

Oral History Interview

with

Omara Khan Masoudi

recorded at the National Museum of Asian Art

Washington, D.C.

8 Dec 2023

by Azizullah Esfandiari

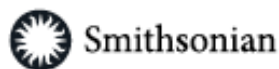
Interviewer

**ESFANDIARI:** Thank you for your time. Welcome to the fourth session. In this segment, we focus on the National Museum of Afghanistan's condition during the civil war. To begin, could you kindly elaborate on the events that transpired at the National Museum following the withdrawal of Soviet forces in 1989?

**MASOUDI:** Thank you for that good question. As we delved into during our previous conversations, the repercussions of the Soviet forces' withdrawal in 1989 had a profound impact on the museum. Unfortunately, the aftermath of this withdrawal, particularly during the civil wars, inflicted significant damage on the Museum. The departure of Soviet forces set the stage for these challenges during the subsequent civil conflicts.

As you're aware, upon the Soviet forces' exit from Afghanistan, the opposing forces or Mujahideen, actively fighting against Dr. Najib's government, utilized a combination of regular and irregular guerrilla warfare tactics, coupled with an extensive propaganda campaign. This campaign aimed to deeply influence public sentiment, and its effects were palpable. Especially in Kabul, there was a prevailing belief that the departure of the powerful foreign backing for Dr. Najib's government would lead to its imminent collapse, paving the way for the Mujahideen to assume control. This mindset directly impacted the morale of the museum staff.

During that period, the opposition forces, through their propaganda efforts, sought to undermine the resolve of soldiers, military personnel, and civilians. They disseminated the idea that the government's military forces should abandon their duties. Apart from targeting government facilities, they exerted considerable pressure on essential infrastructure like roads, rendering them unsafe and challenging the stability of the government.



During that period, the government refrained from utilizing its reserves, opting instead to secure essential supplies from external sources like food and other necessities for public welfare. This approach gradually influenced the population, resulting in escalating commodity prices and an increasing threat of poverty. The entire nation, especially Kabul, faced challenges.

On the military front, there was a concerted effort to exert significant pressure on Kabul, with the city enduring relentless rocket attacks, including Grad twenty and sixty assaults. These attacks prompted the museum staff to recognize the deteriorating situation and take necessary measures. They implemented measures in three key areas. In collaboration with ministry authorities and other competent bodies, they transferred some of the museum artifacts to a secure location—an action I've previously mentioned as the right decision.

Secondly, artifacts on display in the museum were deinstalled and stored. This was crucial due to the high vulnerability of the museum building, situated far from the center and not originally designed for such purposes. The risk of rocket attacks, subsequent destruction, and the possibility of fire were exceedingly high. By disassembling the gallery artifacts, they aimed to prevent significant damage. This constituted the second step.

In the third step, for security and other considerations, a decision was made to close the museum doors to visitors once the display artifacts were safely collected. This marked a transition in the museum staff's activities from an active to an inactive state. Although they continued to come and go routinely, various challenges arose along the way.

A year or two after the withdrawal of Soviet troops, foreign newspapers unfortunately disseminated stories asserting that the Tillya Tepe artifacts had been relocated to Moscow by Soviet forces. Publications like the French newspaper *Le Monde* and the Arabic newspaper *Al-Sharq Al-Awsat*, with offices in London and Jeddah, propagated these baseless narratives, suggesting that the artifacts were transported from Kabul airport to Moscow. These unfounded tales, rooted in Cold War propaganda tactics between East and West, sought to sow confusion in public opinion, particularly in the cultural domain.

Despite our unwavering confidence in the secure transfer and preservation of our artifacts, the publication of such stories in reputable international newspapers posed a dual challenge. On one hand, it disturbed public opinion, and on the other, it questioned the museum's existential credibility. Responding to these allegations could jeopardize the safety of the artifacts in the future while maintaining silence risked undermining the people's trust in the National Museum. We found ourselves caught between the need to safeguard the artifacts and the imperative to maintain public trust, navigating a delicate balance in the face of challenging circumstances.

During that time, we had the capacity to craft a detailed response and disseminate information through national and international media regarding the presence of Tillya Tepe artifacts in Kabul. However, given the precarious security situation, we deliberated on whether revealing the location of the Tillya Tepe and other artifacts was prudent. There was a genuine concern that



providing answers to the questions raised by the propaganda could jeopardize their safety in the future. On the other hand, maintaining silence in the face of false and fraudulent publications could erode trust in the National Museum among the Afghan people.

