

Cultural Massacre in Afghanistan

Heritage Plunder and Its Preservation

Afghanistan is a landlocked, multi-ethnic nation in south-central Asia. Afghanistan has long been a prize yearned for by empire builders as it lies along vital trade routes connecting southern and eastern Asia to Europe and the Middle East.¹ Afghanistan has an uncharacteristically rich past. While Zoroastrianism, Christianity, Judaism, and Hinduism flourished both before and after the arrival of Islam in the seventh century A.D., Buddhism extended to China.² Afghanistan is dotted with the remains of old cities, monasteries, and caravanserais that once housed visitors, including Marco Polo on his journey to the opulent court of Kublai Khan, and served as a key route on the Silk Road connecting India with Iran and China.³ For millennia great armies have attempted to conquer it, leaving records of their efforts in huge monuments now in ruins. The late 19th century saw the creation of the contemporary borders of Afghanistan because of the "Great Game" conflict between imperial Britain and Tsarist Russia.⁴ Afghanistan in modern times became a pawn in conflicts over political ideologies and commercial hegemony. The Mughals, Timurids, Turk Shahis, and many other ascendant nomadic kingdoms and dynasties in Afghanistan had a significant influence on the development of Afghan art as well as its preservation and destruction.⁵ Afghanistan has consistently been embroiled in war, insurrection, and invasion. This violent armed conflict is causing the nation to lose its sense of cultural identity.

In 1996, the Taliban overthrew the *mujahideen* government in Afghanistan and replaced it with a hard-line Islamic theocracy. They commanded the destruction of historic statues, including the biggest standing Buddhas in the world, in an effort to eradicate all reminders of rich pre-Islamic history.⁶ Following the above ideology of eradicating such rich cultural

¹ 'Afghanistan | History, Map, Flag, Capital, Population, & Languages' (*Encyclopedia Britannica*, 2022) <https://www.britannica.com/place/Afghanistan> accessed 8 September 2022

² Lawler A, 'The Taliban Destroyed Afghanistan's Ancient Treasures. Will History Repeat Itself?' (*History*, 2021) <https://www.nationalgeographic.com/history/article/taliban-destroyed-afghanistan-ancient-treasures-will-history-repeat-itself> accessed 8 September 2022

³ Ibid

⁴ (n. 1)

⁵ 'A Brief History Of Afghanistan' (*New Internationalist*, 2008) <https://newint.org/features/2008/11/01/afghanistan-history> accessed 8 September 2022

⁶ Centlivres P, 'The Death Of The Buddhas Of Bamiyan' (*Middle East Institute*, 2012) <https://www.mei.edu/publications/death-buddhas-bamiyan> accessed 8 September 2022

history, Mullah Muhammad Omar, the Taliban commander, issued a proclamation in 2001 demanding the destruction of all non-Islamic statues and shrines in Afghanistan after consulting a college of “*ulama*”.⁷ The Taliban argued by saying, “*Since, there is not a single Buddhist in Afghanistan, then what is the point of saving false Idols.*”⁸ The Buddha statues were viewed as a threat to Islam by the Taliban. But these Buddha statues were critical elements of cultural heritage that were now victims of the Taliban’s myopic worldview. At the heart of this widespread, protest was the need to respect religious tolerance and protect cultural heritage. Since the destruction of the Buddhas of Bamiyan, the Afghan government and the international community, including UNESCO, have worked relentlessly to preserve Afghanistan's rich cultural and ecological legacy, which attests to centuries of interactions between various cultures and peoples. Due to the extraordinary fragility of the niches, the lack of a management plan, and worries about safety and security, the Cultural Landscape and Archaeological Remains of the Bamiyan Valley were concurrently added to the World Heritage List and the List of World Heritage in Danger in 2003.⁹

