locations where they were discovered. Consequently, the coins were meticulously protected in these cabinets. Each box, containing hundreds of coins, was accompanied by acid-free paper detailing the king's name, coin weight, the corresponding king, and the historical period. In my opinion, moving those—The museum's coin manager at that time, Ibrahim Khan, who later passed away, had received training and collaborated with respected experts from England and Austria. The collection was methodically organized and safeguarded in this manner. While it might appear logical

¹⁰ Regarding the transfer of the Bactrian Treasure artifacts to the Central Bank in the Presidential Palace in 1984, only a limited number of museum employees were aware of this. However, most museum staff was familiar with the name Koti Baghcha, as the Ethnographic Museum operated there and was part of the museum administration. By the second phase of transfers, after the withdrawal of Soviet forces in 1989, most employees involved in the transfer process were informed.

¹¹ All artifacts were registered, packed, and prepared, then transferred by vehicle over three separate days, with transfers occurring once each day.

**Smithsonian**

to consider transferring coins due to their smaller volume and the fact that they would have been better protected, the challenge would have been the intricate task of rearranging them.

We did not imagine at all that the museum—most of the museum artifacts remained in the National Museum. We only transferred a very limited number to the Arg, which in total was a very small collection of unique masterpieces from Baghram, Kamadaka, Tapa-e Khazana, Mandigak, Hadda, and Tillya Tepa as well as other archaeological sites, and some coins, exquisite coins, coins that—we transferred all the gold coins representing all periods of Afghanistan's history. Because gold coins are the finest coins. When a state mints coins, common coins may be bronze or copper but the best quality coins are silver or gold. We transferred the gold coin artifacts and currently around 1,028 gold coins representing different periods are there, including the Kunduz treasures or Chaman Hozori treasures. We transferred those; however, we couldn't transfer the entire numismatics collection of forty five thousand coins due to the reasons mentioned earlier—it would have been challenging to rearrange them. Coming back to the transfer, these artifacts were moved to the Arg Central Bank. The museum staff and administration weren't idle; the situation was dire, and it was getting worse, even though the Soviet forces had withdrawn. Their presence or absence didn't matter much to us. We were happy by their withdrawal.

The museum administration, again, contacted the authorities at the Ministry regarding the remaining museum artifacts [and requested] that the Ministry of Information and Culture, responsible for protecting museum artifacts, should provide the museum with a place to further safeguard artifacts. I'm grateful that Mr. Bashir Roygar assigned four rooms for the museum on the fourth floor at the Ministry of Information and Culture building with the facade facing the Ministry of Communications building, which means it was good in terms of security. The museum administration, with the cooperation of the Ministry of Information and Culture, ensured it was made secure; they installed strong doors and windows security bars. There was and is a heating system there, and it was calibrated according to the climate needs of the artifacts. After that, the museum administration transferred a large number of important artifacts from various regions to the Ministry building. I remember, at that time, the Music Department occupied those four rooms. The Ministry of Information and Culture rented them a building in Karte Seh and placed the rooms at the museum administration's disposal. Regrettably, there wasn't any chance later to set up a third relocation site. Events unfolded rapidly, one after another, leaving no room for a break. The initial concept was to move artifacts to safeguard them against damage in a second or third location in case of a potential power vacuum. The museum's proposed plan yielded positive results.

Regrettably, the museum was burned down, and looted, while these two sites remained secure. Once we transferred artifacts to these two sites, the Ministry building and the Arg Central Bank, the third question before the museum administration was how we could ensure some protection of artifacts inside the museum building itself. I remember that the Museum director, in cooperation with the Ministry, PAMA [Central Institute of Town Planning]—a very active engineering firm, headed by Engineer Najibullah Avjan.... They came to the museum building, went to the

**Smithsonian**

basements, and discussed right there in my presence; Mr. Avjan said they could dig basements of the east and west annexes of the museum further underground. [He suggested] the Museum collect and pack the artifacts in metal crates, and they will insulate it so there is no moisture damage. But the issue was that this work could not be done in one day; working inside the building and taking out the soil would be visible—if anyone found out artifacts had been moved there and if there was any leak of information that museum artifacts have been relocated there in the basements, they would take out the bitumen surface and take [the artifacts]. That is where confidentiality turned out to be a challenge as construction work on the museum premises would be exposed. Unfortunately, we were unable to implement this third project to protect artifacts inside the museum building, we were unable to execute this plan. The reasons were what I explained to you.