After extensive discussions among colleagues and consultations with ministry authorities, we reached a consensus. To secure the future of the Bactrian Gold and other relocated artifacts and preserve the trust of the Afghan people in the National Museum administration, we opted for a balanced approach. The National Museum administration, in collaboration with the Minister of Information and Culture, security officials, and other competent authorities<sup>1</sup>, including the president's office, presented these concerns for consideration.

Ultimately, a decision was made to indirectly address these questions. How? Through a temporary exhibition that would serve as an assurance to both foreign newspapers and the Afghan people regarding the existence and safety of the Bactrian Gold artifacts. This one-day exhibition was planned to take place in the Koti Baghcha palace within the presidential palace grounds.<sup>2</sup> Why Koti Baghcha? Firstly, it was a historically significant building that housed the ethnographic section of the National Museum from 1983 to 1992, open to visitors. Secondly, the Bactrian Gold artifacts were stored in the same compound, allowing for easy transportation and display.

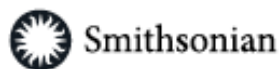
Upon reaching the decision, the museum administration proposed the formation of a committee, which, upon approval, was entrusted with the task of arranging and organizing a temporary exhibition displaying the Bactrian Gold artifacts. Fortunately, I served as a member of this committee. In the initial phase, the committee carefully selected a limited yet highly distinguished number of Bactrian Gold artifacts from the museum's documentation section, relying on the Bactrian Gold album for reference. Although these artifacts had been relocated, their albums served as a comprehensive guide, allowing us to choose prominent pieces for display. A limited number of artifacts were selected for display.

We prepared four empty showcases from the National Museum before setting up the exhibition. While the notion of four showcases may seem simplistic, from a museology perspective, it required meticulous attention to lighting, color schemes, and covering to ensure a harmonious and attractive presentation that complemented the artifacts. It was a technical and professional task. I recall that, during the preparations, we selected a beautiful reddish velvet fabric, commonly

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<sup>1</sup> The competent authorities included officials from the Ministry of Information and Culture and the Presidential Palace. In my opinion, foreigners were not involved in this decision, and Dr. Sarianidi had no information about the storage location of the Bactrian Treasure artifacts.

<sup>2</sup> The Koti Baghcha palace was the most secure location and closest to where the Bactrian Treasure artifacts were stored. When the Bactrian Treasure artifacts returned to Kabul in 2019 after a lengthy tour, following instructions from the President's office, the National Museum administration displayed some artifacts in the Char Chinari Palace. I also attended this exhibition. The exhibition received coverage from national radio, television, and various print and visual media. Char Chinari and Koti Baghcha palaces are the most secure locations near the storage site, and the main goal was to assure the public about the treasure's existence.



referred to as "*Makhmal*," to adorn the showcases. Once the lighting was set up, and the showcases were painted and varnished, we transported them to the Koti Baghcha palace within the Arg, where the exhibition would take place.

After the artifacts were selected and before the exhibition's setup, large posters featuring the selected Bactrian Gold artifacts were printed in color at the government printing press. These posters were strategically installed at various locations across Kabul city. Additionally, on the day of the exhibition's inauguration, we distributed these large posters and some museum publications to all attendees.

With the committee's arrangements in place, it submitted a proposal for the exhibition. According to the law, any transfer of artifacts from one location to another required a presidential decree. Once the committee's proposal, including the selected venue, was finalized, a separate proposal was sent by the Ministry of Information and Culture for approval from the president's office in April 1991. A supervisory delegation, appointed by the President, was tasked with inaugurating the exhibition, consisting of several ministers.

Upon completing all necessary administrative steps, on the designated date, the committee, in the presence of the delegation members and the respective custodians, extracted the chosen artifacts from the Bactrian Gold safes.<sup>3</sup> The artifacts were then transported to the exhibition venue at the Koti Baghcha palace within the Arg. By two p.m., the artifacts were ready for display, and the exhibition was inaugurated, lasting until four p.m. The inauguration ceremony drew attendees such as cabinet ministers, parliamentary members, foreign ambassadors, cultural elites, and domestic and foreign journalists. Despite its brief duration of two hours, all invitees had the opportunity to explore the Bactrian Gold and other ethnographic artifacts at Koti Baghcha.

