

THE ORIENTAL INSTITUTE-NATIONAL MUSEUM OF AFGHANISTAN PARTNERSHIP

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For more than half a century, the protection of cultural heritage has been a central part of the Oriental Institute's mission, starting in the early 1960s with the Nubian salvage project, continuing with the restoration work of Chicago House at Luxor, the training of Iraqi and Afghan archaeological conservators at the Oriental Institute in 2007, and numerous other projects up to the present. In May 2012, the Oriental Institute embarked on an important new project of cultural heritage protection — the Oriental Institute's partnership with the

National Museum of Afghanistan (NMA) in Kabul.

The OI-NMA partnership is a three-year project funded by the U.S. Department of State as part of its continuing efforts to protect the incredibly rich and diverse cultural heritage of Afghanistan. The National Museum of Afghanistan — the country's primary repository of archaeological and ethnographic objects — had been devastated by years of civil war followed by Taliban rule. An estimated 70 percent of the museum's objects (approximately 160,000 items!) had been either stolen during the civil war or deliberately smashed by the Taliban. At the same time, an estimated 90 percent of the object records were destroyed or lost as well. Fortunately, some 20,000 of the most important gold and ivory objects had been hidden away and survived this dark period. These treasures are now touring the globe in a series of international special exhibits.

In the first stage of the reconstruction process, the United States, aided by other members



The National Museum of Afghanistan destroyed (above) and rebuilt (below)

of the international community, supported the physical rebuilding and restoration of the National Museum. Thanks to these efforts, this beautiful and important institution is once again open to the public. In the second stage of reconstruction, the U.S. State Department awarded the Oriental Institute the largest single grant we have ever received — 2.8 million dollars to partner with the NMA to accomplish several key goals: (a) develop a database to manage the NMA holdings; (b) conduct a complete inventory of the museum’s estimated 70,000 objects; (c) conduct preliminary conservation assessments of the objects; (d) re-house the objects in acid-free archival containers; and (e) train the staff of the museum in database management and inventory procedures. The work will be carried out by the Oriental Institute’s “Kabul team” consisting of a registrar, a database specialist, a conservator, and a field director living and working in Kabul for the next three years.

This is an enormous challenge, but the Oriental Institute has undertaken it for several reasons. We are committed as an institution to preserve the cultural heritage of ancient Middle Eastern civilizations. Tragedies such as the looting of the Baghdad and Kabul museums are searing reminders of the fragility of this heritage, and of our responsibility to protect it in the places where it is most threatened. Afghanistan has for millennia been the melting pot that linked the Near East — notably the Iranian plateau — with the cultures of Central Asia, the Indian subcontinent, and China. This region has been an integral part of the tapestry of civilizations in the Near East during the Bronze Age, the Persian Empire, the Hellenistic world, the founding of the Silk Route, and the Islamic period. Afghanistan is thus a very good “fit” for us, because the region, along with these periods and cultures, are core research foci for the Oriental Institute.

A group from the Oriental Institute went to Kabul for a two-week trip in late May and early June 2012 to inaugurate the museum partnership. Oriental Institute Director Gil Stein, Executive Director Steve Camp, Chief Curator Jack Green, Head of Conservation Laura D’Alessandro, Head Preparator Erik Lindahl, and Database Specialist/doctoral candidate



National Museum of Afghanistan with the Hindu Kush mountains in the background



Jack Green, Gil Stein, and Mike Fisher at the NMA (left); in the background is Darulaman palace, destroyed during the Afghan civil war in the early 1990s



OI-NMA project group photo, 2012. From left to right: Hakan Togul, Jack Green, Laura D'Alessandro, Robert Knox, Gil Stein, Steve Camp, Mike Fisher, Nicholas Engel, Laura Tedesco, Susanne Annen, Philippe Marquis, Birte Brugmann. Erik Lindahl is not pictured

Mike Fisher represented the Oriental Institute staff. On our arrival, we met with Dr. Birte Brugmann, the field director for the project. Birte holds a PhD in archaeology and has several years' experience in Kabul working on cultural heritage preservation.

