

THE ORIENTAL INSTITUTE PARTNERSHIP WITH THE NATIONAL MUSEUM OF AFGHANISTAN 2014–15 REPORT

Gil J. Stein

The Partnership and Its Goals

2014–15 saw the completion of the third full year of the partnership between the Oriental Institute (OI) and the National Museum of Afghanistan (NMA). This project, funded by the US Department of State and the US Embassy in Kabul, has been assisting the Museum by working with its staff to develop a bilingual object management database, conduct a full inventory of the NMA's holdings, do conservation assessments for the objects, rehouse the objects in archival quality containers, and train the NMA staff in artifact curation procedures. We seek to complete the inventory database, stabilize objects, and train the staff of the National Museum to the point where they will be able manage the inventory database independently, while developing a fully functioning National Museum.

The OI component of the partnership consists of the “Chicago team” (Gil Stein, Steve Camp, Jack Green, and Laura D’Alessandro), and the “Kabul team” led by Field Director Michael Fisher. In 2014–15, the Kabul team under Mike’s field direction consisted of Catherine Heim, Johanna l’Huillier, and Alejandro Gallego Lopez as registrars, while Fabio Columbo and Reyhane Miraboutalebi served as conservators. We have forged cooperative links with other cultural heritage groups in Kabul such as the Agha Khan Trust for Culture (AKTC) and the Afghan Institute for Archaeology (fig. 1). We also worked with an international team of specialist consultants who assisted us in the inventorying of individual periods or collections. At the US State Department, our key partners are Dr. Laura Tedesco, the Cultural Heritage Program Manager at the Office of Press and Public Diplomacy, responsible for Afghanistan and Pakistan, while the State Department’s financial management of the grant is overseen by Grachel Humphries. In Kabul, our principal partner has been Dr. Omara Khan Masoudi, Director of the National Museum, along with his staff of curators, conservators, registrars, and photographers. Local logistical support for our project is provided by ACHCO (a Kabul-based non-



Figure 1. OI-NMA Partnership project staff meeting with the director of the Afghan Institute for Archaeology (AIA): Left to right: Hafiz Latify (NMA), Michael Fisher (OI), Gil Stein (OI), Mr. Abdul Qadir Taymuri (Director of the Afghan Institute of Archaeology), Steve Camp (OI)



Figure 2. Retiring Director of the National Museum of Afghanistan Dr. Omara Khan Masoudi with the award presented to him at the "Preserving the Cultural Heritage of Afghanistan (PCHA)" conference in recognition of his extraordinary lifetime contributions to Afghan heritage preservation

governmental organization that specializes in cultural heritage projects in Afghanistan). During this past year, Dr. Masoudi retired after many long years of devoted service as Director of the Museum (fig. 2). We wish him well in his retirement, and we look forward to working with his successor.

Progress of the OI-NMA Inventory: 2014–2015

By July 2015 the OI-NMA partnership had inventoried over 88,176 pieces in 37,500 object records (a single museum object and its record can consist of multiple pieces, such as beads in a necklace). Mike Fisher and his colleagues have now completed the inventory for sixteen of the storerooms, storage areas, and galleries whose holdings span all key periods in Afghanistan's history. We estimate that 95 percent of the objects stored on the grounds of the National Museum have now been inventoried. Our database also houses 99,842 images, including scanned archival records and 82,904 object photographs. This is an unprecedented achievement, but much more remains to be done. The main groups of objects whose documentation is still ongoing

are the ceramology and numismatic collections. We hope be able to complete the inventory of the remaining holdings inside the Museum this year. At that point, if permission is secured from the Ministry of Information and Culture, we hope to expand our inventory coverage to document the estimated 22,000 National Museum objects that are currently stored for security purposes in the vaults beneath the Presidential Palace. In addition, we hope to complete the installation of new steel shelving in the Museum storerooms and upgrades to the Museum conservation lab, while also completing the training of selected members of the Museum staff in the actual management of the inventory database. Our goal is that his core group of IT trainees will be able to manage and troubleshoot the operation of the database inventory once the three-year partnership is completed. I am delighted to report that the US Embassy in Kabul has extended our Partnership grant with the National Museum for a fourth year to give us the time and resources to complete these final portions of the inventory, infrastructure development, and training.

During the past year, we brought in a series of consultants. Mathias Naue from the University of Hamburg worked on the numismatic collections and conducted training sessions for the Museum staff on the coins in the NMA collections. These workshops trained staff to use a combination of reference tools and information contained on the coins to make efficient, accurate identifications. This method included how to organize coins by period,

type, and mint; how to analyze the technical aspects of coins such as die axis, weight, and technical peculiarities; and how to effectively use coin catalogs and other reference materials. Mr. Naue’s workshops also demonstrated to the curators how to introduce coins into the inventory as well as photographic methodology for numismatics. We are also very happy that Oriental Institute historian Dr. Richard Payne came to Kabul in May 2015 to conduct a series of workshops for the Museum staff on the Sasanian and Hephthalite periods in Afghanistan and their material culture.

