Oral History Interview

with

Omara Khan Masoudi

recorded at the National Museum of Asian Art

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by Azizullah Esfandiari

Interviewer

ESFANDIARI: Thank you, sir, for your time. Welcome to the fourteenth session. In our previous discussions, we talked about the reconstruction and rehabilitation of the museum, as well as the recovery and preservation of artifacts at the National Museum of Afghanistan. In this session, if you agree, let's talk about a slightly different topic: the exhibitions at the National Museum of Afghanistan. These exhibitions may have taken place inside or outside the country. Could you please start by discussing the exhibitions held within Afghanistan?

MASOUDI: Thank you. That's a very good question. As you know, after the reconstruction of the National Museum building in 2004, the museum's administration shifted its focus toward exhibitions of museum artifacts. We can divide this into two main parts. First, there are the exhibitions held within the National Museum itself, or internal exhibitions, which I'll address first. The first exhibition after the museum's reconstruction was the Nuristan artifacts exhibition. At that time, the museum didn't have display cabinets or showcases, so the emphasis was on displaying large artifacts from Nuristan, most of which were wooden. These artifacts highlighted the unique and distinct wood-carving art of the Nuristani people.

Some of the most notable pieces included a figure of a horse rider, representing one of the Nuristani ancestors, and several wooden statues of religious significance from the period before the Nuristanis accepted Islam during the reign of Amir Abdur Rahman Khan (who ruled from 1880 to 1901). Also on display were multiple wooden column bases, doors, bows and arrows, weapons such as guns, carbines, and swords, as well as musical instruments and jewelry from both the Nuristani people and other Afghan ethnic groups, including traditional clothing. These artifacts were exhibited in a large hall known as the Ethnography Hall. This exhibition marked the reopening of the museum to both domestic and foreign visitors in September 2004, following several years of closure.

In addition to the ethnographic artifacts in the Nuristan Hall, several large items were also displayed in the lower corridor of the museum. These included a black marble stone pot from Kandahar, dating from the Buddhist and Islamic periods; a statue of Kanishka the Great; a Kushan prince; a Bodhisattva statue from Tepe Maranjan; the Surkh Kotal inscription; the Rabatak inscription; Kufic geometric patterns; and a plastered mosque from Lashkari Bazar, along with various ethnographic artifacts.

Following the ethnography exhibition in the lower corridor of the museum, the administration presented a photography exhibition of the covered bazaar of Tashqurghan, or Khulm, in four of the museum's exhibition halls, accompanied by several related items. As you may know, the covered bazaar of Tashqurghan, built during the reign of Ahmad Shah Durrani (who ruled from 1747 to 1772), was one of the major trade markets connecting Central Asia and South Asia, as well as bridging the Eastern and Western worlds. It was also a significant part of the historic Silk Road. The bazaar remained active until 1979 when it was completely destroyed during the wars between the Mujahideen and Soviet forces. While some parts of its citadel still remain, it used to house many caravanserais. This photography exhibition was very popular among museum visitors.

Following the photography exhibition of the Tashqurghan covered bazaar, the National Museum also held a photography exhibition featuring the Bactrian Treasure artifacts in collaboration with the French Embassy. It's worth noting that photographs of the Bactrian Treasure artifacts were first exhibited in October 2006 at the Guimet Museum in France. The most stunning photographs, taken by the Guimet Museum and printed in large formats, were brought to Kabul, where we organized an exhibition of these works at the National Museum. Later, the photographs of the Bactrian Treasure were also displayed at the French Embassy in Kabul. Fortunately, these photographs, along with those from the Tashqurghan covered bazaar exhibition, are still available at the National Museum and are occasionally used for temporary exhibitions.

When the display cabinets from Japan and showcases from the Netherlands arrived in Kabul, the National Museum made full use of them. They were employed to showcase artifacts from various periods and archaeological sites across the museum's exhibition rooms, which include ten halls as well as upper and lower corridors. As mentioned earlier regarding the excavations at Mes Aynak in Logar, which began in 2009, the Ministry of Mines and Petroleum signed a contract with a Chinese company, MCC, in 2008 to extract copper from Mes Aynak. While it is the world's second-largest and richest copper mine, it is also a significant archaeological site. Unfortunately, proper consideration should have been given to the excavation and transfer of the archaeological artifacts before signing the contract, which led to some complications.