We were fortunate to be able to stay in the guest house of DAFA — the French Archaeological Mission in Afghanistan. DAFA Director Philippe Marquis and Assistant Director Nicholas Engel were extremely welcoming, and helped us greatly throughout our visit. Our key partners at the U.S. State Department, Laura Tedesco and Hakan Togul, Cultural Heritage Program Managers at the U.S. Embassy in Kabul, assisted us at every step of the way in establishing our relationship with Mr. Omara Khan Masoudi, the Director of the National Museum of Afghanistan and his staff. We actually knew several of the NMA conservators already, since they had spent six months at the Oriental Institute in 2007 in an intensive training program of archaeological conservation led by Laura D'Alessandro.

Once we had met Mr. Masoudi and the other staff of the National Museum, he allocated office space to our group and we got to work. Mike Fisher began the task of making our prototype database fully bilingual in both Dari (one of Afghanistan's two official languages) and English. The rest of us started to work with the NMA conservation staff and curatorial staff to get their input on how they would like us to customize the database to best serve the needs of the museum. Jack Green ran a workshop to introduce the museum staff to the structure of our database and the ways it will be used in the museum inventory.

The NMA staff had already done a tremendous amount of the foundational work for the database part of the OI-NMA partnership. Over the last five years, the NMA curators had already completed and scanned thousands of paper inventory forms in both Dari and English. In an earlier project with Deborah Klimburg-Salter and Sean McAllister from the University of Vienna, the NMA staff had also begun a pilot museum database; a second small database focused on the numismatic holdings of the museum. This greatly aided our own work, and we started the task of transferring the scanned inventory sheets and the several thousand objects from the Vienna and the numismatic databases into a single integrated data structure to which all of the objects in the museum will be added as we inventory them.



Mike Fisher reviews the NMA database prototype with the Oriental Institute team



NMA Director Mr. Masoudi and a Nuristan sculpture



NMA conservator Abdullah Hakimzadah with Nuristan sculptures



Laura and members of the NMA conservation staff



NMA Chief Curator Fahim Rahimi and Jack Green in the NMA galleries



Jack, Laura, and Fahim discuss a Bactrian inscription at the NMA



Islamic Ghaznavid metalwork at the NMA



Laura with Mes Aynak conservators Mr. Faiz and Mr. Fairazi



Gil stands next to the feet of a large Buddha statue at Mes Aynak



Taking tea at Mes Aynak



Laura and colleagues at the Mes Aynak conservation lab

We examined all the galleries and were able to make an initial assessment of all the museum storage rooms, to give us our first direct view of the number of objects, what sites and periods are represented, what kinds of materials are present, and overall storage conditions as they relate to conservation. It quickly became apparent that the National Museum still has extraordinary collections that span the full chronological range from the Stone Age up through the early twentieth century. The NMA collections showcase the tremendous diversity of cultures, religions, and different groups that have flourished in Afghanistan over the centuries. Some of the most unique collections are the remains of Alexander the Great's easternmost Greek colony at Ai Khanoum, Kushan sculptures that are among the first in the world to depict the Buddha, and the remarkable wooden sculptures of Nuristan, the eastern part of Afghanistan that retained its animist religion and did not embrace Islam until the very end of the nineteenth century. Many of the Kushan and Nuristani pieces had been sledgehammered into bits by the Taliban and were then painstakingly restored by the museum conservators. These committed professionals had to do this work in secret, given the punishment that would have been inflicted on them if they had been caught by the Taliban's Ministry for the Promotion of Virtue and Suppression of Vice.

While in Kabul, we were able to visit Mes Aynak, the only ongoing archaeological excavation in Afghanistan. This enormous 1,000 hectare site was a center of copper mining and smelting in the first millennium AD and boasts a series of Buddhist stupas that have yielded extraordinary wood, terra-cotta, plaster, and stone masterpieces of early Buddhist art. We were delighted to see among the field conservators at Mes Aynak two of the four Afghan conservators whom we had trained four years earlier at the Oriental Institute!

By the time the "Chicago team" departed in early June, we felt we had made good friends at the National Museum and had established the foundations for a real partnership over the coming three years. Our "Kabul team" remained in Afghanistan until the beginning of Ramadan in late August. Over the coming three years, representatives of the Oriental Institute will carry out this inventory with our Afghan partners and will develop the first complete record of the holdings of the National Museum.