

THE ORIENTAL INSTITUTE PARTNERSHIP WITH THE NATIONAL MUSEUM OF AFGHANISTAN

Gil J. Stein

Partnership and Its Goals

In 2015–16 we completed the fourth 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 objects 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 conservation, database management, and artifact curation procedures (fig. 1). 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 two parts (fig. 2). The “Chicago team” consisted of Gil Stein (PI), Steve Camp (grant planning, administration and budgeting), and Laura D’Alessandro (conservation). Our “Kabul team” comprised Mike Fisher, Alejandro Gal-



Figure 1. Unbaked clay sculpture from the rescue excavations at the Early Buddhist (second–eighth centuries CE) city of Mes Aynak in the National Museum of Afghanistan Conservation Laboratory



Figure 2. Oriental Institute team members Steve Camp, Alejandro Gallego Lopez, and Gil Stein at “OI House” in Kabul

lego Lopez, and conservators Fabio Colombo and Reyhane Mirabootalebi. In December 2015, Mike stepped down as field director, and returned to Chicago to complete his dissertation. In his three and a half years in Kabul, Mike developed our inventory database from scratch, started key training programs for the staff of the National Museum, and made major progress on the inventory itself. Mike has played an essential role in the implementation of the OI-NMA Partnership, and ensured that all of the pieces are in place for our new field director Alejandro Gallego Lopez to bring the project to a successful conclusion. Alejandro started as OI Field Director in January 2016, and has been doing an impressive job in moving the inventory forward.



Figure 3. New National Museum Director Fahim Rahimi

During this past year, we saw the end of an era when Dr. Omara Khan Massoudi retired from his long-standing position as Director of the National Museum. His successor as new Director is Mr. Fahim Rahimi (fig. 3), who had previously served as Chief Curator of the Museum, where he developed three new galleries — “Mes Aynak,” “Buddhism in Afghanistan,” and “Bactria: Land of 1000 Cities.” Fahim has also been a Fulbright Scholar at the University of Pennsylvania, where he earned his Masters Degree. Many people in the OI community have gotten to know Fahim when he visited us in Hyde Park over the past two years, and was introduced to aspects of American culture such as White Sox games, hot dogs, and the legendary architectural boat tour of the city. We are very fortunate to have such a well-trained and experienced museum professional as our colleague and partner.

We have worked closely not only with the NMA, but also with local partners and most importantly with the US State Department and the US Embassy-Kabul. Local logistical support for our project is provided by ACHCO (a Kabul-based non-governmental organization that specializes in cultural heritage projects in Afghanistan); our close partners have been ACHCO founder Jolyon Leslie, and Ahmad Bilal, who has worked closely with Steve Camp on accounting, budgets, and logistics. At the US State Department, our key partners have been 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 ably overseen by Grachelle Javellana. At the US Embassy-Kabul, our partners have been Counsellor for Public Affairs Terry Davidson, Cultural Affairs Officer Lisa Helling, and Cultural affairs Specialist Alia Sharifi. Our Partnership is extremely fortunate to have had the strong support of US Ambassador Michael McKinley and Deputy Chief of Mission David Lindwall.

OI-NMA Inventory

Our main priority for the past four years has been to conduct the first full inventory of all the holdings of the National Museum. The Museum had been devastated by the Afghan civil war (1989–1995) when the building was rocketed, burned, and looted. During the subsequent period of Taliban rule, Taliban forces entered the Museum in March 2001 (at the same time

as the destruction of the Bamiyan Buddhas) and smashed hundreds of priceless sculptures and figurines, including some of the world's most important examples of Early Buddhist (second–seventh centuries CE) Gandharan art (fig. 4). After these two cataclysms, it was estimated that 70 percent of the Museum's holdings had been destroyed or looted, and 90 percent of the object records in the museum had been burned. A rough estimate by former Museum Director Omara Khan Massoudi indicated that the Museum's pre-war holdings were about 200,000 objects, of which approximately 140,000 pieces had been lost or destroyed — and only 60,000 survived. However, without a comprehensive inventory, these numbers remained only estimates.

After four years, we estimate that our inventory is about 97 percent complete. We have now inventoried 114,996 pieces in 42,563 object records. The inventory database also includes 117,992 images of scanned archival records and 100,054 object photographs. What we have found so far is in some ways comforting — more than twice as many objects have survived than we had dared to hope. It is heartening that despite the theft of massive numbers of coins from the numismatic collection (including the Museum's holdings from the famous Mir Zakeh hoard, originally weighing about four tons and consisting of an estimated 550,000 Greco-Bactrian and other coins and small objects — the world's largest known coin hoard), nevertheless, at least 11,150 coins from the NMA collections have survived to be described, photographed, and inventoried in our database (fig. 5). Our recording of the NMA's coins is now nearly complete.



Figure 4. Early Buddhist Gandharan style schist sculpture smashed by the Taliban and later restored



Figure 5. Greco-Bactrian coins. Despite massive looting, more than 11,550 coins have survived in the National Museum's collections

By the end of this coming year, we will finally be able to provide exact numbers of what has survived. Almost as important, by comparing what we have inventoried with the incomplete, but still valuable Museum catalogs from before the civil war, we will finally be able to develop the first reliable estimates of what was stolen or destroyed, and we will be able to identify specific objects as “Missing — either stolen or destroyed.” This information will then be available to aid in the recovery of the looted objects.

Equally heartening is the fact that after a year of negotiations, the OI-NMA team was finally granted permission to inventory ca. 22,000 of the most valuable objects in the Museum collections — these are stored under tight security in the vaults of the Presidential Palace. The Palace inventory should be completed by the end of calendar year 2016.