The Institute of Archaeology, under the Ministry of Information and Culture, commenced excavations with financial support from the World Bank and in coordination with the Ministry of Mines and Petroleum. As the excavations progressed, an increasing number of artifacts and archaeological sites were uncovered. Although the site had previously been surveyed in collaboration with DAFA and the Institute of Archaeology, new challenges emerged as the work

continued. Most of the artifacts discovered at Mes Aynak were made of raw clay, although several schist stone artifacts from temples and stupas were also found. Movable artifacts were transferred to the National Museum, while many immovable artifacts remain at the site, where their preservation is threatened by climate conditions.

For the first time in Afghanistan, wooden artifacts, including a Buddha statue, were discovered at Mes Aynak. Such wooden artifacts have not been found at other sites in the country, making the Mes Aynak site culturally invaluable. However, the preservation and transfer of these artifacts pose significant challenges due to limited technical, financial, and professional resources. On-site preservation requires careful academic studies in collaboration with the Ministry of Mines and Petroleum, and serious attention must be given to maintaining the site's cultural integrity. Economically, Mes Aynak is also important, as mining it could significantly impact national economic growth and improve Afghanistan's financial situation.

In 2011, the National Museum organized an impressive exhibition of artifacts discovered at Mes Aynak. The display included various objects such as ceramic and clay pieces, schist stone artifacts, coins, stamped ceramics, and notably, the wooden Dipankara Jataka statue, which features beautifully painted designs on its back, although some have partially faded. Two exhibition rooms at the museum were specially designed for this display, featuring newly constructed metal cabinets and carefully coordinated colors. The lighting system was also well planned. To accompany the Mes Aynak exhibition, we produced a beautifully designed and bound book in both English and Dari, providing a detailed background on the site. This book, printed in Germany, became the first research monograph related to the exhibition.

At every event held at the National Museum, the Mes Aynak book was distributed free of charge to all invitees, alongside other publications. It's worth mentioning that the U.S. Embassy generously provided financial support for this exhibition. I would like to express my gratitude to Dr. Laura Tedesco, the Cultural Attaché [Cultural Heritage Program Manager] of the U.S. Embassy at the time. Additionally, Suzanne Anan assisted the National Museum in designing the exhibition. I am pleased that, through the efforts of my colleagues, the National Museum was able to overcome various challenges and enhance the protection and presentation of its artifacts, both nationally and internationally. It was decided that after the Mes Aynak exhibition, a separate, standardized exhibition would be held annually.

In 2012, a beautiful exhibition was organized in the former Bagram exhibition room, also known as the oval room on the second floor. The National Museum curators, along with the Museology Department, played a key role in its success. The exhibition featured Buddhist-era artifacts from various archaeological sites, carefully arranged in chronological order. The arrangement and lighting were particularly praiseworthy. Artifacts displayed in the exhibition came from sites such as Shotorak, Paitawa, Hadda, Fondukistan, Bamyan, Mes Aynak, and others.

I would like to express my gratitude for the financial support from the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs, as well as the assistance of Mr. Robert Parthesius and Anne Feenstra, Dutch engineers, along with their Afghan team. They contributed to the lighting, design modifications, printing of posters, and preparation of display cabinets. Their hard work, in collaboration with the Museology Department and the young curators of the National Museum, resulted in a truly beautiful exhibition. It was inaugurated with a ribbon-cutting ceremony by the Minister of Information and Culture and attended by many domestic and foreign guests, including cultural elites. The exhibition was a valuable addition for visitors to the National Museum. I'm pleased that each year brought a new exhibition to the museum.

I also appreciate the cooperation of the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs in the restoration and reconstruction of the Jahannuma Palace in Khulm, the renovation of an old city bathhouse, and the work done on the covered bazaar in Tashqurghan. I'd like to acknowledge the efforts of Engineer Anne Feenstra and their team in the Khulm district of Balkh province, who played a key role in the plans to establish an ethnographic museum in the Jahannuma Palace.

