

# ORIENTAL INSTITUTE-NATIONAL MUSEUM OF AFGHANISTAN PARTNERSHIP AND CULTURAL HERITAGE PROTECTION WORK

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## The Partnership and Its Goals

The Oriental Institute-National Museum of Afghanistan (OI-NMA) Partnership is a three year project funded by the US Department of State as part of its broader commitment to protect the rich but fragile cultural heritage of Afghanistan. Over the course of more than three decades of unrelenting warfare, the National Museum of Afghanistan had been devastated, with an estimated 70 percent of its collections either looted or destroyed, and 90% of its object records lost in the period from 1989 to 2001. In the years since 2001, the US and other international partners have physically rebuilt the museum, and its galleries are once again open to the public. Now, in the second phase of reconstruction, the OI-NMA Partnership seeks to take stock of the museum’s surviving collections and develop a long-term, sustainable infrastructure of object curation for the National Museum. Our partnership has five main goals:

1. Develop a secure, easy-to-use, and sustainable Dari-English computer database for the holdings of the National Museum (NMA).
2. Develop the first complete computer-based inventory of the estimated 60,000 objects remaining in the NMA after the looting or destruction of an estimated 70 percent of the museum’s holdings during the Afghan civil war and subsequent Taliban rule.
3. Make preliminary conservation assessments of the objects in the NMA’s collections as part of the inventory process.
4. Re-house the objects in the NMA’s collections in acid-free, archival-quality containers in preparation for a possible move of the collections to a new museum building (if the decision is made to construct a new museum building)
5. Train the NMA staff in international standards of database, recording, and artifact management procedures.

Overall, we want to develop these systems and train the staff of the National Museum to the point where they will be able to use, and add to, the inventory database on their own, with little or no foreign assistance, by the end of the three-year grant period.

As described in last year’s *Oriental Institute Annual Report* for 2011–2012, we began the actual work of the partnership at the end of May 2012. 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, Registrar Catherine Heim,



Figure 1. Oriental Institute team in Kabul, March 2013:  
Left to right: Steve Camp, Catherine Heim, Mike Fisher,  
Gil Stein, Hakim, Sattar, and Bilal



Figure 2. Director of the National Museum of Afghanistan Dr. Omara Khan Masoudi

and other registrars and conservators who have been participating in the project for shorter terms (fig. 1). We also periodically work with an international team of consultants who specialize in different aspects of Afghan archaeology and art and can assist us in the inventorying of individual periods or collections. At the US State Department, our key partner is Dr. Laura Tedesco, the Cultural Heritage Program Manager at the Office of Press and Public Diplomacy, responsible for Afghanistan and Pakistan. In Kabul, our principal partner is Dr. Omara Khan Masoudi, Director of the National Museum (fig. 2), along with his staff, notably Chief Curator Fahim Rahimi.

One of the most important aspects of the project is the fact that Oriental Institute staff, led by Field Director Mike Fisher, are living in Kabul and working six days a week in the museum alongside their Afghan colleagues. The ongoing presence of our staff in Kabul creates an atmosphere of real cooperation that gives us every reason to believe that we will conclude the project successfully. We have been 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 have been extremely welcoming and helped us greatly throughout the past year. During the past year, OI Executive Director Steve Camp and I have made four trips to Kabul to deliver supplies, coordinate with the OI “Kabul team,” and to deal with the administrative aspects of working with the National Museum, the Ministry of Information and Culture, the US Embassy, and ACHCO (the Kabul-based non-governmental organization that handles local logistics for our project).

### Progress of the OI-NMA Inventory, 2012-2013

In late May 2012, we began our work in Kabul. National Museum Director Dr. Masoudi 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 English and Dari (one of Afghanistan’s two official languages). The rest of us started to work with the NMA conservation and curatorial staff to get their advice and suggestions on how they would like us to customize the database to best serve the needs of the museum. OI Head Conservator Laura D’Alessandro met extensively with the conservation staff of the National Museum to understand current conditions in the museum and the role that the museum’s conservation staff can play in assessing the condition of the museum’s ob-



Figure 3. Router extender in a cabinet on wheels – our two “rolling routers” enable the Kabul team to extend our wireless network to reach every gallery and storeroom in the National Museum so that we can carry out the data entry for the museum inventory



Figure 4. Catherine Heim and members of the National Museum staff inventorying objects in the museum storerooms



Figure 5. Screen shot showing the digital image of one of the textiles in the National Museum's ethnographic collection entered into a bilingual inventory record

jects and in re-housing them in archival-quality boxes as part of the inventory process. Laura also asked what kinds of conservation-related information they would like to see included in the database. OI Chief Curator Jack Green organized a workshop for the National Museum staff to discuss the value of databases in collections management, and the ways in which the database we are developing might be especially useful for the needs of the National Museum.