Thirdly, we still feared rocket attacks targeting Kabul city, posing a threat to the Museum. Galleries were shut down; museum staff would still attend office; there was a risk that looters might breach the first floor where most of the storerooms were situated. The risk of a bullet penetrating the area and causing destruction to valuable artifacts and a subsequent fire was ever-present. During this time, the museum administration proposed a solution to the ministry authorities, which received approval. Subsequently, all windows on the ground floor, primarily housing storerooms, were sealed using sandbags. Fortunately, the museum building, constructed under Amanullah Khan, featured extremely thick walls, impervious to small arms fire. The additional sealing of windows significantly enhanced the safety of artifacts housed within the museum.

Given the rapidly changing circumstances post-1989, there were limited opportunities to take further actions or transfer additional artifacts. Rocket attacks persisted, the government grappled with significant issues, and the general population faced their own challenges. Insecurity within the city gradually escalated until the regime changed on April 28, 1992, when Dr. Najib's government collapsed. It was from this point onwards that the museum's misfortunes unfolded. These were the challenges I highlighted. If there are any further questions, I would be happy to answer.

ESFANDIARI: Thank you. You discussed transferring artifacts to the Central Bank and noted that the Islamic era artifacts under the custody of one of the custodians remained at the Darulaman museum building. What measures were taken to protect the Islamic period artifacts that stayed inside the museum building? Additionally, during those years and months, were the Museum doors still open to visitors, or were they shut?

MASOUDI: Thank you, that's an excellent question. As I mentioned earlier, the custodian overseeing the Islamic period artifacts didn't agree to the relocation of artifacts, a portion of it. Unfortunately, a significant majority of the artifacts couldn't be moved; only a very limited percentage found its way to the Arg Central Bank and four rooms on the fourth floor of the Ministry of Information and Culture building. These relocated artifacts were diligently safeguarded – the museum wardens [Nokarival] were on duty there, ensuring the protection of the museum storerooms day and night within the Ministry building. However, the vast majority of artifacts,

**Smithsonian**

spanning different periods, remained within the museum building– over ninety percent, to be more precise. The small percentage that was successfully relocated represents a much lower figure in comparison.

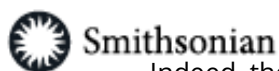
I mentioned earlier that we were able to seal windows and unnecessary doors. The museum did not have an exhibition and remained closed to visitors. However, museum staff continued to attend to their regular tasks. Artifacts in need of conservation were transported from the storerooms to the Conservation Department, but the absence of a display persisted. This situation endured until the regime changed. To clarify, the museum was effectively shut down; from late 1989, the museum remained sealed until 2004. In other words, it was closed to visitors during the period from 1989 to 2004 due to the absence of artifacts for display. It wasn't until 2004, after the building reconstruction, that we organized the first exhibition, marking the reopening of the museum doors to visitors, which has fortunately continued since then. Before the wars escalated severely, museum staff continued their duties. Unfortunately, access to the museum was disrupted during the civil war in Kabul city, a topic we can discuss separately later, God willing.

ESFANDIARI: Thank you. Here's a hypothetical question: If you could travel back in time to when the artifacts were being relocated, and taking into account the events that unfolded later, if you had the option to choose different artifacts to move, which specific ones would you have preferred to transfer from the museum to another location, considering the possibilities at that time?

MASOUDI: Firstly, considering the circumstances and the overall situation, it would have been ideal to relocate all the museum artifacts, although regrettably, that did not occur. The partial relocation was still a positive step. It's worth noting that we had an official list of over one hundred thousand registered artifact items. To grasp the magnitude, just ponder the sheer number of individual pieces represented by this extensive list – a figure unknown to both myself and the museum administration at that time.

Let me provide an example. In 2004, during the cataloging and database process, there were 445 catalog cards or official registration numbers allocated for the Tillya Tepa gold artifacts that were protected. However, the current count for individual pieces stands at 20,578. Consider this: 445 registration numbers correspond to 20,578 pieces. Extrapolating this to our 100,000 artifact line items raises the question of just how vast the collection truly was.