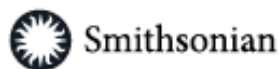
Following the conclusion of the exhibition, the committee dismantled the displayed artifacts and transported them back to their respective safes. All the safes and doors of the two rooms where the artifacts were secured were sealed by the committee. Remarkably, these seals remained intact from April 1991 until 2003. It is noteworthy that in late 1992 and 1998, we conducted checks to examine the condition of the artifacts. On both occasions, we only inspected the seals, confirming that they remained intact and untouched.<sup>4</sup>

In 2003, during President Karzai's visit to the central bank, the bank's board of directors informed him about the existence of Tillya Tepe artifacts there. One of the reasons the bank's board became aware of the Tillya Tepe artifacts was the 1991 exhibition. Before that exhibition, whatever we transported and stored in vaults and safes was sealed, and the contents were unknown to them.

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<sup>3</sup> The custodian of the Bactrian Treasure was Mullah Mohammad Yaqub, a religious and pious individual.

<sup>4</sup> I, Omara Khan Masoudi, was part of the team for the one-day temporary exhibition in July 1991 and also served on the review committees in 1992 and 1998, where I confirmed that the signatures on the boxes and door locks were intact and valid. Dr. Sarianidi never asked about the storage location of the Bactrian Treasure artifacts, and I have no information regarding it.



However, during the April 1991 exhibition, we were extracting the Tillya Tepe artifacts from the safes in their presence; we couldn't have done so without the cooperation of the bank's board of directors. Consequently, they witnessed the existence of these artifacts in those safes. The board members were, and continue to be, reliable and trustworthy individuals. Later, when the President visited, they made this information public, assuring us that our seals from April 1991 to 2003 were intact. Not only the committee's seals but also the signatures of the custodians remained untouched; their keys remained secure with museum staff and custodians, thankfully.

The inauguration ceremony of the exhibition and the guests' visit were broadcast by Afghanistan National TV and covered by some international media. I am confident that recorded footage of the Tillya Tepe artifacts exhibition and the visitors exists in the archives of Radio Television Afghanistan. If accessed, we may be able to find the entire ceremony.

Remarkably, it was during the transportation of artifacts for the exhibition that the bank's board of directors became aware, for the first time, of the existence of Tillya Tepe artifacts in that location. As mentioned earlier, until that point, they had been unaware. The exhibition served as a means for the bank management to understand the presence of these artifacts, prompting them to inform the President in 2003. This marked a significant turning point, and thereafter, no further propaganda occurred. The Afghan people and the world were reassured about the existence of Tillya Tepe artifacts, though the precise location remained undisclosed.

Unfortunately, after the artifacts were transported for the exhibition, the doors of the museum closed, resulting in a cessation of activities. This period was challenging for us, and there's a relevant slogan that still resonates strongly with me: "A nation stays alive when its culture stays alive."<sup>5</sup> Despite our best intentions, we struggled to preserve our history and culture. Afghanistan's cultural heritage is an immense, irreplaceable, and invaluable resource, appreciated not only by Afghans but by the entire world. I can unequivocally state that in the last nearly five decades, Afghanistan's cultural heritage has faced greater dangers compared to any other time in history. I would like to share my opinion on the potential contributors to the destruction of cultural heritage sites.

One. Poverty and Illiteracy in Society: We find ourselves in the first quarter of the 21st century, yet, from my perspective, nearly half of Afghanistan's population cannot read or write. Especially disheartening is the fact that rural women are often denied educational opportunities or a conducive environment for learning. Despite commendable efforts by the Literacy Department of the Ministry of Education, supported by UNESCO's Kabul office, the implementation of adult literacy programs, though somewhat successful in cities, faces significant challenges in remote rural areas. This is particularly detrimental to the elderly and young women, as they are deprived of these adult

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<sup>5</sup> This meaningful phrase was engraved on black marble in 2003 during the reconstruction of the museum building. It was installed on a stone pedestal at the entrance of the National Museum, attracting attention of Afghan and foreign visitors: "A nation stays alive when its culture stays alive."



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education programs—a grave injustice to the rights of half of Afghan society. The stark reality persists; even in the 21st century, fifty percent of Afghans remain illiterate. The absence of literacy translates to a lack of understanding of issues and a limited appreciation of culture, exacerbating the challenges faced by the Afghan culture sector, including the National Museum of Afghanistan. Poverty and societal illiteracy intertwine, each amplifying the impacts of the other.

Two. Prolonged Conflict: Another significant factor, in my assessment, is the prolonged conflict that has plagued the country, holding it back and allowing conflicts to deeply entrench itself in Afghan society.