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. We started the task of transferring the scanned inventory sheets and the several thousand objects from earlier pilot efforts at database development into a single integrated data structure in FileMaker Pro to which all of the objects in the museum will be added as we inventory them.

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. Mike Fisher set up our secure local area network and worked with OI Exhibit Preparator Erik Lindahl to develop an ingenious system of router extenders in cabinets on wheels that enabled our wireless network for inventory coding to reach every storeroom in the museum (fig. 3). By September 2012, Mike had developed the database to the point where it was ready to use, and the museum staff had been trained in inventory procedures.

Each inventory team consists of an OI staff person and a staff member of the National Museum, who enter the description of each object in both English and Dari (figs. 4–5). The objects are measured, labeled with an inventory number, and photographed. The digital photos are linked to each inventory record, along with any older paper documentation (if present). Our system is “scalable” in the sense that the more inventory teams we have working, the more storerooms we can cover, and the more objects we can record. We have now expanded our efforts to the point where on any given day two or three teams are working in tandem in different storerooms within the museum. Best of all, our Afghan colleagues have now gained enough hands-on experience that they are working as independent teams to inventory, describe, measure, and photograph the objects in the storerooms. This is ex-





*Figure 6. Mike Fisher inside the 40-foot shipping container with archival quality object housing materials shipped from the US to Kabul for the OI-NMA Partnership*

actly what we had hoped to achieve: our plan all along has been to provide enough hands-on training that the NMA staff will be able to take over the inventory and be totally comfortable continuing these procedures when the three-year partnership is completed and the OI staff return home in 2015.

By July 2013 the OI-NMA partnership had inventoried 13,000 objects. This is an extremely impressive achievement. As we bring in additional foreign registrars and have additional Afghan staff working on the inventory teams, we hope to double this rate of work in the coming year.

Artifact conservation also plays a key role in the OI-NMA partnership. As we inventory the objects, conservators are providing initial assessments of the condition of the objects in a triage system where we flag those objects most in need of conservation. As part of this process, we are re-housing the objects in archival-quality, acid-free packing materials, bags, and boxes — both to protect them and to prepare them for a possible move to a new museum facility, if this is approved by the

Ministry of Information and Culture, and if funding can be obtained.

In planning the project, we knew that acid-free, archival-quality artifact housing materials are impossible to obtain in Kabul, and that they would have to be shipped over 8,000 miles from the US. Laura D’Alessandro and the OI Conservation department worked tirelessly to navigate the tremendously complex labyrinth of Kafka-esque shipping and customs regulations, and in the end achieved something amazing — we were able to ship a 40-foot container by sea to Pakistan, where (after being delayed for weeks by a teamsters’ strike in Karachi) it was then trucked overland to the Afghan border, and finally delivered to the National Museum safe and sound in the spring of 2013 (fig. 6). We now know how to do this and are in the process of preparing a second container filled with steel shelving supplies for shipment to Kabul.

As the inventory has progressed, we have made wonderful discoveries — locating and recording objects that had been misplaced during the years of civil war and Taliban rule. My personal favorite is a large, third-millennium BC ceramic mouse-trap from the French excavations at the site of Mundigak in southern Afghanistan. But perhaps the most important re-discovery was a fragment of an Achaemenid administrative tablet initially unearthed in the 1970s by the British excavations at Old Kandahar. The tablet had been moved from its original location and had been presumed to be lost. This is one of the only known examples of Achaemenid tablets written in the Elamite language to have been recovered by archaeological excavations in Afghanistan. Its very presence attests to the scale and effectiveness of the administration of the Persian empire in its eastern satrapies or provinces. In January 2014 we plan to bring Prof. Matthew Stolper, the Head of the OI’s Persepolis Fortification Archive Project, out to Kabul to conduct a close examination of the tablet and to prepare a joint publication of this artifact with Mike Fisher. Re-discoveries of this type show the tremendous potential of the NMA collections not only for gallery display, but also as a research

resource. We hope that there will be many more surprises like this in the future, and that the museum collections will attract not only visitors from the public, but also researchers from all over the world.

## Cultural Heritage Projects in Afghanistan

The OI-NMA Partnership is not alone in its efforts. Over the course of the last year, we have been deeply impressed to learn about and see for ourselves the tremendous range of ongoing projects aimed at preserving different aspects of cultural heritage in Afghanistan. These efforts are being designed and implemented by Afghan organizations, by foreign governments, by private foundations, and by dedicated individuals. There are many different types of cultural heritage in Afghanistan, and they are all at risk. Although they generally receive little or no attention in the world media, there are in fact numerous successful projects of heritage preservation. Most important, it is heartening to see that many of these projects are being done by Afghans, and not just by the international community.