Unfortunately, certain practices in the museum's history lacked scientific precision. For instance, in the goods register office, we would come across entries like "one Charak [1.75 kg] copper coin" for an item from the Mirzaka Paktia treasury. However, the actual quantity of these coins was not exactly recorded. In some instances, a single Charak coin was weighed and assigned to a custodian, without specifying the total count. Imagine the cumulative quantity if such items were accurately tallied.



Indeed, there were significant professional shortcomings, exacerbated by the fact that numerous artifacts were being excavated and brought to the museum. However, the museum administration faced limitations in capacity, compounded by the lack of access to advanced science and technology, a disparity with more developed nations. Our country was just developing, trailing behind culturally and economically, grappling with poverty and helplessness.

Given the global prestige of our museum, ideally, we should have constructed a building that, even today, remains beyond our reach. The pressing need for a structure adhering to modern requirements, and equipped with the latest technology and techniques, becomes apparent. Such facilities would play a crucial role in artifact preservation, a task we currently undertake in a primitive manner. The primary threats to artifacts everywhere lie in the infiltration of dust, moisture, and smoke. Regrettably, the museum lacks the necessary facilities to control these elements, as the building was not originally designed for such purposes. There exists insufficient attention to these crucial aspects, compounded by a lack of awareness regarding the value of artifacts. Encouraging commitment from officials is challenging unless they recognize and prioritize these issues. In my perspective, there should be a concerted focus on addressing these critical shortcomings.

Not only the museum, but historical relics and archaeological sites share the same invaluable significance. As I previously mentioned, the escalation of insecurity results in the government losing control over areas, paving the way for the looting of archaeological sites. Unfortunately, the most severe damage we've witnessed is in the realm of illegal excavations of artifacts.

Take, for instance, the Ai Khanum archaeological site, which began excavation in 1966 but remained incomplete until 1977. This site holds tremendous value and belongs to the Greco-Bactrian era. However, as insecurity heightened, illegal excavations took a toll. A quick internet search of the Ai Khanum archaeological site would reveal, through Google images, the calamity suffered by this and numerous other sites subjected to looting. The cultural devastation endured by not only the National Museum but also the Archaeology Institute's artifacts, historical monuments, and archaeological sites over the 45 years of war is beyond description. The sheer magnitude of the damage is impossible to quantify, owing to the factors of war, ignorance, and a lack of attention.¹²

It's disheartening that the valuable insights of a handful of professionals in various fields often go unheard. In the rare instances where their ideas are acknowledged, positive results have been achieved. This grievance is not mine alone; many colleagues from the Museum, Archaeology,

¹² When government control weakens, opportunistic individuals often take advantage of the situation to stealthily loot archaeological sites. Specific sites include those in the southeastern, northeastern, central, and western regions of Afghanistan, such as Hadda, Ai Khanum, Tepe Zargaran, Mes Aynak, and the Kharwar archaeological site in Logar. Looting also occurred in Ghor province, areas of Kabul, the Tagab district, Kham Zargar in Kapisa, Al-Ghatai in Nerkh district of Maidan Wardak, as well as various sites in Parwan, Jowzjan, and Faryab.

**Smithsonian**

and Historical Relics share this sentiment. The forty to forty-five years of insecurity have left us with bitter and unpleasant memories.

ESFANDIARI: Thank you very much. One last question, what was your position and responsibility during and after the withdrawal of the Soviet Union forces? How did your role evolve? Were you still working in the same department as before, or did you take on a different responsibility?

MASOUDI: From the time I joined the museum until my retirement, I remained within the museum, holding the position of head of a department. The museum's organizational structure was relatively small, comprising about 6 or 7 departments. During that period, I served as the head of the prehistoric department, a position equivalent in rank to other department heads, the museum director, and the deputy director. My role did not undergo any significant changes or swaps.

One positive aspect during that time was the collaborative spirit within our team. There were no rigid orders and commands; rather, all the staff were dedicated museum professionals who recognized the value of artifacts and understood the importance of history. They bore the responsibility of protection and went above and beyond to display our cultural heritage at both national and international levels.

However, circumstances unfolded in a manner that constrained our ability to exhibit and expand the showcase of museum artifacts. As mentioned earlier, in 1989, the exhibition was closed, and artifacts were collected and stored. This, in itself, dealt a substantial blow to our cultural endeavors. The core responsibilities of museums are the protection and display of artifacts, especially the Afghanistan Museum, an archaeology museum dedicated to presenting Afghanistan's history. Unfortunately, this opportunity was taken away from us.