In many areas of Afghanistan, art has been destroyed through the destruction of monuments, looting, the sale of items on the black market, and other means. The Taliban support a radical interpretation of Islam that disapproves of all depictions of people and animals and has disdain for pre-Islamic culture. After the demolition of the Buddha statues, conflict, religious and political turmoil, and sudden changes in government have compelled the artistic and intellectual class throughout history to keep cultural creations hidden as a means of survival and to safeguard the heritage itself. The Afghan National Archives' administrative building was robbed in 2021, and the statue honouring an ethnic minority leader was demolished the same night the city was taken over by Taliban forces in certain places by members of the Islamic Extremist Militant group.¹⁰ Furthermore, during the Taliban’s first period of rule from 1996 to 2001, before the US invasion, the Taliban soldiers murdered poets, musicians, and artists; destroyed artifacts, musical instruments, and audio cassettes; outlawed singing; burned down libraries; and allowed museums to collapse under the weight

⁷ Ibid

⁸ Ibid

⁹ Centre U, 'Commemorating 20 Years Since The Destruction Of Two Buddhas Of Bamiyan, Afghanistan' (*Whc.unesco.org*, 2021) <https://whc.unesco.org/en/news/2253> accessed 8 September 2022

¹⁰ Finnegan C, 'Taliban Pose Threat To Afghan Cultural Heritage As They Sweep Back Into Power' (*ABC News*, 2021) <https://abcnews.go.com/Politics/taliban-pose-threat-afghan-cultural-heritage-sweep-back/story?id=79508223> accessed 8 September 2022

of neglect, looting, and destruction.¹¹ The National Museum of Afghanistan has been repeatedly targeted and further was caught in the crossfire as several *mujahideen* guerrilla groups fought for control of Kabul in the early 1990s, following the collapse of the Soviet-backed government in April 1992.¹² A rocket that struck the museum's ceiling in 1993 buried a large portion of the collection's ancient pottery and bronzes and destroyed a painting from the fourth century AD, a second missile struck the structure in 1997.¹³ About 70% of the museum's remaining artifacts had also either been destroyed or robbed by the late 1990s.¹⁴

As a source of history and identity for future generations as well as a foundation for a culture of peace and sustainable development, UNESCO's mandate for the Afghan cultural sector is to support and encourage the Afghan people and authorities to preserve all facets of this rich culture.¹⁵ Although the current security situation makes it difficult to visit many significant archaeological sites in Afghanistan, it is also abundantly obvious from even a cursory examination of the bazaar that sites are still vulnerable to looting and the illegal trafficking of cultural goods. Furthermore, it is imperative to enforce the requirements of the 1970 *UNESCO Convention on the Means of Prohibiting and Preventing the Illicit Import, Export, and Transfer of Ownership of Cultural Property*, to which Afghanistan became a State Party in 2005, addressing export and import.¹⁶

The grave challenges faced during the preservation of the heritage and the culture are financial aid and international support. However, several steps have been taken by the Afghan government towards reviving the heritage through *Conventions Preventing Illicit Trafficking* (UNESCO 1970, and 1995 UNIDROIT) and *Conventions to Protect Intangible Heritage and Cultural Diversity* (UNESCO 2003 and 2005).¹⁷ Restoring these concrete and intangible cultural landmarks would contribute to the development of Afghanistan's national

¹¹ Ibid

¹² Kumar R, 'The Afghan Artefacts That Survived Taliban Destruction' (*Bbc.com*, 2020) <https://www.bbc.com/travel/article/20200203-the-afghan-artefacts-that-survived-taliban-destruction> accessed 8 September 2022

¹³ Ibid

¹⁴ Ibid

¹⁵ 'The Challenges Ahead For Afghanistan's Cultural Heritage' (*UNITED NATIONS ASSISTANCE MISSION IN AFGHANISTAN*, 2010) <https://unama.unmissions.org/challenges-ahead-afghanistan%E2%80%99s-cultural-heritage-0> accessed 8 September 2022

¹⁶ Ibid

¹⁷ Ibid

identity and a sense of social cohesion. The Citizens of Afghanistan will feel safer in a country that respects their ethnicity, religious beliefs, and personal identity which is shaped by folklore and traditions. There is an imminent need to conserve the sites, artifacts, and monuments in Afghanistan and further, UNESCO is closely monitoring the situation on the ground as events are swiftly developing and are committed to making every effort to protect the community's priceless culture. These simple pleasures of life might give them hope to save their motherland and provide peace and harmony in conditions and situations produced by armed conflicts and regimes.