No inventory or database is ever truly complete. New objects continue to be accessioned by the Museum — most notably from the ongoing rescue excavations at the second–eighth century CE early Buddhist city of Mes Aynak. Our joint team of Afghan and international specialists are inventorying the Mes Aynak finds as they arrive from the field, and are working to stabilize and preserve them.

Conservation

After database development implementation of the inventory, object conservation and conservation training form a second key element in the OI-NMA Partnership. and Our two project conservators, Fabio Colombo and Reyhane Mirabootalebi, were very active in the past year in working closely with the staff conservators of the National Museum (fig. 6). In tandem with the ongoing work of the object inventory, conservators from the National Museum assisted the curators and our team members in the condition assessment and rehousing of each artifact. Fabio and Reyhane worked with the NMA conservators to assign a conservation priority to each object in a “triage” process, conducted condition assessments, and then rehoused 308 objects in specific ways based on their material and condition (fig. 7). Objects most in need of conservation/restoration were sent directly to the conservation department for treatment, cleaning, and/or reconstruction. Other objects, such as the majority of the Mes Aynak finds, some objects from Qul-e Tut, wall paintings, and some copper and silver coins were put aside



Figure 6. Conservator Fabio Colombo cleaning unbaked clay sculpture head from the rescue excavations at the Early Buddhist (second–eighth century CE) city of Mes Aynak



Figure 7. Conservator Reyhane Mirabootalebi training National Museum conservators in cleaning unbaked clay sculptures from Mes Aynak

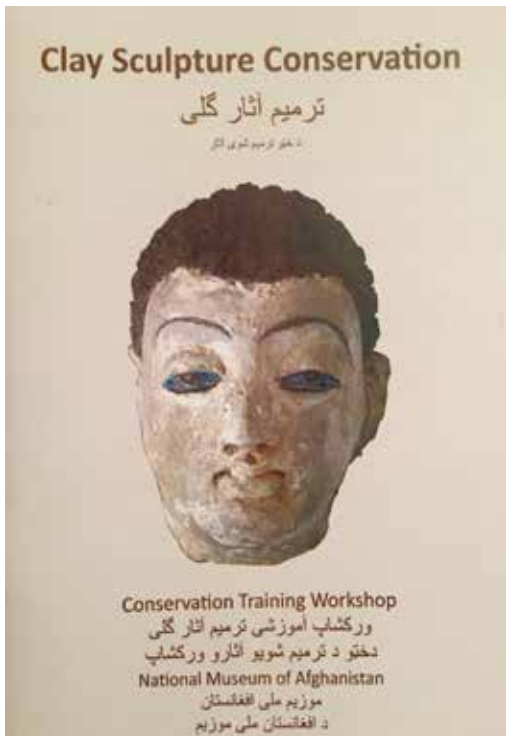


Figure 8. Bilingual Dari-English booklet describing the OI-NMA Partnership's intensive training workshop on clay sculpture preservation

for extensive conservation before they are inventoried.

In 2015–16, the conservation training component of the OI-NMA Partnership benefited tremendously from the work of Fabio Colombo, a senior conservator with wide experience and deep expertise in clay and stone conservation. Assisted by the OI Kabul team conservator Reyhane Mirabootalebi, Fabio conducted an intensive training workshop in the conservation of unbaked clay sculpture. The vast majority of the sculptures found at Mes Aynak are of plastered and painted unbaked clay (fig. 7); these objects are particularly fragile and difficult to conserve. The museum's conservation staff learned theoretical and practical approaches on the preservation and conservation of clay and stone sculptures as well as wall paintings. During the process the NMA conservation staff made remarkable and continuous progress in developing expertise in these complex techniques. Fabio and Reyhane documented the workshop in a well-illustrated bilingual Dari-English booklet, which we published and made available to the National Museum staff, the US Embassy, and the broader community Afghan Heritage specialists (fig. 8).

We have also been working closely with our NMA colleagues to build up the infrastructure of the Museum — most notably in the areas of steel shelving for the storerooms, in providing basic equipment for the museum, and rehousing of the museum objects in archival quality, acid-free packaging. The 40-foot containers filled with steel shelving for the National Museum were shipped to Pakistan, then transported overland by truck from Karachi across the Afghan border to Kabul. The shelving is being installed in each of the Museum's twenty-one storerooms under the supervision of the NMA curators (fig. 9). As each shelving area is completed, the objects are rehoused and shelved in stable micro-environments (fig. 10).

Our partnership has also made improvements in NMA conservation lab equipment, supplies, and infrastructure by providing essential, but otherwise unobtainable equipment such as eight binocular microscopes, two distilled water units, twelve locking cabinets, two ultrasonic cleaning devices, acid-free packing materials for object storage, conservation chemicals, paints, specialized small hand tools (including scalpels, paint brushes, etc.), two vacuum cleaners, and two sinks for the main conservation laboratory.



Figure 9. New steel shelving in the storerooms of the National Museum



Figure 10. NMA staff re-housing textiles in acid-free packing in the ethnography storeroom of the National Museum

Conclusion

Overall, after four years of working together, the NMA staff and the OI teams have come to know each other well, developing friendships, mutual respect, and the high level of trust needed to work effectively together. As a result, we have been able to make great strides in the inventory, in conservation, and in capacity-building. As we move into our fifth year, we can see real, measurable progress toward our shared goal of making permanent improvements in the National Museum of Afghanistan.