The preservation of archaeological sites is one of the most important single areas of endangered cultural heritage. Looting of sites and the connected illicit antiquities trade are an enormous ongoing problem throughout Afghanistan. Large amounts of looted artifacts have been confiscated by customs officials in London and other centers and have been returned to the National Museum in Kabul. But the illicit trade is ubiquitous. On our trip to Herat in northwest Afghanistan this spring, the OI project team saw antiquities (both genuine artifacts and fakes) openly on sale in the bazaar (fig. 7). To monitor this ongoing problem, a number of groups have been using sequences of dated satellite imagery to develop Geographic Information Systems (GIS) databases of sites and looting in the different regions of the country. And on the ground, several teams of archaeologists have been conducting rescue excavations at key sites under threat of destruction by either looting or economic development.

Perhaps the most important of these efforts is the large-scale collaboration between Afghanistan and the international community to conduct rescue excavations at Mes Aynak.



*Figure 7. Looted artifacts along with modern fakes on sale in the Herat bazaar. Extensive looting of sites across Afghanistan continues to be a major threat to Afghan cultural heritage*



*Figure 8. View of the salvage excavations in the upper town of Mes Aynak in Logar province, Afghanistan. The compound of the mining camp is visible in the background. An international team of archaeologists is racing the clock to complete rescue excavations in the core of Mes Aynak before large-scale mining operations begin*



Figure 9. Buddhist stupa at the site of Tepe Narinj on the outskirts of Kabul. Archaeologists from the Afghan Institute of Archaeology excavated and stabilized the architectural remains and constructed a protective fence around the site



Figure 10. Afghan site guards at Tepe Narinj, standing in front of the barred storeroom constructed at the site by the Afghan Institute of Archaeology to protect the large-scale sculpture and other architectural ornaments

Located in Logar province, about 45 km southwest of Kabul, Mes Aynak was an enormous 1,000-hectare Buddhist city, trade entrepôt, and monastic center that flourished especially in the third to seventh centuries AD. The name “Mes Aynak” means “Copper Spring,” and the site is located on top of what may be the world’s largest known copper deposit. This was the source of the wealth of the ancient city, and it is the source of the threat to its future. The difficult balance between economic development and heritage preservation means that there is only a limited window of opportunity to excavate and document the artistic and architectural treasures of Mes Aynak before it is largely destroyed by modern copper mining activities (fig. 8). Former Deputy Minister for Information and Culture Mr. Omar Sultan has been working extensively with Philippe Marquis of the French Archaeological Mission in Afghanistan and an international excavation team to explore much of the urban core of Mes Aynak and the string of Buddhist monasteries that surround it. Some of the finest sculpture and other artifacts from Mes Aynak are now on display in the National Museum.

On the outskirts of Kabul, at the site of Tepe Narinj, researchers from the Afghan Institute of Archaeology have conducted rescue excavations of a Buddhist monastery complex. When our OI team visited the site in March 2013 and met the Afghan archaeologists who had conducted the rescue project, we were extremely impressed to see that they had stabilized and partially restored the remains of the Buddhist stupas at the site (fig. 9). They had also built secure locked storerooms on site to protect the larger sculptural remains, constructed a fence around the site, and even arranged for paramilitary police to patrol the site and discourage looters (fig. 10). The Afghan archaeologists did all this completely on their own. The Tepe Narinj excavations had the added value of producing numismatic evidence to prove that Buddhism was still thriving in the Kabul area as late as the ninth century AD, more than 100 years later than had been previously thought.

Historical monuments of all periods are at risk in Afghanistan, and a number of different groups have gone to enormous efforts to preserve them. Much of this work has focused on monuments and architecture of the Islamic period. The US State department has supported work to document the minarets of Ghazni and is working to preserve one of the earliest known mosques in Afghanistan, located in the region of Balkh (ancient Bactra, near the modern city of Mazar-i-Sharif). Local Afghan groups in the northwest city of Herat have





Figure 11. The fourteenth-century Timurid Masjid-i-Jami (Friday Mosque) in the city of Herat, northwest Afghanistan – considered one of the most important surviving Islamic monuments in Central Asia. Note Steve Camp in front of the central iwan for scale. Local civil and religious authorities in Herat have supported the long-term restoration of the magnificent glazed tile work that covers the mosque

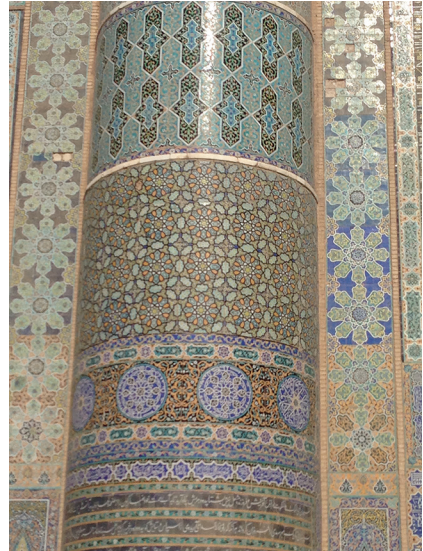


Figure 12. Detail of some of the glazed tile work on the Masjid-i-Jami in Herat

spent decades working to restore the magnificent tile work of the fourteenth-century Masjid-i-Jami, or “Friday mosque” — one of the most important and beautiful surviving Islamic monuments of Central Asia (figs. 11–12).