The Jahannuma Palace was partially restored, and at the time, the museum's policy was to use the palace as an ethnographic museum representing all the northern provinces. Administrative procedures were completed, and some artifacts were collected. Unfortunately, due to certain obstacles, the building's reconstruction was never finished, and the project remains incomplete. In that regard, we weren't successful. The restoration of the Jahannuma Garden was assigned to the Directorate of Preservation and Restoration of Historical Monuments. Had the palace been completed, we would have been prepared to establish the Northern Ethnographic Museum there. Discussions were held with Balkh provincial authorities, cultural elites, and local residents, all of whom expressed great interest. I personally attended one of the meetings and asked locals to contribute ethnographic artifacts they owned to the museum, and they were eager to participate. I assured them that once the palace was completed and the museum became operational, we would visit their homes, systematically register the artifacts under their names, and transfer them to the museum for display. Unfortunately, we couldn't fulfill this aspiration. Anyway.

In 2013, we began planning another exhibition, this time focused on showcasing Islamic-era art, including artifacts from the Ghaznavid, Ghurid, and Timurid periods. The exhibition was held in one of the large halls on the second floor, in the eastern wing of the National Museum. The finest artifacts from various Islamic periods, including those that survived the war, as well as Islamic-era pieces returned from abroad, were carefully selected and displayed in individual showcases with accompanying historical context. A special decorative feature, the Bost Arch, representing the Ghazni period, was constructed from wood with a unique design and placed near the exhibition entrance. This Bost Arch, a collaboration between Alessandro Califano, Ajmal Yar (Director of the Museology Department), and the curator, still stands today. This exhibition was, and continues to be, a highlight.

It's worth noting that during the preparation of the aforementioned exhibition, Mr. Wahid Khalili, the head of Turquoise Mountain, requested that the museum administration allow products and creations from the masters and students of the Turquoise Mountain Institute to be included. These works featured calligraphy, miniature painting, traditional goldsmithing techniques, fine arts, wood carving from Nuristan and Kabul, traditional tile-making, engraving, and more. We accepted their request, and the National Museum agreed to display the finest works from the institute in a dedicated section of the exhibition. This greatly enriched the display, introduced these products to a wider audience, and effectively encouraged young people to engage with the fine arts.

In Islamic societies, several types of calligraphy scripts, such as Nasta'liq, Shekasta, Thuluth, Naskh, and Kufic, are widely used. After selecting the finest works from the Turquoise Mountain Institute, these were displayed alongside the historical artifacts of the National Museum in this exhibition. It was decided that whenever the exhibition's artifacts were removed or changed, the works from the Turquoise Mountain Institute would also become part of the National Museum's collection. Without a doubt, each new exhibition at the National Museum attracted significant public interest. The opening of this Islamic-era artifact exhibition was particularly effective in showcasing the cultural and artistic achievements of various Islamic periods, leaving a meaningful impact.

In 2014, the National Museum hosted an exhibition titled 'A Thousand Cities.' This exhibition showcased artifacts from various periods, including the Paleolithic, Mesolithic, Neolithic (Stone Polishing), Bronze Age, Greco-Bactrian, Kushan, and Islamic eras. It highlighted the civilization of Balkh and other northern provinces of Afghanistan and was one of the museum's more significant displays. Organized in two exhibition halls on the second floor of the National Museum, it was made possible through the efforts of curators, particularly Chief Curator Mr. Mohammad Fahim Rahimi, Director of Museology Ajmal Yar, and others, with valuable guidance from Suzanne Anan, Cultural Advisor to the Ministry of Information and Culture.

The exhibition featured a diverse range of artifacts, including stone relics, silver pieces from Tepe Fullol, objects from Ai Khanum, discoveries from Kunduz province, as well as frescoes and wall paintings from Dilbergin Tepe and other sites.

In the 'A Thousand Cities' exhibition hall, a flat-screen TV was mounted on the wall, displaying a half-hour film about the Bactrian Treasure, produced to a high standard by National Geographic. The film, dubbed into Dari in collaboration with Tolo TV, was shown to visitors, particularly school and university students. The goal of this initiative was to provide young people with greater knowledge of the artistic and historical significance of the Bactrian Treasure, which was discovered on a small hill five kilometers northwest of Sheberghan. The exhibition was made possible with financial support from the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Mr. Robert Parthesius, and the efforts of the National Museum staff.

