

AFGHANISTAN

Hidden Treasures from the National Museum, Kabul



NATIONAL GALLERY OF ART

May 25 – September 7, 2008

NATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC SOCIETY

Archaeological masterpieces from the National Museum of Afghanistan were long thought to have been lost during the years of turbulence and war that followed the Soviet invasion of 1979. Instead, most had been secretly hidden in crates in the Central Bank within the presidential palace in Kabul. In 2004 the crates were opened, bringing to light the works of art that had remarkably survived. This exhibition presents highlights from the museum's collection and reveals the exotic influences and local artistic traditions that shaped the art of northern Afghanistan, known as Bactria in antiquity.

The works on view span Afghan history from 2200 BC to the second century AD and come from four archaeological sites: the Bronze Age site of Tepe Fullol; the Greco-Bactrian city of Ai Khanum; the trading settlement of Begram, which flourished in the first and second centuries AD; and the roughly contemporary necropolis of Tillya Tepe, where a nomadic chieftain and members of his household were buried with thousands of gold objects and ornaments, many inlaid with turquoise, lapis lazuli, or other semiprecious stones (figs. 1 and 3).

BRONZE AGE CULTURE OF AFGHANISTAN

An urban culture developed in northern Afghanistan some four thousand years ago. Its distinctive style of architecture featured massive fortified buildings with towers constructed of unbaked bricks. As this culture had no known writing, its original name is lost, but archaeologists call it the "Oxus civilization," after the Oxus River (modern Amu Darya) which flows through the region. In 1966 farmers near the northern Afghan village of Fullol accidentally discovered a burial cache that contained the first evidence of the Oxus civilization in Afghanistan. The grave contained several bowls made of gold that most likely came from the Oxus riverbed. Their designs include animal imagery such as bearded bulls (fig. 2) from distant Mesopotamian and Indus valley cultures (present-day Pakistan), indicating that already at this early date, Afghanistan was part of an extensive trade network.

ADVENT OF EMPIRES

The native wealth of Afghanistan — rich in gold, copper, tin, lapis lazuli, garnet, and carnelian — did not go unnoticed by its neighbors. In the sixth century BC, the region fell to the Persians. It is through them that we first learn the local name of the lands of northern Afghanistan: Bactria. In the fourth century BC, Alexander the Great and his army conquered Bactria, and his successors established a Hellenized government there, bringing Greek language, art, and religion to the area. With the exception of some beautifully minted coins, however, tangible traces of this Greco-Bactrian culture remained elusive until recently. The subsequent history of Bactria is known from several sources: Chinese chronicles, which describe waves of nomads from the northern steppes moving into the region; Indian accounts, which tell of the rise of independent states; and local coinage that

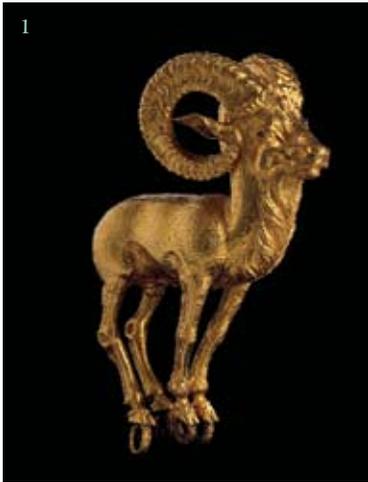


FIG 1

Headdress ornament in the form of a ram (Tillya Tepe, Tomb IV), gold, 1st century BC–1st century AD (cat. 108)

FIG 2

Fragment of a bowl depicting bearded bulls (Tepe Fullol), gold, 2200–1900 BC (cat. 3)

FIG 3

Ornament for the neck of a robe (Tillya Tepe, Tomb V), gold, turquoise, garnet, and pyrite, 1st century BC–1st century AD (cat. 129)

(cover)

One of a pair of pendants depicting the “Dragon Master” (Tillya Tepe, Tomb II), gold, turquoise, garnet, lapis lazuli, carnelian, and pearl, 1st century BC–1st century AD (cat. 61)

documents kings of the Kushan Dynasty (1st–3rd centuries AD). The Kushans, who are said to have been descendants of the invading nomads, established an empire reaching from southern Bactria to the Ganges River Valley in India.