Three. Smuggling of Ancient Artifacts into Global Black Markets: A distressing reality is the smuggling of ancient artifacts from not only the museum but also our historical sites and monuments, finding their way into global black markets through neighboring countries. Regrettably, these invaluable artifacts end up in the hands of international smugglers for meager sums<sup>6</sup>.

Four. Destruction of Archaeological Sites due to Agricultural Development and Other Causes: The rapid expansion of cities, often uncontrolled, has resulted in the neglect and disregard of cultural heritage sites situated in their path. The lack of appreciation for these sites has led to direct consequences. Archaeological sites face destruction when cities expand, particularly due to agricultural development or other reasons. The civilizations, with their artifacts buried underground, suffer when agriculture brings water, and infrastructure like roads and canals are constructed without consideration for these ancient sites. The consequence is the automatic destruction of these invaluable remnants of history. Additionally, the uncontrolled growth of cities, exacerbated by war-induced migrations from villages to cities, has emptied villages, creating opportunities for theft and plunder at ancient sites within those provinces. The prolonged and persistent war has inflicted immense miseries on Afghanistan's cultural fabric, intensifying the challenges faced by its archaeological heritage.

Afghanistan stands as a unique example in the world, having endured unparalleled cultural losses and damages. Regrettably, we bear the responsibility for these miseries. Until 2002, Afghanistan remained a closed society, with limited interactions at various levels with the outside world. Our connections were scarce, and we were confined to a small space. When one's eyes are closed, one cannot see or engage with the world.

After the Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan, inherent differences between the Khalq and Parcham factions, both in power, gradually intensified. Discord emerged among them, and as is often the case, differences paved the way for adversity. These internal divisions were among the numerous factors that contributed to the failure of the national reconciliation and the United Nations plan led by Benon Sevan. Dr. Najibullah, in the later stages of his rule, announced national

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<sup>6</sup> Illegal excavations at various archaeological sites fostered a network of collaborations among domestic and foreign dealers, commanders, and local residents, all profiting from the smuggling of Afghan archaeological artifacts.



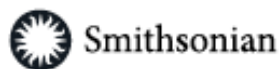
reconciliation. He transformed the Democratic Party into the Watan Party, established a parliament, and held elections. For a brief period, he stepped aside, appointing Samkanai as President, but the effort yielded no results. Internal disagreements within the party, coupled with the Mujahideen viewing themselves as victors after the Soviet withdrawal, contributed to the failure of reconciliation efforts. The Mujahideen, having defeated the Soviets, questioned the need to reconcile with Najibullah, leading to the gradual weakening of the government system.

After the Soviet withdrawal, the Jihadi groups deemed themselves victorious on the Jihad front. However, before entering Kabul, during the crucial period when they were supposed to form a government comprising all Jihadi factions outside Afghanistan, they encountered significant challenges. Their attempts to establish a government in Pakistan faced hurdles, and despite meetings, the ambitious nature that characterizes Afghans, a trait deeply ingrained in our collective identity, became a major obstacle. This ambition, often seeking grandeur, has been one of the enduring misfortunes in our country, contributing to a lack of compromise, reconciliation, and space-making, ultimately leading to discord.

Before the newly established Jihadi government, led by Sibghatullah Mojaddedi, entered Kabul, political figures and prominent commanders from the Khalq and Parcham factions, aligning themselves with various Jihadi groups, had established relations. Subsequently, army units and bases began surrendering to different Jihadi factions. Notably, the soldiers at that time were neither Khalqi nor Parchami; they had joined the army through conscription to serve and protect Afghanistan's land. Unfortunately, due to disagreements and lack of attention, some politicians who were part of the government at the time invited these parties and commanders to gradually take control of these units. This proved to be a significant disaster.

The Shura-e-Nazar council, associated with the Jamiat-e-Islami Party, and the Islamic Movement Party [Junbesh-e Islami] led by General Dostum, formed a coalition. Before the newly formed Jihadi government in Pakistan entered Kabul, Shura-e-Nazar, under the leadership of Ahmad Shah Massoud, entered the city from the north. Junbesh-e Islami and Shura-e-Nazar took control of Kabul airport and other strategic locations. According to the United Nations' plan, President Najibullah was supposed to leave Afghanistan on the same plane that carried UN Special Representative Benon Sevan when it landed at Kabul airport. However, forces affiliated with Junbesh-e Islami prevented the President from entering Kabul airport. In response, the President sought refuge at the UN office in Kabul, where he remained until the first takeover by the Taliban, accompanied by his brother and Mr. Toukhi, the President's chief of staff.

