

Afghanistan's Forbidden History of Art

by Simon O'Lia

One must say that the remarkable exhibition entitled “Afghanistan: Une Histoire Millénaire” organised at The Guimet Museum of Asiatic Arts in Paris (after having been earlier featured in Barcelona) and inaugurated by the Afghan leader Hamid Karzai and the French president Jacques Chirac on February 28th, is long overdue and yet unforgettably instructive. Indeed, it reminds the fascinated visitor that all great art and all decisive and culturally significant creativity result from the interaction of a multiplicity of historically antecedent and formative forces whose anteriority should be considered a healthy assurance of the “timeless” glory of all future creation.

As amply proven by the example of Afghan history, all art or, more precisely, all cultural identity as such is composite, complex and “multicultural” at its very root and origin. It is the endless “result” of what Nietzsche calls life-affirming “experimentation”. Yet, once again, it was precisely the disastrously neurotic and predictably violent refusal to assume and affirm such an “original complexity” (that of a nation's historical identity in this instance) that propelled the extremist and ultimately self-destructive Taliban regime in Afghanistan to commit the millennium's most despicable and manifestly gratuitous crime against a nation's very sense of metaphysical dignity in March 2001 when, on the orders of the Taliban leader Mollah Mohamad Omar, the two ancient and legendary Buddhas of the splendid Bamiyan Valley in central Afghanistan,

the world's tallest statues, were literally blown up. Moreover, whatever had survived of the already looted and damaged collections of the Kabul Museum were no less literally consigned to the dustbin of a depressing history of more than two decades of generalised barbarity (in every sense of the term) whilst UNESCO's own special envoy to Afghanistan and former French Ambassador to Pakistan, Pierre Lafrance, was present in the country.

It is now known that certain influential and hardline elements of Osama Ben Laden's terrorist organisation, Al Qaida (on which the Taliban's financial dependence had considerably grown) had demanded the destruction of these “pagan idols” together with that of all other forbidden representations of the human figure as a token of the regime's continued and serious adherence to their obscurantist and extremist “interpretation” of Islam. The sad irony underlying the perpetration of this obscene and wanton act of cultural destruction could be felt even more acutely were one to consider that it was precisely within the borders of what is modern day Afghanistan or, more precisely, in the Western region of Herat neighbouring Iran (which included the modern Eastern Iranian province of Khorasan and its capital city of Mashad) that the world famous artistic tradition of Islamic Persian miniature and painting was born and flourished to the point that one may quite justifiably compare, in the manner of the influential American specialist of Islamic art, Michael Barry, the historico-cultural status of the city of Herat to that of Renaissance Florence and speak of it as the “Florence of the Muslim East”.

Forbidden had, indeed, the art and the past treasures of a proud nation's glorious history of interaction with every major civilization of the ancient world thus become. The fact that the organizers of the exhibition aptly decided to hold it in the somewhat shadowy basement of the recently renovated and yet impressively lit Musée Guimet can only contribute to the heightening of one's sense of excitement at secretly violating an official ban on "idolatory" reminiscent of the one imposed by the Taliban in Kabul against which those courageous Afghan archeologists and intellectuals (who had remained in their country throughout all the years of suffering and destruction) fought bravely and, happily enough, not always ineffectively.

Once the visitor enters the deliciously lit gallery wherein such elegant remains of an epic past as golden Bactrian bracelets, tiny lion figures dating to the period of the Achaemenid Persian Empire and pottery from the later Hellenistic kingdoms in Bactria and Northwest India are presented in a manner evocative of the richness of the pre-Buddhist past of ancient Afghanistan, she or he can only reach the obvious conclusion that ancient Afghanistan was a truly "experimental" laboratory of artistic creation in which Greek, Persian, Indian, Central Asian as well as, later in its history, Chinese and Islamic artistic traditions interacted and produced one of the ancient world's most influentially cosmopolitan cultures.

The most enduringly visible fruit of this profound cosmopolitanism was the creation of the first human representations of the Buddha. Indeed, before the assimilation of Greek and Parthian figurative conventions in Afghanistan (a long-term consequence of Alexander the Great's conquest of the Persian Empire in 330-327 B.C.) by Buddhism (a

conquest which was contemporaneous with the rise of Mahayana or Great Vehicle Buddhism) the figure of Buddha/Cakayamuni had almost never been represented as a man.

Effecting this fascinating “Metamorphosis of Apollo”, to borrow André Malraux's famous formulation, presupposed almost four centuries of interaction and crossbreeding among the mentioned traditions so that a bodhisattva figure as stunning in its quasi-feminine beauty and imposing in its manifestly Partho-Palmyrian frontality as that of the magnificent bodhisattva from Shahbaz Ghari in Northwestern Pakistan or the disarmingly serene bodhisattva figures from Hadda in Southeastern Afghanistan (featured in the exhibition) could become objects of devout rumination on Lord Buddha's atemporal power of deliverance from the worldly weight of self-created “illusion” during the reign of Afghanistan's legendary emperor Kanishka of the Kushan dynasty (140-180 A.D.)

Yet, the metamorphosis of Apollo's procreative linearity did not stop there. After having anticipated and reached the expressive confidence of the European Renaissance, the Buddhist art of Afghanistan further pursued its conquest of sacred immobility by making possible the nascent Islamic art of the Ghaznavid and Timourid periods' intimation at the overflowing and otherworldly beauty of their miniature depictions of a glorified present. A risky intimation at the joys of the present which also made possible the art of the great Persian court painter and miniature master, Behzad. This is why the choice of a regularly lit (by the museum's standards) corridor containing some of the most beautiful Buddha heads leading to yet another discreetly visible hall containing

brilliant vestiges of the calligraphic art of the Islamic era is contestable in as much as it may imply the organizers' inability to grasp the profound continuity between the Buddhist (pre-Islamic) and the Islamic artistic adventures undertaken in this realm of (passionately Expressed) defiance of common destiny that Afghanistan shall always have remained. May no more shadows be cast on the truth of its universally relevant adventure. That of its truly unique art of “experimentation”.

Article Published in the February 2002 issue of *New York Arts Magazine*, New York.