BALKH, the capital of Bactria, was described in antiquity as “Balkh the beautiful, Balkh the mother of all cities.” It was destroyed by Mongols in 1220, but an account by Marco Polo suggests its former grandeur:

Balkh is a noble city and very large. Formerly it was nobler and larger, it was the most vast and beautiful city in the region, but the Tartars and other people often ravaged and cruelly damaged it. Because I tell you that formerly there were here a number of beautiful palaces and beautiful houses of marble; and still there are, but destroyed and ruined. And I tell you that in this city King Alexander the Great took as his wife the daughter of Darius, king of the Persians, according to the people of the city. — THE DESCRIPTION OF THE WORLD, 1298

THE GREEK COLONY AT AĪ KHANUM

After Alexander the Great’s conquest of Bactria around 328 BC, the region became the eastern outpost of Greek culture in Asia. One of Alexander’s successors, Seleucius I, founded the Greco-Bactrian city of AĪ Khanum (“Lady Moon”) at a strategic location along the Oxus River, on the frontier with nomadic tribes to the north. Defended by massive mud-brick ramparts more than three miles long, AĪ Khanum developed into a cultural hub where Greek art merged with local eastern traditions, and over time, a distinctive Greco-Bactrian style emerged.

A chance find in 1961 resulted in the discovery of the ancient city. During a hunting expedition in the region, the late Afghan king Zahir Shah was shown a Corinthian capital—similar to the one in the exhibition (fig. 6)—and recognized its antiquity. Exploration of the area led to the excavation of AĪ Khanum by French archaeologists from 1964 to 1978. They uncovered a city modeled on a Greek urban plan, with a theater, a fountain, temples, tombs for the city’s benefactors, a residential area, and a gymnasium for education and sports. A limestone statue found in a niche at the site probably portrays the gymnasium’s director (fig. 5). Because AĪ Khanum also contained a palace, it is thought to have been a royal city.

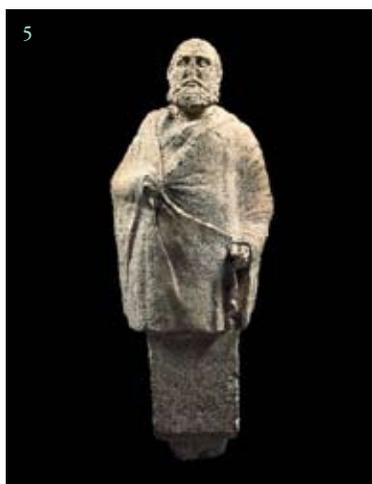
One of the oldest antiquities found at Ai Khanum is a ceremonial plaque made of gilded silver (fig. 4). It depicts Cybele, Greek goddess of nature, riding in a chariot. Next to her is the winged goddess Nike, holding the reins. The chariot is drawn by two lions passing through a mountainous landscape strewn with rocks and flowers. Cybele is attended by two priests: one behind, holding a parasol, and the other standing on a tall altar, making an offering. Three heavenly bodies shine down from the sky: the sun god Helios, a crescent moon, and a star. In sum, the plaque shows the goddess of nature presiding within an orderly cosmos.



FIG 4
Ceremonial plaque depicting Cybele (Ai Khanum, temple with niches), gilded silver, beginning of 3rd century BC (cat. 23)

FIG 5
Portrait, probably of the Gymnasiarch Strato (Ai Khanum, gymnasium), limestone, 1st half of 2nd century BC (cat. 32)

FIG 6
Corinthian capital (Ai Khanum), limestone, before 145 BC (cat. 24)



THE SILK ROAD is a metaphor for long-distance trade across Asia that developed from c. 300 BC to c. 200 AD. It was not, in fact, a “road” but a collection of land and sea routes linking cities, trading posts, caravan watering-places, and hostels between the eastern Mediterranean and the Chinese frontier. Afghanistan is centrally located along the major routes.

Trade goods brought to China included precious metals, coins, glass, and semiprecious stones. Silk textiles, lacquered bowls, and other luxury wares traveled from China to the West. The distances to be covered were so great—and the rigors of travel so daunting—that only goods that combined small size with very high value could be transported the entire distance. By the first century AD, long-distance trade across Asia was fully established, as demonstrated by the artifacts from Rome, India, China, Persia, and Siberia found in Afghanistan.

BEGRAM

An unusual discovery at the ancient city of Begram shed light on the role of Afghanistan in the network of trade along the Silk Road. In the 1930s and 1940s, French archaeologists excavated two sealed and undisturbed storerooms containing luxury goods. Many of them came from distant lands: bronzes from the Greco-Roman world (fig. 7), painted glassware and porphyry from Egypt (fig. 8), lacquered bowls from China, and ivory furniture ornaments probably from India. The hoard dates to the first and second centuries AD, during the rule of the Kushan Dynasty.

