



Explosion of the Great Buddha on 8 March 2001

AFGHANISTAN

SAVE THE CULTURAL HERITAGE OF AFGHANISTAN
APPEAL BY ICOMOS AND ICOM

There is little need to comment in great depth about cultural heritage at risk in Afghanistan, as the terrible situation in the country has attracted extensive international coverage, discussion and outrage. Our commentary in last year's report preceded the unforgivable and unacceptable act that saw the destruction of the Bamiyan Buddha statues. The impact of these events is compounded by the escalation of the catastrophic treatment of heritage in the country, despite attempts at the highest international levels to intervene and prevent this cultural disaster. The horror of the situation has been intensified by world events since September 2001, following the criminal terrorist attacks on the United States of America and the subsequent bombing of Taliban strongholds in Afghanistan. Undeniably, the threats to both lives and heritage in the country have only increased in the last year.

For this year's report, we bring attention to the appeal launched by ICOMOS in response to the Taliban edicts that were made pub-

lic in the first part of the year. We then include a report on the Kabul Museum, which has been provided by ICOM. This brief case study serves to highlight the history and ongoing nature of this conflict, and the impact it ultimately has on all types of heritage.

March 2001 Appeal

ICOMOS played an important part in the international condemnation of the events in March 2001 that culminated in the destruction of the Buddha statues at Bamiyan. At the time, an appeal was launched jointly with ICOM, the text of which is included on the next page.



Taliban soldier in front of the Great Buddha of Bamiyan after the destruction in March 2001

SAVE THE CULTURAL HERITAGE OF AFGHANISTAN APPEAL BY ICOMOS AND ICOM

<http://www.international.icomos.org/risk/>

ICOMOS (International Council on Monuments and Sites) and ICOM (International Council of Museums) learned with great shock of the new decree issued by the Taliban leadership of Mullah Mohammad Omar ordering the systematic destruction of all statues in the country. This decision breaks the commitment made by the Taliban leadership in 1999 to protect all cultural heritage in Afghanistan and in particular the giant Buddha figures at Bamiyan.

Adding to the dishonour of breaking a commitment to preserve the ancient and diverse heritage of Afghanistan as part of that of the whole of mankind, such an act of destruction would be a total cultural catastrophe. It would remain written in the pages of history next to the most infamous acts of barbarity.

For many years, ICOM has alerted the world on illicit trade in cultural objects from Afghanistan. ICOMOS, in its 2000 World Report on monuments and sites in danger (see http://www.international.icomos.org/risk/afgha_2000.htm), pointed out in detail the dangers to cultural heritage in Afghanistan, in particular the pre-Islamic figures of the Buddha in Bamiyan. This decree of Mullah Mohammad Omar confirms the imminence of this danger.

As world-wide non-governmental organisations, ICOMOS and ICOM call on all people, governments, International Organisations and associations to take immediate action to prevent this cultural catastrophe from happening. A dialogue should be established with the Taliban leaders to ensure adequate protection of all Afghan heritage, whether pre-Islamic or Islamic. This is a matter of the highest importance and the greatest emergency.

The Kabul Museum

The history of the Kabul Museum is relatively short. In 1919 the personal collection of the royal family was housed in the small Bagh-e-Bala Palace on a hillside overlooking Kabul. A few years later, it was moved to the Royal Palace in the centre of Kabul, and in 1931 to its present building in Darulaman, 8 kilometres south of Kabul City.

With the first excavations of the Delegation archeologique française en Afghanistan (DAFA) in the early 1930s, the spectacular treasures of Afghanistan slowly began to come to light. Increasingly more archaeological missions undertook excavations, among them the British Institute of Afghan Studies, the Italian Institute, Kyoto University, the Smithsonian Institution, the Soviet Institute of Archaeology, Heidelberg University, and the Indian Institute of Archaeology. Collections spanned 50 millenniums and included Hellenistic and Roman bronzes, Alexandrian glass, carved ivories from India, Chinese lacquer, Persian lustreware, Graeco-Bactrian coin hoards – representing a cultural continuity encompassing the length and breadth of the known world – and, a unique feature of the Kabul Museum, all were found on Afghan soil.

The Kabul Museum has known pilferage since it was first established. Yet nothing equals the devastation it has suffered the last 10 years. The disastrous years of 1992–95 saw the destruction of Kabul itself, which left the Museum building partially laid waste, its staff scattered and much of the collections demolished, looted and dispersed throughout the world.

From 1995 until autumn of 2000, continuing efforts were made to compile a rudimentary inventory of what remained in the Museum among the wreckage and rubble. Museum staff, reduced from 70 to 20 members, worked heroically – with no electricity, no run-

ing water, under shelling and rocket fire, with salaries ranging from \$6 a month for a top cadre post to \$2 for guards. By the end of 2000, 7000 objects from 50 different sites had been registered, packed and stored, with a further 30,000 artefacts from the prehistoric sites, and the vast DAFA ceramic collection still intact in a basement storeroom.

In 1999, a Taliban edict called for the protection of all historic and cultural relics of Afghanistan and made any illegal excavations or illicit trading of objects punishable by law. The sudden reversal of this mandate in March 2001, as the world watched the dynamiting of the Bamiyan Buddhas in impotent horror, has yet again put the future of Afghanistan's cultural heritage on the edge of obliteration.

Looted artefacts have over a long time appeared on the international art market and more are expected to appear. Afghanistan was never a signatory to the relevant UNESCO conventions, nor a member of Interpol, nor were its famous sites on the UNESCO World Heritage list, making it almost impossible to pursue the recovery of stolen art through any internationally sanctioned means. Valiant efforts are being made by the Afghanistan Museum in Basel to assemble and document donations of artefacts for safe-keeping and eventual return to Afghanistan. UNESCO and ICOM are focussing on advocacy campaigns.

As the recent history of the Kabul Museum has paralleled the tragic history of Kabul, so undoubtedly will the future of the Museum continue to parallel whatever fate lies ahead for Kabul.