If I may add another point: In 1981, a large number of Bactrian Treasure artifacts were displayed for forty days in the Bactrian Hall, now known as the Ethnography Hall. For security

reasons, the artifacts were subsequently removed and placed in storage, demonstrating the museum's activities during difficult times. Notably, before the Bactrian Treasure was sent abroad, we held three separate exhibitions for it inside Afghanistan, which I will detail, including their respective years.

A limited number of Tillya Tepe artifacts were displayed for the second time in 1991 at the Koti Baghcha Palace in the Arg (Presidential Palace) during a one-day temporary exhibition. In 2006, before sending the Bactrian Treasure artifacts abroad, we organized a third exhibition. Prominent pieces from both the Bactrian Treasure and Begram were showcased at the Salam Khana Building of the Presidential Palace in Kabul, ahead of their departure for an international exhibition in France. This third exhibition was intended to present the artifacts to government officials and cultural elites, though it, too, was temporary. Afterward, these and other artifacts were transferred to several renowned museums as part of an international tour, in accordance with separate programs.

The National Museum also organized temporary exhibitions on special occasions, such as International Museum Day, Afghanistan's Independence Day, and the return of artifacts from abroad and within the country. At times, we would replace artifacts in the exhibition, considering their artistic and historical value.

Brief information about each artifact was provided in three languages—Dari, Pashto, and English—inside the display cases. The use of technology, printed color posters, and the provision of background information enhanced the exhibits and attracted attention, especially from students. Most students took notes of this information. School students, university students, and official guests were usually guided through the museum in all three languages by the museum's guide.

One new initiative was the placement of two fifty two-inch television screens, donated by Tolo TV, in a specific location on the first-floor corridor. These TVs regularly displayed documentaries and images showing various periods of the National Museum's history, particularly images from the civil wars and the looting of the museum. These presentations were of special interest to visitors, especially younger generations. This initiative, titled Pictures Speak, allowed them to see and understand the museum's destruction, looting, and the fire through images. The aim was to inspire the youth to protect the country's historical and cultural heritage and to prevent future damage.

These activities have a positive impact on people's minds. On one hand, they showcase the museum's resilience during difficult times, and on the other, they convey the message that these cultural heritages belong to the people. People should not think that artifacts could be at risk of damage no matter where they are; they should see themselves as the owners and protectors of this heritage. Although the museum has been rebuilt and the past might be forgotten, broadcasting these images ensures that the memory of the past lives on, especially for the younger generation, who must understand its importance.

Most of the museum's visitors were young people—school and university students from the capital and provinces. It is essential to explain the significance of the museum's collections to them,

providing them with documents and evidence so that they become guardians of this cultural heritage. It's not the sole responsibility of the police to protect them. If this educational process continues, and we assume we have ten million young students, within two or three generations, every young person will, in essence, become a guardian of their own historical heritage. If we don't take this approach, we'll continue facing the same problems. We have already lost opportunities and witnessed major destruction. The smuggling and looting of antiquities should not be repeated. The ultimate goal of these activities is to raise public awareness and ensure that people focus on protecting cultural heritage.

ESFANDIARI: Great. These are very important and informative details. You already talked about the exhibition of the Bactrian Treasure within Afghanistan. A major achievement that attracted the attention of international media, institutions, and cultural figures both inside and outside Afghanistan, was the exhibition of the Bactrian Treasure abroad. Could you please talk about how this was organized, the stages involved, and other details of this significant event for the National Museum of Afghanistan?

MASOUDI: Thank you. That's a good question. As I mentioned earlier, in 1984, the golden artifacts of the Bactrian Treasure were transferred to the Central Bank in the Presidential Palace for security reasons. Later, in 1989, several other valuable artifacts from various archaeological sites were also moved to the Central Bank for the same purpose. During the civil wars, the museum was looted, its building was set on fire, and many of its artifacts ended up in the hands of both domestic and international smugglers. These artifacts found their way to various parts of the world. Smugglers tried to locate the Bactrian Treasure and other precious items from sites like Begram, Hadda, Fullol, and Fondukistan to exploit it for profit. Fortunately, the staff of the National Museum never revealed the locations of these items.