Some of the most effective efforts to preserve and restore Islamic monuments in Afghanistan have been sponsored by the Aga Khan Trust for Culture (AKTC). The country director for the AKTC, Ajmal Maiwandi, was kind enough to show us some of these treasures, most notably in Kabul at the sixteenth-century Bagh-i-Babur — the Gardens of Babur, founder of the Mughal dynasty that ruled both Afghanistan and most of India from the sixteenth to the nineteenth century (fig. 13). The beautifully and accurately restored garden is an oasis for picnics, walks, and relaxation in the heart of Kabul, and it forms the largest green space



Figure 13. Bagh-i-Babur (Gardens of Babur) in the heart of Kabul, constructed in the sixteenth century by Babur, the founder of the Mughal dynasty. Restoration of Babur’s Garden was funded and carried out by the Aga Khan Trust for Culture (AKTC)



Figure 14. Bagh-i-Babur: restored small royal mosque constructed in the Garden by Shah Jahan, the fifth Mughal emperor. Shah Jahan is best known as the builder of the Taj Mahal



Figure 15. Qalat Ihtiyardin, the massive citadel of Herat. Restoration of the citadel was carried out by the Aga Khan Trust for Culture, while archaeological excavations at the Citadel and the reorganization of the Citadel Museum were carried out by Dr. Ute Franke on behalf of the German Archaeological Institute (DAI)



Figure 16. Nancy Hatch Dupree and Gil Stein in front of the newly completed Afghanistan Center at Kabul University (ACKU). With over 70,000 books, magazines, newspapers, and other documents, the center is the world's largest archive of historical documentation on Afghanistan. Construction of the center was funded by the Afghan government as a key project in cultural heritage preservation

in the city. Nestled in the garden is an architectural gem — the small royal mosque (fig. 14) established by the fifth Mughal emperor, Shah Jahan, best known as the builder of the Taj Mahal. The AKTC has also restored the imposing Qalat Ihtiyardin citadel of Herat (fig. 15) and numerous historic houses in the Old City.

Cultural heritage is not just sites and monuments; it also encompasses literature, history, music, and traditional arts and handicrafts. Often called “intangible heritage,” these aspects of Afghan culture have been deeply battered and nearly destroyed by decades of war, refugee displacement, and the near total disruption of Afghan society. We were able to see two especially impressive initiatives that have been preserving these aspects of Afghan cultural heritage. The first of these is the Afghanistan Center at Kabul University (ACKU). This center was founded by Nancy Hatch Dupree, one of the leading and most effective advocates for the preservation of Afghan heritage. Built with funding from the Afghan government, the center is the largest and most comprehensive archive of books, manuscripts, newspapers, and magazines relating to Afghanistan (fig. 16). The center’s location on the campus of Kabul University makes this unique collection accessible to the students and faculty, in addition to foreign researchers.

Finally, we were deeply impressed to see the work of the Turquoise Mountain Foundation in the heart of Kabul. This Anglo-Afghan cooperative venture focuses on preserving and revitalizing traditional Afghan arts and craft specialties such as woodworking, ceramics, gem cutting, and jewelry production. The instructors at Turquoise Mountain are some of the last surviving Afghan masters of these crafts, and they are committed to passing along their knowledge (fig. 17). Instead of simply reviving traditional crafts in a static fossilized form, Turquoise Mountain encourages its students to develop new forms of artistic expression



and gives them the business training to be successful economically once they have finished their training apprenticeships.

This is only a sampling of the different heritage protection programs that are being implemented with great success in Afghanistan. The main point is that despite extremely difficult conditions, committed efforts like the ones mentioned above are taking place at all, and they are actually succeeding. We are proud that the Oriental Institute's partnership with the National Museum forms a part of this set of initiatives. From everything we have seen over the past year, we are more hopeful than ever that Afghanistan can preserve its heritage as the cultural core for the country's future; we are honored to be able to help in this endeavor.

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*Figure 17. Master woodworker at the Turquoise Mountain Foundation, in a restored traditional house compound in the Old City of Kabul. Turquoise Mountain supports the revitalization of traditional Afghan crafts such as woodworking inlay, gem cutting, ceramics, and jewelry making. These are key elements of Afghanistan's "intangible heritage"*