FIG 7

Mask of Silenus (Begram, Room 13), bronze, 1st–2nd centuries AD (cat. 221)

FIG 8

Goblet depicting figures harvesting dates (Begram, Room 10), glass and paint, 1st–2nd centuries AD (cat. 163)



The finds at Begram are remarkable for the extraordinary number of works in ivory, many of which depict voluptuous women relaxing, dancing, or playing musical instruments. The ivories probably once decorated wooden furniture that has since turned to dust. The ivory statuette of a woman (fig. 9) perhaps embellished a table leg. The figure represents the Indian river goddess Ganga, whose mount is the mythological *makara*, a creature that is part crocodile, part elephant, and part fish. The leogryph—another hybrid beast with the body of a lion, wings of an eagle, and beak of a parrot—served as a bracket supporting the arm of a chair (fig. 10).

Ever since this discovery at Begram, art historians and archaeologists have puzzled over just why these marvelous and diverse objects were gathered here in the sealed storerooms. The works of art may have been a treasure hoarded over time by the Kushan kings, but more likely they were a splendid repository of trade goods, sealed off to protect valuable commodities awaiting distribution along the Silk Road. In any event, the objects provide a glimpse into the heart of the Silk Road at a time of intense commercial exchange.

TILLYA TEPE

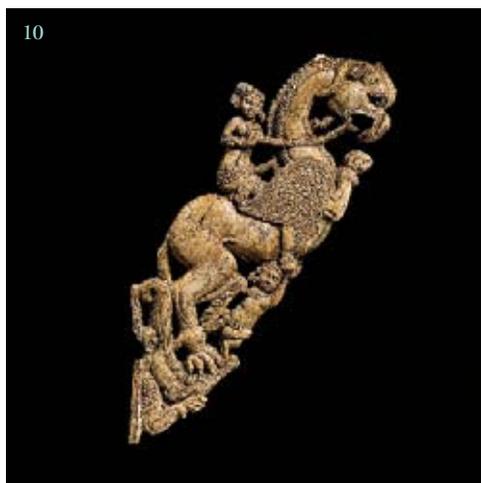
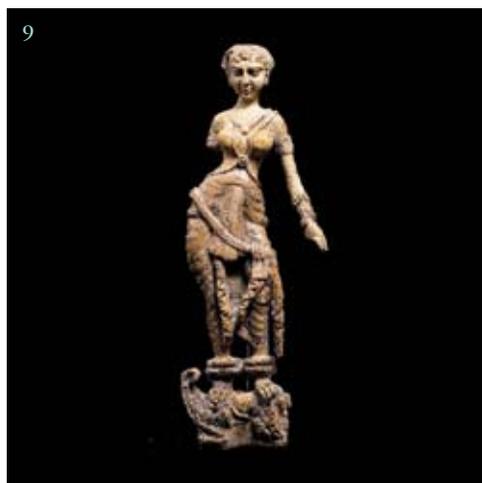
Nomads from the northern steppes, which stretch from the Black Sea to Mongolia, overran Bactria around 145 BC, bringing an end to the Greco-Bactrian kingdoms that had flourished there. The first evidence of this nomadic presence in the region was found at Tillya Tepe, a name meaning “hill of gold.” Excavated in 1978 by a Soviet-Afghan team of archaeologists, the site contained the tombs of a chieftain and

FIG 9

Statuette of a woman standing on a makara, possibly a furniture ornament (Begram, Room 10), ivory, 1st–2nd centuries AD (cat. 148)

FIG 10

Bracket in the form of a leogryph (Begram, Room 13), ivory, 1st–2nd centuries AD (cat. 209)





five female members of his household, who had been buried some time in the first century BC or the first century AD. The graves, numbered in the order in which they were found, contained what today is known as the Bactrian Hoard: thousands of gold objects and ornaments that had been sewn onto the burial shrouds and clothing of the deceased.

Typical of nomadic burials, the graves were dug into an earthen mound with the most important person—the chieftain—placed in the center and the secondary burials arranged roughly in a circle around him. In the northern steppes, funeral mounds were man-made constructions requiring massive movement of earth. At Tillya Tepe, however, the nomads reused an existing “hill”—actually the earth-covered remains of a fortified mud-brick temple dating from the Iron Age (1500–1300 BC).