Now, regarding your question about exhibiting the Bactrian Treasure abroad: On May 2, 2003, His Excellency President Hamid Karzai, along with Dr. Mohammad Ashraf Ghani, then Minister of Finance, visited the Central Bank's treasury at the Palace. Their purpose may have been to inspect the bank's gold reserves or the backing of the Afghan currency. During this visit, the bank's executive board informed the President about the presence of the Bactrian Treasure or Tillya Tepe artifacts. The President, pleased with this discovery, shared the news with the press. Once the news spread, cultural institutions and prominent museums expressed interest in displaying these preserved artifacts from the National Museum, which had survived under very difficult conditions.

One person who paid particular attention was Fredrik Hiebert, an archaeologist and prehistory specialist. He had previously worked with Dr. Sarianidi, a Russian archaeologist, on excavations in Central Asia, so he was well-versed in the history, art, and culture of the region. Representing the National Geographic Society, he traveled to Kabul and expressed his desire to organize an exhibition of the Bactrian Treasure. He discussed the proposal with the Minister of Information and Culture, the Minister of Finance, Mohammad Zahir Shah (the Father of the Nation),

and President Hamid Karzai. He secured their verbal approval to introduce Afghanistan's ancient history, art, and culture through an international exhibition.

In a subsequent meeting with me at the National Museum, Hiebert requested to borrow these artifacts from the museum's collection. However, the National Museum, adhering to the explicit provisions of Afghanistan's Law on the Preservation of Historical and Cultural Artifacts, agreed to organize both national and international exhibitions under one condition: before any exhibition, the artifacts that had been transferred to the Central Bank, as well as those kept on the fourth floor of the Ministry of Information and Culture, needed to be properly re-registered and inventoried.

At that point, I explained that we could not agree immediately to the exhibition because we first had to document and inventory the artifacts. This was particularly important because all the museum's records had been destroyed in the fire. Therefore, before selecting items for exhibition, we needed to thoroughly document and re-inventory all the artifacts that had been transferred to the Palace and those stored on the fourth floor of the Ministry. Only then could we move forward with selecting the best pieces for display.

The National Geographic Society of America accepted my proposal and promptly signed an agreement with the Ministry of Information and Culture to inventory the artifacts. They covered all the costs of this process, including the expenses for inventorying, registering the artifacts, and inviting specialists. I also proposed that, while inventorying these artifacts, we should invite the archaeologists or specialists who had originally discovered them. They shall assist with the inventory and their expenses would be covered by National Geographic. This suggestion was approved, and it was decided that the inventory would be conducted in two languages, English and Dari, following international standards. Dr. Sarianidi was invited to Kabul for the inventory process. Since these artifacts had been excavated under his leadership by a joint Afghan-Soviet team, his presence was crucial to verify the authenticity of the Tillya Tepe gold artifacts. At the time, there were still concerns about their existence.

Why was Sarianidi's presence important? First, because he was the discoverer of these artifacts. Second, there had been propaganda earlier suggesting that the artifacts had been melted down and smuggled. His confirmation was essential to dispel these rumors and assure everyone of the authenticity of the items. Having Sarianidi's approval would provide a positive and reassuring answer to the world and the Afghan people. Sarianidi himself was worried, as these artifacts hadn't appeared on the black market and their fate was unknown. Therefore, I arranged his participation with the support of National Geographic.

When we opened the first safe containing the Tillya Tepe gold artifacts for inventory, the first item taken out was a gold earring. Dr. Raheen, the Minister of Information and Culture, handed this artifact to Sarianidi. When Sarianidi held it, the joy on his face was extraordinary. After so many years, the Bactrian Treasure had been located, and we were seeing the original Tillya Tepe gold

artifacts. Sarianidi's happiness at that moment was unforgettable. Although we were all happy, the joy on Sarianidi's face was especially striking.