By late April 1992, military morale had weakened, and the central authority was on the verge of collapse. The surrender of military units, driven by personal preferences and facilitated by lesser-known commanders and groups without connections to Jihadi factions, allowed Mujahideen forces to seize power, especially acquiring weapons and ammunition. I remember they would call [commanders] and instruct them to hand over specific units in certain locations to particular individuals, and they would proceed accordingly.



On April 28, 1992, a meeting was convened at the Afghan Ministry of Foreign Affairs to transfer power from the People's Democratic Party to the newly formed government led by Professor Sibghatullah Mojaddedi. A relatively small ceremony marked the transfer of political power. All army soldiers and police who had joined the military through conscription were discharged, prisoners were released, and government offices were taken over by various Jihadi factions.

Fortunately, during that turbulent period, the National Museum remained untouched, thanks to the vigilance of the museum wardens on duty. I vividly remember our dedicated colleague, Sayed Mohammad Yunus Mashfiq, and another museum employee who were on duty at the Museum. As commanders moved about, encountering the museum signboard and knocking on the door, the wardens stood resolute, denying them entry. The doors were securely locked from the inside, and these individuals lacked an understanding of the nature of a museum. The patient explanations of our museum colleagues clarified that it was a cultural institution exhibiting ceramic items, fabric displays, and clothing. Thankfully, for the two days during our absence (from Thursday when we left to Saturday when we returned), no harm befell the museum. The diligent warden had faithfully fulfilled his duty for three consecutive nights, and may his soul rest in peace. It was a relief that the museum emerged unscathed.

Upon our return, trust among individuals was notably low. For a week, the museum operated without any security officials until, following the formation of the cabinet, the museum administration contacted the ministry. Mahmud Daqiq, the head of the 5<sup>th</sup> Division of Intelligence or State Security located near the museum in Darulaman, received instructions from Shura-e-Nazar to send some personnel for the security and safety of the museum. Twelve individuals were dispatched by Mr. Mahmud Daqiq, and they assumed responsibility for the external security of the museum. Regrettably, despite their commitment to jihad, they considered themselves the sole authority. They did not show respect to the museum staff or guests who visited, making unreasonable demands such as pressuring and insulting the museum administration to provide them space inside the museum—an offer consistently declined. Additionally<sup>7</sup>, they sought delicate silk rugs from the museum's collection for their residential spaces outside the museum. These carpets, registered artifacts, were unique, and the museum administration, aware that providing them would lead to destruction, firmly resisted.

Let me share a memory with you. During that period, the Indian ambassador held a meeting with the museum director, Anwar Katawazi. Security guards at the checkpoint informed them about the Indian ambassador's impending visit. Perhaps his meeting with the museum director was related to India's collaboration with the museum in the cultural sphere. I recall that Indian experts regularly visited to enhance the capacity of the museum's Department of Artifacts Conservation.

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<sup>7</sup> This photo shows members of the Islamic Unity Party of Afghanistan, who, during the civil war, controlled the area where the National Museum was located.

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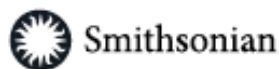
They provided chemicals, conducted training sessions, and, in collaboration with UNESCO, established a conservation lab through an Indian cultural center named NRLC in Lucknow. This center wasn't solely for India but extended to South Asian countries. Annually, one or two museum staff members would travel to India for professional and technical capacity building, receiving training, and returning. Fortunately, I was one of those who went to Lucknow in September 1991 and underwent six months of training in mural painting conservation. The training included practical work and study tours, concluding in March 1992.

The issue is a bit unclear to me. Upon the Indian ambassador's departure, an unfortunate incident occurred. The security guards or officials handled the ambassador very rudely, leaving him disappointed. The museum director, too, felt frustrated and unhappy by the situation. They subjected the ambassador to a search, treating him like an ordinary person. Although he maintained composure and accepted the procedures, dealing with a diplomat in such a manner lacked basic human decency. This series of incidents left the museum director disheartened, leading him to express that continuing to work there was no longer feasible for him, even though he wasn't terminated. During that time, it was common for individuals to take leave without pay. He applied for leave, not leave without pay but sick leave. Eventually, he left the country. Later, we heard that he had gone to Pakistan and was residing in Karachi. Unfortunately, I don't know his current situation.

The situation unfolded in this manner. Regrettably, these attitudes surfaced in the aftermath of that disaster. Until a new director was appointed, the museum deputy, Najibullah Popal, assumed these responsibilities. Unfortunately, Najibullah Popal also encountered similar issues with the security officials. As mentioned earlier, during a change of regime, a power vacuum emerges, and in this vacuum, numerous disasters transpire.