The nomads brought with them weapons, horse trappings, and jewelry decorated in the animal style of the steppes, which features images of both real and fantastic animals, often in combat or intricately entwined. This style is readily evident in the turquoise-inlaid dagger (fig. 11) from Tomb IV, that of the chieftain. The weapon’s design—animals devouring each other—suggests dynamism, aggression, and invincibility. Nomadic traditions are also reflected in the collapsible

FIG 11

Dagger with hilt depicting animals and a dancing bear (Tillya Tepe, Tomb IV), iron, gold, and turquoise, 1st century BC–1st century AD (cat. 11.4)

gold crown found in Tomb VI (fig. 12): five tall “trees” are inserted into small gold tubes on the inside of the diadem, a system that allowed the crown to be dismantled and easily transported.

The finds at Tillya Tepe revealed a culture that was more refined, eclectic, and Hellenized than had been expected. After reaching Bactria, nomadic artists became influenced by the diverse objects that traveled along the Silk Road. The man depicted grasping two dragons on a pendant from Tomb II (cover) wears the tunic and flowing pants typical of nomadic garb, but he has an Indian beauty mark on his forehead and a crown similar to those worn by Iranian rulers. A pair of clasps from a jacket depicts figures from Greek mythology: Dionysus, the god of wine, and his consort Ariadne are accompanied by Nike holding the wreath of victory, and drunken Silenus, Dionysus’s companion, slouched on the ground (fig. 13). The monstrous steed with the muzzle of a lion, beard of a goat, and crest of a dragon is alien to Greek art, however, and reflects the aesthetic of the steppes.

Chinese influence is evident in the chieftain’s boot buckles, each of which shows an exotic scene of chariots being drawn by dragons (fig. 14). The pattern on the chariot’s side suggests a woven material, and the uprights supporting the canopy resemble bamboo. Such lightweight, two-wheeled chariots are known from excavations in Mongolia and from Han Chinese burials of the first century BC. Like many of the gold objects found at Tillya Tepe, this buckle shows signs of wear. Because nomads carried all their wealth with them, often on the body, the buckle was probably used by the chieftain during his life.

Most scholars believe that the adornments, jewelry, and weapons at Tillya Tepe were made locally. The turquoise and most of the other semiprecious stones used for inlays were abundant in the region, as was gold from the Amu Darya. What is most telling is that the workmanship of the gold items is similar among all the tombs, suggesting the possibility of a single workshop located nearby in northern Afghanistan. The objects found at Tillya Tepe constitute a microcosm of the ancient world at the center of the Silk Road, where the combination of Chinese, Indian, Siberian, Persian, Greek, and Roman motifs created a lavish and distinctive style.



Today the National Museum of Afghanistan is being renovated after decades of war during which it was bombed, looted, and then desecrated by the Taliban. Thousands of fragments of smashed sculpture are being reassembled there, and the museum staff is receiving training in conservation, photography, inventory, registration, and

exhibition design. It is hoped that the treasures in this exhibition will eventually be on permanent display in the refurbished National Museum of Afghanistan, which bears the inscription “A nation stays alive when its culture stays alive.”



12

FIG 12

Crown (Tillya Tepe, Tomb VI), gold and imitation turquoise, 1st century BC–1st century AD (cat. 134)



13

FIG 13

One of a pair of clasps depicting Dionysus and Ariadne (Tillya Tepe, Tomb VI), gold and turquoise, 1st century BC–1st century AD (cat. 136)



14

FIG 14

One of a pair of boot buckles depicting a chariot drawn by dragons (Tillya Tepe, Tomb IV), gold, turquoise, and carnelian, 1st century BC–1st century AD (cat. 106)

NATIONAL GALLERY OF ART, WASHINGTON | MAY 25–SEPTEMBER 7, 2008

ASIAN ART MUSEUM OF SAN FRANCISCO | OCTOBER 24, 2008–JANUARY 25, 2009

THE MUSEUM OF FINE ARTS, HOUSTON | FEBRUARY 22–MAY 17, 2009

THE METROPOLITAN MUSEUM OF ART, NEW YORK | JUNE 23–SEPTEMBER 20, 2009

Film Program

Afghanistan on Film

A series of documentary features and short subjects made during the past decade explores Afghanistan's recent history and Afghan society today.

Weekends, July 20 through September 7.