I recall the time when Afghanistan, during the periods of Zahir Shah and Daoud, enjoyed security, attracting numerous tourists. The tourism industry flourished, contributing significantly to the government's income after taxes. This economic growth was not confined to the capital but also extended to provinces, playing a pivotal role in the overall development of Afghan society. Afghanistan boasts numerous tourist attractions.

[END OF TRACK FSA.A2024.03_NMAOH_2023.11.17_01]

Not only does Afghanistan boast historical relics, but it also features breathtaking natural landscapes. During that era, there was an exceptionally high influx of tourists. Even during my tenure at the museum, we experienced a remarkable surge in tourist numbers. Visitors obtained permits from the museum, purchased handicrafts, stayed in hotels, and explored various provinces. The tourism agency operated actively during that period, housed within the Ministry of Information and Culture. They provided guides, and assigned vehicles, and organized large buses to transport tourists in groups to different provinces.



Smithsonian

An excellent guidebook for tourism was written by Nancy Hatch Dupree in English. It was distributed to tourists and guides facilitating their travels on behalf of the tourism department. This guidebook had an almost academic, scholarly foundation for introducing the country. Afghanistan boasts an incredibly diverse range of tourist attractions, including places like Bamiyan, Nuristan, Badakhshan, Kandahar, Herat, and Nangarhar. We had established museums in various locations, such as Hadda in Nangarhar, and some other highly touristic spots in Afghanistan. Some valleys fascinated visitors immensely. Unfortunately, all these places faced destruction. While they retain their intrinsic value, the lack of facilities hampers the ability to provide opportunities for both domestic and foreign tourists today. These issues persisted continuously, creating ongoing challenges. I remained in my position and contributed to the museum's endeavors.

ESFANDIARI: Wonderful. Do you have any specific memories from the period after the withdrawal of the Soviet Union, or around those years of withdrawal? Perhaps there were challenges you encountered related to museum activities and your field of work—something that stands out as a particularly noteworthy experience?

MASOUDI: I must admit that there are more bitter memories compared to positive ones. On a positive note, the museum saw enrichment with the arrival of the Tillya Tepe collection, albeit accompanied by heightened responsibilities for the museum staff. My second memory is about the time when the museum ceased functioning, and its doors closed to visitors. A museum truly comes to life with its visitors, and the absence of visitors for fifteen to twenty years rendered the once vibrant institution devoid of activity. The most bitter memory of my life is the severance of our connection with the museum. Working in the National Archives as migrants, our ties with the museum were severed, and we only learned about the museum's situation through news broadcasts on BBC radio. That is my biggest and most bitter memory. Another bitter memory is the destruction of artifacts.

But we saw situations where – regarding the transport arrangement for museum staff at that time, the government rented buses to transport museum staff to and from work. When insecurity escalated, we encountered numerous challenges en route. The vehicles would be stopped, individuals forced off for various pretexts, subjected to threats, insults, beatings, and coerced into labor, while other staff could only witness these incidents, enduring disrespect. We faced these situations frequently, but there was no alternative, and thankfully, we did not become migrants. Fortunately, we avoided becoming migrants; otherwise, our circumstances might have been even more dire. Regrettably, we couldn't fully discharge our duty in preserving our homeland's history. As museum staff, our museum was looted, destroyed, and vandalized. Despite these adversities, to the best of our abilities, we conscientiously contributed to its restoration and revival.

I wish in all these huge political transformations that happened in our society over forty five years, not even the slightest damage occurred to cultural spheres, museums, artifacts, and archaeological sites. That would have been my ideal life. Unfortunately, these misfortunes came upon the museum.



Smithsonian
ESFANDIARI:

Thank you. If there's another topic you'd like to discuss, please feel free.

MASOUDI: Thanks, I believe we've covered the essential points succinctly. Delving into detailed topics would open a vast array of issues, and I believe I've shared what needed to be conveyed within my capacity.

ESFANDIARI: I genuinely appreciate it. We've had a productive discussion. Thank you once again, and our interview for today concludes here.

[END OF TRACK FSA.A2024.03_NMAOH_2023.11.17_02]

[END OF INTERVIEW]