When Mr. Mujadidi assumed power, government warehouses and weapons stocks were looted, flooding the market and causing a significant drop in prices due to increased supply and decreased demand. President Mujadidi, in his speeches, attributed the price reduction to the mujahideen's grace and God's bounty, claiming increased prosperity and urging people to live in peace. However, the actual reason behind the price drop was the extensive plundering of state reserves. They considered these reserves as spoils, and looted them, instead of fulfilling their role as guardians. This situation also adversely affected the morale of museum officials. The police, who were meant to ensure citizens' security and enforce the law, were completely absent from the scene. These were the challenging conditions I have shared with you.

Unfortunately, the first theft at the museum occurred on the night of December 23, 1992, marking the onset of a significant tragedy. As mentioned in my earlier statements, when we removed the museum artifacts displayed, we left some large installations on the walls of the first and second floors intact, not foreseeing the impending disaster. Among these, two substantial schist works named Dipankara Jataka and Kashyapa Brothers adorned the upper floor of the National Museum. Regrettably, on December 23, these pieces were stolen.



The discovery was quite intriguing. The following day, upon arriving at the museum, we noticed the absence of these two artworks from their designated spots. Anxiously, the museum deputy and I went to the ministry to report the incident, emphasizing the need for investigation due to the gravity of the matter. The deputy minister for culture assured us that he would inform President Rabbani and asked us to return in the afternoon for an update. The situation at the museum was indeed disastrous.

Upon our return to the ministry at 4 pm, Najibullah Popal inquired with Mr. Mesbah, the deputy minister for culture. He informed us that he had discussed the matter with the President, and the president had decided to instruct the defense minister to monitor intersections to prevent the artifacts from leaving the country and to recover and return them to the museum. It was an irresponsible response that left us extremely frustrated and disappointed.

The following day— the working hours for that day had already concluded—, Najibullah Popal submitted a proposal for approval by the deputy minister, and we went to the Ministry of Interior. I was a witness, accompanying him. When we arrived at the office of the Minister of Interior, he initially refused to meet with anyone. At that time, I believe, engineer Ahmad Shah held both the position of Deputy Prime Minister and the acting minister of the Ministry of Interior. In any case, we were not granted a meeting. However, they accepted the proposal, indicating that the Criminal Investigation Department should handle the investigation. We proceeded to the Criminal Investigation Department within the Ministry of Interior.

Upon reaching there, we encountered a chaotic scene—the offices were disorganized, and everything appeared in disarray. We located the head of criminal investigations, though we were unfamiliar with him. Someone informed us that he was the head, and when we approached him, he seemed disheartened, expressing that they were unable to take any action. [He said] “The criminal investigation machines, purchased from Germany at a considerable cost, are all dysfunctional, leaving us incapable of arresting the thief, and all the files have been lost.”

We emphasized the importance of investigating the issue, highlighting their responsibility as an institution. He wrote a note to the Criminal Investigations Directorate of Kabul Province. We visited their office and presented the written directive. Fortunately, the Kabul Provincial Criminal Investigations Directorate exhibited better organization. The head of criminal investigations formed a committee. At that time, even traveling to Darulaman was challenging, and one of our museum colleagues managed to secure a taxi. The committee, appointed by the Kabul Provincial Criminal Investigations Directorate, came to the museum. They questioned the museum security officials, gathering information about who was on duty and other pertinent details. Despite the absence of a logbook, they were thorough professionals, immediately understanding the situation.

The committee went to the second floor where the theft occurred, analyzing how it took place and examining the transfer route to the intersection. They identified a display room with broken glass through which the thieves had entered, and footprints were visible. Upon returning,



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they confidently asserted that it was as clear as day for them. If the government handed over the 12 individuals involved, they could investigate, and within a day, they would recover the stolen artifacts. The challenge was to get these individuals under investigation. The committee provided us with their written statements. We asked them to take action and, if that proved challenging, they had to convey their opinion to the ministry<sup>8</sup>.

In their report to the ministry, they detailed that the museum guards were not involved, but instead, they facilitated the thieves at the checkpoint near the museum intersection. The theft occurred at midnight after the guards entered the Museum, put pressure on the warden, and pretended they were there to watch television. Once they sat down to watch television, the checkpoint soldiers entered and stole the artifacts—Dipankara Jataka and Kashyapa Brothers. This marked the beginning of thefts, followed by subsequent internal conflicts, damage, looting, and fire at the museum. Unfortunately, it was disheartening. This was a brief overview of the museum's security situation, the theft of two artifacts, and the subsequent challenges that we hope to discuss in more detail in future conversations.