Before Sarianidi arrived to begin the inventory, he had shared all his research information with Dr. Fred, as they were already acquainted. During the inventory, Mr. Hiebert used this data on his computer to describe each artifact, while Carla Grissmann handwrote the information on individual cards or data sheets. At the same time, Zia Afshar, who was working at the SPACH Association at that time, translated the English cards into Dari, and the cards were then processed by a special committee. All subsequent details and actions were recorded by us on the data sheet, translating from the English cards into Dari.

For the scientific description of artifacts from Ai Khanum and ancient Begram, which had been excavated by French archaeologists, DAFA archaeologists were invited to Kabul to assist with the process. The inventory took about forty days. Once the inventory of the Palace artifacts was completed, we began work on the artifacts stored on the fourth floor of the Ministry of Information and Culture.

In 2005, with the support of National Geographic, we began inventorying the artifacts on the fourth floor. Professor Deborah Klimburg-Salter and her colleague Suzy joined the National Museum's committees to assist with this effort. The inventory included artifacts from ancient sites such as Mundigak, Deh Morasi Ghundi, Fondukistan, Bamyan, and Nuristan, as well as old rifles, Islamic-era artifacts, and items from the Buddhist period stored on the fourth floor of the Ministry. The inventory process was completed with Professor Klimburg-Salter's help. For each artifact, a data sheet was prepared in both English and Dari. In total, about eight thousand artifacts were inventoried.

Thus, over thirty thousand artifacts from the National Museum were preserved under difficult conditions. Had these artifacts not been transferred to the two mentioned locations in the 1980s, they would have been looted from the museum building, as many other artifacts were. I can say that the decision to move these items during the 1980s was timely and crucial, as it ensured their safety during the civil wars.

The inventory process was conducted by assigned committees, which included not only museum staff but also members of the Archaeology Institute and relevant organizations. The inventory process began in April 2004 at the Central Bank in the Presidential Palace, after receiving approval from the competent authorities, including the Office of the President.

During this process, about 22,607 artifacts were registered. Among them, 20,587 artifacts were from Tillya Tepe, while the remaining 2,020 items were from various collections, including those from Begram, Hadda, Fondukistan, Fullol, Ai Khanum, Tappeh Khazana, Kamadaka, Kuhna Mosque, Aq Kupruk, Surkh Kotal, as well as 1,028 gold coins and some silver coins. Out of the 21,618 artifacts recovered from Tillya Tepe, 20,587 of them were gold and remained preserved. Unfortunately, a large number of non-gold items were looted from the National Museum.

In 2005, Zalmai Haqani, Afghanistan's ambassador to Paris, announced that President Hamid Karzai had agreed with French President Jacques Chirac to exhibit the Bactrian Treasure at the Guimet Museum in Paris. President Karzai was on an official visit when Chirac requested that the Bactrian Treasure be displayed in France's National Museum. Following this verbal agreement, a delegation from the Guimet Museum arrived in Kabul. In coordination with the museum staff and administration, 231 items were selected from four archaeological sites to highlight Afghanistan's role as a crossroads of different cultures and civilizations.

The selected items included treasures from Fullol (Bronze Age), artifacts from Ai Khanum (Hellenistic period, after Alexander's conquests in the 4th century BC), the Bactrian Treasure (dating from the 1st century BC to the 1st century AD), and items from Begram (dating from the 1st to 3rd centuries AD). The artifacts spanned from the Bronze Age to the 3rd century AD, and after their selection, separate agreements were made regarding their insurance and transport. Notably, the French delegation took responsibility for packing the artifacts, bringing all necessary materials with them, as those available in Kabul did not meet international standards. In the presence of the bilateral delegation, the selected items from the Presidential Palace were placed in separate shipments. Similarly, the museum's artifacts from the Darulaman building were packed into separate shipments, clearly labeled with their location and corresponding depot, using a highly effective packing method.

The artifacts from both the National Museum and the Central Bank were transported under special conditions using the secure vehicles of Da Afghanistan Bank to Kabul International Airport, where they were officially handed over to the French delegation. The items were transported on a military flight from Kabul to Tajikistan, and from there to France. Notably, the artifacts were accompanied by curators from the National Museum. According to the agreement, the items would undergo cleaning, preservation, and restoration before being displayed. This process took three months at the Guimet Museum in France, under the supervision of skilled specialists. All the artifacts, except for the gold ones, were cleaned to the highest standards, as Afghanistan did not have the capacity to carry out such preservation work at that level. One of the main benefits of the exhibition was the exceptional cleaning and preservation of the artifacts.