International Conference on “Preserving the Cultural Heritage of Afghanistan” (PCHA)

Preservation of cultural heritage lies at the heart of the OI-NMA Partnership’s work in Afghanistan. As part of that focus, in November 2014 the Oriental Institute was one of the co-organizers of an international conference focused on “Preserving the Cultural Heritage of Afghanistan” (PCHA), held in Kabul at the Afghanistan Centre at Kabul University (ACKU) from November 9 to 11, 2014 (fig. 3). The conference was co-organized by the University of Chicago, the US Embassy Kabul, the Afghanistan Centre at Kabul University, and the Afghan Ministry of Information and Culture.

The conference brought together for the first time the leading Afghan and international cultural heritage specialists from a variety of different organizational contexts: provincial and national governments, universities, museums, and private foundations (fig. 4). The conference was unique in several important ways. Generally, meetings of this sort have been held outside of Afghanistan, in limited-access venues, and with only limited participation by Afghans. In organizing the PCHA conference, we wanted to do something more inclusive and accessible, and we had several key goals. First, we wanted to bring people together to share information and to understand the broad range of heritage preservation projects that are currently underway in Afghanistan at the initiative of both Afghan and international individuals, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), universities, and various government entities. We especially wanted to highlight the important role that specifically Afghan organizations and individuals are playing — on their own initiative — in preserving their own cultural heritage. Finally, we thought it was especially important to hold the conference inside Afghanistan in a university setting where Afghan students, university professionals, government officials, and the Afghan media could have their first chance to learn about these encouraging developments. Half of the conference presenters were Afghans, and half were from the international community. The conference papers and discussions were bilingual



Figure 3. The international conference on “Preserving the Cultural Heritage of Afghanistan” was held in Kabul in November 2014. The conference proceedings were bilingual in English and in Dari (one of the two national languages) with simultaneous translation to make the presentations fully accessible to Afghan students, academics, government officials, and heritage specialists



Figure 4. One of the most important elements for the success of cultural preservation efforts is the cooperation of different international governments, agencies, and non-governmental organizations working closely with the Afghan Ministry of Information and Culture. The US Embassy in Kabul worked with the Agha Khan Trust for Culture to stabilize and preserve the No Gumbad (“Nine Domes”) mosque — the earliest known mosque in Afghanistan, built in the first half of the ninth century CE

in English and Dari (one of the two national languages of Afghanistan) with simultaneous translation. We were gratified to see that on each day of the conference about half of the 130 people in the audience were students — the exact group in whose hands the preservation of Afghan heritage will rest. The significance of the conference was underscored when newly elected Afghan president Dr. Ashraf Ghani phoned in by a live link to give a ten-minute welcoming address to the attendees in which he emphasized the urgent need to protect Afghan cultural heritage as a key element in defining the country’s national identity as it enters into an era of reconstruction.

The papers and moderated panel discussions focused on current and recently completed projects and highlighted practical measures being undertaken in five key areas: museums, monuments (fig. 5), archaeological excavations and surveys, repatriation and the fight against looting, and education and “intangible heritage” (fig. 6). The presentations also explored the different types of partnerships that are proving most successful as ways to carry out effective projects of heritage preservation.

Overall, the conference papers and panels showed that, despite many challenges and uncertainties, Afghans and the international community have been successfully implementing innovative projects to preserve the cultural heritage of Afghanistan, while helping the people of this war-torn country to develop the skills and organizational capacity to take the



Figure 5. Monuments of historical and religious significance such as the shrine of Hazrat Ali in the city of Mazar-i Sharif are crucial elements in defining a shared Afghan national identity as the country emerges from decades of conflict and begins the difficult process of reconstruction



Figure 6. “Intangible heritage” — non-material aspects of culture such as music, literature, folklore, and customs — play a key role in defining and unifying Afghanistan, yet these are among the most vulnerable elements of heritage in times of conflict. Buzkashi is the national sport of Afghanistan and exemplifies many of the most important values of the culture. Buzkashi riders (chapandaz) are widely admired for their individuality, courage, and skill

lead in preservation efforts in the years ahead. We can be cautiously optimistic that these partnerships will be able to help in the efforts to save the cultural treasures of the “cross-roads of Asia.”

The conference proceedings will be published by the Oriental Institute in 2016 in a volume co-edited by Gil Stein, Michael Fisher, Nancy Hatch Dupree, Hafiz Latify, and Najibullah Popal. To make the volume accessible to the people of Afghanistan, it is being published bilingually in English and Dari (along with Pashto, one of the two national languages of Afghanistan), and will be available as a free downloadable PDF from the Oriental Institute website. We plan to add a Pashto translation of the book as an additional feature of the online version.