**ESFANDIARI:** Thank you. This indicates that the situation was becoming increasingly fragile. Did government officials or museum authorities take any measures to protect the artifacts and deter further destruction or theft? Were there initiatives to transfer the artifacts? If so, when did these efforts commence? Could you please provide more details on this?

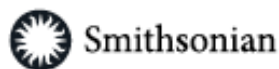
**MASOUDI:** That's a very insightful question. There were several internal measures that we took, and fortunately, during that period, these actions were undertaken with the approval of the ruling regime. I recall when the situation in Kabul was deteriorating, and employees were commuting to the museum, the standard procedure was to transport them by buses from their residences to their workplaces.

Along the way, there were various factions with inspection posts and stops. Anyone affiliated with an opposing group or someone disliked would face insults, beatings, removal from vehicles, and forced labor, and some were even taken to private prisons. These issues were widespread.

Concerning the museum's vulnerability, there was an individual, Paul Bucherer, a Swiss scholar, who, although I didn't personally meet, had contacted Najibullah Popal. He emphasized the high vulnerability of the museum due to its location across from the Ministry of Defense, situated farther from the city center in a military area. Bucherer expressed readiness to engage the Swiss authorities so that, under the supervision of the United Nations or UNESCO, the artifacts could be transferred.

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<sup>8</sup> No one in the Ministry of Interior was aware of the theft beforehand. Najibullah Popal, the museum's deputy, and I, Omara Khan Masoudi, officially submitted an inquiry signed by the Cultural Deputy Minister of the Ministry of Culture to the Ministry of Interior to investigate the theft thoroughly. Consequently, three professional staff members from the Criminal Department of the Ministry of Interior were assigned to conduct a preliminary investigation. Unfortunately, the suspects were not pursued, and the issue was eventually forgotten, leading to further thefts.



Najibullah Popal, along with one or two others (myself included), approached the ministry with this idea, suggesting, "Transfer these artifacts to a third-party country. The law allows for it. If not all, then at least some of them." However, the response was dismissive. Initially questioning the feasibility and public perception, they stated, "How can this happen? What would people think?" Popal explained the process would occur under government supervision, with UN representatives present, and museum staff on hand to guard, register, and display the artifacts.

Unfortunately, despite making the request a couple of times, it received no attention. They even questioned our trust in the regime's ability to secure a small museum building, turning it into a political issue. The museum staff were not politicians but ordinary individuals dedicated to their profession. We became disappointed.

But fortunately, the measures taken earlier successfully protected those artifacts. It is my sincere wish that the authorities had felt a sense of responsibility, listened to the opinions of the museum staff, and accepted their suggestions. These artifacts could have remained protected—perhaps not 100 percent, but at least a significant portion. However, when they ignored our pleas, undervalued the suggestions, and attributed our concern to staff disbelief in the system, it led to disappointment among the museum staff.

Our efforts to protect the artifacts were misconstrued as mistrust. Perhaps, they perceived us as infidels or irreligious since they had waged jihad, and those in Kabul were considered as such. Conceptually, the museum artifacts were seen as idols and an idol-house to them. I don't understand. As I mentioned earlier, artifacts from the Buddhist period were displayed in the corridors, including Buddha statues, the Surkh Kotal inscription, a large stone cauldron from Kandahar, a statue of Kanishka, a Kushani prince's statue, a mosque from Lashkari Bazar in Helmand, and geometric Islamic period decorations. They are still there.

During later stages, they stole some Buddha statues from the museum. Fortunately, the Surkh Kotal Inscription, the mosque, and the geometric decorations were spared and still exist. I fail to comprehend their perspective toward the museum staff. They seemingly lacked dignity or honor, perhaps influenced by religious beliefs. The museum is not an idol house, and its people are not idol worshippers. It represents a distinct period in our history—the Buddhist artifacts. We have the responsibility to protect them, spanning from ancient times to the 19th and 20th centuries. The museum administration is tasked with safeguarding and displaying them. The vast difference in ideas unfortunately led to significant losses for the museum.

**ESFANDIARI:** So, in the first years after the Mujahideen arrived in Kabul, the museum artifacts stayed in their original Darulaman location.