The exhibition opened in October 2006 and ran for four months. French archaeologists and researchers, based on extensive research, published a very high-quality catalog of the exhibited items in French, making it accessible to visitors. Additionally, they released beautifully designed brochures, interesting postcards, and other publications to introduce the culture and art of Afghanistan to an international audience.

The organization of this exhibition not only showcased Afghanistan's ancient and rich art and culture globally but also contributed to changing viewers' perceptions and attitudes toward Afghanistan. The four decades of prolonged conflict had led to the destruction of infrastructure, the migration of millions of Afghans to neighboring and other countries, and the loss and disability of hundreds of thousands of people from this land. Most of the world viewed Afghanistan as a land of

terror, violence, and extremism. The Bactrian Treasure exhibition had over four million direct visitors and tens of millions of indirect viewers through print and broadcast media. This exhibition truly changed people's awareness and mindset about Afghanistan's rich history and artistic values, allowing them to appreciate the high culture, historical past, and artistic finesse of this land in earlier periods. The exhibition played an extraordinary role in transforming public perceptions.

After France, the artifacts were transferred to the city of Turin in Italy, based on a separate agreement, where they received a warm welcome from Italian visitors. It is worth noting that during that time, many European museums were eager to host the exhibition. The museum administration and the Ministry of Information and Culture responded positively to as many requests as possible; however, due to time constraints, they were unable to accommodate some museums.

Following Italy, the artifacts were moved to Amsterdam, Netherlands, where they were also exhibited. The Netherlands was the country that printed the first catalog of the Bactrian Treasure in English and translated it into Pashto and Dari, providing approximately one thousand copies free of charge to the National Museum.

The agreements made by the Ministry of Information and Culture with various museums were all quite similar, with the host country making a $250,000 advance payment to Afghanistan for the exhibition.

Another benefit of this exhibition was that in each host museum, two employees from the National Museum—one curator and one staff member from the restoration department—remained with the exhibition. These two individuals were taught English language and restoration work. This arrangement was inherently very beneficial and valuable, as it added to their professional experience. If any exhibited item from the Bactrian Treasure required conservation and cleaning, it would be transferred to the relevant museum's conservation laboratory in the presence of representatives from both sides. After the cleaning and conservation process was completed, the item would be returned to its exhibition location. This was essentially a thorough and ongoing assessment.

After the Netherlands, these artifacts were exhibited in the United States across four states and in four of its museums. Subsequently, they were displayed in Canada, the United Kingdom, Sweden, Norway, four states in Australia (in four museums), two museums in Japan, two museums in South Korea, and in seven museums in the Republic of China. Due to the outbreak of COVID-19, this long tour of the Bactrian Treasure came to an end. These exhibitions took place in thirteen countries and twenty nine museums. The Bactrian Treasure played an important and valuable role as a cultural ambassador for Afghanistan in strengthening cultural relations during this long tour across four continents: Europe, America, Australia, and Asia.

After returning to Afghanistan, some of these artifacts were exhibited at the Arg (Presidential Palace) in the Char Chinar Palace on February 10, 2021. The exhibition was attended by cabinet members, parliamentarians, the press, cultural elites, and several foreign guests. Following the

exhibition, the artifacts were returned to their previous storage locations. This exhibition generated over 350 million Afghanis in revenue, which was handed over to the state treasury. These exhibitions held both spiritual and material value. This concludes my overview of the Bactrian Treasure exhibition abroad, and I hope you found it interesting.

ESFANDIARI: Thank you very much, sir. That was very informative, and the details were incredibly valuable and useful. I understand you are tired; starting the next topic could make this session quite lengthy. If you agree, let's conclude the fourteenth session here. God willing, we can follow up on the next topics in the fifteenth session.

MASOUDI: I am at your service, however you prefer. Thank you, Aziz Jan.

ESFANDIARI: Thank you. I wish you a good time. Thank you for the opportunity you provided.

MASOUDI: Stay well.

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