The screenings include:

Standing Up (2007)

Earth and Ashes (2004)

My Kabul (2007)

The Giant Buddhas (2005)

Beauty Academy of Kabul (2004)

Osama (2004)

The Kite Runner (2007)

Kandahar (2001)

Buddha Collapsed Out of Shame (2007)

For program times and information, visit

www.nga.gov/programs/film

Documentary Films

Afghanistan: Hidden Treasures

July 1–September 7

East Building
Small Auditorium
Daily, noon–3:00 pm
with minor exceptions

East Building Auditorium
Wednesdays and Sundays,
11:30 am with minor
exceptions

Narrated by Khaled Hosseini, author of *The Kite Runner* and *A Thousand Splendid Suns*, this 28-minute documentary features footage of the 2004 recovery of collections from the National Museum of Afghanistan, Kabul, that had been hidden in the vaults of the Central Bank in the presidential palace. It was produced by the National Geographic Society. The film is supported by a generous grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities.

A 12-minute version will be shown continuously in the exhibition.

Any views, findings, conclusions, or recommendations expressed in this film do not necessarily represent those of the National Endowment for the Humanities.

Lost Treasures of Afghanistan (2006)

Tuesday, June 17, noon

Free. No tickets required.

Presented by *National Geographic Live!*

National Geographic Society
Grosvenor Auditorium
1600 M St. NW
202.857.7700
nglive.org

This film relates the heroic efforts of artists and scholars to protect works of art and film archives from destruction by the Taliban in Afghanistan. Curator and National Geographic Archaeology Fellow Fredrik Hiebert will introduce the film and answer questions following the screening.

(56 minutes)

Gallery Talks

Afghanistan: Hidden Treasures from the National Museum, Kabul

East Building
May 30, June 6, 7, and 30
at noon; June 10 at 1:00 pm
(60 minutes)

Please consult the Calendar of Events or www.nga.gov for full schedule and program information.

Audioguide

Narrated by National Gallery of Art director Earl A. Powell III, this audio tour includes commentary by exhibition curator Fredrik Hiebert, National Geographic Society; Sanjot Mehendale, University of California, Berkeley; and archaeologist Paul Bernard, Paris, France. The tour is available at the entrance to the exhibition for \$5.

To reserve audio tours for groups, call 202.842.6592.

Concerts

West Building
East Garden Court
May 25th, 1:00 pm

Instrumental ensemble led by Afghan singer and arranger Vaheed Kaacemy

East Building Auditorium
May 25, 4:00 pm

Children's choir led by Afghan singer and arranger Vaheed Kaacemy

This exhibition is organized by the National Geographic Society and the National Gallery of Art, Washington, in association with the Asian Art Museum of San Francisco; the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston; and The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.

The exhibition is supported by a grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities and an indemnity from the Federal Council on the Arts and the Humanities.

In Washington the exhibition is made possible by the E. Rhodes and Leona B. Carpenter Foundation. It is also supported by The Charles Engelhard Foundation.

Corporate support is provided by National Construction & Logistics and Hamed Wardak.

This brochure was written by Fredrik Hiebert, curator and National Geographic Archaeology Fellow, and Susan M. Arensberg, department of exhibition programs, National Gallery of Art. It was produced by the publishing office, National Gallery of Art.

Sunday Lecture

East Building Auditorium
May 25, 2:00 pm

Afghanistan: Hidden Treasures from the National Museum, Kabul

Fredrik Hiebert, curator and National Geographic Archaeology Fellow

Book signing to follow

On the Web

Created in conjunction with the National Geographic Society, the Web programs show relevant archaeological sites, an illustrated timeline of ancient Afghan history, an audio slideshow, and reconstructions of lavish burial costumes adorned with gold. Visit: www.nga.gov/afghanistan or www.nationalgeographic.com/afghanistan-treasures/

A family guide is available in PDF form on the Gallery's Web site. It was originally published in French by the Musée national des arts asiatiques-Guimet, Paris.

Catalogue

The exhibition is accompanied by a fully illustrated, 304-page catalogue, *Afghanistan: Hidden Treasures from the National Museum, Kabul*, edited by Fredrik Hiebert and Pierre Cambon. Published by National Geographic Books. Softcover: \$30

General Information

Hours: Monday–Saturday, 10:00 am–5:00 pm
Sunday 11:00 am–6:00 pm
Gallery Web site: www.nga.gov
For information about accessibility to galleries and public areas, assistive listening devices, sign-language interpretation, and other services and programs, inquire at the Information Desks, consult the Web site, or call 202.842.6690 (TDD line 202.842.6176).

Admission to the National Gallery of Art and all of its programs is free of charge, except as noted.

This brochure is made possible by the National Geographic Society.

All of the works are from the National Museum of Afghanistan and are the sole property of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan. Photos © Musée Guimet/Thierry Ollivier