**MASOUDI:** Most of the artifacts remained in their original Darulaman location. A small percentage, particularly the precious Bactrian treasures and exhibition artifacts of the National Museum, were relocated to central Kabul. These were not large items but rather smaller pieces based on available space capacity. In 1989, some artifacts were also moved to the Ministry of


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Information and Culture, and thankfully, they remained safe in those two locations while the Museum, housing the majority of the artifacts, suffered damage during the civil wars.

By early 1993, the museum staff lost access to the museum, and as migrants, we were provided with an office in the ministry. We would show up to sign attendance but were unable to carry out our regular duties. The staff, disheartened, would often engage in personal work to make ends meet.<sup>9</sup> Despite our daily routine, anxiety persisted. The deputy museum director bore most of the responsibilities during this challenging period.

News, especially from BBC, kept us informed. On May 12, 1993, BBC reported a shocking incident: a rocket strike caused a fire on the upper floor of the museum building. The broadcast at eight pm lamented that while Afghans had buried their children, they should not bury their history<sup>10</sup>—clearly referencing the National Museum. The fire continued from the evening to the morning without any fire brigade assistance. Possessions on the upper floor were destroyed, but fortunately, the fire did not reach the ground floor depot where most artifacts were stored, although considered accidental. The fire claimed some of our most pristine artifacts. Two large Delbarjin Tapa fresco paintings in the Bactrian room, a beautiful artifact from the Ghazni display, and a stone artifact were among the casualties. While the first floor was preserved from the fire, subsequent wars ultimately led to its destruction.

**ESFANDIARI:** During the period when your access to the museum was cut off, were there any efforts by non-governmental organizations, the United Nations, or cultural institutions to establish a mechanism for preserving the artifacts?

**MASOUDI:** Unfortunately, no. During this time, there were no offices of cultural institutions or external agencies operating in Afghanistan. The communist government, followed by the Soviet occupation, led to the closure of many offices. Even the United Nations offices had left Kabul by 1991, relocating to Peshawar and Islamabad, along with cultural institutions. UNESCO was also inactive during this period, with its activities becoming more apparent in the media around 2002.

Around the time when the museum was looted, the Special Representative of the UN Secretary-General visited Kabul in November 1994. Following this, a series of activities commenced, emphasizing the need for institutions to pay attention to the museum's situation. Certain embassies, particularly those with longstanding cultural ties to Afghanistan, began to play a role. Notably, the French embassy, with cultural connections dating back to 1923 and an excavation agreement giving them rights for 30 years. Italy, due to the heritage of the ancient Roman Empire and their

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<sup>9</sup> At that time, I engaged in self-employment to support my family, specifically selling potatoes and onions in the vegetable market.

<sup>10</sup> Indeed, this impactful sentence is brief yet meaningful. I heard this news on BBC Radio, and the broadcast date was the evening of May 12, 1993.

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archaeological work in Ghazni, and the Greek embassy in Islamabad, recognizing the lasting influence of Alexander the Great.

These embassies initiated a series of activities, spurred by the visit of Benon Sevan, the Special Representative of the UN Secretary-General. Sorry, he was not Benon Sevan, I forgot his name. During their visit to Kabul, where they met with politicians at the Foreign Ministry, Najibullah Popal accompanied them to the museum. Witnessing the museum's burnt and dire condition, this phase marked the beginning of something significant. The Greek Special Representative pledged urgent funding, and with the collaboration of Nancy Hatch Dupree, an external foundation named SPACH was established. In subsequent discussions, I will delve into more details, exploring the impacts and roles of SPACH, the actions taken, and how the groundwork was laid for museum staff to reconnect with their institution and obtain permission to resume their responsibilities.

**ESFANDIARI:** Thank you, sir. I appreciate it. If you have anything else on this topic, please go ahead; otherwise, we will explore the rest in the next session.

**MASOUDI:** Thanks. It just came to my mind that Mr. Sotirios Mousouris, Special Representative of the UN Secretary-General, came to Kabul on November 29, 1994. I mentioned it wrong twice; I said Benon Sevan. It's not Benon Sevan; it's Mr. Sotirios Mousouris. His arrival was indeed a positive step in drawing the authorities' attention to the museum, to some extent initiating activities to prevent further destruction. This was a gateway that opened, thanks to Mr. Sotirios Mousouris. The role of Nancy Hatch Dupree is undoubtedly valuable in supporting museum staff for subsequent plans undertaken in this difficult situation and finding ways out of it. They reinforced and strengthened our viewpoints, which we will discuss further.

**ESFANDIARI:** Wonderful. Thank you, sir. Have a nice time.

**MASOUDI:** Stay well, and thank you too.

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